Open Data in Europe and Central Asia

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Report Submitted By:
United Nations Development Programme
Istanbul Regional Hub
UNDP Regional Centre for Europe and the CIS
Key Plaza, Abide-i Hürriyet Cd. İstiklal Sk. No:11
34381,Şişli, Istanbul, Turkey

Team Members:
Shelley Inglis, Practice Team Leader, Governance and Peacebuilding
Shelley.inglis@undp.org
Francesco Checchi, Anti-Corruption Specialist
Francesco.checchi@undp.org
Lejla Sadiku, Open Data Consultant
Lejla.sadiku@undp.org
Niklas Kossow, Open Data Consultant
Niklas.kossow@undp.org

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1. Synthesis

More and more governments in the region of Europe and Central Asia [1] are developing new open government policies and opening their data. The majority of countries have initiated work related to open data, but many of these initiatives are at their infancy and they are still facing several challenges which prevent local communities from making the most out of the data that is opened. These challenges include the insufficient number of data sets made public, relevance of data and low quality of data released. The existence of online platforms and open data portals does not necessarily indicate their full functionality or optimal usage.

The purpose of the grant was to undertake the project entitled, *Global Partnership on Open Data for Development.* The overall objective of the project is to support innovative approaches that have been proven to work, and strengthen coordination amongst open data initiatives to ensure they benefit citizens in developing countries. The specific objective of the project is to strengthen the ability of developing countries in Europe and Central Asia to identify priorities and coordinate regional open data for development efforts.

The funds of the grant were used to support the hiring of a UNDP consultant to support both research and implementation work related to the Open Data in Europe and Central Asia (ODECA) network (see the website here), including providing support to countries interested in starting open data programmes, organizing events for data re-use, facilitating knowledge sharing, and conducting an open data impact assessment in the region.

2. The Research Question

Two types of research are taking place within the scope of the project:
1) Conducting baseline assessments on the readiness of interested countries to develop and implement open data programmes, and
2) Assessing the impact of established open data initiatives in the region.

The baseline assessments intend to serve as a snapshot of the governance and data eco-system and answer questions related to political will, government buy-in, interest of the private sector and civil society, as well as identify low-hanging fruit which could demonstrate the value added of opening data quickly.

The aim of the impact research is to create a comprehensive overview of open data initiatives in the EECA region and to assess what impact these initiatives have had up to this point. In doing so, it wants to particularly focus on the question of whether open data in this region has a role in supporting the new Sustainable

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[1] The official UNDP name for the region is Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, which includes the following countries and territories: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo*, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Tajikistan, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

Development Goals (SDGs) and thus how it can contribute to the wider development agenda.

Research Findings

Open Data Readiness Assessment (ODRA)

In both Serbia and Kyrgyzstan, it was identified that open data was of high interest for government and civil society.

- Governments of Serbia & Kyrgyzstan are ready to embark on an open data initiative. Government departments are already publishing data, albeit not in an open format. There is high willingness among several ministries to work on this issue.
- Business community has interest in working with data, but they also outlined some of the challenges that may lie in the process of opening governmental data.
- There is a need for continuous awareness raising and capacity building on issues related to open data and its potential for economic growth.

Quick wins can be generated through work with governmental counterparts, by opening several datasets and organizing bootcamps/hackathons to process the data. Such events are already being planned for the upcoming period until the end of the year in Uzbekistan, Serbia, Kosovo[2] and Kyrgyzstan.

Open Data Impact Study

A general overview of open data initiatives in the ECA region has been prepared providing insights into the general state of open data.

Based on this preliminary research, three countries, namely Moldova, Georgia and Albania, were selected for a deep dive. The countries were selected based on existence of established open data programmes for at least two years and with special attention to sub-regional representation.

At the time of writing this report, field research has already taken place in Moldova and is taking place in Georgia, consisting in total of 30 interviews with government, civil society and private sector. Initial findings of the research suggest that:

- In general, open data has made the Moldovan government more transparent, even though key datasets remain closed.
- There is contradiction between legislation that promotes opening data and legislation concerning privacy.
- Journalists and civil society are exploring the potential of open data, but they struggle to find relevant, good quality and timely data.

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[2] All references to Kosovo are made in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

Preliminary findings from Georgia suggest that open data is seen as one part of a greater governmental effort to fight corruption, ensure inclusive governance and meet its commitments residing in the OGP National Action Plan.

Research Contribution toward Project Goals

The research conducted within this project contributes to several key aspects of the project proposal:

- It fills a knowledge gap concerning the existing initiatives in the area of open data in the EECA region, which is key to better coordinated efforts.
- ODRAs contribute directly to identifying priorities for countries in terms of launching open data initiatives, and UNDP's regional hub has served as a connecting point between the different initiatives.

3. Project Implementation and Management

Overview of Activities

During the reporting period, UNDP in the context of the ODECA platform has conducted the following activities:

- Organized a workshop with civil society and journalists on data driven journalism, to explore the potential of applied data in strengthening advocacy efforts. The workshop was divided into a knowledge sharing session about best practices from the region and a hands on session about state of the art data tools. More about the workshop here.
- Launched a call for proposals for small grants to establish and grow open data initiatives in the region of Europe and Central Asia, selected four open data initiatives in Kyrgyzstan, Serbia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.
- Developed the network website as a common platform to bring together activists and open data aficionados in the region. More about the purpose of the website here.
- Provided regional input for the Open Data Impact Map of the Center for Open Data Enterprise.
- Launched the ODECA network with a webinar on how to use the potential of open data to improve governance, with Beth Noveck, Andrew Stott and Serge Kapto.
- In cooperation with the World Bank, supported the development of ODRAs in Serbia and Kyrgyzstan.
- In cooperation with Slovak Ministry of Finance, prepared the launch of the first sub-regional Open Data Challenge in the Western Balkans.
- Promoted open data in the region by codifying experiences so far to identify practices, lessons learned and impact of open data in the ECA region, and preparation of an Issue Brief on Open Data.

Methodology

The Open Data Readiness Assessment (ODRA) methodological tool, developed by the World Bank Group, has been used to conduct an action-oriented assessment of the readiness of a government or individual agency to evaluate, design and implement an Open Data initiative. In cooperation with the World Bank, ODRAs were already conducted in Kyrgyzstan and Serbia, providing an overview of the readiness of different sectors to engage in an open data program. An ODRA is being conducted in Ukraine, which will deep-dive into public financial issues. In Uzbekistan, where the government wants to enhance the use of the recently started portal, and in Kosovo, to streamline and coordinate the work of the government related to open data.

In terms of the impact research, the first step in the analysis was to create a database of open data initiatives in the 18 countries of the EECA region. The second part of this research will look at three countries in order to zoom in on the use of open data for more inclusive and accountable governance. Two principles guided case selection for the research: countries should have reasonably well established open data initiatives in place for at least two years, in order to be able capture potential impacts and should come from different sub-regions (Western Balkans, South Caucuses etc.) to broaden the scope of the research and make potential results more representative of the entire region.

In order to get a picture of the situation in these countries, a series of qualitative interviews will be conducted with key local stakeholders working on open data and government transparency. In each country, at least ten interviews with a broad group of stakeholders, including government representatives, civil society activists and journalists will form the basis for analysis.

Amendments to the Project & Other Considerations

In general, there is no departure from the objectives set out in the grant agreement. There are no significant changes in the concept, apart from witnessing an increasing interest in open data in the region. Testament to this is the interest of the Slovak Ministry of Finance to fund the Open Data Challenge for the Western Balkans sub-region.

To design and run the regional challenge, some resources have been allocated by the Slovak Ministry of Finance towards the remuneration of the consultant coordinating the ODECA network. The contribution is about 25% of the IDRC grants. The remaining IDRC funds are intended to be used for disseminating the research and towards regional learning events on open data.

Due to the delay at the start of the year with the agreement between IDRC and UNDP, the activities in the project started in March 2015 and the consultant was hired in mid-April 2015. As a result, the funds dedicated for the remuneration of the consultant will be depleted fully by mid-April 2016.

All efforts, local and regional, have paid specific attention to involving local communities in understanding their needs and requirements, as well as designing future actions. UNDP has regularly researched initiatives in the region that are

using open data and consulted with civil society organizations that promote open data initiatives. In Ukraine and Uzbekistan it is envisioned that the ODRA will have a stronger than usual focus on civil society; meanwhile, in the Open Data Challenge for the Western Balkans, the challenge and requests for datasets are being coordinated with active civil society organizations in the region and reflecting their demand for datasets. Special attention was paid to having gender representation throughout the activities. The team working on ODECA is gender balanced, the missions to conduct the ODRAs were also gender balanced and the training workshop in Istanbul had approximately 50% participation of women.

4. Project Outputs and Dissemination

Information sharing and dissemination:
1. ODECA Website – Launched on June 3, 2015
2. Open Data Issue Brief – September 2015
3. Regional Open Data Impact Assessment – October 2015

Knowledge Creation
1. Open Data Challenge for the Western Balkans – September-November 2015
2. ODRA Kyrgyzstan – June 2015/November 2015
3. ODRA Serbia – November 2015
4. Serbia bootcamp for data visualization – November 2015
5. Open data hackathon in Kyrgyzstan – November 2015

Training
1. Open Data Workshop for CSO and Journalists – March 2015
2. Webinar on Open Data – June 2015
3. Fellowship for the Open Data Impact Study – June-September 2015

5. Capacity-building

The launch of ODECA in 2015 has been important to developing a more complete picture of the situation on open data in the region and the future direction of regional open data initiative. The undertaken activities have shown that open data has a lot of potential in the region, but that it will be a lengthy affair which will require concerted efforts, knowledge production and support to the eco-system. Simultaneously as the requests from government come to open their data, governments require support in breaking intra-governmental silos, while the demand side requires increased awareness, data literacy and stronger regional networking to optimize the use of open data.

As a result of the project intervention, there is increased awareness about open data among governments in the region, a broader understanding of the tools

available among civic activists, and increased knowledge sharing between the different countries. During 2015, 30 activists from 15 countries from the ECA region attended the workshop in Istanbul, while UNDP Country Offices, with the support of the project, are engaging with governments in 8 countries and territories across the region – Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – to support open data initiatives.

6. Impact

Considering that the project has only been running for less than 6 months, it is difficult to discuss the impact that it has on development or on policy making.

Short-term impacts have been demonstrated. Open data seems to be able to bring different interest groups together and generate more cooperation between government and civil society, or at least between the people from different sectors who are interested in working on this topic.

As a result of connections fostered during the workshop on data journalism in Istanbul, developers from Kosovo mentored an open data hackathon in Kyrgyzstan in June 2015. The workshop was also a catalyst for other open data activities in the region, such as a follow-up workshop on data journalism in Uzbekistan.

The longer-term impact we expect to see into 2016 is open data interest spreading into other levels of government (local) and different branches (judicial and legislative) especially in Ukraine and in the Western Balkans sub-region. Simultaneously, our efforts will be directed also towards having more relevant and timely data published by governments of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Uzbekistan, as a result of continued pressure from watchdog groups and open data advocates.

The extent of longer-term impacts will also depend on continuation of the project into 2016 and support for additional resources for the second phase of the project from 2016-2017.

7. Recommendations

1. The consultant will be retained until April 2016, using IDRC funds requiring extension of the project.
2. IDRC funds resulting from the savings generated by the Slovak contribution to the project should be allocated towards dissemination of results from the Open Data Impact Study and other regional learning initiatives.
3. Based on the lessons learned from the first year of the network and the demand in the region, the project should grow to provide targeted support to governments and civil society to harness the potential of open data for evidence-based policy-making and development.