

International Support for Data Openness and Transparency

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Abstract³

Data openness is an important issue for statistical systems in many countries, particular in the developing world. Data do not become “open” overnight, even if governments so desire. Openness has several components. First one has to deal with legal issues of openness. Then there are organizational and technical issues, having to do with compiling and presenting data in open formats. In addition, underlying data quality issues surface when data become more open. Furthermore, there are often conflicting interests advocating for or trying to limit data openness, within the government, in civil society, and in the private sector. Therefore, opening databases cannot be accomplished by a simple act of “good will” on the part of government; it entails a lot of preparation and the balancing of many interests. While large, multilateral organizations have recently become notable advocates of open data and, more broadly, “open government,” their interests and practical capacities are often limited by their mandate: some may be interested only in economic statistics, or national-level health statistics, for example. And large international agencies are often unable or unwilling to engage with civil society organizations or other interest groups, who are potential users and producers of data. Still there is a need for their financial support for complex reforms. In some cases, this advice may come from international agencies. But these agencies may themselves be limited in their authority or capacity. Furthermore large multilateral organizations may not be able to engage civil society in some countries due to political antagonisms or other circumstances. Therefore there is a niche for non-governmental organizations, bringing international experience adaptable to local conditions to serve as technical resources and trusted advisers to governments and to act as go-betweens with foundations and international agencies that are prepared to support open data reforms.

Key Words: Open data, transparency, non-Governmental organizations

1. Introduction

The call for greater openness and transparency has been heard by governments across the globe. Some may ignore it, but campaigns are underway in many places for public access to government meetings and court proceedings, publication of budgets, and freedom of information laws with the purpose of making governments more accountable and responsive to citizens. And among these demands are greater access to the large stores of data maintained by governments. In this paper we focus on issues faced by the national statistical offices in developing countries as they attempt to respond to demands for open data. We look at the ingredients needed to make data open and the impediments to openness in countries with less sophisticated and less capable statistical systems. We offer a few suggestions for what can be done at the international level to promote and support increased openness of official data.

2. Open Data

Open data came to life in 2009 when several governments announced initiatives to provide greater public access to government data sets. Among the pioneers were the United States,

³ This article has benefitted from our discussions with Shaida Badiee, Development Data Group, The World Bank. The opinions expressed here are those of the authors, as are any mistakes.

United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand. The initiatives in these countries went beyond the data contained in official publications or releases of summary datasets to providing unrestricted access to administrative records and unit record data, limited only by the necessary precautions to preserve anonymity where confidentiality had been promised as a condition of data collection. The United Kingdom, for example, released detailed records of government procurement contracts, including the identity of contractors, goods and services procured, and amounts paid, have been made available to the public, and these records have been mined by the press for evidence of malfeasance or just plain bad taste.

What is open data? For this paper the definition given in the “Open Data Handbook⁴” serves as a template: Open data are data that are readily accessible in a convenient and modifiable form, can be freely used and reused and redistributed, and are available to everyone for any purpose, commercial or non-commercial. Some would go farther and require that data be accompanied by links to metadata and other resources to facilitate the merging and sorting of data sets.⁵ For statistical information this mean, at a minimum, that data should be stored in an accessible and easily usable format on a government or statistical agency portal. Anyone has to have the ability to download data in a readable format. But this is the tail end of the story. To achieve open data there are several prior steps to be taken by the governments.

First, a country has to deal with legal issues of data openness. The law on statistics, which in many developing countries is outdated, may have clauses limiting full data openness. In some countries it categorizes data users, giving priority to government officials and putting citizenry at the end of the line of users with very limited access. That has to be changed. In many cases the governments need technical and financial support in drafting the new law and navigating it through the legislative branches.

Secondly, there are organizational and technical issues having to do with compiling and presenting data in open formats. Statistical agencies in many countries do not have good database management capabilities. There is a need for a data warehouse where statistical data and metadata can be accessed and downloaded, preferably in non-proprietary formats, for further use. Maintaining such a portal requires new processes for updating and managing large databases and investments in new technology.

When data become more open, underlying data quality issues surface. Statisticians are very uncomfortable in showing low quality primary data to the public. Therefore, the process of data openness has to start with improvement in the quality of primary data. It may call for redesign of important surveys that do not yield satisfactory results. It may require improved registers and regular censuses. In addition, statistical agencies have to learn to employ data anonymization techniques, which allow open dissemination of micro data while adhering to the most important principle in official statistics – data confidentiality.

3. International support for open data

Even in wealthy and technologically advanced economies, implementing open data is time and resource consuming task. In poor developing countries it may be impossible without technical and financial assistance. International organizations have been advocates for open data, but their statistical capacity building programs usually focus on their areas of interest: IMF – national accounts and financial statistics, ILO – labor statistics; FAO – agriculture, and so forth. And often their interest lies primarily in obtaining open access to the data they

⁴ <http://opendatahandbook.org>

⁵ See, for example, <http://5stardata.info>

require with little regard for other potential users.

As described above, open data starts with two important tasks – revising (or, in some cases, creating) the statistical law to permit open access and improving primary data collection, documentation, and dissemination methods. These tasks are usually undertaken in the context of large capacity building programs. Two organizations that have addressed the fundamental restructuring and improvement of statistical systems in developing countries are the World Bank and African Development Bank (AfDB).

The current AfDB Statistical Capacity Building Program, which runs through early 2014, supports programs to improve agriculture and rural development statistics, governance, infrastructure; social statistics, poverty monitoring and analysis, macroeconomic statistics; strategic planning, training, and coordination, as well as data development, archiving and dissemination. As part of the program AfDB is financing development of data portals in many countries on the continent to increase access to statistics, consistent with the principles of open data and statistics.

World Bank programs, financed with grant funds, credits, or loans usually address the institutional framework for national statistics. They include improvements in legal and regulatory mechanisms to maintain integrity, independence, and confidentiality in the management and coordination of statistical activities. The objective is to put in place an appropriate policy, legal, and regulatory framework for statistics, which should include data openness principles. These reforms support improvements in statistical infrastructure such as statistical registers, sampling frames, classifications, databases, geographic information systems. Reform programs should include user-producer dialogue to ensure that the supply of statistics to matches demand. And large programs provide funds for investment in physical infrastructure and equipment to ensure that the physical and communication infrastructure supports the production and dissemination of timely and high quality data and is adequately maintained by the statistical agencies. Capacity building programs also deal with the effectiveness and efficiency of statistical operations and necessary improvements in the skills and technical capabilities of staff. The objective is to maintain statistical cadre who are well versed in the newest statistical methods and methodologies.

In 2010 the World Bank opened its databases. The process entailed all the actions described above. The terms of use for the World Bank's databases were revised and made consistent with its new information disclosure policy. The user interface to the databases was overhauled to meet the needs of both casual and power users. And databases that were previously licensed separately or not available to the public were brought together in one place. It took time and a lot of hard work to launch open data. After the launch more financial resources were needed to maintain the expanded offerings while revenues from selling data have disappeared. If the Bank could barely afford it, many countries will have financial difficulties of doing so. The World Bank has begun to advise countries how to make their data open. One of the examples is open Government data toolkit⁶. Among the early adopters are Kenya and Moldova. This is a good start but countries need a lot of advocacy, much more public support, guidance, and resources to make the data open.

4. Who will support open data initiatives?

PARIS21⁷ has been charged with producing advocacy materials to make a case for bigger investment in statistics. It has published a large number of leaflets urging to increase support for statistical systems. At the level of donors this advocacy worked. But the most important

⁶ <http://data.worldbank.org/open-government-data-toolkit>

⁷ <http://www.paris21.org>

constituency, developing country policy makers have largely ignored or politely forgotten to deal with those important issues.

For more than 10 years, the World Bank has published a statistical capacity indicator and, for last several years, maintained the Bulletin Board on Statistical Capacity⁸. Indicators that actually allow countries to compare themselves with their neighbors or with countries at similar economic development can be a powerful tool for encouraging better practices. The question remains, who at the international level should try to compare how open are countries' data?

Let's look at several organizations at the international level. The first that comes to mind is the United Nations Statistical Commission. If the Commission were to decide to agree on a methodology and on underlying data for an indicators of "openness," it would never complete the task. The index would be killed during the discussion, particularly by those countries who are against openness. The same would happen if the IMF decided to spearhead the work on country data openness. IMF has done a lot of good work in encouraging countries to open and improve the quality of certain categories of data at an aggregated level through the Special Data Dissemination Standard (SDDS) and General Data Dissemination System (GDDS)⁹. But while the SDDS and GDDS promote the production of metadata and the SDDS compels the timely publication of a limited set of statistics, looking at the GDDS website one finds a lot of very old data, some much older than on the countries' websites. Furthermore, the IMF itself has not yet fully embraced the principles of open data, so it is not in a strong position to be an advocate for the same in its member countries.

World Bank may be a better place to look for such support. For example, it has said it is requiring countries who receive a development policy loan (budgetary support) to make their budgets open. But our discussions with the "Open Budget Partnership" make clear that the World Bank sometimes accepts a very narrow definition of openness, which would not qualify as open by the definition presented in this paper. The World Bank however, is a development policy institution and includes all stakeholder governments on its board of executive directions, which sometimes makes it difficult to deal with politically sensitive issues. We recall how much heat the statistical group at the World Bank (or at least it's management) had to take when the statistical capacity index was first published.

What is needed is an "honest broker" that would help the statistical agencies to become open, adhering to the main principles of open data as well as the declaration of the Principles of Official Statistics endorsed by the United Nations Statistical Commission. This is a role for an independent NGO that has earned the trust of national statistical offices and organizations willing to finance open data reforms. There are already several NGOs working prominently to encourage greater openness in governments, among these are the International Budget Partnership¹⁰, the Sunlight Foundation¹¹, the Open Knowledge Foundation¹², and the Open Data Initiative¹³. However none has specific experience in working with the official statistical agencies of developing countries. The proposed NGO, perhaps with advice from the ISI and its members, would provide objective assessments of the openness of statistical systems and

⁸ <http://bbbc.worldbank.org>

⁹ <http://dsbb.imf.org/b>

¹⁰ <http://internationalbudget.org>

¹¹ <http://sunlightfoundation.com/>

¹² <http://okfn.org/>

¹³ <http://www.opendatainitiative.org/>

advice on how to improve its practices. If a country is interested in making its databases open (or becomes ashamed of how low they are rated on the scale of openness), the NGO would also facilitate matching the country with interested donors. Perhaps more important, such an NGO would embody the knowledge and experience of countries that have successfully and sustainably opened their data archives.

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