

OPEN INSTITUTIONS:

The European Union and the Open Government Partnership

A call to the new EU leadership

We recommend that the new EU leadership commits the EU institutions to close engagement with and eventual membership of the Open Government Partnership (OGP).

OGP participation will encourage the EU institutions to uphold the same inclusion, transparency and accountability standards that they ask of others both inside and outside the EU. It will help bridge the gap between the EU and its citizens, and enhance the EU's credibility in its international efforts to improve the quality of governance in third countries by empowering citizens through participation.

Why OGP?

The OGP is an international initiative whose 64 participating countries have committed to making their governments more open, accountable and responsive to citizens. The OGP process creates the opportunity for ambitious action plans for open government, co-designed by officials and civil society, followed by their jointly-monitored implementation. To date, 20 EU member-states are already engaged with the initiative.

Why the EU?

The EU institutions are more distant than national governments from European voters. The structures and processes within the institutions are difficult for citizens to understand, and there is a widespread perception of a lack of transparency and accountability. EU institutions share or have responsibility for many of the powers exercised by national governments, and have gained further powers as a result of the EU's response to the economic crisis.

EU leaders have made many legal and rhetorical commitments towards open, participatory and accountable EU governance but implementation has often been incomplete or not communicated in a meaningful way to the general public. The current approach towards open EU governance is not adequately responding to the concerns of citizens. As noted by the outgoing European Ombudsman in 2013: "An institutional culture of transparency has yet to be achieved."

Is the EU eligible to join the OGP?

The OGP was initially restricted to state parties (meaning national governments), but international and multilateral bodies are now being considered for participation. Despite shortcomings in the implementation of transparency commitments, the EU already fulfils the OGP membership criteria: for '*fiscal transparency*' the EU publishes and explains its budget on a yearly basis; on '*access to information*', Regulation 1049/2001 requires public access to documents; '*disclosures related to elected or senior public officials*' occurs through public declarations of interests of MEPs and Commissioners; and '*citizen engagement*' happens at the level of public consultations, the transparency register, and the new European Citizens' Initiative.

These membership criteria are minimum baseline standards that participating institutions are expected to improve upon. The process towards developing an action plan would in itself be of benefit. The eventual plan would then include action points towards more transparent decision-making, better consultative processes, and timely and consistent access to documents, among others. The OGP would offer EU citizens a tool to demand improved accountability at the EU level, and an independent, qualitative and quantitative assessment of progress.

Who would be included?

As civil society groups supporting open and participatory government, we believe that commitment to OGP standards and processes should eventually cover all EU institutions. Priority focus should initially be on the three legislative institutions that hold the most political power - the European Commission, Council of the EU and the European Parliament. How the institutions develop that engagement, who leads in each institution and the inter-institutional negotiations on OGP will need to be explored by the institutions themselves, **but the first, all-important step is for EU leaders to make the commitment to do so.** The European elections showed the depth of voter disaffection with a distant and unaccountable EU. The Open Government Partnership is an innovative, participatory and ambitious initiative that has already helped participating governments to improve their policies, governance and democratic legitimacy. This is an opportunity that the new EU leadership cannot afford to miss.

Deadline for sign-on is 16 June. Please send sign-on information (org name and logo), and for further information on this initiative contact:

Neil Campbell neil.campbell@opensocietyfoundations.org

Open Society European Policy Institute

Tel.: +32-(0)2-505 46 42

The final statement, with supporting organisations listed, will be made available to all as soon as possible after 16 June.