6 EPILOGUE: LOOKING FORWARD

Can a transnational multistakeholder partnership, like the Open Government Partnership, positively impact domestic public sector reform focused on transparency, accountability, participation, and technology? Our contribution to this debate highlights an overlooked, process-based mechanism of organizational membership—what we call an indirect pathway of change. This theoretical approach highlights alternatives to more commonly-studied direct pathways of change—emphasizing the motions of membership and compliance—to instead emphasize how flexible, stakeholder-driven forms of participation can spawn wider virtuous effects.

In addition to contributing this new theoretical framework, we have also offered evidence supporting the relevance and importance of these indirect pathways in the case of the Open Government Partnership. In chapter 4, we reviewed evidence from settings around the world to illustrate multiple indirect mechanisms, including through norms and policy models, opportunities and resources for reformers, and linkages and coalitions both within and across countries. In chapter 5, we focused in more detail on an in-depth case study of Mexico's membership in the Open Government Partnership. Here, we used qualitative case study evidence to test between two alternative hypotheses concerning the nature of potential impacts and found substantially greater evidence consistent with an indirect pathway than a direct pathway.

For the Open Government Partnership itself, several closely related features are its remarkable staying power and its ability to evolve after seeming

to suffer major setbacks. After the dramatic events of its founding, which we detailed in chapter 3, many observers doubted that the Open Government Partnership would endure, particularly after a decline in attention and investment from the United States government. And yet, the Partnership endured and evolved through a rapidly changing global environment and major shifts in the priorities of key member countries. Our theoretical approach in this book suggests that sustainability itself has been driven by the *processes* of membership and the indirect pathway of change, which have endowed the Partnership with the flexibility, dynamism, and breadth of appeal to weather these changes. In this final section of the book, we take time to look at the larger forces that affect the open government movement going forward and the implications of our findings in a range of academic fields and areas of practice.

THE FUTURE OF OPEN GOVERNMENT

In a globalized world where the contest of ideas on how to govern societies spans the globe and the seeds of new ideas spread and develop in complex ways, there is more need than ever for social scientists to understand how transnational multistakeholder organizations contribute. Scholars working within different disciplinary perspectives, such as international relations (e.g., Andonova, 2017; Bäckstrand, 2006; Tallberg et al., 2013), public administration (e.g., Bryson, Crosby, & Bloomberg, 2014; van Zyl, 2014), and sociology (e.g., Castells, 2008), have growing understanding of the advantages of empowered third-party organizations, such as civil society organizations and companies in facilitating positive policy outcomes. These relationships play a key role in the transmission and realization of open government. We need to take these third parties and their roles in public sector reform seriously rather than seeing their role as merely incidental. The future of open government may depend on how well governments can tie nongovernmental organizations and businesses into networks that support transparency, accountability, and participation, and deliver political justice in reforms.

In addition to there being good scientific reasons for broadening our views of reform, our reader may reasonably wonder how the narratives of global political and economic crisis and pandemics fit in with the indirect pathways of change and the Open Government Partnership. Writing in early 2021, it would be difficult to conclude a book about open government without at least briefly referring to some of the most high-profile global political issues of the 2020s thus far regarding the rise of national populism and the coronavirus pandemic.

At the time of writing, populist leadership—elected premiers who came to power on the back of a popular reaction against the global political elite—has a foothold in three of the founding eight Open Government Partnership countries: Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico. In another founding country, the United States, the four-year presidency of Donald Trump has concluded with a transition back to a mainstream leader in Joe Biden. None of these populist leaders are outright supporters of open government by any stretch of the imagination, but they have often embraced alternative appeals to transparency in terms of personal openness and integrity while snubbing traditional document- or data-oriented kinds of transparency (Roelofs, 2019). Their curious mixture of whimsical censorship and bombastic claims to be honest men with nothing to hide who publish their populist views widely on social media sets difficult precedents for the open government movement. While open government values like transparency and accountability have suffered gross harm on their watches, such as the withdrawal of public information from government websites (Ellington, 2019) and intimidation of citizens and the press (Timberman, 2016), there have also been some successes, such as the passage of the Philippines' first freedom of information policy.

It is also of note that none of those leaders have publicly tried to undermine their countries' participation in the Open Government Partnership. It is likely that strong civil society organization in countries such as Brazil and the Philippines has played a major role in checking greater extension of autocratic powers that the likes of Bolsonaro and Duterte would likely prefer to wield in order to advance their own political agendas. We suspect

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that the indirect pathway of the Open Government Partnership member-ship in these countries has generated norms and networking mechanisms that have galvanized public sector changes despite the extreme rhetoric of their leaders and are shifting the political playing field in ways that generate opportunity and space for more pro-open government actors to move into and exploit—similar to the ways that we found in Mexico. These indirect pathways may be influential enough to lead to a dramatic revitalization of politics if prodemocracy leaders are elected to replace them. If the same leaders are reelected, and civic space continues to be squeezed, then it is possible that the indirect pathways themselves will become less effective at resisting repression, and alternative futures will become narrowed. We did not study the maintenance and longevity of indirect pathways for this book, but we would certainly agree that more research here will be key in the future to seeing how effectively the pathways work.

The year 2020 saw the crisis of the dangerous COVID-19 pandemic that spread rapidly around the world, leading to 2.7 million deaths in the first year. The pandemic, carrying such a dangerous epidemiological threat, became a contentious area of government public health policy. Open gov-ernment was challenged on many fronts: Citizen movement became tightly controlled, experts and citizens questioned the information origins and sci-entific basis of policy decisions, governments defended their prerogative to intervene in people's private behavior, and new tracking technologies were developed with short shrift given to important discussions about data privacy and ownership. We will be dealing with the consequences of policy reforms that took place in the shadow of the coronavirus crisis for years to come.

In general, the increased reliance on centralized government leadership to improve the response at a whole-society level of collective responsibility pushed the envelope in terms of what kinds of public sector reform are up for debate and the kinds of democratic decision-making processes that are necessary to achieve them. In the future, this could be used as leverage for new reforms, whether of the open government sort or via other approaches. Certainly, however, the trend is toward reforms that promote the value of resilience, whereby societies seek to strengthen their long-term political abil-ity to navigate major challenges, such as pandemics, migration, and climate

change. Indirect pathways, emphasizing the diversity of stakeholders and interconnectivity, should play a vital role in strengthening societal resilience.

At the center of the concerns about the pandemic was a debate on how to protect open government as governments tried to strike a balance between closing down as a necessary public health measure and remaining open to criticism and accountability for their decisions. The scale of the cost to human life caused by the pandemic has been catastrophic, and, in some ways, there is very little that open government can do to help the situation, directly at least. The way that the pandemic has influenced open government is perhaps an easier topic to explore and one that fits well within our model of direct and indirect pathways of change. It is clear in the way that the governmental response to the pandemic highlights inherent tensions in the open government view of public sector reform that evaluations of open government performance qua official government compliance with rules of commitment production, cross-sectoral collaboration, and good membership behavior would be poor or mixed in success. We covered these reasons in depth in chapter 2. How, for example, should governments ensure the protection of human rights, such as the right to health, education, equal treatment before the law, and privacy, while also supporting transparency and accountability? It is certainly possible to find sensible balances in pandemic-tackling policies, such as tracking people with symptoms and managing a testing or vaccination program, but this needs to be done carefully to ensure open government values.

In August 2020, the Open Government Partnership published "A Guide to Open Government and the Coronavirus: Open Response, Open Recovery" (Open Government Partnership, 2020c). It emphasizes the need for governments to move quickly and to use the collective power of government and civil society to find solutions in the midst of uncertainty. There was no time for pandemic measures to be implemented within the two-year cycle of the National Action Plans. But many of the reports' suggestions were actionable because of the new norms, resources, and expert and policy communities that had experience collaborating on prior commitments. As a result, there was "a strong set of OGP members who can demonstrate leadership" on pandemic policies carried out according to the principles of open

government (Open Government Partnership, 2020c, 8). According to the report, countries such as Argentina and Brazil were able to use existing transparency and open budgeting websites to add coronavirus-related content tracking, spending, and policies. In many Open Government Partnership member countries, there were robust multistakeholder advisory councils and trustworthy civil society organizations that could be resourced to help deliver medical care. The issues have evolved as the pandemic has progressed, with the focus broadening to include the intersection of open government and vaccine procurement and distribution (Falla, 2021; Robinson, 2021).

While social equity was already an issue deserving more attention in the field broadly (see Blessett et al., 2019), the pandemic further highlighted the relationships between open government and equity that were already present (Porumbescu, Piotrowski, & Mabillard, 2020). In the United States, freedom of information acts were used to access previously unavailable data on COVID-19 infections, which then helped reveal racial inequalities (Sedacca, 2021).

More generally, the Coronavirus pandemic has underlined the important connection between transparency and the effective implementation of reforms—even emergency reforms instigated by a major crisis. Coming at a time when government policies—as well as the data and processes on which the government policies themselves are based—are implemented with open government technologies, such as social media and open data, it is especially clear that open government remains both important and valued by the public (OECD & GovLab, 2021; Pyo, Reggi, & Martin, 2020). The words *transparency* and *accountability* are used everywhere to characterize the kinds of government decision making necessary for public trust and the willingness to comply, as well as to constantly warn of the risks of corruption or failure resulting from public procurement decisions that have been made through nontransparent procedures (Transparency International, 2021).

Yet, global tensions and the economic and political fallout from the pandemic present an unpredictable future for the Open Government Partnership. It may face existential obstacles as funders switch their priorities to protecting national economies and health research. To some, open government may appear to be a luxury, and the Open Government Partnership will

need to argue that open government is relevant. Indirect pathways will need to be part of this argument to the extent they foster shared norms, discussion, and network collaboration. There will also need to be renewed efforts by researchers to harness the benefits of the indirect pathway and examine the complex ways it is interdependent with the direct pathway. The indirect pathway, mediated by different actors, is difficult to manage in terms of traditional ends-means forms of rational planning.

While more evidence is needed for what works best, a clear principle for indirect pathway building is to take advantage of the elements that make it work as a political dynamic—linkages among organizations, norms and values, long-term planning, and horizontal forms of decision making. If the Open Government Partnership—and by extension, other transnational multistakeholder initiatives—can take up the language of the direct and indirect pathways, then this kind of linked, process-driven approach to public sector reform is likely to become more institutionalized in practice.

BUILDING ON PRIOR WORK

Earlier academic writers also noticed the potential for process-based dynamics to compete and interact with ends-oriented behavior change in institutions. In a variety of fields, scholars have highlighted changes as political institutions become more horizontally organized and open to participation from a greater array of stakeholders (e.g., Ansell & Gash, 2008; Mueller, 2010; Raymond & DeNardis, 2015; Tallberg et al., 2013; Bryson, Crosby, & Bloomberg, 2014).

In this book, we have sought to build on these views to highlight how process-based dynamics can indirectly lead to outcomes that create surprising benefits for organizations and even society as a whole. This indirect pathway seems to be at work in the multistakeholder and participatory character of the Open Government Partnership, and it persists even if the direct pathway of change is sometimes failing, as was the case for Mexico. In chapters 2 and 3, we covered the existing scholarship in the fields of international relations and public administration to explain the mechanics of public sector reform via an international multistakeholder initiative. It is worth restating

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what the key literature is and how we contribute to a new discussion and line of investigation.

Our elucidation of the indirect pathway applies a theoretical approach to understanding public sector reform and the influence of transnational multistakeholder forms of governance. The indirect pathway of change represents a different, concurrent pathway for reform impacts, separate from a direct pathway operating through individual commitments and their implementation. The implications of this are significant for many fields that intersect with information policy—from public management and technology studies to international relations and the study of the multistakeholder governance in global and domestic policy reform. This approach adds a new, interdisciplinary thread of inquiry to an already burgeoning field.[1]

In the public administration and management arenas, we depart from the current predominant focuses on organizational and individual factors that determine the success of domestic public sector reform to instead develop a more transnational perspective by bringing in insights from international relations literature. The theories of policy reform in public management, particularly looking at the roles of actors and policy communities (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 2010), the institutional dynamics of policy systems, and Sabatier's (1991) argument for the need to study specific institutions and their policy communities, were important areas of inspiration for our theory of the indirect pathway of change and how it triggers broader dynamics. But our approach offers an opportunity for public management theory to go much further by fusing a traditional focus on internal organizational behaviors that can be managed with an appreciation for institutional processes resulting from national and subnational participation in international and transnational institutions. This requires a shift in conceptual thinking about the origins of policy influence, and it poses a challenge for public management scholars to link local institutional change with transnational and global policymaking.

In the field of international relations, not all scholars have shared the dominant emphasis on the direct impacts of international institutions through commitments and compliance. Many have long emphasized the potential for soft law institutions to drive processes of learning, normative

change, or nonstate-actor mobilization and interaction (e.g., Abbott & Snidal, 2000; Dai, 2005; Trubek and Trubek, 2005; Ruggie, 2007; Slaughter, 2009; Bach & Newman, 2010; Newman & Posner, 2016).

More recently, research has demonstrated positive effects of transnational multistakeholder governance in a variety of arenas (e.g., Bäckstrand, 2006; Mueller, 2010; Brockmyer & Fox, 2015; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2021). Many of these effects critically rely on the process of participation rather than adhere to legally stipulated promises and goals of the participation. Scholars such as Duncan (2015) and Rushton and Williams (2011) reveal how global health and sustainability compacts generate positive rewards because of the costs of participation rather than in spite of them. Recent ideas of global experimentalist governance (e.g., De Búrca, Keohane, & Sabel, 2014) suggest how processes of iterated policy experimentation, implementation, and learning can drive improved outcomes over time.

We draw these approaches together by suggesting that they should inform understanding of transnational policy reform by shifting the attention of researchers to the processes themselves rather than seeing those processes as simply a means to an end. In our approach, the actions most relevant to the indirect pathway are the participation, deliberation, and collaboration among diverse stakeholders; the relationships that these create; and the repetition of these processes over time, which together can establish dynamics with long-lasting and powerful effects. Although the nature of international institutions has indeed transformed, these changes also feed back into the nature of domestic policy reform efforts themselves. This indirect pathway is a missing ingredient in existing understandings of how public sector reform occurs and, therefore, how such reform should be evaluated in its level of success. The Open Government Partnership, despite its flaws, illustrates this pathway of change based on partnership.

Our argument also has implications for any other developing transnational efforts employing multistakeholder, participatory, and/or iterative institutional design principles. These include multistakeholder initiatives in other fields, such as public health, corporate responsibility, and internet governance. Many more traditional international institutions also increasingly incorporate participatory and iterative elements, such as the United Nations'

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Universal Periodic Review of human rights, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Paris Agreement treaty on climate change. Similarly iterative and participatory approaches to policy change have also been pursued within the framework of the European Union's Open Method of Coordination (Zeitlin, 2009)—including in related areas of e-government (Criado, 2012).

Our approach offers the potential for a more optimistic assessment of the extent to which such transnational efforts might lead to meaningful domestic changes in their respective issue areas through indirect pathways of changing norms and policy models, empowering reforms, and building new linkages and coalitions—all, in turn, driven by repeated cycles of participatory interaction, collaboration, and assessment. A key implication of this book is that observers should aim to assess such efforts not only on the basis of direct accomplishment of the specific goals undertaken but also on the potential for broader indirect effects.

For example, our approach has clear implications for the Paris Climate Agreement, which also emphasizes repeated voluntary pledges matched with transnational stakeholder participation and iterative review—albeit on a slower five-year timescale. Many observers might focus their primary attention on governments' pledges themselves, the extent to which they constitute meaningful contributions to climate change mitigation and adaptation, and the extent to which they are ultimately implemented in practice. Although we would absolutely agree as to the importance of these factors, our approach additionally highlights the importance of indirect pathways of change that might operate alongside these direct pathways. The processes of iterative and participatory pledge-making, implementation, and review may themselves have indirect effects in terms of spreading norms and policy models, empowering reformers, and creating new linkages and coalitions. Of course, these mechanisms may not, in fact, be in operation in all settings, but our approach sets them up as new and important empirical questions.

The indirect pathway also adds to debates around transparency in information policy. Scholars have long argued that open government is not just about having laws for freedom of information and open data (e.g., Roberts, 2006) based on the simplistic formula of more information equaling more transparency. More management and rules per se do not necessarily lead to

more open government. Like freedom of information laws, rules of behavior and promises about those rules do not necessarily mean governments will be more open in practice. On the contrary, bold promises are often made (the kind of commitment we named a pipe dream) with no realistic intention of delivering. Transparency scholars argue that to be transparent, there must be an element of monitoring and institutional compulsion toward actors in power to be honest and open (Meijer, 2009). Indirect pathways do not compel authorities to be more open, but they can set better conditions for openness by spreading new norms to different actors and incentivizing behavioral change through the availability of new resources.

Similarly, the digital technologies that the Open Government Partnership harnesses to the service of transparency and participation are important to study within broader institutional analyses. Jane Fountain (2004) predicted that information and communication technologies would gradually transform the entire quality and effectiveness of government, with multiple layers of transparent government interaction with businesses and citizens. What the experience of the Open Government Partnership shows is that the direct integration of technologies often has only a limited effect on public sector reform unless indirect pathways are also operating in a way that involves broad communities of collaborators to harness technology's effects. The idea that technology has a social aspect is familiar, but we offer an alternative theory for how the social side of the sociotechnical can be understood—as a process, practice-based set of human and organizational relationships that are based on agreed rules and procedures for how to adopt and use technologies but whose full potential can only be understood through the indirect pathway of normative, political, and institutional changes that take place as a result.

While the indirect pathway is, in many ways, the most interesting part of our theory, we should not forget its critical counterpart, the direct pathway. Our key point is that, in contrast to the surprising influence of the indirect pathway, the direct pathway of change is often constrained by inherent limitations and vulnerabilities in the way it works. We set the direct pathway alongside the complementary, more fruitful indirect pathway to contrast the successes and failures of the Open Government Partnership. In

chapter 2, we showed how the direct pathway continues to underwhelm the optimistic hopes of public sector reformers, and in chapter 4, we looked at the evidence of the direct pathway in the Open Government Partnership. As public management and political science scholars familiar with the history of cyclical attempts at reform, we approached the Open Government Partnership with skepticism, based on the data put forward over decades showing how bold new reform ideas driven by a top-down approach in the public sector struggle to deliver on their promises. Once all the evidence has been assessed, it is unsurprising why this happens, especially because a multitude of things can go wrong—and often many at once. Rules introduce perverse incentives that undercut the original rules, the goals of the reforms are ambiguous or hard to measure in terms of their impacts on government and society, implementation or resource barriers surface, different values underpinning the reforms conflict, and central leadership and political supporters of the reforms disagree.

Public management, particularly the New Public Management theory, is familiar with the shortcomings of direct pathways of change—the idea that policy change is produced by commitments and rules focusing on performance management, incentives, and results (Piotrowski & Rosenbloom, 2002; Piotrowski et al., 2018). That view has been displaced by post–New Public Management approaches, recognizing the dependency of government policies on other policy actors and networks. A particular strength of open government is that it has a strong normative vision with substantial international support, not least in the Open Government Partnership. As the participatory, multistakeholder model of the Open Government Partnership offers something novel in its potential to drive indirect pathways of change, it will be interesting for public management scholars to monitor open government reforms around the world and compare how successful their efforts will be to the New Public Management and post–New Public Management movements that do not have an international membership organization to represent them.

We also wanted to give the direct pathway of the Open Government Partnership a fair assessment. A simple fail-or-succeed approach to categorizing public sector reforms—including the impact of the Open Government

Partnership—would fall into a facile, thumbs-up/thumbs-down appraisal and would overlook positive lessons. Thus, when evaluating the claims of open government scholarship and the ambitions of the Open Government Partnership, we approached different claims with an open mind. Indeed, when we looked at the Open Government Partnership commitments, from the grimmest flops to the shiniest stars, there are aspects of the direct pathway that sometimes work. In fact, one can always depend on at least a narrow set of programs and commitments conceived through the direct pathway to come to fruition. Rather, it is the evaluation of a narrow focus on commitments as a whole that shows their limitations. The most accurate description, given that the majority of the commitments are lacking in either relevancy, ambition, and/or implementation, is that the direct pathway has an underwhelming impact and frequently disappoints.

WRAPPING UP

Are we being unduly negative about the potential for direct impacts of participation in multistakeholder partnerships like the Open Government Partnership? Such evaluations inevitably depend on one's prior expectations. In the case of the Open Government Partnership, our expectations were not set unusually high. Rather, we examined the explicit goals of its early leaders and architects when they designed and launched it. We also examined the philosophy and the intellectual roots of the open government movement and the lofty expectations of the open government approach to public sector reform.

However, we remain positive about the potential impact of well-conceived, politically supported, and expertly implemented open government commitments. We are enthusiastic about the positive efforts being made by open government researchers and practitioners to learn how open government initiatives can be designed with more transformational impact (e.g., Piotrowski et al., 2019; Porumbescu, Cucciniello, & Gil-Garcia, 2020; Berliner & Wehner, 2022).

However, the purpose of this book is to uncover and elucidate another dimension of this discussion—the counterpart to the direct pathway—the

underestimated and frequently overlooked indirect pathway and its attendant mechanisms and impacts on public sector reforms. More work needs to be done to explore the potential downsides and limitations of open government policies in practice, the equity implications of open government reforms on different groups, the part administration plays in implementing these programs, the long-term impacts of the indirect pathway of change in multiple contexts, the potential of openness in legislative and other collective decision-making bodies, and the potential contributions of new technological tools. In future work, additional country and subnational case studies applying our conceptual framework would add depth to our understanding of how these pathways work in practice. We expect the field of open government and its component practices of transparency, accountability, and participation to continue to grow in the near to mid term.