

Connecting the dots – the coordination challenge for the Open Government Partnership

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In 2011, South Africa was a co-founder of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a multilateral initiative, which secures commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption and harness new technologies to strengthen governance.

Experience with OGP initiatives indicates that coordinating different government departments and agencies is a challenge for implementation. This lack of coordination is especially relevant to advancing open data commitments. To implement 'good' open data, departments must coordinate to share data that is intersectoral, linked, in standard open formats, and – most importantly – is relevant and current.

This practitioner-based participatory research was carried out by ODAC, leading experts in access to information in South Africa, who have been deeply engaged in research and advocacy around South Africa's OGP commitments. It interrogates the challenge of coordination, and asks whether interventions like the OGP can overcome contextual factors to enhance the potential for inter-departmental coordination.

The coordination challenge in the OGP

Coordination in the public sector is complicated by the powerful social and political forces at play; there are also behavioural barriers to policy integration. Assuming that government agencies – and their agents – will coordinate and automatically embrace shared goals is not the correct starting point.

When joint policies are required, or joint implementation of programmes envisioned, the typical organisational solution is to set up particular focused structures. The OGP

promotes the establishment of a permanent dialogue mechanism or multi-stakeholder forum as best practice for member countries, but less than 20% of members have such a forum. This highlights a need for coordination to be an end in and of itself.

Insights from beyond South Africa

Three detailed case studies of OGP implementation offer useful perspectives on coordination, which can be used to inform the South African context:

- The government of **Canada** has some history of explicitly focusing on coordination in policy implementation. This focus manifests in its OGP commitments, which include “the establishment of common principles, standards and licensing across all levels of government.” A major challenge in implementing commitments to coordination has been the lack of a dedicated budget, diminishing the incentive for inter-departmental coordination and making direct coordination harder.
- In the **UK**, there has been significant executive political will behind opening government data, and a widespread cross-party concern with accountability after a scandal about MPs expense claims. But although there has been some successful implementation of open data initiatives, one coordination challenge has been convincing senior managers of the benefits of opening up and linking data.
- **Malawi**, a relatively new entrant to OGP, established a multi-stakeholder steering committee, which developed its first National Action Plan (NAP) submitted in 2016. This plan did not resemble those from many other countries, being focused on institution-building and the implementation of laws, rather than open data projects with simple indicators of

success. But it is an example of how concerted coordination at the drafting stage results in commitments that are synergistic with broader national priorities for accountability.

Contextual factors shaping OGP implementation in South Africa

South Africa has just tabled its third NAP, which includes commitments to strengthen citizen-based monitoring, development of an Open Data Portal and an open government awareness-raising campaign. An analysis of the political, legal, financial and institutional context highlights a range of factors influencing the potential implementation and coordination of the OGP:

- A political climate of retrogressive steps against transparency and widespread public corruption raises concerns for implementation.
- Lack of Cabinet approval for the OGP at its inception has inhibited interdepartmental coordination.
- Conflicting legal paradigms make data sharing and coordination a challenge; legal uncertainty results in very real human fear.
- Lack of an overarching open data policy means inconsistency in data standards, though in practice many officials try to subscribe to a shared technical standard.
- Resources for financing OGP commitments will come from existing budget lines in different departments; this constrains the ability to focus on inter-departmental coordination as an end in and of itself.
- Implementation is seen to drag behind

establishment; one reason for this is that the integrity of institutions established to advance transparency has been threatened in recent years.

Recommendations for enhancing coordination in South Africa

The OGP has the potential to be an agent of influence, particularly regarding coordination. This is an opportune moment in the OGP's history to begin advocating for practical implementation messages, such as improved inter-departmental coordination.

To date, inter-departmental coordination has not been a strong feature of South Africa's OGP work. What practical interventions might further current progress on coordination, so that open data can be made a reality?

1. Establish a Permanent Dialogue Mechanism (PDM), including departments with a coordination function and departments with mandates that fall under the areas covered by the OGP.
2. Re-define the remit of the current lead implementing agency, so that its main focus is on coordination. Devolve much of its current planning and policy remit to the PDM.
3. Encourage the formation of communities of civil society and government experts around the effective implementation of specific Commitments

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About Making All Voices Count

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