REPORT ADDRESSING COVID-19 THROUGH OPEN GOVERNMENT: PUBLIC EVENT

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OPEN RESPONSE + OPEN RECOVERY

BELIZE OPEN GOVERNMENT ACTION PLAN DEVELOPMENT IN TIMES OF COVID-19

PROJECT: **Transformation to an Open Public Administration in Belize**

This document is the report of the Belize open government action plan co-creation launching session held on June 24, 2020. The objective of the session was to identify the priority areas from which commitments can be drawn. The report summarizes the introductory presentations and, most importantly, the conclusions of the dialogue as the baseline for structuring the drafts of open government commitments.

The session, hosting over 70 participants from government and no-government sectors, started with an overview of the open response and open recovery global campaign set forth by the Open Government Partnership, followed by an overview of the government COVID-19 response. These two presentations set the stage for a subsequent dialogue that took place in three different breakout groups with the participants of the session.

the OGP highlighted that governments around the globe have embraced open government principles for COVID-19 response and recovery. Among one of the actions taken by the organization was that OGP give countries the opportunity to extend their national action plans for compliance and/or adjustments to address the pandemic with new open government commitments. The OGP Campaign COVID-19 addresses two momentums:

1. Open response: to ensure proactive and accurate disclosure of information, to facilitate open platforms, to mobilize community assistance, to make procurement more transparent, to integrate transparency and inclusion and oversight during the response.

2. Open recovery: To ensure transparency, citizen engagement, and oversight in economic stimulus packages, aid, and budgets, to empower civil society to follow the money for the recovery.

OGP is helping their members to align their commitments to the covid-19 open response and open recovery. They are working in Costa Rica, Paraguay and Ecuador, among others, for example in setting accountability websites to include procurement, donations, improving health data with help of civil society organizations and universities, guaranteeing access of information, and accountability in government expenditure. In other countries in Africa governments and civil society agreed to manage covid-19 budget in an open fashion under open government principles.

OGP also launched a crowdsource space to gather best practices and examples of what are others doing to tackle covid-19 with open approaches. This space has over 400 complete submissions of cases from 72 different countries. Moreover, OGP created an open government and coronavirus guide that contains specialized modules on specific thematic approaches, for example and openness fiscal guide for covid-19, public procurement, open data, inclusion and data, justice, civic space, right to information, international aid, and misinformation and freedom of expression.

On the other hand, the government response to COVID-19 as presented by Mr. Yashin Dujon, CEO of the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation in representation of the Country's COVID-19 task force, reminded the audience of the major impact on cruises and travel when these were suspended in march 13. The government response has focused in combating the medical and public health, and addressing the economic component, with a four-pillar approach to the response; 1. institutional structure, 2. citizen engagement, 3. listening to science, and 4. technology tools. The government is working in three tiers of leadership: 1. Oversight committee (bipartisan); 2. Executive task force; 3. Sub-Committees, to address specific sectorial needs. The presentation addressed shortcomings experienced that arouse from misinformation and fake news, but overall, the response has shown to be quick and effective. The roadmap established by the government for the response entailed three stages: 1. Testing; 2. Contact Tracing; and 3. Social Collaboration.

To finalize, as next steps in COVID-19 response, under the assumption that there would be some more cases as the world begins to re-open, all of the measures taken by the government are not to be considered temporary, but most likely will be permanent as the new normal. For the road ahead, the government will focus in four non-medical areas to find a balance between health and economic needs: 1. Reopening of the airport to restart tourism; 2. Support business to ensure restart of the economy; 3. Ongoing health management in an open economy; and 4. Prudent and proactive fiscal management.

After the two introductory presentations, the three breakout sessions were predetermined in three sectors noted as priority in the country: 1. Health, 2. Economy & Trade, and 3. Tourism. The sessions were moderated by two international stakeholders and one local stakeholder, as followed: Breakout session 1: Juan Manuel Casanueva (SocialTIC, Mexico); Breakout session 2: Paco Smith (PEACE Movement, Belize); Breakout session 3: Mike Mora (OEA, Washington DC). The following are the conclusions of the dialogues that lead to the identification of the first priorities for drafting open government commitments aligned to COVID-19 response and recovery.

Breakout Sessions Conclusions:

Breakout session 1: Health

Four problems were identified in this group:

1. People do not wear the mask or wear them incorrectly. Perhaps people have not been instructed/guided about how to wear masks properly. Solution: expanding information through new or strengthened protocols about how to wear masks or follow social distancing.

2. Dengue as a health issue is not a priority for the health ministry. Needs to be complementary address if tourism is to be reopen properly.

3. Quarantine is not being followed by many people. Better sensitizing or tools to encourage people to follow quarantine may be needed.

4. Rural communities have more challenges accessing services and that include health workers traveling to provide services that are not supported.

Out of the 4 issues identified, the fourth issue was the focus of the discussion. The solutions proposed on how to make more sustainable health services, especially rural areas and to strengthen and support health workers were:

- Health workers should be involved in identifying and addressing what are the logistic needs to provide their services better, and what invectives are there for them as they travel to rural areas. Also, participation on discussion about what are the needs to keep the job to reduce turnover could be beneficial.

- Many health workers are traveling to capital city for data reporting. It will be ideal to have the possibility to have digital reporting systems for remote health workers so they can report about what is happening in the communities from the communities through online platforms. As a second possible step, considering conducting online doctor consultations for rural remote areas may be beneficial. To strengthen health at the rural level it was also identified as a solution to have greater collaboration for consultation and participation on health issues with civil society, for example to review the quality of the data collected by the health ministry, or to promote the covid-19 health initiatives, and even to support the health services expansion and seek funding for the expansion of services

Breakout session 1: Economy and Trade

There were several issues identified in this group:

- Foster and embrace digital technologies to digitize government services, for example license for trade.

- Improve the level of connectivity/interoperability among government offices to avoid duplication of efforts when citizens request a service.

- There is a need to shift to the ideology that everybody has a part of public services and not just one institution or public servant within an institution has the answers or solutions. Shifting the dynamics to a more participatory open approach in the design and provision of government services may be beneficial. This will require sensitizing and the ability to implement a theory of change in public administration.

- There is a need to Improve citizen participation that goes in hand with sensitizing public about how they can provide their input to public issues. Improving community outreach may be beneficial to address covid-19 recovery.

- Proactive outreach gear to solicit input from citizens regarding trade and commerce, including launching mechanism at municipality level, would be beneficial to ensure that covid-19 economic response is inclusive of the regions and rural communities as well.

- Embracing technology within the financial sectors, especially embracing collaboration between the central bank and private sector entities, both have input that need to be accounted for.

- Notion of accountability in terms of covid-19 aid is needed to monitor figures or how the funds are being spent. Digitizing and making the information public may benefit covid-19 programs and outcomes for response and recovery.

- Belize is outdated in terms of legislation. Ensuring that legislation is up to speed may be beneficial to act promptly when needed for covid-19 response and recovery. Outdated legislation is an issue that could be addressed by launching open multi-stakeholder mechanisms that can assess and prioritize on a plan for updating response and recovery related legislation.

- Building on cultural and creative sectors of Belize and exploring on new products and services within those sectors could diversify the landscape of new opportunities for the post covid-19 labor market. Look at value added of natural and cultural assets in Belize may mean more and diversified tourism.

Breakout session 1: Tourism

Discussion Focused in the non-medical focus areas approached in three different moments:

- Open airport and open tourism in a safe manner; however, there seems not to be enough data, it is either missing or not good quality data to work on. Tourism has data but there is a need to be more specific in what data may be worth gathering or using and needed for reopening, for example to expand tourism services to new markets and for the entire cycle of reopening the airport. The two issues that could be addressed with open government are:

  o Absence of data: as stated above, there is a need to launch mechanism to identify, structure, and mine airport and tourism data. A Hackathon is a combination of data and open government that may feed well into this short-term need. Developing solutions based on existing data (or new) to help the reopening tourism and establishing participatory approach to finding solutions may be beneficial. The OAS/Trust project is hosting a COVID-19 hackathon geared boosting tourism.

  o Absence of a protocol to reopening the airport. Even so it was explained that a protocol is being developed, it may be beneficial to finish the development phase of the protocol by using a participatory collaborative multi-stakeholder approach that include users, civil society, academia, and other non-government actors. This may not only produce a sounder protocol but support in developing trust in the process by users and citizens. Broadening communication between actors so everybody is aware and on the same page in the process is essential

- The second was presented in the form of a question: Is the tourism industry ready to take in the tourism influx of the reopening and to inform well the tourists? The tourism industry is fracture by membership base associations and therefore some actors could be left out of those industry groups. Having more people in the industry participating in a collaborative way to assess readiness of the sectors and to develop COVID-19 related touristic information may support a more holistic and comprehensive approach to reactivate the tourism. Setting a tourism reopening plan using open government participative methodology could help by bringing more views for more solid products.

- The last issue identified is communication within the tourism industry, that is not good or enough and perhaps excluding; therefore, finding ways to build more inclusive products could benefit the overall industry, for example, building a more comprehensive directory of tourism providers and services.

Overall conclusions:

1. Two transversal elements were identified throughout the dialogue that could be addressed or embedded across the board in all the commitments; these two are:

    a. Improve communication and collaboration mechanism among actors.

    b. More data and information are needed.

2. It may be more appropriate if Open Government initiatives focus on government non-medical focus areas for response and recovery. That includes immediate opportunities by establishing collaborative and participatory processes, and medium to long-term opportunities to strengthen the tourism industry while ensuring that health protocols are strengthened, nourished, and preserved. It is advisable to establish immediate participatory mechanism for the development of:

    a. Airport reopening protocol.

    b. Updated tourism industry directory.

    c. Develop an assessment for prioritizing updates to legislation.

    d. Assessing diversifying post covid-19 labor opportunities by researching new products and markets out of unexplored cultural and creative sectors.

About the session

The pandemic COVID-19 has shown to be capable of distressing almost all aspects of our very own existence. Each citizen, business, and government have faced it or suffered it in different ways. The pandemic came unexpectedly as well as the responses were. None of us were prepared to face such an emergency. Moreover, the losses around the world are plenty and difficult in terms of human lives or to the economies. As travels were restricted, economic activity was halted, impacted negatively countries relying primarily in sectors such as tourism and also threatening the capacity of producers to continue growing their crops or distributing produce and supplies.

To face the crisis situation and the recovery with a participatory approach, open government is addressing worldwide, the importance of designing and deciding solutions that can match and benefit from the views and concerns of complementary actors, including government officials, citizens, the private sector, and others.

In advancing open government in Belize through a multi-stakeholder co-creation approach, the Trust for the Americas, and the Organization of the American States (OAS), are supporting during 2020 the process for developing Belize's first open government action plan. The Action Plan is intended to serve as the instrument to orient the actions of stakeholders in Belize to accomplish certain open government commitments that are identified and agreed by government and non-government actors in different topics and/or sectors. Given the diverse challenges posed by COVID-19 in Belize, the exercise of developing Belize's open government action plan seeks to contribute to define priority areas in which open government could add more value or have a greater impact for COVID-19 related emergency response and/or recovery.

The **Transformation to an Open Public Administration in Belize** project in coordination with **the Belize Open Government Steering Committee** invited you to participate in this session, intended to launch the co-creation phase of the Belize open Government action plan with a COVID-19 scope where all participants had the opportunity to contribute to that process according to the following agenda.

15:00 hrs.   Opening remarks | Mr. Mike Mora, *Specialist on Digital and Open Government, Department for Effective Public Management, Organization of American States -* Facilitator

15:15 hrs.   Presentation on the COVID-19 government response | Mr. Yashin Dujon, CEO of the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, *Representing the Country's COVID-19 Task Force for this session, Government of Belize. The CEO also acts as Sub-chair of the Economic Stability/Recovery Committee of the Task Force*

15:45 hrs.   Open Response + Open Recovery | Mr. Pepe Garcia, *Senior Program Officer of Country Support, for North & Central America and the Caribbean, Open Government Partnership (OGP)*

16:15 hrs.   Breakout dialogue sessions (all participants will join group online rooms)

16:45 hrs.   Conclusions of breakout dialogue sessions by moderators and final dialogue

17:00 hrs.   Closing

You can also contact the Trust/OAS Local Project Coordinator for more information: Ms. Audrey Robin (arobin@trust-oea.org)