Connecting Global & Country Engagements

This is one of four issue papers, each focused on an aspect of strategic importance arising from OPM's evaluation of OGP, 2019–2021, to contribute to the OGP Support Unit (SU) and Independent Reporting Mechanism's (IRM) strategic thinking. The research conducted as part of the evaluation focused on seven locations – five national members (Colombia, Kenya, Nigeria, Philippines and Ukraine) and two local government members (Elgeyo-Marakwet in Kenya and South Cotabato in the Philippines); and on three themes (Open Contracting (OC), Beneficial Ownership (BO) and Civic Engagement (CE)). A developmental evaluation approach was adopted, and OPM engaged with the SU and IRM on a regular basis concerning findings, insights and their implications.

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Overview

OGP's global work is influential in demonstrating a global coalition for open government by contributing to the global agenda and providing support at national and sub-national levels. A 'gearing' metaphor illustrates the relationship between drivers of change across these levels, with some priorities and areas of policy focus changing more quickly at the global than at the national level. It is critical to have effective mechanisms to ensure follow-through to reforms at the national and sub-national levels, otherwise there is a risk of demotivating country stakeholders. Equally important is attention to how emerging priorities for different OGP members translate to agenda setting at the global level.

Introduction

'Gears are typically wheels with teeth or cogs. They are used to transmit effort, change torque (turning force), change direction, or change speed.'[1]

The gearing metaphor illustrates the relationship between drivers of change at international, national and sub-national levels, and that some priorities and areas of policy focus change more quickly at the global than at the national level. OGP's global work is valuable in its own right: for setting new global norms and leveraging international processes to achieve traction on commitments. It provides inspiration and motivation, and also secures the engagement of political leaders whose role can be vital in supporting the translation from broad intent to implementation. The metaphor also helps articulate the frustration expressed by some national stakeholders that OGP's global attention moves on before OGP commitments have been translated into domestic reforms.

A gear change in OGP occurs not only from the international to the national level, but also in the other direction. The dynamics of how new policy directions emerge at international level are affected by the varied influence of different actors and countries. There is value in paying more attention to the translation from national to international levels, and how the SU could support this. Thinking in terms of 'gearing' places the focus on the mechanisms designed for connecting meaningfully across the levels and in multiple directions, often simultaneously.

Insights

International Engagements and the Gearing Challenge

OGP's global work is influential at two levels: (1) to demonstrate a global coalition for open government, including contributing to setting the global agenda through international meetings and summits, campaigns and advocacy on policy areas; *and* (2) to support and link with the platform's work at the national level, including through stimulating 'a race to the top' among political leaders. What is critical is effective mechanisms to ensure follow-through to reforms at the national and sub-national levels, otherwise the risk is demotivation of some country stakeholders.

Critical contributors to the gearing challenge include:

- **Unmet expectations:** attention to policy themes at international forums often raises expectations among country stakeholders. Across most sampled locations in the evaluation, particularly the sub-national ones, OGP attention and SU support during co-creation raised expectations

for funding and technical support, and frustration was generated when such support did not materialise. For example, the Ottawa Summit inspired a 'conversion' to the cause of civic tech on the part of some Philippines reformers, but two years later they expressed frustration that the spotlight had moved on before the reform could be implemented.

- **Volume of communications:** across the research locations, some country stakeholders mentioned a sense of being overwhelmed with the volume of guidance and communications provided by the OGP, especially when this was not in their first language. This related both to guidance about OGP processes and about policy themes. Similarly, some reported challenges with translating international peer examples to their own contexts.

1 https://www.primaryconnections.org.au/themes/custom/connections/assets/SBR/data/Phy/sub/gears /gears.htm, accessed 1st December 2021.

- **International campaigns** risk not fulfilling their potential unless they translate into meaningful national or subnational reforms. Campaigns follow a trajectory from raising awareness and ambition, to securing commitments, to implementation, monitoring and learning. For instance, the OGP *Feminist Open Government* (FOGO) campaign succeeded in promoting gender concerns into National and Local Action Plans (NAPs and LAPs) in most of the evaluation focus locations. But in some locations, such as South Cotabato, the FOGO components of commitments were not embedded in reformer's visions of the reforms and were difficult to implement in practice. More support had been planned by the SU, but the FOGO campaign was displaced by the OGP *Open Response, Open Recovery* (OR+OR) campaign on COVID-19. Overall, the sense is that there is a need to give more support and time for each campaign to embed with country stakeholders.

Part of the response to these challenges is picked up in the 'Ambition to Implementation' paper, which focuses on strengthening SU support in the implementation phase to take advantage of the ambition articulated in the commitments. This paper focuses on the tools and mechanisms which reinforce the positive transmission of change in policy areas between the national and international levels.

Securing political engagement sometimes intersects with SU global work. Although international and political engagement are often closely related, they are also independent of each other. The SU facilitates political engagement at national level and international engagements are also with civil servants and civil society. The evaluation found that SU support to political engagement is much valued by country stakeholders, especially when reformers lacked effective entry points to engage and influence political leaders.

Examples of securing or reinforcing political engagement include:

- **Providing a public platform:** OGP international forums provided the Elgeyo-Marakwet Governor with an opportunity to present the county's progress with its OC reform, which generated a sense of personal pride. The county's rising position in national OC rankings also helped to promote additional partner support, which further reinforced his commitment to open government.

- **High-level brokering and country visits from senior SU staff** can be instrumental in securing political support in country, as seen in the OG component of the COVID-19 stimulus package in Nigeria, including for it to be open to CSO monitoring.

- **Informal influencing and learning opportunities**: In the Philippines, OGP international (and national) forums were crucial for bringing senior government actors on board for an OC commitment. This process created space for informal influencing from partners and CSOs, while learning from other countries helped to build interest and understanding of OC.

The challenge is to translate inspiration, motivation and commitments made at international events into the specific actions in the domestic domain. The following types of support were found to have demonstrable value:

- **Country-level structures and processes** which provide established mechanisms for moving intent into action, and building trust and traction with key government agencies, as found by Hivos in the Philippines example cited above. OGP is well placed to support the implementation of the Escazu Agreement,[2] which focuses on access to environmental information, public participation in environmental decision-making, and environmental justice in the signatory countries which are also part of OGP. The pre-existence of tested structures and processes for such participation is a major OGP asset.

- **Legitimisation**: Reformers in the Philippines spoke of OGP's 'legitimisation effect', referring to the status and credibility of a particular course of action derived through association with OGP's international platform, staff and relationships. Sometimes the initiative is in the hands of civil society actors. In Ukraine, for instance, early government enthusiasm to act on BO waned, but picked up again when a civil society actor proposed to present the concept for the BO verification at an event with an international audience.

- **Practical guidance and peer sharing**: Colombia's integration of gender into its fiscal transparency commitment was inspired by peer learning facilitated by the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT) and the SU. Specifically, the Attorney General formulated a gender-focused access to information commitment, based on an example from Uruguay, in the context of a meeting of the Network for Transparency and Access to Public Information in Latin America.

- **The role of the OGP Steering Committee (SC)**: Argentina, for example, drew on its chairing role of both the SC and the G20 in 2020 to push forward the OG agenda with national actors. Conversely, the SU also observed the risk of overload when ISC priorities add to the existing SU work plan or strategy.

OGP thematic work is a key mechanism for gearing policy change between the international and national levels, by focusing on issues which have both international and national dimensions. For example Beneficial Ownership Transparency (BOT) has implications for anti-corruption and money-laundering internationally and at national level.

Helpful practices include:

- **Relationships with international and strategic partners**: Much thematic work builds on the SU's generally acknowledged strengths in these relationships. Partners who are deeply embedded in the broad ecosystem than OGP has nurtured play a key role in commitment design and implementation. Examples are the role played by GIFT in Colombia, Hivos and the Open Contracting Parternship (OCP) on open contracting in the Philippines, and Open Ownership for BO work in Nigeria.

2 Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (https://www.cepal.org/en/escazuagreement).

- **Developing aligned agendas**: Focusing on NAP commitments with relevance to BO, the SU can work with other international agencies to pursue aligned agendas. For example, in Ukraine, the International Monetary Fund's Stand-by-Agreement (SBA) included a component on BO verification reform. The IMF was aware of OGP and interested in how civil society actors participated in generating the NAP commitments, and the connection with the SBA enhanced the importance of the BO verification commitment.

- **Establishing the Beneficial Ownership Leadership Group**: This group of countries came together in 2019 to drive a global shift in terms of best practices on BO transparency. Leveraging on interest in BO from countries such as the UK, it intended to create a dedicated space for peer-sharing and motivation among political leaders, in the hope that this would contribute to a 'race to the top' from other countries in terms of BO performance. One challenge has been to bring together countries at different stages of progress in this work, and a lack of clarity about whether membership is meant to be an acknowledgement of progress made, or to motivate it.

- **Private sector engagement**: BO work has strong implications for businesses, but the evaluation findings suggest that the private sector is not engaging particularly strongly. In some cases, this is because OGP's value proposition to some private sector organisations is not clear: they already have lines of communication with government and OG terminology has less resonance for them than terms such as 'fair competition' and 'levelling the playing field'. Interviewees on BO recommended targeting particular kinds of businesses, particularly banks, which have a mandate to focus on money laundering and hence an obvious connection with BO work nationally and internationally.

Beneficial Ownership is particularly open to such a thematic focus. OGP decides which themes to prioritise based on interest among diverse country members and the potential availability of strategic partners and funding support. Partners have their own strategies and priorities, so facilitating alignment involves building trust and confidence, sometimes years ahead. SU staff generally felt that identifying BO as a priority policy theme was a 'good call'. Past experience is that deciding upon priority themes and commitments is not easy or obvious. A challenge for OGP is how replicable the BO approach might be to other themes, such as citizen engagement, which have a less clear global profile.
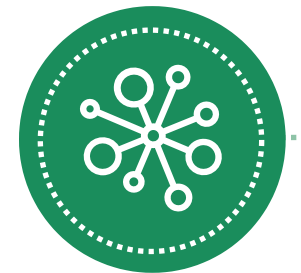
Implications

The issue of gearing is nuanced and complex, implying adjustments to existing processes rather than breaking new ground. Considerable drive necessarily comes from national and local levels, and SU staff are rightly uncomfortable with any sense of 'pushing' agendas.

- **Managing expectations**: One issue for SU consideration is how to mitigate the risk of stimulating interest and demand from national levels which cannot be met, leading to frustration and demotivation. This may require greater thought to the timing of when to move on from one priority issue to another, levels of technical capacity, and degree of in-country financial and political support. Communications has a role in reinforcing the understanding that the priorities are mutually supportive, rather than thinking in terms of a new one replacing an older one. It would be important to consider whether internal incentives for different departments within the SU inadvertently contribute to the perceived speed with which priorities are seen to change.

Much of the way ahead depends on greater clarity on the strategies for moving from inspiration and ambition into traction and reform, elements of which are covered in the other Issues Papers. Addressing the gearing challenge implies being clear about the drivers of change in a given policy context and the optimal role for the SU, including how this changes across the co-creation and implementation phases of NAP/LAP cycles. OGP already has political strategies for each campaign and event. The key opportunities lie in the practicalities and considerations for how these connect in practice to widely diverse national and local dynamics.

In terms of facilitating specific technical and financial support from partners, there is value in adjusting the SU approach. The evaluation's contribution tracing work highlighted the prevalence of the broad term 'brokering' to cover a diverse range of unfolding relationships with partners. SU discussion endorsed the value of clarity about the precise needs to be met, the anticipated results and hence the optimal partner in a given context. It is important that partners' own ways of working do not inadvertently convey a sense of 'pushing' certain themes, or that international partners disrupt local civil society dynamics and accountability - for example, displacing local CSOs by virtue of being seen to have skills and capacity to deliver in a way that domestic organisations cannot currently achieve.

Financing is frequently cited as an obstacle to reform implementation at national and sub-national levels. Key considerations for the SU include:

- Doing more to track the emerging thematic priorities of existing or potential donors and strategic partners, to be better positioned to 'connect the dots' and support strategic collaborations between OGP members and partners.

- Recognising that international donor priorities may change rapidly, and that donors might not always be aware of the different pace of work as commitments translate into implementation. There could be a role for the SU in documenting and communicating this, to encourage donors and partners to support reforms over the longer term, in specific countries.

- Recognising the risks for OGP in being perceived and related to as a donor.

- Recognising that sub-national members, especially those who are far from the capital city where donor offices are located, find it particularly hard to obtain funding.

Recommendations

The following summary points, based on the research observations and evaluation dialogues with the SU, are provided as contributions to OGP planning and strategy review.

Short-term and practical

- **Give thematic priorities time** to allow country traction to take hold. Document strategic thinking and considerations about the timing in any one location.

- **Form links through Ministries of Foreign Affairs** on relevant international processes to complement direct linkages of the platform with ministries and local governments.

- **Provide clear messages** to indicate that themes are iterative and mutually supportive, rather than being dropped and replaced.

- **Be specific** about what results international and regional events are intended to achieve for individual actors or members, beyond broad inspiration and motivation, or generalised brokering of relationships.

- **Consider working beyond geographical regions** to engage with different configurations of countries with similar concerns and peer pressures.

Medium term

- **Pursue stronger coordination** between global, regional, country and thematic approaches.

- **Consider whether SU internal incentives** contribute to any gearing challenges – perhaps because of siloed ways of working for different teams.

- **Build better coherence** in partner, SU and member OGP priorities, and their financing.

- **Consider the potential distorting effect** of international funding on country priorities, and how to ensure that local stakeholder priorities and perspectives are not marginalised.

- **Systematically map and analyse emerging priorities** both from members and international actors, to maximise opportunities for alignment and backing for SU's evolving work in supporting the implementation of reforms.

- **Consider how to support CSOs** and committed civil society groups to use the international OGP space to advance OG at national level, including links to funding.

- **Streamline OGP ISC thematic priorities** so that incoming priorities do not contribute to a sense of being overwhelmed at national level.

- **Take stock of costs and benefits of remote versus in-person events** and meetings, and how to move forward most efficiently and effectively.

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