

Transparency Counters Corruption

The Open Government Partnership improves national accountability

By *per* Concordiam Staff

In September 2011, the United Nations introduced the Open Government Partnership (OGP), an ambitious multinational initiative that aims to disclose government information to citizens. Such transparency can uncover and dissuade corruption, bolster accountability among government officials and empower citizens to team up with their government to promote honest administration. The partnership calls for governments to post budgets and financial documents online, as well as disclose the assets of public officials, and encourages citizen whistleblowers to report irregularities. Serving as a network of support, the initiative provides a framework for countries to start their own domestic open government policies – a task some states find too daunting to undertake alone. The partnership has already garnered commitments from 42 nations and many others are earmarked for membership. Supporters insist the OGP represents a significant step toward global transparency.

Openness is good for the economy

The program's core function is to educate and inform citizens. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says there is an "undeniable connection" between how governments function and whether their people flourish, a July 2011 *Voice of America* article reported. Additionally, open government is helpful to economic growth. Entrepreneurs are attracted to countries that fight corruption and promote transparent government. Openness is beneficial not only for "good government" but for sustained economic growth. As government budgets tighten, transparency can encourage trade and outside investment in a state.

How it works

Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Romania and Turkey are among the numerous countries participating in the OGP. The program starts with governments developing and implementing country-specific reform plans and communicates concrete commitments surrounding five "grand challenges": improving government services, increasing public integrity, managing public resources more effectively, increasing corporate accountability and creating safer communities.

After a year of implementation, each government submits a progress report, and each country is evaluated by well-respected local governance experts that will



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Polish President Bronisław Komorowski, left, and his Georgian counterpart Mikheil Saakashvili speak in Batumi in 2011. Georgia is a member of the Open Government Partnership.

independently assess each country's progress. Brazilian Foreign Minister Antonio Patriota assured prospective OGP participants in June 2011 that reviews will not include "quality labels" or "rankings" and will be conducted in a "technical, neutral and nonadversarial manner."

Nation eligibility list

Twenty-nine additional countries are eligible for membership. An independent group of experts have evaluated and chosen countries by scoring them on fiscal transparency, freedom of information, public figure asset disclosure and engagement of citizens. They must score at least 12 out of 16 to qualify. Italy, Norway, Romania, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States scored among the highest; Armenia, Israel, Panama and Paraguay scored among the lowest, but still made the list.

Some, however, have questioned the list and its accuracy. Notably, Russia and Pakistan, nations that don't always have a reputation for transparency, are eligible, according to the OGP. And surprisingly, Georgia scored higher than the more developed democracies of Denmark, Estonia and Iceland. Placing countries on this list can provide an incentive to strive for openness and inspire reform. Georgia is a good example of this, as it is taking steps toward transparency, but organizers say the nation still has room to improve.

A May 2011 Transparency International (TI) assessment report suggests that countries in the South Caucasus need to strengthen anti-corruption policies. “They should take note that citizens are no longer willing to be passive spectators; they are increasingly showing that they are tired of mismanagement and corruption,” said Jana Mittermaier, head of TI’s Liaison Office to the European Union. The European nations of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland and Poland stand to benefit from joining as well, but had not as of early 2012.

A central part of the plan is collaboration with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). One country in particular is making headway on this front. The Slovakian organization Fair Play Alliance has teamed up with the Slovakian government to reveal the names of those doing business with the government, supplying citizens with information to probe deeper into those relationships. NGOs provide opportunities to complement ongoing reform and monitor implementation, while TI, a nonpartisan organization fighting corruption worldwide, publishes a well-regarded list on government openness that addresses the scale and challenges of government corruption.

Founding partners

The partnership is currently led by the U.S. and Brazil and is supported by six other founding partner nations: Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa and the UK. Leadership of the group will rotate annually among founding partners, with the UK co-chairing the OGP in 2012.

Brazil has used the leadership opportunity to establish a “transparency portal” that reports government spending information and fund transfers, and, despite challenges, established a Freedom of Information Act through which citizens can request previously hidden information. The U.S. has joined the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, a partnership that requires governments, and oil, gas and mining companies to disclose financial transactions among themselves. The U.S. also established an online petition platform offering Americans a vehicle for communicating with the government.

Some open government activists question whether Brazil deserves to be a co-leader. They criticize Brazil for failing to have a Freedom of Information Act at the time of admittance – a membership requirement some activists consider fundamental. Establishing the act was stalled by controversy over the opening of past military documents, but in late 2011 the process was completed. Speculation remains, however, how it will pan out.

“It now remains to see how the law will be actually implemented, and if access to public information will become an effective tangible right for most citizens,” said Brazilian scholar and commentator Ronaldo Lemos in late 2011 in a blog hosted by Princeton’s Center for

Information Technology Policy. Additional objections include accusations of corruption among government officials. “Joining the U.S. in shepherding the partnership to fruition was Brazil, which has seen five cabinet-level officials leave government in the last nine months amid corruption scandals,” *The Wall Street Journal* reported in September 2011.

More transparency needed

Deeper reform is needed for transparency to have a more striking impact. “Publishing official statistics and general budget data online can be a first step, but one ought not declare ‘premature victory’ after tackling such generic ‘low hanging fruits,’” the U.S.-based Brookings Institute said. Brookings praised the benefits of “more politically difficult reforms, such as transparency in the drafting of laws and in policymaking, campaign finance, lobbying, the disclosure of officials’ assets, and fully disclosing which powerful private sector and media executives the leaders of government meet regularly with.”

The UK’s efforts, for example, encompass openness of data and statistics, including medical information. Publishing health care statistics is one example of how exposure to information can save lives. At the commencement of the partnership in 2011, a UK representative pointed out how publishing surgery mortality rates among surgeons exposed remarkable differences in physician quality. Some doctors were put out of business. By publishing data, bad practices were rejected and good practices multiplied. The UK government said transparency helped the country drop surgical mortality rates by as much as 22 percent.

Technological transformation

Citizens are increasingly demanding greater democracy through technology. Demonstrated by the North African revolutions, citizens using social media can heavily influence government. Technology played an invaluable role in empowering citizens to demand freedom against seemingly insurmountable odds and helped shame governments into addressing corruption. It is yet to be seen whether technology will prove equally as effective in constructing fully open societies.

“When a government hides its work from public view, hands out jobs and money to political cronies, administers unequal justice, looks away as corrupt bureaucrats and businessmen enrich themselves at the people’s expense, that government is failing its citizens,” Secretary of State Clinton said. Establishing government transparency “can be a lonely, sometimes even dangerous task. But through this partnership, we hope to change that,” she added. Multinational collaboration in the OGP strives to set standards for transparency and is a solid starting point in countering corruption and empowering citizens to hold governments accountable. □