

How might open data contribute to good governance?

Tim Davies

Access to information is increasingly recognised as a fundamental component of good governance. Citizens need access to information on the decision-making processes of government, and on the performance of the state, to be able to hold governments to account. States often require disclosure of information from public and private bodies, making use of targeted transparency¹ to regulate the actions of both public and private actors.

Conventionally, access to information has involved access to documents: to published reports and print-outs. However, over the last few years an open data movement has emerged, seeking to move beyond static documents, and asking for direct access to raw datasets from governments, institutions and officials in power. This movement wants access to data in ways that allows it to be searched, sorted, remixed, visualised and shared through the internet. Governments have been encouraged to establish open data initiatives and data portals, providing online access to data on everything from national budgets to school performance, health statistics and aid spending. This article considers the potential implications of open data for democratic governance.

What is open data?

Open data can be formally defined as data which is accessible, machine-readable and openly licensed. In practice, that means data that can be downloaded from the internet, that can be manipulated in standard software, and where the user is not prohibited in any way from sharing the data further.

An example may help illustrate this: imagine a national budget that is released in a printed report, made up of hundreds of different tables, each with a slightly different layout. To compare this budget to actual spending, or to see a breakdown of funds by different categories from those the publisher has chosen to present, citizens would have to re-type all the data into a spreadsheet manually. For a budget, this could be weeks upon weeks of laborious work. Even once done, citizens might find that the data is covered by copyright that prohibits their wider use of the information. With open data, these barriers are removed.

Original spreadsheets of budget information could be published, and the intellectual property licence applied to the data could allow citizens to use the data as they choose – including for promoting transparency and accountability and even to support commercial enterprises, perhaps based on providing market intelligence to others.

Open data advocates argue that, by freeing public data (which has commonly already been paid for by citizens through taxation) for re-use, technically skilled developers could build applications and visualisations that allowed citizens to access it more effectively. In addition, a wide community of innovators could use the data in ways that would bring social and economic value never before imagined.

The rise of open data

Although the current open data movements draws upon diverse roots², it really burst on to the policy scene in 2009, when US President Barack Obama signed a Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government as one of his first acts in office, leading to the creation of the data.gov platform hosting hundreds of federal datasets for public access. This US move was quickly followed by the UK, launching data.gov.uk in early 2010 and starting a programme of open data reforms across government that continued and were expanded under a new administration from mid-2010 onwards. In April 2010, the World Bank launched its own data portal, providing free access to hundreds of economic and social indicators, and in July 2011, with World Bank support, Kenya also launched an open data portal (opendata.go.ke), becoming the first developing country to have a national government open data platform. In September 2012, India launched a trial version of data.gov.in, bringing open government data to the world's largest democracy.

Open data has also been a key topic in the Open Government Partnership (OGP)³, co-chaired in 2012/13 by the UK. Seven commonwealth countries (the UK, Canada, Ghana, South Africa, Malta, Trinidad & Tobago and Kenya) are among those who joined the OGP in its first year. The OGP is a multilateral initiative, jointly run by governments

and civil society focusing on transparency and effective and accountable government. The founding declaration of the OGP highlights the importance of technologies in driving more open government:

New technologies offer opportunities for information-sharing, public participation, and collaboration. We intend to harness these technologies to make more information public in ways that enable people to both understand what their governments do and to influence decisions.

Of the 45 OGP national action plans delivered by July 2012, analysis by Global Integrity⁴ found that ‘open data’-related commitments were among the most common, with countries pledging to create open data portals, or launch open data-related programmes of activity.

Open data and governance

A number of connections can be drawn between open data and governance. Open data can drive greater transparency and accountability. It can lead to greater inclusion of citizens in decision-making. And it can support innovation, both in processes of governance and in the delivery of public services. Let us explore these connections in more detail.

Open data can allow information from many different sources to be brought together, and for patterns to be found. Instead of searching through boxes of papers, with open data, accountability activists or watchdog organisations may be able to more easily find out where money is being spent, how government is performing in different regions, or which companies are the largest polluters in a region. In the UK, the government has required all local councils to publish open data on their spending transactions over £500, allowing anyone with an internet connection to see where money is being spent, and which organisations are receiving public funds. Journalists have been some of the most frequent users of this data, but it has also been drawn upon by individual citizens and local campaign groups.

Platforms like OpenSpending.org go a step further in seeking to make data accessible and promoting citizen engagement with key issues like national budget decisions. OpenSpending shows budget and spend data from governments through interactive graphs and a searchable database. The OpenSpending platform now contains budget data for Nigeria, India, Kenya, South Africa and the UK, among others – all input by a network of volunteers working with datasets and documents from their governments.

The emerging power of open data can also be seen in projects like the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), which has created a common data standard for information on aid activities. In the past, aid-receiving governments had to rely on regularly requesting data from

the donors operating in their countries to find out what projects are funded where, and citizens had to search across the websites of many different donors to find out about projects in their country, often finding that only limited information was publicly available. Now, over 50 per cent of official overseas development assistance is published in the IATI standard format, giving governments and citizens up-to-date access to information on who is giving what to whom⁵. The data is far from perfect (it is still early days for IATI), but because it is published as open data, third parties can build upon it, adding extra information such as geographic locations of projects, and ‘mashing up’ the data into visualisations and other products that make it accessible to a wide range of groups. IATI demonstrates that open data has the potential to support good governance across borders – and to promote transparency of multilateral institutions that so often seem opaque and distant to citizens in any particular country.

Meeting the challenges

Few strong arguments can be made against the idea that governments should open up access to data. However, open data policies have not been entirely uncontroversial.

- Firstly, there are questions over whether opening access to data simply ‘empowers the already empowered’⁶ – as the technical skills required to work with datasets can be relatively advanced.
- Secondly, concerns have been raised that open data policies can be politically manipulated, with governments choosing to selectively release data that serves their interests, using open data as an instrument of state deregulation and marketisation of public services⁷.
- Thirdly, as the International Records Management Trust has highlighted, you can only open up data if you have it – and data can only be effectively used for accountability purposes when it is reliable. As such, open data for governance relies upon good records management, which remains a weakness in many countries⁸.
- Fourthly, some in the Right to Information (RTI) movement have expressed concern that open data policies, which are often based on voluntary proactive publication of data by government, might displace a focus on the need for RTI legislation that ensures citizens’ rights to reactively published information.

These issues can, to an extent, be addressed by recognising that open data needs to be about more than just publishing datasets on the internet. Open data policy should sit as a complement to, not a replacement of, RTI legislation. And open data advocates need to recognise that adopting open data policies also requires investment in capacity-building to ensure citizens, civil society and a new generation of technically skilled civic activists and intermediaries can take raw data and turn it into transparent information that supports efforts on accountability and democratic inclusion.

The iHub in Nairobi, Kenya, has been responding to this challenge by creating an 'incubator' to develop the skills and focus of potential open data users⁹. And in the UK, participants at the 2012 UK GovCamp conference articulated a series of principles for 'Open Data Engagement', highlighting the need for open data policy to be demand led, and for governments to see open data as an opportunity for greater collaboration with citizens, rather than just as a one-way route to push out information¹⁰.

Whether open data initiatives will fully live up to high expectations many have for them remains to be seen. However, it is likely that open data will come to play a part in the governance landscape across many Commonwealth countries in coming years, and indeed, could provide a much-needed tool to increase the transparency of Commonwealth institutions. Good governance, pro-social and civic outcomes of open data are not inevitable, but with critical attention they can be realised¹¹.

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Endnotes

- 1 Fung, A., Graham, M. and Weil, D. (2007). *Full Disclosure: The perils and promise of transparency* (p. 282). Cambridge University Press.
- 2 Including, among other roots, advocacy for Public Sector Information (PSI) regulation liberalisation in the 1990s and early 21st century; long established and more recent Right to Information (RTI) campaigns; e-government programmes; and Access to Knowledge campaigns that emerged in response to a global tightening of intellectual property regimes.
- 3 www.opengovpartnership.org
- 4 <http://globalintegrity.org/blog/whats-in-OGP-action-plans>
- 5 See <http://www.iatistandard.org> and find the data at <http://www.iatiregistry.org>
- 6 Gurstein, M. (2011). Open Data: Empowering the empowered or effective data use for everyone? *First Monday*, 16(2). Retrieved from <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3316/2764>
- 7 Bates, J. (2012). 'This is what modern deregulation looks like': co-optation and contestation in the shaping of the UK's Open Government Data Initiative. *The Journal of Community Informatics*, 8(2). Retrieved from <http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/845/916>
- 8 See <http://irmt.org/open-government-trustworthy-records-presentation>
- 9 <http://www.ihub.co.ke/blog/2012/07/is-open-data-making-an-impact/>
- 10 <http://www.opendataimpacts.net/engagement/>
- 11 Davies, T. (2010). *Open Data, Democracy and Public Sector Reform: A look at open government data use from data.gov.uk*. Practical Participation. Retrieved from <http://www.opendataimpacts.net/report/>