Open Government Partnership

2017-18

OGP Research Agenda

Open Government Partnership

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I. OVERVIEW

OGP is excited to publish its 2017-18 research agenda. This research agenda aims to generate useful tools to directly support reformers in the field, while maintaining OGP's commitment to credible, evidence-based policy. This overview informs potential researchers of the areas currently of greatest importance to OGP's success and helps direct their efforts to research those gaps through upcoming calls for proposals and opportunities for collaboration. It also mentions specific avenues through which the research products will be disseminated in order to ensure maximum uptake among target audiences.

Research will be executed in two ways:

Grants

The OGP Support Unit will offer a number of small grants to researchers to answer questions that align with OGP's strategic focus for the next two years.

Convening and agenda setting

The Support Unit and Independent Reporting Mechanism, in collaboration with partners, will provide opportunities for researchers to advance the broader episteme on open government through colloquia.

We encourage interested think tanks, researchers, and academics to regularly check our website to learn about upcoming call for papers or contact us directly at klic@opengovpartnership.org.

Sections II, III and IV of the research agenda set out the rationale and method that determined the content of the research agenda. These sections allow the prospective researcher to better understand and leverage existing projects, and add value to future research work.

Section V presents a list of research about OGP. This list is very much a living document and we hope to see your contributions included in the future.

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A. GRANTS

1. The Skeptic's Guide to Open Government

According to the findings of the 2016 Strategic Refresh, OGP must strengthen high level political commitment at the national and international levels. Identifying the incentives needed to motivate leaders to champion open government is key to this process.

To achieve this, the Support Unit will produce a ***Skeptic's Guide*** that builds upon the existing empirical literature on the impact of open government reforms. The ***Skeptic's Guide*** will use statistics and strong messages to present compelling cases that open government works. It will be used to sway high-level political leaders who may still need convincing that "open is better". It will also support OGP champions by providing them with the facts and examples they need to secure support for open government reforms.

To develop the ***Skeptic's Guide***, the OGP Support Unit will first commission a series of 'state of the evidence' papers on the impact of open government on the following key themes:

1. **Economic growth and investment climate**
2. **Government efficiency and cost-savings**
3. **Trust, legitimacy, and credibility**
4. **Anti-corruption**

The ***Skeptic's Guide*** will be shared at OGP Steering Committee meetings, OGP-organized global and regional forums, and at bilateral meetings. In addition, OGP will publish each of the state of the evidence papers, and authors may be invited to present their findings at OGP's global and regional events.

Please see a link to the call for proposals for the 'state of the evidence' papers.

OGP also acknowledges the need to generate new empirical and instrumental evidence on the impact of open government reforms. This is addressed in Section B.3.

2. Pluralism, Populism, and Participation: Protecting Civic Space and Deepening Civic Engagement

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 on paper and in practice that guarantee the right to organize. What strategies have been successful, especially in contexts where legitimate participation is portrayed as corruption, undemocratic, elitist, or the result of "foreign agents?"

At the same time, however, many countries have been seeing a consolidation of basic freedoms and modernization of the environment for civil society associations. In these contexts, there are clearly lessons to be learnt on how citizens and civil society are influencing policy, and what OGP can do to broaden the base of civil society engagement in OGP.

The Support Unit will commission research in the following areas:

- **Strategies, campaigns and tools used to improve enabling environment for civic space**
- **Factors enabling civil society and citizens to effectively monitor and scale up oversight of policy reforms**
- **The potential of grassroots participation to influence policy outcomes in open government**

The OGP Support Unit will collaborate with partners to produce a series of case studies. These will feed into a synthesis paper, which will be used to influence country level support, and to direct collaborations with civil society on the fundamental issues of civic space, participation, and inclusion.

Please continue to watch the call for proposals on this page.

B. CONVENING & AGENDA SETTING

1. Weathering the Storms: Building Sustainable Open Government Coalitions

Ambitious open government commitments that aim to change the status quo often encounter strong political resistance from vested interests. A few powerful individuals benefit from secrecy and a monopoly on decision-making, while the majority pays the cost of inaction. Political transitions can also pose risks or opportunities to ambitious reforms. In a few cases, they derail implementation for years on end and in others, they renew the drive for results.

Often, reformers within and outside of government are able to build successful coalitions and involve citizens at the grassroots to tackle resistance. The horizontal and vertical bridging across State and societal divides can prove incredibly effective in overcoming obstacles. We would like to examine successful coalition building efforts and learn how they might be applied to an international initiative like OGP?

OGP will convene researchers and practitioners for a workshop to discuss the latest research on solving collective action problems. Together we will review practical tools used to tackle challenges of collective action, build coalitions and identify the key drivers of policy continuity. We will work with disciplinary teams using different disciplinary lenses (public administration, law, political science, and development studies). The outcome of the workshop will ultimately inform OGP's efforts to establish a coalition-building program to support the work of mid-level government officials and civil society organizations who are at the frontlines designing and implementing open government strategies, programs and policies.

Topics to be discussed include:

- **Strategies to mobilize reform champions across state and societal divides**
- **Approaches to institutionalize open government reforms to withstand political or administrative transitions**
- **Sharing political learning on coalition building across countries or contexts**

2. Expanding the Arc of OGP: Working in Unchartered Territories

Transparency, accountability and participation must become a defining set of values for governments that are committed to engagement, ideas and reform. This becomes ever more true as the geopolitical landscape continues to shift, with illiberal democracies on the rise and open government values being challenged. If OGP is to be helpful to reformers working across the spectrum of political ideologies, it needs to understand strategic entry points for working in these contexts. This could be through engaging with various government structures, non-traditional actors or through thematic issue areas that lie at the heart of state credibility with citizens. The research will have operational implications for the Partnership, how it is structured and how the Support Unit and Steering Committee chooses to support OGP reformers in countries.

Some salient areas on which to advance our understanding are:

- **Transparency and Accountability in Illiberal Democracies and Fragile States**
- **Effectiveness of Reforms led by Subnational Governments**
- **Private Sector Engagement in Open Government**
- **Media Engagement in Open Government**

To encourage researchers to investigate these questions, OGP will play a convening and agenda setting role through the following channels:

The OGP Support Unit and IRM maintain an **open door policy** in collaborating with individual researchers, academic institutions and think tanks to operationalize the research agenda. We are happy to provide data to researchers, and have profile their work in OGP Global Summits and regional events, which are attended by thousands of academics and practitioners in the field. Please contact us at klic@opengovpartnership.org for further information.

ACADAYS 2017: In November 2017 the government of Argentina will host the OGP Americas Regional Event in Buenos Aires. This event will be preceded by a convening of academics and researchers to surface emerging theories, best practices and evidence on open government. OGP will help set the agenda and ensure quality control of paper submissions.

3. Investigating the Impact of Open Government Reforms: Generating New Evidence

While OGP is commissioning synthesis papers based on the existing evidence of impact of open government reforms, it is equally important to generate new empirical and instrumental evidence of the impact of open government reforms. To promote work in this area, the Support Unit will explore the following channels:

- **Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF):** The OGP Steering Committee has requested that the World Bank Group set up a MDTF to provide technical and financial assistance to participating governments and civil society in support of OGP's new strategic direction. OGP participating countries would have access to MDTF financing through two main windows, one of which is on Peer Exchange, Learning and Research. This window will support an increase in the number of knowledge products, in particular evidence regarding the actual impact of open government reforms, and to bridge the divide between normative positions and empirical findings. Funds provided through this window would be accessible to participating governments, civil society organizations, research institutions and OGP Working Groups as grants or through a competitive process depending on the type of activity and partners involved.

- **Open Government Impact Research Consortium (OGIRC)** consists of the OGP Support Unit, Results for Development, Global Integrity, NYU, GovLab, and the World Bank. The consortium has already undertaken major studies on mapping the impact of open government and on determining the financial costs associated with particular open government initiatives. OGP will work with consortium partners to define and operationalize the scope of work on generating evidence on the impact of open government reforms.

II. RATIONALE

OGP has learned a lot about itself over the past six years. The Partnership has steadily matured – most participating countries have gone through two National Action Plan (NAP) cycles and over half are on their third NAP. The iterative process of co-creating and implementing a NAP creates an opportunity for OGP reformers to understand what it takes to champion transparent, participatory, and accountable governments in their countries. OGP's leadership and staff are continuously honing strategies on where and how best to help country reformers along this journey. These NAP cycles have generated a wealth of data which in turn has spurred a healthy volume of research into what is and is not working at a national level and where OGP has had an influence in moving the needle towards more open government.

But the geo-political landscape in which OGP operates has been changing in unprecedented ways. Rising citizen distrust of institutions, an increase in nationalist populism and a growing sense of citizen marginalization have influenced the political make-up of countries. OGP's work across the 75 countries now in the Partnership, and its cumulative effect in setting global norms of openness, pluralism and deliberation, are being challenged in real time. This has prompted a period of intense reflection and led to OGP's Strategic Refresh in 2016 – a roadmap that outlines what OGP has achieved, where it has failed, and most importantly, how OGP countries can respond to these challenging political developments by building a platform that allows for fair and equal opportunities for citizens to engage in governance.

Where does the new OGP research agenda fit in all this? A few years ago OGP developed its first research agenda, outlining a need for evidence-based learning to better inform the Partnership's work in countries. This objective has not changed and is perhaps even more relevant in the current political context where facts, empirics and objective analysis need to underpin decision-making and action. The research agenda is particularly critical for three groups of stakeholders. First, OGP reformers - mid-level government officials and civil society actors - who need to understand what factors drive successful open government initiatives and ensure that these factors are implemented, adapted and scaled up. Second, the agenda will have learning and operational implications for the work of the OGP Support Unit and the Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM), and is critical to keeping us abreast of new ways of thinking in this field. Third, now more than ever there is a need to build a strong case for why open government works, and use the evidence to bolster political leaders who champion open government, while convincing the skeptics. Through evidence, we need to illustrate why deeper citizen engagement and governments that are open, responsive and accountable to those citizens is a better solution to overcome citizen distrust and tackle elite capture.

The research agenda for 2017-18 builds on what we know and outlines where we need to go based on the priorities of OGP's Strategic Refresh. Sections III and IV summarize key research inspired by the previous research agenda, and provide guidance on how prospective researchers can leverage this work and add most value to future investigations.

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III. WHAT WE LEARNED

OGP's first research agenda sought answers to three sets of questions:

1. **Compliance and Completion:** What kinds of initiatives are countries implementing as part of their OGP National Action Plans? What do we know about countries' compliance with OGP process requirements and their completion of OGP commitments?

2. **Drivers of Change:** What explains the variation in OGP performance between countries? What factors drive the development and completion of an ambitious National Action Plan?

3. **Long-term Impact:** In how many countries have OGP reforms improved the effectiveness, efficiency and/or responsiveness of government? How has OGP contributed or not contributed to this change?

A. COMPLIANCE AND COMPLETION

What kinds of initiatives are countries implementing as part of their OGP National Action Plans? What do we know about countries' compliance with OGP process requirements and their completion of OGP commitments?

OGP NAPs cover a breadth of public policy challenges, though some are more commonly addressed than others. A number of studies analyzed NAPs on major thematic areas such as fiscal transparency, access to information, justice and open data. Broadly, they studied two things: (i) identified OGP countries that are role models in these areas and ranked highly in ambition[1] and implementation of commitments, and (ii) analyzed the level of complexity and ambition of the commitments in these thematic areas. For example, the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT) mapped OGP commitments against their standards of fiscal openness.

With the exception of access to information commitments which were found to be generally ambitious, contrary to expectation, largely prioritized and completed on time – the studies showed that across the Partnership ambition in the other studied thematic areas was limited. A majority of these commitments also didn't have direct public influence in policymaking, focusing largely on transparency efforts in place of public accountability.

Over time however, countries have gotten better at mastering the basics of participating in OGP. The IRM's technical paper notes that most countries improved in the formal requirements of consultation in consecutive NAP cycles. This promising finding does not, however, speak to the quality of dialogue or the depth of co-creation of action plans. NAPs have also improved in specificity, relevance, and completion, though potential impact has declined. This can in part be attributed to an adjustment of the IRM method, but it may also be a sign of governments scaling back ambition in an attempt to complete commitments. Berliner (2015) layered IRM data with other country-level information such as democratic institutions, economic development, and factors associated with the OGP process itself and found an "impact gap". He argued that context matters in determining how we judge ambition and completion among OGP countries. That leads us to the next question.

[1] The potential to stretch government practice beyond business-as-usual in the relevant policy area

B. DRIVERS OF CHANGE

What explains the variation in OGP performance between countries? What factors drive the development and completion of an ambitious National Action Plan?

The questions above helped to unpack OGP's theory of change, analyzing the causal link between OGP inputs, and its effect on participatory processes and short term outcomes in a country. Are key change agents (high level political leaders, mid level government reformers and civil society organizations) playing their roles the way we envisioned, and what factors - both within and outside of OGP's sphere of influence - affect their ability to successfully co-create and implement NAPs?

Studies from Global Integrity, U4 and Princeton University show that OGP has been very effective in galvanizing high level political commitment, although that doesn't always translate into the crucial "political cover" necessary for mid-level government officials to be able to see through the implementation of reforms. A larger question is whether individual political will becomes institutionalized within government so that progress on OGP is not rolled back after their departure. Studies identified that where OGP finds an institutional home, and whether government reformers have the (official or legal) mandate, broad-based ownership, human and financial resources, and technical capacity to carry out OGP reforms, matters greatly for success. Exogenous factors come into play as well. The United States' early diplomacy around OGP, conditions of accession from regional blocks like the European Union, and pressure from potential donors, investors or trading partners form a package of international incentives that can influence how OGP is prioritized domestically.

OGP's co-creation requirements, and particularly multistakeholder forums, are defining new modes of collaboration between governments and civil society organizations, and helping to deliver more ambitious NAPs. But this experience is not uniform across OGP. The design of the forum, quality of dialogue and active participants define its potential for success. Clarity on how engagement in these forums translates to changes in policy and practice, and historical legacies of government-civil society relations, also affect the forum's effectiveness.

But certain features of the OGP model, such as the two-year NAP cycle could potentially be an inhibitor of ambition. While many countries carry over commitments in consecutive NAPs to complete their lifecycle, others are focused on achieving an IRM report that marks their NAP 'complete'. This forces us to consider how OGP's model is incentivizing reforms with a short political shelf life, rather than the politically challenging, long term processes of reform which can fundamentally change the way governments interact with citizens.

Research so far shows that the OGP model is starting to help embed practices of openness and co-creation in countries. But the framework for participation in OGP - through rules, mechanisms and institutions - can not trigger change on its own. For this reason OGP needs to account for and actively address the macro as well as micro context to drive success. Francoli et. al's (2015) work surveys the socio-political and legal factors that create an enabling national environment for open government reforms to succeed. But micro context - specifically the incentives, motivations and obstacles that reformers encounter through the course of their work - is equally important to crafting effective strategies. That "context matters" is widely understood among those working in the transparency and accountability field. But it has real implications on OGP at an operational level, and the extent to which the Partnership expends energy and resources in understanding and tackling contextual realities.

C. LONG-TERM IMPACT

In how many countries have OGP reforms improved the effectiveness, efficiency and/or responsiveness of government? How has OGP contributed or not contributed to this change?

At the macro level, a few large-N studies on fiscal transparency, composite open government indices and other key topics have attempted to examine the relationship between OGP participation and its effect on third-party indicators over time. By and large the results of these studies have been inconclusive. OGP's mid-term review attributes this to the time lag between NAPs and observed national level changes. Ojo et al. (2015) highlight the misalignment of NAPs with countries' strengths and weaknesses in international governance indicators. Brockmeyer and Fox (2015) cite methodological issues with demonstrating causality.

The lack of results does not necessarily prove or disprove the notion that OGP participation improves government openness, responsiveness and accountability to citizens. Rather it highlights the need for different ways of assessing impact in a field where progress will inevitably be incremental, non-linear and messy. This might mean investigating impact at different points in OGP's journey, with different of levels of government, or as related to various groups of stakeholders. The Center for American Progress, Brockmeyer and Fox (2015) and OGP's mid term review note that OGP has strengthened the international effort and normative framework around open government. Co-creation of policy reforms between government and civil society based on mutual respect - is now a much more established concept, especially in OGP countries that have gone through several NAP cycles. This cultural shift, at least within the OGP process, has been one of the great successes of the OGP model. And five years on, OGP has produced concrete examples of how citizens and civil society have used their countries OGP commitments to change government policy and administration. Of course, these changes can be influenced by a much wider range of factors than OGP activities alone, and should continue to inspire methods of inquiry that gauge OGP's contribution rather than attribution to outcomes.

Notwithstanding the efforts to capture OGP's impact, there continues to be a need to shift from normative arguments of the value of open government to the positive, instrumental value of open government. A recent Brookings Institute study reviewed the empirical and theoretical literature and identified what is known about opening government and its return on investment in terms of public trust, government efficiency, public accountability and development outcomes. However, as was mentioned at the beginning of this document, more of this kind of work is needed and will be critical for reformers around the world doing the difficult work of opening up governments.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Strategic Refresh used much of the above research findings to inform ***what*** OGP should do in the next few years to leverage our successes and to address waning ambition and implementation gaps. The next research agenda should outline ***how*** OGP does it, and present compelling methods to capture the impact of the Partnership over the next several years. OGP will work to ensure that the research generated through this agenda meets three important objectives:

- **That has both practical and policy relevance**
- **That research findings are accessible to the primary audiences**
- **That targeted audiences are able to learn from research findings and willing to apply them to their work**

To apply for research grants, refer to Section I or visit this page for periodic calls for proposals.

To collaborate with or convene researchers with OGP on any of the research topics listed in Section B please email klic@opengovpartnership.org

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