

Interview with Steph Muchai

Steph Muchai is a lawyer and seasoned governance professional with over 15 years of professional experience. She is widely recognized as a global leader who has worked extensively in various capacities towards transparency, good governance, public accountability, enabling civic space, access to justice for indigent and marginalised people, and supporting active citizenship.

Ms. Muchai currently serves as Co-Chair of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a mandate assumed in 2025 alongside the Government of Brazil. Her professional trajectory has been marked by a consistent commitment to advancing technically grounded policies aimed at strengthening good governance and ensuring effective public oversight by an informed citizenry.

This interview was conducted by Professor **Mário Vinícius Claussen Spinelli**, from the São Paulo School of Business Administration (FGV EAESP), and Guest Special Editor of the Revista da CGU.

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Spinelli: Steph, thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. You currently serve as Co-Chair of the Open Government Partnership, a distinctive institutional arrangement within the international system that brings together governments and civil society within a collaborative governance framework. In this context, how do you assess the contribution of civil society to the effectiveness and outcomes of this model?

Steph: Most Governments and civil society generally have the same goal for the countries, that is to grow resilient, just, and sustainable societies built on trust, accountability, openness and responsiveness. Being non-state actors, civil society often acts as a bridge between citizens and the state being made up of community groups, charitable foundations, volunteers, social movements and grassroots organisations, non-governmental, non-profit, and voluntary organizations, and in some countries trade unions as well, all of whom are focused on the public interest.

In a collaborative governance framework, civil society play various roles. They often support incubation of reform ideas and strategies that support countries to better deliver on public goods and services. For example, the open contracting approach which seeks to make public procurement more transparent, efficient, accountable and responsive – civil society around the world worked with local governments and small businesses to test the open contracting approach. These efforts demonstrated positive results in delivery of public goods and services and even resulted in savings for governments. With these lessons in hand, the open contracting approach

was able to spread and scale up in various countries for the benefit of citizens, businesses and governments alike.

Civil society has also plays a key role in civic education for government reforms and re-building trust where it has been fragmented between citizens and states. A decade ago, beneficial ownership was a new approach in advancing corporate transparency, mitigating corruption (including money laundering), and ensuring the public knows who their governments are doing business with. At first, it seemed a technical approach unrelatable to citizens day to day realities. Civil society took up the task to support civic education on beneficial ownership clarifying in simple and accessible language why it is important and how it benefits citizens. This not only spread awareness of open government reforms but also helped to boost compliance with beneficial ownership disclosure enhancing the scope of the reforms. This is just one example of an area where civil society has helped information dissemination to the public about policy reforms. Often on various other public interest issues, civil society boosts public participation efforts by bringing individuals and groups together to discuss and debate public policies and disseminate information in simple and accessible language on issues that affect different groups or society at large.

Civil society is wrongly thought to always be in tension with governments, that is not the case. While there are times that civil society must hold governments accountable for not delivering to the public as they are mandated to do, it is not a consistent posture of opposition with no cause. A collaborative go-

vernance framework means a balance of demanding accountability to citizens with promoting democratic engagement and participation. This often times means civil society co-implement reforms, provide technical expertise and producing evidence to support informed decision making towards more accountable, responsive, inclusive, and effective governments serving their people.

Spinelli: Regarding social participation, there is a growing debate about the deliberative quality and influence capacity of participatory mechanisms. In your view, what institutional conditions are necessary for participation to transcend beyond consultative dimensions and produce tangible effects on the decision-making process?

Steph: Tokenism in public participation has long been a concern of both citizens and civil society. Often the shared reality between countries is that notices for public participation are too short, the process hurried, feedback channels vague and opaque. Of most concern, is that the final product of public participation, whether a law, policy, public project and so on, does not reflect the views of the people. In some countries, the concerns go as far as having pre-organised public participation groups who receive money to provide pre-determined outcomes in the process that support illegitimate interests of corrupt public officials and in some cases, business interests.

Institutional conditions necessary for participation to produce tangible effects on the decision-making process include:

- Timely notices of public participation engagements ensuring both offline and online varied modes of engagement are available to the public. This includes making the information to be discussed accessible to the public in a timely manner. Governments can partner with civil society to produce simplified information materials to ensure discussions are well informed and understood.
- Ensure that the planned public participation approach is inclusive of various groups of society. This also means that the scope and depth of engagement must be in proportion to the importance of the public interest issue at hand.
- Partner with civil society to ensure capacity building ahead of the engagement and during the implementation of the public interest measure to maintain legitimacy, trust and public support for government reforms.

- Ensure feedback mechanisms are in place ahead of public participation engagements. These mechanisms should include feedback to the public on how their proposals were incorporated or rejected; and overall how their feedback influenced the decision-making process.

Spinelli: Considering comparative experiences, there is significant variation in the outcomes of open government policies. In your assessment, are there cases that provide clear evidence of positive impact? Which contextual factors have proven most decisive in shaping the success of such initiatives?

Steph: One clear case of positive impact of open government reforms can be found in an OGP Local member government, Makueni County Kenya. In December 2019, Makueni County launched its open contracting portal at with detailed public information about each step along the tender and award procurement process during an event celebrating the International Anti-Corruption Day. Government users were also able to access a Corruption Risk Dashboard, a tool that flags tenders and awards based on specific metrics that may indicate corruption.

Makueni County was East Africa's first sub-national government to have an open contracting data portal with 133 procurement contracts and 326 projects worth KES 699 million made public.

One year later, improved competition, efficiency and transparency was documented. It was found that the number of public procurement processes published had nearly tripled from 160 to 461. 67% The then Governor of the County, Hon Kivutha Kibwana stated that the reforms had already saved 30 million shillings (approximately USD 273,800) in road construction and savings later increased to 45 million shillings (approximately USD 407,000) based on 129 minor and major road construction projects by the Roads, Transport, Energy and Public Works agency.

The key contextual factor that proved most decisive in the shaping of this initiative was high level political will. Governor Kivutha Kibwana, being the most senior official of the County Government was committed to these reforms for the people of Makueni County. As such, he personally gave direction and opportunity for teams within the County Government to be trained on the open contracting approach and understand it's value, why it is being adopted and what is hoped to be achieved. The trainings and other capacity engagements were done at both political and technical levels of governments which was

extremely useful in advancing the work especially in uptake of ownership. The Governor also gave room to the various teams to be supported to attend peer exchange opportunities to meet with other OGP reformers, open contracting advocates as well as local governments implementing forms. This provided a sense of community and exposure to open government approaches in the course of implementing the reforms.

Spinelli: *With respect to the 2025–2026 Co-Chair agenda, how would you characterize the role of the OGP in promoting open government norms and supporting their adaptation to varying institutional capacities across countries? What lessons emerge regarding the balance between global ambition and local capacity?*

Steph: The Open Government Partnership provides a space for like-minded governments to pursue domestic reforms within a space that can globally scale collective action in various thematic areas of open government into global norms. This means that together, governments and civil society co-develop global norms through their domestic application and approaches to implementing open governance. The more enabling global norms are established, the more sustainable and perpetuating they are for citizens in various countries. Global ambitions are usually high level, aspirational and strategic. The benefit that the Partnership provides is that these are then turned into actionable commitments that often times result in boosted local capacity through technical expertise, partnerships and strong results close to the people. Sometimes it is the case that when local governments join the OGP Local Program, their capacity is at a lower level. They receive support both from the OGP team as well as peer local governments, and some action plans later we observe growth, robustness of work and soar in ambition.

Spinelli: *On the 15th anniversary of the Partnership, what institutional lessons, drawn from its accumulated experience, can help consolidate critical insights for strengthening the open government agenda in the coming cycle, particularly with regard to the sustainability of reforms?*

Steph: This is a reflective time for the Partnership coming to its 15th anniversary. These reflections of course include what has been learnt over the last decade and a half, but also importantly looking forward to what can be harnessed for the future of societies. From my perspective and experiences these are the

key lessons I would highlight to strengthen our work and approaches:

Express and visible high level political will is critical on global stages for the sustainability of open government approaches. This political will extends to the collaborative model of work between governments and civil society to ensure people centered outcomes for prosperous, sustainable and resilient societies. The domestic political will is equally critical for the technical work on reforms to see the light of day, be adequately resourced and sustained over various administrations of government.

Deliberate planning and stewardship of political transitions caused by changes in governments will uphold the sustainability and resilience of open government reforms. Interestingly, civil society transitions also affect the sustainability of reforms. These transitions are usually occasioned by funding constraints or end of programs, personal transitions as well as shrinking civic space issues. These transitions mean that critical technical knowledge is lost to the community, critical relationships with government officials may be lost and funding partnerships may also suffer if civil society organisations suffer high attrition. Therefore, core and responsive funding for civil society partners of the Partnerships, as well as strong internal handovers and re-assignments are needed to maintain this work.

Resourcing! The work of the Partnership, its members and the community needs a commitment to sustainable resourcing. This begins from the country members of the Partnership paying the minimum or recommended country contributions in a timely manner to demonstrate ownership of this Partnership and the open government way of serving its people. Secondly, from external partners who support this much needed work of participatory, accountable, innovative and just governance underpinned by the rule of law. These are partners who ensure that both governments and civil society can continue this collaborative framework particularly in this time of history where the importance of such collaboration is being downplayed or overridden.

Spinelli: *In light of the structural asymmetries that characterize the global economy, which institutional arrangements prove most effective in facilitating a consistent transition toward economic*

justice, particularly in terms of the redistribution of resources and capabilities among countries?

Steph: Asset recovery is a key component of economic justice through the reversal/redistribution of stolen public funds or illicit wealth to citizens or to governments in order to be used for delivery of public goods and services; or other development goals of a country. This social re-use could include just distribution to citizen centric priorities like education, much needed infrastructure, affordable housing, clean water and sanitation, and so forth.

The success of asset recovery and the just redistribution of funds centres largely on international cooperation, meaningful political will and effective mechanisms for the reuse of the assets for the benefit of society. Public support is also key to support meaningful and just resource re-distribution.

There are a number of high profile international asset recovery cases in countries such as Brazil, Kenya, Italy, Philippines, Equatorial Guinea and others. In those and other cases, documented social use of the recovered assets towards economic justice include use of recovered monies for medical supplies, recovery and re-purposing of forest land for environmental benefits, use of confiscated land to provide community services, rehabilitation of public offices and so on.

Efforts towards asset recovery is primarily susceptible to economic volatility, however when successful can ensure much needed resources are made available for public/social use. This is an area of economic justice that countries can focus on towards strengthening both international cooperation and institutional strengthening efforts on the same. This is especially the case for low GDP countries with high corruption.

Spinelli: Finally, given the current international context, what are the main challenges and opportunities for the open government agenda in the coming years?

Steph: The key challenges in this current geopolitical environment include but are not limited to continued threats to multilateralism, declining civic space, rule of law and increasing authoritarian, lawless governments. The global insecurity realities are also requiring states attention which may affect the continued priority of open government reforms and their resourcing. Democratic resilience is also experiencing quite significant challenges globally.

However, various opportunities are presenting themselves amidst these and other challenges. Prime Minister Carney of Canada proposed for ‘middle power’ countries to understand their value and strength in agreeing to act together around continued shared values in a powerful and impactful way. OGP can play a key role in supporting such ‘middle countries’ through its strength in convening and connecting both government and civil society actors. It is an opportunity to pursue a catalytic role to forge alliances and amplify key reformers and torch bearers for this season and time.

OGP has the opportunity more than ever to leverage its strong and diverse community with 70+ countries acting as a whole, producing collective action and evidence that open government is a strong pathway to prosperous and resilient societies. The 150+ local government membership ensures that governments stay close to the people and reforms are even more closely connected to the people.

Finally, at a time when good governance is literally under siege from various corners, OGP can also prioritise developing evidence led impact on how open government delivers for people.



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