

Series Editor's Introduction

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It is easy, these days, to be discouraged about political matters. Agreements—say, on climate change—are signed, but goals are not achieved. Ambitions are committed to publicly—say, on improving protections for human rights—but fully effective means of ensuring such protections have not yet been found. When it comes to openness in government, the international Open Government Partnership (OGP) has been criticized for failing, so far, to achieve all that it set out to do. In *The Power of Partnership in Open Government*, though, authors Suzanne J. Piotrowski, Daniel Berliner, and Alex Ingrams offer an alternative, more optimistic view via their original theoretical lens on indirect pathways of change rather than the direct pathways that have long been the standard approach of policy analysts.

The Open Government Partnership, launched alongside the United Nations General Assembly in 2011, is an effort to move those governments that commit toward further openness, what the authors note President Obama referred to as “the essence of democracy” in the launch speech. Rather than going the formal route of a treaty with its attendant obligations, the OGP seeks to embody “lean dynamism” in an effort to maximize flexibility and local tailoring in a multistakeholder manner that includes civil society organizations with full parity of representation and innovative models of cocreation between governments and their citizens. The terminology is not used, but this can be understood as a form of adaptive policymaking, with two-year cycles of iterative decision making to reset commitments and the processes that will be undertaken to achieve them in response to

developments that had taken place up to that point. Rather than enforcement mechanisms, there are evaluative tools. The bargain, as the authors put it, is exchanging flexibility and weak enforcement for participation and iteration. Eight governments were committed at the launch moment, with leadership shared by the United States and Brazil. By 2019, seventy-seven countries were actively participating, as were several subnational governments, although some countries withdrew from their commitments along the way.

Direct pathways to policy impact are familiar. They focus on commitments made—the authors introduce the delicious concept of a formal policy as a “commitment machine”—and assume that the only thing that matters is the fulfillment of commitment goals as achieved through formal administrative processes. The direct causal chain in the case of the Open Government Partnership included joining the partnership, making commitments, implementing commitments, evaluating direct successes and failures, and repeating the steps. The Open Government Partnership commitments themselves are discrete reform projects that vary enormously in kind, from digitizing public service delivery to using mobile technology devices in schools and on. Critiques of Open Government Partnership direct pathways to change include failures to achieve goals, the assertion of trivial or already-accomplished commitments, and reliance on ambiguous claims that cannot be evaluated.

Indirect pathways involve not the things of commitments but the processes through which commitments are made and acted upon. The policy impact of indirect causal chains includes building new networks and coalitions, contributing to normative changes, and creating new opportunities and power resources for reformers both inside and outside of government. It is the argument of *The Power of Partnership in Open Government* that it is the indirect pathways that have the greatest potential for impact on public sector reform—even if it is much more difficult to evaluate such effects. Successes of the Open Government Partnership indirect pathways to change include clarifying, legitimizing, and globalizing new ways of achieving public sector reform and the mainstreaming of open government as a major theme for other institutions. Civil society actors have been empowered in new ways.

There has been standard-setting for how governments treat data and transparency in government procurement practices. New principles have been introduced, such as beneficial ownership transparency to prevent the use of shell corporations for money laundering, tax avoidance, and corruption. Numerous linkages have been built with other international organizations and initiatives, with policy networks crossing not only the public and private sectors but also issue area boundaries.

This book uses the Open Government Partnership as its case, but the analytical approach presented is valuable for those working with any type of policy issue. A number of concepts used in discussion of the Open Government Partnership have been around for a while, such as multistakeholderism, policy networks, and legal globalization (harmonization of laws and regulations across national boundaries irrespective of differences in political and/or legal systems). Here, they usefully coalesce within the more comprehensive theoretical framework the authors offer. In an interesting way, the authors reverse the causal directions embedded in international regime theory. In the influential formulation by Stephen Krasner, policy regimes arise out of agreements—whether formal or informal, explicit or implicit—on underlying principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures for policymaking in a specific issue area that develop before formal law is put into place. In the case of the Open Government Partnership, according to these authors, there are commitments to formal laws and explicit government practices that came first but have had their most valuable contributions in the building of a global open government regime, a reversal of the causal flows of international regime theory. There is also a surprising resonance, although at quite another level of analysis, with Gilbert Simondon's theoretical work on how influence flows interpersonally in ways quite other than those visible in the networked relationships that currently receive so much attention. And the authors recognize that the real world intervenes, with deep appreciation for the contingencies that create policy windows in which successes are achieved as a result of a particular confluence of factors that could not have been controlled deliberately but can be taken advantage of when they occur together. The detailed analysis of the origin story is fascinating—would that we had the same for the Internet Governance Forum.

Much to their credit, the authors take on the challenge of thinking through what may happen to the successes of the indirect pathways given the rise of tyrannical populism in four of the eight original signee governments and given the pervasive consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the populism point, the authors suggest that there has as yet been no pushback on Open Government Partnership–related initiatives by such rulers because the diffusion of norms via indirect pathways has been so successful. An alternative reading might be that they haven't bothered because there has been so little success via direct pathways that it hasn't been considered worth their trouble to intervene. Open Government Partnership–related initiatives have looked at informational matters related to the pandemic, but it is argued here that it is too soon to tell what the long-term impact on openness commitments of this health crisis may be.

With its seminal insights, this book is rich for those who already have scholarly or policymaking depth in the areas of policy reform and international policymaking and should, from this point on, be considered foundational. At the same time, it is so thorough and clearly written and does such a good job of introducing major strands in the diverse literatures brought together in this interdisciplinary work that it is also a primer for those new to open government and to public reform. The authors offer large intellectual moves that we have needed as we struggle to understand how to most usefully analyze and make policy in what continue to be turbulent times.