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Working Paper

The role of the centre in driving government priorities: the experience of 'delivery units'

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1 Introduction

The delivery unit approach, which has emerged over the past 15 years, is designed to focus the authority and influence of the centre of government on facilitating the effective implementation of a small set of key priorities. However, the effectiveness of the delivery unit approach depends on it being applied with sensitivity to the political and bureaucratic context, particularly regarding how the unit is positioned in relation to the head of government and the bureaucracy. While a range of valuable techniques have been developed by delivery units globally, uncritical application of the tools used elsewhere can make it harder for a delivery unit to position itself appropriately. This is a particular concern in developing countries where challenges around the availability and quality of data, as well as difficulties in delineating specific priorities to focus on, can make more technocratic and target-driven versions of the delivery unit approach impractical and potentially counter-productive.

This working paper contributes to the small body of literature on delivery units and the even smaller body of literature on delivery units in developing countries. The literature has looked at variations in how the delivery unit model is applied (Gold 2014, Lindquist 2006b), under what circumstances a delivery unit is an appropriate intervention (Shostak *et al*. 2014), the types of problems that a delivery unit can help to resolve (Todd *et al.* 2014), and the importance of focusing on 'political authority and incentives' rather than just the 'technical aspects of delivery' (Hymowitz 2016a).

The paper highlights the need for delivery units to be developed in a way that takes account of how the centre of government operates, in terms of both the institutional and the individual leadership style. This includes considering how the centre of government relates to the rest of the bureaucracy, and whether the head of government inclines towards exercising his/her authority through more formal or informal channels. The paper also explores the challenge of achieving appropriate prioritisation. While the literature on delivery units has rightly emphasised the need for delivery units to focus on a small set of key priorities, the suggestion is usually that this prioritisation needs to be explicit and carried out upfront (Hymowitz 2016b). This paper argues that such an approach will often prove politically unfeasible and that delivery units may achieve more by seeking to inform and influence a more gradual process of prioritisation.

Many approaches but some common lessons and principles

- There is no single model and attempts to apply a predetermined approach tend to fail. The approach needs to be tailored to the political context and the leadership style of the head of government.
- Prioritisation is essential to enable the unit to focus in detail on specific issues, but the unit will often have to promote and inform effective prioritisation through its work.
- Routines are important to ensure sustained focus, continuous learning and iteration.
- Formal reporting needs to be backed up by regular informal interaction, which requires regular direct access to those responsible for implementation.
- Data needs to be regularly available and credible but even very rough data can be useful at the beginning, and analysis of what is happening is often as effective as quantitative data.
- The approach needs to sustain political buy-in but be realistic about leaders' time constraints – most of the work needs to be done through interactions between officials.

2 Background: the emergence of delivery units

The emergence of delivery units has been driven by the political and reputational risks associated with governments struggling to deliver on their commitments, which has promoted a shift towards a greater focus on implementation (Gold 2014).

Elected heads of government (presidents, prime ministers, or their equivalents at the subnational level) have a responsibility to implement their party's manifesto commitments. However, once in office, most of their time is typically spent responding to events and keeping up with a relentless schedule of high profile commitments. They often find they have limited information on what their government is doing to take forward key policy commitments, and what happens to a policy after a Cabinet decision has been made. Yet, they are likely to be judged on the basis of what their government delivers and how it affects people's lives.

Government departments are typically not well set up to adapt to changes in the government's priorities, or to give focused attention to prioritising a particular issue within their larger portfolio of work. When departments run into obstacles outside their control, often because they require inputs from another department over which they have no authority, they may find the centre of government has no dedicated capacity to assist them in resolving problems. Given these challenges, there is sometimes a temptation for the office of the president or prime minister to take direct responsibility for implementing key priorities. This can quickly overburden the centre and divert it from its strategic and coordinating roles, potentially creating a vicious circle as the lack of coordinating capacity causes the centre to resort to direct central implementation, thereby further diverting its energies from its coordinating and strategic roles.

In recent years, governments have paid greater attention to implementation in order to close the gap between government policies and what is actually achieved. This has prompted a greater focus on the specific obstacles to delivery, and how they can be overcome. In many cases it has included moving beyond increasing access to services towards a greater emphasis on quality. Improved understanding of the obstacles to effective delivery has highlighted the need for the centre of government to use its strategic and coordinating role to engage with departments on a continuous basis to ensure the effective implementation of key priorities.

The creation of delivery units is part of this increased focus on implementation. Delivery units have been developed in many countries over the past 15 years as a way of using the political authority of the centre of government to ensure a sustained focus on the key priorities of the administration, and to assist departments in overcoming blockages. The creation of a delivery unit 'signals the priority the Chief Executive is placing on implementation and using his/her authority to accelerate progress' (Shostak *et al.* 2014: 4). Delivery units are typically located in the office of the president or prime minister (or the equivalent head of government at subnational level) and they use the authority of the head of government to play a strategic oversight and coordinating role. The way in which they fulfil this role needs to take account of what other capacity exists at the centre of government (Lindquist 2006a: 312). The focus is primarily on trying to get specific priorities implemented despite broader weaknesses in the system, rather than trying to fix the overall system—although this distinction often proves difficult to maintain in practice.

Defining a delivery unit

Shostak *et al*. define a delivery unit as: ‘a discrete unit with a mandate to use the authority of the chief executive to:

1. focus on improving results, as measured by citizen outcomes in a limited number of priority areas;
2. unblock obstacles when monitoring shows that progress is off track; and
3. build understanding and capability for strengthening the underlying actors and systems/processes’ (Shostak *et al*. 2014: 2).

3 What delivery units do

Delivery units typically engage with the full policy process from planning to implementation and monitoring, but the level of emphasis they give to these different stages varies: there are those that emphasise accountability for results, those that focus on strengthening planning and decision-making, and those that emphasise chasing progress and improving coordination. The UK Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, which was established by the former Prime Minister Tony Blair, placed a great deal of emphasis on accountability for results, but in other cases more emphasis has been placed on a unit's problem-solving and coordinating role. Brazil's experience in the 1990s provides an example of how a dedicated unit at the centre could act as a process chaser, keeping track of progress on key projects and helping to resolve obstacles to implementation.

In most cases the delivery unit also works with departments to improve the quality of implementation plans by identifying the key steps that need to be taken and developing consensus on how best to track progress. In the UK and a number of other countries delivery units have also worked with departments to conduct rapid in-depth assessments. This enables the delivery unit to bring a fresh perspective to departmental thinking in order to identify a viable way forward and then ensure that the necessary steps are taken. While these forms of planning support rely on conventional departmental planning processes, the Malaysian Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU) pioneered the use of labs as an addition to traditional departmental planning processes. The lab is a forum in which the unit brings the key players together to develop a detailed implementation plan for a particular activity, including establishing their respective responsibilities. This is particularly appropriate for issues that require multiple departments to contribute to implementation as it enables the relevant officials from different departments to sit together and develop a common plan for an issue requiring inter-departmental cooperation.

4 Sustaining focus and political buy-in: stocktakes and other routines

At the heart of the work of a delivery unit are a set of regular processes, often referred to as 'routines' (Barber 2007). The purpose of these routines is to embed a sustained focus on key priorities within the busy schedules of senior administrative and political leaders. They provide an institutional mechanism for regularly tracking progress.

Most delivery units structure their work around periodic high-level meetings to check progress (sometimes referred to as stocktakes). These meetings are either chaired by the head of government or conducted under the head of government's authority. The delivery unit provides a report on progress on key priorities, which is then the basis for discussion and direction regarding what steps need to be taken next. In some countries, stocktakes are heavily focused on ensuring accountability, while in others they are used more as a tool to initiate and facilitate problem-solving. The delivery unit will usually seek to inform decisions about the way forward, either through its presentation or through private briefings to the head of government.

In some countries the stocktake is carried out through dedicated meetings, while in other countries stocktakes are carried out as part of pre-existing government processes. Which option is most appropriate will depend on the head of government's style of leadership. It is likely that a leader who relies more on personal authority will favour holding dedicated stocktake meetings, while a leader who favours a more structured or collective approach may be more comfortable holding stocktakes in a more formal setting, such as Cabinet committee meetings. For example, in the UK the former Prime Minister Tony Blair held dedicated stocktake meetings, whereas stocktakes are presented to the current Prime Minister David Cameron in Cabinet committee meetings. Each approach has its own risks: dedicated stocktake meetings may prove difficult to organise regularly, while Cabinet committee meetings may incline towards compromise positions and be less likely to provide clear direction.

While it is important that stocktakes are owned by the head of government, some countries find ways of ensuring stocktakes (or other meetings for tracking progress) take place even when the head of government is not available. For example, in the UK it was found that holding meetings in Downing Street (the office of the Prime Minister) sent an important message about Tony Blair's backing, even when he was not able to attend in person (Barber 2007: 122). In some cases the presence of a senior official known to be close to the head of government can signal high-level interest in the stocktake even if the head of government is unable to attend.

Stocktakes provide the mandate for the delivery unit to work intensively with departments to ensure any issues are addressed before the next meeting. In addition, delivery units typically develop several other routines to structure their engagements with departments and maintain the focus on their key priorities. These include:

- monitoring, coordination and problem-solving:
  - stocktakes are central to the work of most delivery units and provide a regular forum for updating the head of government, or other senior figures, on the progress of the main activities being tracked by the delivery unit;
  - producing regular written briefings on progress and challenges in implementing the key priorities. In the UK these were submitted to the Prime Minister as a way of keeping the key priorities high on his radar;

  - establishing a dedicated contact person in a department for each activity and encouraging him/her to inform the delivery unit of any challenges so the unit can help to facilitate a resolution where necessary;
  - tracking trends in access to and quality of services can provide the delivery unit with insights into the broader impact of specific departmental activities and enable it to brief the head of government on progress towards key political priorities;
  - delivery units may complement official data with unannounced visits to, or spot-checks of, front-line service delivery sites. Such site visits provide a mechanism to help senior officials keep in touch with what is happening in their departments, and to make the political leadership aware of issues that are affecting the public. Unannounced visits are often best done in conjunction with senior managers from departments, to avoid creating a sense that managerial authority is being bypassed. Site visits should also provide front-line staff with an opportunity to communicate the challenges they face and develop an understanding of the reasons for any shortcomings in implementation; and
  - unannounced visits to service delivery sites by the head of government are sometimes used as a way to create pressure to improve service delivery standards. They also help to ensure the head of government remains focused on the relevant priority by giving him/her first-hand experience.
- improving implementation planning:
  - assessing proposals submitted to Cabinet for their compatibility with government priorities and the likelihood of their being implemented effectively;
  - working with departments to review specific activities or priorities and identify ways of tackling persistent problems;
  - supporting departments in strengthening their implementation plans by providing comments on draft plans and working with the department to address any weaknesses; and
  - convening labs to bring key stakeholders together to develop detailed implementation plans. This approach is particularly relevant for activities that depend on multiple departments or different levels of government.

The combination of measures used provides the opportunity to adapt the delivery unit approach to particular contexts, as well as to changes over time. For example, the UK Prime Minister's Delivery Unit 'went through some major changes in form and function' (Gold 2014: 17): moving away from its original focus on making departments accountable for meeting targets towards a broader interest in the capacity of departments to deliver. It is therefore important that delivery units are formed and assessed on the basis of how well they operate in their given context, not how well they replicate a standard model. Delivery units that work well are likely to adopt different combinations of the tools described above, in addition to creating their own tools and techniques. The table below draws on case studies covered in the literature to provide a brief overview of the wide range of approaches that have been adopted.[1]

Examples of delivery units – diverse approaches	
Australia	The Australian Cabinet Implementation Unit deliberately rejected what it saw as the UK's target-driven approach because of the perverse incentives it could create. The Cabinet Implementation Unit scrutinised submissions to Cabinet in order to ensure adequate consideration had been given to how they would be implemented. It also monitored the implementation of some Cabinet decisions. It focused particularly on issues where there was a high risk of difficulties in implementation.[2]

[1] For an overview of some of the main points of variation see Gold (2014: 18).
[2] Based on Wanna (2006).

Brazil	Although the delivery unit approach is commonly perceived to have originated in the UK, there is a long history of dedicated units at the centre of government overseeing the implementation of certain key priorities. One example is Brazil in the 1990s: the Brazilian Minister of Planning found his department did not have up-to-date information on projects covered in national plans, and that projects were often delayed due to coordination problems between departments. As a result, the department became more involved in tracking progress and facilitating the resolution of coordination problems for a selection of projects that were given the status of key presidential priorities. To do this the department developed strong relations with the individuals responsible for implementation in the relevant departments. This experience highlights the potential to use the coordinating role of the centre to facilitate the implementation of a few key projects.[3]
Chile	A delivery unit was created in the Chilean Presidency in 2010. The delivery unit was intended to make the centre of government more proactive and to ensure a sustained focus on key priorities, rather than simply responding to problems picked up in the media. It also helped to turn broad goals and objectives into clearly specified actions, and it played a coordinating role. Like many other delivery units, prioritisation has been a challenge, with the number of presidential goals tending to increase over time. As a result, delivery reports were often 300 pages long.[4]
Indonesia	The Delivery Unit was established in 2004, inspired by the UK model, but was then disbanded due to opposition within the coalition government, before being re-established in 2009. The unit monitored a selection of action plans. It focused on a combination of (1) 'high-visibility projects that could be completed rapidly and would provide the administration with quick political wins'; (2) 'initiatives they considered the most strategic in the medium-term development plan'; and (3) 'projects that had stalled and would benefit from the president's or vice president's intervention'. However, in practice the unit found it politically difficult to limit the priorities it focused on. The delivery unit checked progress on a quarterly basis and presented progress reports to the President in Cabinet meetings. Quarterly reporting was frequent enough to allow for rapid response to problems but not so frequent that it would overburden departments with reporting requirements.[5]
Malaysia	The Malaysian Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU) is headed by Minister Idris Jala, in the Office of the Prime Minister. The unit identified the lack of implementation planning, what it refers to as 'three foot' planning, as a key obstacle to implementation. The unit's solution has been to hold intensive problem-solving workshops, which it calls delivery labs, to bring key stakeholders together to agree on a detailed approach to implementation and to resolve specific problems. The labs are facilitated by PEMANDU staff and consultants. After the labs, open days are held to make commitments public and therefore to create pressure to deliver. PEMANDU subsequently tracks progress. While the model relies on visible political leadership, the focus is on officials working through issues in detail. Aspects of this approach have been taken up in a number of other countries, including South Africa and Tanzania.
Sierra Leone	The Strategy and Policy Unit was established in the Office of the President in 2008. A key step was to block out time in the President's diary so that he had dedicated time to look at what progress had been made in delivering on key priorities. Through the use of stocktakes, the Strategy and Policy Unit has been able to draw on the authority of the President to resolve specific coordination problems. For example, where a project was delayed due to the release of funds, the President would instruct that the funds be released. There is a question about how this focus on resolving the problem in a specific case relates to wider public service reform efforts. While it could help to draw high-level attention to systemic issues, a study by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) highlighted that it could also lead to less attention being given to underlying reforms, by making it easier to rely on the President's intervention.[6]

[3] Based on Barzelay and Shvets (2004).
[4] Based on Alessandro *et al*. (2014).
[5] Based on Scharff (2012).
[6] Based on Simson (2013) and Hymowitz (2016).

South Africa	The South African approach has placed greater emphasis on the use of monitoring and evaluation methodologies and integration with core government systems than in many other countries. It has focused on the outcomes or impact of government activities through 14 different outcomes drawn from the country's National Development Plan. The outcomes cut across different departments and progress reports are taken to inter-departmental coordinating forums. Other measures, such as front-line service delivery monitoring, citizen-based monitoring and a presidential hotline, are used to provide other sources of information on the quality of service delivery.[7]
Tanzania	The Tanzanian 'Big Results Now' programme was set up in 2012, inspired by the Malaysian lab approach. Unusually, units have been created in six separate ministries, in addition to the President's Delivery Bureau in the President's Office. The large number of staff required has created challenges for staffing the units and has led to significant reliance on international consultants, particularly from the Malaysian unit PEMANDU.[8]
UK	The Delivery Unit was set up in 2001 under the then Prime Minister Tony Blair due to frustration at the slow pace of improvements in public services. Michael Barber, who had held a similar role in relation to education, was brought in by Tony Blair to head the Unit. One of the most important insights from the UK's approach is the need to develop routines (such as monthly notes to the prime minister, quarterly stocktakes and delivery reports) that ensure a sustained focus on key priorities, and the fact that these routines need to be backed up by regular engagement with the relevant officials in departments. The Delivery Unit was disbanded in 2010 by the Conservative-led coalition government but a year later a new Implementation Unit was created with a similar brief but different approach. The Implementation Unit is seen as less interventionist and less data-driven. It also places less emphasis on the link between inputs and outcomes, in order to simplify the overall approach. The units have not had the same level of influence since the departure of Tony Blair and Michael Barber.[9]
Subnational level	Delivery units have also been created at the subnational level: indeed, part of the original inspiration for the UK Delivery Unit came from approaches to monitoring service delivery at subnational level in the United States (Freeguard and Gold 2015). Subnational delivery units include those in Queensland in Australia (Tiernan 2006), and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab provinces in Pakistan. In 2013 Haringey Council in north London established its own version of a delivery unit (Etheridge and Thomas 2015). The challenges and opportunities for subnational delivery units are likely to be different since subnational governments typically have fewer policy-making responsibilities and a flatter hierarchy, but also more limited technical support for the political leadership. It is likely that delivery units at subnational level will need to be able to liaise across the different levels of government. They may also need to have more direct routes for drawing on citizen feedback than is typically the case at national level.

[7] Based on http://www.dpme.gov.za/
[8] Based on Todd *et al*. (2014) and Janus and Keijzer (2015).
[9] Based on Barber (2007), Richards and Smith (2006), Panchamia and Thomas (2014), and Rutter and Harris (2014).

5 Setting priorities

The delivery unit approach depends on the unit being able to restrict its work to a small number of pressing issues (Hymnowitz 2016b). This means prioritising not just the sectors that the unit works on, but also specific issues within those sectors.[10] Without this prioritisation, the unit will struggle to engage with issues in sufficient detail to be able to add value. However, prioritisation is often difficult to achieve and even more difficult to sustain. If the unit is seen to be effective and influential then it is likely to come under increased pressure to take on more issues. It can also be difficult to maintain a clear distinction between the issues the unit focuses on as the top priorities of the head of government and the broad range of activities undertaken by departments – setting a few high profile priorities can easily be interpreted as implying other areas are unimportant. The approach to, and level of, prioritisation will depend on what is feasible within the bureaucratic and political system, and the priorities delivery units focus on look very different in different contexts.

In some cases the priorities are identified by the head of government and the unit may brand a selection of projects as presidential/prime ministerial priorities. However, many delivery units use other, more overtly consensual approaches. For example, they may draw the priorities from cross-cutting development plans, departmental plans or the ruling party's election manifesto. In some cases they may use a formal Cabinet process to ensure prioritisation, but this can result in a large number of priorities being included.

In other cases, prioritisation is easier to achieve through a gradual process, rather than trying to form a clear consensus at the start of the unit's work. One pragmatic approach is for the unit to track a relatively large number of issues at a high level but then engage with a small subset in greater detail. For example, many units focus on the activities that will make the greatest contribution to the government's overall objectives or those where there are major obstacles to implementation.

The delivery unit approach focuses on achieving 'just enough change' to deliver a particular priority without getting drawn into broader issues around civil service reform, budget allocation or planning (Watkins *et al*. 2010). However, this compartmentalisation can be difficult to maintain where planning and budgeting processes operate more as 'rituals' (von Holdt 2010: 5) than as effective mechanisms for focusing the energies and resources of government.[11] This is likely to be a particular challenge in developing countries, and may make it necessary for the delivery unit to engage with (or seek to influence) planning and budgeting processes, with a view to ensuring adequate attention is given to key priorities, rather than reforming the overall planning or budgeting system.[12]

Prioritisation is thus in constant tension with wider civil service reform, as the progress that can be achieved in any one area runs into the constraints posed by more systemic issues. These limits are likely to be reached more quickly in developing countries where systems are typically weaker and capacity constraints greater. The Strategy and Policy Unit in Sierra Leone has used stocktakes

[10] Hymnowitz suggests that it is difficult to define 'the optimal level of specificity'. He suggests that 'an entire sector is too broad, but a specific project too narrow' (2016b: 5).
[11] A particular challenge for the work of delivery units is that budgeting processes are often insufficiently 'adaptive to changing national circumstances', with resources often not being allocated in accordance with government priorities (Matheson and Hoole 2008: 3)
[12] Even in the UK, Michael Barber, the first head of the UK Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, came to recognise the limits on how far it was possible to get by pushing for the implementation of individual priorities in isolation from broader processes of reform. In 2005 Barber remarked that 'the departments were not really up to the task of driving the kind of agenda that we were setting them … we needed to strengthen the departments as institutions.' (Cited in Panchamia and Thomas 2014: 62). Barber ended up advocating for large-scale reforms of the centre of government in the UK (Barber 2007: 291–340) and his successors in the Delivery Unit focused more on issues of departmental capability than on delivery of specific priorities (Panchamia and Thomas 2014).

to focus the authority of the President on resolving specific blockages. For example, where a project was delayed due to the release of funds, the President would instruct that the funds be released. Simson (2013) raises a question about how this focus on resolving the problem in a specific case relates to wider public service reform efforts. While it could help to draw high-level attention to systemic issues, it could also divert attention from the need for underlying reforms by making it easier to rely on the President’s intervention. Simson argues that ‘by supporting a vertical delivery chain, rather than strengthening government-wide governance systems, it runs the risk of increasing the government’s reliance on discretionary solutions that bypass formal rules and discredit broader institutional reform efforts’ (Simson 2013: 5).

The challenge of prioritisation is about finding the right balance between achieving rapid progress on key priorities and supporting wider systemic change that is needed to ensure progress is sustainable. Pushing too hard for specific priorities without simultaneously addressing the wider constraints on the system is likely to have adverse effects in terms of quality and sustainability, and may create perverse incentives that lead to gaming. However, insufficient prioritisation can result in the delivery unit approach being subsumed back into wider and more long-term government activities.

6 What delivery units focus on: striking the right balance between activities and impact

The delivery unit approach is intended to go beyond merely tracking administrative processes and also focuses on the quality of delivery and the level of impact on people’s lives. This distinguishes delivery units from other bureaucratic reporting mechanisms. It also enables delivery units to draw on sources of data other than administrative reports from departments, and so to provide an independent assessment of whether departmental activities are delivering their intended objective.

There is significant variation in how this is done. Some delivery units develop relatively complex systems for assessing impact through a specific monitoring methodology, while others focus more on subjective accounts and analysis of the progress of particular projects. There are risks in both extremes. The former approach can become preoccupied with the technical challenges of measurement, while the latter approach can become overly focused on reporting administrative processes, without demonstrating whether they are having the desired effect. The most pragmatic approach is probably to strike a balance by identifying a few broad objectives or outcomes, such as improving literacy or reducing infant mortality. These broad objectives can then be used as a basis for engaging departments on the particular activities that should be tracked. This balance is likely to be more effective for sustaining political and public interest than an approach that is either heavily data-driven or activity-dominated. In addition, it is important that this balance is suited to the unit’s institutional location. It is unlikely that the office of the president or prime minister will have the necessary expertise to develop and monitor detailed data sets, which is generally better done by departments of finance or planning. Delivery units that prioritise adaptability over a formal methodology are likely to be able to make better use of their position in the office of the president or prime minister.

7 How the data are used: controversies over targets

The quality and availability of data is often a challenge for delivery units. The approach used needs to be realistic about limitations in the availability and reliability of data. Departments can become resentful if they have to keep providing the same information to different oversight bodies, while delivery units can easily end up spending all their time chasing departments for administrative data that tell them little about the actual state of delivery. At its worst, it can mean that the authority of the head of government is being used to collect data and ensure templates are being filled out, which can divert attention from the direction setting and coordination roles of the centre of government.

Data challenges are a particular problem where delivery units seek to use data as an accountability tool at either the departmental or individual level, due to the tensions and perverse incentives this can create. Particular problems also arise where implementing departments feel targets have been imposed on them. It is therefore important that targets are developed collaboratively with departments.

While clear targets can help to focus attention, there is also evidence from the UK and elsewhere that an over-reliance on targets can create perverse incentives and can lead to gaming. Examples include:

- patients being kept waiting in ambulances outside hospitals in the UK as the target for waiting times only starts once they enter the hospital (Bevan and Hood 2006);
- weaker students not being entered for exams in South Africa due to pressure on schools to improve their pass rate (Department of Basic Education 2013);
- police stations in several countries not recording crimes that will be difficult to solve (Bruce 2010, House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee 2014);
- hospitals in China being closed temporarily to meet targets for reducing energy consumption (Harrison and Kostka 2014); and
- local governments in Rwanda meeting national targets for growing particular crops by uprooting crops that are not covered by the target (Chemouni 2014).[13]

The use of targets is more appropriate for less technically complex, but politically challenging, areas. For example, data on teacher attendance rates could help to focus attention on the amount of time teachers spend teaching. By contrast, improving the quality of learning outcomes is likely to require greater emphasis on analysis and more cautious use of data (Todd *et al*. 2014). Too much reliance on targets (and using too many targets) can also mean the delivery unit spends all its time chasing departments for data to fill empty boxes. As a result of these challenges, some delivery units have chosen to place less emphasis on measuring progress against targets than was the case in the UK.

[13] For a fuller discussion of the possible perverse incentives created by an over-reliance on measurable targets, see National Planning Commission (2015).

8 Sustainability of the delivery unit: short-term intervention or permanent feature?

The delivery unit approach depends on the visible backing of the head of government, and his/her successor will often not want to continue an initiative developed by his/her predecessor. Units that emerge gradually may survive longer but their impact may be different – probably focused more on the way the civil service operates than its immediate delivery on key priorities. However, even a unit that only exists for a short period of time has the opportunity to embed new practices within the work of the civil service and may see some of its work continued even if this happens under a different name or organisational form. The approach a unit takes is therefore likely to be different, depending on whether it expects to be a short-term intervention linked to a particular administration or a permanent feature at the centre of government.

9 Conclusion

The delivery unit approach is designed to use the authority of the centre of government to drive pragmatic and incremental reforms. It does this best through being nimble and adaptive. The variation in what delivery units focus on and how they operate provides evidence that several countries have been able to adapt the broad delivery unit approach to their specific context. However, there is also a risk that too much emphasis is placed on applying a particular set of techniques, which can distract attention from the core challenge of how to use the authority of the centre of government to accelerate and improve the implementation of key priorities. From this perspective, the first question to ask in establishing a delivery unit is how it can build on the way the centre of government operates, including in regard to the leadership style of the head of government.

Questions to consider when establishing a delivery unit

- How can the unit build on the way the centre of government operates and the leadership style of the head of government?
- How can the unit ensure political interest is sustained?
- How can the unit be useful to departments?
- How can the unit avoid taking on too many issues?
- How can the unit help to focus attention on the most pressing challenges in the sector?
- How can the unit prioritise a subset of issues for in-depth engagement?
- What issues can the unit seek to resolve and what issues need to be elevated?
- Is the unit more of a data analyst or more of a problem solver?
- What other sources can be used to complement (or challenge) data from departments?
- What balance should the unit look for between early wins and long-term progress?

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