Open Government Partnership

Independent Reporting Mechanism

Liberia
Comments Received on the First Progress Report

Blair Glencorse

Dear OGP-IRM, Many thanks for the report- a welcome addition to the conversation on Liberia's efforts to meet the commitments it made as part of the Open Government Partnership, and to the broader discussion around open government and accountability in the country. The top five 'smart' recommendations of the report appear valid and reasonable overall. The report makes a number of additional useful points including:

- The need for greater planning for the OGP process in order to achieve results;
- The importance of more specific language around key commitments;
- The need for an OGP Secretariat in Liberia to better coordinate the OGP process and organize consultations (particularly between government agencies and the government and civil society) and track progress;
- The lack of mandate and resources for the Ministry of Information, Communications and Tourism (MICAT) to push the OGP agenda in Liberia and lack of buy-in or incentives for other Ministries to participate in the process;
- The divergence between government estimations and actual progress on key commitments, including freedom of and access to information, budget openness and citizen participation;
- The need for some additional key actions to "unlock" other areas of OGP reforms, including the involvement of all branches of government and the development of a coordination strategy.

Additional comments the Accountability Lab would make about the OGP process and the report would include:

- The importance of sequencing of OGP reforms (eg making sure citizens are aware of how to use open government tools before these tools are built); and ensuring that tools are matched to context (see discussion of the electronic billboard outside the Ministry of Finance, for example).
- Developing an additional smart recommendation. The draft report mentions that "the Executive Branch did not release any circular to ministries and agencies committing to open government principles and values." This created significant difficulties in terms of buy-in for the process and we urge the report to consider specifically listing this as a recommendation to the Government of Liberia. Without a clear (and easy to implement) indication of buy-in from the top down of this sort, other reforms will be difficult.
- Ensuring specifics around recommendations. The report argues for an OGP "focal person" within the GoL. The report may be strengthened by specifically identifying that person's position and department in Government.
- Freedom of Information- A key issue in our experience on the Freedom of Information Act is not just citizen awareness but also the awareness among government officials of the existence of the law and the procedures for utilizing it. A

key recommendation might be a more coherent process to train all PIOs on the law and its uses.
- Budget Openness. We suggest efforts to move beyond the electronic billboard outside the Ministry of Finance and build awareness through radio and other more sustainable tools (such as chalk "Daily Talk" billboards or films) which may be easier and cheaper to operate over time.
- Citizen Participation- we agree with the assertion in the report that "processes for citizen participation were not adequately thought through in the current action plan." Ideas for improving this part of the process in the future include efforts to organize discussions outside Monrovia on what information citizens would like to see more open; support for the development of new tools for citizen engagement; work to build upon engagement through community groups; thinking around creative ways to bridge the digital divide and so on;
- Open Data Website/Technology- given the constraints, the open data website has been a particular hurdle for the
government, but we hope to see progress on this part of the government's commitments in the coming six months.
- We would welcome the opportunity to help the OGP gather more voices and ideas to feed into the process of planning going forwards on the basis of this report to expand the basis of inputs for future reports;
- There are a number of areas where efforts to build open government and accountability have been relatively more successful in Liberia (eg. the Bureau of Maritime Affairs and in tax collection). While these were not listed as key OGP commitments, they might be worth some elaboration as part of a broader analysis of the environment for open government in Liberia in the report.
- We would also welcome more ideas in the report on the politics of open government- including analysis of issues including: what open government/governance means in Liberia; how the history of civil society-state relations in Liberia might affect this process; how information systems and flows relate to the OGP; and how to match objectives with implementation in the Liberian context.
- We would also welcome clarification on issues including: Table 1- whether this is the assessment of the IRM researcher or another source; attachment of the annex that would include summaries of the interviews with stakeholders, which seems to be missing; a sense of who the IRM researcher was going to coordinate with outside of Monrovia (perhaps they can help with outreach around next steps?).

Overall, we very much welcome the report and welcome the opportunity to engage around this process in constructive ways going forwards if we can be of help.

The Accountability Lab Liberia Team