

Author: Sarita Ranchod

THE IRISH EXPERIENCE

Editor: Sonja Boezak

PHASE ONE: THE CAMPAIGN TO JOIN¹

“My objective was to get the people of Ireland involved in the decisions that affect their lives. This was an opportunity to empower as many people as possible to be involved in the decisions affecting them. There is more to democracy than polling stations and voting every five years.”

- Denis Parfenov,
Founder & Director of ActiveCitizen

We caught up with Denis Parfenov and Martin Wallace, two of the lead initiators of the campaign for Ireland to join the OGP. We asked them to share their reflections on the experience to date, and to share lessons, insights and advice for civil society advocates lobbying their governments to join the OGP.

“Ireland sees itself as a tech hub, but when it comes to governance, accountability and transparency, ICTs are being under-utilised. This is possibly due to a lack of awareness of how ICTs can improve engagement and bolster transparency between citizens and the state,” says Denis Parfenov, Open Knowledge Ambassador for Ireland, and initiator of a successful civic campaign for Ireland to join the Open Government Partnership.

DRIVING CHANGE

When he found out about the OGP, Parfenov took it upon himself to campaign for the Irish government to join. He saw the OGP as an ideal vehicle for Ireland,

able to accommodate a range of different areas that could increase openness, state accountability, and transparency in the decisions that affect citizens’ lives.

He quickly gathered a small group of interested individuals, including Martin Wallace, who met regularly to plan and strategise the campaign for Ireland to join the OGP. In the spirit of openness and transparency, agendas and minutes of the ad hoc group were posted online as Google docs. An Open Government Ireland group was established in March 2013 to ensure information was shared, and to encourage citizens to contribute to discussions.

Wallace points out that the political and economic backdrop meant citizens had lost faith in government. The global economic crash revealed poor policy-making, poor political leadership and deep-rooted economic problems in Ireland. The country lost its economic sovereignty in 2010. Irish banks were bailed out by the EU, the European Central Bank and the IMF due to poor decision-making by those in power. “Ireland was in a political and economic crisis and citizens felt disempowered,” Wallace adds.

“Even in this crisis context, there were few demonstrations or protests in Ireland,” notes Parfenov. “While organised business is able to lobby government, there is no equivalent lobby for citizens,” says Wallace. As a result, decision-making can favour business and override citizen interests. The OGP presents an alternative possibility of empowered citizens participating in the decisions that affect their lives, where the state is meaningfully accountable to its citizens.

¹This article is the first of three on Ireland’s OGP Process. The next article will focus on the civil society consultation process, and the third, to be published in January 2014, will focus on Ireland’s OGP action plan.

OPENING DATA

Parfenov, who is at the forefront of the Open Data movement in Ireland, argues that efforts to push for the use of Open Data were not happening in Ireland, and that it continues to be a largely unexplored area. "For a country that sees itself as a technology hub, there is much that can be done to liberate data, using Open Source data driven apps to empower and inform citizens. We do so much using technology, including banking. Yet, using technology for citizen participation is limited."

He and Wallace are involved in hosting informal Open Data Meet-ups bringing together the 'techie' community and state and other actors to exchange and explore ideas about making data openly available for improving the quality of citizens' lives.

Parfenov's guiding vision is of an open Ireland in which information is available for all, whether it is about the quality of hospitals, education, or public services. "My goal is to make information usable and useful. We want to empower people. We want information to be collective, for citizens to have access to information in useful formats. We want information to be published online in searchable, machine-readable, non-proprietary formats that are made available for re-use without restrictions. We want to empower everyone to make better informed decisions on a daily basis," he says.

OPEN LOBBYING

For Parfenov and the initial ad hoc group, using social media tools smartly was an obvious approach to ensure those in power knew of the initiative, understood its value in the Irish context, and wanted Ireland to join its peers in the OGP.

The strategic application of social media tools differentiates the Irish campaign as a case study of good practice, rich in lessons for civil society (CS) players in OGP member states and those lobbying for their countries to join the OGP.

The incumbent Irish Coalition Government came into power with commitments to meaningful reforms to substantially increase state accountability to citizens and transparency in decision-making. This meant a clear synergy in the manifestos of the political parties in government, and the objectives of the OGP.

Initially letters were written to Irish members of parliament to advise them of the OGP and to encourage them to support a campaign for Ireland to join.

"It's easy to ignore an email. But if you use Twitter, it is public and visible. In Ireland most of our politicians use Twitter so it was an ideal vehicle for a campaign for Ireland to join the OGP community. If they ignore Twitter it can become embarrassing in a very public way," Parfenov notes.

The campaign did not stop at letter writing and social media tweets. Every possible forum was used to reach and engage political leaders and their advisors who had the clout to open doors. Parfenov attended public gatherings on Open Data, enterprise development, innovation and digital agendas to create awareness and grow the OGP lobby. He used a specific Twitter hashtag at these meetings to spread the word and promote the OGP agenda.

The ad hoc group, through briefings and lobbying Irish members of parliament, secured a question asked in Parliament on four occasions, to find out why Ireland had not joined the OGP (when more than 50 of Ireland's peers had). "We asked a member of parliament to find out what Ireland's OGP plans were, and within a week the question was raised in the national parliament," Wallace said. "The idea here was to raise awareness of OGP amongst our parliamentarians," he added. Parfenov notes that the Irish parliamentarian, Stephen Donnelly played a particularly helpful behind-the-scenes role in linking the ad hoc group with the appropriate government players.

SECURING ALLIES

The next step was to secure the support of countries that had a strong historical and economic relationship with Ireland. The UK and US, both founding OGP member states, were the obvious influential peers to share experience, advise and encourage Ireland to join. OGP Board Members were linked up with the Irish OGP advocates, and conference calls were placed connecting them with the UK Cabinet Office and the US State Department. Discussions were also held with Croatian and Moldovan counterparts who had valuable insights to share.

The conference calls served as an opportunity to share experiences and 'how to' strategies. "We were particularly keen to learn from those who came before us," says Wallace. He credits support from the UK co-chair, the OGP Civil Society Coordinator and advice from member countries' CSOs and government representatives for bringing Ireland to the point of joining the OGP.

"Without their advice, perspectives and direction, we wouldn't be here. We looked to those ahead of us to learn from their experiences of what worked and what didn't work. We adapted best practices from other country experiences to our local environment."

WHERE DOES OGP FIT?

It was not easy to identify which government ministry was the 'appropriate' one to target lobby efforts at. "Because OGP is a broad initiative, there isn't one government ministry or department that covers all of it. This has been a challenge across OGP member countries.

In the UK OGP is housed in the Cabinet Office. In the US it's in the State Department. We learnt from other countries that housing it within a Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) did not help to forward the OGP agenda sufficiently," Wallace notes.

In June 2012, after much persistence, the ad hoc group was connected to the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI). However, Minister Sean Sherlock felt that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) was a better fit to take the lead on OGP.

DPER houses complementary initiatives, including ethics reforms towards accountability and transparency for public office-bearers; new laws to protect whistle-blowers, regulate lobbyists and reform freedom of information laws. Meetings with senior advisors to the cabinet minister, Brendan Howlin, and other senior officials ensued.

"It took eleven months to find the right people. Once found, things moved along well and they were open to the idea. At present everything proposed to Government requires a business case. So we made a business case for OGP. We had to explain the economic benefits of OGP: the stimulus Open Data can provide; the efficiencies Open Data can yield. It was important to stress the improvement to global perceptions which an ambitious OGP programme would bring, due to its knock-on economic benefits," Wallace said. "And of course, the non-economic advantages that OGP brings were also communicated," he adds.

At meetings with senior civil servants, including William Beausang of DPER, it became clear that while officials were, in principle, positively disposed towards OGP, they needed input to build a strong narrative in support of Irish membership. "In the initial meetings with officials, we brought our own briefing documents. OGP

is a complex concept that is not easy to immediately convey. We needed to break it down to make it simpler to present and understand," Wallace adds.

In December 2012 the Minister of Public Expenditure and Reform announced in its budget speech that it recommended Ireland join the OGP, and in May 2013, a letter of intent was sent from Minister Howlin to the OGP co-chairs.

At this point other Civil Society groups including Transparency International Ireland (TII) began to see the appeal of the OGP for Ireland, and interest started to grow.

Wallace notes that one of the key lessons from this process was how much one individual or a small group can achieve. "It took persistence. For one year, Denis tweeted about OGP every day. He sent letters. He did research. He spoke at meetings. There's an awful lot of progress one person can make," he mused.

OPEN IRELAND

Wallace points out that the OGP agenda requires Ireland to be pushed and stretched beyond what has already been done towards meaningful citizen engagement, access to useful and useable information, accountability and transparency. "So far our officials have displayed good intent. We will have to see what the CS consultations yield, and how Government responds to it. There are no guarantees."

Parfenov reiterates important strategy advice for those working to forward OGP agendas in their countries: "The process is as important as the end result. The citizen engagement with Government needs to be as inclusive and open as possible.

Approaching public representatives and decision-makers in the public domain is a very important strategy. We used public events and opportunities to reach decision-makers. We used talking publicly, email, twitter and other available means of communication. We kept it public so the world can see."

Following the successful lobby for Ireland to join the OGP, the Irish government issued an open tender for organisations to undertake the civil society consultation process. Transparency International Ireland, under the leadership of Nuala Haughey, won the tender to undertake and coordinate a consultation process with civil society/citizens.

Three civil society consultations took place in Dublin between July and September 2013. The physical consultations were supported by online submissions and discussions as part of the process of gathering CS input to inform Ireland's OGP Action Plan.

In our next OGP Ireland article, Phase 2: The Civil Society Consultations, we discuss the consultation process and its outcomes with Nuala Haughey of Transparency International Ireland.



CLICK TO LISTEN TO DENIS PARFENOV