

## TOWARD AN OPEN GOVERNMENT THAT REDUCES INEQUALITIES: OPEN BY DEFAULT AND BASED ON EQUITY BY *DESIGN*

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Amid world political and socioeconomic changes and tensions, unequal societies have become more unequal than ever. Power asymmetries between political and economic elites and population groups influence access to public services and rights, participation in public decisions, and the ability to demand and promote accountability. The advancement of open government initiatives seems limited and unsustainable in the context of these disparities. As a governance approach, open governments seem to lose their democratic relevance when facing the urgent and unattended challenges of highly unequal countries.

However, outstanding developments are revealing the force of open government initiatives around the globe. It is possible to delineate a three-stage historical process of the open government movement:

- First stage: Open by default and the early beginnings (2011-2015); period of the first steps, including institutional changes such as the development of freedom of information laws (FOIA). The Open Government Partnership (OGP) emerged as a global platform.
- Second stage: From 2015 to 2019, the open government paradigm was put in place to transform several government institutions in a more ambitious way and expanded beyond the national executive branch to include local open government initiatives, open parliaments, and open judiciary.
- **Third stage: It has been unfolding since 2019 to the present day, related to the context of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other initiatives. Open government initiatives have prioritized civic space protection, inclusion, and new cross-cutting agendas, emphasizing the need for more inclusive governance.**

<sup>1</sup> Position paper elaborated in the context of the [EQUIGOV](#) research project and the “1st Equigov Meeting – Equity in Public Services through Open Government and Parliaments” - Florianópolis, Brazil, October 2024. First draft presented during the América Abierta Conference, in Brasília, December 2024.

Despite the advancements in open government and democracy, several prominent countries have failed to efficiently reduce inequalities. Improvements in accountability without considering structural injustices and power asymmetries may contribute to concentrating more power in the hands of those already better positioned to demand accountability and influence public decisions.<sup>2</sup>

This raises critical questions about the relevance of open government in addressing poverty and power asymmetries to reduce inequalities and inequities. The challenge can be synthesized in two evidence-based facts:

- The perpetuation and the increase of socioeconomic inequalities and inequities in exercising rights and accessing public services threaten democracies and permeate all important policy agendas in the Global South countries.
- The consolidated (and now stressed) democracies in the Global North experience the emergency of new unforeseen inequalities, that urge to reformulate problems and innovate in policy strategies.

### **Toward a more relevant open government agenda**

Reducing inequalities and inequities as a pivotal axis of change: A new strategy for open governments is advised, emphasizing the issues of inequality and inequity. It is an approach of “open by default” and “equity by design.”

This approach can be relevant in policy areas and public services such as anti-poverty strategies and socioeconomic development; civil and political rights protection; equitable access to public services and effective justice; environmental and water (natural resources) governance and climate justice; public safety; anti-corruption, integrity, and institutional capacity.

In countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, and Spain, for example, there are recent open government strategies (as presented and debated at the GIGAPP International Conference in September 2024 in Spain) and at the EQUIGOV International Meeting (in October 2024 in Brazil) considering equity issues. In Brazil and Colombia, for example, national open government and development plans include commitments to racial equity. There are innovations in local governments in the design of public services and participation forums, aiming to facilitate the access of specific population groups, such as those living in peripheral areas, women, and the elderly. This is happening in member cities of OGP Local, such as Semarang (Indonesia), Bogotá (Colombia), and São Paulo (Brazil). In Spain, partnerships between governments and civil society organizations have fostered initiatives to improve clear language and facilitate access to services for different population profiles, like the “Easy Government” initiative held by the government of Aragon.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Schommer and Hernández-Quiñonez (2024) URL: <https://periodicos.fgy.br/rap/article/view/92260>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/easy-government/>

As a next step, particularly in big cities like São Paulo, it is possible to link open government and public budgeting considering regional inequalities. This requires proximity specific data on each region of the city and population groups, which often move from one region to another, seeking better life conditions.

**So, this document posits that the renewed open government strategy must be open by default and based on equity by design, emphasizing:**

- Innovation and exploring and improving institutional governance structures and procedures prone to reduce inequalities and inequities by design.
- The recognition of different characteristics, difficulties, and contributions of specific profiles and population groups, including them in debates and decisions, particularly those usually marginalized in the policy process.
- The improvement of strategies to achieve more effectiveness and equal access to information (plain language strategies, communication improvements).
- Production and use of more detailed data to identify and manage differences to promote equity.
- Ambitious institutional design innovations in critical issues promoting more diverse and less biased public participation representation.
- Open government plans and strategies considering inequalities and inequities in a more systematic way, in framing (understanding and defining) the problems and goals, and in conducting and monitoring change.
- Cross-cutting (or transversal) approaches or the combination of specialized agents and “classical” elements of the open government agenda (access to information, citizen participation, accountability, integrity, and innovation) with state and civil society of different profiles and in different public policies areas, branches of government, and public arenas.

## **Final considerations**

The open government movement has learned and achieved a lot in recent decades. Changes are not linear and often shift direction. Some common challenges persist and there are new threats affecting citizenship and democratic public regimes.

Since open government efforts recognize and help reduce inequalities and inequities, it may gain legitimacy and demonstrate its value in strengthening democracy as a way to deal with challenging and complex contemporary problems. It implies coordinating local, national, and international learning on political incentives and obstacles to prioritizing the reduction of inequalities, as well as adopting instruments and practices to understand inequities and manage equity efforts and achievements in each context.