PROMOTING INCLUSIVE GROWTH
A New Challenge for the Centre of Government

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Summary
The 2015 Centres of Government meeting focused on the role of the centre in steering the priority work of government from conception to effective delivery, and, specifically, how the centre can drive an inclusive growth agenda. One of the criticisms facing governments today is that the plans and strategies they develop do not always generate real change in people’s lives. Citizens are increasingly aware of the scale of challenges such as inequalities, migration and climate change, and they expect governments to look beyond electoral timetables, political affiliations and bureaucratic silos to find durable solutions. Senior officials from the prime minister’s or president’s offices of 34 member and non-member\(^1\) countries and the European Commission participated in the meeting. The discussion drew on their direct experience of managing complex, politically sensitive initiatives ranging from the current refugee/migration crisis response and emissions to digitalisation, public sector restructuring, poverty reduction and inclusive growth, each of which implies striking a balance between “centralisation” and co-ordination.

The meeting took as its starting point the outcomes of the OECD ministerial meeting on “Public Governance for Inclusive Growth”, which underlined that achieving inclusive growth is in large part a governance challenge that requires careful alignment of policies and resources across departments and agencies. Participants were invited to discuss how centres of government can draw on their unique assets to drive this kind of ambitious agenda. The meeting was organised around three main themes: (i) setting a common agenda to guide action across government ‘the what’, (ii) sharing knowledge and evidence to support decision-making and policy design ‘the why’, and (iii) the role of the centre in policy delivery ‘the how’.

\(^1\) Colombia, Costa Rica, Egypt, Latvia, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Peru, Romania, South Africa.
Participants underlined the importance of setting clear goals and objectives from the outset and welcomed the trend towards more focused government programmes structured around fewer but more strategic priorities.

The role of the centre in this process was likened to a lighthouse, showing where the rocks lie while allowing the ship’s course to be determined politically. It was agreed that a common agenda needs consistent political support from the head of government and senior ministers. This encourages ministries to commit to strategic and innovative projects and overcome the many administrative disincentives that hamper horizontal collaboration. Building a strategic alliance between the centre and the ministry of finance was also identified as an important way to promote a common agenda that has traction with departments. For practical reasons, efforts to reduce the number of participants around the table was seen as helpful — while formal Cabinet or government-wide deliberation and decision-making remains important, priority initiatives can be more effectively driven by smaller ministerial teams. It was also acknowledged that CoGs faced different pressures depending on the political and cultural environment in which they operate.

The common agenda should, where possible, be built around high-profile outcomes that offer tangible rewards in terms of business or citizen impact for participating ministries. Citizen input can also be leveraged to generate momentum and overcome resistance either within government or from other vested interests. To get this buy-in from citizens, however, the centre needs to better communicate to citizens the goals of priority initiatives, particularly those with longer-term impacts.

Participants agreed that mastering knowledge and evidence is crucial to many different aspects of the centre’s work. For example, centres of government are engaged in broad evidence-gathering efforts to define credible development trajectories such as using foresight studies and crowd-sourcing citizen preferences to help decision-makers understand and balance options. Evidence is also collected by the centre to help identify good practices to inform and adjust policies at the practitioner level. With respect to evidence and knowledge sharing, participants underlined the need to set clear objectives at the planning stage. Without realistic and agreed objectives, targets are meaningless and can waste effort and drain enthusiasm.

The centre faces a particular challenge in translating data collected at national level into usable advice for sub-national governments, which are often the principal providers of public services. The other challenge for the centre is to have evidence systems that provide the right data at the right time. Evaluation mechanisms with a quick turnaround were one example of how to ensure that data informs policy development in a timely manner. Centres of government are now becoming more active in using open data to empower citizens. At the same time, qualitative evidence, often drawn from face-to-face engagement, remains an important source of information on citizens’ perceptions of the quality of government action. Data and evidence are only one input into the decision-making process — political choices are still needed and the presentation of issues by the centre has to reflect political realities. Finally, the centre needs to be more effective in working with the media, particularly with respect to how it communicates evidence.

The issue of how the centre can support actual policy implementation is crucial in many countries. While there are compelling reasons for the centre to be more proactive in overseeing delivery, there are also obvious reasons for caution — for example, the risk of “mission creep”. Participants noted that in many cases the “what” can help identify the “how” — with the central steering being the best option in some but not all cases. The delivery architecture for complex policies such as inclusive growth covers a huge range of government and non-government actors, at national and local levels, with diverse powers,
motivations and interests. To be effective, the centre needs to have a good understanding of the ‘organigramme’ of delivery; in other words, what are the relationships that have an impact on the delivery of policies and how can the centre support these relationships. At the same time, the centre needs to explore how to facilitate leadership by specialist line ministries so that the centre is not the default option and to ensure that key policies are not “orphaned” or dumped at the centre.

Even though the centre is taking on a more delivery-focused stance in many countries, there are limits to its influence that derive from “distance from the front line”. These need to be recognised, and departments should get the credit for good results. Nevertheless, the centre needs to retain some capacity to be involved in detailed discussions on policy and progress with departments, which argues in favour of flexible systems to bring in skilled personnel to the centre when required.

In light of the general interest in how the centre drives implementation, OECD proposed a mid-year meeting of the network to explore in more detail practical issues of delivery in a more specific policy area. Options discussed included global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals, and areas such as integrity and the role of the media.