

# Speech: Renewing Citizens' Trust in Government- UK's Transparency Agenda

The UK and Nigeria have a flagship partnership. Just last month, President Buhari joined our Prime Minister and nearly 50 other leaders representing 2.4 billion people for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) in London.

The focus of the meeting was to discuss global development challenges and find new ways to work together building a common future based on prosperity, fairness, security and sustainability. It was acknowledged that as globally agreed under Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda, promoting peace, providing access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable, and inclusive national institutions, at all levels, are essential for development to flourish.

Transparency matters for sustainable development. When people can see how their governments spend public funds and what it achieves, and have a say in how their country is run, then trust and confidence can be built in political leadership. With open, accountable and responsive governments, citizens are more likely to pay taxes, vote, and get involved in decision-making. By shining a light on financial flows and decision-making, transparency also reduces opportunities for corruption.

Today I will cover the following themes: – Why the transparency agenda is important; – The British Government's commitment to global transparency; and – UK's partnership with Nigeria on the OGP.

## **Why is the Transparency Agenda so Important?**

Open government is the simple but powerful idea that governments and institutions work better for citizens when they are transparent, engaging and accountable. It is not a set of lofty principles, but the building block for a more democratic, equal, sustainable and prosperous society. These issues are relevant to all societies and always work in progress.

The consequences of an opaque and unaccountable government are clear to see. Secrecy enables corruption, injustice, and negligence to go unchecked. The release of the Panama Papers revealed the scale of global resources hidden in secretive tax havens. Lobbying scandals have revealed how vested interests seek to influence public decision-making.

Citizens today have access to technology and data that would have been unimaginable a decade ago; providing new tools and data sources to monitor what a government promises and delivers. Citizens are expecting and demanding more from their leaders. In Nigeria alone, it has been reported that over 90 million people use the internet.

Through support for Sustainable Development Goal 16, political leaders across the world have committed to building effective, accountable and inclusive

institutions. Countries have pledged to leave no-one behind in this pursuit; ensuring that the most vulnerable particularly women, youth, those with disabilities and elderly are included in the development of open societies.

But there are formidable challenges. In many countries of the world, governments lack the capacity to implement transparency reforms and respond to citizens' demands. Poor public financial management increases the risk of leakage of public funds, meaning that in many places delivery of critical services such as health and education are weak.

This results in a lack of trust from citizens in their governments. People often do not pay taxes because they do not believe the money will be used properly. Instead, services are accessed through bribes, because citizens cannot see any other way to get even basic healthcare or education. People suffer in poverty, and citizens become disengaged. In some contexts this can feed grievances, based on lack of opportunity and marginalisation, which lead to support for violence and extremist groups.

The cycle can be broken. When governments show openness and willingness to listen to citizens' concerns, and when they respond to those concerns, trust grows. Women and men are more likely to engage in political processes. Citizens begin to pay taxes because they see that they are getting something for their money; and with more taxes collected, service delivery improves.

In the long run transparency helps drive growth and development. Evidence shows that more transparent countries have higher foreign direct investment inflows and lower borrowing costs.

Transparency on its own is not enough. To be useful, the evidence provided needs to be meaningful to ordinary people. Too often, data is not presented in an understandable way that enables citizens to find, interpret and use it. The more information is put into the public domain and used in this way, the more accountable and responsive institutions become.

Countries with a strong civil society tend to have less corruption, higher integrity, and more equitable allocation of funds for the public good. Development is most likely to happen when diverse groups of people come together to rally around specific reform issues and make demands on their governments.

This is why the Open Government Partnership platform with partnership at its core is very important. It is not a partnership of governments but, a partnership between governments and civil society, in the interest of citizens.

It is fairly easy to be skeptical about the OGP, to see it as a talking shop and duplicating things that could be happening in other transnational bodies, like the UN. In many cases, it's difficult to see how what is happening equates to a genuine partnership of any kind, but this is an area where the UK has made significant progress and seen its usefulness.

## The UK's Global Transparency Agenda

The UK prides itself on being a global leader on transparency and the OGP is an important part of that agenda.

As a founding member of the OGP, we have strongly championed the OGP as part of our role in driving forward a global movement on transparency, watching it grow from 8 to over 70 countries since 2011. Nigeria is now an important member of this movement.

At the London Anti-Corruption Summit in London on 12 May 2016, where global leaders underlined their shared commitment to tackle corruption, we made strong commitments on increased transparency and availability of government data and stepping up our support to countries like Nigeria on their anti-corruption and transparency efforts.

The UK has kept this promise. Last year, UK launched its first ever Anti-Corruption Strategy that provides an ambitious framework for tackling corruption at home and overseas with a strong focus on transparency. We have established a public database of who actually owns and therefore benefits from companies. And having adopted the open contracting standard, we will help more countries to do the same. We have introduced strong measures to tackle asset recovery and money laundering in the UK with Unexplained Wealth Orders. The UK is working hard at home and overseas to close down the international opportunities that allow unscrupulous individuals to get away with corruption.

All these measures and more are reflected in the UK's third Open Government Partnership National Action Plan that has pledged on: – unprecedented visibility on how government spends money – world-leading commitments to tackle corruption – increased investment in our national information infrastructure, opening up better quality data to strengthen accountability, drive reform and spur innovation

But, the content of the plan is just one part of the story of our OGP National Action Plan. What matters just as much is how it was developed. The commitments reflect many months of close collaboration between government officials and civil society reformers.

How we spend our own aid is important. Both UK taxpayers and the people our aid helps want to know how we are making a difference. 'What are you going to do with my money? How do I know you will spend it well'? Where are the results? I am proud of DFID's leadership on aid transparency, but there is always more to do. We are holding our development partners to high standards and many more organisations are publishing aid data.

It is staggering to think how far we have already come in the UK. Until the late 18th century it was illegal to report on parliamentary proceedings. The lobby correspondents of the day – including a young Samuel Johnson – had to hide in a corner, furtively jotting down notes, then style their accounts as reports from the senate of a fictional country. Speeches were often misremembered, or heavily embellished. If you were too accurate you could go

to prison. So the public only had a vague and shadowy sense of what was being said in their name.

Parliament's decision in 1771 to stop prosecuting political publishers was an early exercise in open government. The date is no accident. The big idea of the Enlightenment was that no idea was above scrutiny. In politics and science truth was no longer an appeal to authority, but to evidence. Fast forward to today and we live in a world transformed by science and technology, and most recently by the digital revolution. That revolution is fundamentally changing how power is distributed and the scale and speed of human connection. These changes do not just make it possible to open-up as never before – they demand it.

## **UK's Partnership with Nigeria on Open Government**

We recognise that transparency does not however stop at national borders. A transparency revolution on this scale requires a global effort. The fairness of international systems affects us all.

Nigeria's joining the OGP sends a signal that it sees an inherent value in openness and in civil society and government working together. This is also a strong national and global message on your commitment to tackling corruption.

Nigeria's progress has been commendable. The first OGP Self-Assessment Report indicates that reforms in Nigeria's first National Action Plan are on track. Citizen's engagement in the federal budget process has been strengthened by timely release of budget information and the various consultations with the civil society organisations that were held. A number of states have also commendably signed up to the initiative, deepening sub-national transparency. All this has been done with civil society participation. The UK has been side by side with Nigeria in this process from the beginning. Our Partnership to Engage Reform and Learn (PERL) and Facility for Oil Sector Transparency (FOSTER11) programmes have been supporting Nigeria's effort to open up its institutions and enable those who scrutinise the work of government – legislature, supreme audit institution, civil society, and the media – to hold those in power accountable to citizens. Like in the UK more needs to be done.

Opening up government effectively is a learning process for all sides. As a public servant myself, I have learned that I have to be accountable for how I spend public money. The public has a legitimate right to know what I am doing and how I am doing it. Answering questions on the work of the High Commission in Nigeria can be time-consuming, but it is necessary and important. It builds understanding and trust. We do our work better by involving our stakeholders in civil society and working with them. Sometimes we get criticised – and this can be uncomfortable – but it is useful feedback we can use to ensure we provide a high quality service.

It is important too for civil society to learn how to engage with government. When government is not responsive and not providing a good service, it is important that civil society highlights this. When government is seeking to reform and to open up, civil society should ensure it develops a constructive

relationship that supports reform. When government consults and seeks comments from the public, civil society needs to get down working and engaging seriously. That can require new and different skills. I am pleased that through our PERL and FOSTER programmes we have been able to help civil society in Nigeria develop new skills to support a constructive relationship with government. When citizen groups build a positive relationship with INEC that opens up the process for all to see, voters are more likely to have confidence in the process and the outcomes. We are pleased to have been facilitating some of that conversation and awareness through our continued support for credible elections in 2019. While I am on the topic of elections, let me be clear that while INEC has a job to do, and citizens also have a part to play, it will take responsible leadership and behaviour by all involved to ensure that the transparency around the process is matched by peaceful polls. But I digress...

I am very happy to announce that our Ministers have just approved £12m new funding for priority countries like Nigeria to deepen and implement open government reform commitments.

### **Taking Transparency Agenda to the next level – Looking Forward**

The UK will continue to lead by example on this agenda. We will continue to improve the quality and value of our own evidence and data, increasing transparency of our delivery chain, and demonstrating the value of aid data as we use it ourselves. We will continue to demand high standards and encourage similar leadership from our partners. As we move towards to the 2019 elections, we want to encourage transparency around the process, so Nigerians will be confident that the results are credible and that they reflect the will of citizens. We will continue to offer assistance and support, but Nigeria has to lead the way.

We will continue to support existing global transparency initiatives to deliver value, increasing the use of the data and evidence made available. We want to see more implementation of standards like the Extractive Industries and Construction Sector Transparency Initiatives.

All this would be in partnership with countries like Nigeria.

Let me round up with the popular saying that “sunshine is the best disinfectant.” An open government is a better government.

Governments in the UK and in Nigeria are not exempt from this, and we must ensure that openness and accountability are embedded across institutions. Civil society must seize the opportunity and hold government to account for its progress. OGP is a shared process where leadership has to come from both sides.

The UK remains committed to leading the global transparency agenda. We recognise that we cannot do it alone. We will continue to support Nigeria in its efforts for an open government. It may take some time to reach the destination desired, but the journey has begun.