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# Open Government at the Local Level

Experiences  
& Recommendations from  
Morocco and Tunisia



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## I. Introduction

The following report presents lessons and recommendations from local open government reform efforts in El Kef municipality in Tunisia (2021-2022) and Béni Mellal-Khénifra region in Morocco (2020-2022). Civil society and local government leaders - including elected representatives and professional administration staff - engaged in collaborative open government processes in line with the Open Government Partnership's (OGP) action planning framework. In both contexts, civil society and local government partners largely succeeded in establishing an inclusive and constructive dialogue with one another and together made progress towards more open and transparent processes, such as in budgeting, procurement and development planning, and more regular and informative public communication. Efforts to ensure the long-term sustainability of these processes are ongoing.

Feedback and reflections from civil society and government stakeholders from the two communities - El Kef municipality in Tunisia and Béni Mellal-Khénifra region in Morocco - as well as from National Democratic Institute (NDI) country staff who assisted community actors throughout the process - form the basis of this report. We thank all contributors for their

honest and constructive self-assessments.



*Representatives from El Kef and Béni Mellal-Khénifra government and civil society meet to discuss their experiences with OGP on the sidelines of the 2022 OGP Africa and the Middle East Regional Meeting in Marrakech, Morocco.*

Findings aim to benefit civil society actors, local government officials and staff, and other advocates for open local government reform as well as international community actors and OGP partners supporting open government transformation processes at the local level. Recommendations address the start-up and implementation phases of open government projects, and aim to offer helpful

guidance to peer project teams in overcoming common challenges. While emerging from activities that align with the OGP framework, many of the findings will also be relevant for democracy and governance assistance programs focused more broadly on openness, transparency, and accountability at the local level.

## II. Case Studies

“One of the most favorable outcomes of encouraging collaboration between CSOs and the regional council is improved communication,” reflected a Moroccan civil society leader at the conclusion of Béni Mellal-Khénifra region’s open government reform co-creation process, begun nearly two years earlier.

Since 2016, OGP has promoted open government reform and collaboration at the local level, offering a set of standards and a framework for local leaders, activists, and residents to boost transparency, accountability, and participation. Two local projects, in Béni Mellal-Khénifra, Morocco and El Kef, Tunisia, respectively, offer lessons and recommendations for how open governance processes can help stakeholders begin, amplify and incentivize democratic governance reforms at the local level. In both cases, local stakeholders invited the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to facilitate inclusive convenings and access to international experiences and lessons learned.

### Béni Mellal-Khénifra, Morocco

In 2020, the Béni Mellal-Khénifra regional government - eager to align itself with the national promotion of OGP and to integrate with an international good governance platform – began co-creating an open government action

plan with local civil society groups. The regional council shared an open call for participation on both their website and Facebook pages and invited all applicants without exclusion to engage and participate in consultations and the co-creation mechanism. Between October 2020 and January 2021, participating partners regularly convened and identified an open budget, open regional development plan, and policy innovation as priorities. In June 2021, NDI convened in-depth consultations and co-creation drafting sessions between the regional council and CSOs that clarified timelines and priorities.



*In July 2022, the Béni Mellal-Khénifra regional government formally launched its OGP Local membership at an event including representatives from government, local consultative bodies, civil society and media.*

After Morocco's regional elections in September 2021, progress resumed and NDI supported the regional council in holding working sessions with officials and a wide array of civil society groups in the region's five provinces to validate the draft action plan developed prior to elections. In November 2021 and January 2022, NDI's project team assisted the regional council in forming working groups of government officials, civil society, business, and academics that discussed how the regional council could innovate government processes to benefit tourism and agriculture, two key local industries. The regional council also launched an online platform – open from January to February 2022 – to receive public suggestions and opinions on the open regional development plan process.

In February 2022, the regional council formally endorsed the action plan and in March applied for OGP membership. In April, in accordance with its commitment for an open regional development plan (which lays out short- and medium-term public investment priorities), the regional council convened and led consultations with hundreds of representatives from more than 80 civil society organizations and the region's five provinces. The large number of representatives involved in consultations marked a significant shift in the region's outreach practices, which previously reached a much narrower set of civil society organizations. Consultations resulted in a detailed list of priorities relating to the economy, health system, environmental conservation, and infrastructure, organized by province, to guide the drafting of the regional development plan.

When [OGP Local officially accepted Béni Mellal-Khénifra as a member in May 2022](#), the regional council and civil society partners were already planning open budgeting activities, held that June. Béni Mellal-Khénifra is a notable case study in how the incentive of OGP membership can open the door to potentially transformative reforms. Taking steps to open development planning, institute transparent budgeting, and create more participatory policy development processes can raise expectations for how these processes will be implemented in the future.

In addition, by bringing more community voices to the table, the Béni Mellal-Khénifra's regional council has gained greater insight into the priorities of residents, and created a positive model for how other subnational governments within Morocco can take concrete steps to consult with civil society organizations, local officials, and community members to identify needs and set priorities.

The experience has also contributed to shared learning and multiplier effects. At OGP's Africa and the Middle East regional meeting in November 2022, the

government of Morocco, OGP, and local and regional member governments - including Béni Mellal-Khénifra - [launched the Africa-MENA Regional Network for Local Open Government to accelerate the spread of this model to new locations](#).

## **El Kef, Tunisia**

In 2020, El Kef and Regueb were Tunisia's first local governments<sup>1</sup> to join OGP Local. At the outset of NDI's engagement with El Kef municipality, in fall 2021, El Kef's OGP process had stalled. The municipal government felt that it was ultimately responsible and accountable for the implementation of the action plan, and had not prioritized a role for civil society in taking action or monitoring. Similarly, though some civil society groups were involved in the co-creation process, awareness of the agenda and plans for implementation were limited among broader and diverse groups within the sector. In addition, concern about the number of commitments in the action plan created another hurdle to coordination. As an initial step, from November 2021 to early 2022, NDI convened partners to revisit and reaffirm the action plan, which [includes 17 co-created commitments \(although only up to five commitments can be formally tracked with OGP\)](#).

Training on standards and expectations for open government processes helped to restart engagements between civil society and the government; in the words of one El Kef official, "The key added value [of the NDI project team] was in delivering multiple information sessions and emphasizing the role of civil society in action plan preparation and in the implementation of the four commitments jointly with the municipality of El Kef." NDI-led training sessions also offered a venue for informal collaboration and dialogue between the two groups, which built trust and collegiality.

With the action plan confirmed and training complete, NDI assisted partners in turning to joint implementation of the plan. After an open call for participation, El Kef's open government steering committee - which is composed of an equal number of civil society and government representatives - met for the first time in March 2022 and assigned relevant CSOs and municipal agencies responsibilities for specific commitments. Inclusive selection criteria ensured that a diverse and gender-inclusive group of civil society representatives were included in all steps of the process. For

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<sup>1</sup> In March 2023, by decree-law, Tunisia's president dissolved all of the country's 350 municipal councils and assigned temporary management to municipal secretaries general. The president stated that new rules will govern future municipal council elections and powers. See Agence Tunis Afrique Press, 9 march 2023, <<https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Politics/16077514-municipalities>>.

example, a women's association, persons with disabilities organization, and youth are represented on the El Kef steering committee. In the months since, El Kef has made consistent progress in implementing commitments, such as an internal audit system and digital spaces to access services, digital archives, and promote inclusion, often connecting with experts and national CSOs to make progress. In particular, one women's rights organization in El Kef launched a digital space raising awareness of services for and the rights of women residents; this website will be linked to El Kef's first municipal website, under development by a second local organization in fulfillment of action plan commitments.

### **III. Recommendations and Lessons Learned**

Drawing on these experiences, the following section identifies promising approaches, lessons, and challenges in starting, implementing and sustaining open local government reform processes. [In the spirit of OGP's 2023-2028 goals to become the home for inspiration, innovation, evidence and stories on open government, as well as its goal to invest in strategic alliances and partnerships as reinforcers and amplifiers of open government principles](#), the findings and recommendations aim to assist and encourage local reform champions and the international assistance community engaging with OGP at the local level.

#### **Getting started**

**Gain government buy-in by showing the benefits of openness and its potential to solve governance problems (and boost local business), especially where public feedback can be useful in identifying solutions or setting priorities:** One way to gain buy-in from government officials is by presenting open processes as a means to fill information gaps in governing work, such as planning or budgeting. Closing gaps will also help the public understand and follow government projects - opening up priority-setting discussions that might usually be invisible to the public can help officials speak openly about why a certain project may be stalled or delayed. For example, all Moroccan regions are responsible for economic development plans and manage budgets; these processes became logical entry points for transparency and openness commitments, with interest from civil society in providing inputs and where government officials can easily see the value of public participation. Béni Mellal-Khénifra regional council leaders expressed interest in the OGP framework as a high profile and credible way that could help the council respond to national government openness initiatives and improve its coordination and consultation practices with provincial officials and regional civil society groups. Technical assistance training offered by NDI

on communications, open and participatory processes, and budgeting also incentivized participation. Civil society groups especially can offer insights into public perspectives, including from diverse groups such as youth, women, and people with disabilities, which can connect problems with solutions that might otherwise not be identified. In Tunisia, the municipality is responsible for procurement and contracting to support various local services; this responsibility was accordingly addressed in a commitment to make procurement decisions more transparent.

[As OGP has noted](#), government and civil society partners can see how a successful open government process, especially as part of an international framework, can benefit their communities by boosting its visibility and reputation. Openness can also make a locality more business-friendly, such as through a more transparent procurement or contracting process that reduces investment risk through clarified processes and outcomes; the potential draw for investment appealed to partners in Béni Mellal-Khénifra, as economic development is a key responsibility of the regional government. In Georgia, some local governments responded well to arguments that open data benefits local businesses and startups; specifically, open government initiatives to proactively publish different data in user friendly formats can help startups build innovative platforms, such as weather applications or zoning maps.

*While providing technical assistance is of course essential, it is as necessary to help secure a widespread political buy-in through, for instance, awareness raising sessions specific to elected officials, that could include the political and strategic implication of joining OGP. Building a strong and mobilized political will is necessary to integrate a greater openness, transparency, and accountability in regions, and improve outreach and dissemination on OGP.*

*- Morocco, regional government representative*

**Use national government commitments or legal frameworks, especially those requiring public consultation, as an incentive for governments to embrace an openness agenda:** Occasionally, national governments have made public or international commitments to transparency and openness projects, and regional and local governments may be motivated to align with national leadership or directives. For example, Morocco's Ministry for Digital Transition and Administrative Reform is the country's institutional lead for OGP activities, and remains a key partner and supporter of open government efforts at the local level. Accordingly, NDI and Béni Mellal-Khénifra partners regularly updated ministry representatives on progress, and ministry



representatives attended and had visible roles in major project activities. Finally, laws or codes governing local government processes or activities, such as development planning, zoning, or budgeting, may include language that requires the government to seek public feedback. These requirements - also present in Morocco - can also be effective entry points for open government commitments. Tunisian CSOs also recommended engaging national ministries regarding certain commitments (such as the Ministry of Social Affairs for commitments related to persons with disabilities access issues) to ensure implementation aligns with national standards and frameworks. In addition, consider linking the project to global initiatives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16+ which includes peaceful, just and inclusive societies, and accountable institutions, as well as space for inclusion of women, youth, and people with disabilities.

*My main takeaways from Béni Mellal-Khénifra's experience is that local governments must open up more to civil society, improve access to information for their communities, operationalize Consultative Bodies (CBs), provide opportunities for public consultation, such as in the development of regional development plans, strengthen communication, and implement a proactive scheme to publish information. All local governments should work to ensure greater civic participation, and effectively operationalize all the participatory mechanisms available to them.*

- Morocco, regional government representative

**Make use of presentations and training sessions to set expectations and build early collaboration:** Project teams should identify communication gaps or limited understanding of what open government commitments and norms look like in practice and support filling this gaps and building a common understanding of open government and the direction of the co-creation process. OGP Local's online and virtual training materials, amplified by project teams' in-person or ad hoc presentations and training sessions can serve to address some of these capacity gaps, explain what a process might look like, establish a common language for communication about the process, and lay foundations for common expectations . These sessions are also useful in building energy and maintaining momentum behind the project. Finally, including both civil society and government representatives in these sessions can create early, low stakes opportunities for dialogue and joint activity, laying the groundwork for collegial collaboration on more tangible (and potentially contentious) issues later on. In El Kef and Béni Mellal-Khénifra, partners reported that these initial overview sessions helped them understand the process as well as their roles. In the words of a

Tunisian civil society representative, “NDI reinforced the link and participatory approach between civil society and the municipality through facilitation meetings and training targeted to identified needs.” In Tunisia, partners even asked for additional training on specific themes and topics, including communication, public service delivery, and accessibility for people with disabilities to participate in local decision making and access information.

*The informative session gave us a clear picture of the OGP program.*  
- Tunisia, civil society representative

**Ensure commitments are tangible, straightforward, and sustainable:** [As noted by OGP’s IRM](#), sustainable commitments are not overly complex. Partners can aim to improve existing processes and take an incremental approach to openness to spark a virtuous cycle of participation. Alternatively, partners seeking to build something new can be creative in finding and committing resources and should reach out to non-governmental stakeholders to support initial implementation, while at the same time building internal capacities and sustainable resources for initiatives.

To the first point, by starting with known and relatively high profile government processes and documents, such as key services or the budget, it can be easier to frame and make progress on commitments. The concrete nature of these processes makes it easier for the public and everyone involved - such as civil society - to see where openness and transparency can add value. In addition, openness on everyday issues can create a virtuous cycle of public and civil society participation, as open government changes begin to take shape. This can include easier access to official documents, easier participation in more frequent public meetings, and a new or improved digital communication effort, such as through a municipal website. The function and nature of these changes is generally clear to government, civil society, and the public, although implementing and sustaining them requires investing time and resources. Civil society and the public can easily understand the value of providing inputs to the regional development planning process led by Béni Mellal-Khénifra regional council, for example. If the government then provides updates on how public feedback is used and status updates on implementation, this can encourage more participation in future processes.

While innovative and technology-centered commitments may be appealing or offer potential quick fixes, not all local governments will have the funding, staff skills, or infrastructure to enact or maintain these systems over the long-term. Websites - such as the municipal website envisioned by El Kef -

have become much easier to create and maintain in recent years, although governments will need to ensure they have the staff and resources to update the website's content and keep it secure, otherwise it will be of limited value. For example, in efforts to boost sustainability, El Kef partners focused on connecting with domestic resources to develop and fund the website, as well as with a peer government who had successfully developed and integrated a website into its communication and service delivery functions. In El Kef, a local women's right organization used its own resources to develop a website promoting women's political and social inclusion in the community, and this platform will eventually be connected to the municipal website when it is launched in early 2023.

### Ensuring an inclusive and effective process

**Include local or national leadership where possible, but don't neglect administrators and staff:** The attention and support of top leadership and elected officials within the government administration, both locally and occasionally from national ministries, ensured that the open government process remained a priority. Meeting with key leadership officials at the start of the program is important to ensure they understand the process and its goals, and maintain their engagement by inviting them to facilitate co-creation and drafting sessions and provide opening remarks at larger, public meetings. In addition, leaders were given opportunities to review and endorse public communications, such as calls for civil society participation. Participation and buy-in from key leadership throughout the process not only ensured the process remained a priority for the local government, but also encouraged civil society and community leaders to participate in and trust the process as a politically-backed effort.

While leadership's support is important, **staff in the local administration were also essential.** These individuals, such as directors-general of local administrations, play a key role guiding the process, both as the day-to-day points of contact for project teams and by ensuring the relevant government departments and units are aware of and involved in the implementation of commitments.

Finally, by maintaining meaningful buy-in and engagement from both administrative and elected officials, project teams can ensure the process is not dependent on one or two individuals and progress is more likely to continue even in the event of an unexpected leadership or staff change between elections (note that action plans should, by design, expire before elections).

*If you have a good leadership that is involved and truly believes in the project, your chances of success are maximized, which was the case in Béni Mellal-Khénifra. There are of course obstacles, such as limited resources. Increasing the workload of departments/staff/members, which already have limited capacity to begin with, is challenging. There is also the question of determining responsibilities. You could not with certainty ensure that in the next election high level officials would have the same interests and willingness to commit to an initiative such as OGP. It is thus necessary to carry on in building the capacity of the administrative staff and civil society to be able to keep up the same standards of work, and ensure continuity. Maintaining administrative staff and elected officials' motivation and performance is also important.*

- Morocco, regional government representative

**Center elected bodies and representatives as drivers of the process:** Some countries have very centralized systems, and national governments may be reluctant - for various and legitimate reasons - to devolve too much authority and funding to local governments. Nevertheless, NDI's project teams recommend engaging elected representatives in open government processes - in addition to appointed executives or staff - in order to build democratic norms of responsiveness and transparency in elected bodies. For example, Moroccan regional councils have limited responsibilities compared to the whole Moroccan government structure, and often act in coordination or with support from ministries and local ministry representatives. Therefore, engaging the regional council as the key driver and messenger of the open government process reinforced their identity as the people's elected representatives and lent credibility and democratic legitimacy to the regional council's activities. For example, at events for the co-creation or consultation processes, Béni Mellal-Khénifra regional council elected leadership served as key moderators or provided opening remarks for the event. Examine whether local government bodies dedicated to inclusion issues, such as gender equality, youth inclusion, or disabilities access, can be positioned to drive co-creation or implementation of particular commitments.

**Engage a broad range of civil society stakeholders, and stand behind partners:** Encourage the government or driver of the open government process to cast a wide net when seeking input from the public. For example, NDI project teams assisted partners in Morocco and Tunisia in publishing an open call for applications from domestic CSOs to participate. Governments might be reluctant to engage with civil society groups in general or may want to stick with the groups they know, but broadening the number and type of organizations at the table is necessary for having a truly open and inclusive

process. Organizations advocating for women, youth, and disabilities inclusion are prepared to demand for intentional and deliberate inclusion of these groups, improving the overall openness of the process. In addition, CSOs may be skeptical, especially if past open government or transparency promises failed to result in change. NDI project teams recommended providing assistance while standing behind government representatives as messengers and conveners inviting civil society to participate. This lent credibility to the process by demonstrating its endorsement by key political leaders.

**Require action from civil society groups:** Be sure to engage civil society representatives as active contributors to the process, rather than as passive monitors. By sharing part of the work in communicating with the public about commitments, serving on the steering committee, and also by contributing towards the completion of action plan commitments, civil society representatives will build useful skills and experience engaging with government representatives and earn the trust of municipal officials. In El Kef, for example, the steering committee - made of equal numbers of government and civil society representatives - negotiated and agreed to assign responsibilities for completing specific commitments between government units and local groups. Representatives then provided updates on their progress at following meetings. Robust civil society participation will not only increase the likelihood that commitments get achieved, but also - by demonstrating value - encourage the government to continue with a more open and inclusive policy of civil society engagement. Civil society organizations, such as women's rights organizations or persons with disabilities organizations, are essential to providing a platform for traditionally underrepresented voices of women, youth, and people with disabilities.

In both contexts, CSOs ensured government leaders did not exclude these voices, and partners demonstrated increasing awareness of and responsiveness to women, youth, and persons with disabilities inclusion through progress towards commitments related to services and access. In both contexts, NDI ensured that government partners cast a wide net for the participation of CSOs to be involved in public consultations or events, and that CSOs represented diverse communities. For example, in El Kef, partners developed a map of public buildings that were and were not wheelchair accessible to begin addressing accessibility challenges in the community.

*Civil society should be involved from the beginning in the development of commitments and priority projects.*

*- Tunisia, civil society representative*

**Encourage government partners to budget for open government:** In the initial stages of OGP action planning and implementation, external resources played a key role in convening civil society and government partners. For the process to be sustainable and continue for years to come, however - and as OGP has noted, governments will need to budget for the meetings and staff time that make the process possible, and also to implement the action plan commitments that ultimately result from co-creation activities. In El Kef, for example, CSO partners stepped in with technical assistance and expertise on an ad hoc basis, but in future efforts additional government funding and resources that can be allocated ahead of the action plan development process will be needed.

**Maximize inclusion by planning ahead for accessibility for persons with disabilities and language barriers:** A civil society organization partner in Tunisia noted the lack of open government commitments related to persons with disabilities inclusion, and also recommended that the action plan co-creation process and communication materials should be accessible to persons with disabilities to understand, such as by providing sign language or braille documents.

**Encourage a public-facing process from steering committees:** After opening the door to civil society input and participation and forming the steering committee, government officials and participating civil society groups may focus on implementation and neglect updating or reporting to the broader public on the process. While it is positive that civil society and government representatives talk with one another, they should also ensure they communicate with the public. Communication should be varied and effort should be made to reach and hear from historically underrepresented groups, such as women, youth, and persons with disabilities. For example, in Béni Mellal-Khénifra, the regional council could turn to already formed consultative bodies of women and youth representatives to discuss progress and source feedback.

**For external assistance project teams facilitating OGP Local processes, be sure to establish separate and regular communication with government and with civil society to keep tabs on the health of the process:** If you are part of a project team assisting local civil society and government representatives in facilitating OGP Local co-creation or action plan implementation (as NDI was in these two case studies) it's important to validate progress reports with civil society participating in the project as well as the government. Government and civil society partners may have a different opinion of whether co-creation or implementation of certain

commitments is on track. A separate communication channel can help to identify conflict or tensions - either within government, between government and civil society, or between civil society representatives - while there is still time to find a resolution.

### **Scaling up**

**In lieu of membership, consider other, potentially less formal ways to recognize and celebrate open government champions:** Formal membership in OGP Local is a reality for only about 100 of the globe's countless local governments, and the cohort only expands every few years. To encourage uptake of open government principles and the action plan process, project teams and partners suggested communities that passed a certain threshold of performance or commitment towards open governance should be recognized for their achievements, perhaps by national ministries, national CSOs, or other high profile networks, such as national or international local government associations, civil society platforms or governance forums. For example, this could take the form of a certification of open government that needs to be renewed periodically, thus encouraging continued participation. Ahead of the OGP Africa Regional Conference held in November 2022, [Moroccan government officials launched a network](#) of open local governments in Morocco, which will provide a platform for Moroccan local governments that are formal OGP members to engage with non-member peer governments interested in implementing an open government action plan co-creation and implementation process. In addition, at the conference, OGP and OGP member governments launched the Africa-MENA Regional Network for Local Open Government, which will provide an international forum for this kind of experience-sharing.

*Local governments that are committed to their citizens must be open, must seek to implement OGP values, and adopt measures to consolidate participatory mechanisms and principles of transparency and accountability, even if they are not OGP Local members.*

*- Morocco, civil society representative*

### **Increase opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement and learning:**

Partners in Tunisia were interested in the experiences of other municipalities and communities that had benefited from the OGP process. They also suggested implementing a kind of "twin cities" arrangement to develop partnerships and linkages between OGP member governments and communities. Conferences and regional gatherings of OGP members are also valuable; NDI's partners from El Kef reported that the OGP regional

conference provided contacts and inspiration for continued work and new commitments within the OGP framework in their own community. In addition, these exchanges, such as regional gatherings, can be moments to recognize leadership and innovation within the OGP Local cohort, which can be an additional incentive for making an effort to implement open government.



*The Mayor of El Kef presents symbols of the municipality to the Vice President of Béni Mellal-Khénifra's Regional Council.*





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