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## OpenGov Voices: How civil society can nudge Nigeria to deliver on its open data promise

by guest author *Adam Talsma*  ✍ 🐾  |  APRIL 13, 2015, 10:15 A.M.

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Inspiring commentary about the potential economic and civic benefits of open data is everywhere these days. I've seen the momentum building here in Nigeria, especially spurred by the government's first Open Data Development Initiative. Investments by international donors have supported the country's growing community of open data enthusiasts, and the frequency of data-related workshops and hackathons has jumped from virtually zero to periodic events in Lagos, Abuja, Benin and elsewhere.

But there's a major roadblock to the realization of many open data initiatives in Nigeria: a dearth of high-value data. There is no single definition of "high-value data," but it's roughly information that makes government spending, enforcement, policy or other practices transparent and responsive. Since responsiveness is one of the most important goals of open data, citizens largely define the value of any given data. A good rule of thumb: If citizens aren't convinced, the data isn't high value.



*Adam Talsma, design engineer with Reboot.*

Through open data events, targeting civil society and other "demand-side" players, funders hope to catalyze the development of profitable, data-driven civic apps. But we, the practitioners on the ground, often cannot find the up-to-date, trustworthy data needed to create useful applications for journalism, advocacy or development.

### When data breeds mistrust

Realizing the lofty visions of open data is difficult no matter where you are, but it's especially hard where trust in the government is fragile (Nigeria's landmark elections just ousted President Goodluck Jonathan, in part due to his failure to quell civil unrest) and where government statistics suggest as little as five percent of the population consistently accesses the Internet. Despite the government's efforts, many datasets that do exist are irrelevant, incomplete or mistrusted by citizens.

I saw this problem first-hand after a high-profile model school construction initiative launched in Rivers State, located in southern Nigeria. The local Ministry of Education set out to share the results of the

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project through a public website, showing schools built to international standards. But many people were suspicious. One local advocacy organization, the Niger Delta Citizens and Budget Platform, questioned how many of the schools had been built to specification and were actually in use. Rather than increasing transparency, the website threatened to exacerbate mistrust between government and citizens.

## From creating data to opening communication

Understanding that a constructive dialogue would require that government and civil society grasp both the results of the model school program and the impact of those results on citizen perception of government, Reboot, in partnership with the World Bank, supported the Niger Delta Citizens and Budget Platform to go into the field and gather a new set of high-value data. We gathered both representative statistics and examples of how the delivery of model schools has affected locals' perception of government, with the aim of opening a new channel of civic discourse with the Ministry of Education.

Using Formhub, an Android-based data collection tool, we investigated a representative sample of the more than 200 public primary school construction projects. Surveyors visited school locations and asked questions, from whether or not the school actually existed to how locals perceived government services.



*A surveyor utilizing Formhub to collect data in Nigeria. (Photo courtesy of Reboot.)*

Despite a history of antagonism with the Ministry of Education, the advocacy group was able to use the new dataset to engage government officials in a constructive way, increasing their voice in decisions about education spending. With support from Reboot, the organization synthesized their experience in the field into valuable insights, offering the results to state decision-makers. For example, they were able to discuss not only whether the schools were built as planned, but whether trust in the government shifted as a result.

The project was the start of an ongoing conversation about the allocation of public resources. By facilitating productive communication between citizens and their government, it made open government data matter. Our partners managed to deliver on the promise of open data despite the initial lack of high-value data.

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The data collection tool itself was key to the project's success. Formhub was a good choice given the constraints of fieldwork in Rivers State. Most critically, Formhub doesn't require a consistent Internet connection; data is stored locally and uploaded the next time a connection is made. Rather than surveyors recording data on paper in the field and handing it off to others for data entry elsewhere, the app digitizes data at its most accurate point — when surveyors collect it, giving them more responsibility and a greater sense of ownership over data quality. When surveyors have final say over the data, they are also better data collectors, empowered to think critically about the use of the data they collect.

Formhub might be a good fit for other service monitoring or advocacy projects. Developed by the Sustainable Engineering Lab at Columbia, it was designed iteratively for use in resource-constrained environments. And there's a strong developer community around the open-source tool, including people who are eager to give tips on survey design.

Formhub's continued development and applications are exciting. Recently, the Nigerian Office for Millennium Development Goals (MDG) launched a website to capture and display data showing Nigeria's progress toward achieving development goals at the nation, region and state-level — a solid step toward generating high-value data.

## Moving forward: build demand for better data

Still, it remains to be seen whether the government can continue to update and maintain the MDG dataset, alongside the myriad other critical government databases. As Nigeria continues to build its national open data movement, it's vital to recognize that open data will never be a one-size-fits-all solution. As the international development community plans workshops for training civil society and journalists on how to use open data, we should start by understanding how they are — or aren't — using data now and why.

Civil society and journalists play an essential role in raising data standards. The Rivers State model school example shows that service-monitoring projects can raise the bar for higher-quality, more relevant data — even where the relationship between government and civil society is characterized by mistrust, and the initial data are flawed. If we focus on data as a means to encourage constructive dialogue with government officials, each step can bring us closer to a truly open data culture at the national level.

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*Adam Talsma is a design engineer with Reboot, a social impact firm dedicated to inclusive development and accountable governance. He coordinates the program design and implementation process across the firm's entire Nigeria portfolio, prototyping, testing, and refining to deliver effective interventions.*

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