

The truth will out

The Wikileaks controversy has put – in an act of no return – the issue of open access to government data on the world's agenda. The broader open data debate is therefore an opportunity to pressure governments to be voluntarily transparent. The pressure will arise from the fact that making government data public will expose inefficiency and bad governance. That, in turn, will encourage the public to take action against these failures. It will also encourage people to develop software that will facilitate and improve methods for sharing and opening up data to the public, based on the Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) offered by more and more 'data owners'.

The ultimate goal should be transparency across the board. Western governments and their public administration bodies should agree to voluntarily publish their data through an open data system. So should governments from developing countries. One recurring criticism of development aid in the West is that people are wary of what happens to aid money once it reaches its destination. Perhaps it should be a condition that all international agencies, such as donors and aid-receiving countries, publish their data to make the aid process transparent. The World Bank is an example to follow in this respect. It has published its raw data and is offering an API developed by the *Guardian* newspaper to provide online readers with relevant information.

Open data systems are already being used in the development sector. An exciting example is from sub-Saharan Africa. The Social Development Network, an NGO founded in 1994 in Kenya, has developed the Budget Tracking Tool, for example, which makes government data open to the public, who can interact with this data by means of data mining and SMS querying.

Together, this creates a system where government data can be compared to what is collected through citizen participation. This system improves the dissemination of data to the public, but equally importantly, it allows people to feed data back into the system. Kenyan citizens are therefore in a position to examine the national development budget in detail and hold their elected officials accountable for the development projects they have promised.

Another example is Aidinfo, a project that researches the current supply and demand for information related to aid. It hosts the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), which aims, in its own words, 'to make information about aid spending easier to access, use and understand'. Thanks to these initiatives, there is 'now broad agreement among donors on publishing the details of who is doing what, where'. This is an encouraging start and should lead to a profusion of open data on past, present and planned aid activities.

AITI's goal is to make aid information accessible in a systematic manner that grants the public a voice in government accountability. In addition to making data available in the first place, new technologies also make it possible to publish data immediately. These two factors, in turn, will also give the public a clearer, more timely picture of humanitarian and development needs.

Another Kenyan project is Mzalendo.net. Mzalendo's website allows the public to 'keep an eye on the Kenyan parliament'. The government makes available parliamentary proceedings via a printed copy of the 'Hansard', an edited record of parliamentary proceedings. Mzalendo publishes this information online, and builds other tools around this information. It also allows people to provide feedback on the platform on parliamentary proceedings and ministerial performances.

These examples present a compelling case for open data. Software experts need to be mobilized to develop state-of-the-art open data systems that facilitate the sharing of information across the broadest base possible. The good news is that there are ever more options for using data meaningfully. These options for opening up data enable more people to transform it into usable formats.

The open data system used in public transport seems to support this premise. Adam DuVander of ProgrammableWeb, a community of API developers, introduced StreetFilms, an example of processing data based on the Boston Transit Agency's decision to publish timetables and routes in a similar way to weather information. Within an hour of publication, people were able to see bus locations in real time on Google Earth, and within two days people could track bus locations on their computers.

Within five weeks, iPhone and Android apps were developed for this purpose. These tools were created by different developers, none of whom was employed by the Transit Authority, even though the data had always been traditionally 'owned' by the latter. However, while relinquishing ownership of information might not be an insurmountable obstacle in the public sector, it is a more sensitive issue for governments.

So the trick now is to persuade more governments and donor agencies to open up their data and create the preliminary conditions for transparency. Putting governments under pressure seems the best way of achieving this. Whether it will always take something of the same magnitude as Wikileaks remains to be seen. The technology, in any case, is there, as are some initial signs of willingness, by the Kenyan government, for example. Willingness and technology, these are the catalysts for change. ■

The views expressed in this opinion piece are the authors' own and do not reflect the opinions of ATTI, Hivos or Omidyar Network.

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