Africa Data Revolution Report **2018**

STATUS AND EMERGING IMPACT OF OPEN DATA IN AFRICA

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The Africa Data Revolution Report 2018 is delving into the current state and recent evolution of Open Data – with an emphasis on Open Government Data – in the African data communities. It explores key countries across the continent, researches a wide range of open data initiatives and benefits from global thematic expertise. This second edition improves on process, methodology and collaborative partnerships from the first edition. It draws from country reports, existing global and continental initiatives and key experts' input and provides a deep analysis of the actual impact of open data in the African context. The report was critically reviewed by an eminent panel of experts, to whom the Author is grateful.

Full Report will be available in print, in English and French, and accessible online.

■ FINDINGS

In some governments, there is a slow iterative cycle between innovation, adoption, resistance and re-alignment before finally resulting in Open Government Data (OGD) institutionalization and eventual maturity. There is huge diversity between African governments, and each country presents a complex and unique picture.

In several African countries, there appears to be genuine political will to open up government-based datasets, not only for increased transparency but also to achieve economic impacts, social equity and stimulate innovation.

The role of open data intermediaries is crucial and has been insufficiently recognized in the African context.

Open Data in Africa needs a vibrant, dynamic, open and multi-tier data ecosystem if the datasets are to make a real impact. Citizens are rarely likely to access open data themselves. But the democratization of information and communication platforms has opened up opportunities among a large and diverse set of intermediaries to explore and combine relevant data sources, sometimes with private or leaked data. The news media, NGOs and advocacy groups, and to a much lesser extent academics and social or profit-driven entrepreneurs have shown that OGD can create real impact on the achievement of the SDGs.

Opening up election data has had an immeasurable impact on the transparency and acceptance of selected key elections. When open election data is supported with an independent observer system, a real-time and trustworthy communications infrastructure and a vibrant news media community, it has contributed to peaceful democratic elections in sensitive and fragile political environments with outcomes relatively uncontested. Given the humanitarian cost of violent elections, and the incalculable benefits of a stable society and political environment necessary for any sustainable development progress, it can be argued that the positive and demonstrated benefit of just these few open election events alone more than justifies any and all historical investments made in OGD in Africa.

One set of stakeholders that has perhaps created a disproportionately large share of the impact is the fourth estate: the very small contingent of data-driven journalists. Not only did they play a crucial role in the open elections, but they continue to play a key part in promoting government transparency, advocacy of marginalised communities and building stronger democratic structures.

Don't let the perfect be the enemy of good. Although the political pressure for only publishing data of the highest standard of quality is recognized, in many cases, imperfect, timely data is better than no or "too-late" data. Thus this report advocates for the timely release of usable and useful datasets, even if imperfect, and while quality assurance is pending.

> Data belongs to the citizen, not to the government

> A shift in mindset will not happen as long as decisions about which government datasets to release are made only by statisticians and economists accounting directly to politicians. The broader data ecosystem, including data analysts, business intelligence professionals, social scientists and domain experts as well as users need to inform this debate at the very highest levels

■ KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Open Data needs the commitment of political leadership, to be entrusted to a dedicated and adequately resourced custodian and embedded through permanent data processes and a pervasive culture within all relevant government institutions. This takes sustained leadership and commitment inspired by a true belief in the benefits of open data to society as a whole. It cannot be achieved by short-term standalone, once-off externally funded initiatives focused on purely quantitative objectives such as making a given number of datasets available.

Externally funded Open Government Data projects need to focus more on local capacity-building within governments, insist on institutionalizing open data processes, ensure that the datasets released are the ones that address needs rather than those that are easy to open, and involve stakeholder consultations.

Additionally, a different type of intervention or support mechanism is required to improve the impact of open data initiatives: support for OGD intermediaries needs to be more agile, less formalized, easier to access, allowing for more failures (i.e. higher risk tolerance), and focused on multi-pronged and more holistic outcomes.

The intrinsic value of data as a strategic and social asset should be recognized by all the stakeholders in the data value chain, including those who capture the data as well as managers and decision makers at all levels of government institutions.

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promote a shift in mentality and culture around the importance and ownership of government data;
- Move the emphasis in OGD projects from inputs and outcomes to impacts;
- Query the need for strict "gold standard" open licensing for all datasets;
- Reduce the number of 'official open data' portals;
- Release more data relevant to addressing the needs of vulnerable groups;
- Involve users and other stakeholders in Open Data decisions; release more (need-driven) lower-quality datasets with explicit quality indicators and implement feedback mechanisms for crowdsourced quality improvement;
- Donors should continue to support the early phases of quality Open Data production;
- National Statistical Offices should be the primary custodians and drivers of national Open Data agendas and policy implementations;
- Promote key local and urban government Open Data initiatives;
- Open the debate about, and explore pathways for the potential use of, private and corporately-held data for the social good;
- Recognize that the priorities of the global north are not the same as those of Africa.

The continent's unsung heroes of the open data impact are the journalists who have used open and other public data to hold corrupt or resource-wasting governments to account, shed light on the plight of disadvantaged communities, given voice to those who could not understand or speak, and promoted peaceful democratic processes by their electoral reports.

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