

Open Government Partnership - Malta Action Plan

I. Introduction

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a global effort to make governments better and more accountable. It aims to make Governments more transparent, effective and accountable – with citizens that are empowered and institutions that are responsive to their demands and dreams. To further these initiatives is not easy and requires political leadership and political will in conjunction with technical knowledge. To implement these policies requires investment and sustained effort, and a dialogue of collaboration between governments and civil society.

The Government of Malta is committed to OGP as the principles of promoting transparency, empowering citizens, fighting corruption and harnessing new technologies are all in line with the Government's views and policies. This commitment was formalized by the signing of the OGP in July 2011.

The Honourable Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi has drawn attention to the fact that *“for the public sector to be even more responsive and closer to the citizen’s public participation is a necessity. Citizen engagement is seen as an appropriate and necessary part of policy implementation in the democratic system. Decentralising powers also brings decision-making and service delivery closer to the residents with their concerns being addressed more efficiently and effectively.”*¹

II. Open Government Efforts To date

Malta has been implementing a continuous program of improvement in Public Services, increasing Public Integrity and having in place an effective management of Public Resources in order to generate wealth and improve the citizen's quality life. Malta has also strived during the years to create safer communities and improve corporate accountability.

Improving Public Services - Malta has invested in a well structured free health system for all. Recent programs such as the Pharmacy of your Choice scheme have increased accessibility to free medicine, while the Ministry of Health has negotiated lower prices with Pharmaceutical companies. Investment has also been made to strengthen Gerontology Services. Malta has also increased its

¹ SPEECH BY THE HON LAWRENCE GONZI, PRIME MINISTER DURING THE 3RD COMMONWEALTH MINISTERS FORUM ON PUBLIC SECTOR DEVELOPMENT - ST JULIAN'S – THURSDAY 21ST OCTOBER 2010

investment in School infrastructure, with new schools being built and old ones refurbished. New ICT technology plays also a very important and central role in the educational process of our citizens. The Government started a programme of €2.6 million investment spread over five years to install 1800 Interactive Whiteboards in all state, church and independent schools. So far over 500 such boards have been installed. These Interactive White boards will enable teachers to deliver lessons in which students take a more participative role in the classroom, making learning more engaging and enriched with the ICT tools which the digitally aware generation interact with naturally. Such investment is not an investment in technology but an investment in students' education and in the professional development of all teachers and will introduce access to technology to an entire generation and disseminate a culture of innovation and innovative approach for mastering new technologies. This commitment should not be taken in isolation but one should mention also the Euro 8.6 million investments in eLearning Solution. Through this investment, learners in primary and secondary schools will have access to high quality interactive learning content and will be able to benefit from a personal online learning space that offers opportunities to collaborate with other learners, as well as learn more independently anywhere, anytime even outside school. The eLearning Solution will also provide educators with the means to create and maintain their learning materials online, and will enable the uploading, distribution, grading and storing of students' assignments in a purposely-designed online class space. This new technology will also provide educators with the facility to assess and monitor their learners' progress online and will facilitate the transfer of knowledge with other educators in different schools and teaching communities.

Parents, on the other hand, will be able to actively participate in their child's learning process whilst benefiting from the advantages that an online environment provides, including facilitated means of communication with their children's educators. The new technology will give parents easy access to their children's learning materials and school work whilst enabling them to monitor their child's educational progress. These policies are resulting in a higher student's intake in tertiary and vocational education.

Increasing Public Integrity - Malta has in place Institutional and Advisory structures to engage civil society in the decision-making process. We value public participation of all people, equally and without discrimination, in the decision making and policy making. Our belief in this process is manifested by having a Minister responsible for Public Dialogue, thereby demonstrating that that the Maltese Government is an avid promoter of public dialogue. In fact way back in 1989, by an Act of Parliament, the Malta Council of Economic and Social Development (Cap.431) was established. This was primarily the recognition by the State of an institution whose mission is to promote social

dialogue and bring about consensus amongst the Social Partners and members of Civil Society on a number of national economic and social issues related to Malta's development.

The various Council members along the years have ensured a consultative role to Government, through their interventions, ideas and proposals. The commitment to involve the widest possible consultation process is also manifested in the introduction of publishing of white papers on new important legislation that Parliament would eventually legislate. Depending on the complexity of the legislation, this consultation process is spread on a number of months, sometimes even years. In this way, Government makes sure that all the interested stakeholder's views are heard and evaluated.

All policy decisions taken by Government effect the way of life of the citizens. Hence, it is a moral obligation that Government consults with those same individuals that will eventually be affected by such policies.

A decade ago, Government decided to launch a pre-budget document three months prior to the actual budget document is presented in Parliament. This pre-budget document is the basis of various meetings with constituted bodies and the general public. Through these discussions and the substantial comments and proposals put forward by the stakeholders and general public, the document is then fine tuned and the final budget document is then drawn up and presented in Parliament. The Pre-Budget Document process has also become established practice and is eagerly awaited by both Social Partners and Civil Society.

This same consultation process is carried out even on legislation and directives coming out from the European Union. On taking the decision to apply and actively push for Malta to become full member of the European Union, Government, in 1999, set up MEUSAC, the Malta-EU Steering and Action Committee. This Committee was set up to oversee the overall accession process of Malta to the European Union. MEUSAC served as a focal point of such process. It successfully brought together a wide spectrum of organizations representing various and diverse interests within the Maltese Society. Following the signing of the Treaty of Accession on the 16th April 2003, MEUSAC was reconstituted to continue its role after accession. With an even wider representation, MEUSAC is giving civil society an opportunity to make itself heard and to help shape Malta's position in various aspects of membership.

The Government is committed that not only will there be consultation but that the consultation process is well structured and of high standards. This vision of consultation will be implemented through the Directive 6, namely, "Parameters for Consultation Exercises with Stakeholders" was

issued under the Public Administration Act, a Directive published last year. The Directive outlines the preparatory phase for consultation, when one should consult, the level of stakeholders involvement, the type of communication and its clarity, timeframes, the consultation mechanisms and follow-up. This Directive binds all Ministries and Entities within the entire Public Sector to adhere to. Moreover following the issue of this Directive, Government formulated an Impact Assessment Framework which is a checklist that needs to be adhered to when new Legislation is to be forwarded to Cabinet for evaluation and approval.

The Checklist is there to reaffirm the commitment that prior to the introduction of any new Legal Notice, the promoters would have consulted stakeholders and looked at its impact on Businesses, Gozo, Citizens and the Public Administration. Malta has strengthened access to information by the implementation of E-Government Services and the re-enforcement of the Customer Care System (Servizz.gov). The focus of the eGov unit is to bring all the Government of Malta online services together in one simple, seamless framework.

There are currently 80 services and 300 Government of Malta websites. Bridging, or allowing them to 'talk' to each other, would make them highly usable and provide a marked improvement in service to the citizen. Government is committed to improve and introduce new technologies for an open dialogue and accountability. In fact, throughout 2012 -13 we will see the implementation of an aggressive eGov programme geared at transforming public services into catalysts of more competitive economy for Malta. We are currently engaged in:

- Implementing a Government-wide eProcurement system;
- An eForms platform which enables Ministries to deploy services online rapidly;
- An eGovernment operation targeted at having all public services online and concentrating primarily on simplification and on making services ever more accessible and transparent to drive efficiency and competitiveness;
- myBills - an integrated system which allows all public sector bills to be paid online from one portal.

Our vision for e-Government is to make of it an essential component of public service transformation identified by a transparent, lean, well connected administration. This administration will deliver a guaranteed quality of service for all. Malta's public administration will conduct continuous refinement of its processes, resulting in simpler, streamlined services designed to enhance the economic competitiveness and the quality of life in Malta. Our goal is to seize the opportunity of technology to enable these outcomes.

Effective Management of Public Resources - Good governance is an essential ingredient in the successful running of a country and its economy. The people of Malta already enjoy high levels of respect for the law and for civil rights, and for the institutions that safeguard them. Government will continue to build on a reputation for clarity in procedures and for transparency in operations, and will carry on with the process of widespread consultation.

Through such governance, and the continual investment in Culture and Heritage sites, in an improved Road Infrastructure, and further investment in green open spaces, the Quality of Life has been improved.

Creating Safer Communities – Initiatives taken so far focused in having safer waters around the Maltese Islands by investment in new patrol boats, two new surveillance planes and the VACIS system to counter the proliferation of illicit weapons. The Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS) was also setup to manage humanitarian issues. When it comes to creating safer communities, Government placed as a priority to create open spaces aimed not only to make Malta more beautiful and attractive to the million of tourists that visit these Islands but also offer families to spend quality life with their children in a safe environment. To complement these open spaces, various agreements were signed with Local Councils to improve the quality of life of residents by creating and upgrading playing fields, the embellishment of public gardens, the introduction of energy-saving street lighting and paving works and upgrading of residential roads, making them also accessible to reduced mobility persons.

Other initiatives include the preservation, maintaining and restoration of the historical cores of our villages and town centres through pedestrianisation and conservation projects; restoration of various historical buildings and churches and bastions. To succeed in this initiative, we need all the stakeholders not only to collaborate and work in synchronization but also to make sure that no vandalism takes place.

Increasing Corporate Accountability - The Government's commitment to the implementation of highest standards of professional integrity through its governance can be shown through the number of passed legislation all aimed at curbing corruption and introduction of high ethical standards and codes of practice. Such legislation includes:

- on public administration (the Public Administration Act);
- the Permanent Commission Against Corruption;

- on freedom of information (the Freedom of Information Act);
- on the protection of whistleblowers (the Whistleblower Act);
- for the empowerment of the Ombudsman in coordinating all administrative complaints in the public service as a whole;

Accountability also means a Corporate Social Responsibility focused on Equality initiatives so as to balance family life with work, thereby the introduction of family friendly measures.

III. OGP Commitments

Malta will be focusing on the two Grand Challenges centering about the “Creating a Safer Communities” and “Increasing Corporate Accountability”. The initiatives to be undertaken are the result of a wide consultation between the various Civil Society organisations in Malta and Gozo and the Ministry responsible for this OGP initiative. A meeting with high officials of the American Embassy in Malta was also held whereby the initiatives carried out so far and the visions for further initiatives were amply discussed together with two conferences that were open to the general public. Following these conferences, meetings with the Government entities were held so as to discuss the initiatives raised by the Civil Society and to come up with an implementation plan covering two years and prioritizing the implementation of highlighted initiatives.

Safer Communities

Having Cleaner beaches One should recommend the adoption of a system whereby all beaches are daily maintained on an extensive number of hours, say, 12-hour, during the months from mid-June to September. There should also be a waste separation process on Malta’s beaches during the summer months, whereby the public will be also be encouraged to participate in keeping the beaches in a clean and safe state.

Construction of Safer Roads There should be the continuation of the construction of safer roads, which roads should include zebra crossings, pavements, accessibility to reduced mobility persons, traffic lights, good water clearance and water capture areas. The roads are to be well lit with energy efficient lighting and a better traffic management.

Environment

To keep the environment where we live cleaner and more attractive and have a place where citizens can relax, the following are being proposed:

- Continuation of the program to have more open spaces for recreation
- Installation of safer playing fields and continuous monitoring of such sites, including CCTV cameras for the safety of such sites.
- Installation of more bring-in sites for at source segregation of recyclables; the introduction of door-to-door collection of dry recyclables and the establishment of civic amenity sites for the separate collection of bulky household waste and household hazardous wastes
- Establishment of modern facilities for the management of wastes including a materials recovery facility for the further sorting of recyclables and a mechanical biological treatment plant aimed at the treatment of the organic fraction of municipal solid waste to generate biogas to be utilized for energy generation and compost

Corporate Accountability

Transparency in Public Spending

There should be more transparency on how public funds are being spent. This should be monitored through the setting up of different boards to ensure internal accountability and transparency and the amalgamation of the revenue earning departments that includes legislative amendments, HR, systems, and logistical arrangements to ensure a smooth transition process. This merger is a process through which Government is aiming at strengthening its capabilities in ensuring a fuller, fairer collection of tax and other dues due to it, to further strengthen its efforts against abuse while at the same time reducing bureaucracy for businesses and individuals.

Taxation and Benefits abuses

One should also make sure that there tax evasion is to be minimized as much as possible. This could be done through the increase in off site income tax inspections and enhance enforcement of tax collection; investment in more human resources in the investigation/compliance functions; introduction of measures to encourage moves from informal or undeclared work to regular employment; audit exercises through liaison between various government department and entities to curb abuse.

Procurement

Procurement procedures should incorporate a balance between simplification, transparency and accountability. This could be achieved through better use of electronic means and more openness in tender evaluation.

One-stop shop for Citizens

Citizens would like to see a reduction in bureaucracy when getting any public service and as much as possible by going to one entity. In this regards, the further use of Local Councils to act as one shop stop shall be encouraged. A case in point will be the use of Local Councils whereby citizens shall be offering social security services from the office of the local council once a week. This forms part of the reform which involves the extension of social security services on a regular basis within the heart of communities. As a result of this extension, the customer care facilities will be available to the residents of the localities at the office of the local council. The residents will not need to go to other villages or district offices for information and applications since their local council will offer this one-stop-shop facility. Among other facilities available to the residents, they will be able to apply for any social security benefits which do not need any notarial declaration, apply for the pink card and submit their sickness certificate.

Conclusion

The Government of Malta and the Civil Society will be working in earnest together so that the initiatives will be implemented so as to continue to improve the quality life of the citizens living on these Islands.

***‘The opportunities that lie within a policy
that is based on openness, are what promote social justice and democratic equality in
their purest form’***

Fr Peter Serracino Inglott, Professor Emeritus of philosophy and former rector of the

University of Malta

April 26, 1936 – March 16, 2012