

Sponsored Supplement to *SSIR*  
**Transforming Multilateralism: Innovation on a  
Global Stage**  
By Jeremy M. Weinstein

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
Spring 2013

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# Transforming Multilateralism: Innovation on a Global Stage

BY JEREMY M. WEINSTEIN

**The Open Government Partnership seeks to build more transparent, effective, and accountable governments that empower citizens and respond to their democratic aspirations.**

Inside the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building, across the driveway from the West Wing, hundreds of White House staffers work endless hours, glued to their desks inside small cramped offices, covering everything on the president's agenda, from housing and education to non-proliferation and terrorism. Amid the daily routine of meetings, memos, and more meetings, it can be easy to overlook the significance of the work and to ignore the historical grandeur of the physical surroundings. But there are days that stand out from the blur of time on the White House staff—when the power of what's possible at the highest levels of government is visible in the kernel of a new idea.

I remember one of those days very clearly: January 21, 2011. We were gathered in the Secretary of War Room, seated around an ornate mahogany table. We had cleared our schedules for what seemed like an unprecedented day and a half of time, just to think. And we were joined by an amazing cast of characters from across the developed and developing world—government ministers shorn of their staffers and talking points, leaders of international movements with networks spanning the continents, and grassroots activists car-

rying their experiences of pressing for social change into the halls of power.

The first few hours of our time were dedicated to storytelling. The focus was on governance, an opaque, sometimes fuzzy topic that could be boiled down to something quite simple: how to build more transparent, effective, and accountable governments that empower citizens and are responsive to their aspirations.

Jorge Hage, the Comptroller General of Brazil, shared the story of Brazil's fight against corruption. He told of the transformation of a government bureaucracy known for patronage, bribe taking, and inefficiency into one that today is widely viewed as a model of innovation and reform. New laws and bureaucratic institutions have been central to the change, but so have a set of unique Brazilian innovations: random, public audits of municipal expenditures; participatory budgeting that engages citizens in priority setting; and the creative use of technology to promote extraordinary levels of openness.

Kuntoro Mangkusubrato,

head of the President's Delivery Unit in Indonesia, provided a powerful example of harnessing transparency and technology to ensure that funds provided to Indonesia in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami reached those who most desperately needed support. Every dollar received in aid could be tracked to the individual recipient, the house that was built, or the school or health clinic that was restored—and the fact that people could access this information on an online dashboard generated an unparalleled level of citizen oversight and monitoring of the reconstruction.

Nikhil Dey, a leader of the right-to-information movement in India, described how even the simplest technologies could be used to reduce corruption and ensure that social programs benefit intended recipients. He showed pictures of locally produced murals that record the beneficiaries of government programs in each rural community, making fully visible, for example, people who had moved to urban areas but were still receiving a guaranteed payment for rural employment.

Over several hours, we heard inspiring stories from around the globe: initiatives to



**JEREMY M. WEINSTEIN** is associate professor of political science, senior fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, and Ford-Dorsey Director of the Center for African Studies at Stanford University. Between 2009 and 2011, he served as director for development and democracy on the National Security Council staff at the White House, where he was a principal architect of the Open Government Partnership.

rebuild a social compact and give citizens a stake in government in the Philippines; steps to end a culture of secrecy in Mexico; policies to prevent corruption in the natural resources sector in Norway; efforts to institutionalize public participation in post-apartheid South Africa; and reforms to open up government in the United States and United Kingdom. All contribute to reaching the goal of harnessing the ingenuity and expertise that exists outside of the government to solve shared problems.

In many ways, this was an atypical White House meeting: high-level government officials were swapping stories with civil society activists at the same table; officials from developed countries were furiously taking notes on the innovations deployed in emerging economies and vice versa; and officials and activists whose focus is primarily domestic were talking about their reforms on an international stage, not through diplomatic channels but gathered as a community of practitioners doing the real work on the ground.

We found ourselves together in Washington, D.C., because President Barack Obama had issued a simple challenge when he addressed heads of state at the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2010. The president said, “And when we gather back here next year, we should bring specific commitments to promote transparency, energize civic engagement, fight corruption, and leverage new technologies so that we strengthen the foundation of freedom in our own countries, while living up to ideals that can light the world.” After sharing stories, our task was to figure out how, collectively, we could respond to the president’s call to action.

Fast forward 18 months: the Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a robust and growing global effort to make governments better. Launched by eight governments and nine civil society organizations in September 2011, OGP intends to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance. The founding governments announced national action plans at the launch, and 38 new participating countries presented their commitments in Brasilia in 2012. Political leaders representing 2 billion people have made more than 300 commitments to reform and have pledged to be held accountable for their progress by an independent body.

This supplement tells the story of OGP—

how it came about, the impact it is having, and the challenges it faces—and speaks to the possibility of social innovation in the multilateral space, as policy entrepreneurs actively seek to redefine and transform how governments and citizens relate to one another across borders. Multilateralism is not an arena that has been known for experimentation, given the cautious nature of governments. But this new form of partnership demonstrates the kind of transformative multilateral engagement that is possible, at the same time exposing the challenges of making multi-stakeholder initiatives work in practice.

### Changing Models of Multilateral Engagement

For many people, international institutions, such as the World Bank, IMF, United Nations, and European Union, are the paradigmatic examples of international cooperation. Designed to facilitate cooperation among states on issues that transcend national boundaries,

civil society groups, the private sector, philanthropy, international organizations—around specific initiatives that may or may not lead to the establishment of formal organizations.

A focused, achievable goal is at the center of mixed coalitions, and the ambition is to identify governments, organizations, and groups that are willing to take actions that, collectively, will demonstrate success and make the case for broader international engagement. This form of international cooperation prioritizes flexibility and agility, dispensing with universal, binding commitments in favor of voluntary pledges that enable participants to lead by example. Recent examples of initiatives that fit this model include the Global Fund Against AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria and the International Campaign to End Landmines.

Traditional approaches to international cooperation have delivered important successes, especially in the period since the end of World War II. The standards and rules con-

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these institutions establish rules and actions that are considered binding on participating governments. The legitimacy and authority of these international institutions often stem, at least in part, from their broad or near-universal membership. Yet to secure agreement among a diverse set of countries, significant compromise is typically required. As a result, the laws or rules promoted by these organizations often reflect the preferences of the least cooperative country—a “lowest common denominator” outcome—potentially blunting their impact. In addition, as a model of multilateral engagement, international institutions are often seen as opaque, highly bureaucratic, and resistant to change. This is not surprising, given how challenging it is to establish these institutions in the first place.

Contrast this approach with a totally different paradigm, what William Savedoff of the Center for Global Development has called “the mixed coalition” and what *Philanthrocapitalism* authors Matthew Bishop and Michael Green have termed “the posse.” This approach involves gathering together a wide variety of interested parties—governments,

tained in the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) and its successor organization, the World Trade Organization (WTO), have contributed to significant growth in international trade. A set of interlocking international treaties and monitoring bodies, including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), have enabled progress on nonproliferation in nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Important treaties and international organizations have emerged to manage climate change, promote global development, ensure global financial stability, and advance basic human rights norms.

But the international environment is changing in consequential ways, and with it, the form that international cooperation is taking. Most international institutions were constructed in a period in which Western countries had nearly unrivaled power. They used their influence to secure near-universal participation and to incentivize compliance. But with the United States now, in the words of New York University politics professor Bruce Jones, “the world’s largest minority shareholder,”

international institutions are struggling to manage a far greater diversity of preferences among their members. Emerging powers, including Brazil, India, and China, are making their views known and seeking influence consistent with their growing economic clout. The challenge of seeking unanimity or consensus on international issues is becoming all too apparent, as evidenced by the difficulty of advancing climate change negotiations. And the difficulties of securing compliance with international treaties and agreements

are hard to ignore in the face of growing trade disputes and other actions by national governments that flout international rules and laws on proliferation and human rights.

Of course, the old paradigm of international cooperation is not dead—it is being modernized. The emergence of the G-20 is recognition that global cooperation on economic issues cannot happen without the major emerging economies at the table. Commitments to shift the voting shares of countries at the World Bank and IMF and pressure to reform the UN Security Council provide further evidence that a redistribution of influence and power is under way.

At the same time, new forms of cooperation—mixed coalitions or posses—are increasingly important. Tackling issues that are not being adequately addressed by existing institutions, mixed coalitions are playing by a new set of rules. Their membership is not universal, but instead focuses on governments that need to be at the table to get something started. They are often able to set higher standards because they are not universal. They rely on voluntary and collaborative means of generating action, prioritizing meaningful actions over binding commitments that are routinely ignored. And they incorporate the expertise and active participation of nongovernmental players.

As we gathered in Washington in January 2011, we knew of examples where these mixed coalitions were forming to promote cooperation in a wide variety of issue areas, from climate change to nonproliferation and from global development to counter-



terrorism. The question before us was simple: Could we fashion a fresh, dynamic, and impact-oriented approach to strengthening governance that would capture the attention and commitment of governments, civil society, the private sector, and philanthropy around the world?

### **Transforming the Promotion of Democracy and Governance**

Around the table, our conversation shifted quickly from stories of domestic progress to the possibilities of working together to advance a common agenda. Because we began with concrete experiences of reform from around the world, a number of conclusions were already clear.

First, in the realm of governance, old divisions between East and West or North and South were no longer relevant. Political leaders around the world confront a similar set of challenges: how to be responsive to citizens whose expectations have been transformed by the real-time, on-demand revolution in information technology; how to open up the workings of government to strengthen accountability, but also to harness the expertise of people on the outside; and how to build (or rebuild) the sense among citizens that government exists to represent their interests and meet their needs.

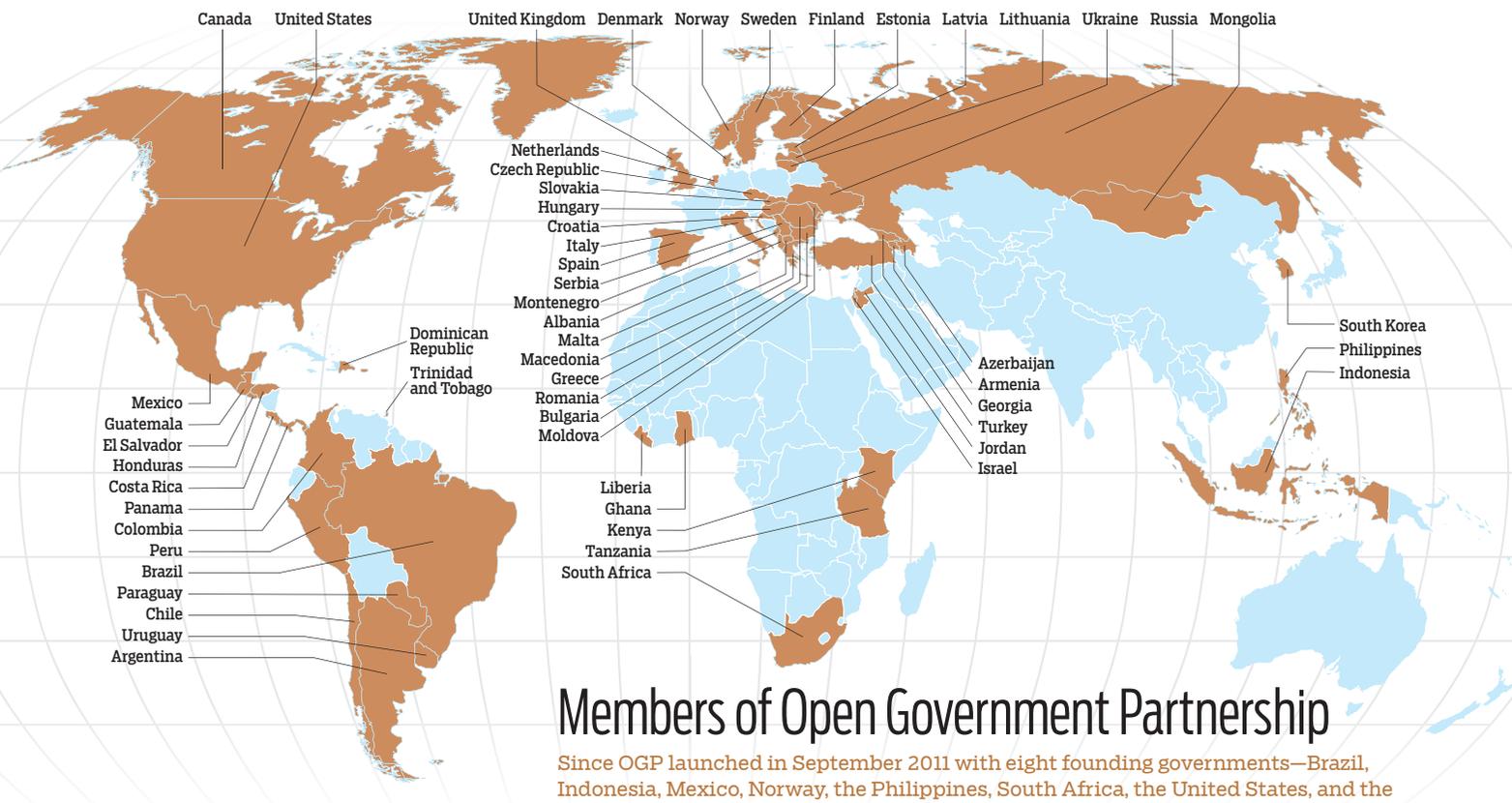
At the same time, one could not escape the conclusion that the locus of innovation had shifted: reformers in new and emerging democracies are at the forefront of efforts to reimagine how government engages citizens, and grassroots groups, especially in develop-

ing countries, are making the case for even deeper and more fundamental changes to the ways in which government operates. Developed countries have much to learn from developing countries, and the most powerful advocates for change are those working these issues every day. These realities called for a fundamentally different approach to promoting democracy and governance in the 21st century.

Many around the table welcomed the opportunity to rethink the multilateral approach to promoting more effective and

accountable governance. In the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq and the human rights abuses committed in the war on terrorism, there had been an international backlash against the very idea of democracy promotion, not only in the United States but also among international democracy supporters who did not want to be associated with a tarnished agenda. The prospects for further democratic progress were also grim: analysts were speaking of a “democratic recession,” with new democracies struggling to perform and authoritarian regimes promoting themselves as alternative, non-democratic models of development.

Together, we saw a different way forward, a way of breaking the mold and diversifying the coalition working to advance this agenda. We felt a need to reclaim the language of democracy promotion—to put the focus on people’s universal aspiration to have a say in how they are governed, and on the common challenges of political leaders in responding to that desire. The emerging concept of “open government” was loose and flexible, not attached to any particular ideology. It allowed everyone to bring his own agenda to a common goal. It was essential to place innovation at the front and center of any new effort, moving away from a framework in which developing countries were under pressure to adopt the “best” practices of the West, toward one in which domestic reformers and activists were empowered to share their stories, and countries were encouraged to learn from one another and take further actions in a meaningful race to the top. Last, it was crucial that we find



## Members of Open Government Partnership

Since OGP launched in September 2011 with eight founding governments—Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa, the United States, and the United Kingdom—it has been joined by 50 additional governments.

ways to harness and support the momentum for democratic change and improved governance within countries. Sustainable progress was possible, in our view, only if governments were making commitments at the highest level and being held accountable by their own citizens, rather than by organizations, governments, or groups on the outside.

### Pivotal Decisions

We had agreement on the need for a new approach, but the real challenge lay in working out the details. With a diverse group around the table—government and civil society, North and South—the debates were contentious, but the ambition to achieve substantive consensus around a new model was shared by all.

Three central issues had to be resolved. Would this initiative seek universal participation, or would it be selective in determining which countries could participate? There were strong advocates for a universal initiative, given the scope of the governance challenges globally and the need to establish international legitimacy. On the other hand, civil society groups and governments spoke forcefully of the need for credibility. An initiative on governance could be credible only if the

participating countries were truly committed to making demonstrable progress. Second, would participating countries be expected to commit to an identical set of reforms, or would the initiative provide space for countries to make political commitments that reflected their own unique circumstances?

Participants recognized the value of uniform commitments, as then we would be able to identify high priority issues and set high standards for participating countries. On the other hand, the stories that we shared suggested the value of encouraging countries to develop reform strategies consistent with the aspirations of their citizens and the priorities of their governments. And how would we ensure that countries actually followed through on their commitments? No one was proposing the establishment of a legally binding treaty, because such treaties already exist—for example, the UN Convention Against Corruption—and we shared a sense that treaties alone are insufficient to generate compliance. Others proposed the notion of independent and objective evaluations of country progress, challenging the standard international practice in which governments provide self-assessments of their progress.

Over the course of two days, the idea took

shape, and we forged a hard-fought consensus on the outlines of a truly novel multilateral initiative. Together, we would create the Open Government Partnership as a forum in which governments, working with their civil society partners, could make far-reaching political commitments to promote transparency, energize citizen participation, increase public integrity, and harness new technologies.

To become a participating country, governments would need to meet a set of minimum criteria, evaluated by objective third-party organizations—demonstrating their basic commitment to open government and a record of practice consistent with their rhetoric. They would embrace collectively a high-level declaration of principles and deliver an individualized country action plan, developed with broad public consultation and feedback, outlining how they plan to put the principles into practice. And governments would agree to have their progress monitored by an independent body, which would report publicly and annually. Our approach was designed to avoid the fate of other governance initiatives that had set lofty goals yet failed to deliver meaningful change. In OGP, governments are expected to make new and concrete political commit-

ments that will have a measurable impact on people in real time.

The outcome did not meet everyone's needs and desires, and the concept had to be sold to political leaders, foreign ministries, civil society networks, and grassroots activists. But it was a new model: in the words of Susan Crawford, professor at Yeshiva University's Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, "a forum not a court; a nudging engine, not a ranking system; a mash-up of personal initiative and entrepreneurship with the stately dance of foreign relations." And the idea reflected the kind of creativity that is possible when officials and activists come together, free of the need to get clearances and manage constituencies, to think collectively about a new way of working together.

The timeline between idea and implementation was exceptionally short. We had eight months before the United Nations General Assembly was to meet again in September, and we would need to deliver on President Obama's challenge. The first step was determining the set of countries that would be eligible to participate—a process that raised enormous diplomatic sensitivities for each of the founding governments. We ultimately selected a set of valid, widely used third-party indicators—capturing, for each country, its degree of fiscal transparency, access to information, public financial disclosures, and citizen engagement—and secured agreement among the founders on a set of criteria for participation. Seventy-nine countries cleared the minimum hurdle for eligibility, decreasing the chances that the initiative would attract governments that were interested only in getting credit for open government without taking any action. Our decision signaled our commitment to focus attention on a set of governments that were really committed to doing things differently. We were prepared to accept that the initiative might not affect the behavior of the most closed governments in the world, as long as OGP provided a platform for countries with the political will to take ambitious new steps.

Second, the founding governments needed to demonstrate the seriousness of their own commitments to OGP by preparing far-reaching action plans that could be announced at the launch. We understood that the initial commitments by the founding governments would set the standard that all other countries would follow. But instead of the yearlong process envisioned for developing commitments in OGP countries,

the founding governments would have only half that time. In the United States, we initiated a White House-led interagency process to develop and refine a set of crosscutting initiatives that would build on and extend the reach of President Obama's Open Government Initiative. As with officials of other founding governments, President Obama, too, would make a set of new political commitments to the American people—underscoring the point that improving governance is a priority for countries no matter how wealthy or developed.

At last it was time to unveil the partnership and secure the agreement of other eligible countries to announce their participation at the formal launch in September. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, joined by Foreign Minister Antonio Patriota of Brazil, invited representatives of the eligible governments to Washington for a jam-packed, day-long event in July to introduce the partnership, begin substantive conversations on important thematic areas such as service delivery and public integrity, and showcase amazing innovations from civil society and the tech sector.

For government representatives, the event transgressed all sorts of norms. We reached out to important domestic officials, rather than to foreign ministries, because our goal was to have people in the room who are responsible for making their governments work better at home. Foreign dignitaries were seated next to civil society activists and next to technologists. No flags demarcated who would sit where, and no hierarchy determined who would get the floor when. As you might imagine, this was a bit of a shock for some of the participants, but it was a true test case of what it would be like to do business differently on the international stage.

### **Delivering Results**

We now have a mixed coalition—a posse if you will—that has mobilized the attention of governments, civil society groups, the private sector, and philanthropy on the challenge of promoting open government. An initiative that was launched with eight governments and nine civil society groups now includes 58 governments and a network of hundreds of grassroots activists around the world. This new model is demonstrating the power of a new multi-stakeholder approach: the ability to move quickly and focus attention on a concrete goal; the possibility of building a diverse coalition that cuts across traditional divides; the opportunity to harness the energies and

attention of domestic champions for reform, and to give them the high-level political backing they need to get their work done; and the prospect that a voluntary, collaborative initiative can generate a meaningful race to the top on an issue as contentious, but as important, as the quality of governance.

We also have reason to believe, even at this early stage, that OGP commitments will have a powerful impact. President Obama committed the United States to implement a significant set of reforms to the management of domestic extractive industries through the Department of the Interior, pledging to participate in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. The United States is the first developed country to embrace these standards, which have been promoted for developing countries for nearly a decade. President Rousseff of Brazil secured the passage of a Freedom of Information law that has languished in the Brazilian Congress for years, finally overcoming the resistance of officials of prior governments who feared the consequences of shedding light on the internal workings of government. And President Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines embraced a set of ambitious reforms throughout his government, designed to increase transparency, enshrine public participation in budgeting, and root out corruption in procurement.

At the same time, OGP—as a new model of international cooperation—raises a number of challenging questions, many of which the contributors to this supplement consider: How do governments benefit from their participation in OGP, and what will keep them engaged over time? How can civil society balance its role as a critical ally, where it must play the roles of both advocate and monitor? Where does philanthropy fit in this new framework of international cooperation? And how can we bridge the gap between countries that embrace participation in these new, mixed coalitions, and those that remain on the outside?

This is a make-or-break year for the Open Government Partnership, as this new model of international cooperation can no longer be judged simply by its success in mobilizing participation and focusing attention on the challenges of governance. The ambition of this new approach is impressive—bringing about a transformative change in how governments relate to their citizens—but the measure of its achievement will be quite simple: how many citizens experience concrete improvements in their lives. ●