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Digital Transformation in the Context of the Open Government Partnership

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Abstract. This paper explores the connection between membership in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and digital transformation. It employs a qualitative research approach and document analysis to examine OGP IRM reports and government self-assessment reports, to get a sense of the nature of digital transformation commitments made within OGP national action plans. This includes a look at what the commitments are, why they are made, and their results. Ultimately, it is found that while few OGP members focus on achieving digital transformation results, most are not leveraging their membership to advance digital transformation. Moreover, those that do are not doing so in a way that addresses a clear policy or governance issue, rendering it difficult to comment on whether the commitments are effectively advancing open government. The mandatory assessment of OGP action plans helps, to some degree, to drive members to complete their commitments, and serves as a useful tool for advancing policies as they relate to open government.

Keywords: Digital Transformation, Open Government Partnership, Qualitative Research

1. Introduction

Today, we are witnessing important connections between digital technology and governance, particularly within the open government movement. Governments joining the Open Government Partnership (OGP), for example, all sign the Open Government Declaration in which they commit to, among other things, using digital technology to advance improved governance: “We commit to developing accessible and secure online spaces as platforms for delivering services, engaging the public, and sharing information and ideas.” [1]. In this way, OGP membership, can be viewed, in part, as a platform for advancing digital transformation.

The goal of this paper is to understand how digital transformation is understood in the context of the OGP. It asks: (1) How is digital transformation understood in countries that have membership in OGP? And (2) how does membership in OGP facilitate the implementation of digital transformation strategies? To answer these questions, a qualitative research design based on document analysis was used to analyse OGP action

plans and assessment documents according to a definition of digital transformation by Mergel et al [2] in the public sector that considers several dimensions: the objects that are to be digitally transformed, the reasons to do so, the processes and the results to be achieved. This study shows that not only are few countries with OGP membership using their membership to digitally transform the public sector, it also reveals that they focus on digital transformation mainly in terms of the results to be achieved. This paper starts by looking at literature on digital transformation and open government. This is followed by a discussion on research design, results, analysis and discussion.

2. Literature Review

Digital technology has spurred organizations across all sectors to develop strategies to harness the benefits that digitalization brings to manufacturing, service delivery, customer relations, and human resource development. Strategies will usually involve the explicit transformation of key business operations to impact product development, internal and external workflow processes, organizational structures, but also company values and concepts. All digital transformation strategies have four central dimensions: the technologies used in an organisation, the attitudes towards them and their adoption, the expected and actual impact of digital technology strategies on value chains, changes in organizational structure by incorporating digital technologies and activities, and the financial aspects driving transformation [3]. Before developing a digital strategy, it is important to know what digital transformation is, Mergel et al [2], for example define it as “*a comprehensive organizational approach*” that does not have a “*measurable and defined end status, as well as a fixed budget. Instead, digital transformation is a continuous process that needs frequent adjustments of its processes, services, and products to external needs*” (p. 10).

Similarly, governments and public administrations aim to transform internal workflow processes, modes of service delivery, and channels of communication with their stakeholders using digital technologies. The emergence and proliferation of digital tools and the digital transformation of public organizations has led to several initiatives, reforms and new principles, and policies. The Tallinn Declaration [4] is one example of a non-binding agreement encouraging governments to provide digital services that are seamless, secure, open, transparent and interoperable. Thus, government’s use of information technology is to create public value by achieving organizational change, improving service delivery, understanding users’ needs [5] and to make changes to institutional structures and arrangements that may lead to a reduction of costs, the development of (better) policies, increasing efficiency and effectivity [6]. Digital tools can also be employed to sustain multiple or changing public values, support collaboration between the stakeholders, ensure public accountability by increasing transparency and openness [7]. This sort of proactive and digital disclosure is at the heart of contemporary open government. Open, transparent, and accountable government represents the basis of an informed citizenry and advances in social media, data analytics, coding, citizen engagement approaches, open and big data, and citizens’ demands all lead to an unprecedented open government that is increasingly ongoing, interactive and transparent [8]. Openness requires that governments establish a range of approaches, processes,

infrastructure, and policies to ensure that citizens, civil society, and others have access to government information, data, and participatory mechanisms today and in future.

Open government is intimately linked to other concepts that are at the intersection of technology and governance, including e-government [9, 10] and government 2.0 [11]. However, open government is broader. It represents the capacity of new technologies and a fundamental shift in the culture and practice of governance that extends beyond the web 2.0 platform on which government 2.0 is based. As Don Tapscott states, it is a “redesign of how government operates; how and what the public sector provides and ultimately how governments interact and engage with their citizens” [11 p. Xvi]. This redesign does not mean a radical or sudden departure from previous modes of operation; rather, we might think of it as the maturation of e-government and government 2.0. Its emphasis is on sharing, the distribution of power and collaboration. It includes things such as peoples’ right to access documents and government proceedings, meaningful participation of citizens and better communication between branches and levels of government [12].

One of the most notable drivers of open government for almost a decade has been the Open Government Partnership (OGP). Founded in 2011 by eight national governments, membership now includes 78 national governments and 20 local governments [13]. It brings together governments and civil society in an effort to develop and implement strategies to foster “accountable, responsive, and inclusive governance” [14]. Members must sign the *Open Government Declaration* [1], which sets out a number of shared values and commitments, including a commitment to harness digital technology. In addition, government members are obligated to co-create, with civil society, national action plans (NAP) every two years. The plans outline a series of commitments to be implemented over the two-year life cycle of the NAP that will improve open government. In this way, NAPs can serve as one important platform for moving specific agendas or policies, such as digital transformation, forward. OGP membership also requires agreeing to have NAPs and progress toward completion assessed by an Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM). The IRM process, as it relates specifically to national members, has changed considerably since the start of OGP resulting in different types of reports.

While all members are assessed by IRM, many also followed OGP processes, which have also changed over time, and delivered their own self-assessment at the mid and end of terms milestones of their NAPs. As will be discussed below, all of the IRM and self-assessment documents are useful to understanding government priorities, and actions. In the case of this paper, and as will be discussed further in the research design section that follows, the NAP and these assessment documents allow us to see what governments are focusing on when it comes to digital transformation, as well as how it has been moved forward, if at all.

3. Research Design and Methodology

For this study, the researchers aim to understand how those countries that have membership in the OGP understand and implement digital transformation. A qualitative ap-

proach was selected for this study as qualitative research promotes a deep understanding of a real-world complexity and can lead to an in-depth description and explanation of what is being investigated [15]. This study is therefore an exploratory study and document analysis was used to gain the data needed to answer the research questions. Given that understanding is the primary goal, the researchers are central to both data collection and analysis. The results thus represent a rich description of the phenomena [16] rather than an “objective” post-positivist answers.

In order to answer the research questions, documentary analysis was used to gather information from selected texts and to study the content according the relevant dimensions. To investigate the extent to which countries with OGP membership understand and implement digital transformation, the documents used for analysis were systematically selected. It is important to consider the documents selected for and to assess their authenticity in order to explore their content [17]. The analysis of the documents is based on a process of “evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed” [18 p.33].

Krippendorf [19] suggests that documents or other text data such as government guidelines and directives, official documents, programs and policies and periodic reports can be analysed in a hermeneutic approach through a five-step process including: (1) access to documents and data, (2) checking the validity of documents, (3) comprehending the documents, (4) analysing the data, and (5) applying the information to themes. Using these principles, the documents identified in the electronic database were screened and for validity and checked for comprehensibility, then analysed. After identifying the relevant commitments, the researchers were able to undertake documentary research by looking at the membership pages [13] for the four countries with relevant commitments. From each member’s page, it was possible to locate relevant IRM reports, as well as any government self-assessments done related to the commitments in question.

Bowen recommends that a document review should lead to the identification of meaningful and relevant passages of text or other data rather than engaging in a numeric quantification [18]. The researchers therefore decided to consider and analyse all the documents according to the coding structure developed in Mergel et al [2]. They considered and analysed all the documents according to the codes of the following themes: what is the focus of digital transformation (the “object”), how will digital transformation occur (the “process”), why is needs to occur (the “reason”) and what results are expected (the “results”) [2]. Thus, on the one hand, the coding leads to numeric results, at the same time, analysing the coded material allows the qualitative analysis of the results.

3.1 Document Analysis

The document began with the identification of the commitments made within OGP NAPs that relate to digital transformation. To do this, the researchers used the OGP Explorer, a database of 3856 commitments made within OGP NAPs from 2011 to 2018

[20]. Ultimately, only 7 of 3856 commitments contained a reference to digital transformation (data regarding the relevant commitments are valid as of March 22, 2020 when search was conducted). These included: 1 commitment from Australia, 4 from France, 1 from Italy, and 1 from Sweden. While this paper focuses on trends and attitudes toward digital transformation, more generally, and less on the specific of each commitment, it is useful to note the focus of each of the seven commitments. The full text of each commitment can be found in the relevant NAPs cited in Table 1:

Table 1. OGP Commitments Analysed

| Country | NAP | Commitment Title |
|-----------|--------------|---|
| Australia | 2016-18 [21] | Digitally transform the delivery of government services |
| France | 2018-20 [22] | Developing an open science ecosystem |
| “ | “ | Increasing transparency in public procurement |
| “ | “ | Organize an international GovTech summit in France |
| “ | 2015-17 [23] | Grow a Culture of Openness Data Literacy and Digital Technologies |
| Italy | 2016-18 [24] | Lecce Start up in the City |
| Sweden | 2016-18 [25] | Putting citizens at the centre eGovernment of government administration reforms |

The document selection process led to identification of 10 documents from 4 countries to be analysed. They represented either a government self-assessment (N=3) or an Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM) assessment (N=7). It should be noted that the distribution of the available reports was not consistent across the four countries. Italy, for example, did not have a government self-assessment. Similarly, there was only one available IRM report for Australia, whereas France has four (remembering it has multiple commitments related to digital transformation), and Italy and Sweden each have two.

Government self-assessments are created by OGP member countries and provide varying levels of detail on progress made toward completion of commitments. Some have offered midterm and end of term reports, while others might offer one or the other, and others still will not undertake the assessment. These reports are useful as they can clarify the goal of the commitment, the rationale for including it in country’s NAP, progress toward completion, along with mention of issues that might be helping or hindering completion.

While the IRM reports contain some of the same information, it originates from a different source that is supposed to be both neutral, and independent of government [26]. In general, the IRM reports on adherence to the OGP process, the quality of co-creation activities, the fit of NAP commitments to the open government context in the country being assessed (does the NAP help to solve some of the challenges to open government in the country), and completion levels of commitments. The IRM reports also make recommendations to government on how, and whether, to move forward with commitments. The reports themselves generate a lot of data and are useful for getting an overview of open government activities within individual member countries, and across OGP.

4. Results

All the available government self-assessments [21-25] and IRM reports [27-33] were coded by one researcher only according to the dimensions in Mergel et al [2]: (1) the focus of digital transformation (the “object”), (2) how will digital transformation occur (the “process”), (3) reasons for its transformation (the “reasons”), and (4) results are expected (the “results”) [2]. Nvivo was used to upload, analyse and code the documents and to extract the results.¹

The coding showed that the documents focus the results and to a lesser extent, processes and objects of digital transformation, whilst the reasons were hardly mentioned.

4.1 Government Self-Assessments

On the basis of the 4 dimensions coded, the government self-assessments [21-25] focus on “results” to be gained through digital transformation (72.73%) and to a lesser extent, the “process” of digital transformation (18.18%). The “object” that is to be digitally transformed is hardly mentioned, the reasons for requiring digital transformation not at all (0%).

4.2 Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM)

The main focus of all the IRM reports [27-33] was on the “results” (57%), whilst the “object” (21%) and “process” of digital transformation played smaller roles. The “reason” for digital transformation were close to 0. This breakdown is perhaps unsurprising given the one of the primary goals of the IRM reports is to provide an overview of completion and results.

5. Analysis

In the analysis, the 4 dimensions of digital transformation and the main focus of each country with OGP documents referring to digital transformation is analysed in greater depth. Whilst all countries focused on the results to be achieved, France also considers the process of digital transformation and Italy the objects to be transformed. The analysis is presented by country, in order to show to the similarities and differences between the only 4 countries with OGP membership which mention “digital transformation” in commitments contained in the OGP Explorer.

5.1 Australia

The GSA and the IRM documents analysed show that Australia focuses on the results or outcomes to be achieved (74%), more than the process (14%) or the outcomes of digital transformation (11%). The reasons were not considered.

¹ Note: Due to space limitations the authors were not able to include the code book and full findings here, but will happily provide it via email to those interested.

Thus, the GSA focuses on achieving results such as better interactions: *“make government services simpler, faster and cheaper. Better services will make it easier for the public to work and interact with Government”* and by developing the necessary digital environment: *“government agencies and departments now have a platform for reporting their service performance publicly, and a framework for measuring user satisfaction”* [27]. The Australian IRM mid-term report also focuses on results in terms of better interactions: *“The Digital Service Standard applies to all new, redesigned or high volume transactional services, allowing individuals and business to transact with the government, including providing information, money or goods, or new or redesigned services providing information to the public”* by using a digital environment (*“Digital Marketplace”*) although there is some concern in the IRM *“that it was not being widely promoted, particularly in sectors not traditionally involved with government software and hardware procurement”* [28]. The role of policies as an outcome is particularly important for both types of documents (25%) [21, 27, 28]. Both point out the necessity to prepare a digital transformation roadmap understood as a *“Digital Transformation Map”* and *“Individual Sector Maps”* [21]. This necessity is reflected in the Mid-Term IRM report as a *“whole-of-government digital transformation roadmap”* as well as *“agency-level digital transformation roadmaps”* and *“sector-specific roadmaps,”* but also a *“Digital Transformation Office”* and the role of *“the National Archives of Australia and the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (...) to assist agencies in developing their digital delivery systems while developing common platforms and standard”* [28]. The *“Agency or sector-specific roadmaps could be developed and continually reviewed by the DTA”* are seen as being important as they provide *“information to the public on the potential benefits of future developments”* [28]. The government self-assessment points out that the *“Whole-of-Government Digital Transformation Map”* was delivered in 2016, to be followed by the sector-wide strategies to follow [21].

5.2 France

The GSA [22] and the IRM documents [29, 33] show that the main focus is on the results of digital transformation (53%), to some extent the process (34%) and finally the object of digital transformation (10%). Only the 2015-17 IRM report [33] considers the reasons, but only to a minor extent (2%).

The government’s ambition is not only to achieve a digital culture, such as to *“grow a culture of openness, data literacy and digital technologies”* [33], but also to showcase the country as a leading digital nation, that is to *“bring the GovTech ecosystem fully into the limelight by cementing France’s position as a country of authority on the subject and by showcasing the success stories”* and *“to give France a position of influence in the tech field”* [29]. This is echoed in the processes required to achieve these results in open science commitment where *“the ministry of France’s efforts to facilitate open access to scientific research constitutes part of a global initiative”*[29]. The reports are not always optimistic and show that there are still several issues regarding the processes that need to be addressed in order to achieve these results: *“an article (...) at Le Monde, claimed that even the political and social elite in France are overwhelmed by digital*

technology” and the “*lack of public information regarding high-level activities concerning digital knowledge and training makes it difficult for the IRM researcher to gauge completion of this activity*” [33]. Not only the public, but the French government still needs to undertake certain efforts in order to achieve the results: “*we want the open government mindset to catch on, we need not only proactive efforts on the part of Government itself, but also support for the stakeholders.*” [29].

5.3 Italy

The results draw on a single IRM report [30] and focuses only on the objects to be digitally transformed (58.3%) and the results to be gained (41.6%).

In terms of the objects to be transformed, it is interesting to see that the documents addresses and encourages the private rather than the public sector: “*rewarding innovative start-ups and SMEs which meet the technological requirements of administrations and help solve their problems*” [30]. The results are also the outcome of the better relationships, more between the private and the public sector: “*to better connect start-ups and public administrations.*” than between citizens and the public sector “*While this commitment aimed to remove bureaucratic obstacles for companies and to gain from the expertise of start-ups and small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) to the technological needs of institutions, it was not clearly relevant to the OGP values of access to information, citizen’s ability to participate in decision-making, or public accountability*” [30].

5.4 Sweden

The Swedish reports [31, 32] focus mainly on results to be gained (60.1%), than the object (27%) or the process (13%). The reasons are not considered.

The government self-assessment notes that through digital transformation “*transparency and participation must increase*” and be able to “*contribute to the target of an increasingly open government that supports innovation and participation*” [31].

The mid-term IRM report sees the involvement of as an important result that is to be achieved: The Digital First programme is debated with stakeholders, and the Swedish council is committed to getting advice once a year “*from digital change leaders in civil society, and from businesses and citizens*” [32]. The government holds a public consultation about a “*new government body coordinating digital transformation efforts*” adding that the response gained shows “*that the stakeholders consider this an important issue*” [32], but the “*Ministry of Finance could make the next open council more result-oriented and involve potential developers, users, and the middle-management of the open of public agencies, as well as use more experimental hackathon methods (...) also clearly communicate to participants how the results of council will feed into the decision-making process*” [32]. The end of term IRM Report echoes many of the comments made in the mid-term report adding that “*public agencies in Sweden are generally advanced in digital public services,*” but that there is “*an increasing polarization among the less digitally mature and more digitally mature agencies. The same is true among municipalities. One key challenge is to improve digital management and coordination*” [31].

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In closing, we return to our original research questions: (1) How is digital transformation understood in countries that have membership in OGP? And (2) how does membership in OGP facilitate the implementation of digital transformation strategies?

In regard to the first question, it is fair to say that digital transformation has not been a priority for OGP members, at least not in the context of open government. In this regard, the conclusion is that OGP membership is not being leveraged as a tool to advance digital transformation. This is evidenced by the small number of commitments identified in this paper focusing on digital transformation (7 out of 3856). It could be that OGP members, including those discussed in this paper, have digital transformation initiatives that are being conducted outside of the scope of OGP NAPs. Given the methodology used here, this would not be captured in the research conducted for this paper. This finding in itself is significant as it shows a sort of disconnect between open government and digital transformation in spite of the emphasis placed on digital technology within the Open Government Declaration signed by all OGP members. It signals a potential lost opportunity.

Within the few countries that do include commitments to digital transformation, the analysis offered in this paper shows that while they all focus on the results to be achieved, France also considers the process of digital transformation. In addition, Italy focuses on the objects to be transformed. This indicates that the most of the other dimensions of digital transformation are not considered in particular depth by the majority of countries.

The findings also hint at a potential problem in the writing of OGP commitments. As is demonstrated by this small sample, few commitments talk about what should be transformed or why. Most simply state a desired result to be achieved. In this sense, there is some evidence to indicate that there is a potential disconnect between commitments in NAPs and the open government challenges in OGP member countries. NAPs are not as strategic, problem, or policy oriented as they could be to move forward ambitious change.

In regard to the second research question, it appears that membership in OGP helps members to implement their commitments. Overall, high levels of completion were achieved across the countries studied. This could, in part, mean that governments are particularly motivated to implement commitments when they know that their success will be assessed and reported on. Thought of in this way, we can see that the OGP NAPs can be a useful mechanism for advancing goals and strategies related to digital transformation. This suggests that perhaps the linkage between OGP and digital transformation could be stronger moving forward for governments which wish to advance digital transformation to transform public administration in order to adapt to the changing environment and address societal challenges. Although management changes are underway, some visions of what digital government may achieve seem over-optimistic as they hope that bureaucracy will be banished or that the “virtual state” will be the outcome [34].

The researchers recognize that there are some limitations to the methodology used for this paper. The qualitative assessment used is built on documentary research including IRM reports and government self-assessments. There are gaps in the reports in some countries. This reflects a difficulty in conducting research across OGP membership. Not all countries are on the same action plan cycle, the IRM process and reports have changed over time, and not all governments produce self-assessments. While this can be problematic, this paper aimed to get a high-level view of what was going on with digital transformation in each country. As such missing reports does not have a major impact on the overall conclusions. The impact is further minimized when noting that the IRM researchers gather much of the information used in their reports through interactions with government.

A more significant limitation is that the methodology used here does not readily allow much insight into the context for digital transformation in each country. To better understand this future research could build upon this study to allow for broader documentary research, outside of the scope of OGP reporting, to get a more fulsome idea of progress made toward digital transformation in each of the countries studied here. Additionally, interviews with key government officials involved in implementing either OGP or digital transformation, would allow for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the trajectory of digital transformation, and how it could, or should, link to open government.

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