From Data to Development: Exploring the Emerging Impacts of Open Data in Developing Countries

1st Interim Report

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Country/Region: Latin America (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay); Africa (Sierra Leone, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, South Africa), Asia (India, Philippines, Nepal, Indonesia)

Synthesis:

The Exploring the Emerging Impacts of Open Data in Developing Countries (ODDC) project is building a global research network to generate evidence on the efficacy of open data, and to inform government, donor and civil society strategies in pursuing or responding to open data agendas in developing countries. The first six months of the project have been primarily focused on network building, establishing methodological foundations for the case study research phase of the project, and supporting the 17 case study partners to commence their research into the emerging impacts of open data in specific governance settings. In this period, contracts have been signed with the majority of case study partners, with most starting the year-long research programmes between March and June 2013. Each project has access to a 'peer-supporter' to provide mentoring support, and we have been working to ensure all these relationships are established effectively. A full research framework for the project was prepared and published as a public working paper.

The first annual network meeting was held in London in April 2013 with representatives from each of the projects attending. This meeting provided an opportunity to develop a shared understanding of the project research framework, and to identify areas for developing shared methods and research tools. To date, a range of research tools covering open data stakeholder mapping, assessing the context of open data initiatives, and media monitoring methods, have been developed by network partners. Part of laying the foundations for the policy impact of the project, the April 2013 meeting also provided an opportunity to launch the project at an Open Government Partnership (OGP) ministerial meeting with the support of Sir Tim Berners-Lee. We have been invited back to share an update on the project at the 2013 OGP Summit meeting in November.

Through a series of monthly online 'Web Meetings'; regional meetings in Latin America and South/South-East Asia; as well as informal meetings between projects in East Africa, and bilateral skype calls with projects and mentors, we have focussed attention on initial research capacity building.

Work on the Common Assessment Methods component of the project is also underway, with an initial meeting held in February 2013 to scope out ways of measuring open data policy, implementation and impacts at the country level. A pilot 'Open Data Barometer' study is currently entering the field, and will report by late 2013, providing the basis for further critical analysis of methods for measuring open data.

The first phase of the project is on track, and provides a strong foundation for planning the second phase (cross-cutting and extended research activities) in Autumn 2013.

The research problem:

The overall objective of the ODDC research project is to establish practical and actionable knowledge about effective strategies for employing open data as a means to achieve greater quality of openness in government, to support citizens' rights, and to promote more inclusive development in developing countries. Open data, it is argued, can support significant gains in transparency and accountability, innovation and economic growth, and enable more inclusive models of governance. This research is motivated by a recognition that a focus on access to open data has rapidly become a significant part of the policy landscape in governance discussions, yet little is understood about how open data can or will drive change in practice, nor about how open data interventions should be contextualised in light of different legal, political, economic and social contexts around the world.

International institutions are pushing for and investing in the adoption of open data initiatives and strategies in specific countries (e.g. World Bank open data Readiness Assessments, and investment in open data in Kenya and Moldova), across regions (e.g. African Development Bank 'Open Data for Africa' platform), and in a growing range of sectors (e.g. International Aid Transparency Initiative, and G8 Initiative on Open Data and Agriculture). In parallel, through initiatives like the Open Government Partnership, states across the developed and developing world are adopting commitments to open data, and civil society organisations are pursuing strategies to secure and use open data in holding governments to account. However, in general such approaches appear to be based on a 'standard model', driven by a common pattern of supply-side interventions to make open data available. Whilst increasingly some initiatives are focussing on 'building demand', there is relatively little focus on use in practice of open data, or on understanding the mechanisms through which open data can bring about developmental change. Consequently, current knowledge cannot offer strong guidance on either how to design supply of open data to support positive developmental outcomes, nor how to build the capacity of different users of open data to gain the greatest benefits from it.

The four main research goals of the project remain current:

1. To explore how open data improve governance, support citizens' rights, and promote more inclusive development in developing countries;

2. To support knowledge sharing, policy learning and evaluation based on, and feeding into, the developing research findings;

3. To develop and test common methods for assessing the context, and the strengths and weaknesses, of open data initiatives over time;

4. To identify how global standards, platforms and infrastructures for open data impact upon the use of open data in developing countries;

Some specific themes of exploration are emerging from work with the case studies. In particular, the relationship between Open Data and Right to Information has been put forward as an important additional area for cross-cutting research beyond the four noted in the initial proposal of:

- Understanding the flow of data from open data initiatives, to potential users, through a range of technical and social intermediaries.

- Understanding how the wider context affects the potential of an open data initiative.

- Understanding how global standards, platforms, infrastructure and 'eco-systems' of open data affect local contexts.

- Understanding the distribution of benefits from open data initiatives.

Whilst our understanding of the research problem remains consistent with that when the proposal was originally submitted, our appreciation of the complexity of the field has developed and continues to develop, and this will inevitably have an impact on how we best 'support knowledge sharing, policy learning and evaluation' with the findings from the research.

A number of case studies have made small alterations to their initial plans in order to improve their ability to focus on the core goals and cross-cutting themes above, based on early field experience.

Research findings:

The specific objectives set out in the grant agreement are:

- 1) To generate strong foundations of academic work on the emerging impacts of open data interventions, and the factors that affect those impacts;
- 2) To generate relevant policy and practice findings that can inform both local and global debates;
- 3) To build the capacity of researchers across the world to explore the emerging impacts of open data and related issues;

We are on track in building towards each of these objectives. Our work on methods is contributing to strong academic foundations, and initial reports from project partners indicate that the network activities have been well received and contributing strongly to research capacity building. As yet we have not collated specific research findings, but we are committed to publishing some initial findings by the Open Government Partnership meeting in October/November 2013, with the majority of case study research reporting in early 2014.

Project implementation and management:

Over the reporting period we have focussed on:

- Finalizing contracts with the 17 case study partners and their peer supporters;
- Hosting a full network meeting in London in April 2013;
- Supporting case study-led regional meetings in Latin America (Montevideo, June 2013) and South & South East Asia (Delhi, July 2013);
- Holding a series of 'web meetings' to introduce the project, explore methodological themes, and introduce cross-cutting issues such as data standards (three web meetings held in the period);
- Building up an audience for research findings, and stimulating knowledge sharing across the field through a regular e-mail newsletter and project website (www.opendataresearch.org);
- Facilitating cross-case collaboration on research methods tools around stakeholder mapping, media monitoring, open data user surveys, and qualitative methods for assessing the use of open data;
- Preparing the Open Data Barometer study as a first stage of developing common assessment methods for open data;

There have been delays in agreeing contracts with four of the 17 case study projects. One case is due to awaiting government approval (Indonesia), and the other three were due to University legal services querying particular contract terms, requiring a slow back-and-forth process. However, with the exception of the outstanding government approval process for Indonesia (which is anticipated shortly), all projects should have submitted their first invoices for funding by the end of July. Because we have paid directly for participation in the first Network meeting and regional meetings, case study partners have been able to start some aspects of their engagement with the project, even if delayed in hiring team members.

Due to a foreign exchange loss of about $18,250 on the initial budget transfer, which our original budget did not build in tolerance for, we have had to manage the budget carefully in the first period.   In addition, given that the initial tranche of funding to WF was predetermined by IDRC, we have faced some limits in our flexibility to respond to case study plans for regional events, with, for example, the South Asia and Latin America regional events taking place earlier than we expected in response to case study needs. We were able to able to absorb the foreign exchange loss by carefully trimming costs, but this may prove more difficult in the future if there continues to be a significant variance.   We were also able to maneuver available funding to meet our expenses for Phase I, but would benefit from building more flexibility into budgets in future, in terms of running activities marginally earlier or later than originally planned.

The ODDC project is explicitly multidisciplinary. The case study partners are drawn from a wide range of research backgrounds, although the majority are adopting predominantly qualitative approaches to their initial research. We are still in the process of aligning methods wherever possible, and the opportunity afforded by face-to-face regional meetings has proved important in this. We have been able to hold earlier regional face-to-face meetings than originally planned in the budget due to an underspend on our first network workshop in London. In some cases we need to provide further

research methods and capacity building support to our case study partners, and we are having to adapt the mentoring and peer-support relationships that were initially established in one case.

In the third quarter of 2013 we intend to focus on planning for the second phase of the project, in which some more explicitly quantitative research designs may be adopted, building on the variables and mechanisms of change identified through the case study work, and seeking to test at larger scale the emerging impacts of open data.

The Web Foundation staff team has been consistent throughout the project so far. Whilst the WF finance director is due to change in the coming months, and extended handover period has been in place to the accounts assistant so that no disruption to the project should occur. The project is currently on schedule, with the exception of participation in DECI 2 Utilisation Focussed Evaluation and Communication processes. We anticipate starting our UFE based project evaluation in Autumn 2013, and will be reviewing participation in the communication aspect of the DECI 2 programme at a similar point.

One case study (INESC) is currently undergoing significant internal staff changes, and we have identified the need to provide additional support to this case once the new staff team is in place to ensure that new researchers in place who have not been part of the previous network meetings are still able to fully participate in the network.

Project outputs and dissemination:

So far the project has published two short reports:

- Working Paper #1: Researching the emerging impacts of open data ODDC conceptual framework, July 2013 - exploring key issues around the definition of open data data, and it's connection with ideas of transparency and accountability, innovation and economic growth, and inclusive governance.
- ODDC Network Meeting Report, April 2013 - sharing learning from the first network meeting, and highlighting a range of methodological issues for open data research.

As yet, no specific research findings have been put forward, but members of the ODDC network have become involved in a range of practice and policy-related activities as a result of the project, including one partner who has been invited to join their national Open Government Partnership steering group, and two other projects who have been invited to work with their municipal governments on the implementation of open data projects.

We are planning to share early findings from the research at the 2013 Open Government Partnership summit in London in October/November 2013, and case study partners have begun to submit workshop and conference paper proposals, including to ICTD 2013 in Cape Town (December 2013), the ICEGOV conference in Seoul (October 2013), the Internet Governance Forum (October 2013) and the Open Knowledge Foundation OKCon event in Geneva (September 2013). We are in discussion with the Making

All Voices Count (http://makingallvoicescount.org/) research team about opportunities to connect into their upcoming conference plans.

The project is building a strong network for policy influence through the website at www.opendataresearch.org which also features stories from the research cases. We have over 320 subscribers to the project mailing list, 270 members of the project LinkedIn group, 725 twitter followers, and 1000 visitors a month to the project website.

Anecdotal evidence from case study partners highlights capacity building benefits from the project, although a full evaluation, using the DECI 2 Utilisation Focussed Evaluation methodology is yet to start which will enable us to report further on this in our next report. The Web Foundation's increased research capacity through this project has enabled us to develop a stronger open data component in the 2013 World Wide Web Index, and early learning from the ODDC project is contributing towards a strong focus in the wider Web Foundation Open Data strategy upon interventions that best support democratic engagement and improved governance on a sector-by-sector basis.

Impact:

The early stage of the project means that we cannot yet assert any specific impacts in relation to the core research objectives. However, over the next six months we anticipate early findings of the project will contribute towards a shift in narratives around open data to include a stronger focus on the use, rather than just the supply, of data.

The long terms impacts of the project should be seen through improved pro-marginalised design of open data policies at the global and local levels.

A number of wider impacts have, however, emerged from the project, including:

- The Web Foundation becoming the civil society co-chair of a new Open Government Partnership Working Group on Open Data, with the Canadian government as the government chair. This working group will meet for the first time at the Open Government Partnership summit in October/November.

- Case study researchers developing strong relationships with national officials working on Open Government, including one case study leader from the Philippines being invited to join the national Open Government taskforce.

- Partnership opportunities between the project and the research strand of the Making All Voices Count programme (http://makingallvoicescount.org/), and plans by supported case studies to develop additional funding applications and activities, including a book proposal on open data in the Philippines.

We will be investigating evaluation frameworks to track these sort impacts in more detail as the project develops.

Recommendations:

At present we have no recommendations to IDRC for any alterations to the project management or project plan.

As mentioned above, we would benefit from building more flexibility into budgets in future, in terms of running activities marginally earlier or later than originally planned.

Photos of recent network activities can be found at http://www.flickr.com/groups/2294440@N22/ and updates from the supported projects are available on the website at http://www.opendataresearch.org. Selected images are shown below:

First network workshop & launch with Sir Tim Berners-Lee - April 2013

First network meeting at the Open Data Institute in London - April 2013

Asia Regional Meeting - July 2013