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The Open Government Partnership in Asia and the Pacific

By Henrik Lindroth¹

Background

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a voluntary global initiative aimed at building trust and fostering collaboration between governments and their citizens to improve development outcomes. Specifically, this initiative seeks to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance.²

Since its inception in 2011, the OGP has gained rapid traction with 69 governments presently having joined the initiative and endorsed the Open Government Declaration. Currently, six multilateral organizations including the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Inter-American Development Bank, the Organization of American States, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank, have also formalized partnerships with the OGP.

A key feature distinguishing OGP from other initiatives is the high-level political buy-in and

support it enjoys. US President Barack Obama made open government an important priority of his administration, and was instrumental for the establishment of the OGP. The same level of commitment is given the initiative by many other top political leaders. Indonesia and the Philippines are two notable examples in Asia and the Pacific, where presidents have led their country's open government reform programs.

It is not hard to see the desirability of the OGP. As a high-level forum to advance good governance, OGP can play a valuable role in supporting development in Asia and the Pacific. This role can be significant as progress in governance is recognized as a vehicle to foster sustained economic growth. As Asian economies grow "...there will be greater strains on informal and inefficient institutions; this will warrant a move toward a more efficient, formal institutional arrangement. This move—in the form of rule of law, effective government, or good regulation—will be essential to generating robust and sustained

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² Open Government Partnership. "What is the Open Government Partnership?". <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/about> (accessed on 15 March 2016)

“Government institutions are strengthened when they are not merely open to the active participation of their citizens, but when they encourage the people to engage it by empowering them and garnering their trust.”

—Benigno S. Aquino III, President of the Philippines, at the launch of the OGP, 20 September 2011

economic growth.”³ The link between economic progress and good governance was also emphasized by Secretary Florencio Abad of the Philippines’ Department of Budget and Management when he stated that: “Foreign direct investment can continue to grow for the Philippines, but only if we sustain our drive for government transparency and openness.”⁴

Furthermore, all countries in the Asia region (save for one or two) are anticipated to have graduated to middle income countries by 2025. As the push for open government reforms tends to be more vigorous in countries with higher income levels, the call for open government is likely to increase. Joining OGP may help governments transform these demands into better development outcomes with increased prosperity.

There is also a political rationale which makes countries embrace the principles of open government. Increased openness improves governments’ own legitimacy by building long term trust among public institutions, government officials, and the citizenry at large. Moreover, strengthening good governance and open government are goals in their own right “...transparency, accountability, voice, or lack of pervasive corruption—is an attribute of a good society.”⁵

How to become a member

Becoming a member of the OGP is a straightforward process. In order to join, an aspiring member country must first satisfy the “eligibility criteria.” This means that a minimum level of commitment to open government principles, in four key areas, have to be met:

- (i) budget transparency,
- (ii) access to information,
- (iii) income and asset disclosures, and
- (iv) citizen engagement⁶

Once eligibility has been confirmed, the interested government needs to identify a lead ministry and/or agency that will start formulating the Open Government National Action Plan (NAP) in close consultation with civil society and citizen groups. The NAPs are at the heart of the OGP and contain the members’ respective reform commitments over a 2-year period. These commitments should focus on ambitious national open government priorities; be relevant to the values of transparency, accountability and public participation; and be specific, time bound, and measurable.⁷

Strengthening the dialogue between civil society and the government in the formulation of the NAP is crucial. Comprehensive involvement of a wide range of stakeholder groups, as well as thorough analysis of inputs received from the consultations, is essential for a successful reform process.

In order to measure implementation progress of the NAPs, benchmarks with timeframes and anticipated annual achievements need to be stipulated for each commitment. The annual self-assessment progress report is developed against these benchmarks.

To ensure that implementation progress is assessed and measured in an unbiased manner, an independent reporting mechanism (IRM) ensures biannual reporting in all member countries.⁸

Theory of Change

Three interrelated elements are critical to advance and sustain open government reforms:

- (i) build high-level political commitment,
- (ii) empower government reformers, and
- (iii) support effective engagement by civil society organizations (CSOs).

The idea is that the NAP generates a cycle of consultations, formulation of open government

³ ADB. 2014. *Governance and Developing Asia: Concepts, Measurements, Determinants, and Paradoxes*. ADB economic working paper series, No. 388, M. G. Quibria, p. 31.

⁴ Florencio Abad, Secretary of the Philippine Department of Budget and Management. Speech delivered at the Public Forum for The Open Government Partnership-Independent Reporting Mechanism (OGP-IRM) on 6 February 2016.

⁵ ADB. 2014. *Governance and Developing Asia: Concepts, Measurements, Determinants, and Paradoxes*. ADB economic working paper series, No. 388, M. G. Quibria, p. 31.

⁶ Open Government Partnership. Eligibility Criteria. <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/how-it-works/eligibility-criteria> (accessed on 15 March 2016)

⁷ Open Government Partnership. Philippines 2014-2015 Action Plan Documents. <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/country/philippines/action-plan> (accessed on 15 March 2016)

⁸ Open Government Partnership. “What are Independent Progress Reports?” <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/irm/irm-reports>

Figure 1: How OGP Contributes¹⁰

“Openness indeed empowers the civil society to become a partner of government in the process of development. In that way, the government and the citizenry can accomplish so much more in terms [of] political, social and economic development.”

—President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia, OGP High-Level Side Event to the 69th United Nations General Assembly, 24 September 2014

commitments, implementation of these commitments, and monitoring and evaluation of progress in achieving the said commitments. This process is expected to evolve into a virtuous cycle that will generate increasingly ambitious reforms, enhance citizen participation, and produce sequentially stronger results. The idea is that the more civil society is engaged, the higher the likelihood of NAP policies and programs to be meaningful, ambitious, and to be implemented.

In addition, the more findings from the IRM are taken on board by the governments, the higher the likelihood that the NAPs will improve in process and content. The more the citizens see the governments initiating meaningful reforms through OGP, the more they realize that their engagement matters and thus would want to stay involved.

Progressively, as governments become increasingly comfortable with open government reforms, they will also become more receptive to civil society input and participation.⁹

A graphical illustration of how OGP seeks to contribute to open government reforms is provided in Figure 1.

Open Government Reforms in Asia

As of February 2016, eight developing countries in Asia and the Pacific have joined the OGP.¹¹ Several countries in the region have not only signaled a clear commitment to open government reforms, but have also launched innovative programs that indicate a strong intent to deliver.

Armenia

Armenia’s plans to advance open government were acknowledged at the OGP Global Summit held in Mexico on October 2015. Armenia was then crowned the regional winner, and labeled an open government “...leader in the Asia-Pacific region.”¹² Armenia received the award in recognition of its “Smart Municipality Project” which seeks to introduce community management and development-oriented information system practices in regional administrations.

The overall ambition of the “Smart Municipality Project” is to increase the efficiency of Armenia’s self-governing authorities by strengthening the

⁹ Open Government Partnership: *Four Year Strategy 2015-2018*. p. 13-14.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 13

¹¹ I.e., Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Indonesia, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka.

¹² *Tert.am*. 2015. Armenia wins high prize in Open Government Partnership awards. 29 October. <http://www.tert.am/en/news/2015/10/29/award/1829743>

“Participation in OGP further encourages us to go beyond current achievements, undertake new commitments, and share experiences with partner countries. Through OGP we learn from others and engage in openness, transparency and accountability contest with partner governments.”

—Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili of Georgia, OGP High-Level Side Event to the 69th United Nations General Assembly, 24 September 2014.

engagement and involvement of citizens in the provision of public services.

With reference to Armenia’s OGP award, and highlighting the importance of citizen’s active involvement in local level decision making under the “Smart Municipality Project,” Armenia Prime Minister Abrahamyan stated: “You may rest assured that the reforms will be continued.”¹³

Georgia

Georgia has launched numerous reform initiatives with high impact potential. Close to 60% of its NAP commitments are of a transformative nature, compared to an average of about 30% for the other Asian OGP members.¹⁴ Georgia’s motivation is also reflected in the speed with which it implements its commitments that in many instances are completed ahead of schedule.¹⁵ Factors that have played an important role in explaining Georgia’s success are:¹⁶

- (i) **Political will.** A potent combination of strong backing from the highest decision-making authority coupled with broad-based buy-in from large sections of the government machinery; and the
- (ii) **Establishment of the “Open Government Georgia’s Forum (The Forum).”** This is an inclusive national coordination mechanism responsible for overseeing the formulation, and implementation of Georgia’s OGP commitments.

Specifically, the Forum has played an important role in (i) broadening the participation by representatives from civil society, the government, and the international organizations, in all aspects of the NAP cycle; (ii) formalizing and regularizing OGP consultation meetings; and (iii) increasing the availability of government and development partner funds for OGP-related reform initiatives.

The approval of the “Open Parliament Georgia Action Plan” in July 2015 is considered one of Georgia’s strongest OGP achievements. The action plan lists 18 commitments to enhance parliamentary openness that have to be completed before the end of 2016.

The action plan has been created with extensive civil society involvement. If implemented, Georgia will have the chance to greatly improve parliamentary transparency and participation of citizens in public affairs. It may even help Georgia emerge as a global leader in parliamentary openness. Georgia’s “Open Parliament Georgia Action Plan” was recognized at the 2015 OGP Global Summit in Mexico, earning it the “OGP Government Champions Awards”.¹⁷

Indonesia

As one of the founding members of the OGP initiative, Indonesia has from the very beginning displayed strong enthusiasm for open government reforms. The “Responsive Open Data Model,” which moves away from blunt mass release of information to prioritize disclosure of data sets that more precisely correspond to the information that citizens want and can use, is one of Indonesia’s reform initiatives with promise.

Another initiative that has been successful seeks to utilize beneficiary feedback for improved public services. There is a strong rationale to include beneficiaries in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of projects to help improve effectiveness, minimize the risk of wrongdoing, mismanagement, and corruption. There are many forms of feedback mechanisms, e.g., suggestion boxes, focus groups, call centers, text messages, etc. One of the more common ones aims to fix problems. The crowdsourcing initiative for improved service delivery under the LAPOR! project is one such undertaking with lots of potential. (See Box 1)

Mongolia

The Government of Mongolia also uses beneficiary feedback mechanisms to connect with its citizens and improve public services. One example of this is the “Government 1111 Centre.” The “Centre” is a low-cost mechanism for citizens to provide feedback and put forward suggestions on government policies and public services through phone calls, SMS, social media, e-mail, or direct visits.

¹³ Government of the Republic of Armenia. 2015. *PM Attends Fifth Congress of Rural Communities in Jermuk*. <http://gov.am/en/news/item/8178>

¹⁴ Transformative commitments are commitments that inspire change, or cause a shift in viewpoint by both civil society and government. “Open Government Partnership: Four Year Strategy 2015-2018”, p.1.

¹⁵ “Open Government Partnership (OGP) Explorer. <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/explorer/all-data.html>”

¹⁶ Zurab Sanikidze, Director of Analytical Department, Ministry of Justice, Georgia.

¹⁷ “Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI)”, “The Inter-Factional Group approved the Open Parliament Georgia Action Plan” (accessed 13 July 2015) <https://idfi.ge/en/open-parliament-action-plan-was-approved>

Box 1: Crowdsourcing for Public Service Improvement in Indonesia

In 2010, then-President Yudhoyono created the “Delivery Unit for Development Monitoring and Oversight (UKP4)” to improve the outcome of Indonesia’s development plans. To effectively scrutinize the vast number of ministerial plans and programs, the unit decided to solicit support from the public by establishing LAPOR!, meaning “report” in Indonesian language.

LAPOR! is an online complaints management system that allows citizens to report on public services. With various digital technologies such as e-mail, text messaging, online reporting, etc., citizens can report anything from teacher absenteeism, damaged roads, and improper behavior by public servants. Once the report is filed, and following validation by the UKP4 team, it is forwarded to the relevant ministry or government agency. The concerned institution then sends a response through LAPOR! with an SMS notification to the complainant about action taken. This whole process is designed to take no more than 10 days.

Because of Indonesia’s high internet usage and mobile connectivity, combined with responsiveness from the government’s side, LAPOR! has grown swiftly and is, as of May 2015, averaging about 800 reports daily. Another reason behind the success of LAPOR! is its tri-monthly progress reports, which are presented to the heads of each ministry and agency. Since the reports are comparable across ministries and agencies, a healthy competition to increase the response rate has evolved.

Furthermore, if a public institution fails to respond to a complaint within one month, the LAPOR! team reports this to the President’s office, creating a strong disincentive for non-compliance.

A major strength of LAPOR! is that it provides a speedy, low-cost channel for citizens to voice their concerns and influence public services through modern technology. Moreover, once participating citizens notice that their problems have been addressed they are likely to stay engaged and continue reporting.

Sources: “Lapor! Layanan Aspirasi dan Pengaduan online rakyat.” <http://www.lapor.go.id>

Enricko Lukman, “Indonesia’s anti-corruption website is now getting 1,000 crowdsourced reports every day” (accessed 30 July 2015) <https://www.techinasia.com/lapor-indonesia-200000-users>

The online function of the Centre, which is operational 24/7, provides an automated response shortly after a call, SMS, or an e-mail has been submitted. Citizens can then access the 1111 system to track the progress on the issue raised.

All ministries and government agencies in Ulaanbaatar are connected to the Centre and are using the 1111 online system to directly respond to citizens’ concerns and inquiries. This system enables easy monitoring of concerned government officials’ performance, which encourages swift response. Mongolia’s cabinet secretariat also organizes a weekly online meeting at the Centre to discuss the key issues of the week. The scrutiny that these meetings generate is another strong incentive to deliver.

Key benefits that the Centre has generated are

- (i) easy access to the central government which is particularly valuable in a large country like Mongolia where the population is dispersed over vast areas;
- (ii) increased trust between the government and its citizens by improving the

- responsiveness of government representatives to the public’s views;
- (iii) financial and natural resources savings due to a drastic reduction of paper usage; and
- (iv) numerous policy suggestions and ideas, one of which has been a significant improvement of provincial health centers.

The fact that the Government 1111 Centres have registered 95,000 requests since its launch in 2012, and that all 21 provinces have initiated the establishment of their own 1111 Centres, are strong indicators of the initiatives’ popularity and success.¹⁸

Philippines

An initiative that shows positive early results in the Philippines is the “Open Data Portal,” which consolidates and makes government datasets publicly available. This initiative provides opportunities for citizens to access and scrutinize public information in areas such as public services provision and financial management. In the long

¹⁸ Mongolia’s application to the OGP award in 2014.

“Member countries’ commitment to OGP is too dependent on the political will of a few. The departure from office of strong OGP champions like Obama can have a huge impact. This is a major weakness that shows how important it is to broaden the political buy-in to the OGP initiative.”

—Don Parafina, executive director, Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP), Philippines

Box 2: Building a Culture of Openness: The Open Data Philippines Initiative

The central idea of Open Data is to turn transparency of public information into citizen participation by increasing the availability and access to data sets and records. The potential benefits are significant. Open data can help (i) monitor and hold decision-makers accountable; (ii) educate citizens so that they can make more informed choices, and (iii) promote direct civic engagement in democratic processes.

Increased information transparency is, however, also of value to the government. It helps the government understand and improve public services provision while strengthening its legitimacy and building trust between officials, public agencies, and citizens.

Following its membership in the OGP taken significant steps towards realizing the potential of open data. A key achievement was the launch of the Open Data Portal (data.gov.ph) in 2014. The portal is a single access point with the objective to make government data accessible and useful to the public by consolidating datasets of different government agencies.

Various applications and infographics make the portal user-friendly and facilitate the access and interpretation of the data. Better still, the portal encourages the public to comment on the data available, the utility of the data, as well as provide suggestions on how to improve it. One specific accomplishment includes hosting interactive dashboards that helps users establish meaningful relationships between raw data and process information. Another is the searchable line-item database for procurement transactions.

Moreover, #KabantayNgBayan: Hacking the National Budget, Tech for Resilience Week, Data Skills Training, Open Data for Citizen Engagement, are just some of many events that have been organized to improve the functionality of the portal, and increase civil society–government engagement.

Technical, legal, and resource constraints remain, but the Open Data Portal is playing an important role in fostering a culture of openness which has the potential to improve policy formulation, quality of services, and accountability by decision makers.

Sources: M. F. Capili. 2015. Open Government Philippines and Open Data Philippines: Review Documentation and Recommendations.

run, increased public demand for accountability by decision makers is likely to result. (See Box 2)

Deepening OGP reforms¹⁹

Institutionalizing OGP

Despite impressive open government reform achievements in many Asian countries, much more can, and needs to be done. In several countries, concerns have been expressed about the lack of a strong institutional foundation for OGP. As a result, the OGP achievements in many member countries become too intimately linked to high-level OGP champions. This threatens the durability of reforms undertaken and risks undermining the belief in OGP and its promise. In the words of one civil society representative: “One solution put forward by the Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM) of the Philippines could be to assign a permanent staff secretariat to monitor implementation

of OGP commitments, in direct coordination with the legislative and judicial branches of government.”²⁰ Practical guidance for a strengthened institutionalization of OGP could be obtained from the national coordination mechanism, “The Forum,” established in Georgia.

Different countries will choose different solutions, but the need to deepen the institutional permanence of the OGP initiative is an important concern that has been echoed by several Asian OGP member country representatives.

Improving Government–Civil Society Interaction

All of the Asian OGP members’ progress reports highlight the need for improvements in the government–civil society consultation process. The reports call for

- (i) increased outreach and promotion of the NAP formulation process and implementation progress by using a wider

¹⁹ These issues are the ones most frequently raised in discussions with government and civil society representatives.

²⁰ M. Mangahas. 2015. Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism. Independent Reporting Mechanism: *The Philippines Progress Report 2013–2015*, p. 65.

variety of communication channels to allow for broader and more robust civil society feedback;

- (ii) more frequent stakeholder consultations and more time given to the public to comment and provide inputs on both the draft as well as the finalized NAPs;
- (iii) civil society's engagement to be broadened beyond the capital region and increase subnational level perspectives; and
- (iv) civil society to play a more proactive role and express their expectations from the government clearer.²¹

In addition, the financial constraints that many civil society organizations face are a big problem that hampers effective and proactive OGP engagement. A deeper analysis and evaluation of existing resource constraints, its implications, and possible solutions, could be useful.

Open Data

Open data reforms are, in many countries, arguably the most successful reform area. Specifically, progress has been related to introduction of e-government processes with emphasis on open data and document transparency. In many countries, achievements have been made by expanding and improving the electronic platforms for storage and digital publication of various forms of government documents. Open data has paved the way for improved information availability as a result of more government reports and data being uploaded and made accessible.

Although positive, a probe into what the nature of the disclosed information is, how meaningful it is to stakeholders, and how easy it is to access and utilize by citizens, is necessary in order to make any qualitative judgment about the value of the rapidly expanded data openness.

Governments may have made more data available online, but “if the webmaster doesn't reply to queries what is its value?” as one CSO representative put it. In addition, many CSOs and citizens neither possess required equipment and connectivity, nor adequate technical capacity to purposefully monitor, scrutinize, and utilize the data that has been made available.

And, importantly, even if the open data digital transparency agenda is overwhelmingly positive,

it's important not to forget that public institutions uploading lots of information online is very different from opening up government institutions and political processes. At its worst, governments can conveniently put emphasis on launching digital platforms and data transparency projects as a distraction away from the more central goal of enacting robust freedom of information legislation and allow citizens to truly scrutinize and hold decision makers accountable. Numerous freedom of information advocates in the Philippines have expressed concern that their government's open data policy is driven by such sinister motives. Their viewpoint is verified by the repeated failure to pass a freedom of information law, they argue.

Against this background, and since data disclosure is both time consuming and costly, a series of questions need to be addressed. What is the impact that we expect, and what impact are we getting from open data? Does increased data disclosure lead to more meaningful reforms, and if so, towards what results? And, how do we measure success?²² Unless these questions are answered, the reform area that has been hailed as one of OGPs true success stories risks running out of momentum.

Summary and Recommendations

This Governance Brief argues that open government and good governance are increasingly important drivers of economic progress and growth in Asia and the Pacific.

It also suggests the OGP initiative to be an important vehicle in advancing the principles of good governance and open government. This position is based on the fact that most OGP members of the region have made significant governance progress under the auspices of OGP. Examples are presented in this brief.

In less than 5 years, OGP has inspired dozens of countries to publicly commit to fully engaging their populations in an open and participatory way. This rapid development builds expectations and makes it particularly important that the OGP initiative delivers on the high hopes attributed to its promises.

The brief ends by proposing suggestions for OGP to improve. These suggestions were among the ones most frequently raised by OGP stakeholders.

“Purposeful participation is too costly for most civil society organizations to afford. This has to be solved if OGP is to really matter. A joint OGP-CSO developed strategy to raise funds for a more meaningful CSO participation would be a step in the right direction.”

—Don Parafina, executive director, Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP), Philippines

²¹ Mongolia's first progress report has not yet been finalized and Papua New Guinea and Sri Lanka only just joined the initiative.

²² Hanif Anilmohamed Rahemtulla, Senior Operations Officer, World Bank, Philippines.

Primary target groups for each recommendation are listed within brackets.

(i) Consolidate and promote the achievements.

Mark the 5th anniversary of the OGP with a stocktaking exercise of the initiative. What has happened, and why did it matter? An independent audit could be a useful tool to help demonstrate the benefits, deepen the engagement, and inspire participation. *(OGP Support Unit / Steering Committee)*

(ii) Institutionalize the initiative.

A limited number of executive institutions seem to drive the OGP initiative in most countries. This is a structural risk that threatens continuity, in case of a change in political leadership. The initiative needs broader representation in the legislature, the judiciary, and among non-elected officials. Georgia's national coordination mechanism is an example in the region that countries could learn from and apply as appropriate. *(Governments)*

(iii) Strengthen the CSO component.

The extensive CSO weaknesses are worrisome. Their ability to adequately provide inputs and oversee progress are at the core of the OGP. There

is a need for rigorous capacity development support to assist CSOs and citizen groups in effectively scrutinizing, monitoring, evaluating, validating data, and providing inputs to the NAPs. In this regard, it is also equally important that the countries joining the OGP eliminate possible barriers of engagement with CSOs, and have proper regulatory frameworks in place that support civil society engagement. *(Governments, Civil Society, Development Partners)*

(iv) Involve media.

Media could play an important role in promoting the initiative's achievements and effectively communicate why they matter. A closer media association would also strengthen the scrutiny of decision makers and help hold them better to account for their actions. *(OGP Support Unit / Steering Committee)*

The Governance Brief was peer reviewed by Bart W. Édes, director, Social Development Governance and Gender Division, ADB; Warren Turner, senior public management specialist, ADB; and Paul Maassen, director, Civil Society Engagement, Open Government Partnership Support Unit.



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