

Armenia

Comments received on the second progress report

Movses Aritakesyan

Dear colleagues,

Our organization would like to present the following comment on the Armenia progress report:

"The Ethics commission should investigate the big monetary presents some Armenian high ranking officials, including judges, received

and should publish a report specifying the sources of money (who donated the money), did the people who donated the money had any business relationship with high ranking officials, their family members or their relatives, whether the money was received in cash or by means of bank transfer, if large sums of money were transferred via banks did the anti-money-laundering authorities investigate those cases, if the money was donated in cash where did this cash emerge, etc."

We hope that this comment will be used in future.

Best regards,
Movses Aristakesyan
Chairman of the "Center of Economic Right" NGO

Arman Udumyan

Dear Madam/Sir,

I looked through the report, which duly presents the findings and shows the progress the country made towards the issues under concern.

See below my comment for the OGP 2nd Action Plan:

To investigate the other topical commitments taken by the RA Government under other initiatives (International Conventions, Agreements concerning the governance transparency and accountability) and based on CSOs priorities, select the most pretentious and important ones to include them in the 2nd OGP Action Plan. Possible commitments (to include in the 2nd Action Plan) may be the ones taken under the CoE Conventions (as a member of Group of European Countries against Corruption - GRECO) and the OECD Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan, as well as tracing the progress made under the Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index and the Global Integrity Report (Scorecard for Armenia).

Hope you find it useful.

Thank you.

Best wishes,

Arman Udumyan
Researcher, Chairman of NGO "Center for Social Development & Public Policy"

OSF Armenia

About the process: Though the MoES reported establishment of working group for implementation of actions under this particular commitment, there was no open call for CS participation. While the issue of school boards' efficiency and transparency has been comprehensively analyzed in different researches, the findings and recommendations of those research reports have not been properly considered by either MoES or the established working group during the implementation of the Commitment #9. For example, in the report on "Strengthening Fiscal Transparency and Financial Accountability in the Public General Education System of Yerevan", which was provided to the MoES for commenting and follow up, Community Finance Officers Association is comprehensively analyzing problems with establishment and operation of Governing Boards at schools. Corresponding policy recommendations are also provided.

About the content: MoES limited actions under this commitment to minor changes in regulation of the Governing Boards that cannot have significant impact on the transparency of these bodies. According to adopted provisions parent of the school who at the same time is working as pedagogue in the same school cannot represent parents in school Boards. However, conducted changes in School boards regulation do not address the cases, when parent is working at school not as pedagogue but as support staff. Moreover, these changes in the election procedure of governing boards do not ensure proportionality among the Governing Boards of schools as stated in commitment text. The second part of the commitment refers to the issues of the transparency and accountability of annual budgeting and financial reporting processes. According to the commitment text, the MoES should have been adopted new "Procedure of the annual budget planning and report on the budget expenses of the RA general education institutions". The formal commitment also defines that new regulation should ensure transparency and accountability of annual budget planning and expense reporting process of schools and that annual draft budgets and financial expense reports should be made available on the web pages and in the announcement desk boards of all secondary schools. Meantime, the majority of secondary schools in Armenia do not have their web pages. The only web source that contains information about the budget and expenditures of secondary schools are the web pages of Marzpetarans (regional municipalities). So far only Yerevan municipality web page provides for proper information about annual budgets and expenditures of schools under its supervision. As for other regions, the information either does not exist or is limited to one line information about the annual budget amounts of schools.

About the status of completion: This commitment cannot be considered as implemented/completed. The conducted amendment to the regulation of schools' Governing Boards does not adequately reflect necessary measures to ensure transparency of election and operation of these Boards. The new document "Procedure of the annual budget planning and report on the budget expenses of the RA general education institutions" was adopted at the beginning of 2015 by the order of the minister of education and science. However, it is currently on probation phase only. The probation will be completed at the end of 2015/2016 education year and based on the results MoES will make necessary amendments (according to the report by MoES). After completion and finalization of the probation results the document will have to pass official procedure of registration at the Ministry of Justice to becoming normative document for schools. The MoES do not have any certain information on how effective and to what extend the regulation is currently followed by the schools. There is also no established mechanism for both decision makers and beneficiaries to monitor the process of application of this procedure. In given circumstances the Commitment #9 cannot be considered as completed.

Alvard Gasparyan

Websites and different IT solutions will help transparency and accountability only if there is a genuine political will. You may consume huge funds and create sophisticated platforms which will be of no use if data is not updated thoroughly and regularly. Similarly, conferences and discussions are waste of money and time - every day we hear media stories about crime and corruption amongst top public officials - nothing happens afterwards, none of them gets suspended or punished. Information and media have only very limited role in suppressing the corrupt behaviour of the leadership. I read that the commitment of "Broadcasting State Procurement Appeals Board sessions" is complete. Obviously, this has not brought any significant change in the effectiveness of the state procurement, and this explains why this commitment has been fulfilled (it poses no danger to the existing wasteful practices). Recently a luxurious training centre for public officials more resembling a grand resort centre has been constructed using state budget. A huge list of ridiculously unjustified expenditures went through this same procurement system with no obstruction. I wonder whether I missed anything interesting in the broadcasting of procurement appeals sessions?...I do not remember the exact numbers involved in this particular case but every reasonable mind concerned about the country struggles to understand these lavish expenses given the fundamental social and security challenges that Armenian society is facing.

Alvard Gasparyan

Re: Gevorg Serghoyan's comment - openness, transparency and accountability ARE the national security. If we've had sufficient transparency and accountability, our army would be much better equipped and human losses considerably less. Perhaps Azerbaijan wouldn't even dare to attack and Russia would have more respect towards our statehood. The Armenian Constitution (the earlier version as well as the new one adopted through fraudulent referendum) declares that Armenia is a democratic country. And somehow I struggle to believe that Armenian leadership over the past decades has tried even the least to fulfill this core commitment. Is it that Armenian Government wants to be transparent and democratic but somehow resources and intelligence are not there and they need IRM commitments to guide them? Is it because the Prime Minister, for example, wants to disclose his finances and explain why he destroyed green zone in the middle of Yerevan in order to build his luxurious palace? Or perhaps Syunik governor or many many other public officials wanted to restrain themselves from their own their illegitimate businesses but needed Europe to help them to do so?.... And so what these IRM commitments are for?...Of course, these are first off all opportunities to take more grants and funds from European or USAID donors and imitate 'democracy building'. As always, these projects will be completed with no added transparency in the crucial areas, such as procurement, education, mining, local government. These areas will continue to be deeply corrupt. Since the core commitment - the fair and democratic national elections - is not any close to happen. Elections are not intended to serve the welfare of the society but only to control resources and power, and this explains the lack of transparency and accountability in all areas of Armenian society. And so the pressure from Europe and other democratic countries should be targeted first of all at ensuring fair elections in the country. Alas, so far certain political considerations prevented these governments from adopting serious measures to this end.

Gevorg Serghoyan

When Armenian national security is under threat, openness, transparency and accountability are secondary. As our history indicates national security is not about territories, wealth or health. In case of Armenians it is the right to live, to exist and to do so on our land. Evidence, Armenian Genocide in present day Turkey in late XIX century, until 1915 and beyond, massacres of Armenians in Azerbaijan city of Sumgait in 1988 and Azerbaijani capital Baku in 1990. However, we know that the fighting on the border will be over and then we will ask the people that govern over Armenia since independence (1) why do they buy new cars for themselves while the Armenian soldiers are equipped with weapons of 1980s, (2) why do they buy fashionable apartments for high level officials while Armenians from Syria face troubles paying the rent, (3) why do they spent huge sums to renovate government premises and build new ones while families of several wounded soldiers do not have money to cover their daily expenses. NO TO ROBBERY. The next Armenian OGP action plan should have commitment to disclose information about every non-classified expenditure of every Armenian government body and every high level government official and must allow the society to scrutinize those expenditures. No Armenian official should have the right to say that we need to drive new expensive cars because our colleagues in other countries drive those, we have to renovate government premises to host foreign delegations in fashionable

offices, ... NO, YOU SHOULD CARE ABOUT OUR SOLDIERS AND THEIR FAMILIES AND THE DEPRIVED MEMBERS OF ARMENIAN SOCIETY

Armen Ghalumyan

Today Armenia is facing troubles on its borders. However, we strongly believe we will overcome this temporary difficult situation and continue our efforts to build strong, fair and lovely country for all Armenians. It is pity that Armenia did not have any "star" commitments in its second action plan. We successfully implemented the first generation reforms that envisaged developing smooth and reliable processes and procedures for operations of public bodies at the national and local level, as well as computerized many of those processes. We need to kick-off the second generation reforms that will add more content to those processes and procedures. The second generation reforms require more ambition and stronger political will. We need more public awareness on OGP, strong commitments in public procurements (e.g., in terms of limiting single source procurements and others) and we also need to know how OGP changes lives of ordinary Armenians. The Country context section fairly presents the diversity of challenges that the Armenian people, civil society and government have faced over the recent years.

