



Foreword to the Special Edition of JeDEM 9(1): The Open Government Partnership

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Six years ago, a multitude of factors came together which were responsible for giving birth to the Open Government Partnership (OGP). There was a desire to leverage digital technologies to engage citizens in government, an acknowledgment that emerging economies were as much the hotbed of ideas and innovation as developed ones, and fatigue with traditional multilateralism and development assistance. With this backdrop, and recognizing that people around the world were increasingly demanding governments to be fast, smart, transparent and accountable, President Obama in partnership with government and civil society leaders from seven developed and emerging economies launched OGP. As President Obama put it, an overarching goal was to ensure that governments genuinely serve their citizens, rather than helping themselves.

OGP is intended to be the home of reformers who want to redefine and strengthen citizen-state relations. It is a platform where policymakers can leverage communications technology, harness the collective wisdom of the people, and exchange and experiment with ideas from their peers on how to make government work better for the people. This enthusiasm led to the rapid growth of the partnership from 8 to 75 national governments in six years, a growing set of subnational governments, as well as thousands of civil society organizations, who have together developed over 2000 individual policy reforms to make government more transparent, responsive, participatory and accountable.

The partnership has achieved much today. While the accomplishments vary significantly across the partnership, a set of OGP countries have implemented transformative reforms wherein citizens are shaping public policy in places like Estonia, Madrid, and Paris. Citizens are following public budgets, contracts, and public services in Georgia, Ukraine, and Mongolia. Moreover, citizens are tracking elite capture and grand corruption in Chile and Ireland. We are beginning to see groups of OGP countries advancing global norms in areas such as open contracting and beneficial ownership transparency. More broadly, OGP has strengthened the international effort and normative framework for openness in government. Tunisia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Afghanistan and Burkina Faso have all passed strong legislation in an attempt to qualify for OGP membership. High-level political officials, spurred in part by international peer pressure and the preexisting reforms in their countries, have made bold, public commitments in support of open government. Finally, what began as a bold and challenging idea to governments – co-creating

policy reforms with civil society based on equality and mutual respect—is now a much more established practice in more than half of OGP countries.

However, progress is never linear. High-level political commitment has not necessarily translated into the crucial "political cover" necessary for mid-level government officials to design and implement ambitious reforms. While countries are getting better at fulfilling their OGP commitments, the ambition and potential impact of those commitments have not improved. According to the data collected by the Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM), only 17 % of commitments are potentially transformative, and only 5% of commitments are starred, meaning they are transformative, relevant, specific and completed. Many of these commitments also do not have direct public influence in policymaking, focusing mainly on transparency reforms in place of public dialogue, agenda-setting, and accountability.

Notwithstanding the challenges within the partnership, today OGP is also operating in a geopolitical landscape exhibiting deeper, more worrying global trends than those which initially drove its conception. Angry public backlash against globalization, rising inequality, and elite capture is fueling populist and reactionary politics. Civic freedoms are increasingly under attack in over 100 countries, authoritarianism is on the rise, and trust in government is at an all-time low.

Governments are facing a crisis of legitimacy, and they need to deliver credibly to address the concerns of their citizens. For OGP, this has meant taking a hard look at our track record so far and infusing the partnership with a drive to demonstrate tangible benefits in people's lives. Countries need to implement more transformative reforms on areas like citizen empowerment, political corruption, climate change, civic freedoms and service delivery - issues that are at the very heart of state credibility with citizens. These reforms need to be designed, implemented and delivered with deeper civic participation and inclusion of the most marginalized voices. Domestic champions - the mid-level government officials and civil society networks and coalitions - need greater support to use the OGP platform to their advantage. If OGP can deliver these, it can potentially serve as a countervailing force against the rise of authoritarianism and citizen distrust, and a positive global force for deepening democracy and openness.

As we move forward with this set of priorities, we need facts, empirics, and objective analysis to underpin decision-making and action. OGP reformers need to access research and evidence that identifies which reforms work, for whom and under what conditions. The IRM plays this learning and accountability function within OGP, producing progress reports and creating critical points of reflection and improvement throughout a country's action plan cycle. However, these efforts have to be complemented by further investigation at the level of individual policy reforms, particularly ambitious ones where there is a need to understand and navigate the complicated politics surrounding them.

As part of our commitment to credible, evidence-based policy and the need to support reformers in the field, we are encouraging academic work on a few selected areas in the next few months. First, ambitious open government commitments that aim to change the status quo often encounter strong political resistance from vested interests. However, often we see reformers within and outside of government who can build successful coalitions and involve citizens at the

grassroots to tackle resistance. OGP reformers would benefit from an increased understanding of what successful coalition building efforts look like across different issue areas and contexts. Second, there has been considerable reporting on shrinking civic space as a result of suppressive laws or violence, as well as failures of the State to protect basic freedoms. To understand how to navigate this challenge, OGP reformers need to know how reforms directly improve the enabling environment for civic space and advocate for basic freedoms that guarantee the right to organize, not only on paper but also in practice. Third, as the geopolitical landscape continues to shift, OGP needs to understand how to work across the spectrum of political ideologies and engage better with new actors from the private sector, media, and subnational governments. Last, but certainly not least, we need to capture and convey evidence on why governments that are open, participatory and responsive yield better results for government efficiency, the prevention and sanction of corruption, and citizens trust. This evidence will be crucial to bolstering political leaders who champion open government while convincing the skeptics.

These lines of inquiry are detailed in OGP's [research agenda](#) and are further refined and propagated through convenings of knowledge producers at OGP's global and regional events. Through both formal and informal approaches, we try to ensure maximum exposure and uptake of this knowledge among targeted government officials and civil society groups working in OGP. The contributions in this journal will help us to leverage our successes, learn from our failures and ring us closer to achieving our mission in the years ahead.

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