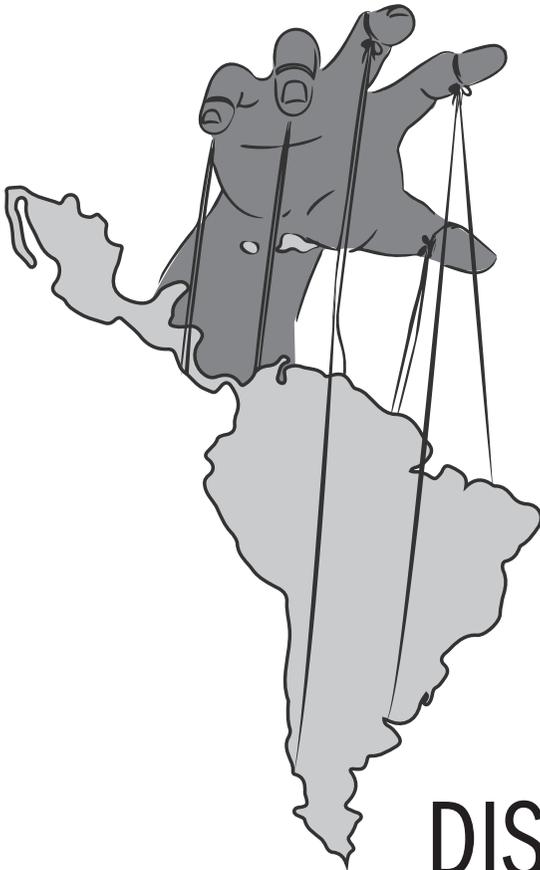


LATIN AMERICA POLICY JOURNAL

A Harvard Kennedy School Student Publication



DISRUPTIVE FORCES

VOLUME 8 - SPRING 2019



All views expressed in the Latin America Policy Journal are those of the authors or the interviewees only and do not represent the views of Harvard University, the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, the staff of the Latin America Policy Journal, or any associates of the Journal.
All errors are authors'.

©2019 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.
All rights reserved. Except as otherwise specified, no article or portion herein is to be reproduced or adapted to other works without the express written consent of the editors of the Latin America Policy Journal.

Commitment to Deliver: Governance Innovation in Buenos Aires

Martín Alessandro and Fernando Straface

Martín Alessandro has led the “Delivery Unit” within the Secretary-General’s office of the City of Buenos Aires since December 2015. Previously, he worked for the public management division of the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, DC and in Buenos Aires; and as Research Director at the National Institute of Public Administration (INAP). He holds a Master of Public Policy from the University of Maryland, College Park, where he attended on a Fulbright scholarship.



Fernando Straface has been the Secretary-General and the Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the City of Buenos Aires since December 2015. He is one of the founders and former Executive Director of CIPPEC, Argentina’s top think tank, according to the 2017 edition of the Global Go To Think Tank Index. Previously, he worked as a Governance Specialist at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, DC, leading projects across 14 countries in Latin America. He holds a Master in Public Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and a BA in Political Science from USAL in Argentina.



ABSTRACT

In February 2016, the new mayor of Buenos Aires, Argentina announced the priority goals for his term in office. These were not generic aspirations; they included specific targets, trajectories, and deadlines. Since then, the city has continually published the progress made to deliver on those commitments. Two separate effects of this practice have been documented. First, it has contributed to aligning the complex machinery of government behind clear priorities, with a focus on improving performance and delivery. Second, it has enhanced citizen trust in the government. This brief paper analyzes this innovation, its impacts, and lessons for other local governments.

INTRODUCTION

Cities have a growing role in the development of nations. For the first time in history, over half of the world’s population live in cities, and this trend will expand in the coming decades. Moreover, cities are increasingly critical as hubs for ideas, knowledge, and innovation, which are the main drivers of economic growth. Thus, the delivery capabilities of city governments have become more relevant given

the need to address the urban challenges that arise from their growth. Moreover, cities are often responsible for implementing the policies and projects designed by central governments. In this context, innovations to enhance delivery capacities at the local level can distinguish a successful city from a struggling one.

In February 2016, the new mayor of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Horacio Rodríguez

Larreta, announced 20 priority goals (“Government Commitments”) for his term in office, with quantitative targets and specific deadlines for each of them. These commitments ranged from typically municipal functions, such as fixing 100 percent of potholes or removing abandoned cars within 15 days of being reported; to more complex policy objectives, like doubling the proportion of students with high performance in math or reducing traffic fatalities by 30 percent. Since then, the city government has communicated these goals extensively to ensure they are known by all citizens; it has monitored delivery through a systematic management model; it has published the data on the progress made towards achieving these goals, using previously defined trajectories as benchmarks; and it has taken new public commitments.

This brief research paper analyzes the government commitments of Buenos Aires, comparing this innovation to relevant international experiences such as “Stat” models in American cities and “Delivery Units” as originated in the United Kingdom. It documents its results, both within city government and in its relation to the citizens of Buenos Aires. Finally, it presents key lessons for other cities implementing similar approaches.

DELIVERING ON GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

One of the main innovations in governance in recent years is the development of management models that focus on key government priorities. The creation of the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit in the United Kingdom, in 2001, was replicated in several countries since then, with Chile’s *Unidad Presidencial de Gestión del Cumplimiento* in 2010 as a relevant regional example.¹ These units are responsible for specifying the chief executive’s key priorities for his or her term in office (with measurable targets and trajectories), and for ensuring systematic routines to monitor progress and unblock obstacles. Thus, priority goals are not treated as “business as usual.”

At the local level, several American cities have developed similar models. Since the introduction of CompStat in New York City in 1994 to improve policing and CitiStat in Baltimore in 2001 to improve service delivery in general, dozens of cities have adopted management tools to optimize performance in selected priority outcomes.² However, a few Latin American cities have replicated a similar approach. One of these exceptions is the city of Buenos Aires.

THE MAYOR’S “PUBLIC COMMITMENTS” IN BUENOS AIRES

The first director of the United Kingdom’s Delivery Unit, Michael Barber, has differentiated between “government by spasm” and “government by routines.”³ The first approach is characterized by vague aspirations and crisis management, while the second one is characterized by clear definitions of success and persistent oversight. The latter approach involves the need to define specific goals and to establish a routine of monitoring and problem-solving. Even if this seems obvious, most governments across the world lack the discipline to keep a systematic approach in the midst of a 24/7 news cycle, crises, or unexpected events.

Between 2008 and 2015, current mayor Rodríguez Larreta served as chief of staff to then-mayor Mauricio Macri (now president of Argentina); in this role, Rodríguez Larreta led the implementation of a disciplined management model, based on ministerial goals and periodic data-driven review meetings led by the mayor or his chief of staff. After taking office in December 2015, the new mayor enhanced this approach by announcing publicly the “Government Commitments” (*compromisos de gobierno*), a set of priority goals with specific targets and deadlines.

The overall government plan for the mayor’s term consists of over 1,200 programs and projects. The government commitments were, originally, 20

high-priority goals, either corresponding to a specific program or project from the government plan or, most often, an aggregate goal combining several programs or projects, sometimes involving more than one ministry (most commitments are *outputs* of the government's work, with some *outcomes* as well). Due to the perceived positive effect of the initiative, the mayor took additional commitments at later dates, totaling over 50 goals during the first three years of his term. This expansion was certainly in tension with the notion of focusing the Commitments on key priorities.

The Public Commitments were selected to satisfy two criteria that are often in conflict, as few policy initiatives can maximize both: impact and feasibility of delivery (see Figure 1).⁴ From an initial definition of priority policy areas by the mayor, a team within the Secretary-General's Office (a "Delivery Unit") identified a set of potential public commitments. These were discussed within the Center of Government (a policy unit including the mayor himself, the chief of staff, the communications office, political advisors, and the planning and budget office) and with the sectoral ministries, narrowing down the list to the ones finally announced. The setting of specific targets for each goal attempted to find the right balance between ambition and realism (see Figure 2).

To ensure that the public commitments achieved their purpose, it was critical that they were not perceived as "just another announcement." Thus, they were set very early in the mayor's term: this would help them actually align the ministries' work before other sectoral agendas took over. The progress or delays were continually published through an online dashboard,⁵ which promoted more accountability and pressure to deliver. The mayor's and the ministers' communications teams used the Commitments and their milestones to inform public activities and speeches, helping to expand citizen awareness.⁶ Additionally, the mayor periodically held town halls to report on the delivery of

the Commitments and to take questions about them.⁷

This level of accountability was possible because the government had in place a management model that strengthened delivery and provided early alerts of potential delays or crises in performance. For the Public Commitments, in particular, the Delivery Unit could rely on the periodic review meetings (led by the mayor or the chief of staff, with support from the planning office) but also on its bilateral interaction with the respective sectoral ministries to monitor progress. The existence of an already embedded routine of review meetings and a culture of collaboration across the government helped to avoid the adversarial relation between the Center of Government and the sectors that was typical in other cases. As of January 2019, less than 10 percent of the Public Commitments were at risk or delayed in meeting their trajectories.

THE IMPACT OF THE PUBLIC COMMITMENTS

The Government Commitments were expected to have two main effects. First, they should contribute to align a broad and complex public sector (such as the government of the City of Buenos Aires, with an annual budget of US \$10 billion and almost 150,000 employees) behind certain clear priorities, set by the mayor. And second, they should increase citizen trust in an administration that is willing to raise the bar in terms of accountability and transparency.

In 2017, Torcuato Di Tella University conducted a study to assess the impact of the Public Commitments within the government.⁸ Through interviews with officials of different levels of seniority in multiple ministries, the study concluded that the Commitments had indeed contributed to internalize the vision and priorities fostered by the mayor. The existence of cross-ministerial goals also helped the horizontal coordination of ministries that shared responsibility for certain

commitments. At the same time, the study also found the need for better dissemination of the Public Commitments among lower-ranked officials, a task that the Delivery Unit has since reinforced.

In terms of the impact on the relation between citizens and government, the Delivery Unit conducted three randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to identify the effect of knowing about the Commitments on different measures of public trust. Through online surveys of Buenos Aires' residents, among those with no prior knowledge of the Commitments the samples were randomly divided into two groups: half of them were immediately asked questions related to trust in the city government, and the other half were only asked those questions after being invited to surf the online dashboard. In every iteration of the experiment, being exposed to the Commitments led to significant positive effects on citizen trust in government. Therefore, the evaluations of the Public Commitments initiative in Buenos Aires show positive impacts, both internally within the government and externally in its relations with citizens.

Although not measured in specific studies, three additional effects of the Public Commitments can be suggested. First, they contribute to structure the government's communications and public events, providing clear purpose and goals for each intermediate milestone. Second, they help clarify priorities for budget allocation and management. And third, they add objective evidence and data to the public debate of policy issues.

CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS FOR OTHER LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

The case of Buenos Aires and other experiences highlight a number of key success factors:

- The strong personal involvement of the chief executive is needed to signal,

internally, that *delivery matters*. Announcing goals with no follow-through, or establishing formal monitoring routines without decision-making capacities, will most probably not lead to any changes in government performance.

- Making the priority goals *public* can help push for better results. The public announcement by the chief executive acts as a "point of no return": it limits the room for delays or retargeting, as they would generate political costs for the ministry and the government as a whole. Thus, it is a powerful incentive to redouble the effort, resources and creativity devoted to achieving the mayor's priority goals.

- At the same time, taking public commitments requires the combination of solid planning capabilities with political sensitivity, and Center of Government teams leading such initiatives need both skills.

- *If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.* The most difficult part is deciding what is *not* a priority, but it is essential (and useful) in order to allocate time, resources, and political capital in ways that maximize delivery of high-impact goals. This prioritization should be informed by evidence, but it is a political process and the Chief Executive should personally "own" those goals.

- The capabilities needed to run a "Stat" or "Delivery Unit" management model are not rocket science. Managerial, technical, and analytical skills are certainly required (and they are critical to add value to the process), but the hardest part is to sustain the discipline and the routines despite the day-to-day events.

- The ability to deliver is especially relevant for local governments. National outcomes may be influenced heavily by external factors (the international price of commodities, interest rates in the United States, demand from China, and so on), but citizens are very much aware whether the streets are clean, public transportation runs on time, and parks are safe. And they definitely know who is responsible for this.

Few cities in Latin America have adopted "Stat" or "Delivery" models. The

case of Buenos Aires can illuminate the potential of this approach.

NOTES

¹Martin Alessandro et al., *Governing to Deliver. The Role of the Center of Government in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank, 2014); Jennifer Gold, *International Delivery: Centres of Government and the Drive for Better Policy Implementation* (London: Institute for Government, 2014).

²Robert D. Behn, *The Performance Stat Potential: A Leadership Strategy for Producing Results* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014).

³Michael Barber, *How to Run a Government So That Citizens Benefit and Taxpayers Don't Go Crazy* (London: Penguin Random House, 2015).

⁴"Impact" was operationalized by estimating the number of citizens expected to benefit, the relevance of that benefit, and the value given to it by public opinion. "Feasibility" included the cost and the complexity of the delivery chain. Because the commitments were selected in a short time frame between taking office and their public announcement, these estimations had to combine hard data with informed judgement. And their actual value was often part of the subsequent discussions, leading to the final decision.

⁵Buenos Aires Ciudad, "Compromisos de Gobierno," n.d., www.buenosaires.gob.ar/compromisos.

⁶In June 2017, only 14 percent of Buenos Aires'

residents were aware that the mayor had made the Public Commitments; by September 2018, this proportion had grown to 30 percent. However, specific goals were much better known than the overall initiative. In June 2017, the best-known Commitment was the goal of ensuring a subway frequency of every three minutes in rush hour on every line (48 percent); in September 2018 it was the goal of reaching 100-percent LED lighting in streets and parks (63 percent). (Source: surveys by the Delivery Unit.) Part of the reason for this growth was the increase in unique visitors to the online dashboard. Heavily promoted by the government communication's team, which saw its value in terms of providing objective data about changes in the city, it passed the mark of 1 million unique visitors in late 2018. For reference, the internal site for one of the Commitments (installing 10,000 cameras in public spaces) was among the top 20 most-visited government websites in 2018, a ranking otherwise dominated by transactional or informational sites (appointments, requests, information on drivers' licences, etc.).

⁷Kate Jones, *Working With Mayors to Create Prosperous Places* (London: Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, 2018).

⁸Carlos Freytes, "Estudio del proceso de implementación de los Compromisos de Gobierno al interior de la administración de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires," unpublished manuscript, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, 2017.

⁹Martin Alessandro et al., "Transparency and Confidence in Government. Evidence from a Randomized Survey Experiment," unpublished manuscript, Inter-American Development Bank, 2018.