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Presentation on
Open Government Partnership in Liberia: Sustaining the Momentum and Changing Lives
With focus on Institutionalization for Sustainability
At the C. Cecil Denis Auditorium
Ministry of Foreign Affairs MOFA
By Janet Johnson on 4/12/17

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen: All protocols observed.

It gives me a distinguished honor to represent the Governance Commission and in particular - our Board Chairman Dr. Amos C. Sawyer, whose shoes I'm not attempting to fill but to address the topic under discussion at this Panel. Our Panel discussion is on the theme "Open government Partnership: Sustaining the momentum and changing lives". However, our specific topic is "institutionalization of the OGP for sustainability".

In addressing this topic, I'll like us to take a quick look at four key questions: What is the OGP? Why was it introduced? What are the commitments made? How can OGP be sustained?

What is the OGP?

The Open Government Partnership is a global multilateral initiative, **to which the Liberian government has signed up to**, aimed at securing concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, accountability and integrity, ensure citizens' participation and empowerment, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to **strengthen governance**.

The OGP, a multi-stakeholder collaboration, is overseen by a Steering Committee which includes representatives of governments and civil society organizations, and supported by international partners. Under the OGP arrangement, government signs up to a number of commitments that assure of transparency, openness in its operations (promises accountability and integrity), citizen's participation and empowerment, fight corruption, carry out necessary reforms, and harness new technologies to help enhance development, as were described in our definition of OGP.

Civil society organizations, on the other hand, are expected to collaborate, monitor and when possible, pressure government into living up to and fulfilling its obligations/commitments to the people.

Since the launching of the OGP in September 2011, more than seventy countries have joined the partnership. I understand that 75 OGP participating countries have made over 2,500 commitments to make their governments more open and accountable.

Why was OGP introduced?

The OGP was introduced because of peoples' demand for their governments to be more accountable, transparent, responsive, and effective, and calling for greater citizen empowerment and participation in national decision making process.

It was also observed that governments needed to strengthen their commitments to the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Convention against Corruption, SDGs, and other applicable international instruments related to human rights and good governance. Therefore the OGP's policy declaration is similar to those international instruments just mention making government more responsible, effective and accountable.

What are the Commitments made?

In signing up to the OGP membership, governments agree, among other things, **“to uphold the value of openness in their engagement with citizens to improve services, manage public resources, promote innovation, and create safer communities”**. They also agree **“to embrace principles of transparency and open government with a view toward achieving greater prosperity, well-being, and human dignity in our own countries and in an increasingly interconnected world”**.

This now brings us to the issue of “the how”? How can these commitments of OGP be operationalized?

The Ellen Johnson Sirleaf led government, since Liberia signed - up as member of the OGP in 2011, has made tremendous efforts aimed at ensuring governments commitment to the principles of OGP, as already noted. These efforts constitute the activities supporting actualizing the commitments. These activities include:

a. Increase the availability of information about governmental activities through the freedom of Information Act (FOI/IIC);

Governments collect and hold information on behalf of people, and citizens have a right to seek information about governmental activities. OGP member countries are committed to promoting increased access to information and disclosure about governmental activities at every level of government.

Other commitments under this section include increasing efforts to systematically collect and publish data on government spending and performance for essential public services and activities; promote civil society access to public data, as well as facilitating the interoperability of government information systems; and seeking feedback from the public to identify the information of greatest value to them, and pledge to take such feedback into account to the maximum extent possible.

All such information should be placed on various relevant government functionaries' websites.

b. Support civic participation

The OGP declaration notes that Government should value and encourage public participation of all people, equally and without discrimination, in decision making and policy formulation. Public engagement, including the full participation of women, increases the effectiveness of governments, which benefit from people's knowledge, ideas and ability to provide oversight.

The OGP encourages commitments to making policy formulation and decision making more transparent, creating and using channels to solicit public feedback, and deepening public participation in developing, monitoring and evaluating government activities; protecting the ability of not-for-profit and civil society organizations to operate in ways consistent with its commitment to freedom of expression, association, and opinion; creating mechanisms to enable greater collaboration between governments and civil society organizations and businesses.

Government is undergoing reforms, amending and/or creating laws/policies that address civic participation as just mentioned. We now have a GoL/CSO Partnership Policy and Accord that assure of responsibilities and actions of both GoL and CSOs in Liberia (put together by GC, MFDP and CSOs). This GoL/CSO partnership is an innovation that provides the space for Government of Liberia and Civil Society to dialogue. It provides the framework that ensures the empowerment of communities and the foundation for development of an MOU that obligates both GoL and Civil society to work as effective partners to accomplish shared common goals and country outcomes. Like this GoL/CSOs partnership, we need civil society organizations to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the OGP.

c. Implement the highest standards of professional integrity in government

The OGP declaration also notes that Accountable government requires high ethical standards and codes of conduct for public officials. Other commitments include: having robust anti-corruption policies, mechanisms and practices, ensuring transparency in the management of public finances and government purchasing, and strengthening the rule of law.

Other commitments are: 1. maintaining or establishing a legal framework to make public information on the income and assets of national, high ranking public officials. 2. Enacting and implementing rules that **protect whistleblowers**; making information regarding the activities and effectiveness of **anticorruption prevention and enforcement bodies**, as well as the procedures for recourse to such bodies, available to the public; and respecting the confidentiality of specific law enforcement information; decreasing **bribery and other forms of corruption in the public and private sectors**.

Government has established the LACC, PPCC and other integrity institutions to fight corruption and enhance integrity in public and private institutions. We also have a Code of Conduct in place. Though Liberia is not 100% there yet you can agree that we are getting somewhere.

d. Increase access to new technologies for openness and accountability.

Again the OGP declaration says “New technologies offer opportunities for information sharing, public participation, and collaboration. Commitments include harnessing technologies to make more information public in ways that enable people to both understand their governments’ operations and actions, and to influence decisions. Other commitments are to developing accessible and secure online spaces as platforms for delivering services, engaging the public, and sharing information and ideas; (**OGP recognizes that equitable and affordable access to technology is a challenge**), commitment to seeking increased online and mobile connectivity, while also identifying and promoting the use of alternative mechanisms for civic engagement; engaging civil society and the business community to identify effective practices and innovative approaches for leveraging new technologies to empower people and promote transparency in government; and supporting and developing the use of technological innovations by government employees and citizens alike. MOPT is leading that process.

How can OGP be sustained?

We have discussed the “What is the OGP? Why was it introduced? What are the commitments made?” and now let’s discuss the issue of OGP’s sustainability in Liberia.

Liberia has made a number of gains since emerging from war, particularly since the past eleven years, towards reforms that qualifies Liberia as a nation practicing open government and its principles. It is therefore worthwhile to continue this global partnership.

However, to ensure that the Open Government Partnership, to which Liberia is a signatory, maintains its momentum, its existence in this country must be grounded by law. The **Governance Commission**, clothed with the mandate to ensure reforms in the various MACs, is carrying out mandate and function reviews of all government ministries, agencies, and commissions to address present day realities. Therefore, **discussions are already underway to ensure that the Office of OGP is established under the auspices of the Ministry of Information but as an autonomous agency with national budget allocations.**

The OGP is currently housed within the office of the Deputy Minister of Information for Administration and his staff doubling for both Ministry and OGP. We think this is not providing enough political will for it to operate as a national priority, and yield the desired result. The OGP needs to be institutionalized with a paid Secretariat appointed to oversee its full operations, unlike the ad-hoc arrangement that is currently obtaining. In the absence of legal backing, we fear that future Liberian government(s) may decide to discontinue this global initiative.

The OGP declaration stresses the importance of promoting a comprehensive approach and the availability of technical assistance to support capacity- and institution-building. This too should reflect our approach to the OGP. This step has already been taken by other countries that signed up to the OGP including Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria.

The Liberia OGP Steering Committee should also be allowed to solicit funding outside of government but that an annual report is made to reflect its funding sources and operations. The political must be shown to prioritize this move.

GC Holds TOT Workshop for National Vision Youth Club.

The Governance Commission has held the first in a series of Training of Trainers (TOT) workshop for Liberia's National Vision Clubs. The workshop brought together 30 participants from 26 of the youth organizations that participated in the 2012 National Vision Conference held in Gbarnga Bong County. These organizations include universities and political parties' youth wings among others.

The youth TOT two – day workshop ran from January 26-27, 2017 at the Isaac Tugbeh Wreh Community Hall in ST. Paul Bridge Community and organized by GC and youth organizations that participated in the 2012 National Vision Conference. Highlights of the workshop included a presentation on the National Vision 2030: Liberia Rising, and group presentations.

The 2012 National Vision Conference itself brought together more than 500 delegates representing Liberians from all 15 counties, sectors, religions, professional groupings, political parties, and civil society organizations, the diaspora, and opinion leaders in Liberia. International observers/partners and organizations also supported the Conference.

It can be recalled that at the end of the National Vision Conference in 2012, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf made an official presentation of the document to the youths of Liberia noting that the Vision represented the people's future and therefore Liberia's future leaders (Liberian youths) to guide and protect.

The Conference was held under the aegis of Her Excellency President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf with the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs and the Governance Commission serving as sponsors. The Conference was organized by a 21-member National Conference Committee, provided space for Liberians to select a possible future, and ended the design phase of the visioning process.

The Vision is also an expression of love for country and commitment to mobilize resources to achieve our aspirations as expressed in the Vision Statement: **ONE PEOPLE, ONE NATION, UNITED FOR PEACE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.**

The following are excerpts of the National Vision document.

“Components of the Vision gleaned from retrospective and structural analyses of Liberia as a system and consultations throughout the country and abroad include an economically prosperous people, a socially and demographically harmonious nation united in diversity, a democratic political system, an environmentally beautiful flourishing country, and a country culturally vibrant,

and technologically innovative. Such components of the Vision suggest a holistic approach to development, addressing at once the social, economic, political, environmental, cultural and technological aspirations of the Liberian people.

Three Conclusions can be drawn from the deliberations that led to the adoption of this Vision:

1. Many of Liberia's problems are deeply rooted in the country's social fabric, economic structure and governance arrangements. Others find their roots in the external environment. As the issues at stake are structural and systemic, long-term perspectives and timeframes are required to address them satisfactorily.
2. Liberians believe the Developmental State Scenario, as contained in the visioning process, is the optimal framework for sustainable growth and development. This scenario suggests a significant departure from the current resource-based development model to a model that is knowledge-based, open to strategic intervention, and supportive of social capital development.
3. The development contemplated will be possible only if we the Liberian people are committed to change. Citizens' participation in the formulation and implementation of the vision will therefore be critical for its success and sustainability.

Now that the Vision has been determined, the operationalization or action stage should follow. The challenge can be expressed as moving from what we desire to creating the conditions that will make the desirable achievable. Against this background, the participants have adopted three recommendations:

1. A clear Strategy for dissemination of the Vision throughout the country and the Diaspora.
2. A clear Strategy for operationalization that includes:
 - A clear alignment or re-alignment of the Agenda for Transformation and the National Reconciliation Roadmap with the National Vision.
Issues of particular importance flagged by the participants include:
 - Making quality education available to all citizens;
 - Developing macro-policy frameworks conducive for sustainable growth and development;
 - redefining national symbols to reflect our unity;
 - working toward agreeing on a national language (s) for Liberia;

- providing equal access, especially for persons living with disabilities, to opportunities for development and participation in national affairs;
 - developing and instilling in our youths moral and ethical value systems;
 - developing policy measures to address issues of youth education, responsibility and empowerment;
 - developing policy measures to deepen and make more inclusive our system of democratic governance;
 - Effecting policy measures required to support and enhance greater national ownership of natural resources;
 - Effecting policy measures that ensure improved participation for Liberians in their economy through significantly strengthened access to capital and an enhanced role in gross capital formation;
 - Developing policy measures that ensure an accelerated transition of the Liberian economy from reliance on extractive export led growth to improving the share of domestic manufacturing;
 - Developing policies, programs and institutions that promote decentralization and local ownership of the Vision implementation;
 - Developing policy measures and initiatives to enhance cultural identity and national reconciliation.
 - Strengthening regional cooperation and improve relations with our neighbors.
 - Developing policies and programs that accelerate infrastructural development;
 - Strengthening rights, including gender-based rights, rights affecting persons living with disabilities, human rights, and the right of the child.
3. Develop a clear post –Conference implementation, coordination and Monitoring and Evaluation mechanisms that support the achievement of the Vision.”



- 4.
5. Presentation of the Vision statement to the President by Conference Chairperson, Ms. Kula Fofana on behalf of participants (Left); President Sirleaf presents Vision statement to the civil society/youths and charged them with its implementation (Right).