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Assessing the Potential Impact of Open Government Initiatives

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The Open Government Partnership (OGP) was established in 2011, following the great acceptance that this new philosophy of public management has received across the world. Over 60 countries have become members of this global network. The extent of their commitment to open government is established in **action plans** that are periodically reviewed and updated. These plans contain projects and initiatives that I have classified into seven categories (and 31 subcategories not described here):



1. **Expansion of public information available to citizens.**
2. **Improvements in the exercise of the right to public information.**
3. **Improvements in the access and delivery of public services.**
4. **Protection of the rights of customers and public officials.**
5. **Increase in the transparency of public management.**
6. **Promotion of citizen participation in public management.**
7. **Increase in institutional capacity for open government.**

The classification is based on the action plans submitted to the OGP by 14 Latin American countries and 12 others, selected from North America, Europe, Asia and Africa.

My initial examination of these plans leads to the conclusion that most initiatives and future projects belong to the broad category of e-government technologies. However, the potential impact that would produce the full implementation of these action plans on public management and on the role of the citizenry in the policymaking process has not been fully assessed yet. This article contributes in this direction. Such an evaluation should first include the separate, and then combined analysis of several variables:

1. Degree of complexity or sophistication of an open government (OG) technology.

It requires an estimate of the extent to which such technology implies a significant jump or move forward vis-à-vis previous applications. By technology, in general, I mean any set of knowledge and techniques employed to allow human beings modify their material or virtual environment for

satisfying social needs. It may be assumed that the degree of innovation could possibly be measured by using a scale that would consider:

(a) The degree of technological novelty in terms of programming tools, supports, channels or applications.

(b) Their degree of complexity in terms of number of actors, entities and relationships involved, as well as quantity of services offered by the initiative.

2. Degree of social antagonism potentially caused by an OG initiative.

It depends mainly on the relative power of the actors affected to resist its implementation. Although most OG actions tend to be neutral or positive in their consequences on most social actors, many tools tend to strongly modify the cultural or technological bases of public management. Their implementation may thus find opposition from various sources:

(1) Administrative employees turned into modern bureaucratic *luddites* fearing to lose their jobs as work processes are automated or simplified.

(2) Government suppliers accustomed to winning contracts through spurious channels, who may resist the introduction of transparent procurement systems. (3) Political appointees, forced to disclose the results of their performance or their personal wealth and income tax returns.

3. Demonstration effect on the initiative.

It depends, among other things, on how easy it is to reproduce or transfer the tools or processes involved, as well as on the relative advantages (i.e., time-saving, economic, organizational) implied in the replacement of previous practices. Mimicry appears to be a dominant feature of the action plans. Not only technology evolves swiftly. Their applications are rapidly spread and adopted in different contexts, even where the prevailing cultural patterns would seem impervious to their acceptance. The frequency with which an innovation appears in the different action plans is a good indicator of its demonstration effect.

4. Temporal dimension of an innovation.

Whether it seeks to obtain, develop, use or apply a specific piece of information for solving a particular problem or, rather, to modify a certain aspect of public management in a permanent way makes a huge difference. A special study aimed at evaluating the capacity of government response to the demands of information from the citizenry would be an example of the first situation. The adoption of a permanent survey (i.e., a barometer) to assess the quality of services of a municipality or the construction of a one-stop window for integrating several e-government services, would exemplify the second situation.

5. Population scope of the innovation.

Assessment of this variable simply requires an estimate of the number of people reached by the initiative. Projects included in the action plans may involve a very specific and small number of people (i.e., whistle-blowers) or they may reach a country's entire population, as in the case of laws to safeguard privacy or of the simplification of the process to obtain identification.

6. Sustainability of the initiative.

It requires an estimation of the probability of success of a new technology and a fair estimate of it becoming naturalized as a new practice in the functional area being considered. Not every project included in an action plan has similar prospects of acceptance or institutionalization. The more a particular innovation tends to produce important changes in the values, interests or relative power of social actors (such as turning information into a politically important resource), the less its chances to be accepted and converted into a dominant cultural or technological pattern.

Finally, the **impact** of a new OG initiative would result from the combined analysis of the variables just discussed. A scale should be devised containing indicators of the potential scope and depth of change, namely the relative degree of transformation that the norms, tools or systems proposed or adopted in the name of OG, could produce on the values, attitudes and behavior previously observable in the interaction between citizens and public officials. Impact would be greater the higher the values obtained by the initiative in terms of the depth of change, its degree of complexity or technological sophistication, its temporal and population scope and its sustainability. Demonstration effects upon other systems or applications, and a favorable cost-benefit relationship, may also be considered as relevant variables.