

# Choosing the first among equals

Dan Hymowitz

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## Three steps towards government prioritisation

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- **Build commitment to prioritisation:** Get senior government officials and partners to buy into the idea that prioritisation is essential.
- **Choose the priorities:** A government-led process is needed to decide what the priorities are.
- **Get the priorities to stick:** It is crucial to embed the priorities in the government's thinking and, more tangibly, in government systems.

When United States (US) Vice President Joe Biden travelled to Afghanistan several years ago, he asked the same question to everyone he met – US troops, Afghan officials and members of the army, Afghan citizens and others: ‘Why do you think the US is in Afghanistan?’ People’s answers varied widely, which showed there was a lack of clarity about the US’s mission in the country.

This spawned something AGI calls ‘the Biden test’. When we begin working in a country, we ask everyone we meet, including the president, what the government’s priorities are. The consistency of the answers is one indication of whether or not the government is focused on shared objectives.

AGI doesn’t do this because we like calling governments out for not being in sync. We do it because prioritisation – by which we mean, government picking a small number of objectives on which to focus its resources and capacity – is a pre-requisite for successful delivery, and most governments around the world struggle to do it.



**Dan Hymowitz**

Head of Insight  
and Learning at the  
Tony Blair Africa  
Governance Initiative

[@dhymowit](#)

This paper, the second in AGI's 'Art of delivery' series highlighting lessons from supporting African leaders to implement reforms, looks at why prioritisation is essential, and how it can be achieved.

## Why prioritisation matters

In countless conversations with leaders, we've heard that 'everything is a priority'. For the president of a country with high unemployment, limited infrastructure and a broken health system, this is an understandable position. But prioritisation is an essential step for governments trying to deliver results for citizens. For one thing, as AGI's Chief Executive Officer, Nick Thompson, has pointed out, there are genuine policy trade-offs:<sup>1</sup> subsidising the price of a staple crop might be good for local consumers, for example, but bad for farmers; and measures that spur economic growth may also have environmental consequences. Governments need to confront these choices.

Secondly, there clearly aren't enough resources – financial or human – to do everything. In Liberia in 2012, there was enough government and donor financing to build one set of roads: either roads to connect the county capitals with Monrovia – an approach seen as the most equitable and inclusive; or a different road network that economic analyses found would be best for growth. The government chose to prioritise the 'growth corridor'. The point isn't that this was right or wrong, but that the government had to make a decision. This is exactly the kind of choice governments are there to make on behalf of citizens.

Prioritisation is both more difficult and more important in developing countries. It is more difficult because donors often push government to adopt multiple, politically unrealistic agendas. It is more important because the stakes are often higher: researchers such as Ethan Kapstein have shown that emerging democracies which don't "provide adequate supplies of 'public goods' like healthcare and education are unlikely to succeed".<sup>2</sup> This is even more urgent in post-conflict countries, where there's a need to "generate rapid and visible results".<sup>3</sup> Others, including Lant Pritchett, have argued that fragile states risk "premature overload" if the state tries to do too much.<sup>4</sup>

AGI has supported prioritisation in 10 African countries over the past seven years. We've found that governments need to work through three steps to make prioritisation a reality:



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In practice, these stages are not linear and often need to be revisited. The rest of this paper looks at lessons from each step for governments and partners.

## Step 1: Build commitment to prioritisation

Governments struggle to prioritise because it involves choices between multiple urgent demands, and creates winners and losers. “There are no key four things in my country; everything matters,” one African president said in a meeting a few years ago.<sup>5</sup> We often hear this from leaders.

There's no formula for getting senior government leaders to commit to prioritisation – it takes a mix of persistence and tactics. We've seen that trusted advisers can eventually make a successful case to a president. And sometimes challenging circumstances can be an opportunity to increase the centre of government's appetite to prioritise.

In Sierra Leone, for example, when mining prices dropped in 2014, the government was forced to make tough choices about where to focus its resources. In other countries we've worked with, a retraction in donor support forced the governments to make budget cuts and to decide where to target these reductions.

The following table highlights the moments and mechanisms we've seen used to build commitment to prioritisation effectively, and also to choose priorities and get them to stick. The three steps of prioritisation overlap in practice, and so some of these approaches can be used to support multiple steps simultaneously.

## Windows of opportunity for prioritisation

Prioritisation approach	Type	Example
Political opportunity	Cyclical	<p>Momentum of new presidential term: The 150 day plan at the beginning of President Sirleaf’s second term in Liberia in 2012 defined the targeted actions which the government aimed to achieve during this period.</p> <p>Impending election: In Guinea, the government put extra focus on completing the Kaleta Dam, a project which would double the country’s energy supply, before Guinea’s 2015 presidential election.</p>
	Constructed	<p>Speeches with commitments and deadlines: President Koroma announced that a free healthcare initiative would launch on the 50th anniversary of Sierra Leone’s independence. The public nature of the announcement combined with the symbolism of the launch date generated urgency around this objective.</p>
Contextual urgency	Crisis	<p>During Ebola: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone began to focus largely on eradicating Ebola, putting many other government priorities on hold.</p> <p>Post-Ebola: As the epidemic subsided, these governments developed recovery plans which defined new priorities.</p>
	Financial austerity	<p>In Malawi and Sierra Leone, for example, budget cuts driven either by reductions in donor support or a slump in export markets have forced the governments to choose which policy areas mattered most.</p>
Strategy or planning	Strategic analysis	<p>In one country we’ve worked with, priorities emerged from an economic analysis that led to consensus on the strategy needed to sustain the country’s desired growth and job-creation rate. A prioritised plan for how the government could deliver the strategy followed.</p>
	Planning process	<p>We’ve worked with several countries, including Sierra Leone, that have used the process of developing a new five-year plan (or Poverty Reduction Strategy, PRS) to attempt to define, debate and build cross-government consensus on priorities.</p>

## Step 2: Choose the priorities

How should a government choose what to focus on? In a perfect world, the leader has been elected on a platform or manifesto that provides the answer. But manifestos are often a long list of policy goals and fail to suggest what to prioritise.

Stakeholder consultations are another approach that many countries use as part of their PRS development processes.<sup>6</sup> But while consultations are appealing for their inclusiveness, as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) process illustrates, they're good at generating a list of important needs without actually defining which are the most essential.<sup>7</sup>

What international partners often don't want to accept is that the ultimate choices are the government's, and inevitably those choices need to be political or value-based. If the priorities don't make sense politically, governments are unlikely to focus on them long enough to make sure they're implemented, and without ownership there can't be proper accountability.



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### WHAT ARE THE 'RIGHT' PRIORITIES?

AGI doesn't believe as a partner we should tell government what its priorities should be – that's for the elected government to decide. We do, however, work with governments to define priorities with good characteristics.

What are some of the features of a good priority?

- **Less is more:** A smaller number of objectives – ideally a government-wide number of between three and ten – is more likely to lead to success.
- **Technical and political:** The ideal priority should have broad, deep and sustainable anticipated impact, and also align with the government's political needs and objectives.
- **Right ambition:** Priorities should be pegged to targets that stretch government to its limit, but are also feasible given resource constraints.
- **Right scope:** Perhaps the hardest criterion to define is the optimal level of specificity. Typically, an entire sector is too broad, but a specific project too narrow.
- **Measurable:** The best priorities are measurable so that government can monitor progress and clearly state results.

The following include some of the approaches we've seen used by centres of government to help choose priorities.

## Government planning processes

Using government planning processes makes most sense in places where leadership already buys into the concept of prioritisation, and where there's an existing government mechanism in place.

For example, in 2008, President Kagame set up yearly retreats to help Rwanda's top leaders develop ministerial priorities and implementation plans. At first, these events were not very successful, in part because of sprawling focus on as many as 174 'priority' areas. Rwanda's centre of government was able to improve these National Leadership Retreats significantly by putting more structure around pre-retreat planning. By 2011, the retreats had become "high-level forums for government planning, coordination and accountability"<sup>8</sup> with a targeted focus on six areas.

In Sierra Leone, President Koroma's re-election in 2012 was a useful opportunity to force government to refocus on a smaller number of deliverables. AGI worked alongside the President's Strategy and Policy Unit (SPU) in the Office of the Chief of Staff to develop criteria for assessing what the flagship projects for the next five years should be. This included designing a 'prioritisation matrix', which ministries and agencies in priority sectors used to rate their planned projects and prepare submissions to the SPU.

Once the ministries had made their submissions, the SPU analysed them and briefed the Chief of Staff, to support his negotiation with ministers to agree the final list of 39 new flagship projects. This process also yielded a subset of the 10 highest-priority or 'presidential legacy' projects.

Another approach is to use the process of shaping a PRS. While a PRS can often prove to be the enemy of prioritisation – because of pressure to include everything<sup>9</sup> – it's also an opportunity, because it's a defined moment when a government goes through joint planning.

We worked with one centre of government that used the PRS process to try to make individual ministries define between five and eight priorities each. Admittedly this had limitations. While we found this useful as a mechanism to help get to ministry-level priorities, there was no clear way to get the total list down to a manageable government-wide number.



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Performance contracts can also be a useful way to force choices. As we talk about in the first article in our series on delivery, ‘Too much art, not enough science’, performance contracts are contracts signed by ministers and other senior officials which commit them to specific delivery targets.<sup>10</sup> Their primary use is as an accountability mechanism, but they can also be a useful way to force government to decide priorities. One strength of this approach is that ministers don’t want to disappoint the president and so may be more willing to choose a smaller number of commitments which is likely to be more achievable. One drawback is that the contracts are short-term (e.g. often one year) but sometimes priorities require more time.

### Strategic analysis

Assessments such as growth diagnostics or an analysis of competitive advantages are potential mechanisms to shape government priorities. In one country we’ve worked with, an economic analysis led to a consensus on the strategy to drive growth and job creation and a prioritised plan for where government would need to focus its efforts to deliver that strategy. But it doesn’t always work that smoothly. As with PRSs, we’ve seen that strategy processes, particularly if they’re donor-driven, don’t necessarily result in government making policy choices.

### Step 3: Get them to stick

Often governments say that they agree on the need to prioritise, or that they have identified a set of priorities, but this will not be reflected in their decision-making, allocation of resources or use of officials’ time. Government deciding and stating its priorities is not enough. At least as important is embedding priorities in the government’s thinking and, more tangibly, in key government systems. Without mechanisms to create a ‘rhythm’ of accountability, consistently focused on a single set of issues, governments can struggle to maintain focus, resulting in an ad hoc approach to delivery and poor implementation.

Following the formal agreement of a set of priorities, these are some of the ways we’ve seen governments make sure priorities are integrated into budgeting, planning and accountability processes.

## Align with the budget and other plans

If a government doesn't dedicate resources to an issue, it's a priority in word but not deed. Linking the prioritisation process to the budget and other planning processes is really important. In one country we've worked with, the government had multiple mechanisms for planning and tracking the delivery of different sets of 'priorities', including the annual budget process. AGI worked with the government to bring these together into a single reporting framework, with a single set of priorities, which met the needs of different centres of power. This meant tweaking the timing on some of them, including moving a planning retreat closer to the budget cycle.

We've worked on this in Guinea. President Conde had been clear on the sectors he considered priorities since he started, but the government hadn't always fully defined what this meant at the project level. Furthermore, a disconnected budget process had sometimes meant that priority projects weren't getting funded. In late 2013, AGI supported the Office of the President and other central government institutions to reach consensus on a list of priority projects that were then clearly communicated across government prior to the budget process. The result was a big increase in the proportion of priority projects receiving the financing they needed in the 2014 budget.

One note of caution is that many people, including donors, think that the budget is the priority-setting process. In most systems however this isn't the case – the budget process tends to be good at fitting a set of ministry 'bids' in an overall envelope, but, because budgeting is often a bottom-up process, it can prove to be a poor way of making tough prioritisation calls between ministries. Most of the time, the question should be, how to make sure the budget *reflects* the government's priorities not how to select those priorities through the budget process.

## Using the leader's time

When the leader consistently focuses on an issue, it sends a powerful signal that a priority really is a priority. This is closely linked to performance management and is something we talked about in our first article in this series.

There are a few ways to approach this. A time-use analysis of the leader's diary can be an objective way to assess whether the leader's time is focused on priorities, and to start a conversation about making



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changes. Simple steps can then be helpful. In Liberia, we worked with the President's private office to put in place a more regular, predictable diary for the President, resulting in an increase in time spent on her three priority issues.

### Communicating priorities

If a government communicates its priorities well, it helps to keep it focused and creates accountability. Communication of priorities needs to be clear and visible; using, for example, important moments like a president's state of the union address or the launch of a new development plan to articulate a focus. Equally important is consistency. There is inevitable pressure on leaders to give airtime to many issues. The more this can be resisted in favour of consistent messages about the leader's top issues, the more priorities will stick.

### Choosing the best people for the priorities

A government has truly embedded its priorities when it focuses its best resources on them. This isn't only about financing. Another critical dimension is human resources. In Rwanda in 2010, the government introduced a Strategic Capacity Building Initiative (SCBI) to focus its capacity on four priority areas: energy, agriculture, mining and private sector development. This means that Rwanda's top young talent is increasingly working in these sectors. In other countries we've seen the president place their most effective people in the ministries responsible for their priority sector.



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## Conclusion

For leaders, prioritising is always hard. It means saying no to some demands and alienating stakeholders. But it's essential because there is often a tension between competing policy areas and there are never enough resources to accomplish everything. Prioritisation is even more necessary in fragile countries where resources are highly constrained and where delivering tangible results can mean the difference between an emerging democracy surviving or not.

That leaves governments with difficult choices about where to focus; choices that come down to values and judgment calls, as with Liberia's decision on roads. As partners we also have a choice to make: between pressuring countries to focus on what we think is most important, and respecting and supporting governments' decisions.

## Endnotes

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