

## Book Review

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Piotrowski, Suzanne J, Daniel Berliner and Alex Ingrams (2022) *The Power of Partnership in Open Government: Reconsidering Multistakeholder Governance Reform*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press.

*The Power of Partnership in Open Government: Reconsidering Multistakeholder Governance Reform* assesses whether the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a voluntary international multistakeholder initiative, and open government, the cluster of transparency, accountability, participation, and technology-based reforms, can have a meaningful impact on public sector reform. It applies direct and indirect pathways of change theoretical frameworks to make this assessment. It concludes that the indirect pathway approach has the greater potential to assess impact and illustrates its arguments both generally and with a case study about the OGP experience in Mexico.

The introductory chapter summarises the history of open government since Sweden's Freedom of Information Act in 1766; the evolution and progress of the OGP, including the importance of open government values in its eligibility criteria and Articles of Governance; and the international response to its multi-stakeholder design. It presents the authors' methodology for analysing the OGP's impact on international relations and on domestic public sector reform. They build on two approaches they have already written about: the traditional direct pathway which looks at compliance mechanisms for assessing international initiatives, and the indirect pathway which focuses on the process-driven mechanisms set in train by membership of the OGP (Berliner et al., 2021). The framework set out in Fig. 1.1 and the impacts in Tables 1.2 and 1.3 summarise these pathways and are presented as useful conceptual tools for tracking modern public sector reforms. Their conclusions are based primarily on qualitative evidence which shows the nature of the processes at work rather than measuring achieved outcomes.

The authors conclude that the direct pathway approach reveals initial important but often limited, context dependent and superficial impact as well as long-term potential for more effective change through the OGP's iterative National Action Plans and the Independent Reporting Mechanism cycles. They argue, however, that the indirect pathway approach has the most promising potential to drive reform through the way that the OGP defines, legitimises, and globalises new policy models of open government reform. They assert that OGP membership is creating opportunities for reformers both inside and outside of government and new linkages and coalitions among public sector reformers and other actors. They present examples of reform that they argue could not have occurred plausibly independently of the OGP.

The second chapter opines that open government primarily provides the public with a greater vision of what government does (*information out*) and gives the public opportunities to influence government (*participation in*), calling these two components *vision* and *voice*. It traces the roots of open government reform and its position in public management reform and related public administration theory from the Enlightenment through to the arrival of the modern bureaucratic state in the twentieth century. It gives examples of open government policy being applied, discusses competing visions of public management reform, and reviews key reform transitions. It notes that open governance has only been possible since the growth of mass media and the Internet. Discussing the implementation of reforms by OGP members, it reports difficulty quantifying the level of openness implemented by a government, goal ambiguities, structural barriers, and political conflicts. It links open government to the Late Modern Technology group

of reforms, gives examples of its adaptation of New Public Management and New Public Governance benefits, and cites scholarly findings on New Public Management reforms which raise doubt about optimistic claims about the benefits of open government.

Chapter three looks at multistakeholder initiatives, the establishment of the OGP, and its context as an international institution. It sees transnational multistakeholder initiatives as having more diverse memberships and often more flexible and/or informal rules than formal intergovernmental organisations. Through its governance structure, flexible obligations, little direct enforcement, and the speed of its creation, the OGP is defined as a multistakeholder initiative which focuses specifically on public sector reform. Unlike many others, its formal members or governing body participants do not include private firms.

Summarising three theoretical approaches to the creation and design of institutions: functional, agency-based, and conflict-based, the authors assert that transnational multistakeholder initiatives have similar approaches for membership. They use interviews in 2018–2019 to explain the origin of the OGP and its current processes and membership. They see the then new President Obama's Open Government Directive on 20 January 2009 as an open government trigger and they identify a growing fatigue with existing models and new ideas about multistakeholder cooperation.

Chapter four argues that there is potential for the OGP's multistakeholder design to drive genuine public service governance reform and policy change. It draws on academic theory and global evidence to assess how the direct and indirect pathways achieve these. The OGP's eligibility and enforcement rules, commitment to policy change, and compliance with commitments, which are intended to produce specific policy outputs with broader governance outcomes and impact, represent the direct approach. Its iterative and participatory processes, norms and policy models, linkages, coalitions, resources, and opportunities, such as participatory governance, open data, open contracting, and beneficial ownership, are seen as indirect outcomes.

Detailed evidence of the impact of each pathway of change is presented. For the direct pathway, regression analysis predicts the effect of country processes on commitment success, the OGP's own data on the performance of National Action Plan commitments between 2011 and 2019 is examined, and an assessment made of opinions expressed in Independent Report Mechanisms' reports on National Action Plans. This direct approach records limited success: the commitments are a "mixed bag of high and low performing initiatives"; a small percentage of commitments are stars (i.e., transformative); the most common commitment only does "so-so"; commitment completion levels seem to be declining; and the level of ambition in commitments is essentially static. The indirect pathway approach examines multistakeholder processes activated outside of the core National Action Plan commitment planning and OGP governance systems. It looks at policy reports by relevant global organisations, country news articles, civil society blogs, and examines three cases: open data, open contracting, and beneficial ownership. This indirect approach is presented as leading to meaningful reforms. When applied to the OGP, the authors argue that the OGP has been a catalyst for new open government norms and an impetus towards participatory governance and broad civil society coalitions and resources within and across countries which depends strongly on critical actors' political will and engagement. The authors argue that without the OGP these changes would not necessarily have existed and become important.

Chapter five assesses the two pathways of change through qualitative evidence from a detailed case study of the OGP experience in Mexico. Mexico, one of the OGP's eight founding members, served as chair of the Steering Committee in 2014/5 and hosted OGP's 2015 global summit. In 2017, its civil society members formally withdrew from Mexico's OGP Tripartite Technical Secretariat due to concerns about corruption and human rights scandals in Mexico. Following consistent civil society involvement and a new President taking office, the OGP process was restarted in 2019.

The authors use the two pathways to evaluate how much the OGP affected governance reform in Mexico. They argue that this “case exemplifies the paradoxical character of multistakeholder governance in open government reform where democratic and accountability setbacks still occur, despite attempts to operate in a climate of greater openness and integrity” and that, despite the formal breakdown of official OGP mechanisms, broader dynamics continued. They concluded that reform dynamics were institutionalised in Mexico, and they observed a qualitative change in interactions between relevant actors in government and civil society. The direct commitment and compliance pathway of change indicated limited impact whereas the indirect pathway showed much more potential for more holistic changes and broader processes of institutionalisation. Major landmark reforms to Mexico’s access to information law and a new national anti-corruption system were subsequently achieved.

The final chapter summarises key academic literature on institutional process-based dynamics, the authors’ case for the indirect pathway of change approach and looks briefly at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on open government. It observes that, in January 2021, three founding OGP country members, Brazil, Philippines, and Mexico were still OGP members. Their new populist leaders had not publicly tried to undermine their countries’ participation in the OGP. It opines that OGP norms and networking mechanisms in these countries galvanised public sector reform changes and provided opportunity and space for more pro-government actors to “move into and exploit”. The future of open government depends on governments’ ability to tie non-governmental organisations and businesses into networks that support transparency, accountability, and participation, and to deliver political justice in reforms. It recommends stakeholder diversity and interconnectivity and use of the language of both direct and indirect pathways to institutionalise linked, process-driven public sector reform. This language could assist the OGP to argue that open government is relevant, not merely a luxury. The authors look ahead to new research to study the maintenance and longevity of indirect pathways.

As an OGP Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM) reviewer since 2017 who attended some events referred to in Chapter three, this reviewer congratulates the authors for their accuracy and interesting insights. This book, including the introduction by the *Information Policy Series* editor, makes a significant contribution to open government literature and OGP’s impact. As an academic work, it is particularly strong on scholarly research and citation and the reviewer looks ahead to further research on this theoretical approach.

As a practitioner, however, this reviewer identifies an omission in the authors’ examination which could influence their theory and conclusions. The direct pathway of change analysis of compliance does not examine the critical role and influence of members’ multistakeholder forums (MSF) in national action plan cycles. The analysis of the role of nongovernmental actors (see pages 6, 25–27, 109–110), mostly covers consultation with civil society on the action plan and international Steering Group membership. Yet, a tabular Annex in each IRM report rates domestic multistakeholder forum co-creation and participation performance, including equal government and non-government membership of the MSF and the level of openness between government and civil society or other stakeholders (Open Government Partnership, 2020, pp. 58–59). In this reviewer’s experience, governments work hard to receive positive performance scores from the IRM as this affects their membership eligibility. This formal MSF role was the subject of a well-attended session (including by this reviewer) at the Ottawa 2019 Open Government Summit where government and civil society MSF members from Canada, Scotland and Chile shared their experiences. The MSF was described as a “force which drives the open government vision” and enables sustainability beyond government or political change.<sup>1</sup> This direct mechanism was seen as building transparent and

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<sup>1</sup>OGP Global Summit May 2019. OGP Multi-stakeholder Forum: Best practices and challenges moving forward. <https://>

inclusive open government, providing direct civil society relationships with government commitment leads, and leading to commitments in policy areas important to civil society. This reviewer suggests that this direct MSF role at a domestic level is creating the same interactive and participatory processes, changes, norms, policy models, linkages, coalitions, and opportunities identified by the authors as outcomes from the indirect pathway of change.

While there is no doubt that OGP and several member countries are promoting wider transparency initiatives, the reviewer also has doubts about the argument linking open data and open contracting initiatives directly to OGP membership. The open data movement was underway well before the creation of the OGP in October 2012. Key influences were the 2008 Public Sector Information Recommendation agreed by Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) members in 2008 (OECD, 2008), the January 2009 Open Data Directive and the first International Open Government Data Conference which was held in Washington, DC, in November 2010 (this reviewer presented at this conference). The World Bank carried out open contracting work from the early 2010s, admittedly slowly (Centre for Global Development, 2014), and Open Ownership, while established more recently, is driving beneficial ownership transparency.<sup>2</sup>

Further work investigating a combined pathway of change would be helpful as would more conclusions about the relationship to the OGP of the two open government components of *information out* and *vision in* (introduced in Chapter two: page 35). They would complete what is already a comprehensive analysis which is very timely for the OGP which is finalising its 2023–2028 strategy. It is looking to expand the open government community to become a much broader, more interconnected movement of open government reformers (Open Government Partnership, 2023).

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<sup>2</sup>Open Ownership. <https://www.openownership.org/en/>.