The State of Open Government in the Geneva State

Abstract. This article presents a comprehensive benchmarking study of the State of Geneva and several of its citizen centred services, with the aim of connecting them to the open government movement. It is the result a participatory research effort of students at the University of Applied Sciences in Geneva, doing desktop analysis and conducting interviews of several key actors. The tracking and evaluation of the selected activities took place in mid-2020 and includes public or public and private services, projects, as well as, other initiatives. The presented activities were categorised under four, open government inspired, benchmarking categories: information, participation, collaboration and cooperation. This analysis allows to map and document the activities in which the State of Geneva creates a participation friendly environment for its citizens. The results help us to understand the structure and governance of these services and proposes concrete actions for their improvement. Most importantly, this work provides a framework for an ongoing analysis around the evolution of open government practices in the State of Geneva.

Keywords: open government, citizen services, State of Geneva, benchmarking.

1 Introduction

1.1 A brief introduction to the State of Geneva and our research

The State of Geneva has a strong heritage for providing citizen services. It appears as an international, innovation driven because of dependencies with the Swiss federal, political, and administrative system. Switzerland represents a hybrid governance space that is based on a strong state decentralisation, with regional levels of governance. Far from being a pure instrument for implementing public policies, the State of Geneva administration tends to occupy an important role in the regional decision-making process. This dynamic is reflected by the variety and types of services provided by the State of Geneva, which aim to solidify the relationship between the administration and citizens.

The State (or Canton) of Geneva is made up of 45 communes with their own specificities and is one of the 26 Cantons of the Swiss Confederation. It is home to multiple international organizations located in a cross-border region in the heart of Europe, and so it is imperative for the State to position itself as a unifying and meaningful actor in this new digital transformation and governance paradigm. It established its digital strategy in 2018 [1]. As mentioned in the strategy document, the online public consultation conducted in March 2018 reached more than 110,000 people; 474 of whom submitted proposals or arguments. More than 3,000 votes were recorded on the proposals submitted. These contributions reflect a real interest on behalf of the Geneva population for the raised issues. In general, the digital strategy provides a clear grouping of goals and objectives followed by a comprehensive presentation methodology of existing and future activities. However, the objectives and activities presented are not supported by an action plan, allocated resources, or any binding milestones.

Since 2002, the State of Geneva has voted a law regulating access to information of all administrations, parliament, central and local governments. The law on public information, access to documents and protection of personal data (LIPAD) applies to all legal entities; including private individuals who perform public tasks in which the State owns more than 50% of the share capital or finances more than 50% of their budget [2].

In this context, discussions around digitization, citizen services, platform algorithms and digital governance (be it local or global) are becoming increasingly intense and controversial. Therefore, we set ourselves to a research project that would allow us to better understand the current situation in these areas. In particular, how the governance of services takes place within the State of Geneva and how can they be examined thought the use of open government methods and tools? In other words, what is the state of open government in the State of Geneva?

1.2 An overview of the open government movement

Our research analysis builds on the existing open government framework. Open Government is a governance doctrine and an international initiative (Open Government Partnership or OGP) that aims to improve the effectiveness and accountability of public governance arrangements. It was established in 2010 [3] on the sidelines of a UN General Assembly meeting where the Heads of State from 8 founding governments (Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, United Kingdom, and the United States) endorsed the Open Government Declaration. Through the participation and engagement of various countries in open, collaborative and public action plans, OGP aims to establish that citizens have the right to access their governments' documents, procedures and services.

In 2009, the Obama Administration had already put forward three requirements of Open Government: transparency, participation, and collaboration [4]. Collaboration was included as a basic element of a more open, efficient and citizen centric government. Bertot et al (2012) argue that open government falls into three broad categories: 1) leadership, governance and culture change, 2) transparency, and 3) participation and collaboration. Following this initial movement, several organisations adopted open government strategies or recommendations. The OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government (2017) [5] defined stakeholder participation in open government as various ways in which stakeholders can be involved in the policy cycle and in service design and delivery. One way is through information, specifically an initial level of participation characterised by a one-way relationship in which the government produces and delivers information to stakeholders. This covers both on-demand provision of information and "proactive" measures by the government to disseminate information. Another way is through consultation, referring to a more advanced level of participation entailing a two-way relationship in which stakeholders provide feedback to the government and vice-versa. The third way is through engagement, meaning when stakeholders are given the opportunity and the necessary resources (e.g. information, data and digital tools) to collaborate during all phases of the policy-cycle and in the service design and delivery.

In the following section, we will demonstrate how the above elements have inspired our own methodology and research efforts.

2   Methodology

The research methodology used to describe the state of open government in the State of Geneva is based on the principles of participatory research, a practice involving diverse stakeholders in scientific research. Participatory research is an approach that emphasises relationships between partners in research and practice settings, participation and co-learning, mutual benefit and long-term commitment to the research process [6]. This type of research aims to produce new knowledge, solving a problem identified by the actors, and strengthening the capacities of these actors for greater autonomy [7]. This point allows us to connect participatory research with a "learning by doing" approach for all participants. For example, students had to learn about digital governance and, at the same time, research and apply what they learned in an ongoing, collective action. It is essential that this experience is a two-way relationship. On the one hand, the student is active in relation to the world around them, and they must take responsibility for the consequences of their own priorities, decisions and actions [8].

Further, OGP is advocating for citizen participation and co-design in new services and promotes systematic transparency and accountability. The benchmarking of the Open Government Partnership initiative is based on a systematic analysis of state activities for: a) documenting an activity (service, project, training, etc.) to demonstrate its evolution and the organisation responsible, b) helping citizens and civil society to play a watchdog role on the implementation of these activities, and c) encouraging states to involve citizens during the development of these activities. The OGP's benchmarking activities and declaration commits to "foster a global culture of open government that empowers and delivers its citizens and advances the ideals of open and participatory 21st century government".

Therefore, we are using four key words to characterise the activities reviewed, which consistently constitute different categories:

1. Information: describing a unidirectional activity focusing on informing citizens, but without providing them with a possibility of contribution.
2. Participation: describing an activity that allows for a contribution on behalf of the citizens, but without a commitment from the side of the service provider to provide feedback, follow-up, or an organised collaboration.
3. Collaboration: describing an activity with established mechanisms and practices that allow organised citizen participation. This participation should include substantial possibilities for them to take decisions regarding the use of the data provided to this service. Collaboration includes various levels of citizen involvement, such as the possibility to reuse resources under open data or free and open source software regimes.
4. Cooperation: describing an activity with rules of governance that define and encourage systematic collaboration between several actors from public, private and civil society sectors in multiple phases of the activity.

To find and document the activities, we opted for a policy area approach. We agreed on ten (10) policy areas that we thought to be representative of the OGP areas, and of those presented by the State of Geneva. Those areas are the following: urbanism and urban planning, transport and mobility, health, justice, education, elections and referendum, environment, security, media, platforms, and sports. Activities analysed include public services, services of public interests, cooperatives, public or private projects, forums, and networks. The researchers involved in this work are of students at the University of Applied Sciences in Geneva following a course allowing for such an experiment. They used desktop analysis and conducted interview organised in thematic (policy area) groups and were active mid-2020.

Taking into consideration that Switzerland is not a member of the OGP, the main research questions of the current study are as follows: 1) What are the current activities linked to the open government movement in the State of Geneva? 2) How can we map and create a comprehensive, open government oriented, guide for the evaluation of these activities?

During the next section of this article, we present the results for each activity listed in our research field. Thirty-six (36) activities were selected, reviewed, and categorised. Fourteen (14) were categorised under information, nineteen (19) under participation and three (3) under collaboration. The majority of the activities are public services. All the data and results related to this research are documented and available online [9].

3   Results

The following tables show the results for each policy area analysed, with information regarding the activities, which category was used for the open government benchmarking, which body was responsible, and our recommendations. The numbers under each section are used to show which results correlate to each other. Our results were as follows:

3.1 Urbanism and urban planning

Urbanism and urban planning is an area with multiple activities presented. There is a mix of public services (online application), public – private initiatives driven from universities (HES-SO) or mixed partners (housing co-operative).

Activity	Open government benchmarking
1. Online construction application service 2. GE-21 Ecosystem Services 3. HES-SO urban development 4. Participate in an urban project 5. SCHG: housing co-operative 6. SITG: Geneva's territory à la carte	1. Participation 2. Participation 3. Participation 4. Participation 5. Participation 6. Collaboration
Responsible organization	**Main recommendation**
1. Office des autorisations de construire 2. Comité de pilotage inter-organisationnelle 3. HESSO 4. Canton de Genève 5. Conseil d'administration de la coopérative 6. Direction de l'Information du Territoire	1. Propose open data 2. Co-decision process for project selection 3. Encourage collaboration with citizens 4. Organise a citizen awareness campaign 5. Propose open data 6. Propose an Open API for open data provided

3.2 Transports and mobility

The transports and mobility area is heavily linked to the Geneva Public Transport (TPG) company that operates most of the public transportation system in canton of Geneva. TPG is a public law company producing for the market and controlled or mainly financed by the public authorities.

Activity	Open government benchmarking
1. TPGPreview 2. TPG Open Data 3. OpenData Swiss	1. Information 2. Participation 3. Participation
Responsible organization	**Main recommendation**
1. Transport publics genevois (TPG) 2. Transport publics genevois (TPG) 3. Secrétariat Open Government Data (CH)	1. Offer linked data 2. Offer linked data 3. Offer linked data

3.3 Health

The heath area included a public service (Mon Dossier Medical) and two privately initiated services: the Diabete Forum and an application facilitating vaccination documentation.

Activity	Open government benchmarking
1. MonDossierMedical.ch 2. DiabeteForum 3. mesvaccins.ch	1. Collaboration 2. Participation 3. Participation
Responsible organization	**Main recommendation**
1. Département sécurité, emploi, santé (DSES) 2. Les membres de l'association Diabètesuisse 3. La fondation mesvaccins	1. Organise an awareness campaign 2. Organise an awareness campaign 3. Improve the application

3.4 Justice

The justice area included an important public project Justicia 4.0, which is only in its very early stages, but aims to radically change justice related services for citizens, in the coming years.

Activity	Open government benchmarking
1. Justicia 4.0 Project 2. Cantonal referendum 3. Cantonal statistics	1. Participation 2. Participation 3. Information
Responsible organization	**Main recommendation**
1. Le comité de pilotage (CCDJP et HIJP) 2. Direction Générale Systèmes d'Information 3. Canton de Genève	1. Setting up a Q&A forum 2. Online signature collection 3. Simplify the terms of use

3.5 Education

Overall, our work in the education policy area revealed several services seeking to empower professionals and citizen, characterized by limited organized interactions: none of services below comes with the ambition for structured collaboration.

Activity	Open government benchmarking
1. Digital in school 2. (Cyber)harassment prevention 3. MITIC toolbox 4. Statistical Yearbook of Education in Geneva	1. Information 2. Participation 3. Participation 4. Information
Responsible organization	**Main recommendation**
1. Département de l'instruction publique (DIP) 2. Département de l'instruction publique (DIP) 3. Service écoles-médias	1. Enabling collaboration with its users 2. Define a responsible team for interaction 3. Simplify access to (public) content

4. Service de la recherche en éducation (SRED)	4. Propose an open API

3.6   Elections

Switzerland runs compulsory referendum as an instrument of direct democracy with each federated state (canton) defining the issues subject to it. The Geneva State election results are available online, while two, one public (CHVote), one private (La Poste) electronic voting systems are also available.

Activity 1. CHVote platform 2. Electronic voting La Poste 3. Voting and election data **Responsible organization** 1. Canton de Genève 2. La Poste CH 3. Chancellerie de l'Etat de Genève	**Open government benchmarking** 1. Collaboration 2. Participation 3. Participation **Main recommendation** 1. Change in legislation 2. Transparency at software level 3. Improve open data disponibility

3.7   Environment

Services linked to environment are all public ones. The ones examines in this project were purely informational with no possibilities for citizen engagement or review.

Activity 1. Air quality (Service) 2. Water quality (Service) 3. State of the fauna and flora	**Open government benchmarking** 1. Information 2. Information 3. Information
Responsible organization 1. ROPAG et SABRA 2. Le service de l'écologie de l'eau (SECOE) 3. L'association Faune Genève	**Main recommendation** 1. Propose an open API 2. Improving data quality 3. Improving data quality

3.8   Security – Crime

This is a public driven area with services asking citizens to provide data but without any engagement on behalf of the provider to provide access to anonymized statistics or an opportunity for service evaluation. This is the case, for example, for the report a cyber-incident form.

Activity	Open government benchmarking
1. Form: report a cyber-incident 2. Online training 3. Cyber Security Competence Centre	1. Participation 2. Participation 3. Information
Responsible	**Recommendation**
1. Brigade criminalité informatique (Police) 2. Département du développement économique 3. Délégué cyber-sécurité de la Confédération	1. Raising public awareness 2. Raising public awareness 3. Transparency about how it works

3.9 Media

The media policy area includes a mixture of public and private initiatives, mainly, striving to better inform younger populations.

Activity	Open government benchmarking
1. Geneva Solutions 2. Young people and media 3. MIXLINFO	1. Participation 2. Information 3. Information
Responsible organization	**Main recommendation**
1. Mission Suisse à l'ONUG et Geneva Solutions 2. Office Fédéral des Assurances Sociales (OFAS) 3. Département de la culture et du sport (DCS)	1. Evaluation of articles by the public 2. Collect user feedback 3. Gaming with a mobile app

3.10 Platforms

In the platform policy area, we tried to capture latest regulation developments regarding well-established platforms. Although these services do not fall under the usual OGP categories, we thought that it is important to include related government regulation or other activities and note whether these activities had some kind of open consultation process supporting them. Such regulation efforts are linked to citizen demands.

Activity	Open government benchmarking
1. Airbnb and hotels (regulation) 2. Uber and taxis (regulation)	1. Information 2. Information
Responsible organization	**Main recommendation**
1. Département Sécurité, Emploi et Santé (DSES) 2. Grand Conseil Canton de Genève	1. Provide linked data for more transparency 2. State mediation

3.11 Sports

This last policy areas aims to open the scope of open government to less discussed policy areas and possibilities of more active citizen participation.

Activity	Open government benchmarking
1. Sports courses of the City of Geneva 2. Geneva Stadium 3. Geneva E-sport	1. Participation 2. Information 3. Information
Responsible organization 1. Ville et Canton de Genève 2. La Fondation du stade de Genève 3. Structure d'esport approuvée par l'état	**Main recommendation** 1. Online training courses 2. Collect proposals from the public 3. Public governance platform for the e-sport tournament

4 Discussion

When discussing these results, we should bear in mind that Switzerland is not an OGP member and has no published intention of becoming one. The documented activities or the interviews contacted with public administration officials shows that open government is often understood as providing access to open data.

The results above come with few flagship activities, categorized under collaboration, in relation to urban planning, health, elections and justice that need further attention. In the urban planning area, the Geneva Territorial Information System (SITG) offers the urban and spatial planning profession a variety of open data sets, combined with easy-to-access interactive maps and comprehensive governance rules (open data licenses).

When examining the same policy area (urban planning), we need to highlight the public dialogue platform of Geneva region under the name of Participate [10]. This deliberation platform is facilitating various urban related consultations with the possibility for citizens to make distinct proposals.

Regarding the health area Mon Dossier Medical (My Medical File) is a platform initiated by the State of Geneva allowing every citizen to share their medical file online, so that it can be more securely and easily transmitted to various health actors. This is a sort of medical passport accessible online by health professionals, where data access and reuse is co-decided with data owners.

In the area of elections, we would highlight the CHVote public project, a free and open-source electronic voting system, which has been in operation in the canton of Geneva for the last 15 years. The voting system is currently frozen due to a mixture of budget and political reasons but it remains available online

The latest report of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on digital governance and open data under the title Open, Useful and Re-usable data (OURdata), Index: 2019 [11], shows that Switzerland is lagging behind the open data offer. This is partly confirmed from our analysis and our recommendations for the State of Geneva on several themes [12]. We have several examples (urbanism, elections, justice, health, environment) indicating that data are available for several services either for information or reuse as open data (collaboration).

Most importantly, this work provides a framework for an ongoing analysis around the evolution of open government practices in the State of Geneva in the following years. More services need to be reviewed yearly, while the evolution of existing ones needs, also to be monitored. During 2021, this participative research effort will continue with a new set of researchers (students) and an analysis of a new list of services aiming to describe current practices on data collection, organization and reuse. As mentioned above data and open data are key elements of the open government perception in the State of Geneva, a better view their use is needed.

5   Conclusions and recommendations

The result documented above were presented in two occasions to State of Geneva officials during 2020. They were received with enthusiasm, mostly, because they provide a cross sectorial overview of the state of open government.

The conclusions regarding our research effort were positive in terms of how researchers (students) perceived the participative research methodology. Comments and experiences can be summarized under one main element: the research effort helped them to better understand existing public services and to realize the various possibilities of improvement.

Overall, the State of Geneva offers services which seek for effectiveness in citizen collaboration. Participation at a level is acquired for several of them, and collaboration should be considered as a future objective.

Another important point is that the State of Geneva has a set of existing mechanisms that facilitate access to information audit and transparency. The most important one being the Federal Data Protection and Information Commissioner (FDPIC - LIPAD) responsible to advise, educate and ensure the protection of personal data in the State of Geneva.

Our recommendations are grouped in this section to give our readers the opportunity to imagine a plan of action towards open and collaborative governance in Geneva.

The Sate of Geneva should propose an open data portal with; a) updated data, b) user guidelines, and c) the possibility to create structured and connected data. This effort should be accompanied by the implementation of application programming interfaces (APIs) and propose a central API portal for the State of Geneva. Good practices at international level already exist in this area, with cities like Milano providing open API portals [13].

Following the previous recommendation, the Sate of Geneva should be organising and implementing a register of algorithms for the State of Geneva. The Open AI Register of Helsinki [14] and Amsterdam [15] are innovative open government initiatives in this area.

The State of Geneva should systematise the collection of proposals from the public on both public services and future projects by transforming Participating.ge.ch into a space for "compulsory" consultation and raising public awareness in collaboration with citizen projects and entities of public interest, following the example of the state of Barcelona [16].

Finally, open contracting and participatory budgeting (transparency and collaboration on resource allocation) are clear opportunity areas for new open government initiatives. The City of Paris is leading by example with Paris Open Budget Participative initiative [17] and the Maximilien platform: a regional public procurement communication platform [18].

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