

Open Government is Struggle

**Opening Remarks at the Third Anniversary of the Open Government Partnership
Rakesh Rajani, Twaweza, New York 24 September 2014**

President Yudhoyono, President Zuma, Co-chairs Kaimal and Gonzales, colleagues:

My father gave me only one piece of serious advice growing up. "Son", he said, "Avoid three things and you'll be fine: fire, deep water, and the government."

Over time, I have come to appreciate the wisdom of my father's warning. For too many people government is something to be feared, precarious and predatory, that uses its power to harass, that cares little about your wellbeing. The most insidious effect of this experience is that it dulls people's aspirations of what government can be. We often expect little of government and get little back in return.

The premise of the Open Government Partnership is that we can break this vicious cycle by demonstrating a different kind of governance, where government is transparent about its dealings, genuinely seeks people's ideas, and works with citizens to get things done. And by so doing, we restore and reinvent trust and accountability.

How is OGP faring? It is true that some country commitments are not very meaningful. Others have failed to deliver. The challenge of 'open washing' is real, and the road we need to still travel is long. But the truly remarkable story here is how committed civil servants and citizens have seized the OGP platform to get traction and deliver, in less than three years, on some 400 substantial commitments and made serious headway on another 200. This is huge.

The OGP momentum has helped spur progress elsewhere as well, such as the G8's attempt to reduce tax evasion and the Open Contracting Partnership which hopes to disclose public contracts worth over \$9 trillion each year. Both set radical new norms. If successful, their impact could be huge, saving taxpayers billions each year.

In my view, OGP's norm shifting role may be more important in the long term than even concrete delivery. The UK is trying 'open policy making'. Mexico speaks of 'co-governing' with civil society. South Africa is developing a 'Batho Pele' or 'people first' consequences framework for public servants. It's not that any of these have been fully achieved, or will be anytime soon. Their significance lies in how they are shifting underlying norms, compelling governments to make such commitments, shifting the frame of debate and negotiation.

My friend Minister Francis Maude likes to say, "transparency is an idea whose time has come". I couldn't agree more. But the time doesn't come on its own. It is wrought through painstaking efforts of citizens and reformers in government, who keep at it, day in, day out.

Indeed, if I have learned one thing, it is that the OGP cannot realize its promise without struggle.

The first struggle is of fashioning a meaningful collaboration between civil society and government. It resists the cynicism that says 'this is how things are and you cannot change them'. It goes beyond easy stereotypes of government as callous and corrupt and civil society as entitled and unfair. It avoids the temptation to evade argument by questioning the credibility of the other side. It seeks conversation and understanding, knowing that no one has a monopoly on good ideas. It is as pragmatic as it is principled, having understood that people have only so much time for visions and just speaking truth to power. People want to get things done, results, decent work, bread on the table, safety from violence, respect when they go to the clinic and the school.

The second struggle is to think hard about what works. Often things that appear obvious are anything but. Countries have invested billions in basic education, but evidence shows that children are not learning, that too many graduate without the ability to read and to count. Or take graft. Dozens of countries have passed laws, set up anti-corruption commissions and done capacity building, despite little evidence that these things work. Open government understands that good intentions are not good enough. Effective policy making requires an appreciation for rigor, evidence, feedback and adaptation, rather than a dogmatic fidelity to a linear plan, or what the anthropologist James Scott calls "seeing like a state". It means being open to ideas that challenge your core beliefs; to have the

confidence to change your mind; and to challenge the inertia of habit and vested interests.

The third struggle is for inclusion. For long kings ruled, pillaged and enslaved at whim, and the best citizens could hope for was to be left alone. The wave of democratization in the past century has made it possible to conceive of a government of, by and for the people. But we would be blind not to see how our action and inaction let so many perish from the earth. How can we not be haunted by the images of hundreds of migrants, crammed in dinghies, craving a better life, being turned away and left to perish? When we launched the OGP, the Occupy protests had just started a few miles south of here. Today inequality still gnaws away at cohesion and opportunity. We were inspired then by the Arab Spring, by the people who stood up to dictators and insisted on voice and dignity. But, while the significance of that moment remains, repression reigns. Across the world, including in some OGP countries, journalists are beaten, dissenters locked up, organizations shut down. We can craft legalistic arguments for why this cannot be our concern, but history will see through its prejudice and moral contradiction.

There is nothing inevitable about the opening of government or the closing of civic space. It rests upon what we choose to do. The path to progress is fraught with setbacks and uncertainty. The OGP has its limits, but I know of no other platform that offers so much possibility for reimagining government. If we put our mind and heart to it, it can become so much more. The progress we make will keep up our spirits and allow us to reach into our better selves. But we do not keep going because of the certitude of success; we persevere because we choose to care and we understand that real change takes time.

My father is 79 years old. My daughter is 10 and my son 12. I hope that one day, when my children talk with their children, they will be able to say: "Be careful of fire. Deep water can be dangerous; learn to swim. And as for government, it belongs to you. It is your friend. Make it work. Make it better."

Thank you.