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Privacy and Surveillance are the Elephant in the Room at OGP Summit [UPDATED]

BY KATRIN VERCLAS | Friday, November 1 2013

ABOVE: Intel Free Press/flickr

Privacy, surveillance and the closing of political space for openness and transparency activists in many countries was the hot issue at the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Summit in London that was left largely unaddressed by the OGP member countries present.

A group of civil society organizations have now responded to what they see as a lack of attention to these critical issues in the proceedings and commitments that comprise the OGP process. The OGP is a voluntary consortium of now 62 countries that was formed in 2011 to "provide an international platform for domestic reformers committed to making their governments more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens. In all of these countries, government and civil society are working together to develop and implement ambitious open government reforms."

The letter, published on the Web Foundation's website, is being circulated widely.

It states, in part:

> We join other civil society organisations, human rights groups, academics and ordinary citizens in expressing our grave concern over allegations that governments around the world, including many OGP members, have been routinely intercepting and retaining the private communications of entire populations, in secret, without particularised warrants and with little or no meaningful oversight. Such practices allegedly include the routine exchange of "foreign" surveillance data, bypassing domestic laws that restrict governments' ability to spy on their own citizens.Such practices erode the checks and balances on which accountability depends, and have a deeply chilling effect on freedom of expression, information and association, without which the ideals of open government have no meaning. As Brazil's President, Dilma Rousseff, recently said at the United Nations, "In the absence of the right to privacy, there can be no true freedom of expression and opinion, and therefore no effective democracy."

The undersigned call on OGP member to do three specific things:

- Update existing privacy and human rights laws in light of new surveillance technologies revealed this year,
- Commit in their specific OGP Action Plans to a review of national laws and enact reforms to regulate "necessary, legitimate and proportional State involvement in communications surveillance"; and
- To guarantee freedom of the press; and to protect whistleblowers who lawfully reveal abuses of state power.

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INDIA'S ELECTION COMMISSION LAYS DOWN LAST MINUTE LAWS FOR ONLINE CAMPAIGNING

India's Election Commission recently published a set of guidelines for the use of social media in political campaigns, requiring that candidates declare the amount of funds spent on social media campaigning and pre-certify their political advertisements, among other requirements. The new rules, sprung on political campaigners less than a month before the scheduled elections, have had mixed reception, with some saying that the rules do not go far enough.

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Why is it that you can by a Coke nearly everywhere in the world, even in the most remote developing country, but in many of those same locations one in nine children die from preventable illnesses like dehydration from diarrhea before their fifth birthday? That was what the founders of the organization ColaLife wondered when they came up with the idea for Kit Yamoyo, an anti-dehydration kit that piggybacks on existing Coca-Cola distribution networks to get the solution to those in need.

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ITALY, A TEST LAB FOR PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Online platforms for participatory democracy are flourishing in Italy and they are being initiated by civil society and local governments alike. Some of these tools are limited to 'social reporting,' where citizens are asked to recount problems and disruptions; others strive for empowering people with some sort of liquid democracy that allows people to debate and even propose legislation. But all of these platforms grew out of a deep dissatisfaction toward Italian politics and politicians. Now, a variety of tools to enable bottom-up decision making are being tested by local municipalities in Italy and being developed by small groups of volunteers. GO

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