

‘Tanzania yet to fully embrace openness’

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In Summary

- **How can citizens push for accountability on the side of authorities with the task of delivering medical supplies according to the calendar?**

Even though Tanzania is a member of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) — a voluntary, multi-stakeholder international initiative seeking to secure concrete commitments from governments to their citizenry to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption and harness new technologies to strengthen governance — since September 2011, it still has a long way to go to fully embrace the initiative.

This is in spite of the fact that during the plenary session of the OGP conference in London in October 2013, President Jakaya Kikwete said: “Transparency, openness and accountability are critical for both the government and the people because, when the government is open, the people know what is going on and they can hold their government accountable and the government has the urge to deliver.”

Just like other member countries, Tanzania developed the first action plan indicating its commitment towards transparency and accountability.

The question is, how much has the government of Tanzania lived up to its commitments in regard to being open to the general public on how it runs the country’s affairs.

To begin with the government laid down 25 commitments relating to three service delivery areas of health, education and water. These were to be fulfilled by July 2013.

Most of the commitments were on improving public access to key information; meaning posting important information about public service online to make them accessible to the people.

This is in spite of the fact that only a few people in Tanzania have access to the internet. Now, the question remains: are citizens sensitized enough so that they can access and analyse the information for them to make informed feedback or criticise?

For example the health sector posts online information about medicine distribution calendar -- MSD website: www.msd.or.tz. However, the challenge a reader is likely to face when reading the information is the manner of presentation and language used. Most common citizens cannot grasp the key message.

So, how can citizens push for accountability from authorities whose task is to deliver medical supplies according to the proposed calendar?

Of what use is the information if it can only be understood by a few technical staff within the MSD system?

Another hurdle in accessing important information is the unresponsiveness of some ministries, departments and agencies when citizens place requests for certain information.

This means that the OGP initiative and its terms are not understood or are ignored by some government officials. That is why you will hear people complaining of sending requests to certain authorities, make follow-ups to no avail. This particular challenge was exactly what the OGP aimed at breaking.

Reluctance by government officials probably had something to do with Tanzania only fully accomplishing three out of the 25 commitments -- establishing citizens' budget document in an accessible language, establishing an OGP contact point within the government and establishing citizens' website (Progress report 2011-2013).

Now that the second two-year action plan has been prepared, what limited implementation of the first -- low level of knowledge on OGP initiative among citizens -- needs to be tackled. It is unfortunate that the second plan is silent on how citizens' knowledge on the OGP initiative can be increased. It should, therefore, not be surprising that the same challenges will be faced towards the end of the second action plan in 2015/16.

For an initiative like OGP that needs citizens' knowledge and participation, it is essential to find appropriate channels of involving the community.

Tanzania has well-defined systems and structures that can provide easy access of information to the community. For instance, the existence of village/kitongoji committees can be put to some good use.

Strengthening and making good use of these structures can provide ample room for involving and increasing citizens' participation.

For example, the revenues and expenditures of a health facility in a particular village can be made public by posting this information on notice boards of both the health facility and the village office. This will enable citizens to be aware of what is going on and that way hold their government accountable.

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