

Address to Open Government Partnership A cornerstone of good governance – local, national, European

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national, European** 08 May 2014, Dublin Castle

Thank you very much for the invitation here this morning and I'd like to congratulate Minister Howlin and his Department on this very tangible demonstration of their commitment to the OGP project.

It's a particular privilege to be here as European Ombudsman after my time as Irish Ombudsman and Information Commissioner and to join with my successor Peter Tyndall among others in discussing what I consider potentially to be a transformative initiative of unprecedented scale and significance.

If it is revolutionary, and I believe it can be, the revolution comes essentially from the jettisoning of the idea that Government is the sole preserve of government. The guiding philosophy of OGP, as I understand it, is that by giving to citizens what was previously locked away in the private files of the administration, they can join as partners with Government to propose and to create themselves new ways of producing and delivering public services that can radically improve the lives of people from the richest to the poorest states of our world.

At its most radical it partly decouples the legislative process from the legislators and allows the collective wisdom of the people, aided by the supply of critical data collected by government and public agencies, to make better laws and better regulations and propose more intelligent and effective ways of running our countries.

Another, critical, focus of the OGP is its anti corruption drive. The estimated cost of global bribery is more than one trillion dollars per annum. In the EU member states, a conservative estimate is 120 billion euro per annum, roughly the size of the entire EU budget. The cost to human welfare, to human health, to the life prospects of the poorest of our children, to the environment, and to third world development in particular perhaps, is incalculable.

As European Ombudsman, I particularly appreciate the invitation because the EU does not, as such, participate in the OGP. I'll say more about what I think could and should be done about



that in a panel session this afternoon but given the increased and increasing role of the EU institutions in the lives of the people of the individual member states of the Union, I believe that it should be possible to find a way for key EU institutions including my own, to play their role in the development of this initiative which resonates so much with their own work and with their drive to develop and promote better standards of transparency, accountability and integrity.

Two days ago in Frankfurt for example, I met with the President of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi and discussed, given both the drive towards a banking union and closer and more direct ECB supervision of member state banks within the Eurozone, how important it will increasingly become for the ECB to become more transparent and to allow citizens much more access to information to the decision making process of the bank.

The European Commission just yesterday responded to questions I posed arising out of an inspection by my Offices of files relating to how it deals with conflict of interest situations involving civil servants moving into the private sector. Late last year, following another investigation, the Chairman of the Commission's ad hoc ethical committee stepped down in light of concerns raised about possible conflicts with his own work in the private sector. The institutions, and particularly the Commission, are working to improve their governance standards and transparency standards and I believe that if a way is found to bring those institutions into this initiative, then those efforts will be enhanced. The institutions are now too vital to the lives of EU citizens to be mere onlookers at something that is now gaining such global traction.

But this morning, I want to focus on why I see the OGP as a uniquely transformative development.

The OGP creates positive synergies among agendas that used to be largely separate and among associated policy communities that used to pursue those agendas largely in isolation from one another:

- the FOI agenda
- the public participation agenda
- the quality of governance agenda
- the e-government agenda
- the "open data" agenda.

The FOI agenda is focused mainly on access to information as a way of making the holders of public power accountable to citizens for their decisions.

Public participation is focused on empowering citizens and civil society. Although participation is sometimes presented as an "input" value in terms of adding legitimacy, it also has an "output"



dimension. The idea behind, for example, the Aarhus Convention is that public participation has the potential to change the outcomes of public decision-making on the environment, and change them for the better.

Good governance is perhaps the broadest agenda. At one end of its range, it comes close to the accountability focus of FOI, bringing together concern for ethical issues, conflicts of interest, and lobbying. At the other end, it comes close to “better” or “smart” regulation, and so shades into the output focus of public participation.

The e-government agenda mainly concerns improving citizens’ access to public services and making those services more efficient.

Open data is perhaps the outlier. Its primary focus is access to data as a commercial resource. But there are also synergies with the other agendas and a key insight of open data advocates is the transformative potential of open data access on public policy, an issue that I’m not yet sure the general public is sufficiently aware of. But the successes that have already emerged from government open data initiatives, from water point mapping in Tanzania to help rural communities access water supplies to cancer outcome mapping in the UK, should convince the sceptics of their worth.

The most exciting thing about the OGP is that it creates a process and a forum in which the synergies between these different agendas and policy communities can be explored and developed.

The OGP process is itself something new. It is not based on a Treaty between States, or a formal legal framework. Its legitimacy is based both on inputs and outputs. Indeed, one of the most exciting things about it is that it makes that kind of distinction seem rather old-fashioned.

I have no doubt that OGP is the most promising 21st Century global development towards making a living reality of open government and good government.

That is why, as an Irish citizen, I am delighted that Ireland is participating in the OGP.

As European Ombudsman, I will do everything within my power to make sure that the European Union is not left on the side-lines.