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Analyzing National open Government Strategies: A Comparative Study of the Open Government Partnership Action Plans

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Abstract

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a global initiative launched in 2011 by eight countries to promote civic engagement, participation, transparency and accountability. Today, the OGP counts 65 countries that have published one (or more) action plan(s), setting specific goals for the development of national open government strategy. The published action plans represent valuable information for analyzing the different strategies adopted by OGP countries in the field of openness. What are the emerging strategic aims of the considered action plans? What are the main differences in terms of structure and contents? Are there any peculiar differences between Liberal, Mediterranean, Baltic and Nordic countries in this field? We address these questions highlighting inter and infra group differences emerging from the national documents of the four considered groups. Issues such as transparency, citizen participation and anti-corruption programs, are comparatively explored by using statistical text-analysis tools.

Introduction

Nowadays most of our activities are strongly influenced by forms of global standards and regulation. Global regulatory regimes include a vast range of different policy-areas, such as environment and natural resources protection, banking and financial regulation, law enforcement, human rights, internet governance, and the list goes on. The growth in the range of regulatory regimes and the move towards the internationalization of several public policies, marks not only the advancement of globalization, but also a remarkable proliferation of different types of international organizations (formal intergovernmental organizations; hybrid public-private organizations; trans-governmental networks; multi-level governance regimes, etc.), with the extension of responsibility of the global level [1].

Numerous transnational systems of regulation have been established through international treaties and more informal intergovernmental networks of cooperation, shifting many regulatory decisions from the national to the global level [2]. Certainly, there are significant differences among the different types of regulatory regimes. Some offer an agenda or a framework for State action, while others define plans and courses of action addressed to national administrative organizations. Some regulatory regimes rely on national or local authorities, while others create their own implementation mechanisms. Within this frame work, a new regulatory space - different from that of international law - is evolving, as a global administrative space.

National administrations are, thus, more and more subject to rules, regulations and standards spread by international organisms that work in an extra-state legalorders, where the same elements that compose the classic notion of administrative law and, consequently, public administration, are intercepted. The evolution of the 'nationality' of public administration, has *de facto* launched the formation of a global juridical system, characterized by: a system of guarantees based on general principles, procedures and expertise; a not always clear redefinition of the categories and interactions between public and private, global and national and between regulators and the regulated; constitutional gaps that influence the validity and the accountability of international organizations. Global standards that are, for instance, generally addressed to national governments, are established either by private bodies (e.g. accounting sector) or by formal global

organizations (e.g labour standards - ILO), and seen either as regulatory devices (e.g. *International Civil Aviation Organization* Standards) or as a technology of global governance (e.g. PISA Rankings) [3].

The emergence of an administrative law beyond the State, a "global administrative law", as defined and studied by several scholars [2-8] as a result of how national administrations are penetrated by the aggregation processes in international organization [9], seems to be affecting a convergence process in the regulation of national administrative practices.

In this context, the global challenges placed on Open Government (OG) and Open Data (OD), that amount to a new interaction between citizens and administration, represent an interesting setting to analyze, for instance, the strategies that the single countries are elaborating to implement a common legal framework. The OG is, in fact, one of the institutional challenges of the last years that interests public administrations on a global level and that has attracted a vast amount of public interest (among others: [10-12]. One of President Obama's first activities in 2009, was a memorandum for "committing his administration to creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government" [13]. The primary objective of this American strategy, that later spread to many countries, was to reduce the *gap* between citizens and public bureaucracy, putting the theme of transparency at the center. In line with the main concepts of the Obama *memorandum*, the processes of the OG tend to satisfy three fundamental principles [10,14,15]: *Transparency, Participation* and *Collaboration*. Such principles fulfill three different tasks that are related to each other; transparency also favors greater communication and interaction between offices, participation as well as collecting citizens' opinions and views, transforms decisional processes, making the citizen active

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part, allowing him a greater collaboration with the administration in defining government programs.

From this document a process of "isomorphic" contamination was activated on a global level that gave life to a series of documents and international initiatives for the construction of guidelines and reference standards for the implementation of policies on ODs. From the constitution of the Open Government Partnership, to the European Commission Communication of 2011 "Open data, an engine for innovation, growth and transparent governance", until the Open Data Charter approved in the G8 of 2013 in Lough Erne. Through such initiatives international standards are established and commitments are taken that the single governments are tied to respect, with important effects on the involved national administrations. Considering that these OD strategies are relatively new, there are only few studies that have examined national open data strategies [16-18,], and even less that consider the influence played by OD global standards in governmentstrategy decisions. Hence the evidence on this issue is still limited. In order to address this void and to contribute to the discussion in this area, this article looks at the process of isomorphism and global convergence in act, highlighting the role of the various national institutional contexts in the construction of strategies on OD. In particular the study explores the main differences in the Open Government Strategy expressed by a selected group of countries participating in the *Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiative*.

The article is structured in three parts. Section 1 summarizes the OGP initiative, the main research questions addressed and the research method adopted. Section 2 illustrates the analysis carried out on national strategic documents (Action Plans) in which the issue of the OG and OD comes in specific themes and political commitments, and presents the main results. The article concludes with a short section summarizing findings.

Materials & Method

OGP seeks to support governments and civil societies by raising up OG commitments to the highest levels of political discourse, as well as to ensure that countries involved will progress toward achieving their OGP commitments. Looking at the OGP portal we can observe the global dimension and the recent spread of the OG phenomenon attested by the increasing number of countries that have decided to approve and publish an Action Plan (AP) according to the OGP guide lines. The AP represents the strategic documents in which the issue of the OG and OD comes into specific themes and political commitments. In the AP, each country assumes specific strategies and actions despite the global convergence on this issue.

It is possible to group the 65 participating countries in three different cohorts:

- countries that are at the second AP cycle;

- countries that are at the first APcycle;

- countries that are developing AP;

Considering only the first cohort of countries, because these are the ones with a more consolidated experience on OG that show a series of commitments assumed for a long period, we decided to select, for the presented analysis, the set of the first already implemented AP.

In order to develop a cross-national comparative analysis of the emerging themes present in this document, we decided to concentrate our attention on a sample of 12 countries divided in 4 different groups, and each one composed of three countries with similar socio-economic environments. The analysis of strategic documents for the assessment of public policies is a consolidated methodology [19-21].

The four groups created for our analysis are: the Liberal countries (UK, USA, Canada) in which the OG issue has been generated and developed since 2009 and where the topic of OD has strong resonance [22]; the Mediterranean countries (Italy, Greece, Spain),highly bureaucratized and with a mixed economy system characterized by a long tradition of a State Manager, with a significant role of the informal economy and a lower level of cooperation between different institutional actors [23-25]; the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) coming from a post-communist tradition and now crossed by disruptive tensions converging towards neo-liberal assets [26]; the Nordic Countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark)where the global convergence to the open government is balanced by a strong corporatism and a social-democratic welfare [27,28].

The AP published by the countries participating in the OGP initiative represents valuable information for analyzing the different strategies adopted by OGP countries in the field of openness [29,30].

Our interests are focused, in particular, towards these questions: what are the main differences in terms of structure and contents in the considered AP? What are the emerging strategic aims? Are there any peculiar differences between Liberal, Mediterranean, Baltic and Nordic countries in this field? The cross-country analysis seems quite interesting for deepening how the different institutional environments influence the strategy and policies on OG [31,32].

We address these questions by analyzing the twelve AP, highlighting inter and infra group differences emerging from the national documents of the four considered groups. Issues such as transparency, citizen participation, policy assessment, open data commitments and anti-corruption programs, are comparatively explored by using statistical text-analysis tools. A content analysis [33-35] through the T-Lab Software on the text of the selected AP was performed. For a deeper analysis we also decided to encode the set of the selected texts with categorical variables in order to create different sub-corpus for allowing a comparison between the single cases considered (12 countries) as well as between the groups created (4 group of countries).

Results and Discussion

Co-Word analysis and concept mapping

The first step of this analysis is to understand the core themes emerging from our corpus. Using T-LAB we can automatically select the lexical units with the highest occurrence values [36]. According to the Obama Memorandum, we selected the three pillars of OG: transparency (accountability, information disclosure, online availability, public feedback); participation (citizens engagement, public participation in government and policymaking); collaboration (cooperation at the different levels of Government with nonprofit organizations and private sector, use of collaborative digital tools).

Looking at the figure 1, we can observe the concept map of the co-occurrences derived from our main corpus (all twelve AP considered). The figure shows four thematic groups divided in four different spatial

planes, graphically distinguished by color. The size of the single circles indicates the frequency of occurrence of each represented lemma. The first group of themes in red (1st quadrant), seems connected with the citizens participation, one of the most important pillars of an open government policy- e.g. lemmas: participation / participatory (110), democracy / democratic (63), right (59), local (53), people (35), welfare (18) -.On the other side, the core theme (shown by circles in green, 2nd quadrant) seems to concern mainly the aspects related to the processes of innovation and efficiency of public administrations- e.g. lemmas: administration / administrative (248), programme/ program (81), governance (40), innovation (38) -. Observing the two areas below, we can find on the left side (the yellow circles in the 3rd quadrant) other thematic groups related with public administrations and governments but in this case the focus is on different issues like public ethic and anti-corruption that seems semantically near to the wider theme of transparency policies and their possible social impact - e.g. lemmas: corruption (53), ethic (30).

Lastly, on the right side (in blue, 4th quadrant), it is possible to recognize some topics connected with cooperation and collaboration - e.g. lemmas: cooperation (62), participate (29), commitment (64) - issue often emphasized in the strategic documents as well as in the recent literature dealing with OG [37].
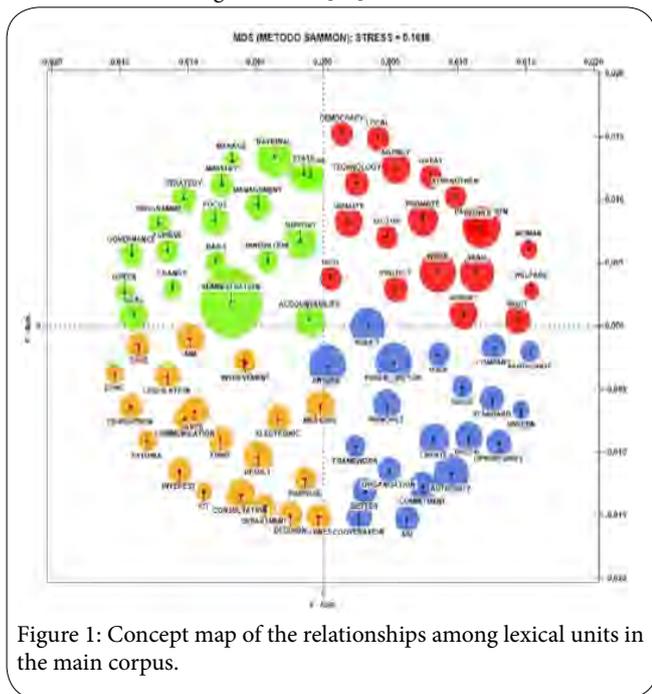

Figure 1: Concept map of the relationships among lexical units in the main corpus.

From the figure 1, we can notice that the emerging issues confirm the importance of themes related with the threeOGpillars. Moreover, in some cases, the concept map goes beyond. In fact, the national APanalyzed shows also new and recurrent lexical units like *gender, welfare, woman, work*, etc., putting in evidence an emerging topic strictly connected with the social dimension/impact of open government policies.

The results obtained here are in line with the evidence of a recent report of the OGP (2014) about the most recurrent tags and commitments in the national AP (Table 1).

As for the thematic framework just described it is possible to trace some cross themes such as the strategic value of new information

Concept Category	Tag included in National AP
1. Citizen participation	Social Audits Participatory Budgeting Citizen Budget Public Participation E-Petitions Gender and sexuality Human rights Health and Nutrition Citizenship and Immigration
2. Innovation and efficiency of P.A.	Audits & Controls Records Management Public Service Improvement Justice & Law Enforcement Judiciary Legislation & Regulation Legislature Sub-National Government Public Safety Infrastructure OGP
3. Transparency, Public Ethics & Anti-Corruption	Anticorruption Conflict of Interest Asset Disclosure Budget Transparency Public Procurement Election & Political Finance Aid Whistleblower protection
4. Collaboration & Cooperation	Public Participation Access to Information Capacity Building Open Data Private Sector Media & Telecommunication Non Profits Natural Resources Welfare and Social Security Science & Technology

Table 1: Leading concept and tag in OG National Action Plans.

technologies, in its various forms (digital, ICT, technology, innovation), that is a key factor for the development of digitization of public administrations (e-government) as well as for the new opportunities given in terms of chances of participation (e-democracy) and the increasing possibilities of bottom-up control and collaboration between Public Administration and citizen-users.

Finally, it is important to stress the presence of some interesting niches of topics relating to: *welfare, gender, private sector, local dimension* and *policy assessment*. These emerging themes show how relevant the potential socio-economic impact of open government policies is in the national AP, that is not only a way to support efficiency and transparency at the governmental level but a wider approach with significant repercussions on people lives.

In order to deepen these results, it is necessary to pursue a comparative analysis clustering the emerged themes, looking at the differences among the four groups of countries considered.

Thematic Analysis of Elementary Contexts and Clustering

The thematic analysis of elementary contexts allows us to explore the relations between the most significant thematic units, partially emerged also from the analysis previously conducted.

Based on the emerging evidence analyzed in the previous paragraph, we can now consider the main themes of our corpus of AP within a semantic space (see diagram 1), defined by the intersection of two dimensions:

- the spatial dimension of the open government policies (vertical axis) whose two semantic opposite poles move from the "central" dimension (at the top) to the "local" one (at the bottom);

- the dimension referring to the purposes of the tasks contained in the AP(horizontal axis) that can be categorized as actions focused on "accountability" and programming of public policies (on the left) and actions focused on the aspects of "control" (on the right) and evaluation.
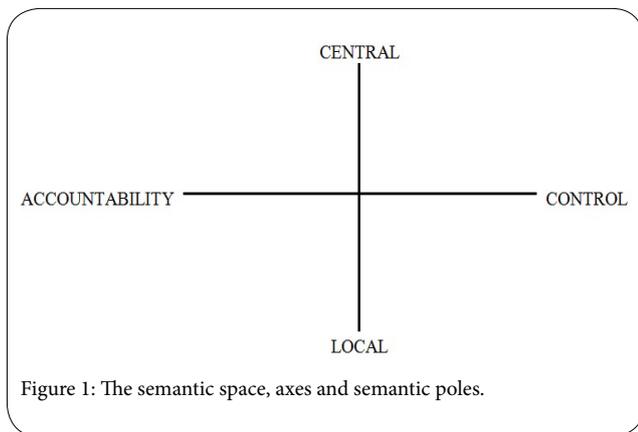

Figure 1: The semantic space, axes and semantic poles.

Among the various options offered by the text mining tool applied, we present below a four-cluster theme configuration.

Looking at the lemmas included in each cluster and at the same time considering the leading concepts analyzed in the previous paragraph, we applied the following labels:

- CL_01 "Planning and assessment of policies" (21,9%);

- CL_02 "Open Government Data" (22,3%);

- CL_03 "Anti-Corruption" (29%);

- CL_04 "Local Welfare" (26,9%).

Observing the graphical representation and the respective position of the four thematic groups (Figure 2) it is possible to note the close relationship existing between the first cluster "planning and assessment of policies" and the third "corruption", both located in the first quadrant (upper, on the right) and partially overlapping. For these reasons, we decided to attribute to that semantic pole of the graph the label "control" that is closely connected with aspects like evaluation (program control) and with those of corruption (social control).

The second cluster "open government data" is located, instead, inside of the opposite quadrant (on the left top corner).This part of the chart seems to represent the policy-making area and its implementation with particular focus on OD. We can define this thematic pole as "accountability". The vertical axis (y), instead, seems interpretable on the opposition between the "local" dimension that characterizes the fourth cluster "local welfare" (which contains also topics like *gender, municipality, work, education*) and the "central" dimension which increase in the upper quadrants whose clusters, already described, are certainly linked to questions of an administrative nature and semantically near to government or legislative processes.
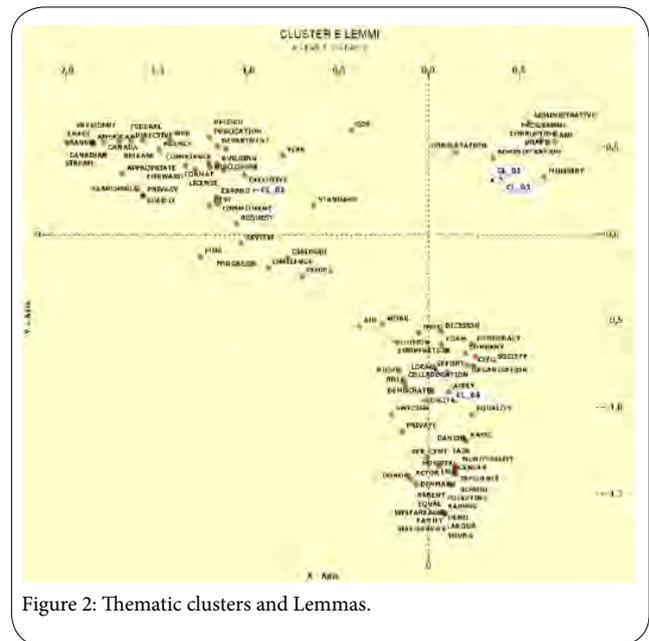

Figure 2: Thematic clusters and Lemmas.

Once the composition of the clusters and their relationships with the axes (X) and (Y) are analyzed it is now possible, by inserting the variables used to encode the corpus, to observe the spatial distribution of the 12 selected countries with particular reference to the four groups (Liberals, Mediterranean, Baltic and Northern countries) in which we have divided them. Observing the Figure 3, the close link between the theme on the right top corner of the 2nd cluster "Open Government Data" and the liberal countries, USA (74.2%) and Canada (82.3%) in particular seems clear, while the United Kingdom detaches in part, showing a smaller presence of the themes of the cluster 1 (60%) and a greater presence of the themes of the cluster 4 "Local Welfare" (24.3%) than the other two liberal countries (USA: 5.3% and Canada: 3.8%).
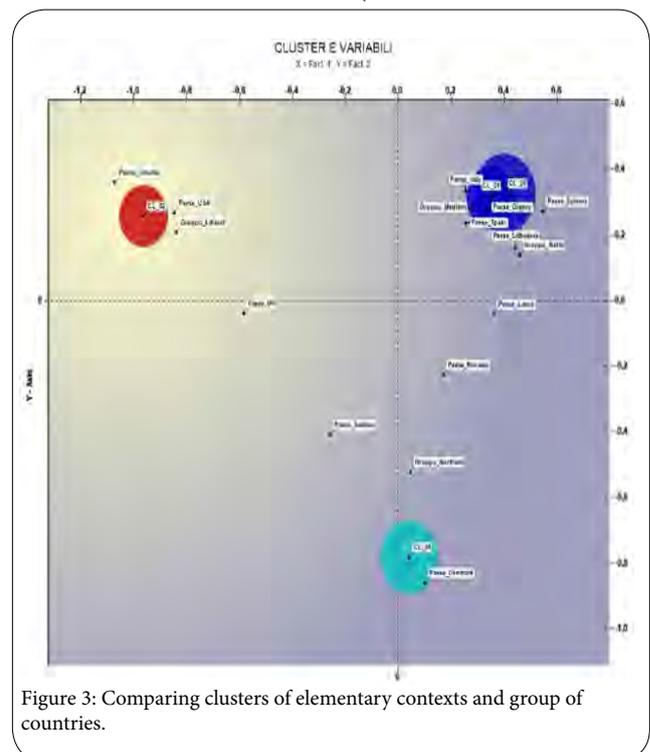

Figure 3: Comparing clusters of elementary contexts and group of countries.

In the first quadrant, in close proximity of the clusters 1st "Planning and Assessment of policies" and 3rd "Anti-Corruption" we can find both the Mediterranean countries and the Baltic country groups that share the predominant attention to issues related to evaluation and corruption of public administrations. This result reveal show in these countries the main aim of "evaluation" practices is the control of public actors rather than an instrument for learning and improving public policies.

Latvia is the only country that shows a certain distance from the others (Mediterranean and Baltic groups) and it seems "attracted" by the 4th cluster "Local Welfare", dominated by the presence of the Northern countries that appear as the group that is perfectly positioned in the lower quadrant around axis (Y). The dominance of these countries on that cluster is not surprising, considering their long and strong tradition of universalistic welfare.

By applying a particular t-lab tool for the specificity analysis of the sub-corpus (one for each of the four groups of countries under exam), it is possible to highlight the more specific lexical units of each country group and the whole corpus (the entire set of the twelve selected AP). This type of comparative analysis gives us a better view of the lexical specificities coming from the documents of a single group of countries and, moreover, allows us to deeper explain the infra-group differences (figure 4).
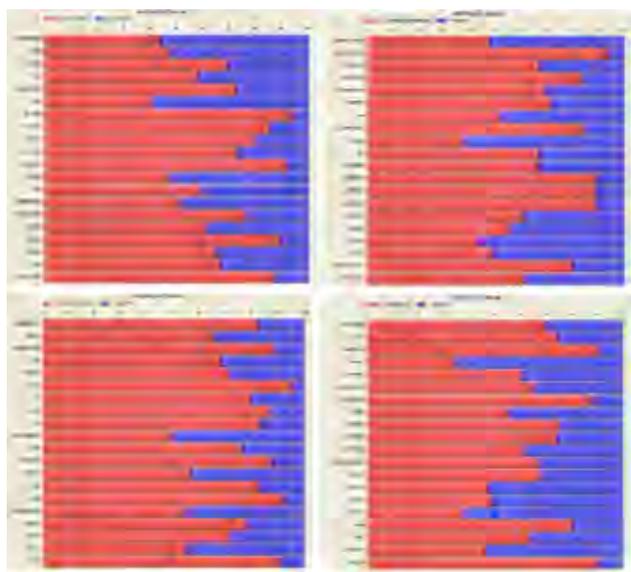

Figure 4: Specificity analysis for each of the four groups.

In the Baltic countries, we find specific lemmas that refer to the theme of anti-corruption – prevention (90%), corruption (70%), ethic 70%) - in public administrations and central institutions (institution, organization), but also the relevance of new models of interactions between citizens and public sector through the new possibilities offered by the net (e-services: 90%).

Lastly, among the specificities of the group of Nordic countries, it is possible to notice the relevance of the local dimension (local: 60%: municipality: 89%) of social welfare, together with citizens participation (democracy: 81%; cooperation: 57%) and pair opportunity (gender: 94%; equality: 90%).

Concluding Remarks

In the last years, technological innovation has produced important social transformations. The evolution of the public sector, in particular through processes to digitalize and redefine communicative functions, is leading to the birth of an open electronic government, with a view to a modern, transparent and more efficient administration. The introduction of the concept of openness, that assumes gradual and pervasive centrality in redefining the administrative system and in the field of public services, has led the way to Open Government and Open Data strategies and processes. The underlying promise of these strategies is that the dissemination of government data in a reusable format can strengthen people engagement and produce new innovative businesses [16]. The need for an open, transparent and responsible administration has therefore become part of global political agenda.

The analysis on the AP's emerging issues not only confirms the relevance of themes related with the three OG pillars (transparency, participation and collaboration) - with particular reference to citizens participation - but highlights an emerging topic linked with the potential socio-economic impact of open government policies.

One of the findings of this research is that the convergence process at global level on the OD themes is not as pervasive as was hypothesized. The study, in fact, highlighted multiple elements of differentiation and uniqueness inside the group of observed countries. In some countries the emphasis of OD is on innovation processes and efficiency of public administrations, others on constructing the conditions for better accountability and transparency of public administration, or on anti-corruption prospects.

The liberal countries such as USA, Canada and UK, are evidently promoting better governance through OD and innovation in public system organization, whereas the Mediterranean countries (Italy, Greece and Spain), where the trust level between citizens and public administration is often low, focused on bottom-up - through citizen participation - and top-down control - through evaluation - of administrative decisions and procedures.

In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, where corruption is a crucial problem, influencing economic development and governmental stability, the strategies are clearly geared towards the use of OD as a possible means to reduce or counteract corruption in public administrations and central institutions. These Baltic countries are also promoting, in their strategies, new ways of citizen interaction with the public sector. The local dimension of citizen participation together with a specific emphasis on social welfare and equal opportunity are, instead, the main concerns of the Nordic countries group analyzed here.

The role of the social institutional environment is highlighted as variable intervening in the process of the construction of International organisms, also in the field of administrative law. The historical political characteristics and the welfare regimes in the various countries seem to represent the most relevant variables in the recognition of the regulatory principles defined in international areas. OD strategy cannot be considered as a standalone or unconnected government strategy, but is strongly affected and rooted in national socio-economic policies and cultures.

As much as the results of the analysis are believed to represent an

interesting contribution to the debate on global and national strategies on the theme of OD, further investigations are essential, not only because many countries adhering in the OGP are defining the new APs, but because many other countries are gradually adhering to the initiative promoted by the Partnership. It would be, therefore, desirable in the future to widen the analysis also in countries not included in the analysis presented in these pages. Moreover, the monitoring reports on the National actions foreseen by the APs are due soon, and could be object of future investigations on the theme. The field of Open Data confirms itself to be therefore fertile for research given the growing attention on the theme in the last years and the quantity of new information and data that is continually produced and issued in open form.

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