

**Open Brazil by Haidee Bell**  
**Guimarães, Open City Project**  
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***A nation of contradictions?***

History paints a mixed picture of government transparency in Brazil. The country has free elections, a free Congress, an independent Judiciary and formal constitutional guarantees to match those of most western democracies. It has been described as a leader and innovator on the world stage in its approaches to transparency policy. In 1996, well before other nations were even discussing the switch from paper ballots, Brazil introduced an electronic voting system, which has drawn praise as a model for other democratic nations. The Brazilian voting machine accomplishes three steps (voter identification, secure voting and tallying) in a single process and is very simple to use for the country's 115 million people, who are all obliged to vote. Brazil was also one of the first nations to experiment with participatory budgeting – involving citizens in deciding on government investment – an approach many have attempted to follow. Yet some would say that the rhetoric does not reflect the reality. Questions are raised over electoral rules, the power to corrupt and the lack of accountability in a country where not all states have a modern press to hold government to account.

The country's commitment to more transparent government has recently been under the global spotlight. Brazil was co-chair and host of the inaugural meeting of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), the first multi-nation initiative devoted to advancing transparency, access to information, citizen participation and accountability in government. The meeting on 17 and 18 April 2012 in Brasília brought together more than 50 countries all of which have made a commitment to transparency reforms and an openness to delivering these 'under the watchful eyes of citizens'.<sup>1</sup>

***Moving towards open governance in Brazil***

The journey from the end of military rule in 1985 to the chair of the OGP has been an extraordinary one for Brazil. 1988 saw the declaration of the 'Citizens Constitution' a clear

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<sup>1</sup> [www.opengovpartnership.org](http://www.opengovpartnership.org)

statement of a gear shift that prioritised concepts of democracy. This created the legal basis for many of the country's most progressive institutions and policies. One of the most well known was the establishment of Management Councils (*Consejos Gestores*) –fora in which citizens join service providers and government in setting public policies and overseeing their implementation. Over 28,000 Management Councils have been established in areas including health, education and the environment. Citizens constitute 50% of each council's members, the remaining 50% made up of government institutions, service providers and sector professionals.

This development makes a very compelling story about the creation of new spaces for participatory governance. It has been seen as a landmark moment in attempts to drive out the old and start afresh in Brazil. However, a close look at research into the dynamics of some council meetings reveals that while they can offer space for debate, there are barriers to participation from a diverse range of social groups. The fact that participating civil society organisations are often dependent upon government funding can also mean that meetings are vulnerable to political manipulation.<sup>2</sup> There is an additional risk of tokenism; genuine participation needs to be about more than simple response to invitations from the state and to allow for deliberative enquiry into key decisions.

Participatory budgeting (*Orcamento Participativo*) is the other key policy from this era to have gained international attention. Established in the 1990s in Brazil, this involves citizens directly in making decisions on the spending and priorities for a defined public budget. There have been some key successes, especially in Porto Alegre where participatory budgeting was first established and almost 10% of the population has taken part in the process.<sup>3</sup> This policy has served to increase transparency within local government, though it still covers only a small proportion of government spend and the lion's share of municipal budget is still agreed by a city's mayor.

After President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (known popularly as 'Lula') took office in 2004, Brazil took another step forward. It was one of the first nations to maintain open government

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<sup>2</sup> Cornwall, A (2008) Engaging Citizens in Governance: Lessons from Brazil's Democratic Experiments. A report from the Olhar Critico project, with support by DFID, Action Aid and the Citizenship DRC

<sup>3</sup> De Souza Santos, B (1998) Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre: Toward a redistributive democracy. Politics & Society Vol 26 issue 4

expense accounts, using the Transparency Portal (*Portal da Transparência*), a government website dedicated to making public all expenditures of the Federal Government. It includes all expenses and money transfers made, including lists of all people receiving family social welfare benefits and how much they have received. A considerable move in terms of transparency, yet the view from close observers of the open government practice in Brazil is that this does not go far enough. One transparency expert highlighted that since only national government spend data is included, those operating at local level remain unmonitored.<sup>4</sup>

Current President Dilma Rousseff seems set on using Brazil's leading role of the OGP as a catalyst for closing the country's gaps in transparency. In 2011 she initiated two other key developments: a Truth Commission – setting out a right to truth that will investigate rights abuses, including those committed during the dictatorship – and a Freedom of Information Law, which came into effect on 16 May 2012. The Freedom of Information Law is an international standard so allows Brazil to be compared alongside international counterparts. *Brasil Aberto* (Open Brazil), an organisation founded for citizens from around the country to monitor Brazil's commitments to government transparency, notes that Brazilians are using their new Freedom of Information Law less than citizens in Chile did when its law first went into effect (0.24 requests per 100,000 citizens versus 0.55 for Chile).<sup>5</sup> However it is early days and too soon to be drawing conclusions about impact. Fabiano Angélico, co-founder of *Brasil Aberto*, is pleased to see that the Freedom of Information Law is gaining a good deal of media coverage, frequently not the case with government initiatives<sup>6</sup>. And the NGO community is beginning to use the power of this law to focus attention on key areas of work around, for instance, anti corruption and human rights.

The use of technology for crowd-sourcing solutions to public service challenges, traditionally used by corporates, is also just beginning in Brazil. The organisation *Mutopo*<sup>7</sup>, which supports groups in 'social production' initiatives, has recently set up a São Paulo office that is active in tackling complex societal problems. Social innovator Reinaldo Pamponet has

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Fabiano Angélico, Co-Founder Brasil Aberto, 4 June 2012

<sup>5</sup> [www.brasilaberto.org/ba/en](http://www.brasilaberto.org/ba/en)

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Fabiano Angélico, Co-Founder Brasil Aberto, 4 June 2012

<sup>7</sup> [www.mutopo.com](http://www.mutopo.com)

created a methodology for cooperative learning *Eletrocooperativa*<sup>8</sup> that uses an online interactive environment for young people to create their own collective and socially responsible enterprises whilst providing information on their rights and roles as members of society. Reinaldo believes that the concept of crowd-sourcing could be transformational from a social perspective: 'We Brazilians need to ask ourselves what our role will be and what part we have to play with it.'<sup>9</sup>

Brazil is clearly a country of multiple identities as regards openness in public life. On one hand, the Federal Government, as clearly outlined by the President, is open about its transparency commitments. Federal practices do not, however, necessarily reflect on states and municipalities. The Legislative, likewise, consists of older, more traditional politicians who may have vested interest in maintaining the status quo: the Freedom of Information Bill was stuck for some time in the Legislative where two former presidents now sit.

Agencies like *Brasil Aberto* and *Transparência Hacker* – another network devoted to the fight against corruption and strengthening of democracy in Brazil – are championing the 'Open Brazil' agenda and are active through events and social media to ensure that the momentum does not dissipate. Now – immediately following Brazil's time in the global spotlight of the OGP launch – is a key moment for the country to be open about its blocks to transparent governance and determined in its commitment to removing them.

### ***What the world can learn***

Brazil's experience illuminates key questions around open governance that are relevant to states and cities across the world. Firstly, transparency can only have real force where it applies across all parts of government – most crucially at a local level. Individual policies cannot be meaningful if they operate in isolation and OGP leaders would be wise to start their work by understanding the major gaps in commitment and seeking to fill these. For many nations, not least Brazil, this means finding ways to incentivise (or force) those who still hold the power – such as city mayors – to engage positively with the agenda.

Enlightened city leaders, like Henk de Jong in the City of Amsterdam, should be role models proving to cities around the world what is to be gained at a local level. De Jong is publicly

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<sup>8</sup> <http://itsnoon.net>

<sup>9</sup> Pamponet, R speaking at Conferência Crowdsourcing, 2-3 July 2012

passionate about governments' new role as 'convener':

'This is a new era of governance. We must innovate to become truly social; to this end government may not have all the answers.'<sup>10</sup>

In practice this has meant a series of pioneering social innovations in the city. Amsterdam has employed digital technologies to create a crowd-sourcing platform *Amsterdam Open*<sup>11</sup> that involves citizens not only in responding to government policy, but also in proposing new solutions for city challenges, suggestions the city actively takes on board.

The second lesson from Brazil, linked to this, centres on the question of 'civic participation': how to answer the OGP commitment for citizens to be able to influence and change their daily lives and society. There is often a fanfare around the opening up (of policy, of data). However, where the real value and true democracy comes, is in how the data gets used, how this sets the agenda and, vitally, what effect participation has upon balances of power.

In a transparent society, the ideal is that every member of the population has an equal level of physical, intellectual and social access to information, and can equally act on public information and take part in public discussion. Transparency activists in Brazil and elsewhere are pressing hard for answers to questions around how to increase usability for all, stressing that the open governance goal cannot be achieved without meaningful citizen participation. The right tools are crucial; innovations well intentioned to reach more people through online engagement platforms may inadvertently end up widening the gap in physical and intellectual access, especially in parts of the world where digital access is patchy.

Here again, cities and the network of hyper-local communities that form them, have an opportunity to lead. The more local the theme, the more level the playing field becomes: we all understand and have something to offer to discussions about our neighbourhood, our open spaces and our high streets. Open governance in cities ~~also~~ allows for physical as well as virtual participation, so providing access to more people. Early indications are that it is at this local level that genuine 'collective intelligence' - group work which generates outcomes

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<sup>10</sup> De Jong, H speaking at Commons4Europe Launch, Amsterdam, 29-30 March 2012

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.amsterdamopent.nl>

beyond what could be achieved by the individual participants - can be achieved. Collectively intelligent systems combine elements, some virtual, some face-to-face, some standardised and some intensely personal: combinations that normally require a local focus.<sup>12</sup> Cities need to employ a range of methods for wise decision-making.

***‘When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.’***

This quote<sup>13</sup> from one of Brazil’s most well known writers Paul Coelho sums up much of the optimism and belief in collective action which are part of Brazil’s DNA. The nation’s open government story is one of considerable progress and it is commendable how willing President Rousseff has been to put their transparency commitment so high on the world stage. Her trick will be to move from a player to a champion in the global transparency movement – ensuring it is on the agenda in as many contexts as she has influence.

And judging from her remarks at the launch of the Open Government Partnership, this is what she is setting out to do:

‘Open government is not just about allowing individual access to budget execution data; it goes beyond, it is also about ensuring the rendering of accounts by governments, monitoring, oversight and citizen participation, it is about establishing a permanent two-way channel for communication between governments and society.’<sup>14</sup>

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Haidee Bell works on innovation programmes at UK agency Nesta [www.nesta.org.uk](http://www.nesta.org.uk) She was awarded a fellowship from the British Council’s Cultural Leadership International programme in 2011-12 to undertake a study visit of open governance in Brazil in June-July 2012.

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As part of the *Open City* strand, [Watershed](#) has curated a series of [artistic interventions](#) as well as commissioned [think pieces](#) which will explore the concept of openness in relation to city development. *Open City* provides the opportunity for Guimarães to establish a leadership role for open city

<sup>12</sup> Mulgan, G, Mateos-Garcia, J, Marston, L and Westlake, S (2011) Draft Discussion Paper on Collective Intelligence, Nesta

<sup>13</sup> Coelho, P (1988) *The Alchemist*

<sup>14</sup> Rousseff, D speaking at the launch of the Open Government Partnership, 20 September 2011

*development. It is a knowledge exchange programme that will help to re-draw approaches to city-making and change the ways we plan, deliver services and engage communities.*

*This work will be both published online and presented in Guimarães, providing the context and the content for a symposium to be held in the city in November 2012.*

[www.watershed.co.uk/opencity](http://www.watershed.co.uk/opencity)

