Chapter 10

Exploring Government Transparency as a Path to Open Government

Anna Oksiutycz

The calls for, and declarations of, commitment to transparency by government have come from many quarters, including politicians, lawmakers, business managers, customers, activists and civil society. In South Africa, both government and business organisations are under the increased scrutiny of the public, media and civil society, and as such, there is a growing emphasis on government and public sector organisations becoming more transparent and consequently accountable to the citizens.

Transparency and accountability are critical issues in South Africa, considering the prevalence of corruption, mismanagement, fraud, misappropriation of funds and other malaises that have been identified at all levels of government. At the local level, it has been reported that many municipalities experience abuses of power and public resources are diverted to serve private interest (BusinessTech, 2022, Corruption Watch 2021), severely impacting local government's ability to deliver essential services to communities.

Government transparency has become a prerogative of modern democracy, yet according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020), less than 10% of governments consider transparency and stakeholder participation as the focus of their government communication strategy. The concept of transparency has gained prominence in the past two decades, not least because it reflects the ideals of a fair and just society. Transparency is closely linked to governance and accountability (Wehmeier &

Raaz, 2012; Alcaide-Muñoz, Bolívar & Villamayor-Arellano, 2022). However, transparency as a concept is frequently oversimplified and reduced to information provision without questioning the process, decision-making and expectations about transparency. This chapter analyses the complex nature of transparency in the context of government and public service, highlighting its contradictions and paradoxes, particularly how they emerge in the digital age.

In this chapter I argue that information is not neutral and that providing information is a process loaded with subjectivity, reflecting deliberate choices and the established institutional order and culture. Although information is a precondition of transparency, it is not a guarantee of transparency. Therefore, principles of communication should be applied by governments to foster transparency and its outcomes: accountability, engagement and efficiency. Furthermore, transparency needs to be institutionalised within the government by instilling the ideas of open government among government departments and designing and implementing policies that facilitate transparency.

The chapter begins with an overview of the concept of government transparency, followed by a discussion on initiatives promoting open government, e-government and access to information. The final section of the chapter presents the case of the South African government's progress towards achieving an open and transparent government.

Perspectives on Government Transparency

Scholars who research contemporary transparency discourse (Wehmeier & Raaz, 2012; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016) have consistently underscored the multiplicity of views on transparency. Far from being a simple concept, the literature highlights various approaches to government transparency.

Transparency is presented in contrast to closure, opacity and secrecy (Rawlins, 2009; Birchall, 2011). Government transparency is described in similar terms; for example, Johnson (2021) refers to government transparency

as openness in decision-making, policy outcomes and access to, and provision of, information. Hood (2007: 701) defines government transparency in terms of rules guiding information disclosure, stating that "transparency denotes government according to fixed and published rules on the basis of information and procedures that are accessible to the public". Porumbescu, Meijer and Grimmelikhuijsen (2022) state that government transparency is the availability of information which enables external actors to monitor the internal workings or performance of that government. However, given the complexity of government transparency and the multiplicity of approaches to studying it, there is some consensus in the literature that an agreed upon definition of government transparency is lacking (Bauhr & Grimes, 2012).

Government transparency can be analysed at different levels. The institutional level pays attention to rules and priorities in terms of their general orientation towards openness and information priorities (Roberts, 2020). Organisational level focuses on transparency practices in different government organisations (Porumbescu et al., 2022). These two levels are interrelated because the government is a social institution that organises the lives of citizens according to socially established rules, and at the same time, it is a network of public sector organisations that enact these rules. As such, it is pertinent to consider government transparency as a form of organisational transparency.

Another consideration of government transparency is based on broadly understood government activities: transparency of decision-making processes, transparency of policy content and transparency of policy outcomes or effects (Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012). In addition, government transparency comprises fiscal, administrative and political transparency (Cucciniello, Porumbescu & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2017). Fiscal transparency deals with budgets and how the money is spent; administrative transparency refers to structures, procedures and functions of different departments; and political transparency is information about elective process and officials.

Government transparency is closely linked to the democratic process, legitimacy and trust in government. Meijer, Hart and Worthy (2018) refer to these aspects as a political dimension of government transparency. The complementing dimension is what they refer to as the administrative dimension, which has to do with good governance, curbing corruption and improved decision-making. Thus, government transparency is seen as a desirable state of affairs; it is a goal to be achieved by government organisations. From this perspective, the most fitting definition is provided by the King IV code of governance, which defines transparency as an "unambiguous and truthful exercise of accountability such that decision-making process and business activities, outputs and outcomes – both positive and negative – are easily able to be discerned and compared with ethical standards" (IoDSA, 2016: 24).

The alternative approach considers transparency a dynamic, evolving, complex and sometimes contradictory social process (Oksiutycz, 2021). The former view is based on the assumption that degrees of transparency can be objectively determined or that there is a clear-cut distinction between the presence or absence of transparency. The process view highlights the socially constructed nature of transparency, which emanates from continuing societal and organisational discourses and values. From the process perspective, Meijer (2013: 429) defines government transparency as a relational process "constructed through complex interactions between a variety of political and social actors, within sets of formal and informal rules, and with the availability of constantly evolving technologies".

Transparency as intrinsic value

Transparency is primarily seen as a positive phenomenon. It is associated with government actions that reflect the universal ideals of democracy, principles of human rights and the beliefs of rationality and justice embedded in the "right to know" and human rights (Klaaren, 2013; Christensen & Cheney, 2015). Transparency is also linked to ethics and moral

values that guide the conduct of government departments. Transparency as a normative intrinsic value is usually referred to as a "principle" (IoDSA, 2016; Marais, Quayle & Burns, 2017) corresponding with the "right to know" perspective. On the other hand, transparency as an extrinsic value is an avenue to strengthen democratic processes and build relationships, trust and the social capital of a society (Oksiutycz, 2021).

Transparency as purposeful information disclosure

Although definitions of transparency are numerous and varied, most of them revolve around the provision of information. Rawlins (2009: 75) defines transparency as "the deliberate attempt to make available all legally reasonable information – whether positive or negative in nature – in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced and unequivocal, to enhance the reasoning ability of publics and hold government organisations accountable for their actions, policies and practices". Forssbaeck and Oxelheim (2015: 6) state that transparency is "the production, the processing, the use and the flow of, as well as the access to the control over, the information". Bushman, Piotroski & Smith (2004) consider transparency as "an output of a collective process of gathering, validating and disseminating information, to those outside of an organisation".

The interpretation of transparency as information disclosure exposes taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of information. This view assumes that information is objective, precise and explicit and leads to indisputable truth (Christensen & Cheney, 2015; Lee & Comello, 2019). Transparency as a purposeful information sharing view perceives message construction and transmission mainly from the perspective of the sender's intent to attain a particular effect on the audience based on the aims of the sender (Rawlings, 2009; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016. Furthermore, when transparency is linked to information disclosure, organisations are presented as senders of impartially selected information, whereas the complexity behind the construction and reception of messages is

ignored, particularly the asymmetrical and purposeful nature of information disclosure and concealment. Instead, it is assumed that organisations are senders of neutral and unbiased information, ignoring the fact that disclosure of the information is a deliberate and political process. Many government documents are created with a specific aim in mind, such as upholding reputation or political gains, so they are far from being objective information.

Numerous authors paid attention to the nature of information, highlighting its qualities related to temporality, relevance, reliability and accessibility as conditions of transparency (Forssbaeck & Oxelheim, 2015; Almuqrin et al., 2022). Each condition has a set of more specific descriptors, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Characteristics of information aiding transparency

Characteristic	**Descriptors**
Temporality	Timeliness, instantaneous information, real-time, instant
Relevance	Beneficial to stakeholders, usable, understandable
Reliability	Quality, quantity, accuracy, truthfulness, clarity, consistency
Accessibility	Cost, availability, access, control, boundaryless nature

In the context of government communication, information is supposed to be provided for the benefit of the intended receivers – the citizens; however, this is not always the case. With easy access to all kinds of information, new forms of opacity can occur as a result of information overload, and various forms of misinformation and disinformation (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015; Ruijer, 2017). Expanding volumes of available information and increased regulation of transparency and governance is not always a path to improved transparency. Government agencies tend to "push

out" as much data as possible. The implicit assumption is that "discerning citizen-consumers" have the skills and abilities to find, select and understand the available data (Moore, 2018: 11). In addition, the information provided by the government is often incomplete, irrelevant, difficult to grasp and sometimes expensive to access (Etzioni, 2010).

Aware of the public demands for transparency, government departments can engage in nominal transparency, a form of "transparency-washing", where transparency tokens are generated to legitimise certain decisions or to manage the organisational image or merely to create impressions of compliance with legal requirements or social norms (Bernstein, 2012; Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015; Hansen, 2015). Transparency is only helpful if the stakeholders for whom transparency is intended, have an interest in specific content, knowledge and the ability and resources to process, interpret and understand the information provided (Heald, 2012: 34). The ability of the government to provide information in formats that are comprehensible to publics with varying levels of education, who often have limited access to technological resources, makes delivering transparency particularly challenging in South Africa and other developing countries.

Transparency as communication

When looking at transparency solely through the lens of information disclosure, transparency becomes a condition, a state achieved by the organisation rather than a two-way relationship between the public sector and citizens, built on engagement and communication. In contrast to the transparency as purposeful information dissemination perspective where organisations are presented as rational senders of impartial information, a communication perspective on transparency assumes that transparency is a meaningful co-creation process whereby stakeholders' needs and resources are considered. Consequently, transparency implementation requires that the government takes cognisance of stakeholders' transparency needs and engages

in strategic dialogue with the stakeholders (Willis, 2015). This requires governments to be interactive and responsive. Responsiveness is a domain of engagement, which is a way for government organisations to acknowledge the values of the stakeholders they are meant to serve.

Yet, as argued by Macnamara (2016), in the organisational settings, one-way transmissional notions persist. In particular, government departments have limited willingness and skills to listen to their stakeholders (Willis, 2015). In order to achieve constructive transparency, government must allocate requisite resources to the stakeholder research and engagement in order to better understand stakeholders' transparency requirements.

In public service and government, communication transparency is considered a catalyst for social change, entailing stakeholder engagement and collaboration of different societal actors based on inclusivity, dialogue and trust (Oksiutycz, 2021). Transparency and accountability reduce political tensions and distrust, which is particularly important for a government that suffers from a trust deficit, with only 42% of South African citizens saying they trust central government and less than 35% having trust in local government (DPME, 2021: 4).

The outcomes of government transparency

Although challenged by some academics (Christensen & Cheney, 2015; Flyverbom, Leonardi, Stohl & Stohl, 2016) a common view on transparency is that it allows those outside the government to observe and assess government actions and plans and inner workings, thus leading to better accountability to the stakeholders (Bearfield & Bowman, 2017; Radcliffe, Spence & Stein, 2017), ultimately making governments more efficient (Volta, 2019).

Ruvalcaba-Gómez and Renteria (2020) suggest that transparency and its outcomes, such as citizen participation, can maintain the balance of power by keeping the power of political elites in check. When stakeholders are aware of

what a government department intends to do, they are in a better position to engage in the social discourse that defines their expectations about legitimate government behaviours. In particular, civil society organisations are able to act as "information intermediaries" and put pressure on regulators to enforce accountability (Ingrams, 2017). Transparency thus serves as a symbolic and observational control mechanism that can be exercised through various monitoring technologies, regulations and laws. Two types of control observational and regularising (or disciplinary) can be implemented (Foucault, 1977; Flyverbom, Christensen and Hansen 2015). Regularising control is coercive in its nature. Observation control creates the potential for interventions where necessary. When information about the government is available to the public, the public exercises observational control simply because it can access information about its actions or intentions. Among forms of observational control are various institutionalised reporting requirements, mandatory disclosures, audits and other legally defined mechanisms for the provision of specific information are examples of observational control. By promoting integrity in government, transparency as a form of surveillance fulfils its role as a social control mechanism.

Harrison and Sayogo (2014) argue that transparency is a precondition for accountability. Openness is thought to prevent corruption and abuse of power as it mandates the conduct of public affairs in the open, exposing it to public scrutiny (Redish & Dawson, 2012; OECD, 2020). In the past decade, South Africa has made little headway in fighting corruption, being ranked 72nd out of 180 countries, with a score of 43 on the corruption index – the same position as in 2012 (Sibanda, 2023).

Numerous authors argue that transparency leads to better utilisation of government resources (Leroy, Saez-Martin, Caba-Perez & De Avila, 2022), more accountable spending of public funds (Ruijer, 2017), sound decision-making (Bluemmel, 2021) and increased efficiency of the public sector (Alcaide-Muñoz et al., 2022; Castro & Lopes, 2022). Considering that the number of dysfunctional municipalities

increased in 2022 from 64 to 66, 151 municipalities in the country are under the threat of collapse, while 43 have already collapsed and require central government rescue (BusinessTech, 2022), an increased fiscal transparency at various levels of government is a necessity.

Ultimately, transparency empowers citizens and should ideally lead to incorporating a diversity of ideas in government decision-making, whereby stakeholders can comment, object and contribute to the societal outcomes based on the information they have. Citizen empowerment and participation are linked with public policy transparency. Communication about proposed policies becomes a part of a democratic and two-way process whereby the government has the opportunity to be exposed to citizens' views and needs concerning a particular policy issue. Communication about policy can present the government's rationale for the policy and elicit citizens' support (or resistance) to the intended policy (Gelders & Ilhen, 2010).

From The Right to Information to Open Government

If government transparency is to be implemented by the government, it needs to be supported by a legal framework and practical steps. An example of the former is the freedom of information law. The latter is reflected in the ideas of open government, open data and e-government.

The right to access information

Close relationships between transparency and the right to access information, also referred to as 'freedom of information' (FoI), is a crucial component of government transparency. "The right to access information is an effective lever for inclusive growth. It increases citizens' trust in their public institutions, as well as their participation in the elaboration of public policies", states the OECD (2019). Freedom of information policy, with its aim to guarantee the "right to know" and thus create informed citizens, is, in many countries, including South Africa, guaranteed by

law. However, it should be noted that public information disclosure has limitations due to restrictions related to public interest protection matters such as privacy or national security (Moon, 2020).

It should be pointed out that access to information laws preceded the widespread use of information and communication technology. Hence, the key aspect of information laws was demand-driven access to information. The interested party had to request information, and the government agencies were obliged to provide it. The key objective of FoI was to create informed information receivers. In contrast, the concepts of open government and open data are based on the premise of proactive information disclosure by the government.

Open government

In the early 2000s, many governments began to promote open government ideas by taking advantage of technological innovations (Moon, 2020). Open government is a governance model within public sector management associated with transparency, accountability, open data, access to information, interoperability, new technologies, democracy and citizen participation (Ruvalcaba-Gómez & Renteria, 2020). The concept of open government is closely related to transparency, freedom, freedom of information, human rights and development (Kurmanov & Knox, 2022).

Open government has been applied to different government and public service levels, from central government through local government structures and various public agencies. The OECD (2009) states that open government entails: "the transparency of government actions, the accessibility of government services and information and the responsiveness of government to new ideas, demands and needs".

High levels of transparency as a mechanism for public oversight are at the centre of open government, with accountability to citizens and improvements to people's

quality of life being the main objective. Accountability is defined as the state of being responsible for one's actions (Christensen & Cheney, 2015: 71) and it involves fostering integrity in the public sector and strengthening the governance measures within the government. Open government is a governance regime based on "a culture of governance that promotes the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation in support of democracy and inclusive growth" (OECD, 2017: 42). Although transparency is the critical element of open government, it is not the end goal but rather the means to an end. According to the OECD (2017 :42) open government is "a foundation of inclusive institutions that offer broad citizen participation, plurality and system checks and balance which, in turn, provide better access to services".

The concept of open government is based on the idea of creating civic space where stakeholder involvement happens and where the public sector and civil society can collaborate. Providing information about government activities is the foundation towards involving the citizens in decision-making and public policy formulation. The ultimate outcome is identifying appropriate solutions with the help of civil society and a broad spectrum of stakeholders (Kurmanov & Knox, 2022). On the one hand, open government enshrines the rights of citizens to be informed, and on the other hand, it is meant to enforce civic responsibility as communities become part of the space created due to open government (Volta, 2019).

The key elements of such a space are civic freedoms (e.g. access to information, protection of whistle-blowers and activists), free media (e.g. independent media, free internet, data protection), and an environment that enables strong civil society through capacity building, the availability of funding and a low administrative burden. The fourth element is citizen involvement through fostering inclusion, institutionalised engagement mechanisms and support for citizen-led initiatives (OECD, 2019).

Civic freedoms refer to ensuring access to government information, both legally mandated and voluntarily and proactively provided by the government. Bearfield and Bowman (2017) note the importance of the local press and the presence of government watchdogs as the factors influencing the degree to which government is open. The media – traditional and online – have been considered an important governance mechanism. Through their coverage, media engage in legitimising or de-legitimising practices framing and selecting arguments and rhetorical devices that may influence the publics' perceptions of the legitimate behaviour of government departments. The citizen involvement dimension focuses on co-production (co-designed co-delivery) and networked collaborative governance (Moon, 2020) through knowledge and idea sharing. Transparency, as a facet of communication between government and citizens, fulfils its constitutional role of strengthening democratic institutions through citizens' participation. In addition to enabling stakeholder participation in government decisions, open government is also intended to create platforms for collaboration between civil society and the government.

Open government has mainly been prioritised in the central administration of countries (Volta, 2019), with a much lower adoption rate by local governments and municipalities, particularly in the developing world. However, in the global north countries, open government is increasingly being adopted across different levels of government (Bearfield & Bowman, 2017). To advance the idea of open government, the Open Government Partnership (OGP, n.d.) was established in 2011. The partnership comprises 77 participating governments, 106 local authorities, civil society advocates and reformers who are united under a common objective, "to make governments more transparent, accountable and participatory" (OGP, n.d.). Notwithstanding initiatives such as the OGP, less than 2% of commitments contained in OGP National Action Plans aim to improve public communication (OECD, 2019). Sandoval-Almazána, Criado and Ruvalcaba-Gómez (2021) note that, generally, there are two aspects

to open government. The first one has to do with fostering democratic values and transparency, and the other with applying technology and innovation to deliver more efficient public service through e-government and open data.

Open data

Open government transparency is one of the pillars of open data, which is data that is either produced or managed by the government, and which is made publicly available. The open government and open data concepts are based on the premise of proactive information disclosure by the government. Open data also means that the data is provided licence-free, so citizens can use it without restrictions. Furthermore, data should be provided in open access formats without the need to acquire any special software to retrieve it. Digitalising public information allows governments to make data accessible online to multiple citizens simultaneously and instantaneously through multiple channels. Furthermore, Wamukoya (2012) draws attention to the need to provide government records in context, without which the value and usability of such data to users diminishes.

While governments have made some effort to provide data using computer and online applications, as noted by Wamukoya (2012), little attention has been paid to government record-keeping processes, data integrity, trustworthiness and data safety – issues that are particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa. Record keeping is also an essential element in inhibiting corruption and mismanagement. Along with accounting and auditing, robust record management systems can provide documentary evidence to support financial accountability and responsible management of government budgets. The lack of a paper trail is one of the main problems in tracing mismanaged and misappropriated public funds, preventing successful investigations by the authorities and thus indirectly enabling corrupt practices.

E-government

E-government – also called digital government or government 2.0 – is a concept closely associated with open government as it relates to delivering services via digital platforms, open data and information provision. It is based on the coherent use of technology by the government. The use of technology facilitates integrated policies and public services and promotes s effective, resilient and transparent institutions (UN, 2022a). Developing e-government allows for the promotion of sustainable development, particularly in developing and transition economies (Castro & Lopes, 2022).

The World Bank (2015) describes e-government as "the use by government agencies of information technologies (e.g. wide area networks, the internet and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses and other arms of government". The OECD (2003: 11) defines e-government as "the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs), and particularly the internet, to achieve better government". Examples of e-government applications are the use of technology to provide government services such as issuing documents, customer relationship management systems and, increasingly, electronic voting. Among the benefits of e-government are improved delivery of government services, lower costs, timesaving, improved administrative capacity and democratic governance, improved efficiency of government and revenue growth (Castro & Lopes, 2022).

By providing more equitable access, e-government facilitates basic service delivery in areas such as health, employment, education and social welfare (Castro & Lopes, 2022). It allows citizens to access government services without dealing with long-distance travel and inconvenient service hours. E-government has become a measure of development, and as a developing country, South Africa still has a long way to go in terms of fully-fledged e-government.

Government transparency and the use of communication technology

As ICTs expand their grip on sharing information, communication, service delivery, and other aspects of life, governments increasingly incorporate ICTs into various aspects of their activity, including communication with stakeholders. Transparency is implemented by using different communication media, communication channels, platforms and genres to communicate with stakeholders. Internet communication and social media increase the freedom for citizens and the government to communicate with each other. The internet also enhances accessibility and reduces the cost of communication. Therefore, there is less justification for governments not to be transparent (Mason, 2008).

Today, it is almost unthinkable for any government not to have an online presence. Most public service organisations have elaborate portals and websites and utilise social media platforms (Hofmann, Beverungen, Räckers & Becker, 2013) but does using these platforms automatically lead to an open and transparent government? There seems to be a disconnect between technology implementation and transparency for reasons that include challenges in terms of accessibility, relevance and clarity. A study by Hoffman et al. (2013) indicates that the online communication behaviour of local governments is based on disseminating information in a traditional way without adapting their communication habits to the particular characteristics of the online medium. The successful use of digital media for communication by many governments during the COVID-19 pandemic is a refreshing example of the unexhausted possibilities for governments to apply them beyond crisis communication.

One of the shortcomings holding back effective government communication and transparency is the lack of professional development of government communicators. Government officials may also be reluctant to fully engage online for lack of expertise or time and also because of the perceived reputational risks stemming from the lack of control

of online communication as opposed to the carefully planned transparency of the pre-digital age. Furthermore, some research indicates that digital communication technologies are used to enhance the reputation of the government rather than engage with stakeholders (Alcaide-Muñoz et al., 2022). Another primary environmental constraint on government communication is "the lack of importance often placed on communication by management" (Liu & Horsley, 2007), as if the achievement of policy and political goals can be dissociated from stakeholder communication.

The use of social media opens vast opportunities for public sector organisations to connect with the public and derive the benefits from such engagements, such as sharing ideas, coming up with solutions and soliciting public support for government policies (Lim, Rasul & Ahmad, 2022). Engagement requires that the government creates spaces for dialogue about public life and invites the public to participate in shaping it (Oksiutycz, 2021; Cezar, 2018). Yet, as noted by Macnamara (2018), even in advanced democracies, public consultations face limitations such as the narrow framing of questions, short-term notice of public meetings, use of official and technical language, failing to acknowledge submissions from the public, not taking into account the needs of different publics and not providing feedback on the result of consultations. Despite the possibilities of immediate exchange of information and opinions provided by digital platforms, citizen engagement is challenging for government departments owing to a lack of resources and skills on the one hand and the digital divide on the other, affecting those left behind by the digital revolution. Shao and Saxena (2019) note barriers to transparency, such as the complexity of data formats, the inability to identify the appropriate data, no incentive for users to participate and the high cost to users (e.g. data or devices).

Challenges to open government

Despite heralding the value of transparency, the OECD (2019) estimates that less than 10% of governments list promoting

transparency or encouraging stakeholder participation as one of their key objectives. The research identified different issues that affect the implementation of open government policies, depending on the political and economic makeup of the particular society. Factors such as government resources, administrative professionalism and organisational networks were found to be factors in government transparency (Bearfield & Bowman, 2017). Other aspects include culture, political pluralism and robust political competition (Bearfield & Bowman, 2017). To date, the implementation of the open government concept in South Africa has been slow. The research on why it is so is scarce is limited; however, studies by Ingrams, Piotrowski and Berliner (2020) in other parts of the world suggest that political manipulation, goal ambiguity, inherent value conflicts, inter-sectoral complexity and coordination problems, policy conflict between departments, structural barriers, technological and economic dependency, political conflicts and political faddism and short-term interest prevent the adoption of e-government.

Kurmanov and Knox's (2022) research in the countries of Central Asia revealed the resistance among state officials to implement open government policies, as they perceived it as "extra work". Some government officials believe that disclosure of information will lead to ill-informed or unnecessary public debate about government policy (Bluemmel, 2021). Government officials are often more concerned with creating a particular image of their departments than with broader objectives and transparency benefits (Marland, 2017).

Progress towards Open Government: The Case of South Africa

Since 1994, South Africa has made a tangible effort to improve various aspects of open government and transparency. Notable developments were the establishment of the Government Information and Communication System in 1998, the adoption of the Promotion of Access to Information

Act (PAIA) in 2000 and the introduction of the Government Communication Policy in 2018. In addition, relatively advanced telecommunication infrastructure, a free press and a strong legal system create favourable conditions for promoting government openness. However, there is a lot of room for improvement. According to the UN e-government ranking, South Africa is in the top 30% of countries. It is ranked 65th out of 193 countries in the e-government development index and 61st in the e-participation index (UN, 2022). This relatively high position does not always correspond with the everyday experiences of ordinary citizens and government employees. For example, Mawela, Ochara and Twinomurinzi (2017) highlight various difficulties and outright failures of the South African government to introduce e-government at the local level due to a lack of ICT skills, poor leadership and structural issues such as organisational siloes. The State Information Technology Agency (SITA) performance, by its own admission, is far from effective. SITA has 170 services hidden in "a very obscure website", and with merely 300 000 registered e-Gov portal users and only 1.3 million total users (2.4% of the population) of government digital services. South Africa trails behind the world and even neighbouring countries (Mzekandaba, 2024).

South Africa was one of the first countries in sub-Saharan Africa to promulgate an access-to-information law, the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA), in 2000. PAIA's main objective is "to give effect to the constitutional right of access to any information held by the State and any information that is held by another person and that is required for the exercise or protection of any rights" (Republic of South Africa, 2000). Despite the progressive nature of the PAIA, its implementation in practice is challenging as there are many instances (see Moosajee & Makan, 2020) of civil society organisations only being able to obtain information from the government after successful court challenges. Furthermore, access to information requires functional records and data management systems, which are a challenge in many sub-Saharan countries (Wamukoya, 2012). Marais et al. (2017) all

point out that processes and procedures for recording, storing, accessing and retrieving information are crucial to fulfilling the legal obligations of PAIA, yet in reality, these elements are often absent in South Africa (Marais et al., 2017).

South Africa is a founding member of OGP, but its progress since 2011 towards open government is, at best, lacklustre. South Africa did not submit an action plan for 2018–2020. The new plan (2020–2022), the fourth such plan, is an attempt to revive the OGP process in the country (DPSA, 2020). The plan has three main commitments: commitment to open data, transformative fiscal transparency and beneficial ownership transparency. Sadly, in the assessment of the OGP, only the first of these commitments is "verifiable" and has modest potential for a positive result. The other two obligations were considered vague, without explicit activities and milestones (OGP, 2020). However, in an effort to avoid being grey-listed, the country enacted legislation in December 2022 to require disclosure of beneficial ownership.

By its own admission, the fiscal transparency of the South African government leaves a lot to be desired. According to the DPSA (2020: 8), "The budget transparency that South Africa currently has and which is globally recognised, is unfortunately not sufficient to achieve oversight of public expenditure, including public procurement. While high-level budget data is available, much of the government's granular level spending data and its procurement and contracting data is simply not available. This contributes to a lack of real-time monitoring both by government and civil society, resulting in inadequate oversight of spending". There are some moderate initiatives for introducing e-Government services in South Africa. The province of Gauteng has a department of e-Government, which defines its role as creating a network infrastructure connecting government facilities, including schools, hospitals, offices and economic zones (Provincial Government of SA, n.d.). Currently, the department has a page on the Provincial Government of South Africa site, with very limited functionality and information.

The GCIS Government Communication Policy, introduced in 2018, is an attempt to create a cohesive approach to government communication. The policy deals with matters such as the role of government communication, media engagement, online communication platforms, crisis communication, marketing, internal communication and research. It does not explicitly refer to open government and hardly refers to transparency. In fact, transparency is mentioned twice in the policy. On one occasion, transparency is referred to as a democratic principle: "Government communication is driven by democratic principles of openness and participation and is guided by the basic principles of transparency, accountability, consultation" (GCIS, 2018: 7). The second mention is in the context of information disclosure, being "To promote transparency in Government operations and decisions, requests for the sharing of various types of information must be timeously dealt with" (GCIS, 2018: 36). However, the policy document does not use the word 'transparency' to label the information and instead 'provision of information' to the public is more frequently used. For example, the role of government communication is to "provide the public with timely, accurate and clear information about government policies, programmes, plans, services and initiatives in a non-partisan way, thus making it accountable to the public it serves" (GCIS, 2018: 8) and "make information widely accessible to all South Africans with diverse needs". Another document, the government guide for website communication (GCIS, 2012), states that the aim of the government entities' websites is to "provide current, factual and official information to the public".

The Government Communication policy also references another vital aspect of open government – public participation in policymaking. The key methods listed in the policy are *imbizos*, Thusong service centres, which aim to enable two-way communication between citizens and government, and council/ward committees (GCIS, 2018). The government commits to allocating 1% to 5% of the institutional budget to the communication function, based on the strategic

communication plan and the size of the institution (GCIS, 2019). However, due to limited financial transparency, it is not clear how much is spent on communication activities. While the normative goals of transparency are clear, the practical application in the South African public service is another matter because research indicates that, in the view of citizens, government communication is ineffective due to the superficial nature of public consultation and communication methods and practices that do not resonate with the publics (Rasila & Musitha, 2017; Shabangu & Oksiutycz, 2018).

Conclusion

This chapter analysed the nature of transparency in the context of its application to achieving open government, which is said to improve government efficiency, promote democracy and contribute to sustainability and development. The study indicates that creating an open and transparent government requires a deep understanding of the complexity of the transparency concept, which has multiple antecedents and outcomes: ethical, organisational and social. In the context of government, transparency was considered a result of three broad processes: information provision, communication and stakeholder engagement. Transparency cannot be achieved just by making available government-generated information but needs to incorporate stakeholder needs and expectations about openness. The content of government communication should include accountability for past actions and debates on future policies. Furthermore, financial and budget transparency is lacking, yet it is crucial in South Africa, where accusations of fruitless and wasteful expenditure, maladministration, mismanagement, nepotism, and dereliction of duty are the order of the day.

To create conducive conditions for stakeholder engagement, a strategic and systematic approach to improving public sector transparency must be applied by developing, implementing and refining policies and procedures that facilitate the culture and practice of transparency. To

achieve open government, transparency must become a dominant institutional logic worldview, be embedded in organisational culture and become a key principle of government communication. Governments need to build internal capacity for open government and put transparency at the top of the hierarchy of government goals. It can be argued that transparency is only one antecedent of effective controls that should be used in conjunction with other enforcement and surveillance mechanisms, such as laws and government regulations. Conscious efforts should be made to change the organisational logic and culture to promote transparency as an internalised norm within the government. Open government cannot be achieved without an enabling environment, relevant resources and skills development for communication practitioners and public servants at all levels, including politicians. Furthermore, possibilities opened up by ICT technology in terms of information provision, communication, stakeholder engagement and service delivery should be fully utilised.

Transparency is not a simple construct. It needs further development in the context of public service and government communication in terms of a deeper understanding of its dimensions and to foster the institutionalised forms of transparency – a foundation of open government leading to new and robust forms of governance necessary for South Africa's development.

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