



What is Open Government?

Broadly speaking, Open Government (OG) is an umbrella term that covers the culture, principles, and practices of changing the relationship between government and wider society towards more openness, transparency and participation. While a range of definitions of OG exists, a [2018 Council of Europe Explanatory Memorandum](#) points out that most share three common elements: *transparency, participation, and accountability* (a [Recommendation of the OECD Council on Open Government](#) also lists the principle of *integrity*).

To help further conceptualise Open Government, a [2016 study prepared for the European Commission by PWC](#) develops a trifold framework: open engagement (opening policy-making processes for public participation), open services (re-usability of digital public services) and open assets (covering government information – whether data, software, frameworks or specifications).

What is the role of libraries?

The description above already suggests a strong alignment with library sector values – promoting free access and flow of information to support development and democracy. As the pointed out in both the [IFLA response](#) to an OECD Open Government consultation and the [2018 Good Governance Briefing](#), such value alignment and libraries' capacity and expertise implies they can help deliver on Open Government goals – for example, by helping measure intervention impacts, supporting information users, lending their information management expertise, or other ways.

Over the last few years, we are seeing this potential reflected both in library practices and LIS research. "[The Role of Public Libraries in Improving Local Open Government Ecosystems](#)", a project carried out by the US Center for Technology and Development, developed a typology of public library engagement with Open Government, as well as a planning model to help libraries build an Open Government program for their communities. Both this project and other works – for instance, [Sayogo, Wang and Yuli, 2016](#) – suggest that libraries can be particularly well-suited to supporting the demand side of Open Government: supporting and mobilising user engagement, ensuring access opportunities, and similar.

Experiences from around the world: libraries in OGP plans and implementation

One possible way to explore how libraries around the world contribute to Open Government is by comparing the roles they play in different countries' Action Plans within the Open Government Partnership (OGP).

The [OGP](#) is a framework for cooperation between states and civil society actors to promote Open Government. Within this partnership, they jointly set out plans and commitments for reforms in each participating member state, implement and review their impacts in recurring two-year cycles.

The OGP offers a framework that is both comparable across member states and quite prominent: as [one OECD study points out](#), among more than 50 surveyed states, 47% had a single Open Government Strategy – of which 76% referred to their country's OGP Plan as the national strategy.

OGP Action Plans in turn should include commitments, all of which should contribute to [one or more core principles](#): availability of information, citizen participation, integrity and accountability, and technology/innovation for openness and accountability.

So how do libraries feature in the countries' plans and commitments – and implementation evaluations that follow?

The OGP database suggests that “libraries” and “library” are mentioned in more than 30 commitments – tangible goals that states set for themselves for each two-year cycle.

These commitments involve different libraries – from public (e.g. in Georgia and Ukraine) and academic/university libraries (e.g. in France and Slovakia) to national (e.g. in Canada) or Parliamentary (Greece) - and even special libraries (e.g. a Presidential library in the U.S.)

Libraries and library associations can either assist other agencies with the implementation of their commitments or lead initiatives (for example, Library and Archives Canada is a lead implementing institution for a [2012 commitment](#) to increase access to governmental records).

In terms of the types of OGP commitments to which libraries contribute, the most common areas cited are ‘availability of information’ and ‘citizen participation’ – however, beyond these, there are several areas which see libraries commonly involved.

Area 1: Equitable Access and Service Delivery

Public service delivery [is an important element](#) of many Open Government Strategies - [focusing on such questions as](#) broadening the reach of these services and enabling citizens to oversee and offer feedback on their quality or delivery.

Traditionally, many libraries work to help people make use of digital public services – whether by offering on-site assistance, providing access to the internet and workstations, or offering digital skills learning opportunities – from [Moldova](#) to [the Philippines](#) to [the UK](#), and many others. These traditional roles are reflected in number of Action Plans which sought to ensure equitable service delivery and access to information with the help of libraries.

- *Service Delivery Points*

In the [2012-2013 cycle](#), Ukraine engaged libraries in its e-governance strategy. [Recognising that](#) internet access was not fully widespread at the time, a fact that, together with a lack of user confidence, could drive down the demand for e-government solutions, the “Public Libraries as Bridges to E-Government” initiative was launched. The initiative saw librarians trained to offer consultations and help people make use of e-government resources – and raised public awareness around existing digital public services through libraries.

Similarly, [the 2014-2016 Georgia Action Plan](#) aimed to transform four rural libraries into [service delivery points](#) to facilitate the connection between their communities and local governments and assist with capacity-building. Necessary equipment was delivered to the libraries, and librarians received training on public service delivery.

- *Digital Skills*

Other cases emphasise libraries’ role in delivering ICT training and support to help people make use of digital services. Both the [2012](#) and [2013-2014](#) Denmark Action Plans, for instance, engage public libraries in initiatives (setting up peer-to-peer learning groups, helping citizens with the use of digital public services) that help ensure that no one is left behind as the government transitions to online and digital communication.

The [2019-2021 Italian plan](#) also points out the need to further raise the digital skills among the population to support the digital transformation of the public sector. Libraries are set to

contribute to the efforts addressing this skills gap by creating digital content and services – as well as other measures.

These examples focus on how libraries can support equitable access to digital government services and information – whether as full service delivery points, or by offering training and support for the public. **However, it is important to emphasise** that e-government [in and of itself is not synonymous with open government](#): OG reforms emphasise meaningfully opening up **more** information and processes for the public, rather than digitising existing documents or mechanisms that the public can already access in analogue forms.

For example, Georgia's [2018-2019 Plan](#) shows how a library can help support citizen engagement in service delivery assessment. The National Parliamentary Library will be involved in Ozurgeti Municipality's initiative to develop an assessment system and evaluate the services the local self-government offers - and citizen's satisfaction with them.

Many libraries have extensive experience with facilitating people's engagement with digital public services. While e-government and Open Government are conceptually different, [digital solutions naturally can be employed](#) to broaden access to information, boost transparency and accountability and create engagement opportunities – and libraries in turn can contribute to the implementation of such measures.

While e-government inclusion is absolutely crucial and, without a doubt, many libraries will continue their work to support it; library initiatives focusing specifically on Open Government in relation to service delivery can focus on such objectives as:

- Setting up feedback mechanisms or measuring user satisfaction with service delivery;
- Creating opportunities for public participation in decision-making over service delivery, or facilitating communication channels with relevant government representatives;
- Increasing accountability and transparency of service delivery; and so on.

Area 2: Boosting Civic Participation

A number of Open Government Plans engage libraries to help carry out interventions to boost or support civic participation. This can range from highly formal participation (e.g. in official electoral processes), to less formalized consultation and engagement, or one-off events.

- *Participation in formal processes*

The [2013-2014 Denmark Action Plan](#), for example, sought to facilitate early voting by making it more accessible and increasing its visibility, especially among young people and first-time voters. Municipalities organised postal voting at institutions which citizens frequented – and the [End Of Term Report](#) shows that municipalities many relied on educational institutions and local libraries to implement this measure.

- *Venues for civic engagement*

In Georgia, citizen engagement was one of the key goals behind the commitment to modernise several village libraries set out in the [2014-2016 Action Plan](#). Communities [used the modernized libraries](#) to hold public meetings, discuss relevant issues and develop local proposals

Similarly, the [2018-2020 Canada Action Plan](#) sets out to test suggested good practices and new ways to facilitate citizen engagement and public consultation. This can include holding events in community-focused venues like libraries – which can help make it easier for people to take part.

The cyclical OGP process includes a member country preparing a self-assessment report shortly after the end of the first year of implementation. After drawing up their self-assessment for the 2016-2017 cycle, the government of Romania held a public debate and consultation on the draft [in the National Library](#). In fact, between 2014 and 2017, the National Library [often hosted](#) an OGP club where interested citizens could find out more and express their views on the process. This channel allowed to offer feedback and input to the government - [another step](#) towards more openness and citizen participation.

- *Developing and supporting engagement mechanisms*

The Canadian Plan discussed above also mentions a crowdsourcing tool introduced by the Library and Archives Canada. The tool enables citizens to tag, add keywords and descriptions, transcribe and translate digitized images from the Library and Archives – and is offered as an example of an activity that helps boost openness and engage Canadians. The plan sets out an objective to make the source code this tool uses publicly available. This would allow other institutions to make use of this solution for public participation and engagement in their areas of work; and shows how library-focused engagement solutions could be used in other contexts.

The example of a National Library assisting with service delivery assessment from the 2018-2019 Georgian plan also falls within this category - one of the key rationales behind this commitment is to raise the local public's interest and engagement in governance and decision-making.

Broadly, the examples above show that the roles of libraries in facilitating civic participation could fall into three broad categories:

Libraries-as-designers: creating (or helping design) mechanisms, events or platforms that enable engagement with governance and decision-making.

Libraries-as-facilitators: relying on libraries' capacities and community ties to launch and implement their own civic engagement initiatives.

Libraries-as-venues: the unique characteristics of library spaces: inclusivity, openness and community orientation – can make them well-suited to hosting civic participation events organized by relevant organisations or agencies.

Area 3: Supporting Open Government Data (OGD) Regimes

Open government data (OGD) can be [broadly characterised](#) as open, free to use, reuse and redistribute government data and information. Libraries can play a versatile role in supporting and enabling OGD regimes: [a 2017 publication](#) by the UN Economic Commission for Africa, for example, suggests that public libraries and community centers can act as key points for both disseminating government data and information (whether in digital or print form) and collecting local data - especially in rural sites and/or areas with low internet penetration. OGP Action Plans show several ways that libraries can support open data regimes:

- *Government records in National Libraries: access and digitisation*

National and/or Parliamentary libraries are often directly involved in ensuring access to government records. In the [2012-2013 cycle in Canada](#), for example, the national Library and

Archives was a key actor in broadening access to archived government documents. That included removing access restrictions and making classified information available online (including through digitisation). The [2016-2018 Plan](#) commits to updating the Library and Archives Canada's online archive – this measure aims to ensure that online government information remains accessible in the long term.

Similarly, national archives naturally are crucial players in ensuring access to government records– for example, National Archives were among the key institutions responsible for [Australia's 2016-2018](#) commitment to make government information more discoverable and accessible. They were responsible, inter alia, for continuing to digitise archived records and making more records publicly available.

The Department of the National Library in Jordan, meanwhile, is the lead implementing agency [for a commitment to strengthen](#) and institutionalize the enforcement of the country's Access to Information Law and create a unified classification system for managing governmental information.

- *Government information platforms: library expertise to help streamline access*

Libraries can also support or offer assistance to initiatives that aim to build and maintain government's own digital databases and portals. For example, also mentioned in the 2012-2013 Action Plan is the supporting role of Library and Archives Canada in building a Virtual Library of government documents and publications. The subsequent review highlights that information and library science expertise can be valuable in making sure that the online repository is well-designed and maximises its potential.

Similarly, the 2016-2018 [Australian Plan](#) set out to improve the accessibility and discoverability of government information – both the data on the government's own open data platform and information released elsewhere. The Australian Library and Information Association and the National Libraries of Australia and New Zealand are among the actors involved in delivering this commitment. These actors are also involved in the commitment to support and foster public trust in the Open Data regime.

These examples point to libraries' (especially National Libraries') roles as *curators* - ensuring access to government information in their possession – and *advisors* - helping build easy-to-use, visible, and accessible portals of government data and information.

But these and other roles are not limited to National Libraries and state-level records! The broader role of LIS professionals in maintaining Open Data is referenced, for example, in [Ireland's Open Data Strategy](#) - promoting and encouraging the use of Open Data, and sharing their expertise on data management and archiving. Beyond state-level records, individual libraries can take on many roles in supporting open data regimes – for example, on city, municipal or regional levels. These are many practical examples of libraries working together with local agencies to support and enable open data (see e.g. a [presentation](#) by the open data literacy consultant at the Washington State Library).

There are also notable research efforts to document and systematise the ways libraries can support open data. The [Civic Switchboard Project](#), for example, sets out a comprehensive guide to the different roles libraries can take on – from advocacy, to bringing together data users, helping coordinate data production efforts, offering data literacy skills development, data management or archiving, and beyond.

Area 4: Open Cultural Data

While it can be viewed as a subcategory of an OGD regime, open cultural data stands out as a separate engagement area for libraries in Open Government Action Plans. Here, libraries would go beyond curation and consultation to take on an active role as data publishers and contributors.

- *Cultural resources and cultural sector data*

The [2016-2018 Romania Plan](#) also puts forward a goal to digitise cultural resources and make them available online to improve access to cultural heritage. This is linked to the development of the Digital Library of Romania and the country's input to the Europeana project. Notably, [a subsequent report](#) emphasises the importance of making different types of cultural information open – including such data as budgets and records on cultural spending.

The [2019-2021 Italy Action Plan](#), for example, aims to publish National Library Service data on a dedicated platform as part of their national Open Data approach. [The 2019-2021 Norway Plan](#) aims to implement a Strategy for Open Cultural Data. The Ministry of Culture, with the participation of the National Archival Services, National Library and the Norwegian Council for Cultural Affairs, intends to identify and make publicly available priority datasets, survey and find relevant standards and registers.

The commitment points out that, ideally, cultural institutions would be able to submit more open data that can easily be reused (meaning data that is machine readable and more standardised) – be it for value creation, development of better services, etc. Importantly, the commitments also notes that both intellectual property and privacy considerations would impact the release of data sets.

As part of the Open Government movement, libraries can help generate open cultural data by making the datasets they have openly available, or, if applicable, submitting them to relevant aggregation databases. These initiatives can help contribute to the open cultural data movement – but it is important to keep in mind that privacy and IP considerations will impact what can be made available.

Area 5: Championing Open Science and Open Education

Finally, several Action Plans sought to engage libraries in Open Science and Open Education commitments. As OGP points out, [this policy area receives a lot of attention](#) across various Action Plans – from budgets, to strengthening oversight, to Open Educational Resources.

- *Libraries for Open Access*

For several cycles, the Action Plans in Slovakia included important measures to support Open Access. There, libraries are conceptualised as both intended recipients and partners in implementation. For instance, the [2017-2019 Action Plan](#) commits to establishing a Contact Office for Open Access which would, inter alia, offer training for librarians and researchers.

The [2019-2021 Plan](#) reaffirms the need to train and raise awareness among librarians on the benefits of Open Access – but it also seeks to actively engage them to help advance OA. In particular, it plans to partner with several university libraries to test different approaches to OA publishing – from training to incentives to assessment criteria – to see which conditions are most favourable to enable OA publishing.

- *Transparency to support Open Science*

The French 2018-2020 plan, in the meantime, aims to introduce a system for monitoring university libraries' expenditures on digital acquisitions.

In the area of Open Education and Open Science, libraries are both an important part of the system and potential drivers and agents for change. Of course, [the work of libraries around Open Access and relates topics](#) goes beyond the framework of Open Government – but engaging them in OG Action Plans remains a feasible way to advance Open Science and Education.

Ensuring Impact: Lessons from the OGP process

Another benefit of assessing library engagement through the OGP processes is the chance to get insights on the impacts of different measures. Alongside state self-assessments, independent reviewers evaluate the implementation of each Action Plan evaluated halfway into and at the end of each cycle.

So what makes for an impactful intervention which engages libraries? In many reviewed commitments, libraries have helped bring about valuable incremental changes towards a more open and participatory governance. Drawing on the feedback that these commitments received, a few suggestions on how to maximise impact – and potentially carry out interventions that result in major changes! – can be made:

- 1) **Understand, conceptualise and clearly indicate how a given measure can contribute to one or more core OG values.** Does this measure open access to new data or information, create or enable new governance participation channels, increase transparency or accountability? What outcomes do you expect, and how would they be achieved?
- 2) **Set tangible and verifiable objectives.** This can guide and help track the implementation. Does the activity depend on other actors; is it feasible?
- 3) **Consider the scope and scale of the potential impact.** How much new data or information would be made accessible? How many people could benefit from this intervention; is it scalable or replicable?
- 4) **Make sure that the library has sufficient resources to carry out the commitments.** Especially for resource-intensive, long-running or continued initiatives, libraries may need financial resources, equipment and/or personnel training. A lack of resources can hinder or prevent effective implementation.
- 5) **Identify and track the outcomes.** Who made use and benefitted from the intervention – and why? How did this contribute to the core OG values?