

# Joint Meeting between the Governance and Leadership subcommittee of the Steering Committee and the Board of Directors

## Meeting Minutes

September 2, 2021 | 08:00 am - 8:30 am | Virtual

### **GL and Board Members Present**

Mukelani Dimba, Board Chair  
Laura Gorrie, Board Secretary/Treasurer  
Maria Baron, Board and GL Member  
Aidan Eyakuze, Board and GL Member  
Jihye Park, GL Member  
Ernesto Belisario, GL Member  
Sanjay Pradhan, CEO (*ex officio Board member*)

### **Staff Present**

Joe Powell, Deputy CEO  
Kate Lasso, CFOO  
Helen Turek, Regional Lead Europe  
Meghan Wallace, Sr. Events Officer  
Jaime Mercado, Sr. Governance Officer  
Bianca Nelson, Global Program Officer

### **Introduction**

Sanjay opened the meeting at 08:01 am (Eastern Standard Time) with an introduction to the purpose of this joint meeting between the Governance and Leadership Subcommittee of OGP's Steering Committee and the OGP Secretariat Board of Directors. This joint GL-Board meeting was organized to inform both the GL and the Board about the extraordinary events that have occurred around Afghanistan, given the combination of strategic and fiduciary issues involved.

### **Situation in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan has been a member of OGP since late 2016. As the Taliban advanced into Kabul and President Ashraf Ghani fled Afghanistan, the OGP Support Unit staff began receiving requests for help from civil society and government reformers affiliated with OGP, including many who had visibly taken stands against extremism and championed democracy, women's and LGBTQ rights and other values that are anathema to the Taliban. Because of the clear threats they faced, they were asking for OGP to evacuate them.

### **OGP Response**

To respond to this extraordinary challenge, OGP first launched efforts through formal channels to reach out to key OGP governments such as US, UK, Canada, France and Germany with urgent requests to help evacuate members of the OGP Afghanistan forum. Unfortunately, these requests for assistance were not met as western governments focused on evacuating their own citizens, embassy staff and military affiliated staff rather than Afghan civil society and government counterparts.

There was no precedent for OGP to deal with this most unprecedented catastrophe. OGP's policy and governance framework provides guidance for situations where civic space in an OGP country is shrinking, through the rapid response protocol. But when OGP reformers and activists, and their families are under immediate risk of being killed, there was no option for a rapid response policy. Evacuation was the only way to protect them.

In this evacuation effort, OGP:

- played a coordinating role that pulled together and evacuated reformers affiliated with partner organizations like EITI, OCP, given OGP's role as a cross-cutting platform.
- signed an agreement with KAM Air airlines for them to charter a flight out of Mazar airport and secure necessary approvals for flight plans that would allow them to land with possible final destinations in Albania and North Macedonia, both OGP governments.
- evacuated 152 activists and reformers and their families out of Afghanistan on August 30th. These evacuees are now safely in North Macedonia. This includes 53 children and one new-born boy. Of these evacuees, 73 (about 50%), were women and girls.

Through this evacuation, OGP not only saved lives, but also sent a strong message that we in OGP stand up to protect those fighting for open government values. This is our most powerful act on protecting civic space and also courageous reformers.

Sanjay then recognized the extraordinary individual and team efforts of OGP staff that were involved in this successful evacuation.

This effort also revealed the power of the OGP community pulling together, including the governments of Georgia, Albania and North Macedonia, among others. For the next phase of evacuee resettlement, OSF and the Government of North Macedonia have already pledged a total of up to four months coverage of costs. This will include the basics, but also health care.

With regard to ongoing support of the evacuees, Sanjay reported that OGP continues to liaise with partners to transfer responsibility for groups of evacuees to others who can provide longer term solutions for them. This includes the North Macedonian government, OSF, US State Department, the Northern Macedonian Red Cross and others. Our goal now is to put a clear time limit to OGP support and to hand over the transition and resettlement of evacuees to partner organizations.

#### Financial Situation

Turning to finances, Sanjay informed the GL and Board and GL that, prior to entering into the agreement with Kam Air to charter the flight, we briefed Board members of the unfolding events, given their responsibility for fiduciary oversight. The initial estimated cost was \$280,000, but as exit and transit routes became more complex, the total cost of this evacuation flight was finalized at \$700,000 or approximately \$4600 per person onboard. Despite OGP's decision to initially cover the cost of the charter flight, there is agreement that the flight costs should not, ultimately, be shouldered by the Support Unit's operational budget. We are actively seeking to secure financing from funders to reimburse OGP for the flight costs.

Sanjay closed his overview by informing the GL and the Board that he has taken personal responsibility to cover any costs that are later not covered by funders or that are deemed unacceptable later by the Board upon a full review of these expenditures and OGP finances. Sanjay then invited questions and comments by others.

## **Discussion**

Joe indicated that we are deliberately not sharing many details about this situation. We are keeping this low profile and internal and are not sharing information with the media. Many people were not evacuated and we do not wish to put them at risk. Given OGP's success with this evacuation, he has been talking with other groups seeking advice on how to evacuate people.

Mukelani expressed his support for this evacuation effort, which shows greatness of spirit and heart. This is a real demonstration of OGP being a champion of civic engagement and defenders of values of democracy and civil rights. This moment captures what OGP has been about for 10 years. Mukelani then disagreed with Sanjay taking personal responsibility for the cost of the evacuation flight. This evacuation has benefitted us all and was done on behalf of the whole OGP community, so the costs are OGP's collective responsibility.

Maria thanked Sanjay as well as the three staff members most immediately involved in the evacuation effort for their leadership. Bureaucracies are not positioned to make decisions such as was required in this moment, while OGP was. Maria was personally tracking the case of one family which had reached out to her and which made it on the plane. What is unfortunate for Afghanistan is that these evacuees are the people who would have been able to change the country. Maria will follow up later with specific questions about people who made the flight and one person who did not.

Aidan added that OGP's efforts are a witness of courage. This was an understated, humble rescue of 152 people. This sends an incredible testimony to the declaration and values of OGP. We will look for a way to underwrite these costs to release Sanjay from his personal liability.

Laura said that she is continuously impressed by OGP's leadership. OGP consistently demonstrates resilience and the persistence to continue despite the roadblocks. This was exceptional. She expressed gratitude to the team and appreciation for timely information sharing with the Board.

Jihye was also impressed with OGP's work to evacuate reformers. OGP took action in a live situation to safeguard the lives of open government reformers. Korea was previously a war-torn country and is now Korea is the co-chair of OGP. This effort, in the end, will have a powerful result; Korea is an example of this.

Ernesto Belisario said thank you for this amazing job. This is a great example of humanity and leadership. He informed those present that the Italian government has evacuated over 5,000 Afghan people and he would like to know what Italy can do now.

Both GL and Board members requested further updates about this ongoing situation, which Sanjay and Joe agreed to provide.

## **Adjournment**

With no other discussion at hand, this joint meeting of the Governance and Leadership Subcommittee of OGP's Steering Committee and the OGP Secretariat Board of Directors ended at 8:38 AM EST. Board members left the meeting and the GL continued with the remaining portion of its regular agenda.