



GOVCOMMS PODCAST

128 PART ONE: DEMOCRACY
BEYOND THE BALLOT BOX.

- WITH SANJAY PRADHAN

TRANSCRIPT

TRANSCRIPT

Sanjay Pradhan:

That's my way of illustrating, David, what OGP is about. It represents a collaborative governance model between citizens and government reformers to deliver better to citizens. We call this democracy beyond the ballot box.

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 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. Today, the first of a two-part interview with the CEO of the Open Government Partnership, Sanjay Pradhan. Sanjay joined the OGP in May of 2016, but before then, he served as the World Bank's President for Leadership, Learning, and Innovation and the Vice President of the World Bank Institute and Director of Governance. His work at the Open Government Partnership, an organisation which links national and local governments as well as civil society organisations, is to make governments more transparent and more responsive to citizens' needs and to be less corrupt.

Sanjay leads OGP's policy dialogue with heads of states, ministers, and civil society organisations, and serves as the OGP's global spokesperson. He has been on platform all around the world, including the TEDGlobal Conference. He's spoken at the UN General Assembly and the European parliament to name but three. He holds a PhD and a bachelor's degree from Harvard University and was principal author of the 1997 World Development Report. His work has been acknowledged by the Schwab Foundation, who awarded him the 2022 Social Innovator of the Year at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Quite the CV, Sanjay. Welcome to GovComms.

Sanjay Pradhan:

Thank you. Thank you so much, David. It's such a pleasure to be here. Truly.

David Pembroke:

So listen, let's start at the beginning, really, around the Open Government Partnership. What is it, and why is it important?

Sanjay Pradhan:

All right, David, so the Open Government Partnership, or OGP, is a partnership, as you said in the introduction, of now 78 countries, growing number of local governments, 76 at present, and thousands of civil society organisations that are working together to ensure that democracy delivers and government delivers better outcomes for and with citizens. Now, that's a bunch of words, so let me actually illustrate this for you, David, with some concrete examples. Let me begin with three examples.

Sanjay Pradhan:

First, in 2015 in Kaduna, Nigeria, an audit revealed that a health clinic promised to the citizens, paid by the budget only existed on paper. It was a ghost clinic that the citizens never saw. The second example, in that

same year in Ukraine, a country we should come back to in our conversation, David, because of the invasion, in Ukraine, media reported scandalous tales of exorbitantly inflated prices for government contracts awarded to powerful oligarchs syphoning money from ordinary citizens. They paid, for instance, \$4 million for a little strip of road. And the third example, in Costa Rica, the indigenous community has suffered for decades from violent conflict and lack of basic health and education, excluded by successive governments. So these three examples that I begin with, David, are unfortunately familiar tale of ordinary citizens suffering from corruption, poor service delivery, or exclusion. They live in democracies, but the ballot box alone has not proven sufficient for delivering on people's aspirations.

Sanjay Pradhan:

Now, to answer your question, the Open Government Partnership was created exactly to tackle these types of governance challenges faced by ordinary citizens. The goal of OGP, in the words of one of our founders, former US president, Obama, is to ensure that governments truly serve their citizens rather than themselves. The mechanism of OGP to address this, to tackle this is that in every national and local OGP member, government reformers and civil society or citizen groups work together to co-create concrete reforms in published OGP action plans, reforms that make governments more transparent, more participatory, more inclusive, more accountable while empowering citizens to shape and oversee government to ensure it delivers for them. So it's a collaborative governance model between citizens and government.

Sanjay Pradhan:

And in the last decade, David, OGP has expanded really rapidly. 78 countries and local governments and thousands of civil society organisations have joined. But importantly, in the last decade, they have together co-created in published action plans more than 4,500 reforms. And just to round off my story, David, let me tell you what happened to those three problems I began with. So first, in Kaduna, Nigeria, where you remember there was a ghost clinic, when the budget director discovered this ghost clinic, he leveraged OGP platform to partner with citizen groups to become the eyes and ears of government. He created a mobile app, using which citizens could see what where the health clinics in a two kilometre radius. So a mother in Kaduna, Nigeria could use this app to upload photos and feedback on whether the health clinic existed and what was the condition of that health clinic, which went directly to the governor's office and the state legislature mandating a government response. The result: in two years, there was a record completion of 250 health clinics.

Sanjay Pradhan:

On the second example I quoted on Ukraine where there were those scandalous tales of extravagant contracts being given to oligarchs, coming out of the Maidan revolution, and that's why it's so sad right now to see this in Ukraine, young reformers from government, civil society, and private sector resolved to tackle and really challenge the power of the oligarchs. They used OGP to create two platforms, one is called ProZorro, where all these previously opaque contracts which were handed over to powerful oligarchs in corrupt backroom deals were disclosed as open data on a platform called ProZorro. And then they used OGP to do a second platform, which is called DOZORRO, which is fascinating, where citizens can monitor and report violations if the contract of roads or health clinics are not being appropriately deliver. In two years, David, in Ukraine, citizens reported 14,000 violations online. The government responded to half of them, resolved them. The government then reported saving \$1 billion in two years. 82% of the private sector surveyed by USA reported reduced corruption. And there was a 50% increase in new businesses bidding for public contracts. Galvanised by these results, 70 OGP members are embracing open contracts.

Sanjay Pradhan:

The last example I'll close with, you go back to Costa Rica where that indigenous community was excluded, leveraging OGP, a reformist vice minister in government partnered with RIBCA, which is the indigenous community civil society organisation, and together they built a consultation mechanism which built trust,

abated conflict, and finally ushered vital investments in health and education. So you look at all these three examples, and that's my way of illustrating, David, what OGP is about, it represents a collaborative governance model between citizens and government reformers to deliver better to citizens. We call this democracy beyond the ballot box.

Sanjay Pradhan:

When you think of democracy, you think of the ballot box, citizens cast their vote, but all these problems existed beyond the vote. They continue to not get these services. So OGP is a way to indeed focus on the ballot box, but also beyond the ballot box empowering citizens to shape and oversee their government every year, every day, not just once in a few years when we cast our precious vote.

David Pembroke:

Now, listen, and this is perhaps an unfair question and a difficult question to ask given that there is so much diversity across the world and OGP has such a big remit across the globe, but how would you summarise the appetite from government for openness, for this collaborative model, for this collaborative governance that you speak about beyond the ballot box? I can understand that citizens would be excited, but what's the general view of elected governments about being more open, more considered, and more involved in co-creation and co-design?

Sanjay Pradhan:

That's a very good question, David, and the most significant thing to register there is that governments are not monolithic entities. There is not a single government view. And the central point is governments have reformers who, in fact, want to reform government. You work, I presume, on government communications and you know that there are reformers even in the most corrupt, the most repressive regimes. And these reformers are fighting against the odds. What OGP does is it gives them a platform and helps them build coalitions with like-minded civil society and citizen groups who they're trying to empower. So if you look at all these cases in Ukraine, which again we will come back to in the present context, there was a reformist minister, in Costa Rica, there was a reformist minister, in Kaduna, Nigeria, it was a budget director. And of course, in Kaduna, the governor was supportive. But these are reformers who were upset at whether it was corruption or exclusion of marginalised groups.

Sanjay Pradhan:

So the central point, David, is to recognise that it is not all gloom and doom, right? That there are reformers inside government. If I can just backtrack for a moment, I come from the state of Bihar in India, which was India's poorest and most corrupt state. My father was an honest government bureaucrat who was trying to fight corruption in the award of road contract. I remember he was harassed, he was threatened. He was in jeopardy, but he didn't budge. And these are reformers who want to take the risk and try to make a change. And so, there are people who are fighting for openness, both from inside the government and outside government, and OGP tries to connect them to reverse the power structure, to tip the odds in favour of the reformers. That's what we are trying to do as a partnership, David.

David Pembroke:

In terms, then, of the OGP movement and the platform that it offers to reformers across government and around the world, what have been the impacts of digital transformation and the uptake of technology and the impacts of digital transformation driven by the COVID pandemic? How has that changed the work of the OGP?

Sanjay Pradhan:

So, there are two facets, two aspects of this, David. One is digital technology has been a huge enabler for opening government because it allows government to get closer to citizens and for citizens to directly engage with government. The flip side is that we're also now seeing the insidious impact of digital technology as well. There's a negative impact on disinformation and so on, I'll come back to that. But first on the positive, the two examples I gave you, David, Kaduna, Nigeria was a mobile app. So it was a mobile app which immediately gave the information to citizenry on the location of projects, and they could upload photos using the mobile app, which the government responded to. So this was a very concrete manifestation of the power of digital technology, as was the Ukraine ProZorro, DOZORRO because citizens could report violations by viewing searchable contracts.

Sanjay Pradhan:

But on COVID, which you referred to, in the pandemic, so I can just give you an example of the power of digital technology in open government and citizen participation during the pandemic. So what's happened in the pandemic, to counter the lockdown and the healthcare emergency, governments launched, with the help of international financial institutions globally, a whopping \$12 trillion in COVID-19 stimulus and safety nets around the world. That's just a rough estimate, right? But when so much money moves so fast, there is a tremendous risk of corruption and capture and mismanagement.

Sanjay Pradhan:

To give you an example from New York, as New York at the height of the pandemic struggled to acquire ventilators, you remember those desperate news stories we saw, New York paid through an opaque contract, which was not published, not using digital, nothing, it paid through an opaque contract a whopping \$70 million for 1,500 ventilators at more than triple the retail price. And guess what? Tragically, none of these were even delivered. By contrast, in Moldova, using OGP, the government publishes all its emergency contracts including for COVID-19 medical supplies as open data on an online platform which civil society monitors to track price differentials. In Columbia, David, and this is a fascinating example, to build citizen trust that the COVID-19 money, where millions of lives and livelihoods are at stake, to ensure that this money is reaching the intended beneficiaries, in Columbia, the government has empowered citizens using a mobile app to become citizen auditors of these COVID-19 stimulus and safety nets. So if the money does not reach the intended beneficiaries, they can report this.

Sanjay Pradhan:

These are concrete examples, David, of the power of digital technology in getting the information. Again, this partnership between government and citizens, I'm trying to do these things for you, tell me, have you received it? Give me the feedback, and I will respond to it. Closing the feedback loop. That's on the positive power of digital technology. OGP reformers are also now seeing the negative impacts of technology at the same time. We are seeing the insidious role of disinformation which is being spread online. We are seeing the threats to our individual privacy. And here, again, OGP countries are launching effects to tackle this. For instance, on disinformation, just to give you a couple of examples, Netherland and Canada have used their OGP action plans to strengthen the transparency of online political campaigns which have been used, as you know, to divide people, to do microtargeting, and do all kinds of divisions and sow discord and undermine democracy.

Sanjay Pradhan:

Canada and France are strengthening the transparency of public algorithms that impact how services are delivered to us. Australia, I believe, is strengthening transparency on how public information about us is collected using OGP. So these are just some examples where countries are first advancing using technology to advance open government and citizen empowerment, but at the same time tackling the negative impacts of technology on disinformation and so on. Back to you, David.

David Pembroke:

You mentioned in an earlier answer a reference to Ukraine, and one of your examples was in fact in Ukraine, but clearly we are seeing the horrible scenes from Ukraine at the moment, a democracy under attack. We are hearing about this continued profiteering by the Russian oligarchs who are linked to Putin and their luxury properties and yachts and everything else in between. And more broadly, we've seen the rise of somewhat authoritarian leaders who are restricting civic engagement and spreading disinformation. What role can OGP play to deal with this rise in autocracy?

Sanjay Pradhan:

Thanks, David. As we all, I know, share in our hearts and souls, the Ukraine situation first, let me just address that very briefly, is heartbreaking, isn't it? It's just gut-wrenching. For us, it is particularly so because Ukraine has been a vital, an active member of the partnership from the start. As I issued a statement right after the invasion, this attack on Ukraine represents an attack on democracy, freedom, and openness everywhere. The resilience and courage you are seeing of Ukrainians fighting to defend their democracy and freedom was also mirrored for us for the last decade in Ukraine with courageous reformers from government, civil society, private sector fighting to fight corruption and strengthen democracy like the ProZorro/DOZORRO open contracting example I shared. They have really inspired 70 governments to do this. And it's so tragic to see all of this happening now, to see the democracy itself under attack, but our amazing reformers also under attack.

Sanjay Pradhan:

But as you know, David, Ukraine is just the most egregious and palpable and visceral manifestation of this attack on democracy. Globally, we are seeing these threats to democracy and attacks on democracy around the world. Freedom House notes that we've had 15 years of democratic decline and attacks on civic space. International IDEA notes that two-thirds of the world's population, get this, two-thirds of the world's population today live in outright non-democratic regimes or countries with democratic backsliding. From Russia to Hungary to Tanzania and beyond, we have seen elected leaders attack civil society, attack media, attack oversight Institute. And yet at the same time in this decade, OGP has grown into a global platform with 78 countries. So this represents an opportunity and imperative for OGP to leverage this global platform to counter this trend. And the opportunity of that is not rhetoric, its reality, because as the examples I showed you, those examples show how democracy is being renewed and citizen trust is being built through OGP. It needs to be scaled up and become a counter to this rise in authoritarianism.

Sanjay Pradhan:

So, very specifically, there are two ways in which OGP can counter this rise of authoritarianism that you mentioned, David. One is tackling the external drivers, where you talked about the oligarchs owning yachts and property. And the second is tackling the domestic drivers, which is lost citizen trust in government. So take the external one, which is the problem you referred to, these oligarchs' guards that we hear about in the news and from Russia are not just really wealthy people owning expensive yachts. They have for years and years been serving as the representatives of Putin and the Russian leadership. And they have been taking money laundered from Russia, and the same problem we see in Angola and elsewhere, oligarchs using corrupt proceeds, using transnational financial flows to hide them in anonymous companies and anonymous real estate. Today, oligarchs from Russia, China, Angola can hide money in London real estate in a company in Delaware.

Sanjay Pradhan:

All this talk about sanctions, David, this is really important, but how can you sanction someone when you don't know who owns the property? So the starting point of this problem is transparency on who owns these

properties, who owns these companies. We call this beneficial ownership transparency. And starting from the Panama Papers, Paradise Papers, and so on, this became a real priority in OGP. So to today, David, 30 OGP countries including Nigeria, Slovakia, and the UK are disclosing who owns the companies. They're trying to end these shell companies. And this is really important because the non-autocratic countries have been an enabler to the autocrats by permitting this financial flow in these shell companies that remain opaque. This has to stop. This is a real priority in our OGP, and because we have 30 countries ending shell companies, this is a very concrete way in which you can stem the flow of money which props up these autocrats. That's an illustration of the first thing OGP can do, which is tackling the external driver, the external flow of money to proper autocrats.

Sanjay Pradhan:

The second one is the domestic drivers of the rise of authoritarianism. And there, democracy must deliver concretely to citizens. The symptom of the failure of democracy is historically low levels of citizen trust in government. In far too many countries, David, citizens feel that their elected governments are disconnected and unresponsive to their needs or corrupt and captured by special interests. Populist leaders have emerged in this context to inflame the citizen distrust, say that they are the saviours of this whole thing, reject the whole system, empower them. And once they are in power, they start undermining these institutions of checks and balances and democratic oversight.

Sanjay Pradhan:

Open government approaches can really help by ensuring that democracy delivers better for and with citizens to build citizen trust. And the examples I gave you at the start are exactly the kind of examples which are needed to renew democracy beyond the ballot box and build citizen trust. Citizens need to have a voice in government policies. In Madrid, Spain, the reformers using OGP set aside €100 million where citizens can propose and fund projects that respond to their needs. Next to Facebook, Decide Madrid, this platform, became the most used social media platform in Madrid and is being emulated by 90 countries. This is an example of giving citizens a voice and a stake in public policies. Kaduna, Nigeria where citizens give feedback on health clinics is another example. Fighting corruption, which builds this distrust of government, that the elites are robbing them blind rather than serving them through open contracts, open company ownership, open budgets are another example of ways in which you can build citizen trust and stem this autocratization sequence where populists come and inflame citizen distrust.

Sanjay Pradhan:

Inclusion of marginalised groups. In North Macedonia, reformers are trying to enhance access to justice for the historically excluded Romani minority using OGP. In Buenos Aires and Jalisco, Mexico, women are being empowered. In Jalisco, Mexico by targeting the gender wage gap using OGP. In Buenos Aires by enhancing information on sexual and reproductive health services. These mechanisms, these three frontiers I mentioned earlier, David, on fighting corruption, empowering citizen to shape and oversee public policies, including historically marginalised groups, are concrete ways in which you can build citizen trust, renew democracy beyond the ballot box, and try to stem this rise of authoritarianism.

David Pembroke:

But it seems such a simple formula when you articulate it in the way that you do, but why then, those Freedom House statistics that you referred to, two-thirds of the world population are either living under autocracy or in democracies that are declining, why is it that is taking place when there are so many forces for positivity? We mentioned a few of them in terms of technology and access to information, ability to engage. Why is it that it's as hard or it seems to be as hard as it is to connect to this openness?

Sanjay Pradhan:

That's a very good point. It is because the reforms I mentioned to you are concrete, real illustrations of what's happening and what can happen. But David, to answer your question very simply, they're too few and far between. They're just simply too few. We really need to enhance them, and we need to build stronger coalitions to fight the opposite. So what you're seeing is because citizen distrust is not being addressed, the populist autocrats have taken over centre stage, and those reformers and activists that can really make a difference in addressing citizen distrust with these kinds of reforms that I mentioned, they're too few and far between. And so, this is not a rose-tinted glass where you say everything is hunky-dory. It certainly is not. And it's a fight. It's a fight. It's a hand-to-hand combat in countries to actually implement these reforms.

Sanjay Pradhan:

It sounds simple, but just think what it took. The reformer, again, going back to Ukraine, the ProZorro reformer, it was a young civil society leader who got this award for this Ukraine ProZorro open contracting reformer. He got an award in Paris in 2016 by French president Hollande at one of our global summits. I congratulated him afterwards and he said, "You're see me now, but you may not see me again because they may kill me for what I've tried to do." That is the stake here, it's not easy. And therefore, what we are trying to do, David, is build a coalition, build a coalition of reformers and activists that fight the entrenched networks of corruption and capture.

Sanjay Pradhan:

And that is what OGP represents. At a country level, we are trying to coalesce coalitions of reformers and activists that can fight these entrenched networks of polarisation, of exclusion, of corruption, of authoritarianism. And at a global level, David, we are trying to stitch together through our partnership, through our steering committee, which is our governance body, more leaders who stand up for democracy and openness. Right now, the illiberal forces and autocratic forces are in ascendancy. At a time when Hungary's Viktor Orbán proudly proclaims the end of liberal democracy, we need more heads of states, we need normal mayors, we need more civil society leaders to speak out in democracy's defence. But not just speak out, show through these types of concrete reforms that a renewed democracy can deliver dividends rather than autocracies.

David Pembroke:

So there you go, Sanjay Pradhan, who is the CEO of the Open Government Partnership. I really enjoyed that conversation. And if you thought that was good, you wait to hear part two, which comes along next week, when we further explore this opportunity for governments to communicate more effectively and why it is so important to communicate effectively in order to build trust. Thanks again for coming along. If you do have time for a rating and a review and some nice comments of GovComms, we would certainly appreciate that because it helps the programme to be found. Thanks again for turning up once again. My name is David Pembroke. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks. But for the moment, it's by 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.