

## **Why Open Government Practices are no longer Optional**

As counties participate in this year's Devolution Conference in Naivasha, it is evident countrywide that devolution has transformed the local development aspirations of Kenyans and potentially has the capacity to change their welfare for the better in the future.

Just like in the previous events, successes in road constructions, water supply, classroom buildings and other physical infrastructure will dominate the discussions and exhibitions this year. And rightly so given that these sectors constitute the bulk of citizens' priorities in most counties.

But it is expected that this year, the conference will also highlight on possible replication of the non-physical innovative governance approaches that have been adopted and implemented by various counties and whose impacts have been commendable.

These counties have made significant progress in the areas of citizen participation and accountable and responsive practices. However, as devolution matures, it is becoming clear that these practices together with the seeming bias towards physical infrastructure are not sufficient to guarantee openness and people friendly governance processes in devolved systems.

In appreciation of this challenge, we in Elgeyo Marakwet County went ahead and sought to integrate innovative approaches commonly referred to as open government practices to inspire sustainable participatory and inclusive development processes, responsive feedback mechanisms, operational efficiency and synergize development initiatives in our governance processes.

Out of these efforts, we have enacted progressive legislations such as the Public Participation Act, 2014 and Equitable Development Act, 2015 and other citizen focused policies which have led to vibrant citizen participatory processes, complaints management mechanisms, citizens' feedback platforms and equitable distribution of resources amongst others.

Notwithstanding these positive milestones, my government went ahead and joined the global Open Government Partnership (OGP) Program whose strict compliance levels in commitments, participation and evaluation criteria can be prohibitive if one does not have citizens' aspirations at heart.

OGP was launched in 2011 by amongst others the US and Britain with the aim of securing concrete commitments from governments around the world that would promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption and harness new innovative technologies to strengthen governance practices. More than 70 other countries have since joined and participated in developing transformative actions plans with commitments whose subsequent successes are currently being replicated around the world.

In 2016, OGP called for proposals from regional governments to participate in the Program as well and offer to be evaluated periodically on commitments deemed transformative with committed political leadership, reforms oriented public servants and civil society actors willing to partner and share capacities required for reforms in governance processes.

It was delightful therefore when our county was selected competitively to be one of the 15 regional governments chosen to be part of this prestigious program as the only county chosen in Kenya and only one of three in Africa. This culminated in our identifying and signing of our commitments for 2017. But what exactly are these commitments and how can the citizens evaluate their progress?

First, we recognize that integration of citizens' voice into governance engagements should go beyond budgeting, spending and policy decisions to include representative participation by special interest groups and geographic constituencies. Synergizing efforts with other actors, instituting a hybrid of open and delegates system of citizen participation are some of the activities we have committed in this area.

Secondly, enhancing citizens input into county spending decisions by simplifying, publishing and seeking citizen feedback on budget formulation process is vitally important. Citizens have previously faced difficulties in interpreting them because of the budget complexities and voluminous nature and the lack of projects cost reference lists to eliminate misallocations.

Thirdly, we have realized over the years that transparency and accountability in the development process should not stop at the prioritization and budgeting stages but also transit to open project contracting processes, implementation and monitoring and evaluation stages. By including this commitment we intend to further arm citizens with tools that can help them track real-time projects implementation progress, monitor open procurement decisions and report unethical governance practices.

Finally we sought to institutionalize the informal innovative communication channels and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp amongst others. This will enable real-time citizen engagement, rapid response and prompt government action which would otherwise be delayed by bureaucratic steps and approvals.

Even as we implement these commitments we have already achieved some quick wins out of our participation in the OGP. An active platform for joint action with the civil society and development partners has been invigorated. We have also realized that notwithstanding physical infrastructure priorities a disregard on pro-citizens governance practices will continue to perpetuate citizen mistrust towards government actions. If not checked through adoption of open government practices this may lead to citizen lamentations which is a threat to the actualization of the devolution objectives

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