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Department:
Public Service and Administration
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**REMARKS BY THE MINISTER FOR THE PUBLIC SERVICE AND
ADMINISTRATION, MINISTER NOXOLO KIVIET,
AT THE OGP SUMMIT TALLINN HIGH LEVEL ROUNDTABLE ON
“REALIZING THE AMBITION OF OPEN GOVERNMENT”,
07 SEPTEMBER 2023**

CEO of the Open Government Partnership

Ministers

Excellencies

Members of the Media

Civil Society Movements

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me first appreciate the government of Estonia and the City of Tallinn as our host, thank you very much for your kind hospitality. Your generosity and kindness will not be forgotten.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am requested to share some thoughts on the topic, “*Realizing the ambition of Open Government*” in our work. Open government can among other things be seen as a way to strengthen democracy through greater transparency, inclusive participation, and collaboration. These concepts are important aspects of administrative democracy, and to develop these democratic aspects in the interdisciplinary setting of open government, government must develop a shared democratic foundation.

Excellencies, we must always be reminded that Open Government Partnership is the instrument that drives the attributes of public values, such as transparency, accountability, public participation, collaboration etc. I am emphasising these attributes because it could be very difficult to realize the ambition of open government without transformers, administrators, and good implementation.

While the term “*open government*” may be relatively new, initiatives to foster the open government principles of transparency, accountability, integrity, and participation have existed for a long time. Open government has widely been phrased and referred to, as transparent and participatory political and administrative mechanisms that lead to better government accountability.

There are scholars who travelled the journey with this concept. One of them is Wallace (1957), who *advocated the importance of open government access to public information and public administration*. He further identified the *fundamental concept of transparency, which is perceived to elevate controls over the government and increase the public acceptance of political decisions, reduce corruption, and give legitimacy to democratic governments*.

Excellencies, realizing the ambition of Open Government requires that government administrators MUST start to adopt open government principles and practices as a new way of managing resources. In the process of planning cycle of government strategic framework, open government principles must find expression. This would assist with the assignment of necessary resources aiming to initiate innovative solutions to pressing challenges such as low levels of trust. Linking the Open Government projects to the wider strategic policy framework and to the budget will be the adequate solution to trust divide.

It is now prudent that governments must start with the initiative of developing more integrated and holistic approaches to promote the open government principles. Without doubt this would represent a new

paradigm of governance that puts citizens at the heart of all government initiative and activities.

Realizing ambition of open government calls for governments to move away from simply perceiving and seeing citizens as “users” of public services. It is high time that governments must consider citizens and civil society as actors that fully participate in the democratic lives of their countries and communities. By so doing, citizens would start making valuable contributions assisting government in addressing different types of challenges. Indeed, this would ensure that the principle of Co-Creation will become the reality.

Yesterday I listened tentatively to all speakers, including the moving speech by the OGP CEO, there is growing call that openness lies at the heart of good and effective government as an essential ingredient of democracy. This call is backed up by three building blocks which are seen to support number of benefits for government and societies. These are improving the evidence base for policy making, strengthening integrity, discouraging corruption, and building public trust in administrative processes.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is important to point out that, the primary goal of the open government agenda is to make government more responsive to the needs and priorities of its citizens. It is every government’s aspiration to provide citizens, and civil society organisations with better access to government information. Indeed, people need to trust that the governance system will deliver the services they need in order to continue with their lives. It should be known that citizens are not asking for ‘favours’, they deserve fundamental rights to ‘know’ how government is planning to deliver services.

Trust

Excellencies, citizen’s trust and confidence are hard won and difficult to restore once dishonoured. Today, more than ever, governments globally need an efficient, effective and well-coordinated system for administration. This is why governments must respond to the public’s call

for better service delivery, otherwise governance will increasingly appear to be a quest rather than a reality.

Again, more than ever, citizens are calling for state institutions that are democratic, efficient in the use of public funds, effective in delivering public goods while in the meantime remain strong players in the increasingly competitive global system.

The need to build confidence in governments in light of the increased concern on corruption and unethical behaviour of their civil servants require governments to review their approaches to ethical conduct.

Indeed, it may just not be possible to effectively address many of the greatest challenges that government is facing without a certain level of trust in public institutions. Lack of trust in the public sector is perhaps the single most important factor for failures in service delivery.

Realizing open government ambition is further embedded in effective communication strategies of government. This may include the arrangement of public meetings and service delivery platforms in subnational as well as the strategic use of both modern and traditional forms of media.

The power of social media can catalyse the spread of information to citizens of their rights and responsibilities, engaging their interest and mobilizing them to build partnerships with different stakeholders. The ability of citizens to organize for collective action and the capacity of government to facilitate and support such mobilization is crucial to the success of open government initiative.

Holding government accountable

We are all aware that, government is the biggest employer and therefore officials and bureaucrats must be accountable for their conduct and performance. In other words, they can and should be held accountable to obey the law and not abuse their powers, and serve the public interest in an efficient, effective, and fair manner.

All states must establish some form of open government mechanisms in order to promote or ensure accountability of public servants.

The obligation of government officials to be accountable to citizens derives from the notions of citizen's and information rights, often enshrined in different legislative prescripts, and the broader set of human rights. These prescripts underline the right of citizens to expect and ensure that government acts in the best interests of the people.

Bringing information into the public sphere and generating public debate is the key element of most accountability initiatives. Be it budget details, the findings of public expenditure reviews, audits or project evaluation results, this information takes on new significance and impact when made accessible to the public at large, serving both to inform and to create an impetus for action.

The legal and regulatory frameworks for open government

One of the progressive administrative actions that governments must take in realising the ambition of open government, would be the development of legal framework of a country. This framework must set out the rules and determines rights and obligations for citizens, stakeholders, and the government.

It is about time that countries must endeavour to include references to the principles of open government and specific rights and obligations associated with them in their legal prescripts. For example, most Constitutions establish access to public information and citizen participation as a basic constitutional rights.

Above all, there must be a declaration by the OGP Rules encouraging countries to develop Open Government Partnership Strategy that is aligned with the National Development Plan to give common vision to a country's open government agenda.

Conclusion

The total realization of the open government ambition requires transparency and, most importantly, the cooperation with respect to co-creation agenda in all spheres of government.

To many countries, realisation of open government ambition provides a change of paradigm which has profound consequences for the way political systems, governments and public administration are run. Nonetheless, we must all of us implement the OGP goals and agenda with vigour and diligent in order to better the lives of our citizen.

I thank you,

Mercie