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Tanzania’s Transparency Agenda
By Elsie Eyakuze
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Minister Matthias Chikawe and Rakesh Rajani, a Tanzanian civil society leader, discuss the potential impacts of OGP in Tanzania.

Matthias Chikawe, Tanzanian Minister for Justice and Constitutional Affairs, does not mince words when he talks about his country’s participation in the Open Government Partnership (OGP). “It’s something that is not in our culture,” says Chikawe. “Our government has always been run on confidentiality, so this is a big change. You need a big change of attitude by civil servants.”

“It’s one thing to say, ‘Let’s do it and make a plan.’ But it’s quite another to change a culture,” adds Rakesh Rajani, head of Twaweza, a government accountability NGO in East Africa. Rajani goes on to stress that the Tanzanian government, known for its lack of transparency, is not monolithic: there are those who support change, and those who might need coaxing into it.

Chikawe and Rajani are sitting in adjacent chairs at the Twaweza offices in Dar es Salaam in a rarely seen instance of government and civil society collaboration. It is a hopeful sight, considering the checkered history of Rajani’s relationship with his government. In 2005, he was executive director of Haki Elimu, an education advocacy NGO, the government banned the organization from “undertaking any studies on Tanzania’s education.” The situation was resolved in February 2008.

When the two men are asked if the social media community has been approached to assist with OGP-Tanzania’s agenda, uncertainty creeps into the conversation, because social media are still new, and public institutions are in the initial phases of trying to harness them for their work. For several years now, however, young Tanzanians have been using various social media with some success to push for increased transparency. Plus, says Rajani, the issue of communication goes beyond new technologies. What OGP-Tanzania must figure out is how to spread the culture of open government throughout the public sector, right down to service providers on the ground.

Chikawe says that citizen participation is being sought through two main approaches: public meetings, with a focus on where local government projects are planned and how they are monitored; and access to the Internet, to make information available. Twaweza is interested in creating opportunities for citizens to engage more effectively in their day-to-day interactions with the government, such as at public schools and clinics.

“Practical accountability on the ground is important,” says Rajani. “Citizens have to have some level of confidence that there will be consequences.”

Rajani points out that government accountability and confidence are also beneficial for the public sector. If government employees are rewarded or disciplined according to how they perform—as verified by their “clients,” citizens—it could motivate an overall improvement in services.

“Open Government Partnership is about helping government to create an environment in which citizens can get things done,” says Rajani.