



**GOVCOMMS PODCAST**

**EP#129 PART TWO: BEING CITIZEN  
CENTRIC**

- WITH SANJAY PRADHAN

TRANSCRIPT

# TRANSCRIPT

---

Sanjay Pradhan:

I think there is a window of opportunity here, which rightly you say is coalescing, if you will, democracies to band together. But this has to be followed by very concrete action, David. If you look at it in terms of the frame I was giving, internationally, or in terms of externally, you are seeing this coalition form. But one thing I would say is that domestically this has to be followed by reforms that actually renew democracy.

Introduction:

Welcome to the GovComms Podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone and welcome once again to GovComms, the podcast that examines the practise of communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me.

David Pembroke:

Today, part two of our interview with the CEO of the Open Government Partnership, Sanjay Pradhan. Sanjay joined the OGP in May of 2016, but before then he worked at the World Bank, both as Vice President for Leadership, Learning and Innovation and also as the Vice President of the World Bank Institute. Sanjay, as many of you will know, having listened last week, is a very accomplished professional spokesperson for the Open Government Partnership. He holds a PhD and a bachelor's degree from Harvard University and he was also a principal author of the 1997 World Development Report.

Now listen, if you haven't listened to the first episode, it really makes a whole lot more sense if you listen to part one, because here comes part two, our conversation with Sanjay Pradhan, the CEO of the Open Government Partnership.

David Pembroke:

Are you optimistic that out of the Ukraine tragedy that this in fact may take place where we are seeing the unification of the NATO states? We're seeing Western democracies being very supportive of Ukraine, we're seeing authoritarianism challenged. Are you optimistic that this may be a tipping point?

Sanjay Pradhan:

I think there is a window of opportunity here, which rightly you say is coalescing, if you will, democracies to band together. But this has to be followed by very concrete action, David. If you look at it in terms of the frame I was giving, internationally, or in terms of externally, you are seeing this coalition form. But one thing I would say is that domestically this has to be followed by reforms that actually renew democracy. Because even though there is the external aggression that Russia has had, internally we still have the problem of historically low citizen trust in government. Countries must start to renew democracy by becoming more transparent. So it's not just sloganeering and posturing, there has to be real reforms which deliver better for citizens.

Sanjay Pradhan:

I'm an eternal optimist, you have to be when you're in working in the governance space, but I believe in galvanising action, I believe in galvanising coalitions, which do actual actions to get to the root of the problem. One route is a stronger Western alliance, or a democratic alliance as you said, but another route must be to

really empower citizens and make real reforms that actually... Why is it that when the Taliban marched into Afghanistan, citizens did not stand up to defend their democracy as you're seeing in Ukraine? It was a half, or less than half... Afghanistan also is a real member OGP, and courageous reformers were doing very interesting reforms there on citizen monitoring of road construction, women's rights and so on, but it was a very incomplete democracy.

Sanjay Pradhan:

And it is important for us to really, and this is the role of government communications also David, which is that we need to make citizens be a part of this. So they have a stake and they fight as much as we are seeing Ukrainians fight today. They have to have a stake and a buy-in and an ownership, so they're mobilised to support for this. And that bottom up support from citizens is really important for us to facilitate.

David Pembroke:

So, just moving on, onto that role of government communication, I think there are a couple... actually maybe a question before we get to that one. When you talk about real reform and we talk about the influence and impact of the social media platforms and the role of disinformation and misinformation, there is again, an emerging growing coalition; whether it be in Western Europe or North America, certainly in Australia, that is looking to try to make these giant companies, these massive media companies effectively is what they are, to make them more accountable for the content that they publish. What's the OGP's view on those measures that are being taken against the social media platforms to regulate them more effectively?

Sanjay Pradhan:

This is absolutely vital, David. These giant social media platforms must be held accountable for the use and misuse of high information, for when they're used to polarise citizens. I think it is absolutely vital that we join forces between government civil society, business, to actually ensure that social media platforms are not used and misused for this information. This accountability is absolutely central part of what needs to happen. Hundred percent.

David Pembroke:

Now, you mentioned trust, and I think that really goes to the heart of this. And you did say that citizens need a voice in policy and that they feel a lack of trust. They feel disconnected and they feel unresponsive. And you were suggesting that government doesn't, and hasn't done, a particularly good job of explaining itself to citizens. What do you see as the role of government communications in advancing open government and democracy?

Sanjay Pradhan:

Yeah, I think it's not just government explaining to citizens. There should be a real reform where citizens feel that government is transparent, inclusive, and participatory and accountable, and that they have a voice and a role in shaping government. First and foremost, the role of government communications is so important in this, because these end up sounding like abstract buzz words, David. And the role of government communications is so important in conveying actual stories, stories that touch and impact the lives of citizens. That's exactly what I tried to do in a very brief way, by showing how it impacted the mother in Kaduna or the indigenous community. You need stories which bring it down to how it impacted citizens lives. That's the first thing.

Sanjay Pradhan:

The second thing is you need a three way communication. It's not just a one way communication where government discloses certain things. The three way communication, let me just explain. The first piece is

where government explains to citizens what services it is trying to provide. Like in the Kaduna example, what are the health services I've constructed in your vicinity? In the Ukraine example, what are the contracts that your money is financing? Why don't you see it and search it? That's why open data is important. So the role of communications in the first part of the three way communication is to ensure that citizens can have accessible information on what government is trying to do. That's just the first part.

Sanjay Pradhan:

The second part is that citizens then have an opportunity... So first part is government to citizens, second part is citizens to government. Citizens should have a way to give feedback. Does the health clinic exist? Is it functional? Is it leaking? Did the contract for public procurement actually deliver the road, and what is the quality of the road? And that involves the heart of what I believe is good communications, which is genuine consultation, genuine listening, genuinely creating the space for citizens to feel heard.

Sanjay Pradhan:

And it's the third piece of the communication, which I think is probably the most important and the one that's most ignored, which is government reporting back to citizens. What did they do once they heard them? Closing the feedback loop. This is vital to build trust. Only when you respond to the citizen feedback, saying yes we listened to you. This is what you said and this is why we are changing this.

Sanjay Pradhan:

I had a very interesting conversation once with the governor of Kaduna Nigeria, on that Kaduna example I was saying. I was saying, "Why don't you create a WhatsApp mechanism for people to be responded to and say what did you do with their feedback." And he loved the idea. And he said, "Every WhatsApp response I give, that third part of the government to citizens feedback loop, will be one vote for me. Because they will feel we heard them and we responded."

David Pembroke:

Well, politicians love nothing more than a vote do they? And that's that's an interesting insight, isn't it?

Sanjay Pradhan:

It's a good vote. But, this is the good vote, David. This is a vote which says, I vote for you because you listened to me and you responded to me. That's what builds trust. That's real... being citizen centric. That's what builds trust, where citizens are at the heart of government. We need to put citizens back in the heart of government and that's what open government represents.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. But, why is that so hard? And again, if we move away from the autocracy and the really corrupt and difficult and very challenged... But even in open Western democracies, governments find it hard to close the loop. It's hard for whatever reason. What reasons would you offer and how can they be overcome?

Sanjay Pradhan:

I think one is, there is an established culture and tradition of how government bureaucracies have functioned, where there's been a presumption that they know best. And they've been doing things in a particular way. To change this into a collaborative approach, where you partner and listen to citizens and go for a user-centric approach, does involve a change in the culture of government, which is not easy to do. You will have reformers who get it and you'll have others who don't get it. And then it also delays the job of government, although it delivers that vote, it delivers that democratic dividend. But that is a little bit of a change to do.

Sanjay Pradhan:

I have to share with you David, that when I joined OGP from the World Bank, and I did my first survey of all the reformers of government, one of the things they told me is that the best part about the OGP for them was this co-creation process, where government and citizens get together and they co-create these reforms. They felt that really helped them change the culture of government. And the reason it's hard is because that's not what's done, and in OGP it's mandated. At this 10 year anniversary, David, we issued a report, OGP at 10. It's called the decade report. Where we looked at all the evidence, there's been huge amount of research done by various scholars on OGP and so on. And what it finds that the OGP model of government civil society co-creation and consultation works when government consults with civil society genuinely and responds to that feedback. The reforms that come out are more ambitious and the results are stronger.

David Pembroke:

So listen, you've got Open Government Week coming up between the 16th and the 20th of May. What are you going to celebrate? And what are you going to hope to achieve or draw attention to during Open Government Week?

Sanjay Pradhan:

So, the Open Government Week is something we have been doing for a number of years. And one of the things that it actually does, it is a way... it's like a festival, it's a giant festival of open government across the globe. And one of the things we will be doing is to be inviting government, civil society and other reformers to start co-creating these reforms that can really make a difference. We are entering our 11th year and in this present geopolitical context where democracy is indeed under threat, the Open Government Week is an opportunity to invite government civil society and other co-creators to come up with concrete reforms that actually can stem this tide. So it is a way to galvanise the global community into real action through the upcoming OGP action plans. That's what we are trying to do.

Sanjay Pradhan:

We are not a talk shop. It's a very action-oriented platform because we have something unique. Right now you have the Biden Summit and many other things which are really important; The Global Summit, Anti Corruption Conference. What distinguishes OGP is we are very global, but we are also country based and we have a country based action plan. And that is what distinguishes us. Because we don't just talk, we translate it into action and there is accountability. We have an independent reporting mechanism where independent evaluators assess; did the government do what it said it would do and was it ambitious? And these are ways in which we try to ground, anchor in concrete actions and concrete reality, and translate these big global commitments into concrete actions, so it actually delivers better democracy in the end. And the Open Gov Week is a way to mobilise the global community into a giant collective campaign to get into transformative reforms that make a difference.

David Pembroke:

Now, Sanjay you did say that you are an optimist and working in governance and working in government, you need to be. But if I was to ask you to sort of throw forward 10 years and perhaps reflect on what you think is possible in the next 10 years. We're celebrating 10 years of OGP, and clearly there's been an enormous amount achieved in that 10 years, but what would you hope can be achieved in the next 10 years?

Sanjay Pradhan:

Two things. First is I hope to see norms, international norms, which actually reverse this trend of kleptocracy, of exclusion, of authoritarianism that we see. So specifically, I want to see all budgets being open. I want to see

all contracts being open. I want to see all company ownership being open. I want to see citizens, where feasible, particularly at the local level, and OGP is expanding greatly at the local level, have a voice in shaping and overseeing health, education, roads. I want to see the inclusion of historically marginalised groups of women through OGP action plans. These should become the new international norms when right now they are the exception. That's the first thing I want to see.

Sanjay Pradhan:

The second thing I want to see is a coalition. A coalition which can push back. A positive coalition to renew democracy with heads of states, with civil society leaders, with community leaders, with international partners. A coalition that's fighting to advance this as a countervailing force to the rise of authoritarianism, and as a positive global force to renew democracy. I need to see the reforms and the reformers, both.

David Pembroke:

Well, Sanjay Pradhan, good luck with that. Best wishes to you and to the Open Government Partnership and congratulations on everything that you have achieved in the first 10 years. I would encourage people to get onto the Open Government Partnership website and to really take a look at some of the reports and some of the things that have been achieved. Because what strikes me is it's the simplicity of the story, it's the simplicity of the message around things like openness. Openness around contracts, openness about company ownership, openness about budgets. Those things, people can understand that and I think that's an expectation that could be realised. And certainly by bringing like-minded people together in coalition to bring about meaningful reform, that has to be a great aspiration for the world, as we go through what is a very challenging time. And I imagine as someone who has a global leadership role, such as yourself at the moment, you must be seeing and hearing and indeed knowing a lot of people who are suffering a great deal at the moment.

Sanjay Pradhan:

Thank you so much, David. It was a real pleasure. I just want to add two quick points to what you just said in closing. Number one, you congratulated me. I wanted to make the obvious point, which I made when at the World Economic Forum, they gave me an award for Social Innovator of the Year. And I said to them, as I say to you now, that I'm simply a mirror. I'm a mirror of these courageous reformers and activists who are advancing these incredible reforms against formidable odds, in very difficult circumstance, as they were doing including in Ukraine, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. And so I want to use this opportunity, this platform, to raise a toast to them and ask you to join us in celebrating them and empowering them.

Sanjay Pradhan:

And secondly, in doing that David, as you wish me good luck, I would invite your media and other outlets to join us because this is a shared fight. We cannot do this on our own. Your help in disseminating these stories, in disseminating what we are trying to do will help tip the balance the other way around when the world is facing a lot of challenges.

Sanjay Pradhan:

Thank you so much, David. I so appreciate this opportunity.

David Pembroke:

Well, Sanjay Pradhan, thank you so much for joining us here on the GovComms Podcast. Sanjay Pradhan, ladies and gentlemen, the CEO of the Open Government Partnership. And what a powerful story, what a powerful insight, that Sanjay was able to give us today about the work of the Open Government Partnership and the aspiration to bring about change. Not just in autocracies, but I think there's a responsibility in Western

liberal democracies to do more, to be more open, to be more inclusive and to hear the voice of the marginalised in the decisions.

David Pembroke:

And again, from a government communication point of view, Sanjay gave us some great advice. There is that idea about explaining to start with, but that's just step one. Step two is the feedback and making sure that you're making those channels of feedback open, so is it you can hear what citizens have had to say. But then the third step, closing the feedback loop. Go back and tell people what it is that you have done as a result of that feedback. And if you haven't been able to do something, go back and tell them that, but make sure that you go back. And then the gift, the democratic dividend as Sanjay pointed out, is a vote, and who doesn't like a vote in a democracy.

David Pembroke:

Such a great guest today for you all. I'm sure you got a lot out of that as I did. Thank you so much for coming back once again. If you are able to rate and review the show, that is much appreciated, because it does help us to be found. So if you do have time for that, I would be very grateful if you were able to do that. But yeah, great interview today. Thanks again. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks with another great guest from the world of government communications. But for the moment, it's bye for now.

Outro:

You've been listening to the GovComms Podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to rate and subscribe to stay up to date with our latest episodes.