

# Cooperation Modalities and Benchmarking for Good Governance in the New Reality

By Alikhan Baimenov, Tolkyun Omarova and Diana Sharipova

*Today's new reality puts governments on the fast-paced race for prompt solutions, underscoring the ever growing significance of collaboration and benchmarking that can help every party find "best fit" solutions for their own settings. In demanding new ways of cooperation, modern challenges show the high relevance of the multilateral platform that the Astana Civil Service Hub offers through partnerships in its wide network of participating countries and partner institutions. Eventually, the benchmarking and solutions that governments seek demand adequate measurements, including international indices that require methodological improvements to meet development trends.*



Geopolitical tensions, globalization, demographic shifts, climate change and repercussions of the recent viral outbreak place immense pressure on public administration systems around the globe. In a world of continuous and constant change, a BANI world,<sup>1</sup> citizens turn to the state, expecting timely and effective responses to crises, regardless of a given socio-economic model. Governments are constantly searching for adequate responses to the challenges they face, a result of the fast-changing landscape in meeting growing citizen expectations and maintaining public trust in government.

At the same time, governments can respond more effectively if they learn about others' experiences through collaboration modalities. The significance of global partnerships and cooperation for sustainable development has been acknowledged by the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, specifically Goal 17.<sup>2</sup> The recent pandemic has made even more salient the greater challenges that humankind faces, and

the more important and urgent international and regional partnerships have become.<sup>3</sup>

In the absence of a silver bullet, exchanging ideas and sharing experiences can help governments—each operating in a unique socio-economic and cultural context—find best-fit solutions for their circumstances. Yet public institutions often lack time and resources to study best practices and trends on a daily basis. Therefore, as they demand new forms of cooperation, modern challenges show the increased relevance of multilateral platforms such as the one the Astana Civil Service Hub offers to its wide network of participating countries and partner institutions. The Hub's experience shows the effectiveness of peer-to-peer (P2P) learning alliances as an innovative form of collaboration.

P2P learning's success rate will increase if it is based on the right benchmarking considered helpful both at assessing the overall performance of a country in a wide range of directions and identifying some key areas for improvement. A useful benchmarking tool is international indices' rankings, which play a navigating role in finding the right benchmarks. It is imperative that their methodologies are periodically reconsidered and improved, considering new trends and growing citizen expectations.

- 1 BANI is an acronym coined by Jamais Cascio to describe a complex world of constant change and continuous crises. VUCA stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity and BANIs for brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible.
- 2 SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. It is an important goal as the SDGs can only be realized with strong global partnerships and cooperation, as any successful development agenda requires inclusive partnerships—at the global, national and local levels—built on principles and values, and a shared vision and goals placing people and the planet at the center. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal17>

- 3 UN75 Report (2020). "UN75: The Future We Want; The UN We Need." Nearly nine in 10 respondents to this UN survey, included in the report, believe that global cooperation is vital to deal with contemporary challenges. <https://www.un.org/en/un75/presskit>

## Collaboration as a Way for Finding Best-Fit Solutions

Governance systems around the world are adapting to the new realm driven by digital transformation, a part of the fifth industrial revolution that aims to improve the collaboration of humans and technologies (George Shaji and George, 2020), entailing intensive use of Big Data analytics and creating a more conducive environment to deliver proactive services, all while keeping citizens' rights and values at the heart of any decisive action (Baimenov, 2021).

In this regard, countries are collecting their experiences with varying degrees of success. Governments can make their efforts more efficient by sharing the practices regularly among each other, especially with their neighbours and countries with similar socio-economic backgrounds.

A collaboration scheme or network can be in different modalities and formed in varied degrees of commitment and involvement. Working collaboratively and independently makes perfect sense for members of networks, as they can bring their own experiences and compare them with others. According to Forrer et al. (2014), a network is a loose coalition where partners come together to take collective actions on which they share common interests, develop and implement cost-effective or highly beneficial public policies, while maintaining their own value primacy actions that protect and advance their own interests. Forrer et al. classified four dominant approaches of the network:

1. the *informational network*, where partners come together to exchange information, policies and solutions. In this collaboration scheme, stakeholders can have voluntary and one-time membership through meetings, seminars or conferences. This collaboration scheme also promotes flexible and open access where members can join or leave at any time.
2. the *developmental network* unites partners to share information, knowledge and experiences to enhance their capacities and implement solutions within their home organizations. This collaboration scheme also is voluntary, but a longlasting one based on trust and respect between the members, rather than responsibilities and pressure.
3. the *outreach network*, where partners develop strategies for policy and program changes that lead to an exchange or coordination of resources. In this setting, members can have some obligations to make contributions.
4. the *action network*, which brings partners together to make interorganizational improvements, formally adopt action plans

and provide services, along with information exchanges and advanced technological capabilities. This type of collaboration requires fixed memberships, fees, commitments and regulations.

This practice demonstrates that collaboration can combine more than one of these types or can be supplemented with other modalities.

A vivid example of such a multimodal and multilateral institutional platform is the Astana Civil Service Hub, which assists governments to excel in their public service transformation through partnerships and capacity development mechanisms, as well as through production of innovative and evidence-based research.

One of the key success factors of the Hub, established in 2013 as a joint initiative of the Government of Kazakhstan and the United Nations Development Programme, is that it has promoted demand-driven and flexible agendas from its very inception, as the scope and pace of implementing reforms has varied among countries and been subject to change. Its global platform enables governments to utilize partnerships effectively at the time when they are needed the most to improve their practical purposes. The Hub has implemented more than 150 research and capacity building activities, in which more than 9,000 practitioners, experts and scholars from 125 countries have participated. It has published more than 40 research knowledge products, including case studies, journals, research papers and publications.<sup>4</sup> And, its relevance is proved by the increase in participating countries from 25 to 43 members.

The Hub uses P2P learning to encourage individuals with common interests or issues to interact long-term and share knowledge and experience—at the international or regional levels, and across different sectors—and apply best-fit solutions to their own organizations and ensure an impact at scale on reform initiatives (Andrews and Manning, 2016). P2P learning is comparable to the intergovernmental network (Voets and Rynck, 2008) and community of practice (Gobbi, 2010). However, its main distinguishing feature gives learners more autonomy in membership, their own learning, communication and decisionmaking. Adhering to principles of equality, trust and respect, it focuses on professionals' grouping, sharing best practices on specific issues, plus strengthening partnerships and developing avenues for future advancements.

<sup>4</sup> The Hub employs several forms of collaboration to support the governments of its participating countries and beyond in building institutional and human capacity and promoting civil service excellence. It realizes its mission through three main pillars: partnerships and networking; capacity building and P2P learning; and research and knowledge management.

## Hub P2P Learning Alliances

P2P Alliance Theme	Launched	Countries and Organizations Involved	Outcomes to Date
One-Stop-Shop Public Service Delivery	May 2016	Azerbaijan, Georgia and Kazakhstan	Three case studies on the “One-Stop-Shop” principle of public service delivery published; meetings, workshops and conferences conducted.
E-government Development	June 2018	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan	Three workshops and online meetings conducted; one case study on smart government published; preparation of case studies and P2P activities (in progress).
Transformation and Innovations in Governance	June 2019	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, international experts from AAPA, OGC and UNDP	Several online peer learning activities held; study visits and seminars (in progress).

Source: <http://www.astanacivilservicehub.org/>

In 2016, the Hub launched the first ever P2P learning alliance of practitioners of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Kazakhstan, focused on public service delivery and based on high demand, showing the limited applicability of adopting best practices in the context of countries in the region. The alliance’s successful outcomes led to creation of two more alliances on e-government development and transformation and innovations in governance. These bring together civil servants and practitioners in specific fields of expertise and assist them in capturing tacit knowledge and sharing among each other; devising solutions for country-specific problems; and developing and implementing reforms.

The P2P learning alliances enable practitioners to cooperate on the basis of equality, making them feel that they are neither students nor teachers. Such a modality is useful in time sensitive fields like public administration.

For these alliances, the Hub serves as a facilitator and provides a multilateral platform, bringing together practitioners from various government organizations and agencies and other related entities, as well as international organizations. Peers of the alliances are decisionmakers who interact voluntarily by participating in regular capacity building activities to discuss issues of mutual interest; find and develop innovative solutions; and prepare research papers and case studies to advance public sector development.

It is important that the Hub adapts to realities—for example, in conditions of restrictions stemming from COVID-19. It launched a “Virtual Alliance of Practitioners,” comprising the P2P learning approach with cutting edge technology. The digital platform gathers and disseminates practices and innovative solutions employed by different countries and partners to cope with the pandemic’s effects. It contains more than 40 practical materials and useful

resources reflecting the experience of 10 countries and 20 organizations in the fight against COVID-19. It is noteworthy that innovative and technological practices from Azerbaijan, Estonia, Kazakhstan and the Republic of Korea evoked high interest among the Hub’s participating countries, leading to replication by some.

Taking into account nation-specific practices, it is possible to initiate projects, too. The Hub utilized the P2P learning approach and experience of a benchmarking country when launching a joint regional project with the Government of the Republic of Korea and the UNDP. The three-year project is aimed at improving the capacity of civil servants responsible for the digitalization of public services in seven countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The benefit of the project is that it is supported by the Government of the Republic of Korea, since that nation is the world leader in this area; it allows participating countries to benchmark with its best practices and apply innovative solutions.

The project already has conducted a needs-assessment study of the participating countries and a number of capacity building activities in digitalization. The activities were in congruence with the demands of the project’s participating countries, in which leading experts from government agencies and institutions in Estonia, Finland, Korea and Singapore—as well as such organizations such as the OECD and World Bank—shared their practices and initiatives.

In promoting P2P learning, the Hub employs the Effective Institutions Platform (EIP) methodology, supported by, and based in, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). EIP members are public, private, multilateral and civil society organizations that facilitate peer

learning in different ways and operate on a voluntary basis. In addition to EIP, the Hub has found other OECD-used modalities to be of great interest. For example, the “peer pressure” approach fosters its member countries and stakeholders to implement OECD recommendations, standards and initiatives, leading to the unification of policies among the countries, building collective wisdom and shared values (Guilmette, 2007; Lehtonen, 2020). The OECD also uses the “peer review” mechanism to undertake systematic evaluations of member countries’ performance to enhance policymaking, set benchmarks and adhere to norms through mutual trust and accountability (OECD, 2003).

Taken together, these OECD mechanisms allow governments to analyze complex political issues and solutions to develop compiled strategies and move toward a collective goal. They can be detected within OECD’s Recommendation of the Council on Digital Government Strategies (2014). This recommendation has applied to numerous digital government reviews to support analysis and elaborate policies to shift from e-government to digital government. Moreover, this analytical work has promoted peer learning and aided in determining the core characteristics of effective design and implementation of digital government strategies. They are encapsulated in the OECD Digital Government Policy Framework (DGPF, 2020).

To fulfill its mission, the Hub has established close cooperation with relevant OECD units and strived to serve as a platform for the dissemination of standards and principles among its participating countries which, in turn, encourages countries to benchmark practices for good governance. Collaboration among governments provides the opportunity to examine numerous options when addressing country-specific challenges; while mindful of various factors, it enables them to consider global and regional trends and best international practices (Baimenov, 2018).

### The Need to Improve Benchmarking Instruments

“Peer learning,” “peer pressure” and “peer review” are employed within the international frameworks, including indices and rankings, serving as a powerful means for some for stimulating a country’s development process in the right direction. In other words, these countries may use indices’ scores and rankings as a benchmark for pinpointing their own strengths and weaknesses, making comparisons to improve their own policies and strategies. This kind of framework may indeed trigger policymakers to improve their policies through collaboration, comparison and discussion to achieve their goals (Boeren, 2016).

Given the major role of international indices as a benchmarking tool, it is necessary that their methodologies take into account current trends and ongoing changes taking place in the world. There always is room for improvement of the assessment methodology to be adaptive and flexible.

The Hub developed this idea after carefully considering two international indices. First, analyzing the Global Competitiveness Index<sup>5</sup> rankings for different years, the Hub observes the case when on the Labour Market Efficiency pillar—which, as we know, by its nature cannot change swiftly in one two-year timeframe—a country’s position fell by 17 points within two years.<sup>6</sup> This undoubtedly raises the question of how the country achieved such a result. Authors and developers of the Global Competitiveness Index did not provide an answer, given that information is unclear.

Another international assessment framework worth considering is the UN E-Government Survey, which evaluates the progress of e-government of the UN member states via the UN E-Government Development Index (EGDI), consisting of three components: the Online Service Index (OSI), Telecommunication Index (TII) and Human Capital Index (HCI). EGDI is used to measure the development of e-government at the country level, and in some cases at the city level.<sup>7</sup> It is widely recognized by digital policymakers, experts and researchers as an incentive and motivational benchmarking tool. Its significance also is emphasized by the High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, established by the UN secretary-general in July 2018, recognizing the e-government survey as a key ranking, mapping and measuring tool, supporting the digital transformation of countries (Kabbar, 2021).

COVID-19 led to a massive acceleration of using state-of-the-art technologies to enhance efficiency of public service delivery. This led to the re-assessment of e-government and its priorities. Indeed, the initial e-government concept focused on utilisation of ICT and web-based technologies for enhancing public service delivery. However, it has been replaced by a new concept emphasising a government open by default (OECD, 2020), making government data publicly available and accessible and promoting government transparency to achieve more open,

5 The Global Competitiveness Index by World Economic Forum is a comprehensive annual assessment that serves as a global benchmark for country competitiveness.

6 Global Competitiveness Reports. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/>

7 EGDI is the ultimate outcome of the United Nations E-Government Survey covering 193 countries in its latest edition (2022). The survey demonstrates the degree to which digital technologies play a role in advancing digital transformation across countries worldwide. <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/>

accountable and responsive government. At the same time, open government encourages active citizen participation and collaboration in co-creating public value; it also supports data-driven and evidence-based policymaking (Charalabidis et al., 2019).<sup>8</sup>

Considering EGDI's current methodology, increasing the significance of open government as a key aspect of e-government overall advancement is crucial. A close look at EGDI's composition reveals that the Open Government Data Index (OGDI) score makes a very small contribution to an overall EGDI country's score.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is not possible to directly associate the value of a country's EGDI with the availability of open data<sup>10</sup>, as the OGDI score weighs very little in overall performance.

At one time, EGDI encouraged significant progress in improving government processes and public service delivery. However, in light of recent developments in digital government, it has become more important to ensure greater openness and access to data rather than mere technological progress. Currently, some post-Soviet countries, being well positioned on the EGDI, still face big issues associated with open government data, although they score "very high" on OGDI, too. For instance, the cadastre—an official record of land and property ownership—is not accessible to the public in these countries. In fact, there is no unified countrywide system containing real estate ownership information; each region

develops its own.

Other countries, such as North Macedonia, have seen considerable progress in making government data available and accessible as public information. However, their overall EGDI score does not capture such advancement. Unlike some post-Soviet countries where existing systems do not provide all necessary information in user-friendly format, North Macedonia, a country with a lower OGDI score, fully provides real estate ownership information in the national cadastre. Hence, if actual availability of basic government data is fully considered in the EGDI structure, the overall picture of the ranking would definitely differ.

The situation is the same for the availability of information on budgetary allocations, another critical component for open government. Notwithstanding the existence of dedicated portals, citizens in some post-Soviet countries complain about the low level of data reported on public finances (Hamidullina, 2019). Moreover, available budget data are rather difficult for average citizens to comprehend, given they do not possess special knowledge on finance or legal matters. As a result, cases of a country with a comparatively lower OGDI score yet with greater openness of budget data (and vice versa) are not rare.<sup>11</sup> Here, the weight given to an open budget in the overall structure of OGDI needs to be increased.

The root of the issue can be traced back to a legacy of

## An Example of Open Cadastre Data in North Macedonia



### Носители на право

Имотен лист	Име и презиме	Град	Улица	Број	Дел на сосед
194864	СТОЈА БОЖИНОВСКА	СКОПЈЕ	ДРАЧЕВСКА	37	1/1

### Објекти

Имотен лист	Број	Објект	Намена	Површина м2	Место	Влез	Кат	Стан	Право
194864	12182	1	A1-1 стамбени куќи со дворови – самостојни	94	УЛ. ЛУСТИНИЈАН 1 БР.37	1		1	СОПСТВЕНОСТ
194864	12182	1	A1-1 стамбени куќи со дворови – самостојни	94	УЛ. ЛУСТИНИЈАН 1 БР.37	1	1	1	СОПСТВЕНОСТ
194864	12182	1	A1-1 стамбени куќи со дворови – самостојни	13	УЛ. ЛУСТИНИЈАН 1 БР.37	1	1	1	СОПСТВЕНОСТ

Source: <https://ossp.katastar.gov.mk/>

8 Often referred as e-Government 1.0, e-Government 2.0 and e-Government 3.0, respectively.

9 OGDI is part of seven sub-indices that comprise the Open Services Index (OSI); it is a part of the overall EGDI along with the Human Capacity Index (HCI) and the Telecommunications Infrastructure Index (TII), each carrying an equal weight in the overall EGDI score for a country.

10 In the paper, referred to as open public sector information.

11 This is seen in large discrepancies between OGDI and Open Budget Index rankings of some post-Soviet countries. The Open Budget Survey is the world's only comparative, independent and regular assessment of transparency, oversight and participation in national budgets.

the Soviet past. In fact, many post-Soviet countries give extremely high importance to state secrets, or information subject to non-disclosure, due to the historical legacy of the Soviet totalitarian system, which was one of the most secretive states that has ever existed, as the scale of concealment was vast (Harrison, 2004). On a related note, a study by Bougherra et al. (2022) suggests that e-government is better implemented in democracies than autocracies, as the type of a political system influences the conceptualisation of e-government, execution of its practices and assessment of its performance. Even now in some post-Soviet countries, any information in government bodies, if there was no previous order to disclose it, has a “presumption of closedness” (Kidrisheva, 2021).

It is not surprising that countries with rich mineral resources can rank high in the current methodology, as they can afford new technologies, carry out digitalization initiatives and allocate adequate budgets for it, thus scoring high on some of the UN EGDI components. In a similar vein, Bougherra et al. (2022) argue that the EGDI only evaluates the supply side of government outputs, leaving their impact on citizens unconsidered, and thus “does not provide a holistic view of the whole picture.” In this sense, the EGDI does not necessarily indicate improved e-government or citizen satisfaction through countries’ rankings. Further, most variables used in calculating the OGD score are binary in nature, capturing either the absence or the presence of a certain feature, entailing that the obtained scores tell little about the quality of available data and thus re-consideration of the methodology is required.

To explore openness of government data in some countries where open government portals are available, from the ordinary citizens’ perspective, a number of datasets from the portals were evaluated based on the eight principles of open government data: complete, primary, timely, accessible, machine-processable, non-discriminatory, non-proprietary and license free.<sup>12</sup> An “ordinary citizen” observation suggests the overwhelming majority of government datasets lack granularity (aggregation), the key factor for data to be considered primary. Some datasets could not be reached for technical reasons, hence failing to meet the accessibility principle. Still others had little utility in furthering open government, but allowed authorities to promulgate the illusion of open data provision.<sup>13</sup> Taken together this raises questions about open government data standards in the region.

<sup>12</sup> Known as the Sebastopol principles: <https://opengovdata.org/>.

<sup>13</sup> The published data include a list of construction companies and their contact details with no references to the respective road construction projects. It can be assumed that the listed companies are engaged in road construction in the region (Open Data Portal in Kazakhstan: <https://data.egov.kz/>).

Eventually, discrepancies between EGDI rankings and the real situation in some of the areas it measures could negatively affect government policy development (Skargren, 2020). Policymakers and politicians unintentionally can misinterpret or intentionally misuse benchmarking and ranking results (Wang and Shepherd, 2020). For instance, when countries are ranked high according to a particular benchmark, policymakers can use it to argue for no longer putting effort into further developing their open data initiatives. They also may intentionally or unintentionally ignore other benchmarks in which their country is ranked lower and neglect the opportunity to identify measures for improving their progress (Zuiderwijk et al., 2021). It is necessary to rethink the methodology measuring open government data availability periodically and increase its weight in the overall structure of the EGDI, so that it reflects the true state of open data availability and accessibility.

### Conclusion

Countries around the world continually pursue reforms in civil service, public administration and other sectors, taking into account the challenges that technological advancement, economic crises and other factors impose. It is apparent that different countries have varying degrees of public service development, and set reforms based on internal conditions and political readiness to follow international trends and recommendations. Most countries demonstrate progress and effective solutions to different policy issues based on their own practice, while others face challenges and are in constant search for effective solutions. Therefore, understanding the successes and challenges of other countries, along with the lessons learned, is of great importance moving forward. There is no “silver bullet” to advance the public service, but exchanging ideas and sharing experiences through continued partnerships can help governments identify common interests and challenges, as well as find innovative solutions.

International collaboration is a main determinant of success and sustainability of any public sector transformation. Its different modalities, including P2P learning and exchanging knowledge and practices, can contribute to mutual learning and lead to positive outcomes (Baimenov and Liverakos, 2019).

In line with earlier examples, collaboration through multilateral platforms and varied modalities facilitate governments and stakeholders to not only share best practices and knowledge openly and easily, but also enable them to strengthen partnerships, benchmark practices and trends, and develop best-fit solutions for their own settings. The advantage of these approaches is that governments can further advance the public service

by comprehensive benchmarking and application or designing of best fit solutions, not blindly rely on best practice approaches (Baimenov and Janenova, 2019).

Such cooperation modalities as peer learning, peer review and peer pressure incentivize governments and stakeholders to network and explore best practices regularly; reconsider new trends and citizens' expectations; and receive recommendations from others to develop effective solutions. These approaches work toward improving policies, bringing large-scale reform initiatives and adhering to international frameworks.

We believe that the following findings, drawn from the above and from the Hub's experience, can be valuable in the creation and development of various platforms for cooperation:

- Promoting a demand-driven and flexible agenda to meet practitioners' needs and requirements of the fast-changing priorities of the governments in the new reality.
- Applying P2P learning as an efficient experience and knowledge-sharing modality, allowing practitioners to cooperate equally and feel that they are neither teachers nor students.
- Actively involving countries not only with similar socio-economic backgrounds and common issues, but also those that are benchmarking for the participating countries.
- Combining different innovative types and modalities of cooperation. For example, the Hub's virtual platform launched on the basis of P2P learning approach and advanced technologies during COVID-19; and its joint project with the Government of the Republic of Korea, promoting P2P learning among seven project countries and utilizing the Korean experience as a benchmarking country in digital government transformation.

The authors also consider it useful to refer to the OECD's modalities and experience in the development of such platforms.

The use of international indices as a benchmarking tool is of great importance for directing a country's development. Yet it also puts increased demands on the methodologies of the indices themselves, requiring periodical reconsideration. We have demonstrated this using the example of two indices, the Global Competitiveness Index by the World Economic Forum and the UN EGDI. Ensuring that international assessments consider current trends and ongoing changes taking place worldwide is key.

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