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The UK's Transparency Agenda
By Jane Dudman

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The UK's Transparency Agenda

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FRANCIS MAUDE (left) serves as the UK Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, and as a Member of Parliament representing the constituency of Horsham, West Sussex, England.

SIMON BURALL (right) is the director of Involve, and also serves as chair of Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom, an ambassador for WWF UK, and head of dialogue at the UK's ScienceWise Expert Resource Centre.

Minister Francis Maude and Simon Burall, a British civil society leader, discuss the potential impacts of the Open Government Partnership in the UK.

On September 26, 2012, to mark the first anniversary of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), UK Minister Francis Maude wrote on the *Guardian* Public Leaders Network: “Data is the raw material of the 21st century and a resource for a new generation of entrepreneurs. But transparency is not just about economics. Transparency shines light on underperformance and inefficiencies in public services. It allows citizens and the media to hold governments to account, strengthening civil society and building more open societies.”

The United Kingdom is a world leader in open government. Since May 2010, it has made almost 9,000 datasets of government information available at data.gov.uk, from school performance tables to pricing information about large government capital projects.

Maude heads the Cabinet Office, the department at the heart of the UK government's efficiency and reform program, where he has set up a new, central efficiency and reform group to keep an eagle eye on budgets and procurement. Transparency and the release of government information have been critical to Maude's reform program, and he has been particularly active in developing the independent review mechanism of OGP members' national action plans. The next iteration of the UK action plan will be released in 2013, and Maude's department has been working closely with civil society partners to ensure that they take a vital part in the review process.

This message was exactly what Simon Burall wanted to hear when he met with the minister in November 2012 in Maude's

elegant offices in central London. Burall is director of the think tank Involve, which specializes in how new forms of public participation can strengthen democracy in Britain and elsewhere. Burall says the partnership between the government and civil society in the United Kingdom is significant in enhancing local democracy.

“OGP is a useful umbrella organization to pull together what's happening here,” he says, adding that the loose network between government and civil society is both a strength and a potential weakness. If the collaboration is to have real teeth, says Burall, it must involve civil society partners in the peer review of the 2013 national action plan. Civil society organizations, he adds, may want to go further than the government in some cases, such as not just consulting with citizens about existing policies but getting them involved in policy making and in the government's public services reform program.

Maude agrees on the need for OGP to be more than just talk. “By the end of the UK's time as co-chair, we want the OGP to have real authority, resilience, and credibility,” he says. These are high aims, both internationally and domestically, and Maude acknowledges the challenges in the United Kingdom, where the coalition government has driven through a radical reform program of big cuts to public sector budgets and jobs since it came to power in May 2010.

In a more diverse and dispersed world of public service provision, it will be vital to

provide better information about public services if citizens are to make informed choices, says Maude. Some in the United Kingdom believe this fragmentation of public services, particularly in health and education, and the introduction of more providers, will make it difficult to compare services. But Maude insists that all providers will have to produce comparable data on outcomes.

He acknowledges, however, that the UK's transparency program, which includes publishing all local authority spending over £500, has not been welcomed by everyone in government. And there remains the wider challenge, acknowledged by both Burall and Maude, of getting all public service providers—not just those whose main focus is handling data—involved with OGP's agenda. The challenge, explains Burall, is “how to make the stuff about datasets seem important to organizations that are interested in outcomes.” He says the agenda is about forcing the government to move from “talking inwards to turning outwards.”

One of the UK government's grandest aims is to make as much as possible of its public sector data available for free or priced cheaply. “If I compare the UK to the US, we've made more useful datasets available than the US,” notes Maude. “But the US has a more liberal policy in terms of making datasets available free. It has taken public sector data as a public good.” The United Kingdom has had a more restrictive approach, because it has required government organizations

like Ordnance Survey and the Met Office to use their mapping, weather, and other data as an asset, which they have sold to companies, to cover their costs. Now, though, the government would prefer to make raw government data freely available and let others add value to it through services and products. ●

JANE DUDMAN is editor of the *Guardian* Public Leaders Network.

