

## 1 INTRODUCTION

On September 20, 2011, at the UN General Assembly meeting in New York City, eight founding governments launched the Open Government Partnership. Representatives from Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States each endorsed a declaration of shared principles and presented action plans containing their governments' specific commitments. The new multilateral initiative aimed to harness the recent wave of attention and energy surrounding open government to “secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance” (Open Government Partnership, n.d.).

The Open Government Partnership boasted several unique elements for an international institution. Although initiated largely by joint efforts between the United States and a collaboration of foundations and aid agencies, more than half of the founding governments were in the Global South. Brazil served alongside the United States, both as inaugural cochairs. The Open Government Partnership embraced multistakeholder participation, giving civil society organizations full parity of representation on its Steering Committee and promoting innovative models of cocreation between governments and their citizens. The partnership eschewed one-size-fits-all standards, instead encouraging governments to make flexible, voluntary commitments that fit local context and could generate a “race to the top” (Weinstein, 2013). The Open Government Partnership also sought to avoid the lumbering bureaucracy of many traditional international institutions,

aiming instead for a lean dynamism often explicitly compared with a start-up company. The combination of these features was appealing: As of the official launch, thirty-eight new governments had announced intentions to join, committing to develop their own action plans.

And so, with great fanfare and a speech from US president Barack Obama calling open government “the essence of democracy” (White House, 2011), the Open Government Partnership was officially launched.

But the new movement was not welcomed by everyone. Despite having an original approach and influential leaders to ring in its arrival, from the start, there were many eyebrows raised by the prospect of such a lightweight outfit being able to live up to the hype. The *Economist* (2011a) described the initiative as “really nothing new or major” and said “its launch seemed rushed” (2011b). Transparency experts said that the move smacked of “cyber-optimism” (Rooney, 2013) and asked: “Can we expect the OGP to be anything more than feel-good window-dressing?” (Michener, 2011b).

Indeed, several years later, this prognosis appeared to have been borne out. One could easily think that the Open Government Partnership was a failure—particularly in the founding countries. It appeared that in many of the founding countries, the reform movements for transparency and accountability had begun to lose their way, with other forces in government and society having more powerful, opposing effects on governance. Examples of founding countries behaving cynically in contradiction to the principles of openness seemed to abound. Indeed, many of the open government policies billed as new or inventive were just the continuation of traditional transparency programs (Piotrowski, 2017).

Of the Partnership’s eight founding member countries, six would see major democratic disruptions over the next several years. These included the election of populist leaders in the Philippines, the United States, Brazil, and Mexico; national-scale corruption scandals in Brazil, Mexico, and South Africa; and episodes of governance dysfunction like the handling of Brexit in the United Kingdom. Only Indonesia and Norway generally seemed immune from these trends.

Reasons for skepticism could also be found in the initiative’s structure and goals. Member countries commit to no set standard of action; instead, they design their own National Action Plans composed of individual commitments

whose number, scope, focus, and design are up to individual governments. Many governments made commitments that were minor, vague, irrelevant, or concerned policies already underway. Further, as long as countries adhered to the formal procedural guidelines, there was no express requirement that the commitments be implemented. Even the goals of open government itself were criticized for their ambiguity, with Yu and Robinson (2012) arguing that “the term ‘open government’ has become too vague to be a useful label,” creating risks that “governments may be able to take credit for increased public accountability simply by delivering open data technology” (182). Many individuals involved with the Open Government Partnership raised concerns over the prevalence of commitments that seemed to value flashy technology over real progress toward accountability. Other analysts criticized the open government movement for its apparent neoliberal tilt (Bates, 2014; Pozen, 2018) or as a “back-door strategy for democracy-promotion and opening markets” (Michener & Bersch, 2013, 240). Meanwhile, disagreements over the relative merits of reforms based on open data or freedom of information (Noveck, 2017) threatened to open rifts in the open government advocacy community.

The inclusion of civil society organizations in the Open Government Partnership’s governance structure led to growing tensions between them and governments both globally and in specific countries, especially around issues of freedom of association and other human rights. The membership of certain countries became controversial, and after civil society groups successfully demanded more stringent membership rules and sanctions, several governments announced their withdrawal—including Tanzania, formerly a Steering Committee member. Tensions erupted within countries as well, with civil society coalitions in both Mexico and Guatemala announcing their refusal to continue cooperation with their governments in the cocreation process. According to Civicus (2016), the participation environment for civil society organizations was seriously undermined in nearly a third of all Open Government Partnership members in 2016.

Surveying this landscape in the late 2010s, one might see the Open Government Partnership, and the open government movement overall, as a failure, rife with internal conflicts and overwhelmed by a world turning toward illiberalism, populism, unrepentant corruption, and hypocrisy

around transparency. One might see the Open Government Partnership as another traveler on the well-worn path of so many international initiatives toward empty rhetoric, window-dressing action, and ultimate irrelevance.

However, this is not a book about the failure of the Open Government Partnership. Instead, this is a book about the often-overlooked ways that voluntary, flexible, participatory, and iterative international initiatives *can* shape domestic public sector reform. Looking beyond the headlines and beneath the surface, we argue that existing approaches neglect the full breadth of mechanisms through which an institution like the Open Government Partnership can have meaningful impacts.

Should the partnership be understood as a commitment machine, impactful only to the extent that it induces member governments to commit to meaningful reforms and actually follow through on them? This commit-and-comply focus is the standard approach in most research on international institutions and, indeed, in how many stakeholders have sought to assess the Open Government Partnership. We call this the direct pathway to impact.

But we argue that this approach is too narrow and that instead, we must understand the Open Government Partnership as involving participants in a *process* that both evolves over time and has its own causal effects, even independent of commitments themselves. This indirect pathway to change is composed of process-driven mechanisms and is distinct from the direct pathway of change that comprises more traditional compliance mechanisms.

In this book, we show that while the direct pathway of change has received the most attention, its mechanisms have been frequently stymied or have yielded disappointing results. Yet we argue that the indirect pathway instead highlights the most promising potential to drive reform and is, in many ways, the most instructional for understanding new processes by which international actors influence the ideas and practices used in the quest to transform government.

Our book is motivated by the question of how international initiatives can and do shape domestic public sector reform. We study this question in the contexts of a specific initiative—the Open Government Partnership—and a particular arena of governance—the cluster of transparency, accountability, participation, and technology-based reforms known collectively as

open government. In the remainder of this chapter, we introduce the reader to these specific contexts and then review the relevant pieces of literature, crossing usual disciplinary boundaries between international relations and public administration. Finally, we present our argument, emphasizing the importance of the indirect pathway of impact, and discuss the types of evidence we draw on in this book to demonstrate.

## THE QUESTION OF IMPACT

Can a voluntary international initiative have a meaningful impact on public sector reform? We seek to answer this question in the case of the Open Government Partnership, given its novel institutional design features, rapid growth in membership, and clear centrality to a new reform movement focusing on open government. Indeed, this is a daunting question in light of the design of the Open Government Partnership and the existing literature on both international institutions and public sector reforms.

The Open Government Partnership is an unusual international initiative, combining a largely voluntary, flexible, and nonbinding soft institutional design (Abbott & Snidal, 2000) with an unprecedented level of civil society participation within the organization and an iterative process that repeats every two years. There are several characteristics that make the partnership stand out as a novelty in the world of international institutions.

First, the Open Government Partnership sets no binding standard to which members must adhere; rather, it encourages flexible commitments driven by local needs and interests. The range of commitments across issue areas and policy types is enormous, including new legislation, open data portals, new venues for participatory policymaking, and sectoral transparency efforts across domains, including budgets, natural resources, foreign aid, and public service delivery. At best, this flexibility encourages innovation and alignment with local priorities. At worst, it allows countries to opportunistically make commitments that are narrow, superficial, or irrelevant to the goals of open government.

Second, the Open Government Partnership also sets a relatively low bar for membership. Although it always had eligibility criteria, these have

allowed many nondemocratic countries to join the partnership, such as Azerbaijan and Jordan.

Third, the Open Government Partnership features only limited enforcement mechanisms. For the first several years, sanctions (such as being rendered inactive) could only be imposed for failing to adhere to the formal National Action Plan process and not for any broader features of open government or democratic rights in member countries. Furthermore, for the first several years, there was no penalty for governments failing to implement any of their commitments as long as National Action Plans were on time and met formal criteria for civil society collaboration.

Finally, the Open Government Partnership was initially launched as a lean, start-up model of global initiative that aimed to avoid what its founders saw as the slow, inefficient bureaucracies of traditional international institutions. Yet this model faced difficulty managing the Partnership's complex activities and diverse stakeholders.

However, the Open Government Partnership also featured an unprecedented level of formal inclusion of civil society organizations in its governance structure. Its Steering Committee features full parity between government and civil society representatives, with one cochair from each. The partnership also encourages deep civil society participation at the domestic level through consultation and cocreation in the National Action Plan design and implementation processes. Not only are civil society organizations encouraged to formally participate within the organization and throughout the action plan development process, but the Open Government Partnership also encourages domestic reforms focusing on public participation broadly defined to include not only civil society but other actors, like companies, citizens, associations, and so on. However, while these two types of participation are closely related, in the context of this book, when we mention "civil society participation," our intended emphasis is on the governance structures that emphasize partnership with civil society organizations. In chapter 3, we also describe many examples of public participation initiatives that member countries undertake as part of their broader open government reform efforts.

Finally, the Open Government Partnership also features an iterative process similar to—and, in fact, predating—the pledge-and-review model

of the Paris Climate Agreement. Governments make new National Action Plans on a two-year cycle, informed (at least in principle) by experience and by the review and evaluation by the Independent Reporting Mechanism. This iterative process necessitates repeated interactions among stakeholders, continuous expectations of new commitments, and opportunities for learning and ratcheting up.

Importantly, these design features of the Open Government Partnership represent a bargain of sorts between naturally reticent governments and reformers in civil society groups, donors, and some government officials. This bargain consists of *flexibility* and *weak enforcement* in exchange for *participation* and *iteration*. For reticent government leaders and officials, the design of the Open Government Partnership is appealing on account of the flexible nature of commitments and the relatively narrow and nonbinding monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms. These same features have often been the target of critiques by reformers, especially among the more skeptical civil society actors.

In exchange for accepting these features, the Open Government Partnership was able to include the innovative design features of participation and iteration, which reformers and open government advocates hoped would be worthwhile. Yet both of these innovative features had little in the way of track records, and it remained to be seen if they might serve to counteract the possibilities for opportunism and window-dressing created by the Open Government Partnership's flexibility and weak enforcement provisions.

How would this institutional design bargain play out in practice? Can an initiative like the Open Government Partnership serve as an effective driver of meaningful reform?

Insights from existing literature on both international institutions—our independent variable—and public sector reform—our dependent variable—would suggest skepticism toward the potential for the partnership to lead to meaningful reform. We review these here.

### **Insights from the International Institutions Literature**

Research on international institutions is often concerned with why states do (or do not) participate in international institutions and initiatives and

why they comply (or not) with their commitments to them. Considering the Open Government Partnership's unusual institutional design in the context of this literature, one would have many reasons to be dubious. Indeed, skepticism runs deep in the field of international relations. Many critiques expect international institutions to accomplish nothing that would not have happened otherwise, or that does not serve the interests of powerful states (Mearsheimer, 1994). Others understand governments' participation in international institutions as driven purely by a logic of self-interest, sometimes cooperating when long-term benefits predominate but more often behaving opportunistically except where limited by hard mechanisms of monitoring and credible enforcement (Keohane & Martin, 1995; Simmons, 2010).

Even more optimistic theoretical approaches still see states' willingness to accept international rules as limited by sovereignty costs—the “loss of authority over decision making in an issue-area” (Abbott & Snidal, 2000, 436). In particular, states tend to resist agreements marked by greater hard law characteristics: obligation, precision, and delegation (Abbott & Snidal, 2000). Many scholars see a tradeoff in the design of international initiatives between stringency and membership (Bernauer et al., 2013; Prakash & Potoski, 2007)—as they incorporate more hard law characteristics or stronger monitoring and enforcement provisions, fewer states will be willing to join. But, simultaneously, a less stringent and easier membership threshold may come with negative consequences, such as slower decision making and less credibility.

Although the original design of the Open Government Partnership sought to escape some of these traditional tradeoffs, they nonetheless emerged as subjects of contention and as limits on some actors' willingness to join. For example, although India was initially one of the founding participants in the discussions that produced the Open Government Partnership, it withdrew several months before the official launch, citing sovereignty concerns and qualms over external monitoring (Bhaumik, 2011; Dey & Roy, 2013; McIntosh, 2011).

Studies of state compliance with international institutions often conclude that membership has no true impact, given processes of self-selection and screening (Downs, Rocke & Barsoom 1996; von Stein, 2005). Studies of the impact of international institutions on measurable outcomes across economic,



environmental, and human rights issues often conclude that the impact of membership is zero or even negative, as states instrumentally take advantage of “window-dressing” institutions (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005).

These perspectives would lead most observers to have decidedly low expectations of an initiative like the Open Government Partnership, given the myriad of opportunities created by its institutional design for member governments to take only window-dressing actions while nonetheless burnishing their reputations on the world stage.

Other theoretical perspectives, however, see the potential for soft institutions, particularly in conjunction with processes of learning, normative change, or mobilization of nongovernmental actors (Abbott & Snidal 2000; Newman & Posner, 2016; Ruggie, 2007). Constructivist approaches focus on normative changes (e.g., Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) and the potential for both interactions and institutions to change stated preferences (Bearce & Bondanella, 2007) or activate learning networks (Ruggie, 2002). Liberal approaches focus on pressure from below by civil society (Simmons, 2009) and domestic constituencies (Dai, 2005) as well as transgovernmental interactions among bureaucrats themselves (Bach & Newman, 2010; Slaughter, 2009). Managerial approaches (Chayes & Chayes, 1993) suggest that most countries follow most of the rules most of the time and view problems as arising from lack of capacity or knowledge and difficulty of implementation or coordination.

Much research has been devoted to understanding whether such mechanisms can operate and under what circumstances. We build on these past efforts while also offering focused new evidence and extending past arguments to this new type of international institution and to processes that are *outside* direct compliance pathways.

### **Insights from the Public Sector Reform Literature**

Our expectations for what successes the Open Government Partnership could achieve are also informed by research on the impacts of earlier management reforms and how they attempted to change the way the public sector functions. How successfully a transnational initiative achieves its goal of reforming the public sector depends, to a large degree, on how well the

initiative can use novel ways to address public sector obstacles that prior reforms have tried to grapple with.

Scholars have studied public sector change for hundreds of years and observed a virtually continuous procession of new reform visions and fashions (Light, 1998). New ideas of reform can be distinguished by differences in the means, leadership models, and ultimate values (e.g., efficiency, equality, economic growth, democracy, etc.) of the reformers (Osborne, 2010a). For example, perhaps the most influential reform idea of the twentieth century was New Public Management, which emerged in the 1980s and drove a public sector reform process of privatization, decentralization, and citizen choice designed to deliver more efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector. These policies have been shown to directly impact the implementation of transparency related public sector programs (Piotrowski, 2007).

Although New Public Management lost its preeminent status as a global public sector reform movement in the early 2000s (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011), it continues to stand as a vital reference point for reformers because of its global reach and its powerful impact on many subsequent public sector reforms (Greve, 2015). Today, New Public Management's impact is under scrutiny. Its rise was characterized by hopes for improvements to government efficiency and effectiveness that have not turned out as intended (Hood & Peters, 2004; Osborne, 2010a). The experience of New Public Management has been borne out repeatedly in subsequent reforms: It constantly fell short of its goals because it was treated as a panacea for an impossible range of different bureaucratic problems (Hood, 1991).

The Open Government Partnership vision of reform would seem to fit this mold of over-optimism. Compared to New Public Management, the partnership aims for a different set of reform values, such as transparency, accountability, and participation, but there is a similar tone of optimism in open-government promulgations such as Obama's Open Government Directive (Coglianese, 2009).

It may be too early to say if the kinds of public sector reforms advanced by the Open Government Partnership will suffer the same fate of New Public Management—rising rapidly before going into decline. Some scholars would place open government alongside a raft of post–New Public Management

reforms that try to correct the failures of that model (e.g., Dunleavy et al., 2006), while others would identify open government reform with the same streak of privatization and limited government (e.g., Catlaw & Sandberg, 2014). The reality that policymakers face is that there are many competing visions of public sector reform currently jockeying for position, and none has provided policymakers with a model of management reform that can fill the space left by New Public Management (Lodge & Gill, 2011). The Open Government Partnership faces a tough reform environment in a mix of competing reform visions offering answers to the problems of New Public Management.

We will explore whether the Open Government Partnership's process approach offers a plausible new way forward. Looking back on public sector reform history as well as considering some of the inherent characteristics of the open government idea, there are good reasons to be pessimistic.

Public sector reform literature suggests that reforms face an often-impossible task of reconciling the demands of different interest groups and their competing visions of what should be prioritized. Hood (1991), one of the leading scholars of New Public Management reforms, argues that public sector reforms contain a panoply of mutually inconsistent ideas and conflicting values that are difficult to accomplish simultaneously. Open government reform is itself a marriage of categories of public sector values that clash in problematic ways.

The first episode in the modern chapter of open government started with the freedom of information movement. Today, the kind of public sector reform championed by digital government reformers such as Beth Noveck (2009) seeks to make public agencies not just transparent but also open in the sense of agencies interacting dynamically in the internal and external exchange of information. The unification of these transparency and participation visions that Meijer, Curtin, and Hillebrandt (2012) called vision and voice are indeed powerful in theory, especially when combined with the communication and interactive platforms of Web 2.0 technologies. But they would seem to multiply problems of clashing values and supporters, too—perhaps in even more unpredictable ways than other reform movements (Berliner, Ingrams, & Piotrowski, 2018).

Though the existing literature on international institutions and public sector reform all cast doubt on the Open Government Partnership's potential for impact, the literature also highlights the Partnership's importance as a case to investigate in-depth, and there is a shortage of available literature on how transnational multistakeholderism influences the fortunes of national government reform efforts. Given the high-profile failures of open government around the world, what impacts should we expect from the Open Government Partnership?

### **What is open government?**

The bundle of reforms pushed by the partnership is referred to as open government. Open government is often used interchangeably with *transparency*, but open government is more than transparency. The term *open government* gained currency in the 1950s in the lead-up to a global wave of legislation regarding access to information (Ingrams, 2018). Philosophically, freedom of information acts also connected such procedures to the principles of free speech and public deliberation necessary to inform and educate the public in the exercise of their democratic rights (Curtin & Meijer, 1995). These legal reforms in transparency and public deliberation spread through democratic countries over the next several decades. These reforms were, and still are, very popular but do have clear tensions at times with other public sector values such as privacy, secrecy, and efficiency (Piotrowski, 2010).

In fact, while not called *open government*, public laws passed earlier in history were harbingers of open government ideas. The first freedom of information act was passed in 1766 by Sweden, where it was called the Press Act. The Swedish case was an outlier in the history of freedom of information acts. However, the Press Act suggests that, despite the wave of freedom of information act reforms in the mid-twentieth century, open government ideas have a much older history (Banisar, 2006). The philosophy of information access, public accountability, and public deliberation is evident in the work of nineteenth-century scholars such as John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, particularly in Bentham's concept of publicity (Birkinshaw, 1997). There was another fundamental shift in our understanding of open government at the start of the twenty-first century, as open government advocates

started to dedicate more attention to public participation in addition to transparency. Sharing information with the public was one thing, but the ability for the public to use the information to talk back to government is conceptually so wrapped up with the idea and purpose of public information that information access and public participation are essentially two sides of the same coin. Meijer, Curtin, and Hillebrandt (2012) called these two dimensions *vision* and *voice*, respectively.

The added element of public participation marked a radical change in the idea of open government. The interactive perspective of Web 2.0 and the idea of government as a platform, where the power of the crowd—interested citizens contributing ideas, expertise, or suggestions—could be used to make better policy decisions (e.g., Lathrop & Ruma, 2010), gained momentum. This interactive aspect of open government emphasizes public participation and collaboration. Like the information access and transparency dimensions of open government, specific laws could enshrine principles of public participation—for example, in e-government laws requiring public consultation with stakeholders (McDermott, 2010). Public participation in open government also resurrected traditional public participation methods that have been around for centuries by giving them new channels, including the use of online tools such as e-petitions where citizens put forward policy proposals that gather signatories (Lindner & Riehm, 2011); hackathons, where citizens win prizes for creating novel public service solutions with digital technology (Michener & Ritter, 2017); and technology-based tools for localized reporting of public service problems (Mergel & Desouza, 2013).

Popular interest in open government is rising, often closely linked with the rise of open data (Ubaldi, 2013) and freedom of information legislation. And yet, the term itself is often not specifically defined. We define *open government* as a public sector management reform movement focusing on three primary values: transparency, accountability, and participation. In many individual reform initiatives, technology plays a prominent role in the advancement of these values but is not a requirement. Open government policies can incorporate any one of the values or any combination. Technology is a driving tool in open government policies, but new technologies are not a necessary component of open government policies. For example, an open government

policy can include the value of participation without new technologies (e.g., the public comment section of a traditional open public meeting). Alternatively, it can consist of the value of participation coupled with new technologies (e.g., an online government petition website), or it can include multiple values, such as participation and transparency, coupled with new technologies (e.g., a website that posts proposed regulations and allows the public to comment).

### **The Open Government Partnership**

The Open Government Partnership is a transnational multistakeholder initiative founded in 2011 by eight governments: Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. As of January 2019, seventy-seven active countries were participating in the partnership, as well as several subnational governments involved through a pilot program. Table 1.1 shows a list of which countries are members, when they joined, and their status in the partnership. For countries to become members of the Open Government Partnership, they must meet four eligibility criteria (requiring minimum levels of civic engagement, access to information legislation, fiscal transparency, and public asset disclosure), pass an Open Government Partnership values check assessment, endorse a declaration of open government, and commit to delivering action plans cocreated with civil society and to being assessed on their progress. As noted in the table, some countries joined as members but later decided to withdraw, while others have been made inactive either for civic space violations or for repeated failure to even produce a National Action Plan. Since 2015 (von Bertele, 2015), the Open Government Partnership has also included subnational members through its Open Government Partnership Local initiative—including Scotland, provinces like Jalisco in Mexico, and cities like Seoul in South Korea.

The action plans that governments produce center on a list of commitments that, if designed well, focus on improving transparency, accountability, participation, and innovative use of technology. Yet these commitments vary in their scope, ambition, and focus, potentially covering a wide range of issue areas related (and sometimes not) to open government. Concerns about these commitments have sometimes led to criticisms of “openwashing” (e.g., Alonso, 2011).

<b>Table 1.1</b> Open Government Partnership member countries as of January 2019
<b>Founding members:</b>
Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, United Kingdom, United States
<b>Later in 2011:</b>
Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan,* Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Estonia, Georgia, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Paraguay, Peru, Romania, Slovak Republic, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Tanzania,† Turkey,* Ukraine, Uruguay
<b>2012:</b>
Argentina, Costa Rica, Finland, Ghana, Hungary,† Liberia, Netherlands, Panama
<b>2013:</b>
Australia, Ireland, Malawi, Mongolia, New Zealand, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Trinidad and Tobago
<b>2014:</b>
Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Tunisia
<b>2015:</b>
Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka
<b>2016:</b>
Burkina Faso, Germany, Jamaica, Luxembourg, Nigeria, Pakistan
<b>2017:</b>
Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Portugal
<b>2018:</b>
Ecuador, Morocco, Senegal, Seychelles
*: Inactive (Azerbaijan, Turkey) †: Withdrawn (Hungary, Tanzania)

However, the Open Government Partnership Articles of Governance also place expectations on governments that serve to guide the action plan development process. Thus, governments must develop their action plans in consultation with civil society, must be ambitious and go beyond their current practices, and their commitments must be relevant to one of four principles (transparency, accountability, public participation, and technology and innovation). The Articles convey that the civil society consultation process should be timely, transparent, and serious about dialogue and should take the form of a forum enabling “regular multi-stakeholder

consultation on OGP implementation” (Open Government Partnership, 2015b, 19).

In theory (while not always practiced), each member produces a new action plan every two years, leading to a cycle of policy commitments and, in some cases, policy fulfillment that pushes the open government agenda forward. Local country researchers, overseen by the Independent Reporting Mechanism, assess progress made on the commitments in the plans. The Independent Reporting Mechanism, a component of the Open Government Partnership, selects a local country researcher based on their research expertise and gives the researcher special training on how to carry out the review of their country’s action plan. The review is typically wide ranging and draws on broad consultation with governmental and civil society actors who are involved in implementing or monitoring the action plan. At the end of this process, the researcher produces a country progress report, ostensibly enabling learning, benchmarking, and accountability both within countries and globally.

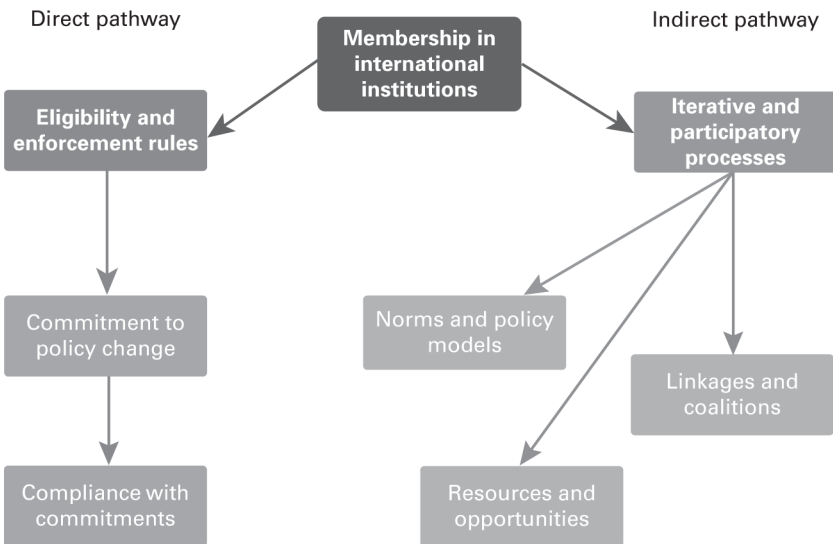
At the global level, the Partnership’s leadership rotates, with both a country chair from government and a civil society chair, normally not from the same country, leading the Steering Committee at any one time. The Steering Committee is made up of an equal number of government and civil society members. The Open Government Partnership Support Unit is staffed with a permanent secretariat that works with the Steering Committee. The Support Unit’s goals are to “maintain institutional memory, manage Open Government Partnership’s external communications, ensure the continuity of organizational relationships with Open Government Partnership’s partners, and support the broader membership” (OGP Support Unit, n.d.). In 2017, the Open Government Partnership’s budget was over \$9.5 million. Funding for the partnership comes from private foundations, bilateral agencies, and some member governments (Open Government Partnership, ca. 2018). The Hewlett Foundation, Hivos, Omidyar Network, Ford Foundation, and Open Society Foundation are among the major nongovernmental funders, but member governments also donate modest amounts. A major forum for organizational planning and development is the annual (except for 2014 and 2017) global summit, usually hosted by the rotating country chair, where governmental representatives, academics, funders, civil society



members, and advocacy organizations gather to address the Open Government Partnership’s progress and future challenges. A further discussion of the mechanics of the Partnership is found in chapter 3.

### OUR ARGUMENT: TWO PATHWAYS TO IMPACT

We argue that an assessment of the Open Government Partnership specifically and of the potential of international initiatives to shape domestic governance reform more broadly must distinguish between direct and indirect pathways of transnational impact on domestic governance reform. These pathways build on ideas that we earlier developed in Berliner, Ingrams, and Piotrowski (2021), with a more specific focus on compliance models and their alternatives. In this book, we have elaborated those ideas further and developed them to be more generally applicable. We summarize these in figure 1.1. A direct pathway follows a causal chain from eligibility and enforcement rules, to commitments to policy change, to compliance with commitments. For the Open Government Partnership, this comprises the



**Figure 1.1**  
Impact pathways for international institutions.

actions of joining, making commitments, implementing those commitments, evaluating their direct successes and failures, and then iteratively repeating the process through subsequent rounds of National Action Plans.

An indirect pathway, however, focuses on broader mechanisms driven not by government commitments themselves but rather by the processes set in motion by membership. These include contributing to normative changes, building new networks and coalitions, and creating new opportunities and power resources for reformers inside and outside of government.

We argue that for voluntary and flexible initiatives like the Open Government Partnership, direct pathways of change will often be limited, context dependent, and superficial, especially in the short term. Yet the process-driven mechanisms of change of the indirect pathway have the potential for greater breadth and depth of impact on public sector reform, even if in ways that are often difficult to evaluate. Nonetheless, these broader mechanisms themselves crucially rely on participatory and iterative processes for impetus and sustainability—suggesting that these dynamics will be apparent to a greater extent in some initiatives than others.

The participation of nonstate actors opens new political opportunities and creates new sources of influence, particularly for civil society groups, and brings together actors within and across countries who have often not worked together previously. The formalized iteration of reform procedures also creates a repeated demand for new ideas and models, and opportunities for new norms and patterns of behavior to emerge over time.

This framework provides a useful conceptual tool for tracking the types of complex global innovation and diffusion processes that characterize modern public sector reforms. While we focus on these arguments in the context of the Open Government Partnership, we suggest that these arguments also generalize to other, similar institutional forms in which governments increasingly participate and that may become more common features of global reform agendas in the future.

For example, transnational multistakeholder initiatives (Raymond & DeNardis, 2015), such as the UN Global Compact and Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, are more frequently participatory and iterative than more traditional organizations. There are also organizational parallels in the

decentralized network developments that are shaping internet governance and the role of the state (Mueller, 2010; ten Oever, 2019). Yet we also see these procedural elements as variables, present to differing degrees across all institutions. Tallberg and colleagues (2013), for example, show wide variation and increases over time in the accessibility of international institutions to nongovernmental organizations. Recent work on global experimentalist governance (De Búrca, Keohane, & Sabel, 2014), the UN’s Universal Periodic Review (Milewicz & Goodin, 2016), and the Paris Climate Agreement “pledge-and-review” system (Hale, 2016) also points toward the wider prevalence and increasing importance of iterative features.

In table 1.2, we summarize the broader relationships we hypothesize between institutional design features and the relevant causal mechanisms potentially linking membership with impacts on domestic governance. A focus on the direct pathway of change emphasizes variation in the horizontal dimension of this table and suggests that institutions with weak monitoring and enforcement provisions are unlikely to see compliance-driven mechanisms of impact at work. The indirect pathway of change, however, emphasizes the vertical dimension: For institutions with iterative and participatory design features, we expect to see process-driven mechanisms at work.

Our focus in this book is on the Open Government Partnership, which falls into the bottom-left quadrant, with relatively weak monitoring and enforcement provisions but unusually iterative and participatory processes. Past research, instead, has focused primarily on institutions in the top row, which are weak cases for process-driven mechanisms.

<b>Table 1.2</b> Relationships between institutional design features and prevalent causal mechanisms potentially associated with the impact of membership			
		<b>Expectations of the direct pathway of change</b>	
		<b>Weak monitoring and enforcement</b>	<b>Strong monitoring and enforcement</b>
<b>Expectations of the indirect pathway of change</b>	<b>Low iteration and participation</b>	<b>No impact</b>	<b>Compliance-driven mechanisms</b>
	<b>High iteration and participation</b>	Process-driven mechanisms	Both compliance- and process-driven mechanisms

### **Direct Pathway of Change**

The direct pathway of change focuses on outcomes driven by the commitments governments make to international institutions either in joining or in their explicit action plans. For the Open Government Partnership, National Action Plans form the most important element of this and the most straightforward route for partnership membership to ostensibly lead to successful reform: Governments commit to meaningful reform efforts in their National Action Plans and subsequently carry them out, with resulting impacts on measurable outcomes. Yet each part of this pathway raises questions and has demonstrated severe limitations.

Most importantly, Open Government Partnership commitments are overwhelmingly discrete reform projects, such as the adoption of legislation, the creation of an online portal, the incorporation of citizen participation into a process, or a specific capacity-building effort (Piotrowski, 2017). The Independent Reporting Mechanism encourages specificity of commitments. Even at best, when commitments are both ambitious and fully implemented, they necessarily constitute only piecemeal fragments of a more holistic and long-term reform process (Fox, 2015; Michener, 2019). Consider, for example, an access to information law (in different contexts also referred to as a freedom of information law). Even if the legislation is designed according to international best practices and fully implemented and resourced in practice, it remains an open question how much impact this reform will have on outcomes such as good governance, corruption, and economic efficiency. Rather, such a law can potentially be an important piece of the puzzle of changing public sector institutions in concert with civil society, the media, reformers in government, independent accountability institutions, and an engaged public.

At worst, commitments may not be implemented at all or may be narrow, irrelevant, or mere window dressing intended to tick the boxes of the checklists of international and domestic stakeholders while accomplishing little of substance. According to the Open Government Partnership's record of commitments successfully implemented, 447 of 2,883 commitments made between 2011 and 2016 were fully completed, and a further 526 were at least substantially completed. This represents a fully or substantially completed proportion of only around one-third.

Of the commitments that do get completed, many involve applications of information technology in narrow ways, such as launching a government Twitter account, using mobile technology devices in schools, or digitizing public service delivery without any clear connection to transparency or public participation. In fact, the data show that “e-government” is the single most common theme of commitments. (As a point of reference, a few of the other themes are public participation, capacity-building, and records management.)

Many commitments that are implemented are not actually new initiatives but rather reflect governments taking credit for efforts that were already underway. While this rebranding of old work as new might have benefits, such as galvanizing the government’s own efforts to complete projects, bringing greater public attention, or generating synergies with other commitments, it also may give the leaders of those governments unmerited credit.

Over time, the iterative process of the Independent Reporting Mechanism has yielded improvements in some areas. More recent National Action Plan rounds have yielded commitments that are more ambitious and more relevant than those in the Partnership’s early years. This iterative process of action followed by evaluation, learning, and updating is an important strength of the Open Government Partnership’s direct pathway of impact and resembles recent trends toward “problem-driven iterative adaptation” in development (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2013) and “experimentalist governance” in global policy (De Búrca, Keohane, & Sabel, 2014). It also bears many similarities to the pledge-and-review model adopted by the Paris Climate Agreement, by which governments make flexible, voluntary commitments toward reductions in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that are subject to review every five years, and to the European Union’s open method of coordination (Radaelli, 2003; Zeitlin, 2009).

More recently, the Independent Reporting Mechanism and the Support Unit have placed greater emphasis on the ambition of commitments, encouraging governments to refocus their National Action Plans on fewer commitments but with more transformative potential and to focus more on measurable outcomes rather than project-based outputs (Vossler & Foti, 2018). Yet these same efforts also risk undercutting the potential for impact by placing greater priority on measurable results achieved within a set time-frame rather than on true transformative potential.

Open Government Partnership commitments are also dependent on domestic political context. Leadership changes in many countries have left the partnership process with an absence of political energy and halted or even reversed progress on commitments. Elsewhere, as in Mexico, national governments lose interest as relationships with civil society turn from collaboration to conflict. Contrarily, the Open Government Partnership process can thrive where political conditions are favorable, such as in moments when substantial political attention and resources are focused on governance reform. Ukraine, for example, had made and implemented several ambitious commitments in the years following its post-2014 political transition.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in these contexts, it is also difficult to evaluate the impact of the Open Government Partnership itself, as many of these reforms would have likely happened anyway.

Another direct pathway of change for the Open Government Partnership is through its eligibility criteria for new members, which requires minimum levels of civil liberties, access to information legislation, fiscal transparency, and public asset disclosure. While the majority of members were already eligible at the outset and joined in the Partnership's first year, roughly a dozen countries were not initially eligible and thus engaged in processes of reform *prior* to joining. In some cases, these reform processes were unlikely attributable to the Open Government Partnership itself, such as the political transition in Tunisia that culminated in democratic elections in 2011. But in others, the desire to join the Partnership was an explicit driver of reform, such as in the adoption of access to information legislation in Morocco (OGP Support Unit, 2018). In such instances, the direct impact of the Open Government Partnership came prior to membership yet was nonetheless real.

Skepticism toward the Open Government Partnership has come primarily from considerations of its direct pathways of impact. Many observers have expressed skepticism over the nature of commitments (e.g., Marczynski, 2018; Steibel, Alves, & Konopacki, 2017), the extent to which they have been implemented (Fraundorfer, 2017), and the seeming absence of a link between policy output and meaningful policy outcomes (Adler, 2015; McKenzie, 2014). We agree with most of these critiques and yet argue that they miss the point. The limitations of the Open Government Partnership's compliance mechanisms are fundamental to the inherent dilemmas of its

institutional design and the tradeoffs that made the Partnership possible in the first place.

If one considers a scenario where some core element of the Open Government Partnership's design was altered, then for every new potential that might be gained, something else would be lost. Possible methods exist by which the Partnership might crack down on members' subpar commitments, poor implementation, or problematic civil liberties records. Yet, if these enforcements went beyond the incremental steps the Open Government Partnership is already taking, the likely result would be member governments departing in droves, leaving behind a mere club of the already high-performing. Further, reduced flexibility in the National Action Plan process might undercut the opportunities that do exist for creativity, innovation, collaboration, and learning.

In summary, we conclude that the direct pathway, in the short term, can indeed matter in important ways sometimes and under certain circumstances, but it is more often limited, context dependent, and superficial. However, the longer-term, iterative process of repeated National Action Plans and Independent Reporting Mechanism cycles with gradual ratcheting up of expectations has the potential to shape the direct pathway into a more effective force for change. We now turn to the indirect pathway for impact, which we argue deserves greater attention.

### **Indirect Pathways of Change**

By process-driven mechanisms, we mean those impacts delinked from the formal chain of eligibility rules, commitment to policy change, and compliance with commitments of international institutions. Indirect impacts may be difficult to measure, causally complex, emerge over longer timeframes, and be visible only in certain cases. Yet the processes associated with membership, even independently of commitments and compliance, can produce fundamental changes in the ideas, interactions, and opportunities of key actors involved in public sector reform at both domestic and global levels.

We consider indirect pathways of impact in three overarching categories: new norms and policy models of reform, new resources and opportunities for reformers, and new linkages and coalitions. These mechanisms pertain

to actors involved in public sector reform both inside and outside of government and at domestic, global, and transnational levels.

### **Norms and policy models**

First, the Open Government Partnership has contributed to defining, legitimizing, and globalizing new policy models of public sector reform. As described at length in chapter 2, the concept of open government ties together several more specific reform agendas—including transparency, participation, accountability, and technology—into a broader model of how government ought to work. While this process of defining open government as a distinct model had already begun in the United States, the Open Government Partnership played a role in contributing to and cementing that process of definition. Beyond that, the Partnership played a key role in globalizing the concept, promoting it vis-à-vis other international institutions, and imbuing open government reforms with a sense of normative legitimacy, as something that governments ought to do. As with global normative developments in other arenas, such as human rights and the environment, this sense of normative legitimacy sometimes manifests as window-dressing reforms that decouple form from function yet nonetheless speak to the powerful legitimacy of the new model.

Evidence of this pathway of impact can be seen in the mainstreaming of open government as a major theme in global institutions like the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), in the creation of new global indices like the Open Data Barometer and the Open Data Index, and in the rapid global proliferation of reforms like open data portals and forums for policy cocreation (Ingrams, Piotrowski, & Berliner, 2020). Importantly, it can also be seen in the increasing institutionalization of open government models in national and subnational politics, even beyond the formal remit of the Open Government Partnership itself. For example, in Mexico, a subnational open government initiative modeled after, but not formally linked with, the Partnership took root with a majority of states participating, including governors across three major political parties. This initiative continued in operation even after the collapse of national-level collaboration in Mexico's Open Government Partnership process.



The Open Government Partnership also served as a platform for the emergence of new subsidiary norms linked with open government. Advocates used Open Government Partnership working groups and meetings to develop and launch new standards like the Open Data Charter and the Open Contracting Partnership and to mainstream new principles like beneficial ownership transparency (to combat the use of shell corporations for money laundering, tax avoidance, and corruption). As the Open Government Partnership catalyzed the supply of new norms, the iterative process of making new National Action Plans every two years also drove the demand, and governments rapidly began making commitments focused on these new areas.

### **Resources and opportunities**

Second, the Open Government Partnership has led to new resources—both material and symbolic—and new political opportunities for reformers both inside and outside of government. Most importantly, the Partnership has empowered civil society actors—both domestically and globally—in new ways. These include a formal seat at the table, seen both in the unprecedented formal parity between governments and civil society in the Open Government Partnership’s global governance structure and in national-level consultation around National Action Plan design and implementation. But beyond the formal representation, these mechanisms also empower civil society groups with new forms of informal power through networking, information provision, and agenda-setting. Additionally, the formal inclusion of civil society groups can give them structural power through their implicit threat of exit. While this threat was exercised by civil society from the national-level Open Government Partnership process in Mexico, it has been threatened in other places such as Croatia (Montero & Taxell, 2015) and is latent at the international level, giving weight to civil society concerns over other institutional design issues.

The impacts of these new forms of power can be seen both at the global level, as civil society has taken advantage of its newfound empowerment to ratchet up the institutional design of the Open Government Partnership itself, including a broader scope, expanded capacity, and increased ability to monitor and sanction member governments, and at the domestic level, as civil

society coalitions in many countries have successfully used their new role to obtain long-demanded policy concessions. In Mexico, one civil society representative even said that the Partnership was “like steroids for civil society.”<sup>2</sup>

The Open Government Partnership also empowers reformers *inside* of government. Rather than focusing on more traditional diplomats and foreign ministries, the Partnership has sought to focus on line ministries, midlevel bureaucrats, and local governments, thus serving to provide resources, support, and models to current and potential future reformers in government. The result is that it is easier for government reformers to launch new open government projects when and where such reformers emerge and seek to leverage these international opportunities.

### **Linkages and coalitions**

Finally, the Open Government Partnership has created new linkages and coalitions among public sector reformers inside and outside of government as well as with other types of actors. These linkages enable new forms of learning, diffusion of innovation, and strategic coordination, in addition to helping the open government movement find new allies across ideological divides. Transgovernmental linkages, from bureaucrat to bureaucrat across countries, spur the sharing of both innovative reforms and strategies for pursuing reform agendas. Linkages among civil society groups that were previously more isolated have led to flourishing regional networks, particularly in Latin America.

The Open Government Partnership itself has formed important linkages with other international organizations and initiatives, contributing to the gradual emergence of a regime complex (Keohane & Victor, 2011) for open government. For example, the Partnership has forged partnerships with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative to help coordinate mutual efforts and partnered with the World Bank to form a trust fund to support innovative reforms.

Perhaps most importantly, the Open Government Partnership has encouraged the creation of new coalitions that span disparate issue networks and cross ideological boundaries. Among civil society at both global and

national levels, the Partnership has brought together organizations and issue communities that often did not work together previously, including human rights, media, anticorruption, environmental reform, good governance, and even business groups, often with very different ways of working with governments. Such developments have also played out within countries. In Mexico, for instance, the Open Government Partnership spurred a shift toward a new culture of collaboration among civil society groups, even bringing together groups focused on human rights and those focused on business competitiveness into a coalition focused on shared goals. However, these new coalitions have not always been without friction, as evidenced by the tension that often emerged between access to information and open data advocates (Berliner, Ingrams, & Piotrowski, 2018).

Importantly, this ability of the Open Government Partnership to build cross-ideological coalitions has also helped in several cases where national participation *did* endure across political transitions. These include transitions from Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to Joko Widodo in Indonesia, from Cristina Fernández de Kirchner to Mauricio Macri in Argentina, from François Hollande to Emmanuel Macron in France, and from Felipe Calderón to Enrique Peña Nieto (at least initially) in Mexico. Crucially, these include cases of major ideological transition as well as cases where Open Government Partnership participation had been a signature issue of the outgoing leader and thus tempting to undermine as a sign of change. Most strikingly, the partnership process in the Philippines has survived the stark transition from Benigno Aquino to Rodrigo Duterte, as the new government saw the potential to pursue its own goals through the Open Government Partnership process, including improving performance on global competitiveness rankings, obtaining concessions from extractive industries, and broadening citizen participation in rural areas (though, as will be seen in chapter 4, this has sometimes been in unsettling ways). Certainly, in many other cases, political transitions have been major challenges for the Open Government Partnership process, including setbacks in Croatia and the United States.

In table 1.3, we summarize the key features of the two different pathways of impact of international institutions and the mechanisms they highlight.

<b>Table 1.3</b> Summary of direct and indirect pathways of impact of institutional organizations			
<b>Pathways of impact</b>	<b>Key institutional design features</b>	<b>Key mechanisms</b>	<b>Key actors</b>
Direct	Monitoring and enforcement; eligibility requirements	Government compliance with commitments; eligibility requirements.	Central government decision makers
Indirect	Iterative and participatory processes	Changing norms and policy models; new resources and opportunities for reformers; new linkages and changing coalitions	Central government decision makers, individual politicians and bureaucrats, civil society organizations, policy experts

### Evaluating direct and indirect pathways

How do we evaluate an argument that focuses on the indirect pathway and its iterative and participatory processes of change? Often, previous research seeking to evaluate the effects of membership in international treaties or initiatives has focused on evaluating the average effect in a framework focused on causal inference. For such an approach, the self-selection of states into membership offers the greatest challenge (e.g., Von Stein, 2005). Simply comparing the behavior of members and nonmembers is insufficient, as members may join an initiative in order to take credit for actions that they anticipated undertaking anyway. It is difficult—indeed, often impossible—to assess the counterfactual scenario in which members did not actually join.

This inferential challenge applies to the Open Government Partnership and makes any attempt to quantitatively evaluate the impact of partnership membership complex and highly suspect. First, membership is non-random, as governments decide whether to join (or not to, as in the cases of India and Russia). Second, eligibility is governed by a set of criteria that can, in some cases, motivate reforms ahead of time to make membership possible (such as in Morocco).

Finally, it is unclear what the appropriate outcome variable in a quantitative analysis would be, given the scope and ambiguity of open government itself. There are no satisfactory crossnational measures of meaningful government transparency toward citizens in practice, and common indices

of corruption and democracy are far too broad-brush and stable over time to capture even the most optimistic sorts of effects that might be expected of the Open Government Partnership. Desirable outputs of Open Government Partnership membership might include the passage and implementation of a well-designed whistleblowing law, the creation of a functional and easy-to-use portal for government data, or the institution of participatory decision-making bodies. Open government, similar to transparency, is frequently linked to issues of ethics and corruption (Piotrowski, 2014). Yet it remains a separate question, and beyond the scope of the present work, whether these types of reforms would, in turn, lead to measurable changes in broader outcomes like corruption and democracy.

Our focus in this book is slightly different. We are interested in the processes and mechanisms that might link international initiatives to meaningful public sector reform, even if those pathways cannot characterize the average effect of membership. We are focused more on a proximate dependent variable of meaningful public sector reforms themselves, even if it remains an open question whether or not those reforms, in turn, lead to movements on commonly measured outcome variables such as corruption and democracy indices. Our distinction between direct and indirect pathways is thus orthogonal, or crosscutting, to the question of “causal or not causal?”

Our evidence is primarily qualitative, not quantitative, and primarily concerns characterizing the nature of processes at work rather than measuring the outcomes they achieved. We approach these tasks at two separate levels of analysis: the international and the national. The international level focuses primarily on the historical development of the Open Government Partnership and the broader transnational open government reform movement over the period since 2011. At the national level, we offer thematic evidence drawn from an array of member countries and global settings, as well as a more focused case study of Mexico. Our evidence is collected from interviews, official documents, secondary data analysis, media reports, and participant observation.

At both levels, we trace how the Open Government Partnership contributed to new norms and policy models of reform, created new resources and opportunities for reformers, and forged new linkages and coalitions

between different types of actors. We take care to bear in mind the question of counterfactuals: Would those same dynamics have taken place even in a world without the Open Government Partnership? Although such a question is often impossible to answer definitively, we highlight cases where the changes that took place were specific to partnership operations, processes, and relationships; were instigated by Open Government Partnership activities; or could not have plausibly occurred independently of the partnership through other causes.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

To reiterate, we argue that the Open Government Partnership has had important impacts on public sector reform—but not necessarily in the ways that might be obvious and not necessarily in the ways to which the initiative itself gives the most attention. Impacts from commitments and compliance alone have been limited, frequently leading to discrete projects that, while worthwhile, are likely to be narrow in their potential impact—if they are implemented at all. However, indirect pathways of impact, including shaping policy models, empowering new actors, and forging new connections, have more transformative potential, even if they are more difficult to observe and measure.

Yet we do not suggest that the direct pathway has failed in the sense that it ought to be yielding more substantial impacts. Rather, we suggest that its limitations are fundamental to the basic tradeoffs that made the Open Government Partnership possible in the first place—between membership and stringency, participation and credibility, and flexibility and accountability. This series of fundamental institutional design dilemmas creates limits for what any membership-based international initiative can hope to achieve, and the Open Government Partnership is operating at or near the frontier of what is possible. What the Partnership's direct pathway has produced in terms of impact is what one ought to reasonably expect at this stage in the initiative's existence. Iterative learning from experience resulting in small tweaks to the National Action Plan and Independent Reporting Mechanism processes may yield more substantial results in the future, but the gains

will likely be incremental. Importantly, one of the most pressing threats to this process comes from expectations themselves, as the Open Government Partnership and its proponents have created expectations of more transformative impact from the National Action Plan-Independent Reporting Mechanism process that is unlikely to be realized, thus setting themselves up for perceived failure.

Crucially, we also do not argue that the Partnership's direct pathway ought to be abandoned. Rather, we see its participatory and iterative National Action Plan-Independent Reporting Mechanism cycle as the engine that powers and makes possible the indirect pathways of impact. The cyclical, iterative process keeps government and civil society stakeholders in dialogue, creates demand for new models of governance reform, and ensures that opportunities for new actors to have influence will continue to open. The repetitive nature of the process transforms the status-quo option for member countries. Even if governments seek to opportunistically claim credit for membership while doing nothing, they still need to go through the formal motions of holding consultations, drafting a National Action Plan, making commitments, and cooperating with the Independent Reporting Mechanism—even if no commitments are implemented. This creates a new situation where governments need to keep running just to stand still and so, perhaps, will find it worthwhile or easier to simply move forward. These requirements force governments to continue engaging with civil society and other domestic, transnational, and international actors, thereby creating new opportunities for change. The National Action Plan process also creates a focal point for new coalitions to work together and for new models of governance reform to emerge and take root.

*The Power of Partnership in Open Government* is a book that adds to both the public administration literature on public sector management reform and the political science literature on international institutions. By the nature of the subject, it also pushes our understanding about the Open Government Partnership and international reform initiatives generally. We push the public sector reform field to consider open government as an aspect of reform and to take international and transnational influences seriously but critically. We push scholars within the international relations field to rethink how the

impact of membership-based institutions works. For the Open Government Partnership itself, our research and analysis point to a broader scope for the evaluation of organizational outcomes and impacts than a commitment-based one alone. Finally, our research points to iterative and participatory processes as key design features for international reform initiatives.

## PLAN OF THE BOOK

This introductory chapter introduces the reader to the central participants and ideas in the story of the Open Government Partnership and the set of problems and questions posed by its rise to prominence and puts forward the key contours of our arguments and the plan of the book. In chapter 2, we go over the theory and practice of public management reform. This is primarily a chapter to set out the key debates about how scholars and policymakers have grappled with the challenge of making public governance fair and effective. It traces the visions, values, and concrete tools and programs that have characterized the quest to transform the function and operation of the public sector. The main takeaway from this chapter is that there are a host of lessons from history guiding us to be skeptical of the claims of reformers.

In chapter 3, we situate the creation and design of the Open Government Partnership in the international relations literature and put into place many of the innovative ideas and institutional features of the partnership that we empirically investigate later. This chapter also sheds new light on the origin story of the partnership, leveraging interview and documentary evidence to tell this story in greater detail than has been publicly written to date. We emphasize how the creation and design of the Open Government Partnership exemplify *both* old dynamics of political contestation and new dynamics of flexibility and collaboration. This chapter also offers an overview of the structure and functions of the Open Government Partnership to lay the groundwork for the empirical evidence that follows.

Chapter 4 focuses on marshaling the empirical evidence and testing and debating the impacts that the Open Government Partnership has had on open government reform. A range of examples of direct and indirect impacts of the partnership are analyzed and presented. We assess whether



its novel methods have had any of the desired results, and we conclude that the direct impacts from the Open Government Partnership have often been disappointing, while at the same time, indirect pathways of change have often created powerful new forms of partnership and opportunities in ways that we would not have expected.

Chapter 5 uses an in-depth case study of the Open Government Partnership in Mexico to explore and demonstrate the pathways of change in more detail from the perspective of both the direct and indirect pathways. We review both the overall chronology of Mexico's membership in the Open Government Partnership and evaluate specific contributions made to public sector reform both through a direct pathway of commitments and compliance as well as through more indirect pathways. Indeed, although commitments themselves have often been limited, we see substantial evidence of broader effects of the Open Government Partnership in Mexico. These include new policy models, new patterns of collaboration, new opportunities for reformers, and several specific moments of leverage for civil society groups.

Chapter 6 concludes the book by highlighting the implications and lessons of our research for the scholarly literature on both public management and international institutions, for the open government policy community and the Open Government Partnership itself, and, finally, for other multi-stakeholder and transnational reform efforts around the world.



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# The Power of Partnership in Open Government

## Reconsidering Multistakeholder Governance Reform

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