

# Learning to Open Government

Summary findings and reflections on how the Open Government Partnership is playing out, in practice, in five countries

This brief summarizes and synthesizes the findings from five in-depth case studies that explore when and how pro-reform actors have been able to leverage the Open Government Partnership (OGP) — its processes, spaces, and resources — to pursue improved government responsiveness and accountability. It is one of a number of recent efforts to explore the contribution of OGP to more open and effective governance.<sup>1</sup> Our research, undertaken by teams of local open government experts in five countries, covers Albania, Costa Rica, Mexico, the Philippines and Tanzania.

This summary and the research products on which it is based, are not an evaluation of OGP, nor do they speak to OGP's role in motivating a global movement toward openness, something that is an important part of OGP's overall approach but which was not part of our assignment. Rather, we focus on lessons and reflections distilled from case studies about how OGP is playing out, in practice, in five particular contexts. Our aim is to contribute to a richer understanding of whether and how OGP is supporting progress toward more open government, in order to inform action by OGP stakeholders at the global and country levels.

## I. Background

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Founded in 2011, the Open Government Partnership is a multi-stakeholder initiative that brings together reformers from government and civil society, as well as the private sector, to work for improvements in the transparency, accountability and responsiveness of government. Having grown from an initial set of eight member countries to 69 today, OGP occupies a prominent position in the open government landscape.

At the country level, OGP's domestic policy mechanism, the National Action Plan cycle, aims to support governments and civil society as they collaborate to design, implement and monitor commitments to open government. At the global level, OGP provides a framework for international networking and aims to incentivize governments to compete in a race to the top and implement ever more ambitious reforms. Through the combination of these mechanisms, OGP aims to empower and connect pro-reform actors at various levels and support their efforts to work together to drive progress toward more open government.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: [Francoli, Ostling, and Steibel, 2015](#); [Guillan Montero and Taxell, 2015](#); [Guillan Montero, 2015a](#); [Guillan Montero, 2015b](#); [Schneider, 2015](#); and [Berliner, 2015](#), among many others.

As is to be expected with any initiative that intends to tackle deep-seated governance challenges, questions about the effectiveness of OGP are being asked<sup>2</sup> and considered.<sup>3</sup> Evidence from our country case studies indicates that OGP processes in these countries, to date, are contributing marginally to efforts to open government at the country level. This finding is in line with recent research on the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder initiatives,<sup>4</sup> and transparency and accountability initiatives more broadly.<sup>5</sup> In reviewing and synthesizing the evidence from our five case studies, we provide food for thought on how OGP can most effectively deliver on its goals and help lay the groundwork for the initiative to maximize its impact and effectiveness.

## II. Methods

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Our country case studies were researched and drafted by teams of local open government experts, with close oversight from Global Integrity. They are based on scores of interviews, document reviews and other sources of evidence. The cases situate OGP in the broader open government landscape of each country.

In order to systematically explore how, in practice, pro-reform actors leverage OGP across the five different contexts studied in our cases, we developed a conceptual framework for comparative analysis. Drawing on relevant literature and OGP's Theory of Change,<sup>6</sup> our conceptual framework sets out three pathways through which OGP might be expected to contribute to substantive progress toward more open government.<sup>7</sup> The three pathways are:

- High level political leadership;
- Collective action to rebalance power;
- Learning to navigate politics.

In the remainder of this brief, we define and explore these pathways in turn. We also lay out the lessons that emerge from the diverse OGP experiences tracked in the case studies, providing insights into the challenges and opportunities pro-reform actors face in leveraging the resources provided by OGP. Some of the lessons are not surprising. But by making them explicit and exploring their implications, we hope to inform discussions about how to improve the impact and effectiveness of OGP.

In consideration of these lessons, we offer reflections on the way forward for OGP. How can the experiences and lessons drawn from our five country case studies enable OGP stakeholders — donors, the Steering Committee, the Support Unit, governments and civil society organizations in OGP countries — to take steps to ensure that open government reformers can more

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, [a 2015 blog post](#) by OGP Steering Committee Civil Society co-chair Suneeta Kaimal.

<sup>3</sup> See [2016 blog](#) by Kitty von Bertele, special assistant at the OGP Support Unit.

<sup>4</sup> [Sterns, 2015](#); [Brockmyer and Fox, 2015](#); [World Bank, 2014](#).

<sup>5</sup> [McGee and Gaventa, 2011](#); [Fox, 2014](#); [McGee and Edwards, 2016](#).

<sup>6</sup> [OGP, 2014](#)

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, [Falleti and Lynch, 2009](#).

effectively leverage the processes, spaces and resources of OGP in order to drive progress toward more open government?

### III. Learning from the Evidence

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#### A. High level political leadership

##### *i. The Pathway*

- The OGP platform provides incentives for high level political leaders to commit to ambitious reforms. Their commitment then enables and motivates midlevel government officials and civil society to take advantage of OGP's processes, spaces and resources to drive progress toward more open government.

##### *ii. Lessons from the Case Studies*

- Our country case studies provide little evidence that OGP investments meant to encourage high level political leaders to enact ambitious change, and to open up space for midlevel officials and civil society to do the same, are as yet leading to politically meaningful reforms.
- OGP events and awards do not appear-in these five countries to have inspired a “race to the top.” As noted by other researchers, the race to the top may more closely resemble a nonlinear “crawl.”<sup>8</sup>
- Because OGP has limited resources, investments in securing high level political support — while arguably important for creating space for action by midlevel reformers — necessarily reduce the resources that can be directed toward supporting midlevel government officials and civil society engagement in OGP processes. There is also a risk that investments made in high level political support may not deliver returns once political leaders leave their posts, and that these investments, if they do not pay off, may have negative consequences for OGP's legitimacy in the eyes of pro-reform actors.
- Governments, and especially high level political leaders, appear to use the credibility conferred by OGP to strengthen their reform credentials and demonstrate to certain domestic and international audiences that they actively support open government.
- At the same time, governments may use the validation provided by their participation in OGP, and their successful completion of OGP processes, to deflect deeper reforms.

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<sup>8</sup> [Elgin-Cossart, Sutton, and Sachs \(2016\)](#).

### *iii. Reflections*

- **Review the allocation of resources:** To more effectively support domestic actors working for change on the ground, OGP should review the balance of investment between global summits, awards, etc., and country-level support, and give further consideration to how investments at multiple levels might be made complementary to maximize returns on OGP's (and related) investments in open government.
- **Consider when, where and how OGP and its international supporters can most effectively encourage incentives that are conducive to country-level reform:** OGP investments that target high level political leaders may encourage them, and other pro-reform actors, to expend political capital and other resources on complying with the OGP process, rather than channeling those resources into other reform efforts. Adopting and complying with the procedures of OGP, therefore, entail trade-offs. More evidence is needed on the trade-offs of engaging with OGP, instead of pursuing reform in other arenas, as well as on the dynamics that shape OGP incentives, the results they generate in practice, and the conditions in which particular outcomes may emerge. Discussions on how OGP can learn to support open governance in and across contexts, and how it interacts with and shapes the incentives, processes and institutions available to pro-reform actors at the country level, are already underway and should continue as more evidence emerges in the future.

## **B. Collective action to rebalance power**

### *i. The Pathway*

- OGP processes, and in particular the National Action Plan cycle, provide spaces for reformers in and across government and civil society to work collaboratively, strengthening the collective power of pro-openness advocates and their ability to pursue reforms.

### *ii. Lessons from the Case Studies*

- Expectations about the pace of governance reform that OGP might support,<sup>9</sup> and the ability of governments and civil society actors to leverage OGP inputs to act collectively to drive progress toward more open government, may be too high. Seeds of future progress may have been planted, but our country case studies reveal few signs of multi-stakeholder empowerment and collective action to date.
- Conditions on the ground matter: Relative to Albania, Costa Rica and Tanzania, coordination between the government and civil society on OGP in the Philippines and Mexico, as well as among civil society organizations in those countries, seems to be largely the result of the interaction of strategic, operational and pre-existing contextual factors.

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<sup>9</sup> High expectations are recurring themes in numerous OGP materials. See, for example, [Weinstein, 2011](#), as well as remarks by U.S. President Barack Obama ([White House, 2014](#)).

- Sectoral and bureaucratic politics can obstruct or enable the implementation of OGP commitments and reforms. Bureaucratic buy-in and civil society influence, as well as political sensitivities and dynamics, are key aspects of successful or failed reform.
- Technical capacity, funder dynamics and relationships with the government affect which civil society organizations engage with OGP, whether they do so adversarially or constructively, and whether OGP is leveraged to reinforce or reshape existing asymmetries of power.

### *iii. Reflections*

- **Provide more flexible, politically informed assistance for pro-reform actors' collective action:** Donors and the OGP Steering Committee may want to consider piloting new approaches to supporting and learning from domestic reformers and organizations. In particular, learning how to enable pro-reform actors to effectively interact with and adapt OGP resources to coordinate in-country stakeholders should be an area of focus. This might include helping OGP's Support Unit and Steering Committee acquire additional resources and expertise, especially new strategic and technical know-how, so that they can tailor and adapt those resources to the country level. This would enable them to step up engagement with and support to pro-reform actors, and the multi-stakeholder action that is at the heart of open government.
- **Tailor support to promote collective action that transforms commitments into implemented reforms at the country level:** The Support Unit and its partners could experiment with approaches to providing support that are more closely tailored to the political context, and focus on reinforcing the ability of pro-reform actors to collectively engage with the sectoral, bureaucratic and political dynamics that shape the politics of implementing open government reforms. Accomplishing this goes beyond encouraging sector-specific reforms in OGP and entails explicitly learning about and accounting for the ways in which all the players relevant to a given effort, including bureaucrats, government officials, politicians in the opposition and civil society groups, interact with and shape reforms, both inside and outside OGP. Attempting to obtain and work with this information can help the Support Unit and its partners more effectively develop and implement politically salient strategies for breaking down silos and facilitating the implementation of commitments, as well as cope with the obstacles and sustainability issues exemplified in the country case studies.

## **C. Learning to navigate politics**

### *i. The Pathway*

- By providing spaces and resources to encourage and enable collaboration among government officials and civil society representatives, OGP encourages reformers to work together to make progress on inherently political issues. That political experience will then be taken forward into other areas of work, enabling more effective cooperation on addressing governance challenges beyond OGP.

## *ii. Lessons from the Case Studies*

- Confirming assessments made by the Independent Reporting Mechanism across all OGP countries, the five countries we studied are becoming better at holding formal consultations and complying with other aspects of the OGP process.<sup>10</sup> There is not clear evidence, however, that improved compliance with OGP processes is leading to desired changes on the ground.
- In the countries considered, OGP seems to operate as a parallel reform arena. Government officials and civil society organizations may participate in OGP, and improve their engagement with its processes and resources, but they then seem to go about their business as usual, with little evidence that they adapt their approaches or apply the lessons learned through their experience in OGP to other areas of work.
- There is a risk that learning to comply with the short-term time cycles of National Action Plans may distract attention from the need for deeper, long-term reform by incentivizing countries to focus on relatively minor commitments that can be met within a couple of years, rather than addressing deeper systemic challenges.

## *iii. Reflections*

- **Provide support for learning about the political as well as the technical:** The knowledge and learning resources and materials currently produced by the Support Unit, including peer learning, direct country support and support for civil society, typically emphasize augmenting technical capacity. These resources, though useful, are not specifically designed to equip country-level actors to navigate and shape the political landscape. The Support Unit and its partners should give greater emphasis to providing tools and resources — including opportunities for cross-country learning and multi-stakeholder collaboration — that enable country-level actors to more effectively reflect on, share experiences about and improve their approaches to navigating the politics of reform.
- **Strengthen OGP's learning function:** The Support Unit and Steering Committee should look to strengthen OGP's organizational learning, taking advantage of the midterm evaluation planned for 2016 to thoroughly review OGP's Theory of Change against emerging evidence of how OGP principles are playing out in practice. This should include careful assessment of whether OGP is generating the competitive dynamics required for a race to the top. The Support Unit and Steering Committee should also — working alongside other multi-stakeholder governance initiatives — put in place stronger processes for continuous learning, reflection and adaptation, to enable course corrections, and progressive improvements, which will help to maximize the impact and effectiveness of OGP.

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<sup>10</sup> See [2015](#) and [2016](#) blogs by Joseph Foti, program manager at the Independent Reporting Mechanism.

## IV. Conclusion

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To date, OGP has achieved impressive growth and attracted considerable international acclaim. The challenge in the coming years is to make sure that OGP is providing pro-reform actors with the leverage and resources they need to achieve concrete, sustainable and deep open government reforms. The evidence from our detailed exploration of the OGP experiences of Albania, Costa Rica, Mexico, the Philippines and Tanzania indicates that if OGP is to deliver on its promise to foster transformative reform, changes may be necessary.

By building on the findings and insights from our case studies about whether and how open government principles are being translated into open government practice, and by strengthening its learning function, OGP could further sharpen its effectiveness and impact. At the heart of this would be a more explicit focus on the ways in which OGP can support the domestic champions of governance reform as they try, learn and adapt their way toward solutions that work in the complex political environments in which they operate: in short, putting adaptive learning, with a strong political emphasis, at the center of the open governance agenda.