



UNITED STATES

CIVIL SOCIETY MUST KEEP PUSHING

Open government principles were well entrenched within the Obama Administration by the time the Open Government Partnership was launched in September 2011. Since the first day of Obama's presidency, in January 2009, the federal government has worked to make government more efficient, effective and responsive to citizens' needs.

'The President's bold proclamation of the intention to become the most transparent administration in history has certainly contributed to raising the visibility of open government.'

says Patrice McDermott of the Open the Government (OTG) coalition. In July 2011, once the White House began developing the US National Action Plan, it became increasingly clear that the OTC could play an important role in coordinating efforts on behalf of civil society. 'We noticed that the internal

interaction within the government was not well coordinated and that there was no systematic way for government to interact with civil society about the OGP,' recalls Tom Blanton of the National Security Archive. Given that the OTG already had a history with both the Bush and Obama administrations in making government more open and transparent, the OGP presented a good opportunity for the domestic community to start engaging on another level. The OTG seized the role of coordinating and engaging both broader civil society and some international organisations in order these parties could exert influence on the developing National Action Plan. With very limited time, the OTG rallied around and acquired some seed funding from within its network to kick-start the process of formal engagement. A consultant was recruited with the following mandate: to become the main contact point between

government agencies and civil society; to support the process of establishing the teams charged with monitoring the implementation of the actions; and to help establish online and offline communication tools. From July to September, the OTG established a Google group for those within and outside the capital, coordinated six face-to-face meetings, set up regular conference calls, established a website and facilitated communications with the Obama Administration. Says Patrice,

'Having a dedicated person was critical. The consultant was a nominated focal point, which really helped to consolidate the dialogue and facilitate communication for both parties.'

From action plan to evaluation During the meetings with government, civil society put forward its priorities and what it

'We met with open government civil society organisations several times to gather ideas, and many of the best initiatives in our Plan.' - Lisa Ellman, Chief Counsellor for the OGP, the White House

wanted reflected in the Action Plan. With only a few months to draft the Plan, there was limited opportunity to go back and forth with the document.

'We were told they were constrained by internal processes and legal restrictions from sharing the draft plan with us as it developed, but we were assured that "you are going to be happy" with it,'

says Tom. The first National Action Plan outlined a set of 26 commitments and 17 goals to help increase public integrity, promote public participation, manage public resources more effectively, and improve public services. In crafting the National Action Plan, 'we met with open government civil society organisations several times to gather ideas, and many of the best initiatives in our Plan – including, for example,

implementing the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative – we heard of initially from the civil society groups,' says Lisa Ellman, Chief Counsellor for the OGP, the White House.¹

Soon after the Plan was released, civil society established teams focusing on each of the commitments. 'These teams were self-selecting, based on what people were interested in and cared about,' says Patrice. The implementation has been very collaborative; the teams have met regularly with staff of the various government agencies to discuss the nitty-gritty issues. These meetings have been highly productive and have prompted the building of an ongoing and substantive relationship between CSOs and government officials. The OTG also established relevant metrics for each of the government commitments. In the end, a total of 17 teams of volunteers from

37 civil society organisations and academic institutions were involved in the process of evaluating the first National Action Plan, the findings of which were formally released in March 2013. From the government's perspective, the Plan serves as a great example of what can be done as a country when government, civil society and the public collaborate. 'We are proud that the United States has fulfilled 24 of those commitments,' says Lisa.² Some highlights include We the People, an online platform that allows anyone to create or sign a petition asking the Administration to take action on an issue; the passage of the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act, protecting federal workers who expose waste, fraud and the abuse of authority in government; the commitment by the US to implement the international standard known as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI); and Open Data Initiatives,



'We feel there were too many commitments and the Plan was too broad. Next time, we plan to encourage government to have fewer commitments but to go deeper to achieve more meaningful impact.'

- Patrice McDermott of the Open the Government (OTG)

whereby thousands of government data resources in the fields of health and medicine, education, energy, public safety, global development and finance have been posted in readable formats for free public use. For civil society, the evaluation was designed to resist the natural tendency to turn a governmental action plan into a 'tick the box' exercise. This was done by creating an incentive for the government to act on inputs received from civil society organisations about how best to implement the commitment, and how to make additional progress. In addition to scoring whether the government met the letter of its commitment, evaluators were asked to rate the government's efforts to collaborate with civil society organisations, movement toward civil society recommendations, and the meaningfulness and sustainability of the government's efforts. 'We feel there were too many commitments and the Plan

was too broad. Next time, we plan to encourage government to have fewer commitments but to go deeper to achieve more meaningful impact,' says Patrice. Substantively, civil society wants government to address the issues surrounding national security, government spending transparency, transformation of the classification system, the proactive disclosure of information, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and ethics disclosure. The OTG is also aware of the importance of broadening participation beyond Washington DC. 'A challenge is to enable greater web-based participation through webinars and other means so that participation is wider and more inclusive.'

Moving forward, civil society acknowledges that while much progress has been achieved, a key lesson learned is that if the process is not pushed from the outside, very little happens. 'The

administration has many shifting priorities and sometimes things fall off the radar. Civil society needs to be well informed. We cannot sit back and expect things to happen,' says Tom. Government is excited to announce the release of a second Open Government National Action Plan. 'We will engage members of the public and open government advocates in a variety of ways – from in-person consultations to online dialogues,' say Lisa.³ Reflecting on the journey thus far, 'the Administration should be commended for taking good first, if often small, steps forward on a number of issues. Achieving the greater goal of transforming government into a body that is open and accountable to the public, though, will require the proverbial giant leap,' says Patrice.

🔗 For more information or to get in touch with one of the people interviewed, please e-mail nvaart@hivos.nl.

'The administration has many shifting priorities and sometimes things fall off the radar. Civil society needs to be well informed. We cannot sit back and expect things to happen.' - Tom Blanton, National Security Archive

¹Collaboration on Government Secrecy; Transparency in the Obama Administration American University, Washington College of Law, 17 January 2013; <http://www.wcl.american.edu/lawandgov/cgs/documents/20130117keynote.pdf>

²Open Government: A time for self-reflection; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/03/29/open-government-time-self-assessment>

³Open Government: A time for self-reflection; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/03/29/open-government-time-self-assessment>

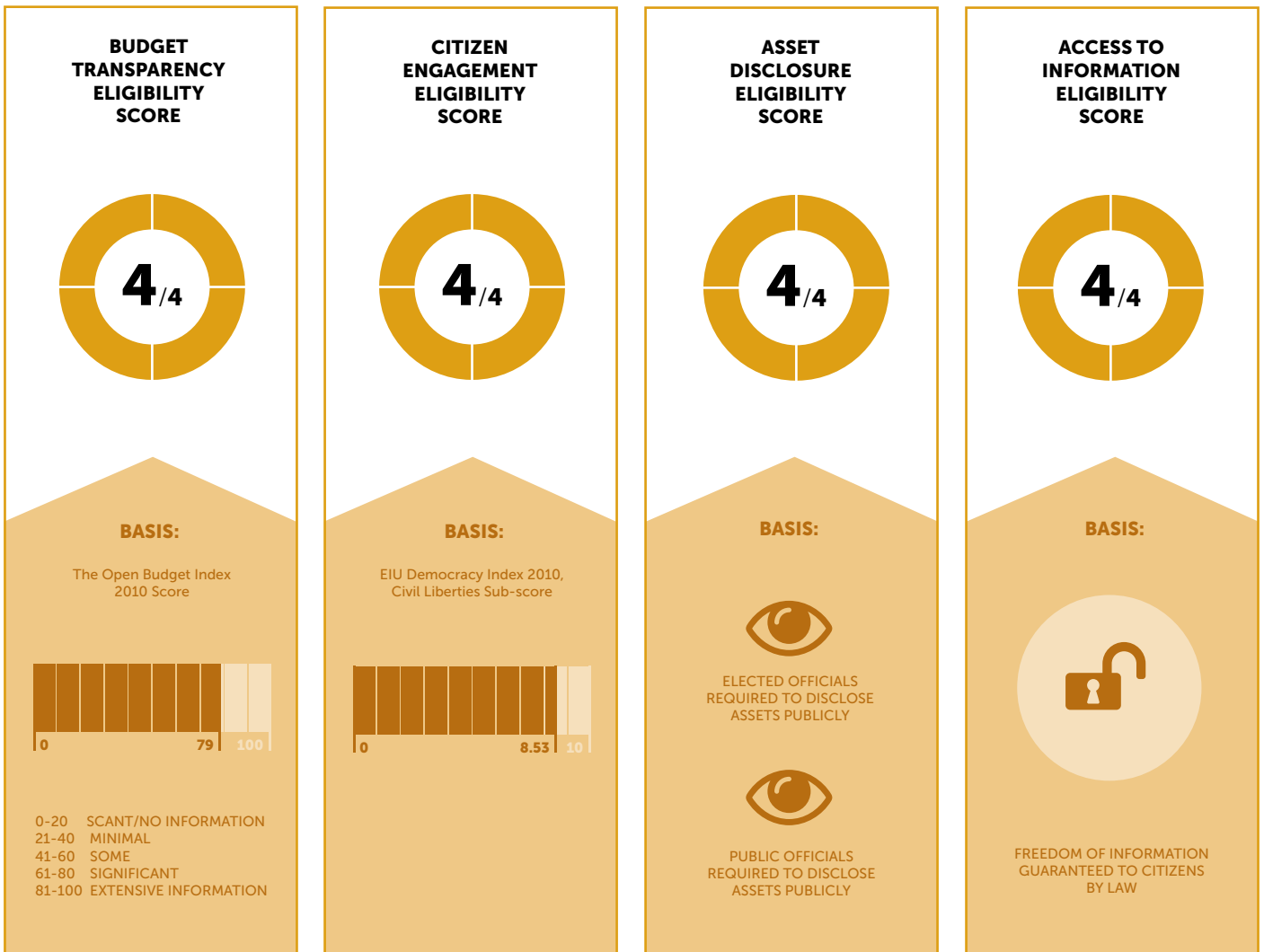


🕒 OGP MEMBER SINCE:
April 2012

🏗️ CURRENT STAGE:
Implementing 1st Action Plan

🌐 OGP SITE:
<http://www.openthegovernment.org>

USA OGP ELIGIBILITY DATASHEET



TOTAL OGP ELIGIBILITY SCORE: 16/16

