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IMPROVING DECISION MAKING AT THE CENTER OF GOVERNMENT: LIBERIA'S CABINET SECRETARIAT, 2009 - 2012

SYNOPSIS

When Momo Rogers became director general of Liberia's Cabinet Secretariat in June 2009, he thought the office could begin to support President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and her team of ministers much more effectively than it had done previously. Cabinet offices generally aimed to improve the quality of decision making and coordination at the center of government. That function was especially important in Liberia, where President Sirleaf wanted to advance an ambitious development agenda—six years after the end of a protracted civil war—yet before Rogers stepped into his role, many Cabinet meetings were long and unfocused and often yielded few tangible results. For example, policy decisions reached in the Cabinet meetings were not often communicated to the people responsible for implementing policy. Moreover, the relevance of decisions about the government's priorities was sometimes unclear even to those who had participated in the meetings. Recognizing those challenges, Sirleaf tasked Rogers with responsibility for making the office—and the Cabinet itself—work better. Rogers built a team at the Secretariat and introduced procedural changes like circulating agendas and policy papers in advance of Cabinet meetings. By 2012, the Cabinet was functioning more effectively: agendas circulated in advance, discussions were more focused, and the Secretariat followed up on action items agreed to in the meetings. But shortcomings remained, including a persistent need to improve the quality of policy proposals submitted to Cabinet.

Michael Scharff drafted this case study based on interviews conducted in Monrovia, Liberia, and the United States in April and May 2012. Case published in September 2012.

INTRODUCTION

Seated at his tiny desk in the corner of the office of the president's secretary, Momo Rogers, Liberia's new director general of the Cabinet Secretariat, wondered where he should begin. It was June 2009, and days earlier, President Ellen

Johnson Sirleaf had appointed him to his post—one he had never expected to hold.

"She just told me, 'I want you to come home,'" said Rogers, recalling his exchange with the president during a visit to his native Liberia in

2008. “Usually, when the president asks you, you don’t say no.” Unsure what the president had in mind for him but certain his skills were needed in a country still rebuilding from a devastating 14-year civil war that had ended only five years earlier, the 61-year-old Rogers resigned from his job in the United States as a professor of mass communication and returned to Monrovia, Liberia’s capital. “When I met her, she told me I would be working in her office,” said Rogers. “I was to be the director general of the Cabinet. It was a position I had never heard about.”

Sirleaf took office in 2006 after winning Liberia’s October 2005 presidential election. She had an ambitious development agenda—and a capacity problem. The protracted war had killed more than 250,000 and left the country’s economy and institutions reeling. “Because of the war... all the systems and processes had broken down,” said Rogers. The pool of educated Liberians whom the president could tap to fill key government posts was limited, and Sirleaf worked hard to recruit Liberians from abroad. However, it was nearly impossible for her to find people with pertinent skills to match the positions they assumed. Rogers was a case in point. He was highly educated and had spent some time in the Liberian government, including as a deputy minister in the late 1970s, but he had no experience in managing a Cabinet.

Rogers arrived at a distinctive moment. From 2003 to early 2006, a transitional government had established a Cabinet and created the position of director general. The Cabinet did not have a Secretariat, and ministers were struggling with one another to shape agendas. When Sirleaf came to power in 2006, she quickly hired a director general to help arrange Cabinet meetings and serve as her special assistant. However, she chose not to create a Cabinet Secretariat to help the director general carry out her role.

Sirleaf spent the first three years of her presidency trying to address a seemingly endless array of problems. Enabling her own Cabinet to

work more effectively never ranked high on her list of priorities during that challenging period when there was so much to do. As a result, the Cabinet suffered from lack of focus and purpose. “The process with Cabinet was pretty ad hoc,” recalled Steve Radelet, who served as Sirleaf’s chief economic adviser in those early years. “They had their regular meetings, but [the meetings] tended to go on a long time. They weren’t as well organized as they might be, and communication with the Cabinet, especially outside the meetings, was fairly weak.”

Other institutions had assumed responsibility for some of the functions Cabinets often fulfilled in other countries. For instance, in 2006, Sirleaf created the Liberia Reconstruction and Development Committee (LRDC) at the Ministry of State for Presidential Affairs to align donor funds with government priorities. When she created the LRDC, she designed it around four pillars: security, economic revitalization, governance and the rule of law, and infrastructure and basic services. A minister chaired each pillar, and meetings of the LRDC involved representatives from the president’s office as well as other government officials and donors. “A large part of what would have been normal Cabinet agenda business was covered pretty effectively in those early LRDC meetings,” said Radelet.

By 2009, Sirleaf had begun to think strategically about how to make her office work better. She needed a way to coordinate across government to advance her priorities more effectively. She also sought to improve the ways decisions were reached and communicated by the center of government. Sirleaf recruited Rogers, instructing him to improve the way the Cabinet functioned, but she provided him with no guidance as to how to accomplish the task.

At his desk, Rogers began to search for ideas that would lead to more-effective support of the Cabinet. He tried to search online for examples of how Cabinet secretariats worked, but he was

hampered by poor Internet access. He ventured into the building's basement to try to locate documents from his predecessor, who had left for the private sector. But he found only a stack of meeting notes from 2006. It was then, Rogers said, that he realized how big a challenge he faced.

THE CHALLENGE

In 2009, Rogers pinpointed three big challenges to providing more-effective Cabinet support: the Secretariat lacked clear procedures, Cabinet ministers did not perceive the office as useful, and the unit was understaffed.

Historically, directors general of Cabinet in Liberia wielded little authority, their roles were limited, and they lacked guidelines on how to do their jobs. For example, the director general sometimes formulated agendas without consulting the ministers, who often discovered, at the last moment, that they were expected to present information or policy choices. When the director general did seek ministers' input, the ordering of items for discussion was based not on strategic reasoning, but rather reflected the order in which ministers responded with agenda items. An aide to then minister of finance Antoinette Sayeh recalled that in 2008, he "always got the agenda the night before the meeting," which left the minister very little time to prepare. The short notice also meant that discussion would veer from the agenda and that the meetings sometimes lasted up to five hours. "The issues that ended up being discussed in Cabinet were more a function of what had happened that morning than anything else," said the aide.

Procedural problems, too, contributed to the poor quality of policy proposals that originated in the ministries and made their way to the Cabinet for discussion. In many countries, Cabinet subcommittees review proposed policies and legislation and forward their recommendations to the full Cabinet for approval. "The real decisions in the Cabinet process should take place at the

Cabinet subcommittee level," said Willie Belleh, who served as chief of staff to the president of the Transitional Government, Gyude Bryant. "That's where Cabinet members debate the issues. That's where they negotiate among competing institutional interests and demands so that you don't go to the full Cabinet and begin to debate issues and negotiate the policy solutions." In other countries, subcommittees typically coordinated implementation of policies across ministries after decisions had been reached in Cabinet. In 2009, no such subcommittees existed in Liberia. Ministries also lacked trained staff to develop strong policy proposals, and the Cabinet Secretariat did not provide a quality control check, which meant that ministers voiced their preferences based on incomplete information.

Frederick Norkeh, who served as deputy minister of commerce from 2007 to early 2011 and who attended meetings when the minister was unable to do so, recalled that before Rogers became head of the Secretariat, meetings had not been well planned or well organized. Norkeh said he often would not receive relevant documents in advance, and the director general did not usually follow up to ensure ministers acted on what had been agreed to in the meeting. Belleh, too, noted the lack of follow-up. "They did not hold ministers and heads of autonomous agencies accountable for agreed actions, deliverables and timelines approved by the Cabinet," he said.

The lack of a well-crafted process contributed to a second challenge: Rogers had to change people's perceptions of what Cabinet was and what it could do. Ministers were confused and apathetic about Cabinet's role. Among some, confusion turned to apathy. "I felt the Cabinet meeting was a significant waste of everyone's time," admitted the aide to Finance Minister Sayeh. "Cabinet meetings were something we had to go to."

Finally, Rogers had neither the team nor the requisite experience to turn things around by

himself. He was the Cabinet Secretariat. In 2009, he sat alone at a desk in the corner of a room—without a reliable Internet connection and with only a handful of the 2006 Cabinet minutes, which he had dug out of the basement, as a guide.

Sirleaf had little time to give Rogers guidance and advice. Moreover, she may have perceived difficult trade-offs, and in postwar Liberia, reforming the Cabinet was not a top priority. “Liberia needed everything because everything had been destroyed,” said Radelet. “And so, where you put it in terms of your priorities was an open question because she was trying to deal with the equally urgent issues of trying to build a relationship with Parliament and trying to build the judiciary. The Cabinet operated. It had its monthly meetings. They moved things along.”

FRAMING A RESPONSE

Rogers knew he had to build the Cabinet Secretariat to reform the Cabinet, but he did not know how. “I had a learning curve,” Rogers said.

A few months after Rogers began his work at the Secretariat, the president asked the Africa Governance Initiative (AGI) for help in improving the performance of her office. AGI was a nonprofit organization funded by former U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair that provided strategic advice for partner governments. Sirleaf instructed AGI to find ways to improve coordination and monitoring at the center of government and agreed with the organization’s recommendation to focus on supporting Rogers’ efforts to reform the Cabinet. Josie Stewart, an AGI adviser, began working full time with Rogers in June 2010. She had a one-year contract.

“If you see the Cabinet Secretariat as a key link between the very center and the line ministries, having a team that can facilitate the two-way back and forth is important,” said Stewart.

The roles of Cabinet offices vary across countries and over time. In the parliamentary

tradition, Cabinets are collegial. Ministers consult with their peers at Cabinet meetings and make joint decisions about priorities or about draft bills to forward to the full legislature, and the Cabinet office helps coordinate the process. In presidential systems, the full Cabinet typically meets less often, and the president makes some decisions after one-on-one consultations with the most-relevant ministers. Whatever the setting, core Cabinet office functions include setting standards and deadlines for policy documents; coordinating ministerial proposals to ensure timely budget decisions; facilitating cooperation when policy implementation cuts across several departments; legal review; and legislative liaison. In the decade or so before Rogers assumed his role, some Cabinet offices began to assume more responsibility for follow-up, monitoring and evaluation as well.

In Liberia, the constitution did not define Cabinet’s role. (Constitutions rarely spelled out rules for meetings of ministers or department heads.) Therefore, it was up to the president to outline what the Cabinet was. Rogers and Stewart sought Sirleaf’s guidance. “We thought a lot early on about the concept of what Cabinet could be and what the Cabinet Secretariat could do to support it,” recalled Stewart, referring to her conversations with Rogers and the president.

Sirleaf told Rogers she wanted better policy advice and stronger communication with her ministers, but she was vague on how she wanted the Cabinet to help. With Sirleaf’s requests in mind and believing that Cabinet could aid in better policy advice and enhanced communication, Rogers decided on a two-pronged approach to strengthening the body. First, the Secretariat would establish procedures for the planning, execution and follow-up of Cabinet meetings. Second, the Secretariat would help ministries formulate policy proposals.

With the first approach, Rogers would ensure the Secretariat set meeting dates in

advance, asked ministers for input on agenda items, and circulated the agenda ahead of the session. Rogers would also try to shorten meeting lengths by setting an amount of discussion time for each item on the agenda. The Secretariat would take minutes, note action points and follow up with ministers to chart progress.

By standardizing procedures, like the advance circulation of a meeting agenda, Rogers hoped to signal to ministers the value of Cabinet in the machinery of central government. For the reforms to work, Rogers needed the cooperation of ministers. He would be asking them to take time from their busy schedules to participate in the various stages of the meeting cycle, such as offering suggestions for agenda items, and he knew that he would face resistance unless ministers felt they were getting something out of Cabinet.

Rogers already sensed that ministers viewed him with some suspicion and was unsure whether they would cooperate. “The temptation, of course, was that as director general of the Cabinet, because you work in the office of the president and because you wield all this power over ministers, some of them might think you might be a threat to them,” Rogers said. “If they don’t do something right, [they think] you might complain to the president or you might want their job.” To win their cooperation, he needed to offer them something in return.

Rogers appreciated the fact that ministers prized the chance to impress the president, which a minister could do by submitting a strong policy proposal to the Cabinet. He felt he could appeal to that sense of pride. The principles he wanted ministers to adopt would increase the chances that they could impress others: Documents submitted to Cabinet should be clear and complete so that the decision makers could quickly understand what the issues were and could make informed choices without getting bogged down in the

details. But without strong support staffs, ministers found it difficult to assemble detailed policy proposals. Rogers felt the ministers would welcome the Secretariat’s help in developing their proposals for that reason.

Aside from securing the goodwill of the ministers, the Secretariat could provide a quality control check on documents. The Secretariat could ensure that ministers consulted their staffs when formulating documents, that the policies presented all possible options, and that the proposed programs were properly budgeted.

The president gave Rogers and Stewart wide latitude to make changes. Rogers would look to establish subcommittees in the future, but for now he would focus on the meeting and on the processes around it that were necessary to make Cabinet effective. As their first order of business, Rogers and Stewart decided to hire a staff. Since their reforms would focus on both processes and policy, they decided to recruit a program coordinator to oversee the logistics and a policy analyst to help ministries develop policy proposals. In deciding whom to hire, Rogers and Stewart sought candidates who were politically savvy, could work effectively with senior officials and Cabinet members, could offer strong organizational skills, and had experience delivering projects on deadline.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

In the fall of 2010, Rogers hired a program coordinator and a policy analyst. The Ministry of State had earlier assigned Rogers an office manager and given the Secretariat its own office, one floor below the president’s. The John Snow Institute, the nonprofit affiliate of development consultancy John Snow Incorporated, paid the salaries of the program coordinator and the policy analyst; the Ministry of State covered the office manager’s salary. (Rogers was already on the Ministry of State’s payroll.)

Revising procedures

The Secretariat got to work immediately on creating a Cabinet directory. Rogers hoped the directory, containing the phone numbers and email addresses of the ministers and deputy ministers, would make it easier for Cabinet members to reach out to one another if they had questions or concerns. The directory received an overwhelmingly positive response from the Cabinet, and some ministers suggested it would be helpful if the directory also included the contact information of ministers' assistants. Rogers' team promptly made the update and circulated a revised version.

The Secretariat next turned to the issue of building an agenda for the Cabinet meeting. An agenda could help focus the meeting and give it a sense of purpose. Rogers recognized that Cabinet meetings dragged on for hours, in part because of the number of items listed on the agenda and also because the Secretariat had not designated anyone in the meeting to move the discussion along. Rogers wanted to ensure that all Cabinet officials had the opportunity to propose items for the agenda, but he also needed to prioritize the items that made it on. Moreover, Rogers' vantage point at the center of government made him uniquely positioned to offer his own items for discussion. A well-formulated agenda could prevent the conversation from getting bogged down on small matters.

Approximately three weeks before a scheduled Cabinet meeting, Rogers would send a request to the ministers asking whether they had items for the agenda. He also requested that the ministers submit any policy documents they wished to present. Before agreeing to include an item on the agenda or allow for a presentation on a policy document, Rogers asked the minister to justify why it was prudent to discuss the item in Cabinet. In his gatekeeper role, Rogers could shape the dialogue at the highest decision-making meeting in the government. But he also risked

damaging his rapport with ministers and losing their trust if he failed to include what they wanted on the agenda. Anticipating this delicate problem, Rogers never turned down an item outright, but he would suggest alternatives, like noting something on the agenda as background information but not for discussion. To reduce the lengths of Cabinet meetings, Rogers set a specific length of time for discussion of each item, which he listed on the agenda. Because ministry staff found it difficult, if not impossible, to send attachments over the unreliable Internet connection, they often brought documents to the Secretariat's office on a flash drive.

Three or four days before the Cabinet meeting, Rogers would share a draft of the agenda with the president. She often asked him to defend each item. "I'd go up to her sometimes with the agenda, and she'd ask me, 'Why did you do this?' or 'Why did you do that?'" said Rogers. Prior conversations he had had with the ministers helped him answer the president. Sirleaf would often add to the agenda.

Rogers would then finalize the agenda, and the Secretariat's program coordinator, John Logan, would send it to the ministers and their assistants via email. (Prior to joining the Secretariat staff, Logan had pursued graduate studies in Ghana and had worked in a number of Liberian ministries, including the Ministry of Transport.) To ensure the ministers received the agenda, Office Manager Samuel Toe traversed Monrovia, dropping off at each minister's office the copies of the agenda and any Cabinet papers that had been submitted to the Secretariat.

When it came to the actual meeting, there were three very visible changes. First, Rogers kept time and would tell participants if they ran over. Second, whereas Rogers had always taken minutes, now Logan took minutes, which he wrote by hand because, he said, "Cabinet ministers abhor the ideas of electronic gadgets like computers being in the room." It would have been

impossible for Logan to produce a transcript of the conversation by hand, but the lack of a computer actually provided the opportunity to prioritize what should be included in the meeting notes. “There is a strategy we follow when recording the minutes,” Logan said. “You have to be very keen as the discussion is ongoing to see which points are very important and should be included in the notes.” And third, Rogers began each Cabinet meeting by reviewing the action items agreed to in the previous meeting.

After the meeting, the Secretariat staff gathered for what it called a Cabinet post mortem. Rogers said the staff reviewed how the meeting went and would ask questions like, What were the strengths? What were the weaknesses? and What did we see that went wrong that we could correct the next time? Logan then typed up the minutes. He also created a spreadsheet with two columns. One column listed the action points from the meeting. He labeled the second column Percentage Complete but left the rows blank. He emailed the minutes and spreadsheet to the ministers and their assistants, and Toe delivered copies to the ministries. The Secretariat asked that ministry staff put numbers in the boxes corresponding to the action points that were their responsibilities and return the spreadsheet before the next meeting.

Securing cooperation

The president’s view of Cabinet evolved over time. Initially, neither the president nor her ministers saw much utility in Cabinet meetings. Yet as the Secretariat’s reforms—like focused discussion in meetings on whether ministries had addressed action items—began to take hold, Sirleaf began to realize the Cabinet could be a useful tool for governing.

In March 2011, Rogers briefed the president on the changes he had implemented. His presentation marked a turning point in Sirleaf’s view of what the Cabinet could be. Because she

chaired Cabinet meetings, Sirleaf was already aware of the visible changes like Logan’s meeting minutes and the addition of a structured agenda with discussion times for each item. In his briefing, Rogers told the president how his staff communicated regularly with ministers and ministers’ staffs before and after meetings. Stewart recalled the president complimented Rogers on his work. From that day forward, “She began to speak openly in the Cabinet meetings about collective responsibility and the concept’s being important to her that if things were agreed to in Cabinet, everyone was responsible to support it,” said Stewart.

Documenting processes

By the spring of 2011, Rogers had been director general of the Cabinet Secretariat nearly two years. He felt it important to put in writing what he had been able to accomplish and decided to create a Cabinet manual. Although the Commonwealth Secretariat in London had developed a Cabinet manual, which they circulated throughout Africa, the Secretariat wanted to document the unique aspects of the Liberian model. Rogers and Logan drafted the document with input from Stewart.

The manual explained what the Cabinet was and its importance to the governing process. According to the manual, Cabinet’s main role was “to provide advice to the president on policy issues and manage the delivery of government priorities. Under the direct guidance and supervision of the president, the Cabinet seeks to bring collective wisdom to the conduct of government business. Cabinet discusses issues of significant national interest and recommends and decides on actions to take in advancing these issues into policies.”

The manual also outlined the roles and responsibilities of the Cabinet Secretariat and ministers to the Cabinet process. For instance, the document noted which items should be brought to the Cabinet meeting and which should not.

Items for Cabinet discussion included those that the president requested, those that affected several ministries or agencies and required cross-government support, and matters of significant national interest. The manual stated that anything related to the day-to-day delivery of a ministry or agency's individual responsibilities were not to be brought to Cabinet. The manual also provided guidelines on preparing for and participating in Cabinet meetings. Ministers were to submit documents at least one week before a Cabinet meeting, and presentations in Cabinet were not to exceed 40 minutes each.

The Cabinet manual helped institutionalize process changes. Rogers said the manual also had a signaling effect. As its first publication, it established the Secretariat as a viable office in the presidency—one with rules and procedures. Rogers recalled that he introduced the manual at a Cabinet meeting in May 2011 and gave each minister a copy. He recalled that the president flipped through the manual, said it would be really useful, and advised her ministers to stick to it. The director general said Sirleaf's endorsement bolstered the Secretariat's credibility and empowered the office to follow up with ministers on items both before and after meetings.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Rogers had made the strengthening of the Cabinet policy proposal process a key priority. In that respect, the role of the Secretariat (and its cousins in other countries) was very delicate, however. There would always be differences of opinion over policy. Any adviser had to be able to present important information about design and impact in an unbiased way and also help discern which policies would best advance the president's agenda. Finding someone with the right combination of qualifications, experience and the ability to work with ministers proved difficult. In fact, the person hired to the role found that the

position was not to his liking and left a little more than a month after taking the job.

Rogers did not hire a new policy analyst for two reasons. First, there was a time crunch. It had taken Rogers and Stewart roughly three months to find the initial analyst. Stewart's contract lasted only until June 2011, and Rogers knew it could take months to recruit a new person to the role and many more months for Rogers and Stewart to train the new hire. Moreover, Sirleaf was up for reelection in October, and the Secretariat staff would almost certainly change if a new administration took power. Second, Rogers' plate was already full by trying to implement process changes to the Cabinet meeting cycle. Rogers and Stewart realized they would rather focus on getting the procedural changes right, before they thought about hiring a new policy person.

These events dealt a blow to Rogers' efforts to improve the policymaking function of Cabinet, however. For example, Rogers had to postpone his plan to set up Cabinet subcommittees. It would have taken the dedicated effort of a policy person to get the subcommittees up and running, and neither Rogers nor Logan could find time in their already busy schedules.

Rogers had intended that his policy analyst work with ministers and their staffs to shorten the lengths of policy documents sent to Cabinet for discussion. Ministers were inundated with work and rarely found time to read full documents before they were discussed and voted on. In the absence of a policy person, Rogers asked that each minister include with the papers a one-page executive summary for the president and a two- to five-page summary with recommendations to the Cabinet. "In other words, you summarize your document, and you end up by telling the Cabinet what you want them to do," said Rogers. However, the quality of the submissions varied.

The summaries helped, but the analyst's absence still left holes in the process. Policy papers

would sometimes lack critical details like a budget or a timeline, and the Secretariat did not have the capacity to work with the ministry to fix those issues. Instead, Rogers carved out time from his schedule to skim through the document and note important details that were missing. Before the meeting, Rogers would brief the president on any key information absent from the documents. Since the president chaired the meetings and facilitated the discussion, she was present to ask the ministers to account for the omitted information before the Cabinet voted.

ASSESSING RESULTS

Speaking at the Cabinet Secretariat's office in 2012, Rogers was modest about the positive effects of the changes he had instituted in Cabinet. "We have moved the Cabinet processes and system one notch up."

Norkeh, the minister of posts and telecommunications, said, "I see a very big transformation between then and now." (In 2011, Sirleaf had elevated Norkeh from deputy minister at commerce to minister of posts and telecommunications.) "The short meetings that I went to [before 2011] were not as organized as they could have been, especially in the area of sharing information such as when the Cabinet meeting would be held, what the topic was and getting the documents that we would be discussing. Those things were not very forthcoming like now."

The reforms in Liberia did not go as far as changes adopted by some other countries such as Rwanda and Jordan did, but they still had a positive impact on decision making at the center of government. For example, changes in the procedure for developing agendas helped focus the discussion and shorten meeting times. Rogers said that when he first set time limits on each agenda item, "Some of them [the ministers] would say, 'No, no, I've got to speak more than that; I have so much to present.'" Rogers recalled his reply

was, "No, you're not here just to present. You're also here to have a discussion of what you present and also to have the Cabinet make a decision." Whereas in 2009, Cabinet meetings would often last upwards of five hours, by 2012, the average Cabinet meeting lasted three and a half hours.

Rogers' reforms helped the president realize her Cabinet could be an asset to her. "In the beginning, I thought the president saw my role mostly as just organizing meetings," said Rogers. "But now I think she knows I am not just one who organizes meetings, but this office can also help her in following actions."

Ministers said that improvements in the ways meetings were planned such as by sharing documents ahead of time led to more-productive discussion and helped them better understand what colleagues at other ministries were doing. "There are certain agencies, for example, that I need to work with on a regular basis," said Florence Chenoweth, the minister of agriculture. "These include Public Works, Youth and Sports, Education, Health and Social Welfare, and Commerce and Industry. We are working with them anyway, so I'm not going to the Cabinet meeting to learn what they're doing. But you can learn from other agencies you're not doing a lot of collaboration with. I just like the idea that we can come together and share."

The introduction of a spreadsheet that listed action points and tracked progress enabled the president to see how ministry-led initiatives were evolving. Stewart said, "The shift in the time I've been here—from the content of Cabinet discussions focusing on talking about what's going on to reporting on what you've delivered and what your constraints are—has almost turned it into a bit of a program management board to help the president be able to get things done." Though it remained unclear whether the president could mobilize her office to assist a minister who was struggling to advance items listed on the action sheet, the tracking system did help spot problems.

However, challenges remained. For example, the spreadsheets Logan circulated after meetings listed all of the action points but without prioritizing which were the most important. As a result, ministers were sometimes unclear on the order in which their ministries should attend to the items, and it was easy for important action items to get buried under numerous less important tasks. Action tracking also proved difficult because the Cabinet did not attach completion dates to items discussed. A minister would report to Cabinet on progress on an action item, but without a deadline, the Cabinet had trouble telling whether the particular project or initiative was on track.

The Secretariat also struggled to get all the ministries to comply with its requests that they submit information in advance. The president's endorsement of the Cabinet manual encouraged the ministers' cooperation, but faced with capacity problems at their own ministries and having to deal with constraints on their time, ministers still had trouble fulfilling their obligations to Cabinet. Rogers said the compliance rate improved during his tenure, though the Secretariat did not keep data that would have verified his assertion.

The absence of a policy analyst who could have worked with ministries to develop their proposals meant that documents that came to Cabinet for discussion usually lacked important details. "Sometimes Cabinet ministers basically leave it up to their junior officers to do those things, and sometimes [the junior officers] don't do it properly," said Rogers. Based on the briefing she had received from Rogers, the president would ask ministers about the missing details. But Cabinet would still approve plans in principle, on the condition that changes were made to the

document. However, it was difficult to ascertain whether the appropriate updates happened.

REFLECTIONS

In the development of rapport with ministers and the president, personal aptitudes often shaped success. John Logan, the Secretariat's program coordinator, said the rapport he and Momo Rogers, the director general of Cabinet, developed with the ministers played a role in the ministers' acceptance of and compliance with the new rules. "The biggest change here, I think, is the relationship we established with all of the ministers," said Logan. "Whenever they see Rogers, they are very happy to give any information. Whenever they see me, they are very happy to talk to me. Even some of the ministers call me from their personal phones to ask for XYZ information."

Rogers added: "They know that what I'm trying to ask for is in their best interest... The only reason they wouldn't answer when I call is that they're in a meeting, but as soon as they leave the meeting, they will call me right back. 'DG. What's wrong? Anything?'"

Rogers and Logan connected with the ministers in part by providing them with the information they needed to perform well in front of the president. "As the director of the Cabinet, you have to make sure everybody is prepared the best way possible so that when they are there, they feel they can contribute if they want to," said Rogers. "I'm sure there is someone who will come and tell me you can make it better. But everybody who has been in government tells us this time around, the Cabinet is functioning much better than it ever did."



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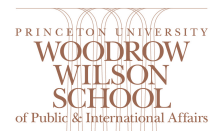
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