

SUSTAINABLE GOVERNANCE: HOW CAN OPEN GOVERNMENT CONTRIBUTE TO PARTICIPATORY INNOVATIONS AND PROMOTE MORE REFLEXIVE, ADAPTABLE, AND ECOLOGICALLY ATTUNED SOCIETIES?¹

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In the context of addressing overlapping socio-environmental crises, this article explores the role of open government initiatives in supporting the intricate relationship between democracy and sustainability. Focusing on Brazil's National Action Plans within the Open Government Partnership (OGP), the study examines how these plans contribute to good governance and environmentally sustainable development. By fostering participatory innovations and promoting transparency, accountability, and social participation, open government initiatives aim to build governance systems for a sustainable future. The research employs methods such as semi-structured interviews with civil society members, document analysis, and collection of secondary data from OGP National Action Plans and Independent Report Mechanism reports. This critical examination of the potential and challenges of participatory innovations in Brazil's OGP Action Plans not only contributes to understanding sustainable governance but also enhances interdisciplinary knowledge in public policy analysis.

Keywords: sustainable governance; open government; participatory innovations; public policy.

GOVERNANÇA SUSTENTÁVEL: COMO O GOVERNO ABERTO PODE CONTRIBUIR PARA INOVAÇÕES PARTICIPATIVAS E PROMOVER SOCIEDADES MAIS REFLEXIVAS, ADAPTÁVEIS E ECOLÓGICAMENTE SINTONIZADAS?

No contexto de enfrentamento de crises socioambientais sobrepostas, este artigo explora o papel das iniciativas de Governo Aberto no apoio à complexa relação entre democracia e sustentabilidade. Focando nos Planos de Ação Nacionais do Brasil no âmbito da Parceria para Governo Aberto (OGP), o estudo examina como esses planos contribuem para a boa governança e o desenvolvimento ambientalmente sustentável. Por meio da promoção de inovações participativas e do fortalecimento da transparência, da responsabilização e da participação social, as iniciativas de Governo Aberto buscam construir sistemas de governança voltados para um futuro sustentável. A pesquisa utiliza métodos como entrevistas semiestruturadas com membros da sociedade civil, análise documental e coleta de dados secundários dos Planos de Ação Nacionais da OGP e dos relatórios do Mecanismo de Relato Independente. Esta análise crítica sobre o potencial e os desafios das inovações participativas nos Planos de Ação da OGP no Brasil não apenas contribui para a compreensão da governança sustentável, mas também amplia o conhecimento interdisciplinar na análise de políticas públicas.

Palavras-chave: governança sustentável; governo aberto; inovações participativas; políticas públicas.

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GOBERNANZA SOSTENIBLE: ¿CÓMO PUEDE EL GOBIERNO ABIERTO CONTRIBUIR A INNOVACIONES PARTICIPATIVAS Y PROMOVER SOCIEDADES MÁS REFLEXIVAS, ADAPTABLES Y ECOLÓGICAMENTE SINTONIZADAS?

En el contexto de abordar crisis socioambientales superpuestas, este artículo explora el papel de las iniciativas de Gobierno Abierto en el apoyo a la compleja relación entre democracia y sostenibilidad. Con un enfoque en los Planes de Acción Nacionales de Brasil en el marco de la Alianza para el Gobierno Abierto (OGP), el estudio examina cómo estos planes contribuyen a la buena gobernanza y al desarrollo ambientalmente sostenible. Mediante la promoción de innovaciones participativas y el fortalecimiento de la transparencia, la rendición de cuentas y la participación social, las iniciativas de Gobierno Abierto buscan construir sistemas de gobernanza orientados hacia un futuro sostenible. La investigación emplea métodos como entrevistas semiestructuradas con miembros de la sociedad civil, análisis documental y recopilación de datos secundarios de los Planes de Acción Nacionales de la OGP y de los informes del Mecanismo de Revisión Independiente. Este análisis crítico sobre el potencial y los desafíos de las innovaciones participativas en los Planes de Acción de la OGP en Brasil no solo contribuye a la comprensión de la gobernanza sostenible, sino que también amplía el conocimiento interdisciplinario en el análisis de políticas públicas.

Palabras clave: gobernanza sostenible; gobierno abierto; innovaciones participativas; políticas públicas.

JEL: Q01; H83; D71.

1 INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEMATIZATION

The debate on inequality and development, in all its multidimensional and inter-sectoral approaches, has increasingly been associated with issues related to environmental sustainability and democratic governance (Durkheim, 1977; Goffman, 1993, 2006; Sen, 1999; Silva, 2001, 2009; Baker and Eckeberg, 2008; Baker, 2009, 2022; Niederle et al., 2016; Fischer, 2017; Bornemann, Knappe and Nanz, 2022). The growing intersection of these topics highlights not only environmental challenges but also the political and institutional dilemmas involved in implementing effective public policies to address climate change and social inequality simultaneously.

Considering these interconnected challenges, the recognition that overlapping disasters and socio-environmental issues are often linked to political and institutional barriers has prompted reflection on the limitations of traditional governance paradigms and the need for participatory innovations (Fung and Wright, 2003). Hammond and Smith (2022) emphasize the central role of institutions and culture in shaping the concepts and definitions of sustainability and democratic consultation mechanisms. In this regard, as Evrard (2012) points out, it is impossible to understand environmental actions without acknowledging the importance of the institutional and strategic dimensions involved. For example, Fischer (2017) illustrates that the maintenance of democratic governance could be jeopardized by the permanent state of emergency inherent in the climate change agenda.

The increasing relevance of sustainability for democratic governance (Baker, 2022) is tied to a better understanding of how to ensure that the needs of the present do not compromise “the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UN, 1987, p. 16). In this context, the demand for guaranteeing human rights to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is directly linked to access to information, participation, and access to justice (UN, 1992; CEPAL, 2018b).

Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided (UN, 1992, p. 2-3).

The existing literature still lacks in-depth analyses of how open government initiatives can overcome the structural and institutional barriers that often hinder the implementation of effective public policies aimed at addressing climate change and other socio-environmental challenges. Few studies systematically explore how the articulation between open government principles and the environmental agenda can foster participatory and inclusive practices that not only respond reactively to environmental problems but also actively engage communities in the construction of sustainable solutions. In this regard, the central question of this research is to understand how open government practices can be shaped to address sustainability challenges by more effectively integrating citizen participation and social engagement into environmental public policies.

This article addresses these very issues through the analysis of Brazil's National Action Plans in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) concerning the environmental agenda and sustainability. The OGP National Action Plans are forged in the struggle between autocracy and democracy. It should be possible to consider them as a constitutive force for the renewal of society. The analysis of Brazil's National Action Plans in the OGP allows for mapping and illustrating attempts to build sustainable governance practices within a democratic perspective and inclusive conceptions of sustainability. Accordingly, the development of a more direct communication channel between state and non-state actors – intensely sought after by the open government agenda – has the potential to successfully foster participatory discussion forums ratified and legitimized by the recognition of individual and collective rights and responsibilities.

2 METHODOLOGICAL PATH CHOOSING

The research concerning dynamic and complex relationships involving democracy, sustainable governance, and participatory innovation in the environmental agenda involves multi-thematic and interdisciplinary areas specificities. They require care and accuracy in methodological quality for the critical analysis focused on public policies (policy focused analysis). To this end, the multi-method approaches was selected as a research method. The data collection and analysis techniques selected were literature review, document analysis, combination of narrative interview and semi-structured interview, and secondary data sources.

The first milestone of the methodological path focused on the development of a research environment, which was arranged from a syntax assembly of keywords composed by sustainable governance, open government, participatory innovations and public policy. The research environment enabled mapping the specificities of the subject matter, the characterization of interest groups, the typification of secondary data and the documented record. During the research of syntax and matter, it found that sustainable governance directly relates to transparency, participatory innovations and adaptable and ecologically attuned societies. Based on this finding, the research environment was expanded to include a broader analysis of these contexts.

The document analysis as a qualitative research method involved OGP, Independent Report Mechanism (IRM), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) documents and reports. It also involved analysis of national and subnational regulatory frameworks of the open government, sustainability and environmental agenda. The assessment of the Brazilian National Action Plan allows the identification of good practices and examples of attempts to develop sustainable governance standards and inclusive conceptions of sustainability. A central challenge in the documentary analysis of Brazil's government records in the OGP was identifying the bias present in the documents, particularly regarding the euphemisms used to describe the advances in co-creation with society. Since the reports were produced by the government itself, it is essential to recognize that they are not neutral, reflecting the perspectives and interests of the state. These perspectives often contrast with the evaluations from the IRM and the accounts of civil society representatives, revealing divergent interpretations of the progress and challenges of governmental collaboration.

Based on the principle of theoretical sampling, characterization of the stakeholder groups over the last years enables us to recognize the local and national authorities, press, activists, organized civil society representatives, experts and university professors for the data collection through combination of narrative interview and semi-structured interview. The narrative interview expands our understanding and knowledge concerning different and research contexts.

It shows itself as an important and high-quality tool to underscore experiences and trajectories that are structured and still have structured the complex and multifaceted environmental agenda. On the other hand, characterized by a predefined set of questions, the semi-structured interviews both have an exploratory nature, aiming to obtain additional information and are an important role in involving a significant set of interviewed who are capable of providing expert knowledge about contents, context and decision-making. The interview guide covers wider issues in thematic clusters that encouraged the interviewed to reflect upon open government, participatory innovations and sustainable governance. The research faced several significant obstacles during data collection. One of these was the refusal of certain mapped actors to participate in the interviews, many of whom claimed they were no longer involved in the open government agenda or the institutions they were previously associated with. Furthermore, other interviewees were unable to recall specific details of the debates and negotiations, which limited the depth of the analysis on the co-creation process with society. In this way, activists, expert and organized civil society representatives were interviewed who were involved in the OGP production process. Namely Institute of Forest and Agricultural Management and Certification (Imaflora), InfoAmazonia, Center of Life Institute (ICV), Forest Code Observatory (OCF). Two representatives of government institutions were also interviewed. Namely Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Natural Resources (Ibama) and National Water and Sanitation Agency (ANA).

Last, but not least: the theoretical framework. The reflective thinking introduced in this research proposals is governed by the Francophone theoretical framework concerning the instrumentation of public action provides by Lascoumes and Le Galès, in accordance with the hypothesis that open government initiatives are instruments of public action. For that matter, a narrative review of literature on the instrumentation of public action was developed.

3 REVISITING THEORETICAL CONCEPTS: INSTRUMENTATION OF PUBLIC ACTION

Given its increasing engagement with traditional themes of political sociology – such as governability, legitimacy, the exercise of power, governance, and bureaucracy – open government initiatives have emerged as cross-cutting instruments that span across sectors and levels of governance. These initiatives aim to encourage social participation, promote transparency, and foster technological innovation as mechanisms for democratic innovation. In this context and considering that “instrumentation is at the core of governmentality” (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004, p. 20),⁴ the Francophone theoretical framework concerning the instrumentation of public action offers important analytical support for understanding the dynamics of institutionalization, political recompositing, multi-actor arrangements, and the exercise of power shaped by open government practices.

4. Original excerpt: “*l’instrumentation est au centre de la gouvernementalité*”.

From a sociological neo institutional perspective, an instrument of public action is a construction comprising both technical and social dimensions that structure collective action. It plays a dual role – cognitive and normative – by not only producing knowledge but also guiding behaviors and shaping social facts. Therefore, instruments of public action are not neutral tools; they express political intentions, values, and representations of the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed. They operate simultaneously as mechanisms of social control and as frameworks for structuring its exercise. Forging trust-based environments and reducing uncertainty, instruments of public action act as institutions in the sociological sense. They hold cognitive, informal, and symbolic dimensions that materialize and operationalize government policies (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004, 2007, 2012; Halpern, Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2021; Lascoumes and Simard, 2011). As Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004, p. 15-16) emphasize,

instruments are institutions in the sociological sense of the term [...]. Institutions thus provide a stable framework of expectations that reduces uncertainties and structures collective action [...]. These instruments are indeed institutions because they partly determine the way in which actors behave, create uncertainties about the effects of power relations, lead to prioritizing certain actors and interests while excluding others, constrain actors and offer them resources, and convey a representation of problems (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004, p. 15-16, our translation).⁵

The choice of public policy instruments is not merely operational; rather, it reflects political decisions shaped by various actors and interests. As Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004) argue, instruments embody condensed interpretations of power and social control, influencing structures, organizational dynamics, and collective behavior. In this regard,

the choice of this analytical approach also encourages a reinterpretation – or even an alternative interpretation – of public policy decisions. The instrument materializes intentions and often allows for a more precise distinction between what constitutes genuine innovation, mere repackaging, or a half-measure (Lascoumes and Simard, 2011, p. 3, our translation).⁶

Instruments may both enable and constrain political change. They serve as markers of contextual transformations and reveal shifts in public policies and state structures “instruments are tracers of change [...] serving as indicators of shifts in

5. Original excerpt: “les instruments sont des institutions au sens sociologique du terme [...]. Les institutions fournissent ainsi un cadre stable d’anticipations qui réduit les incertitudes et structure l’action collective [...]. Ces instruments sont bien des institutions, car ils déterminent en partie la manière dont les acteurs se comportent, créent des incertitudes sur les effets des rapports de force, conduisent à privilégier certains acteurs et intérêts et à en écarter d’autres, contraignent les acteurs et leurs offrent des ressources, et véhiculent une représentation des problèmes”.

6. Original excerpt: “le choix de cette entrée analytique encourage aussi une relecture, voire une interprétation alternative de décisions de politiques publiques. L’instrument matérialise les intentions, et souvent permet de distinguer plus précisément ce qui relève d’une véritable innovation, d’un recyclage ou d’une demi-mesure”.

public policy and as analyzers of the transformations of the contemporary state” (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004, p. 273, our translation).⁷

Furthermore, the design and adoption of such instruments often expose underlying conflicts and interests, challenging rhetorical justifications and signaling structural changes in public management orientations – such as democratic innovations, income transfer programs, social security reform, affirmative action policies, and environmental sustainability agendas (Lascoumes, Le Galès, 2004, 2007; King, 2007; Palier, 2000; Evrard, 2012; Lucio, Daroit, Freitas, 2017). As Lascoumes and Simard (2011, p. 3, our translation) explain,⁸

the question of change, whether it concerns public policies or, beyond that, political regimes, is a recurring one in our field. The approach through instruments constitutes an excellent tracer of change beyond the voluntarism of actors and political rhetoric. In this sense, it represents a new methodological perspective for the study of public action and favors an entry point based on the observation and analysis of dimensions that are as discreet as they are significant. It encourages the grasp of public action in its materiality [...]. Understanding instrumentation is a way of apprehending the transformations of the State by considering its practices, and the recompositions they undergo, particularly in the permanent tension between constraint and incentive.

The effects produced by these instruments, emerging from their dual cognitive and normative functions, unfold in the medium and long term. They reflect the power dynamics, legitimacy mechanisms, and identity construction that influence governance practices. As Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004, p. 15) assert, it is necessary to examine both “the effects produced by instruments in their relative autonomy”⁹ and “the political effects of instruments and the power relations they structure”.¹⁰

These effects can be analyzed from three complementary perspectives. First, the role of instruments in disrupting inertia and fostering a clustering effect, compelling actors to engage in dialogue and cooperation. Second, their cognitive influence in shaping agendas, categorizing events, and framing social realities. And third, their capacity to induce contextual adjustments by enabling prioritization, generating new interpretive frameworks, and offering plausible justifications (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004, 2007; Lascoumes and Simard, 2011).

7. Original excerpt: “les instruments sont des traceurs du changement [...] comme révélateurs des changements de politiques publiques et comme analyseurs des transformations de l’État contemporain”.

8. Original excerpt: “la question du changement, que ce soit celui des politiques publiques et au-delà celui des régimes politiques, est récurrente dans notre domaine. L’approche par les instruments constitue un excellent traceur de changement au-delà du volontarisme des acteurs et des rhétoriques politiques. Dans ce sens, elle constitue une nouvelle perspective méthodologique pour l’étude de l’action publique et privilégie une entrée par l’observation et l’analyse de dimensions aussi discrètes que significatives. Elle incite à saisir l’action publique dans sa matérialité [...] Comprendre l’instrumentation est une façon de saisir les transformations de l’État en envisageant ses pratiques, et les recompositions qu’elles connaissent, en particulier dans la tension permanente entre contrainte et incitation”.

9. Original excerpt: “les effets générés par les instruments dans leur autonomie relative”.

10. Original excerpt: “les effets politiques des instruments et les relations de pouvoirs qu’ils organisent”.

4 SUSTAINABLE GOVERNANCE AND OPEN GOVERNMENT

A sustainable governance model is grounded in the principle that citizens are central to democratic processes and that multilateral cooperation enhances collective action (Sanhueza, 2020). As Goffman (2006) suggests, pro-environmental social interactions play a stabilizing role by enabling coordinated responses to environmental change. For Sen (2010, p. 4), the active engagement of non-state actors reflects their responsibility to address global challenges beyond individual concerns.

This perspective aligns with Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which states that “environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level” (UN, 1992, p. 2-3). Reinforcing this vision, the Escazú Agreement – entered into force in April 2021 – establishes a binding regional framework in Latin America and the Caribbean for promoting access to environmental information, public participation in decision-making, and environmental justice. Originating from the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, the agreement also pioneers a dedicated space for addressing the protection of environmental human rights defenders in the region (CEPAL, 2018b).

In this broader context, open government has emerged as a key approach to fostering sustainable and democratic governance. By institutionalizing transparency, participation, accountability, and collaboration, open government initiatives contribute to strengthening the legitimacy of public action and generating public value. These initiatives establish multi-actor forums for dialogue, encourage participatory innovation, and enhance service delivery and institutional trust (Ramírez-Alujas, 2011; CLAD, 2016; OECD, 2017, 2022; Cepal, 2018a; Mariani, 2019; CLAD, 2020; OGP, 2021; Mariani and Bessa, 2022).

[...] set of mechanisms and strategies that contribute to public governance and good government, based on the pillars of transparency, citizen participation, accountability, collaboration, and innovation, focusing on and including citizens in the decision-making process, as well as in the formulation and implementation of public policies, in order to strengthen democracy, the legitimacy of public action, and collective well-being (CLAD, 2016, p. 5, our translation).¹¹

In Brazil, however, open government practices were initially fragmented and lacked systemic articulation. It was only with the country's formal adherence to the OGP in 2011 that a structured instrumentation of public action in this domain began to take shape. Through its National Action Plans, Brazil adopted an inter-sectoral and transversal strategy anchored in voluntary commitments with defined

11. Original excerpt: “conjunto de mecanismos y estrategias que contribuye a la gobernanza pública y al buen gobierno, basado en los pilares de la transparencia, participación ciudadana, rendición de cuentas, colaboración e innovación, centrando e incluyendo a la ciudadanía en el proceso de toma de decisiones, así como en la formulación e implementación de políticas públicas, para fortalecer la democracia, la legitimidad de la acción pública y el bienestar colectivo”.

implementation timelines. These plans aim to modernize public administration and advance socio-economic development by embedding transparency, social participation, and accountability at the core of governance (Mariani, 2019; Guerzovich and Schommer, 2022; Mariani and Bessa, 2023). According to the OGP (2023, p. 3),

participating countries in the Open Government Partnership pledge to deliver country action plans that elaborate on concrete commitments on open government. In each country, these commitments are developed and implemented through a multi-stakeholder process, ideally with the active engagement of citizens and civil society. OGP action plans are meant to be living documents that can be updated on a rolling basis. Each country's action plan contains concrete commitments related to open government reforms that governments pledge to implement. Those commitments may build on existing efforts, could identify new steps to complete on-going reforms, or might initiate actions in an entirely new area.

This alignment between open government and environmental governance highlights the potential for promoting institutional change through inclusive and participatory mechanisms. The convergence of these agendas reinforces the democratic dimension of sustainability and offers a path toward reconfiguring public administration through more transparent, legitimate, and citizen-centered practices.

5 THE BRAZILIAN EXPERIENCE IN PARTICIPATORY INNOVATIONS AND ATTEMPTS TO PROMOTE MORE REFLEXIVE, ADAPTABLE AND ECOLOGICALLY ATTUNED SOCIETIES

During the 1st and 2nd Action Plans, effective from 2011 to 2013 and 2013 to 2016, respectively, the environmental agenda was practically excluded from discussions. However, it was addressed indirectly. It was only starting with the 3rd Action Plan (2016-2018) that the environmental agenda was fully incorporated into the open government debate in Brazil. This issue was raised by civil society during the public comment period, with 19.3% of valid votes nationwide in 2016 (OGP, 2016).

Throughout the co-creation workshops for the environmental commitment of the Third Action Plan, conventional realities were identified through social facts. As a specific type of institution in the sociological sense, the instrumentation of public action allowed for the reflection of the environmental agenda's broad cognitive, informal, and symbolic dimensions that materialize and operationalize government policy. In this context, the central issues identified during the workshops were linked to the traditional call for establishing direct collaboration channels between the government and non-governmental actors. These channels would enable active participation and legitimate recognition of collective rights and responsibilities. Another key issue identified was the difficulty in obtaining and accessing environmental data, which were often incomplete, outdated, or poorly organized.

As such, the co-creation workshops focused on transparency and participation – two of the four core principles of open government. Therefore, Commitment 15 of the Third Action Plan was designed to create opportunities for dialogue between government and society, with the goal of generating and implementing actions related to transparency in environmental issues (OGP, 2016; Mariani and Bessa, 2023).

As noted by OGP (2021), one of the essential elements of social participation is establishing a platform for dialogue between the government, civil society, and other non-governmental actors. The symbolic and decisive effort that Commitment 15 represents is directly related to breaking inertia through a public action instrument and contributing to the creation of social facts associated with the development of behavior patterns. Thus, Commitment 15, acting as a central actor-network, was expected to help resolve conflicts of interest that prevented actors from discussing and debating common agendas.

Commitment 15: Make room for dialogue between government and society, aiming at generating and implementing actions related to transparency in environment issues. The commitment seeks to improve active transparency mechanisms for environment issues, as well as to advance in making room for a better interaction between governmental areas and civil society, with the intent of building more effective actions to disclose environmental information in better quality and greater number (OGP, 2016, p. 24).

Monitoring reports from the Brazilian government on Commitment 15 suggest that the dialogue over the two years was satisfactory and met the expectations of both the government and society. Interviews conducted in this research with civil society representatives also indicated a positive evaluation, though it was noticeably limited. Both groups acknowledged that all structural milestones of the commitment were completed, and that a dialogue channel was indeed created, aiming to achieve greater active transparency of environmental information and data (OGP, 2017, 2018a). However, the IRM raised significant concerns regarding the ambition, potential impact, and actual contribution of commitment to government openness (IRM, 2018, 2020). These concerns are better understood when analyzing the sustainability of the results of the commitment from a temporal and critical perspective. Did the commitment advance sustainable governance? Was there real participatory innovation and increased public transparency? Did it create tools and alternatives for open and inclusive participation in environmental issues?

FIGURE 1
Assessment of progress by commitment

Commitment overview	Specificity				OGP value relevance (as written)				Potential impact				Completion		Midterm		Did it open government?				
															End of term						
	None	Low	Medium	High	Access to information	Civil participation	Public accountability	Technology and innovation for transparency and accountability	None	Minor	Moderate	Transformative	Not started	Limited	Substantial	Completed	Worsened	Did not change	Marginal	Major	Outstanding
15. Environmental transparency				✓	✓	✓		✓		✓				✓	✓				✓		

Source: IRM (2020).
Authors' elaboration.

The inclusion of the environmental agenda in the 3rd Action Plan marked a significant institutional change, reflecting conflicts of interest and power relations. Its subsequent inclusion in the 4th Action Plan further reaffirms this trend. Four environmental topics were added in the 4th Plan: one proposed by the federal government, concerning transparency and social control in the Mariana recovery process (after the 2015 dam disaster), and three by civil society, based on a public consultation. Of the 2,002 votes in the consultation, 7.79% were for land transparency, 6.79% for climate, and 6.09% for water resources. These environmental themes dominated the consultation, suggesting that the open government dialogue mechanism was seen as legitimate and capable of generating expectations for more ambitious environmental policy advances (OGP, 2018b).

The most ambitious expectation emerged in the co-creation workshops on climate, where the central challenge identified was improving Climate Policy management with effective societal participation. Effective participation here transcended mere consultation, aiming for involvement, collaboration, empowerment, and deliberation, as outlined by the International Association for Public Participation – IAP2 (OGP, 2018b; Mariani, 2019; Mariani and Bessa, 2023).

In this context, the writing chosen for Commitment 9 “to construct a transparent mechanism for evaluating actions and policies associated with climate change in a participatory manner” highlights the explicit and implicit power relations regarding the legitimacy and governance dynamics of the climate agenda. As a particular type of institution, commitment has a dual normative and cognitive role with technical and social elements aimed at conditioning organizational dynamics surrounding the climate agenda. Associated with the normative aspect of specific representation of the agenda itself, the initial milestones of Commitment 9 were well implemented, despite some records of certain delays in the agreed schedule.

They were characterized by scientific contextualization focused on identifying and mapping national and international studies that noted impacts on climate change. Milestones 6 and 7, in turn, presented potentially more ambitious elements with a direct influence on the cognitive role of power relations in the instrumentation of public action. They were related to the joint definition of a mechanism for evaluating actions and policies related to climate change (OGP, 2022a; Mariani and Bessa, 2023).

The sensitivity of the discussions related to milestones 6 and 7, despite not including effective implementation of public policies, brought to the fore exponential issues and conflicts related to the agenda: external pressures, conflicts of interest, and resistance to dialogue. These issues and conflicts were well characterized by civil society representatives during the interviews conducted. The climate of the monitoring meetings showed a veiled environment of dissatisfaction and unreal expectations. Although recognizing the importance of the OGP for the co-creation process of public policies, in early 2021, civil society issued a statement withdrawing from the debates denouncing a lack of transparency and a lack of listening (OGP, 2022a).

[...] the technical and substantial contributions made by civil society organizations were not properly internalized. In fact, some contributions, of a more analytical and critical nature regarding the transparency of the climate agenda in Brazil, were even vetoed. [...] We emphasize the lack of openness, joint and transparent construction by the body responsible for coordinating this commitment (MMA), as well as the lack of listening and adoption of the contributions proposed by civil society regarding the open government commitment on climate” (OGP, 2021, p. 1-2, our translation).¹²

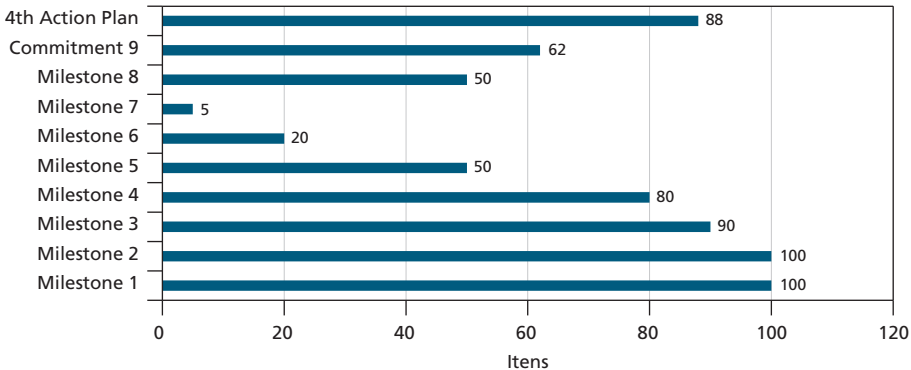
CGU recognizes the difficulty in advancing the debates and justifies that it was a direct result of the administrative reform associated with the redefinition of perspectives and priorities of the Brazilian government.

Furthermore, between 2019 and 2021, the Ministry of the Environment (MMA), the commitment’s lead government institution, underwent further administrative changes that resulted in changes to the commitment’s focal points. This resulted in delays in discussions and implementation of actions. In particular, there was particular difficulty in advancing the implementation of milestone 3 [...]. No consensus was reached between the government and civil society about the scope of the policies and actions targeted by the assessment (milestone 3) [...]. CGU and the Civil Society WG thus decided, on June 16, 2021, to discontinue the commitment’s implementation after reaching an implementation rate of 62% (OGP, 2022b, p. 74-75).

12. Original excerpt “[...] as contribuições técnicas e substanciais realizadas pelas organizações da sociedade civil não foram devidamente internalizadas. Inclusive, algumas contribuições, de caráter mais analítico e crítico na perspectiva da transparência da agenda climática no Brasil, foram até mesmo vetadas. [...] Reforçamos a falta de abertura, construção conjunta e transparente por parte do órgão responsável por coordenar tal compromisso (MMA), bem como carência de escuta e adoção das contribuições propostas pela sociedade civil quanto ao compromisso de governo aberto em clima”.

The expected effects of the instrumentation of public action should be associated with the opening of dialogue channels on the common agenda, with the reduction of conflicts of interest and with the attenuation of resistance among actors in dialogue (Mariani and Lassance, 2020; Mariani and Bessa, 2022). Does the schism between government and civil society in the execution of the commitment and the Ministry of the Environment’s attempt to compose a new civil society group and subsequently continue the execution of the milestones independently call into question the very dialogue channel built within the open government agenda? Did the instrumentation fail to sustain an effective channel of dialogue? Or, on the contrary, did the instrumentation ensure that public action took place only from a legitimized structure among the actors? In other words, did the instrumentation prevent unilateral decisions from being made?

FIGURE 2
Commitment progress assessment 9
(In %)



Source: OGP (2018a).
Authors’ elaboration.

Before responding directly to the previous questions, it is necessary to analyze Commitment 10 from Brazil’s 4th OGP Action Plan. This commitment, which aimed to improve the National Water Resources Information System (SNIRH) to strengthen Committees in critical areas for integrated water resource management, demonstrated a high level of collaboration between government and civil society. The implementation process reflected an effective and efficient participatory dynamic, where all milestones were successfully completed, and joint deliverables were produced.

Interviews with those involved highlighted the presence of a constructive and collaborative environment, fostering shared understandings of public problems, promoting horizontal dialogue, encouraging mutual accountability, and stimulating innovation based on public data. Civil society positioned itself as a governmental

ally in advancing the environmental agenda. Key outputs included the identification of critical areas, capacity-building and evaluation workshops on SNIRH, an online consultation, and the mapping of gaps in documentation and information (OGP, 2018a; Mariani, 2019; OGP, 2022a).

According to the IRM (2020), this commitment aligns with three core open government values: access to information, social participation, technology and innovation. The IRM noted that the joint efforts of government and civil society resulted in full implementation of agreed actions. Noteworthy improvements to SNIRH included expanded content availability and easier access to reports, publications, interactive maps, metadata, dashboards, mobile apps, open data, and geoservices. These enhancements, informed by consultations and surveys, strengthened both governmental decision-making and civil society oversight (OGP, 2022a, p. 78-79).

Brazil's 5th Action Plan (2021-2023) continues to reflect participatory innovation, aiming to promote more adaptive, reflective, and ecologically aware societies. Both governmental and civil society actors again advocated for environmental themes. Three key agendas emerged: i) environmental licensing, proposed by the federal government; ii) agribusiness chains and open data, proposed by civil society with 15.3% of public votes; and iii) environment, forests, and open data, also from civil society, with 9.14% of the votes (OGP, 2022b).

An important theme in the 5th Plan's co-creation process – emphasized by interviewees – was the need to calibrate expectations. Whereas earlier plans focused on establishing dialogue channels and ambitious policy tools, the 5th Plan shifted attention toward improving the quality and sustainability of data availability. This shift reflects both an appreciation for the open government dialogue mechanisms and an awareness of their vulnerabilities – such as external pressures, conflicting interests, political shifts, and the evolving nature of social oversight. A more in-depth evaluation of these dynamics will be possible once the plan's implementation period concludes at the end of 2023.

6 CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

In the context of overlapping socio-environmental crises, how can open government practices be shaped to more effectively address sustainability challenges by integrating citizen participation and social engagement into environmental public policies? This article sought to identify and analyze efforts to build sustainable governance practices in Brazil, grounded in democratic principles and inclusive conceptions of sustainability. By exploring transversal competences and the strong connection between open government instruments and the environmental agenda, the article focuses on how open government initiatives can overcome structural and institutional barriers. It examines how these initiatives can integrate citizen participation and social engagement into environmental policies, while promoting

participatory and inclusive practices that not only respond to environmental challenges but also actively involve communities in constructing sustainable solutions.

By addressing these questions, the article highlights both challenges and promising prospects. It was possible to identify specific obstacles and concerns, but also significant progress and encouraging signs for advancing sustainable governance. The first key point concerns the establishment of dialogue channels – specifically, the creation of direct collaboration mechanisms between state and non-state actors. The instrumentation of public action through Brazil's Open Government National Action Plans enabled the environmental agenda to gain a legitimate and effective space for dialogue among diverse actors. Because these plans are forged through analytical and practical deliberative processes, they allowed representatives of organized civil society to share perspectives, propose alternatives, and voice demands. In doing so, they created spaces of active participation grounded in the recognition of collective rights and responsibilities.

However, these dialogue channels also revealed their limitations. While effective for articulating claims, they fell short in enabling transformative action. According to the IAP2 spectrum, social participation was mostly limited to information, consultation, and, in some cases, involvement and collaboration. There was no effective empowerment enabling civil society to influence strategic public policy decisions or solve pressing public problems. The environmental agenda continues to demand a more ambitious and transformative participatory approach. There is a clear need to open new channels of dialogue that allow society not only to follow and contribute to public debates, but also to co-decide, evaluate, and ensure accountability, legitimacy, and democratic governance in public action.

The second key point involves progress in ensuring transparency and access to information – particularly through the right to information and the interoperability of open databases. The open government agenda made a meaningful contribution by promoting the proactive publication and dissemination of environmental information. Nevertheless, progress in this area also revealed shortcomings. Many of the demands raised at the outset of the open government process remain unresolved. Civil society representatives have pointed out that open databases are often incomplete, outdated, inadequately structured, or not truly interoperable. For open data to be impactful, it must be accessible, usable, and editable.

In recognizing both the challenges and the advances, it is clear that there is no single, “magic bullet” solution to the overlapping socio-environmental crises. Still, open government initiatives offer encouraging prospects for a more accessible, responsive, and accountable environmental agenda. The strong association between open government instruments and environmental governance has provided a valuable learning experience for both state and non-state actors in Brazil. It would be counterproductive to imagine a prosperous future for sustainable governance

without considering how open government initiatives can support the complex relationship between democracy and sustainability. Building governance systems for a sustainable future – grounded in participatory innovations – remains closely tied to the principles and practices of open government.

To enhance the implementation of environmental policies, it is crucial to strengthen the core pillars of the open government model, such as transparency, collaboration, and participation, which place the citizen at the center of public action and aim to create public value for society. To achieve this value generation, it is necessary to adopt an integrated approach that combines these key principles with the strategic use of technological innovations, thus amplifying their transformative potential.

In this context, strengthening dialogue mechanisms is an essential measure. This can be achieved through the establishment of robust participatory structures, such as permanent sustainability councils, regional forums, and digital platforms, which enable real-time co-decision-making and continuous monitoring of environmental policies by civil society. These initiatives are fundamental for creating a collaborative environment, in which society can actively engage with the state, promoting shared responsibility in policy formulation and implementation.

Moreover, advancing transparency and the use of open data is equally imperative. The adoption of rigorous technical standards to ensure quality, accessibility, and regular updating of environmental data, along with the creation of a centralized platform for easy access to this data, are essential strategies to strengthen public oversight and engage society in environmental management. The provision of real-time data in accessible formats is a vital tool for promoting social control and enhancing governmental accountability.

Furthermore, it is necessary to promote participatory monitoring mechanisms that allow civil society not only to track policy progress but also to actively evaluate and audit these policies. Such monitoring ensures greater transparency, accountability, and social control, which, in turn, strengthens the legitimacy of public action and its capacity to deliver effective solutions to environmental challenges.

By adopting these recommendations, open government initiatives in Brazil will be better equipped to address complex socio-environmental challenges, offering a more accessible, effective, and sustainable governance model for the future. This integrated and collaborative approach will not only enable the implementation of more inclusive policies but also contribute to building a governance model that is both participatory and transformative.

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