



Elgeyo Marakwet County Government Opens Up to Global Scrutiny to Promote Transparent, Participatory, Inclusive, and Accountable Governance

County:	Elgeyo Marakwet		
Sector/s:	Governance	Sub-sector/Theme:	Transparency & Accountability
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Target Audience:	County Stakeholders, County Government Officials, Civil Society Organizations, Community leaders, Development Partners, Media practitioners, Policy makers, Researchers, Academia		
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Introduction

In 2016, the County Government of Elgeyo Marakwet took a bold and unprecedented step by voluntarily opening its governance systems to global scrutiny. This was accomplished through joining the Open Government Partnership (OGP) program, a global initiative aimed at promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in governance. Elgeyo Marakwet became the first County in Kenya and one of only three local governments in Africa to embrace this pioneering spirit. This move signalled a clear commitment to reform and innovation in public service delivery, aligning the County with global best practices.

The Open Government Partnership was founded in 2011 as a coalition of reformers inside and outside government. It brings together government leaders and civil society advocates who share a common vision of transforming how governments serve their citizens by making them more open, participatory, and accountable. The initiative represented a significant shift from traditional governance models toward inclusive governance that values citizen engagement.

Before the era of devolution, government operations in Kenya were often shrouded in secrecy and mistrust. So widespread was the perception of government opacity that the Kiswahili term for government, *Serikali*, was humorously altered to *Sirikali*, meaning “top secret.” This reflected a deep-rooted disconnect between the government and its citizens. Recognizing this challenge, the County set out to reverse this culture by promoting openness and accountability at the local level.

Among the County’s notable achievements that propelled it into the OGP program was the enactment of its Public Participation Act in 2014. This legislation created formal avenues for citizens

to contribute meaningfully to County governance through structured forums, enhancing transparency and accountability. Additionally, the County enacted the Equitable Development Act, 2015, a model framework that ensured fair distribution of resources across its 20 wards and empowered citizens to decide on the allocation of funds each fiscal year. These measures provided a strong foundation for participatory governance and laid the groundwork for deeper reforms.

The County's commitment to good governance was further validated in 2015 when the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC) rated Elgeyo Marakwet as one of the least corrupt Counties in Kenya. This recognition came as a result of a comprehensive survey mapping corruption-prone areas and unethical practices across Counties. The County's exemplary performance earned it the privilege of hosting the North Rift region's International Anti-Corruption Day celebrations in 2016, further cementing its reputation as a leader in transparency and integrity.

Implementation of the practice

Engagement in the Open Government Partnership requires a collaborative approach that brings together government officials, citizens, civil society organizations, the media, and special interest groups. This co-creation process is designed to foster innovative solutions that improve public service delivery by promoting transparency in budgeting, procurement, audits, and other critical government functions. Opening government processes to stakeholders encourages joint problem-solving and ensures that policies and programs better respond to the real needs of citizens.



Figure 1 County officials participating in the official launch of the program

Despite initial resistance from some government insiders wary of such openness, the County courageously embraced the OGP model and committed to the co-creation process. This willingness to confront entrenched norms and foster collaborative governance underscored the County's vision for a more inclusive and accountable government.



The co-creation process culminated in the development of Action Plans, which outlined commitments the County Government and its partners agreed to implement to transform service delivery. Since joining OGP in 2016, Elgeyo Marakwet has developed and implemented two four-year action plans and recently completed its third, covering 2024 to 2027. Each plan built upon the previous one, progressively deepening governance reforms.

The first action plan primarily focused on establishing foundational systems that would enable the County to operate in a more transparent, accessible, and accountable manner. These efforts set the stage for the second action plan, which introduced specific, results-oriented commitments aimed directly at improving service delivery outcomes. The policy focus expanded to include the inclusion of marginalized groups, transparent public procurement, and enhancements in healthcare service delivery. The plan also sought to expand civic participation and ensure that youth had access to relevant information that could empower them socially and economically.

Results of the practice

The Open Government Partnership has profoundly transformed the relationship between the County and its citizens, as well as civil society organizations, the media, and development partners. Through the co-creation process, a culture of collaboration, transparency, and accountability has taken root, fundamentally reshaping governance in the County. This shift is most visible in the quarterly stakeholder roundtables chaired by the Governor. These meetings provide an open platform where government representatives and civil society engage in candid dialogue about the progress and challenges of County projects. Civil society organizations bring forward social audit findings that either commend government achievements or call for greater accountability. This open exchange has established a dynamic culture of engagement and responsiveness.

The County has also made notable strides in ensuring inclusive participation by marginalized groups such as women, youth, and persons with disabilities. By widening access to information and decision-making spaces, Elgeyo Marakwet has deepened democratic governance and empowered communities to have their voices heard. A standout achievement is the creation of real-time communication channels through SMS, WhatsApp, and an interactive County website. Unlike often slow and bureaucratic feedback processes at the national level, these channels allow citizens to quickly raise concerns, submit complaints or compliments, and receive timely government responses. This innovation has brought government closer to the people, fostering trust and enhancing responsiveness.

Transparency efforts extend beyond communication. The County has proactively published key budget documents online, a move that earned its recognition as Kenya's top County in budget transparency by the International Budget Partnership in 2019. This openness has empowered citizens to engage meaningfully in budget decisions that affect their lives. Furthermore, Elgeyo Marakwet has simplified procurement processes to improve access and transparency, especially for women, youth, and persons with disabilities. Formal mechanisms for citizen feedback on procurement activities have helped curb corruption and promote fairness.

The County's commitment to open data is evident in its efforts to publish detailed development and service delivery information. By improving the quality and availability of data, citizens are better



equipped to monitor progress, hold leaders accountable, and participate actively in planning and budgeting processes. These reforms have attracted international attention. For instance, in 2021, the University of Miami partnered with Elgeyo Marakwet to fund 120 community-chosen projects across the County's 20 electoral wards, reflecting the trust and credibility the County has earned through its transparent governance practices.

Elgeyo Marakwet's leadership in open governance was further highlighted when it hosted the Africa OGP convention in 2018. The event brought together government and civil society representatives from Nigeria, Tanzania, and Ghana for peer-to-peer learning, positioning the County as a regional beacon of governance innovation.

As the first County in Kenya to join the OGP, Elgeyo Marakwet has set an example that inspired other Counties including Makueni, Machakos, Kakamega, and Nandi to embrace transparency and citizen participation as pillars of governance reform.

Lessons learnt:

The County has come to appreciate that the success and sustainability of governance reforms depend heavily on institutionalizing these changes within County systems. Rather than viewing the OGP initiatives as short-term projects, the County has focused on embedding the commitments and practices into formal policies and everyday operations. This policy integration has been crucial for maintaining momentum and ensuring that transparency, accountability, and citizen participation become part of the County's governance culture. The experience has shown that systemic change requires consistent effort and a shift in mindset at all levels of government.

Recommendations

To build on its achievements, the County recommends establishing a dedicated forum that brings together all Counties participating in the Open Government Partnership. Such a community of practice, ideally initiated through collaboration between the National Government and the Council of Governors, would provide a valuable platform for peer-to-peer learning and exchange of best practices. It would also help amplify the importance of transparency, inclusivity, and citizen engagement, encouraging broader adoption of OGP principles across all devolved units. Sustaining these reforms requires ongoing commitment to embedding openness and participation deeply into County governance structures, ensuring that progress is not only maintained but continually enhanced.

Further reading:

- Open Government Partnership – Elgeyo Marakwet:
www.opengovpartnership.org/elgeyomarakwet
- Elgeyo Marakwet County Official Website: www.elgeyomarakwet.go.ke
- International Budget Partnership – Elgeyo Marakwet:
www.internationalbudget.org/elgeyomarakwet
- Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission – National Ethics and Corruption Survey 2015:
www.eacc.go.ke/National-Ethics-and-Corruption-Survey-2015-REPORT
- Open Government Partnership General Website: www.opengovpartnership.org