Civil Society Outcome Document

Open Government Partnership (OGP) Africa/MENA Regional Meeting

Rebuilding Trust Through Open Government

Nairobi, 25th March 2025

Civil Society members of the OGP are pleased to convene at the event of the Regional Africa/MENA Meeting to discuss, collaborate, network, showcase, assess progress, and share recommendations for strengthened open government implementation in the region among present state and non-state reformers. As members of the Partnership, we are tasked with articulating, championing, and implementing open government values and approaches to make communities in nations of the world stronger, more open, participatory, inclusive, responsive, and accountable. We are also tasked with protecting and promoting the engagement of civil society as part of multi-stakeholder approaches to good governance.

Introduction

We note that the region has seen some promising growth in various areas, including developmental, environmental, and digital advancements, and an improved regional integration agenda, which have all been positive trends. However, there continue to be complex and nuanced national and regional challenges. These include civil unrest, wars, strained standards of living, growing inequalities, subtle or open marginalisation, debt crises, social and economic injustices, and an overall increasing deficit of trust between citizens and their representatives in government.

Trust deficits run across the board in the region, from day-to-day activities of public institutions to the ability of national and local governments to make effective, enabling, and transformative policy decisions for all groups in society. There is little or no trust in existing public participation systems to adopt citizen opinions expressed in public consultation. Similarly, there is low or no trust in meaningful parliamentary representation of citizens' needs in lawmaking compared to corporate and political influence.

In the information eco-system, the majority do not trust governments to regulate new technologies with human rights and people-centred approaches. With the rise of mis- and disinformation, few find information distributed by governments to be trustworthy, it is largely seen as an insincere and disingenuous publicity-seeking exercise. Additionally, information shared on statistics, budgets, and other complex information proves difficult to understand by the average citizen and needs to be simplified for meaningful public consumption. The source of information and how it is communicated is proving to be a major trust factor. Artificial Intelligence also plays a big role in exacerbating deficits of trust as to what is genuine and what is fake information, for both governments and citizenry.

Opportunities for Open Government Approaches in Rebuilding Trust in the Region

Meaningful collective action and genuine stakes in the region's prosperity will be key to navigate the nuanced and often complex national and regional challenges, interests and opposition to people-centred progress. It is against this backdrop that we express the following key proposals towards *rebuilding trust through open government*. They are not exhaustive of required reforms; however, they are foundational and critical aspects to be addressed.

- ***Meaningful and Proactive Disclosure of Evidence-Based Information*** – Overall decision making and prioritisation of public agendas of governments in the region would benefit from communicated research, evidence and backing statistics. It is also critical for governments to proactively share verifiable information on how their decisions and initiatives are (i) meeting existing needs and (ii) contributing to resilient, inclusive societies. Lastly, governments would benefit from communicating information on the checks and balances that are in place to ensure that integrity is upheld in all implementations. This includes communication on measures in place to prevent undue influence, and conflicts of interests in public affairs to further support trust building.

- ***Engage better with citizens to enhance trust in both local and national governments*** – There is a significant need for governments to go beyond public participation forums to documenting and publishing all feedback received from citizens on matters of public interest. Governments should then provide additional feedback on (i) how this information was incorporated into policies, laws and systems (ii) provide reasoned responses explaining to the public and other stakeholders why certain priorities, ideas, or activities were or were not included. This will help to promote genuine dialogue and greater buy-in for government initiatives, policies and projects.

- ***Enable Citizens to Follow the Money*** – anecdotal and empirical evidence has shown that most citizens want to know that tax money is being spent prudently, and that wastage, corruption and illicit financial flows are being addressed meaningfully to ensure maximum availability of resources for use towards public needs. Furthermore, that domestic resource mobilisation is fair and not oppressive to their social and economic livelihoods. Governments should implement meaningful fiscal transparency mechanisms to enable citizens to monitor public debt, public spending and report the misuse of public funds. This will help build confidence in public institutions by demonstrating that public funds are being stewarded and maximised for public benefit.

- ***Empowering Citizen Voice in Policymaking*** – Governments must make every effort to ensure that all citizens, including minorities, indigenous peoples, as well as other marginalised groups are not only heard, but that the government is responsive to their voices.

Without meaningful transparency and participation there is a lack of real responsiveness from governments. This will continue to fuel citizens scepticism and distrust in government. Governments should make every effort to put citizens at the heart of policymaking to allow them to shape government plans in areas that they care about most. To ensure the citizen voice beyond elections, governments can take practical measures such as inviting citizens to set budget priorities, vote on key policy proposals, and provide monitoring feedback on stalled or incomplete projects without fear of reprisal from political or business interests.

- **Improved Political Will for Reforms** – The credible intent and commitment of political leadership to initiate, fund, effectively implement and sustain open government approaches for the common good and against self-interests is critical to the success of the objectives of OGP membership. This intent, commitment and resourcing must be sustained until the desired results are achieved. While political will is complex and entails various dimensions and multifaceted underlying factors, it is an imperative and crucial pre-condition for meaningful, sustainable and resilient open government reforms. Meaningful political will means political leadership genuinely believes in the content and benefits of the reform. Political will is difficult to navigate, however, societies with strong transparency, accountability, participation and adherence to the rule of law demonstrate improvements in political will. In the region, the unspoken political mindset is largely to make every effort to retain power at all costs. Therefore, to have meaningful political will for open government approaches to governance, the fear of losing power must be a real and open conversation. As must be the demonstration that fostering transparency, accountability and empowering citizens can enhance buy in, trust and popularity of effective governments. Stakeholders must sit together and develop real value propositions that not only speak to citizen value, but political value as well, if meaningful political will is to be realized.

- **Protect and expand civic space** – Civic space is the underpinning of open government. This is a call for all governments in the region to provide an enabling and safe offline and online environment for people to think and speak freely, act in coordination, and advocate for change without fear of oppression and reprisals. An open and safe space for information, expression, association and assembly is a critical precondition for open and accountable governance. Repression, violence and intimidation, censorship, surveillance, violations of human rights and other oppressive actions in the public arena of engagement and expression must be urgently, but genuinely, addressed.

OGP member countries are urged to take a leading role in cultivating enabling legal frameworks, practices and accountability mechanisms for thriving civic spaces. As an open government community, we can support partnership members to co-create more transformative commitments that enhance and strengthen civic space as well as address key constraints on civil society.

Additionally, at this time of upheaval to civil society operational realities due to geopolitical and funding shifts, the OGP community should collectively work to mitigate the detrimental impact on OGP civil society members as key partners. The unique model of OGP is consequently facing compromise and we must ensure that this approach of collaboration and co-creation continues to thrive in uncertain times.

"Umoja ni Nguvu"
(Swahili for "Unity is Strength)

Let this meeting not only leave us inspired and with strengthened networks—while these are important, we must also translate our discussions into concrete actions and lasting impact. More important is that we hold ourselves accountable to all the proposals generated in our time together, to ensure that our united vision for prosperous, inclusive and resilient societies produces generational fruit that will live beyond the combined years present.

Brief on the CSO Regional Meeting – March 25, 2027

The CSO Regional Meeting held on sidelines of the OGP Africa & Middle East Regional Meeting on March 25, 2027 in Nairobi, Kenya centred on strengthening the civil society's role in advancing open government and democratic governance. Discussions were focused on enhancing public participation, fostering stronger CSO-Government engagement, ensuring funding resilience for civil society organizations and protecting and expanding the civic space.

The session highlighted the importance of collaboration in safeguarding civic freedoms, securing sustainable support for CSOs, and driving meaningful governance reforms. As part of the OGP Regional Meeting, the discussions reinforced the need for joint action to promote transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance across the region.