

FROM AMBITION TO IMPLEMENTATION: A THEORY-GUIDED QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE OPEN GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIP

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Article Info

Article History:

Received:

November/2025

Accepted:

December/2025

Published:

December/2025

Keywords:

Open government, Open Government Partnership, theory-guided qualitative analysis.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) as a global initiative aimed at promoting transparency, participation, and accountability in governance. Employing a qualitative-descriptive approach based on secondary data and guided by Theory-Guided Qualitative Analysis (TGQA), the research integrates Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM) reports, OGP Data Dashboard, and scholarly literature to identify patterns, trends, and variations in OGP implementation. Findings reveal that while OGP has expanded into a multi-level governance platform with 74 member countries and 152 local governments, regional disparities remain evident: Latin America stands out as a laboratory of participatory democracy, whereas Africa and Central Asia face structural and political constraints. Thematic analysis shows that classical issues such as fiscal transparency and public service delivery continue to dominate, yet the agenda has increasingly shifted toward justice, inclusion, climate governance, and lobbying regulation. However, IRM data highlight a persistent gap between ambition (44%), completion (60%), and transformative results (15%), underscoring the enduring implementation gap in governance reforms. These findings reinforce the view that OGP is not merely a technocratic platform but also a contested reform arena, where success largely depends on domestic political context, bureaucratic capacity, and civil society engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Open government has been one of the key tenets of public governance change worldwide within the last 20 years. Open government is seen as a way to increase democratic legitimacy and boost public confidence in state institutions through the values of accountability, openness, and public involvement (Afandi et al., 2025; Grimmelikhuijsen & Feeney, 2017; Meijer et al., 2012). In order to advance the open government agenda in a more methodical and quantifiable way, the Open Government Partnership (OGP) was established in 2011 as a worldwide project that links national and local governments with civil society. With thousands of commitments outlined in national and subnational action plans, OGP now has 74 member states and more than 150 local governments (Afandi et al., 2024).

However, OGP's trajectory has also shown intricate and contradictory processes. On the one hand, membership has increased geographically, with a concentration in portions of Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Latin America. While Europe and Oceania view OGP as an advancement of their digital governance traditions, Latin America, for instance, is frequently characterized as a testing ground for participatory democracy in the post-authoritarian age. On the other hand, Africa and much of Central Asia continue to demonstrate low levels of involvement due to insufficient bureaucratic ability and political resistance (Fox, 2015; McGee & Gaventa, 2019a; Shao & Saxena, 2019a). The applicability of multi-level governance theory (Marks & Hooghe, 2004), which places open government not only at the national level but also at the local and international levels, is highlighted by this regional variance.

In addition to membership, OGP shows differences in the policy areas that governments focus. The idea that budget openness is the cornerstone of governmental accountability is supported by data showing that traditional concerns like fiscal transparency and public service delivery continue to be important (Alt et al., 2006; International Monetary Fund, 2019). Recent developments, however, indicate that the agenda has expanded to include social inclusion, justice, lobbying regulation, and climate governance. This change represents a move away from technocratic methods and toward more meaningful objectives that address global issues, as noted by Biermann & Pattberg (2012) and Gaventa & McGee (2013).

However, there is still a significant disconnect between OGP commitments' impact, completion, and ambition. Only 15% of promises have shown notable early outcomes, despite the fact that 44% are regarded as ambitious and 60% have been substantially accomplished. This practice supports the idea of an implementation gap in governance reform (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), according to which normative pledges frequently run against institutional, political, and technological roadblocks that prevent real change (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; Fox, 2015). According to this perspective, OGP may be viewed as a disputed reform arena where civil society dynamics, bureaucratic capability, and domestic political settings all play a significant role in its success (McGee & Edwards, 2016). It is not only a technocratic mechanism.

Using a Theory-Guided Qualitative Analysis (TGQA) technique, this study investigates the dynamics of OGP through a qualitative-descriptive analysis

grounded in secondary data. This approach enables the integration of key theoretical frameworks in public policy and governance—such as multi-level governance (Marks & Hooghe, 2004), empowered participatory governance (Fung, 2006), and social accountability (Fox, 2015)—with empirical data drawn from IRM reports, the OGP Data Dashboard, and national or local action plans. The aim of this research is to systematically assess how OGP operates as a global reform platform and to identify the factors that shape the gap between reform ambitions and actual implementation outcomes.

Building on existing theory and global comparative evidence, this study advances the hypothesis that the effectiveness of OGP commitments is primarily determined by domestic political context, bureaucratic capacity, and the strength of civil society engagement, rather than by the ambition level of the commitments alone. By articulating this hypothesis, the research seeks to illuminate the mechanisms through which OGP both promotes and constrains open government reforms, thereby offering a clearer understanding of why discrepancies persist between stated reform goals and real-world results.

RESEARCH METHODS

The dynamics of the Open Government Partnership are investigated in this study using a qualitative-descriptive research approach based on secondary data analysis. In addition to pertinent academic literature, publications, and comparative studies on governance reform, the main data sources include official OGP papers, including Independent Reporting Mechanism reports, the OGP Data Dashboard, and national/local action plans. Because the OGP is a worldwide platform, it produces systematic documentation that enables researchers to find patterns, trends, and differences across geographies and policy areas (Flick, 2018; Johnston, 2014), making secondary data very pertinent to our study.

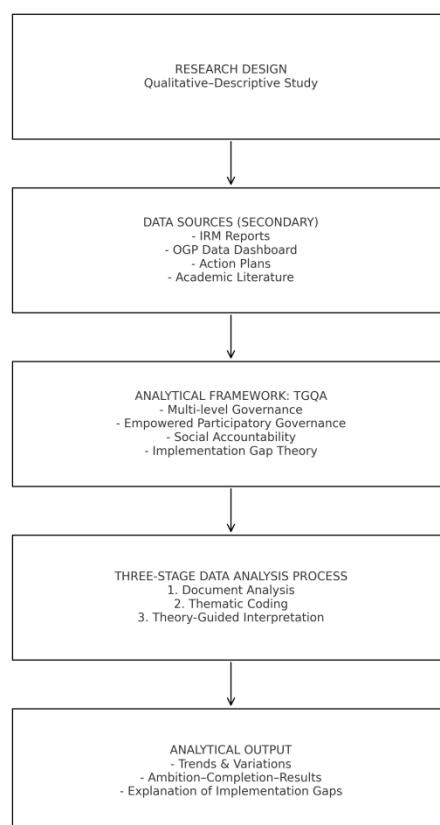
Theory-Guided Qualitative Analysis is the methodology used. This method ensures that conclusions are not just descriptive but also analytically based by combining empirical data with well-established theoretical frameworks in public policy and governance (Fendrich & Turner, 1989; Kuckartz, 2014). In particular, this study makes use of ideas like social accountability (Fox, 2015), empowered participatory governance (Fung, 2006), multi-level governance (Marks & Hooghe, 2004), and the implementation gap in public policy (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). These theoretical stances provide as a framework for interpreting OGP data and placing trends in the context of larger discussions about institutional change and democratic governance.

Three phases of data analysis were conducted. First, data on membership distribution, commitment performance, and priority policy topics were extracted from OGP databases and IRM reports using document analysis (Bowen, 2009). Second, in order to highlight prevailing tendencies, pledges were categorized into thematic clusters (such as fiscal transparency, participation, and extractive sectors) using category coding (Saldaña, 2016). Third, in order to detect discrepancies

between normative commitments and actual results, theory-guided interpretation was used to compare empirical findings with theoretical expectations.

This research attempts to offer a comprehensive understanding of OGP as a platform for global governance and a disputed reform arena by fusing descriptive analysis with theory-driven interpretation. While being rooted in the scholarly literature on open government, this research is well-suited to capture the interaction between aspiration, completion, and effect across many locations and policy domains due to its reliance on secondary data and TGQA.

Figure 1. Research Method Flowchart



Source: Author's processing 2025

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Open Government Partnership now has 74 national members and 152 subnational governments, with 477 action plans and over 5,600 commitments, according to the membership map (see Figure 1). This distribution shows that while Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia continue to be disproportionately underrepresented, OGP adoption is mostly centered in Europe, Latin America, and portions of the Asia-Pacific region. The active participation of Latin America, according to McGee & Gaventa (2019), demonstrates the powerful role that civil society has played in calling for transparency in the post-authoritarian era, establishing the area as a test bed for participatory democracy. Fox (2015)

emphasizes the value of social accountability in bolstering democratic institutions, and this conclusion is in line with his views.

The expansion to the local level, which now encompasses over 100 cities and regions, highlights the applicability of multi-level governance theory developed by Marks & Hooghe (2004). This theory contends that open government is not only implemented at the national level but is also driven by subnational initiatives like those in Seoul, Madrid, and Buenos Aires. The membership map, as outlined by Meijer et al. (2012), theoretically demonstrates how the three fundamental tenets of open government—transparency, participation, and collaboration—are manifested. But, as Grimmelikhuijsen & Feeney (2017) point out, OGP participation is more common among nations with longstanding democratic histories, while semi-authoritarian regimes either don't participate at all or only do so in a token way.

According to Shao & Saxena (2019), this scenario results in an implementation paradox, which is the effectiveness gap between stated promises and their actual reality on the ground. Therefore, even if the OGP membership map shows how popular open government is becoming, each country's and subnational government's ability to implement action plans effectively determines how successful open government will be. In this way, OGP serves as both a worldwide forum for transparency pledges and a test case for voluntary global governance that links state and non-state entities in a multi-level cooperation framework.

Figure 2. Open Government Partnership Membership Map



Source: Open Government Partnership 2025

Different regional patterns may be seen in the geographic distribution of OGP membership. With widespread involvement from nations like Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and Chile, Latin America stands out as one of the most significant areas. This active involvement is inextricably linked to the region's lengthy history of civil society mobilization and demands for openness in the post-authoritarian era, according to McGee & Gaventa (2019) and Fox (2015). In this regard, OGP has developed into a tool for social responsibility that broadens the public domain and enhances participatory democracy.

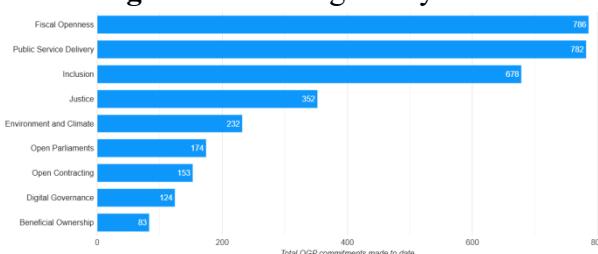
The situation in Europe is different. With an emphasis on open data and government digitization, nations like the UK, Spain, France, Germany, and the Scandinavian states frequently present OGP as an addition to their long-standing governance traditions (Meijer et al., 2012). OGP functions as a continuation of established democratic practices rather than just a reform agenda, whereas European involvement is frequently linked to institutional innovations—such as open data portals and e-government services.

With a few noteworthy exceptions, like South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya, OGP adoption is still rather low throughout Africa. Abott & Tiner (2022) state that political opposition, resource limitations, and a lack of bureaucratic capability are the primary obstacles. However, African members demonstrate how OGP may be used to address home calls for openness while also establishing international credibility.

The membership pattern in Asia is more irregular. While some nations, especially in Central and East Asia, are still not members of the alliance, others, including South Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Mongolia, have been trailblazers. According to Shao & Saxena (2019), a number of political issues, including the predominance of semi-authoritarian governments, ingrained bureaucratic cultures of secrecy, and a lack of civil society pressure, are responsible for the low implementation of OGP in Asia. Notable exceptions include Indonesia and the Philippines, where OGP participation has been fueled by foreign incentives to fortify democracy following political changes and vigorous civil society involvement.

OGP is used in Oceania by Australia and New Zealand as a component of their already sophisticated digital governance plans. Both nations, like Western European states, place a strong emphasis on open data and technology-based public service delivery. The disparity in OGP usage is highlighted by this comparison. While Asia reflects notable political divisions between democratic and semi-authoritarian governments, Africa has structural obstacles, Europe and Oceania view OGP as an extension of digital governance, and Latin America is propelled by bottom-up civil society mobilization. These trends support the findings of Grimmelikhuijsen & Feeney (2017), who found that open government is more likely to thrive in consolidated democracies while being either nonexistent or only symbolic in authoritarian environments.

Figure 3. Trending Policy Areas



Source: Open Government Partnership 2025

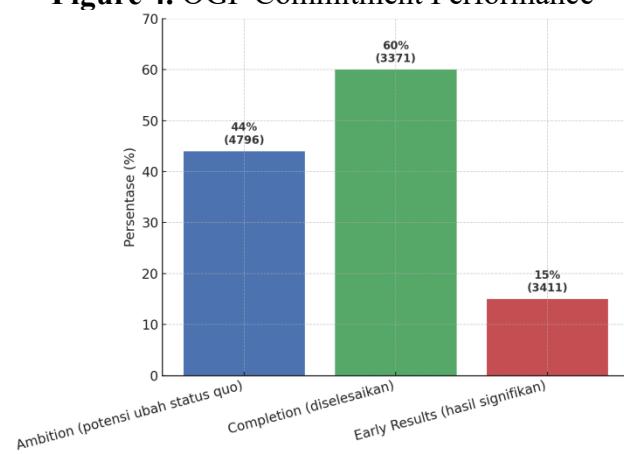
Member states' pledges are mostly focused on budgetary transparency (786) and public service delivery (782), followed by inclusion (678) and justice (352), according to OGP's Trending Policy Areas (see Figure 2). The International Monetary Fund (2019) and Alt et al. (2006) have shown that budget transparency is a key component of governance change because it enhances governmental legitimacy and accountability. This is consistent with the prevalence of fiscal and service delivery difficulties. The agenda is moving away from simply technical issues and toward social aspects, as seen by the increased emphasis on justice and inclusivity. Initiatives for inclusive accountability can increase citizen involvement and expand the rights of excluded groups, as argued by Gaventa & McGee (2013).

Open government is becoming more closely associated with sustainable development and global governance objectives, as seen by commitments to environmental and climate change concerns (232). This supports the idea put out by Biermann & Pattberg (2012) that legitimacy in international climate governance requires both transparency and involvement. Similar attempts to apply transparency principles to the legislative and procurement spheres are reflected in parliamentary openness (174) and public contracting (153). As Kosack & Fung (2014) point out, these measures can reduce opportunities for corruption while strengthening the accountability chains between the public and the government.

On the other hand, despite their enormous potential to promote governance innovation and reduce transnational corruption, digital governance (124) and beneficial ownership transparency (83) are still comparatively under-adopted. While Meijer & Bolívar (2016) emphasize how digital governance may serve as a catalyst for smart governance, Sharman (2017) emphasizes how crucial beneficial ownership transparency is to the fight against cross-border corruption and money laundering. Political opposition and technological difficulty are probably the main causes of these two fields' limited acceptance.

These patterns theoretically corroborate the idea put out by (Meijer et al. (2012) that open government is a dynamic paradigm. During its early stages, member nations' pledges were primarily focused on traditional, concrete, and technological challenges like service delivery and fiscal transparency. However, more recent events demonstrate an expansion toward digital governance, social justice, and climate change, suggesting that the open government agenda is becoming more and more entwined with global issues and social transformation. OGP should thus be seen as a political forum that mediates calls for transparency, equity, and sustainability rather than just as a technical platform.

Figure 4. OGP Commitment Performance



Source: Independent Reporting Mechanism 2025

Three important aspects of the Independent Reporting Mechanism evaluation are highlighted by the OGP Commitment Performance statistics (see Figure 3). First, of the 4,796 commitments, about 44% are thought to have the capacity to change the current situation (ambition). Second, 60% of the 3,371 obligations have been executed, either completely or partially. However, according

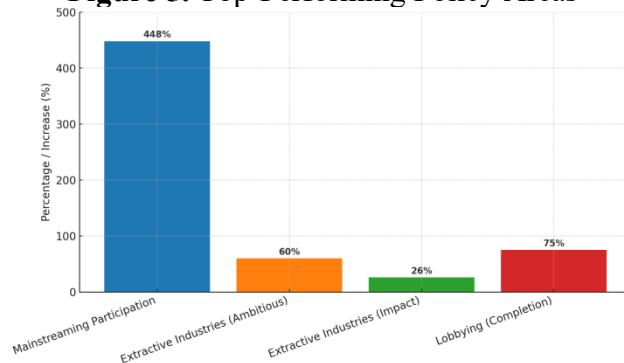
to preliminary findings, just 15% of the 3,411 promises show meaningful improvements in government transparency.

These results highlight a disconnect between open government reform aspirations and concrete results. According to Fox (2015), there is what is commonly known as a "accountability gap" since many social accountability efforts find it difficult to convert normative pledges into long-lasting effects. Similar to this, Carothers & Brechenmacher (2014) contend that although promises of governance transformation are usually lofty, institutional resistance, bureaucratic capability, and domestic political concerns usually limit their implementation.

The comparatively high completion rate (60%) supports the argument made by McGee & Gaventa (2011) that, despite the fact that power dynamics have not yet been completely rearranged, OGP has helped institutionalize transparency norms. On the other hand, the low percentage of noteworthy results (15%) emphasizes the need to gauge changes by their transformational effect rather than just administrative compliance. This supports Heald's (2006) contention that the quality of governance practice change, not the quantity of pledges fulfilled, should be used to gauge openness.

The evidence presented here theoretically supports the larger body of research on the implementation gap in public policy (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), which contends that political and technological obstacles frequently cause ambitiously conceived plans to be diluted during the implementation phase. Regarding OGP, this suggests that although the platform has been successful in encouraging involvement and influencing progressive agendas, turning pledges into significant improvements in government transparency remains its biggest obstacle.

Figure 5. Top-Performing Policy Areas



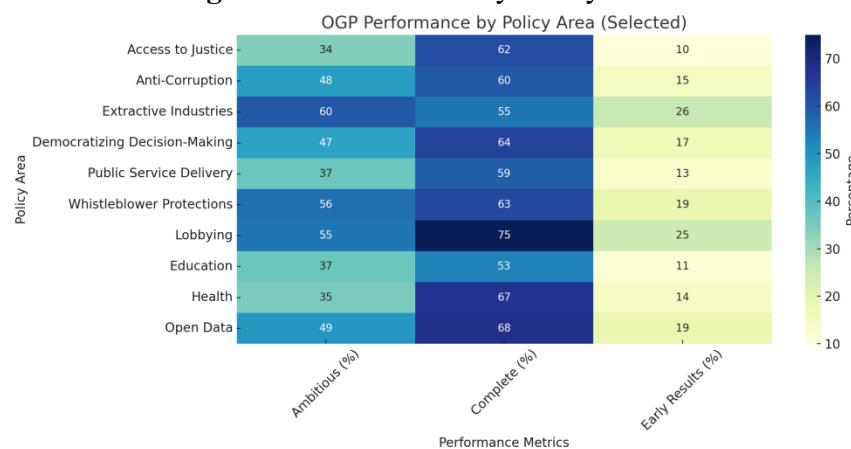
Source: Independent Reporting Mechanism 2025

The Open Government Partnership framework's disparate policy commitment accomplishments are shown in the Independent Reporting Mechanism's data on Top-Performing Policy Areas (see Figure 4). First, the most current action plans show a noteworthy 448% rise in mainstreaming participation. This emphasizes how important public engagement is as a fundamental element of democratic administration. Institutionalized involvement can increase the legitimacy of policies and improve their efficacy of execution, according to Fung's (2006) research on empowered participatory governance. In a similar vein, Smith (2009) contends in Democratic Innovations that chances to improve representation and accountability arise from citizen involvement in policymaking.

Second, according to two metrics, the Extractive Industries sector is exceptional. Of the pledges made in this area, almost 60% are seen as ambitious and have the ability to change the status quo, and 26% have already had a noticeable impact on promoting government transparency. This result is consistent with resource governance literature. For instance, transparent administration of extractive sectors might lessen societal conflict and corruption, according to Hilson & Maconachie (2020). Similarly, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) is frequently mentioned as a specific illustration of governance practices that demand transparency in agreements, earnings, and the allocation of resources (Gillies, 2010).

Third, with 75% of promises partially or fully fulfilled, lobbying stands out as the policy area with the highest completion rate. This suggests that lobbying methods are becoming more regulated, which will lessen interest groups' covert power. Clear lobbying laws improve political actors' responsibility and bolster public confidence in democratic processes, according to Chari et al. (2019) in *Regulating Lobbying*. Additionally, Campos & Giovannoni (2007) show that open lobbying can encourage more responsive policymaking when it is controlled with strong accountability measures. All things considered, these results point to lobbying regulation, extractive industry governance, and public involvement as OGP priority topics. Success in these areas not only improves accountability and transparency, but it also strengthens democratic legitimacy and public confidence in the government, according to the larger body of academic research.

Figure 6. Performance by Policy Area OGP



Source: Independent Reporting Mechanism 2025

The OGP's Data on Performance by Policy Area (see Figure 5) shows how pledges in 40 different policy areas—which include 5,658 commitments from 208 members—performed differently. Democratizing Decision-Making (148 members, 753 commitments) and Public Service Delivery (163 members, 782 commitments) are the policy areas with the greatest member involvement rates. These results align with the research on governance reform, which highlights the need of improving service delivery and involving the public as the cornerstones of effective governance (Fung, 2015; Meijer et al., 2012).

Whistleblower Protections (56%) and Extractive Industries (60%) exhibit the highest levels of ambition, indicating significant attempts to change the status

quo in the areas of integrity and resource-sector transparency. This result is consistent with Gillies (2020), who emphasizes the crucial role that extractive governance plays in bolstering state legitimacy. In comparison, even though Mainstreaming Participation was the OGP sector with the strongest growth in prior years, it displays very modest ambition (18%). This supports the claim made by (Nabatchi & Leighninger (2015) that, although being frequently accepted as a norm, public involvement still faces systemic barriers in real-world settings.

Despite the relatively modest number of commitments, the completion rates for Lobbying (75%) and Automated Decision-Making and AI (73%) show high rates of considerable or complete implementation. This backs up Schillemans' (2018) assertion that concerns that are more recent and have a more focused scope may advance more quickly due to their restricted focus and limited reach. The implementation complexity of areas involving various players and opposing interests is highlighted by the lower completion rates (about 53–67%) in more general sectors like education and health.

Extractive Industries (26%) and Freedom of Assembly (25%) stand out as the most significant early outcomes, suggesting that improvements in these sectors are relatively faster to produce noticeable effects on government transparency. The majority of other policy sectors, however, continue to show early results below 20%, supporting Peixoto & Fox (2016) criticism that many openness efforts have a gap in implementation between their stated goals and their actual results.

When considered collectively, these trends support the idea that open government is a contested reform space (McGee & Edwards, 2016), where certain policy domains are successful in bringing about meaningful changes while others are blocked by institutional capability or symbolism. Overall OGP data indicate that while completion (60%) and ambition (44%) rates are relatively high, the percentage of commitments that result in substantial effect (15%) is still low. This highlights the need for more strategically directed and context-sensitive reform routes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that although the OGP has contributed to the institutionalization of global norms of transparency, participation, and accountability, a persistent gap remains between the ambition of reform commitments and the achievement of transformative outcomes. The analysis indicates that only a limited portion of OGP commitments lead to substantive improvements in governance practice, underscoring the continued relevance of multi-level governance theory, empowered participatory governance, social accountability frameworks, and implementation gap scholarship. These theoretical perspectives collectively explain why OGP operates not as a purely technocratic mechanism but as a contested political arena shaped by variations in state capacity, political incentives, and civil society strength. The findings further support the study's hypothesis that domestic political context, bureaucratic capability, and civic engagement are the primary determinants of OGP effectiveness, often outweighing the ambition embedded in reform commitments. Countries with robust

administrative institutions and active civil society actors tend to achieve more meaningful outcomes, whereas contexts characterized by resistance, institutional inertia, or limited resources frequently exhibit symbolic or minimal implementation.

To enhance the likelihood of achieving substantive reform, several strategic considerations emerge. Strengthening institutional capacity is essential to ensure that openness practices are embedded within routine governance processes rather than dependent on shifting political cycles. Commitments must also be designed to be realistic, measurable, and adequately supported by financial and human resources to mitigate the recurrent gap between ambition and execution. Deepening civil society participation—particularly among grassroots and marginalized groups—is necessary to reinforce the accountability functions envisioned by OGP. Furthermore, integrating subnational governments more systematically into the OGP cycle can enhance the multi-level governance dimensions of openness reforms. Finally, stronger institutional linkages with oversight bodies, including parliaments, audit institutions, and ombudsman offices, are critical to translating transparency into enforceable accountability mechanisms. Overall, the OGP retains considerable potential to advance democratic governance; however, realizing this potential requires addressing the structural and political determinants that shape implementation trajectories. If these conditions are met, OGP can move beyond symbolic transparency and function as a genuinely transformative platform for accountability, equity, and citizen-centered governance across diverse political settings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is one of the outcomes of our primary study on open government. We extend our sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to this work, particularly the Institute for Research and Community Service, Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, for its invaluable support and encouragement throughout the research process.

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