

Galvanizing Our Partnership Between Open Governments & Engaged Citizenry

Sanjay Pradhan | 18th November 2021

In less than a month, two summits will take place on democracy. The first, the White House Summit for Democracy will deal with global threats including the rise of authoritarianism and feature the voices of prominent Heads of States, some from OGP members. The second, OGP's Global Summit, will feature country reformers who are taking meaningful, concrete actions to renew their own democracy at a time when citizen trust in their government has plummeted.

In this video talk, listen to OGP CEO Sanjay Pradhan share the most exciting open government innovations over OGP's first decade that are renewing democracy, while also helping tackle the confluence of other societal crises – pandemic, recession, inequality, climate. Hear his call for collective action to scale up these transformative reforms and galvanize a movement to renew democracy for and with citizens.

So join me on a journey around the world – a journey to renew democracy.

- In Kaduna, Nigeria, an audit in 2015 revealed that a health clinic promised to the citizens, paid by the budget, only existed on paper – a ghost clinic!
- That same year Ukrainian media reported scandalous tales of extravagantly inflated prices for government contracts awarded to powerful oligarchs, siphoning funds from citizens – US\$4 million for constructing a little strip of road!
- The indigenous community in Costa Rica suffered for decades from violent conflict and lack of basic health and education, excluded by successive governments

From corruption to poor service delivery to exclusion of the marginalized, these are unfortunately familiar tales of citizens globally, suffering the impact of poor governance, without voice or remedy. They live in democracies, but the ballot box alone has not proven sufficient for delivering on people's aspirations.

- But what if a mother in Kaduna could monitor the construction of healthcare clinics and send feedback via her mobile phone to government leaders who took corrective actions.
- What if in Ukraine young reformers joined forces to take on the powerful oligarchs by openly disclosing opaque procurement contracts that citizens monitor, saving the government US\$1 billion.
- What if in Costa Rica government reformers and the indigenous community joined hands to set up a consultation mechanism that built trust, abated conflict and ushered vital investments in health and education.

All of this happened. And that is what I want to talk to you about today. These resulted from collaborative actions between government reformers and citizen groups under the Open Government Partnership or OGP – an organization that seeks to renew democracy for and with citizens.

OGP was launched in 2011 at the United Nations. In just ten years, 78 member countries and 76 local governments, together representing over 2 billion people, have joined the partnership along with thousands of civil society organizations.

But over the same period the global context worsened significantly. Today we confront an unprecedented confluence of five crises:

- First, a crisis of democracy reflecting rising authoritarianism and plummeting citizen trust in government;
- Second, a pandemic health crisis;
- Third, a global economic crisis;
- Fourth, a crisis of inequality of income, race and gender laid bare; and
- Fifth, a climate crisis ravaging communities with fires, floods and droughts.

At this critical moment in history, our central imperative as we mark OGP's 10th Anniversary is to leverage this global platform to renew democracy and help tackle these crises.

The goal of OGP, as echoed by one of its founders, former US President Obama, is to ensure that the government truly serves its citizens rather than itself. To achieve this, OGP empowers government reformers and civil society to co-create concrete reforms in OGP action plans. Reforms that make governments more transparent, participatory, inclusive and accountable while engaging citizens and civil society to shape and oversee governments. In this way, OGP represents a unique partnership between open governments and engaged citizenry working together to deliver better outcomes for citizens.

Over the last ten years, government and civil society have together co-created more than 4,500 reforms. For example, when Nigerian President Buhari announced that Nigeria would join OGP, an alliance of 200 civil society organizations immediately presented to the government a draft action plan with ambitious reforms. Over the last 4 years, this alliance and an inter-ministerial group led by the Ministry of Finance have co-created two ambitious action plans.

In OGP, there is accountability from civil society but also from an Independent Reporting Mechanism or IRM which publicly assesses, did the government open up? Evidence from the IRM shows that when the government co-creates with civil society, action plans are more ambitious and results are stronger. Of the 2,000 OGP reforms reviewed by IRM, over 20 percent were assessed to have made government significantly more open.

In sum, over the last decade, OGP has grown into a global platform with a well-functioning mechanism at scale.

Tackling the Crisis of Democracy – Pathways Towards a Better Democracy

But over this same period, the broader global context worsened significantly so democracy itself is under threat in many parts of the world.

The last 15 years have seen the rise of elected, authoritarian and populist leaders. From Hungary to Tanzania, Turkey, Russia and beyond – including in OGP countries, elected leaders have been attacking the media, civil society and oversight institutions, spreading disinformation.

Today, even though citizens in a majority of countries are electing their governments through formal electoral processes, citizen trust in their governments has plummeted. In far too many countries, citizens perceive their governments to be disconnected and unresponsive to their needs, or corrupt and captured by special interests.

We see this crisis of democracy mirrored in several OGP countries. But at the same time, we are also seeing courageous OGP reformers elsewhere advance innovative reforms that show a hopeful way forward, that light pathways towards a better democracy. These reforms make governments more open and engage citizens and civil society in areas where they have the interest and capacity, empowering them to shape and oversee public services, policies and institutions – every day, not just once every few years when they cast their vote. In this way, OGP seeks to renew democracy beyond the ballot box to deliver stronger results for citizens. Open government then is not just about governments becoming transparent, but fundamentally about governments working collaboratively with citizens and citizen groups to tackle shared challenges.

While no single government has all the constituent elements, across OGP four clusters of reforms are helping to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. Our goal is to scale up these four clusters of reforms to build healthier and more vibrant democracies.

First cluster, opening up opaque institutions to build citizen trust and combat corruption.

- Globally, governments spend a staggering US\$13 trillion through public contracts but only 3 percent are published openly. By contrast, those young reformers in Ukraine disclosed previously opaque contracts as open data on an online ProZorro platform and then citizens

reported 14,000 contract violations in two years on a DoZorro platform, so the government saved US\$1 billion, 80 percent of businesses surveyed reported reduced corruption. Galvanized by such results, 70 OGP governments have committed to open contracts.

- The Panama, Paradise and Pandora Papers unmasked illicit and stolen wealth stashed in anonymous companies. Today, 30 OGP countries like Armenia, Slovakia and the UK are opening up who really owns the companies – allowing journalists and activists to follow the money and oversee that, for instance, the massive COVID-19 bailouts are not captured by the politically connected.
- Through South Africa's Vulekamali platform, reformers are also making budgets, including COVID-19 stimulus, accessible to citizens so they can follow the money. One parent, upset about his local school's infrastructure, was able to use this platform to track funding that was meant to fix schools and hold the government accountable. Today, his children and others have safer places to learn.

Second cluster of reforms, engaging citizens to shape and oversee policies and services that impact, that touch their lives. This is particularly impactful at the local level where governments are closest to citizens and citizens care deeply about their schools, streets or health clinics.

- In Kaduna, Nigeria, after discovering that ghost clinic, the Budget Director partnered with citizens to become the government's eyes and ears, uploading photos and feedback on a mobile app, resulting in a record completion of 250 health clinics.
- In Italy, when an investigative journalist revealed that only 9 percent of EU funds were being utilized, the government disclosed, on an online Open Coesion platform, all projects financed by a whopping 100 billion euros of EU funding. But what was even more fascinating is that they then launched a massive public awareness campaign to enlist citizens and interestingly high school students to become on-the-ground citizen monitors of projects they care about.
- For most of us the government budget is opaque, distant and inaccessible. By contrast in Madrid, Spain, reformers set aside 100 million euros for citizens to themselves propose and fund projects that respond to their needs. 90 governments are emulating this Decide Madrid platform.
- At a time when populist leaders are polarizing our societies, OGP reformers are instead convening citizens in Citizens' Assemblies to deliberate on contentious policies such as same-sex marriage in Ireland or ensuring climate justice in France. And citizens are finding that they can forge shared solutions across political divides, when politicians can't.

Third cluster of reforms, empowering marginalized groups.

- In a rapidly growing area in OGP, government reformers are enhancing the access to justice for marginalized groups – such as the Roma minority in North Macedonia or those living below the poverty line in Indonesia – providing them legal services so they can advocate for their rights.
- Another growing priority is to empower women politically, socially, economically such as Jalisco, Mexico addressing the gender wage gap or Buenos Aires, Argentina empowering young women with information on sexual and reproductive health services.

Fourth cluster of reforms, leveraging digital technology and civic space as key enablers.

Across OGP digital technology has been an accelerator for opening government and direct citizen engagement, such as Ukraine's Prozorro or Decide Madrid.

At the same time, OGP reformers are also now confronting digital threats to democracy such as the insidious spread of disinformation online, illegal surveillance and attacks on citizens' privacy. Through OGP, the Netherlands and Canada are strengthening the transparency of online

political campaigns. Finland launched digital literacy campaigns for students to challenge disinformation. Canada and France are improving the transparency of public algorithms used to deliver services.

A central area for OGP is to protect civic space – the basic ability of citizens – you and I – to freely speak, associate and assemble. Without this, democracy doesn't work. Unfortunately over the past decade, civil liberties have declined in most countries, including the majority of OGP countries. Many governments have used the pandemic to expand state surveillance and arbitrarily restrict civic freedoms. Yet, these remain unaddressed – with only a few exceptions.

- In Mexico, following the 2017 illegal surveillance scandal where the Pegasus spyware was used to target anti-corruption activists, the new government committed to multi-stakeholder supervision of the state's digital surveillance.
- Instead of restricting civic freedoms, OGP countries must leverage vibrant civic space, as beautifully exemplified by South Korea. After millions descended on Gwanghwamun Square in candlelight protests to bring down the corrupt regime of President Park, the new government of President Moon invited those protesters and citizens back to the same Gwanghwamun Square, except this time to propose policies that address their pain points. We need more Gwanghwamun Squares in our world today.

In this way, reformers are advancing four clusters of reforms to renew democracy.

Tackling Societal Challenges

This combination of open governments and engaged citizenry is essential for not only tackling the crisis of democracy but also the other crises. That is because these crises are too big for the government or any one group to tackle alone. At its core, open government galvanizes collaborative action between government and citizens – citizens who don't just represent passive beneficiaries of governmental action, but active agents and partners in a shared endeavor.

- **For instance, to recover from the pandemic and economic crisis**, governments mobilized a massive US\$12 trillion for COVID-19 stimulus and safety nets. Millions of lives and livelihoods are at stake. But with so much money moving so fast, corruption scandals have also proliferated. We need open budgets, open contracts, open company ownership so citizens can follow this money. The Colombian government published its COVID-19 spending as open data and then interestingly, empowered "citizen auditors" through a mobile app to monitor and report whether these are reaching the intended beneficiaries. We need similar openness and citizen monitoring now in vaccine contracting and distribution.
- **To tackle the crisis of inequality**, we must scale up three vital reforms laid out earlier: first, empower marginalized groups at the bottom such as through access to justice; second, combat corruption and capture at the top, such as through open contracting; and third, build cohesion across polarized societies, such as through Citizens' Assemblies.
- **Tackling the climate crisis has been a nascent but promising area in OGP**, Argentina, for instance, is arming citizens with critical information on greenhouse gases. Ecuador and Mexico are enhancing citizen participation in implementing the Escazu environmental Agreement.

Our Call for Collective Action. So amidst the grim confluence of crises, OGP reformers are advancing innovative reforms that show a hopeful way forward. Our collective imperative is to scale these up to meet the scale of the challenge. So this is our call to action for government reformers, civil society, citizens, others:

- At a time when citizen trust in government has plummeted, let us join forces to build a citizen-centered democracy by scaling up participatory policymaking, citizens monitoring public services, making all budgets, contracts and company ownership open to citizens.

- At a time when democracy is under attack, let us join forces to make democracy resilient by safeguarding civil liberties and media freedoms, combating disinformation, and convening citizens' assemblies to build cohesion when populist leaders are trying to tear us apart.
- At a time when societies are struggling from the pandemic, let us join forces to ensure a just and effective recovery by making all COVID-19 stimulus, safety nets and vaccines open for citizen monitoring.
- At a time when societies confront heart-wrenching inequality, let us join forces to empower marginalized groups at the bottom and rein in abusers of power at the top.
- At a time when climate change is ravaging communities, let us join forces to tackle climate change by arming citizens with information on climate risks and empowering them to shape bold climate actions.

How? Three Drivers of Change

To advance this vital but hugely ambitious agenda, we must mobilize a much stronger collective effort through broader coalitions, stronger leadership and bottom-up citizen pressure.

First, Coalitions

At the country level, we need to broaden coalitions to accelerate reforms where OGP needs to make greater progress. We need to build awareness and enthusiasm for open government reforms across a broader constellation of ministries, political parties and civil society such as those advocating for gender, climate and civil liberties.

At the global level, we must coalesce a strong, renewed global coalition for democracy as an existential imperative to push back against the rise of authoritarian leaders, spreading the authoritarian playbook across national boundaries. We saw a vignette of such a coalition at our 2020 Virtual Summit, with Heads of States, such as German Chancellor Merkel, Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau, French President Macron, leaders from civil society, the World Bank, IMF and thousands online. But to forge a credible countervailing force against authoritarianism, we must multiply this – top down and bottom up – including at our upcoming Summit hosted by South Korean President Moon. And we must forge stronger global partnerships, positioning OGP with its unique country action plans as the implementation arm for vital global initiatives such as the SDGs and the Biden Summit for Democracy.

These coalitions are essential. But they cannot by themselves make change happen. That requires leadership.

Second: Leadership

At the global level, a Steering Committee of 11 governments and 11 civil society leaders formally leads the partnership. As earlier champions of democracy such as the US retreated, others such as Canada, France, Germany, South Korea stepped up on the Steering Committee. But given our challenging global context, the demands on leadership are vastly greater. Unfortunately, in recent years, there has been a visible paucity of high-level political leadership championing democracy on the global stage. At a time when authoritarian leaders like Hungary's Victor Orbán proudly proclaim the end of liberal democracy, we need more Heads of States, Ministers and Mayors to speak out in democracy's defense and show through the power of example, how a renewed, citizen-centred democracy can deliver better results.

At the country level, we need bolder, collective leadership across government and civil society to raise ambition, forge broader coalitions, and persist against formidable obstacles. I was privileged to see this from my own staff when the Taliban advanced on Kabul and they evacuated against all odds 153 courageous Afghan reformers whose lives were in great peril. Today democracy is in peril and we need bolder, collective leadership from across our partnership to collectively raise our game

to renew democracy. For this, we have launched an Open Government Leadership Collaborative to build a growing coalition of committed leaders advancing the movement.

Third: Citizen Pressure

Complementing leadership, bottom-up citizen pressure can be a huge accelerator. We have seen the power of citizens in the Black Lives Matter movement and EndSARS protests in Nigeria. A critical driver has been the strength and authenticity of youth. Over the past 18 months, despite lockdowns, we have seen a huge upsurge in citizen protests globally – visceral demonstrations of citizens’ loss of trust in governance. We must leverage these to demand change, to open government to citizens.

For this, it is vital that citizens – especially youth, all of us – engage. Demand open budgets and contracts, become the eyes and ears of public services. Even if the issues that you care most about – whether gender or climate – do not focus on “open government”, open government approaches that empower citizens with information and voice will be a key part of your solution.

The role of civil society is vital in amplifying the voice and interests of citizens, pressing for broader social causes and advocating for open government reforms. And in OGP, they have government reformers on the other side of the table, who they can press and partner with to co-create and advance ambitious reforms.

From Mechanism to Movement

Together these drivers of change can galvanize a movement – top-down and bottom-up. And that is our vision for the next decade: transform OGP from a mechanism to a movement – from a global platform to a global movement to renew democracy for and with citizens, to deliver better outcomes for citizens in Kaduna, Ukraine, Costa Rica and beyond.

This may seem impossible. But let me show you an example from nature that makes the impossible possible.

This is the phenomenon of starlings. Starlings are these small birds vulnerable to prey from the falcon, the predator which is much bigger, swoops down and swallows them up. But at dusk, hundreds of thousands of starlings make a formation in the sky called murmurations. These murmurations have a purpose – to drive the falcon away. And lo and beyond, you see the awesome power of the collective.

Individual citizens are like starlings. They vote, but beyond the ballot box, they feel helpless and hopeless in the face of the grand falcons of corruption, exclusion, authoritarianism, climate change.

- But we have seen in Gwanghwamun Square, candlelight protests bring down the very President.
- We have seen in Ukraine young reformers join forces to challenge powerful oligarchs and open contracts to citizens.
- We have seen in Costa Rica, reformers and activists reach out to serve the most vulnerable.
- As traditional champions of democracy retreated, the grand falcon of authoritarianism has gained strength. With 78 countries, growing number of local governments and thousands of civil society organizations, OGP provides a global platform to forge ever more powerful murmurations:
 - To renew democracy for and with citizens,
 - To forge a countervailing force against authoritarianism,
 - To serve as a bulwark, beacon and bastion for lonely reformers and activists under siege,
 - To empower ordinary people to shape and oversee their government, to ensure it serves them rather than itself,

- To deliver on that precious, precious promise – “a government for the people, of the people, by the people”.

Thank you.