

Regional round table on Open government and renewal: local governments take action

Speech by Rafael BENITEZ, Congress Director

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Dear mayors, dear local councillors,
Dear Chairs and representatives of national associations
Dear representatives of OGP national secretariats,
Dear colleagues from OGP,
Ladies and gentlemen.

I am pleased to welcome you on behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe to this regional round table on “Open government and renewal” with the theme “local governments take action.”

I’m glad to see you in such a great number, which speaks of the growing interest on open government and the commitment of both central and local authorities to promote a new culture of governance closer to citizens.

It is also proof that we share the same values and priorities, and we are pleased to organise this event together with the colleagues from the Open Government Partnership, OGP. The OGP is indeed an organisation of reformers working together with national and local authorities around the world to transform the way governments serve citizens.

I am therefore, very happy to open this event together with Rudi Borrmann, OGP Deputy Director who will present prospects on open government following the last OGP Summit held in December 2021.

Ladies in gentlemen,

There is an growing demand of citizens to greater transparency and accountability. This is what citizens want and this is what they expect from public authorities and we cannot ignore it.. Some core principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government channel this demand. The right to participate in the affairs of local authorities, and the key rights of communities to enjoy autonomy and self-government, as well as to elect local bodies that have their own structures and financial resources.

Open government embodies the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and participation in support of democracy, human rights, and ultimately, to inclusive development and growth.

We in the Congress encourages processes that foster an effective dialogue between central government and local authorities. Such dialogue is the backbone of a functioning democratic system. This is precisely because local authorities are the first level for the effective development of democracy, the level as we know closest to citizens.

Consultations with local authorities through their national associations, beyond being a legal requirement under the European Charter of Local Self-Government, but it is also a very practical tool. After all, it is about building together the democratic system in a country and responding together to the needs of local communities with and for the citizens.

Citizens involved in decision making, which is a key element of good governance is dear to ask.. It is part of the Preamble of the European Charter and has been developed by the Additional Protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of local authorities. Later this year, we will mark 10th anniversary of its entry into force of this protocol, and please note that Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine are among the parties to the protocol. I'd like to use this opportunity to call the to the national authorities of the Republic of Moldova to become a party to the Additional Protocol. For citizens, participation is the token of the quality of democracy..

In the context of reforms, the quality of local democracy increasingly becomes a decisive factor for gaining citizens' trust in public authorities. Here, open government strategies and initiatives emerge as an opportunity to streamline dialogue between all levels of governance and with citizens. It allows r improving local governance, as well as for ensuring that all levels of government are equipped with the necessary tools to enhance responsiveness and promote innovation.

Equally important, co-creation and inclusive decision-making fostered through open government provide a sense of belonging, of being part of a common mission, of the same community, contributing to a better response to global challenges. Undoubtedly contributes to promoting and protecting human rights at local level as well, while providing an environment in which all citizens can equally enjoy their rights and freedoms.

The European Urban Charter adopted in 1992 by the Congress, then called Standing Conference, presents an overview of these rights in the urban setting, from security to health, from services to equality. Thirty years later, we find it very relevant, particularly against the backdrop of the current sanitary crises. , as it also embodies the essence of open government.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Open government is key for the Congress and is key for the implementation of strategic priorities, whether seeking effective responses to the public health crisis, enhancing the quality of democracy, or supporting digitalisation at local and regional levels through reliable and controlled technologies, which meet human rights standards and take into account the need for democratic security and the protection of the individual.

Open government has become an essential condition for participatory, inclusive and open decision-making at all levels. It is also a valuable instrument for the promotion of human rights at local level for improving service delivery, for increasing citizens trust and for preventing corruption. Sadly still one of the mayor threats to democracy at all levels of government.

Striving for open local government entails reviewing ways of governance, enhancing decision-making processes, and renewing the relations between authorities and their constituencies. Open government allows a more holistic and integrated approach and ultimately strengthens the implementation by all levels of governance of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda.

Today, we will listen to good practices of multi-level dialogue on open government and co-creation. The Congress has supported some of these initiatives taking in Armenia, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, as part of the respective Council of Europe Action Plans.

And we are very proud of it and the results achieved thanks to your commitment.

We look forward to more municipalities and civil society partners joining the OGP local programme – to become so-called “OGP locals.” We also look forward to greater involvement of local authorities in the design, implementation and evaluation of national Open Government commitments. With no mistake, this the only way to ensure effective processes for co-creation, for the renewal of democracy and increased our citizens' trust in public authorities. Let's work for it.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to our discussions.