Before and poverty share thank As and outstanding if persists, of "Overcoming we agree with the Government of the President Juan Carlos Varela, I want to thank the Government of Botswana and the UNDP Botswana for kindly inviting us to share with you the experience of Panama in the implementation of policies to reduce poverty and promote human development, considered as a main priority for the President and his Cabinet.

Before sharing with you our lessons learned and best practices, allow me to give you some context:

Panama has been the country with the highest growth rate in Latin America and the Caribbean for the last decade, with an average rate of 6.2%. At the same time, poverty and inequality have been progressively reduced, going from 29.8% of general poverty in 2010, to 22.1% in 2016. The same trend applies to extreme poverty figures, which decreased from 17.6% in 2010, to 9.9% in 2016. Furthermore, according to the Gini Coefficient, inequality in Panama has also reduced, going from 0.56 in 2002, to 0.485 in 2016.

Even though poverty and inequality keep decreasing, we must recognize that these results are not proportional to our economic growth. Beyond averages, there are dramatic disparities among regions. For example, while in some provinces the poverty rates are under 5%, in others poverty rates are higher than 90%. The government of President Juan Carlos Varela has been the one with the greatest investment in a social agenda, but we are well aware that this is not enough to ensure that no one is left behind. Hence, he has requested his whole Cabinet to go further and focus on those territories that have been historically left behind.
Consequently, the Social Cabinet, presided by the Vice President, and coordinated by the Ministry of Social Development, created the plan “Panama: A country for all – Zero Poverty”. The Plan identifies the territories with the highest poverty rates, both monetary and multidimensional. The Plan’s core strategy unifies the tools for identifying beneficiaries of social programs, focusing them in order to ensure that its impact is felt by those who really need it the most and are often left behind.

Following a multidimensional perspective, the plan relies on the National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)’s dimensions and indicators as tools to articulate and coordinate the activity of all the institutions that integrate the Social Cabinet, ensuring that the programs and services are delivered as an integrated package that guarantees the basic services needed for families to escape from poverty in a sustainable way.

Additionally, to support the work of the Social Cabinet, each prioritized territory has a member of the cabinet taking on an oversight role, to follow up and help to ensure that every institution is doing their job in their assigned territory.

Finally, to facilitate the articulation, there are 4 tiers or levels (political, technical, local and family). At the national level, there is The Social Cabinet, who coordinates the plan’s implementation. Then, there is the Multi-sectoral Commission, who focuses on the technical side of the plan. At the local level, hence in each prioritized territory, there is a Local Social Cabinet, who is responsible for articulation in the territory, as well as on implementing a Territorial Development Plan, designed with the participation of the local leaders and authorities. Finally, at the center of the strategy and at the family level, there is a personalized family plan, developed with the family itself, in response to their specific needs.

Moreover, a key part of any poverty reduction plan, is to couple this kind of initiative with actions led, to some extent, by civil society. For example, we are in the process of establishing a Multi-sectoral Platform for the SDGs, in which the public and private sector, as well as academia, will be able to collaborate in the efforts needed in the long term, to achieve the SDGs. In order to be sustainable, this strategy will be framed as a State Alliance, instead of a government alliance. The platform will provide a space for dialogue and will be an opportunity for social audits and projects led by the civil society, leveraging on the strengths of each stakeholder.

With this in mind, and in the hope that you find our experience useful for your own poverty reduction strategies, I will now share with you the best practices we have encountered to be efficient and that could be replicable for other programs or strategies.

In the first place, get people involved in designing solutions. Never assume that a high-level governmental position nor a degree or PHD will let you understand better than those who live in poverty conditions what does it mean to be poor, and what will it take to get out of poverty.
Second, do not be fooled by figures and averages. Behind averages, usually, there are huge disparities. This means that while some might be doing well, there are others being left behind. Moreover, behind each figure, there is an individual, who thinks, feels and dreams. Therefore, presenting poverty reduction results in figures is a good reference that shows that we are moving forward, but we can’t proudly celebrate it until we ensure that no one is left behind.

Third, always have in mind the importance of advocacy inside government as much as external advocacy. We must ensure there is a holistic commitment from all ministries. This means, getting everyone on board, caring and discussing about the roots of poverty, further than just considering what’s inherent to a specific Ministry.

Another key point is that, from the very beginning, you should consolidate formal spaces for articulation, in at least 4 levels: Political, technical, local, and at the family level.

Equally important is to have (and use) robust tools to orient public policy, such as the MPI, which not only measures but also gives enough information for monitoring and guiding evidence-based policies, while favoring articulation and coordination among sectors.

Finally, and a point often overlooked, make sure to promote partnerships using SDG#1 as a starting point to connect among sectors, both in the public and private sector.

There’s hope. We have all experiences to share and lessons learned, some might have worked, some didn’t work as planned, but the fact that we all have a testimony means that we are all trying, and that’s a start, but I urge you to try harder. From all the things I’ve shared today with you, if you could leave with at least one thing, I would like it to be this: Forget the figures and think of the people behind them, and whenever you are going to make an important decision, think of them again, and think with them.