

Unclassified

GOV/PGC/MPM/M(2013)1

Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Économiques
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

26-Nov-2013

English - Or. English

**PUBLIC GOVERNANCE AND TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT DIRECTORATE
PUBLIC GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE**

GOV/PGC/MPM/M(2013)1
Unclassified

SUMMARY

**32nd meeting of the Network of Senior Officials from Centres of Government
23-25 October 2013
Santiago, Chile**

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JT03349246

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English - Or. English

SUMMARY

Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government (CoG)

23-25 October 2013

Recovering public trust in challenging times through a strategic state

The 32nd Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government (CoG) brought together cabinet secretaries, heads of the prime minister's office and their equivalents from 30 countries, including several Latin America states and the European Commission, to discuss the challenges facing the Centre today. The opening remarks by the President of Chile, Sebastián Piñera, and OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría underlined that the role of the Centre is now more crucial than ever in today's difficult economic and social environment. The meeting provided an opportunity to exchange perspectives and good practice on how the Centre of Government can play its role more effectively and how and where it needs to be strengthened.

Participants agreed that current economic and social uncertainty, in a context of declining trust in government in most OECD countries, affects the work of the Centre of Government very directly. The Centre is expected to demonstrate that it has a clear vision for recovery and that it can give clear direction, particularly on cross-departmental or strategic priorities. The Centre must translate this vision into actions that can mobilise key actors. Participants noted that this transmission of political vision into policy action must be accompanied by a positive, optimistic attitude in order to motivate. Their role at the political-administrative interface was highlighted during a lively Q&A with President Piñera.

The crisis tested the capacity of the Centre of Government to introduce reforms informed by the lessons of the crisis. There has been general support for seizing the opportunity offered by crisis to promote difficult reforms, but, as signs of economic recovery become stronger, participants agreed that this appetite for reform could weaken. An important argument to maintain the pressure for reform is provided by the examples of several countries that were shielded from the worst effects of the current crisis by effective and far-reaching reforms undertaken during previous shocks. Participants underlined that crises of different kinds seem to be becoming more regular and that the centre needs to play a role in ensuring that necessary reforms to promote economic and social resilience are put in place, despite the presence of many complicating factors such as complex coalitions, minority governments, and so on.

In this complex policy environment, participants stressed the Centre's role in enhancing the quality of decision making by providing clear and evidence-based advice for the Head of Government and Cabinet. This means, on the one hand, objectivity and a realistic assessment of what is possible, and, on the other, finding solutions to facilitate the implementation of a political vision. Bearing in mind that the Centre does not have a monopoly on this advisory function, another key function of the centre is to facilitate the flow of advice and opinion from other sources, including from the local/community level.

Participants also emphasised the importance of good communication capacity at the Centre in order to present convincing arguments and optimistic scenarios regarding the rationale and expected results of proposed policies – as well as the trade-offs involved – to the public. Clarity and frankness can help win citizens' support and confidence.

Trust is clearly a key issue with respect to implementing effective policies. Participants noted that the centre can contribute to strengthening trust by ensuring that the policy-making process, as well as the content and implementation of the policies themselves, are of high quality and meet citizens' needs. They identified measures that can be taken in two areas: 1) improving the Executive's methods and 2) improving

its capacity. Transparency, anti-corruption, open government, and integrated service delivery are all areas related to trust in which the Centre is a driving force. These areas do not fall neatly into specific ministerial portfolios and, as such, some mobilisation led from the Centre is often desirable. In addition to discussing their role in co-ordinating cross-government strategies on issues such as open government and transparency, participants also exchanged experiences on how these issues affect the Centre's staff directly: how to deal with privacy, how to deal with social media, and how to make freedom of information work symmetrically (across government entities, across levels of government, etc.).

Discussion on how to strengthen institutions and capacity at the Centre was supported by information from a new comparative survey to which 32 countries have responded to date [see GOV/PGC/MPM(2013)3 and 4]. The survey shows clearly that governments have very similar needs that give a strong *raison d'être* for the Centre of government, notwithstanding very different political and constitutional contexts. Across presidential, parliamentary and other systems, the three key roles of the Centre are (i) supporting quality decision making at the head of government/Cabinet level, (ii) policy co-ordination across government and (iii) monitoring of the implementation of government policy.

Exchanges focused on how these core functions can be enhanced by, among other things, making the Centre more adaptable/flexible, more focused, more strategic, and a more effective co-ordinator. Participants provided examples of the structural and resourcing efforts that their countries have introduced in these different dimensions to strengthen the Centre (and the OECD Survey provides additional evidence). Policy co-ordination was identified as one of the most rapidly expanding roles of the Centre. Participants described a number of innovations in place to improve cross-department co-ordination and mechanisms to help the Centre facilitate, motivate and incentivise departments and other stakeholders. Piloting and experimenting new ways of collective working seems to be a key role of the Centre.

In the interaction of the Centre of Government with other parts of government, the partnership with the Ministry of Finance is crucial. Steering from the Centre needs to be linked to resources; but the allocation of resources must also support innovative policies led from the Centre. In this regard, the presence of Mr Gerhard Steger, chair of the OECD Network of Senior Budget Officials, was a sign of the importance of linking the work across central agencies including Finance.

Good practice in effective policy co-ordination, including approaches to managing complex policy challenges from a cross-government perspective, will be discussed by the Public Governance Committee at its November 2013 meeting and the background material and outcomes will be made available to CoG participants.

In conclusion, participants underlined that the Centre should be a positive, optimistic force for coherent and innovative policy development and delivery. The discussion showed that the Centre has an essential convening and motivating role in responses to many of the biggest societal challenges facing developed countries today. As such, permanently refining the structure and skills of the Centre is a crucial element in effective public governance. Reactions to the OECD survey suggest broad interest in further comparative analysis by OECD leading to actionable recommendations on key aspects of the structure and functioning of the Centre of Government.