An Open Government takes humility
Remarks on the occasion of the first anniversary of the OGP
Rakesh Rajani, New York, 26 September, 2012

Ministers, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen:

As we celebrate the first year of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), we find ourselves at a crossroads. If I was a betting man, I'd say there is at best a one in five chance that the OGP will achieve its full promise.

Not that we haven't made remarkable progress. Brazil has a powerful new freedom of information law that was nudged into being by its membership in the OGP. The Philippines and Indonesia have shared experiences on checkmyschool so that citizens can know whether money reaches school and children are learning. In Tanzania, a civil society and government collaboration is about to distribute four million popular booklets countrywide to engage citizens and invite their views on how government can be more open. Across the world foreign aid and resource extraction is becoming more transparent. And there are many other examples.

At one level, if only 10-15 OGP countries achieve just a third of what they have committed to, the effort will have been worth it. The nature of many commitments is such that even just a few succeeding could make a key difference in lives of millions of people.

That said, we can do much better than this minimal ambition.

When we came here a year ago, under the leadership of President Obama and President Rousseff, we did not say let's do some really important projects. It was not a vision of incremental change. We made a much bigger promise. We promised to respond to the deep human impulse for freedom and dignity we witnessed in the Arab Spring, in the concerns raised by Occupy Wall Street, and by the less visible but equally important voices across the world for better services, more inclusion, greater internet freedom, and an end to corruption.

The vision was about transforming the very relationship between the governors and the governed, about creating a new compact where governments truly serve their citizens and create conditions where people thrive.

As things stand, the odds that the OGP will achieve this deeper vision are small. And if that happens, it won't be because the moment is not ripe or that citizens did not want it. It would be because we -- particularly the government and civil society members of the OGP Steering Committee, as well as within the 57 countries -- will have failed to exercise necessary leadership and squandered the opportunity.

Our job is to change the odds of OGP succeeding.
It won't be easy. Changing long established cultures and practices anywhere is hard; changing the culture of government is even harder. Long ago my father gave me some stern advice. "Son", he told me, "you need to avoid three things in life: fire, stormy seas, and the government."

I believe that many people across the world would agree with that advice, because their primary experience of government is that of an overbearing and callous institution that cares little about their wellbeing and aspirations, and in fact all too often undermines them. It reminds us of the lived reality of Mohamed Bouazizi, the fruit vendor in Tunis who refused to accept everyday humiliation at the hands of the authorities.

Not all citizen responses are as dramatic as that of Mr Bouazizi. But we should not make the mistake of conflating lack of dramatic expression with public satisfaction. In countries of the North and South there is deep unease and desire for a better life, for prosperity for all and not just the elite. The human spirit can only bend so far in the face of insult. It is not clear that we in the OGP fathom what this means, and are up to the challenge.

Even where governments and civil society are willing, realizing the full promise of OGP commitments is not easy; executing meaningful programs is very difficult. In Kenya the Open Data portal makes an impressive level of data public for the first time, but few use it. In Tanzania, the project to enable citizens to report broken water points through their mobile phones, a project that was featured in the OGP launch film and that my organization supported, has largely failed, because people simply did not believe reporting data would make a difference. Overall, if we are honest, of the 300 or so commitments made in the OGP plans so far, the glass is more empty than full. These are still early days, but the window to learn lessons and get our act together is closing fast.

The true metric of our partnership is not how many countries sign on to the open government declaration, but how many commitments are delivered in countries, and how many citizens experience concrete improvements in their lives. That is why the Independent Review Mechanism, about to take off, is crucial to the success and legitimacy of the OGP.

Going forward, what will it take for the rubber to hit the road in countries? We will need to summon all our talents, determination and resources. Of all the things we need, I want to suggest there is one that is most important.

And that is humility.

Humility is to acknowledge that we do not have all the answers. It is about government not pretending it can solve the world's intractable problems, provide the perfect services or have figured out decent accountability. It would welcome people to give ideas, to be truly curious, and to develop practical mechanisms to handle such ideas. Because
some of the best thinking and our greatest innovations come from outside the box, from unusual people.

Second, humility is to welcome criticism, even where it feels imbalanced and does not appreciate what we have done. It is our job to get through the noise to find the truth in what people say, to treat it as valuable feedback, and to use it to make course corrections. Even more importantly, even where it does not serve these instrumental purposes, we must protect it because the right to speak up is so deeply part of what it means to be human. For this reason the most important indicator of open government may be the legal provision -- and practical implementation -- to the right to information and freedom of expression.

Third, humility is to create a new collaborative way of doing government, a way that is less about issuing directives and more about creating conditions in which governments and citizens come together to solve common problems. It means honoring people’s rights and intelligence, harnessing technology in grounded ways, taking risks and fostering creativity. It is asking citizens to be co-responsible for our common fate.

An open government with humility takes confidence. And when it is genuine, it is far more powerful than brute force and far more persuasive than spin.

I believe that the idea of open government is as fundamental as some of our greatest achievements of the last century, such as that of the equality of men and women and equality of the races; indeed underlying them all is the deep human impulse for freedom and dignity. That is why, despite my concern about the prospects of the OGP, I am optimistic. Open government is so fundamental to being human that the arc of human history, driven by the everyday actions millions of people across the world, will inevitably bend towards openness. The challenge before us, and awesome privilege, is whether we muster the humility and good sense to be part of that movement.