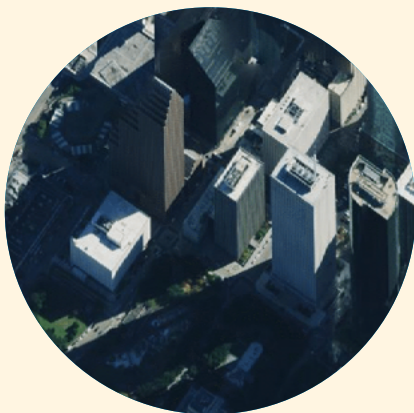



# OUR DATA, OUR VALUES



## A HOW-TO GUIDE FOR CREATING DATA VALUES STATEMENTS

An aerial photograph of a city, showing a mix of residential and commercial buildings, streets, and green spaces. A large white circle is overlaid on the lower half of the image, containing text.

BUILDING A SOLID  
FOUNDATION FOR  
ACCOUNTABLE  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
DATA SHARING

# INTRODUCTION

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**People who work with environmental data—i.e.,** collecting, using, and managing data—do so with purpose. They are analyzing information to answer questions or working with partners to create knowledge. They are using data to make sense of their environments, inform their programs, or advocate for policy changes. This work is often catalyzed by a climate or environmental injustice: a polluted waterway, lack of access to drinking water, or toxic air.

You, as a reader, may be battling these injustices in your community, and understand why and how data is an essential tool for action. You understand why and how you utilize data. This how-to guide is a tool to clarify and document those values so you can make informed decisions on organizational strategy and data sharing partnerships, as well as underscore organizational values with your team.

## HERE ARE THE WHAT, WHY, AND HOW OF CREATING AND USING DATA CO-OWNERSHIP AGREEMENTS

**What:** Data values statements are documents that describe how and why an organization or project uses data. They describe the purpose of the data use, and what the organization will or won't do with the data it collects or uses.

### NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In this zine, we use the word “organization” to refer to the data managers or stewards of a particular dataset or database. This could be a formal organization like a non-profit, specific project team, community-based group, or collective of data users.

**Why:** Creating a data values statement might seem like a supplementary piece of a data use strategy, but it is essential to data governance. Just as an organization's mission and values guide their purpose and align the team's actions, a set of data values can provide a strategic direction for an organization that relies on using and sharing data to fulfill its goals. Internally, it creates a baseline for how to create data workflows, products, and infrastructures; externally, it can set others' expectations and broadcast organizational commitments.

This “why” is especially critical for organizations using environmental data. Organizations work hard to collect hyperlocal data to serve their community's priorities. But when their work extends beyond the boundaries of the community itself, it can become counterproductive: researchers from outside institutions can use the data in ways that are antithetical to community priorities, and big tech companies

are increasingly collecting data to monetize for their own gain. Environmental data\* users are employing data governance tools, like data values statements, to address these power asymmetries. Data values statements, when they're backed up by legal and technical protections, can draw a line around who can and will benefit from this data, what will be done with it, and how it will be managed now and in the future.

Ultimately, a data values statement explicitly calls for ethics to be part of a realm that is increasingly devoid of them.

**\*NOTE**

While this zine is tailored to environmental data users, many of these concepts can be applied to other sectors collecting and using data. Humanitarian, health, rights-based, and educational organizations come to mind as having similar needs for documented ethical data standards, like a data values statement, to reach their strategic goals.

**How:** Creating a data values statement is a collaborative process, and can be as iterative as you need. In this how-to guide, we will 1) outline one approach to facilitating a workshop to brainstorm your values, 2) provide a template for a simple data values statement, and 3) provide suggestions for communicating and using the statement.

# FACILITATING A WORKSHOP ON HOW TO BRAINSTORM YOUR VALUES

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## GOAL OF THE WORKSHOP

Brainstorm a list of values, considerations, norms, and standards that answer “how” and “why” the organization uses data. This list will be adapted into a data values statement.

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## TO START, YOU'LL NEED:

**Your team:** Anyone on your team who uses data (in any capacity) should be involved in this conversation. Different users will be able to provide varied perspectives around different use cases and speak to data at different points in its lifecycle. You could also involve critical community members or collaborative partners depending on how they are involved with or impacted by data collection or use.

### Materials:

- For an in-person setting, you'll need: Markers, flipcharts/whiteboard, sticky notes
- For a virtual setting, you'll need: A collaborative note-taking space (e.g., Etherpad or Riseup Pad, Google Docs, Miro, Mural)

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## PREPARATION

15 MINUTES

### Before the workshop...

Prepare separate notes spaces (i.e., flip chart pages or digital sections) with these headers:

- What are your existing values that inform data sharing?
  - You can add known organization values to this notes space, pulling from existing organizational mission, vision, or principles
- Why do we use data? Why do we share data?
- How do we use data? How do we share data?

Depending on the group size, determine if you'd prefer to have this discussion as a whole group, or split up into breakout groups with report-outs. If your team is larger than 12 people, we advise that you split into smaller groups to ensure everyone has an opportunity to contribute.

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## WORKSHOP FLOW

1-2 HOURS

*Note: This will be written as if this workshop is being conducted in-person. Substitute virtual tools for in-person tools as needed.*

### Provide context for the workshop.

Use the “why” of this how-to guide to set the stage for what a data values statement is, why a data values statement would support your work with data and overall data governance, and how you will adapt the gathered information today into a final document.

- **Internally:** Discussions on data values can align your team on goals and direction and provide a space to verbalize and document things that are often unsaid but critical to the project.
- **Externally:** Data values statements can be sent to new collaborators to set the stage for meaningful relationships and ensure that goals for data usage are aligned. Data values statements

can also be used in fundraising, to demonstrate that the organization has performed its due diligence concerning data stewardship and governance.

### Begin the conversation by brainstorming existing values.

**Ask participants to reflect on this question:** *What are your existing values that can inform data sharing?*

You can offer participants 1-2 minutes to jot down values on sticky notes, or if participants have immediate input, ask them to speak their thoughts aloud.

#### Facilitation tips:

- Allow for “awkward” silence and gaps in the conversation—depending on the group, discussing values might be a new or uncomfortable territory.
- If needed, refer to organizational values that are explicitly mentioned in mission or vision statements.

During the discussion, **take notes on stickies** on the flipchart. At the natural end of the discussion, ask participants to verbalize any notes that have come up on stickies and place them on the flipchart.

### Transition into the Why We Share Data discussion and flipchart.

Depending on how in-depth the first discussion went, participants might have started to answer the question of “why do we use and share data?,” but this explicit re-frame may elicit a different response.

**Ask participants to reflect on this question:** *Reflecting on our stated values for our work, why do we use and share data?*

- Participants may have different responses to the

“why we use” vs. “why we share” questions, or they may serve similar goals or purposes.

You can offer participants 1-2 minutes to jot down values on sticky notes, or if participants have immediate input, ask them to speak their thoughts aloud.

**Supplemental questions you can ask to spur discussion:**

- Are there different “whys” depending on a specific audience or stakeholder?
- Is our “why” now different from our “why” in the past? Will it change? What purposes will never change?

During the discussion, **take notes on stickies** on the flipchart. At the natural end of the discussion, ask participants to verbalize any notes on stickies and place them on the flipchart.

To end the discussion, **take a moment for clustering**: ask 2-3 participants to come to the flipcharts and group similar values together. Then, ask them to suggest single-word or -phrase names for each cluster.

**Transition into the How We Share Data discussion and flipchart.**

Preface this discussion by making the connection between values around data and the practices and tools employed to use and share that data.

**Ask participants to reflect on this question:**

*Reflecting on our stated values and why we use and share data, how does this affect what we do with the data?*

**Supplemental questions you can ask to spur discussion:**

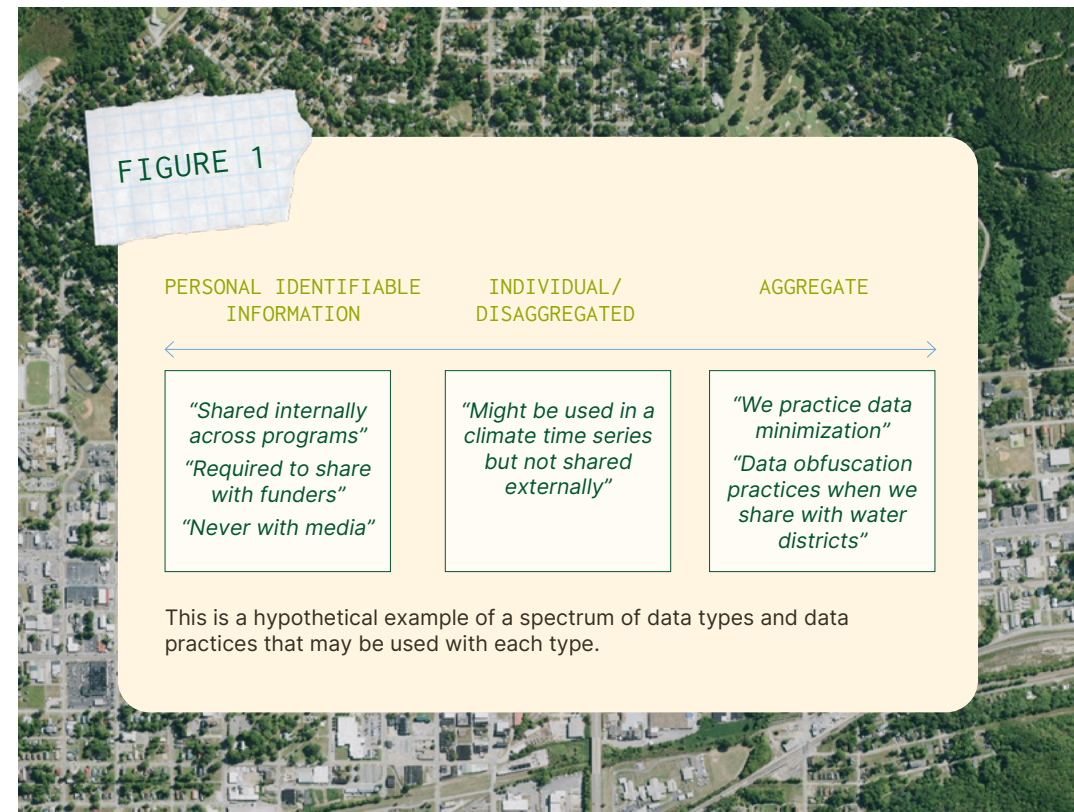
- What are our current practices or workflows when we collect, use, or share data?

- How did we decide on that practice? Are there ways to improve or alter these practices to better suit our values?

You can offer participants 1-2 minutes to jot down values on sticky notes, or if participants have immediate input, ask them to speak their thoughts aloud.

It can be useful to examine the different kinds of data, and if there are different practices depending on the data type, e.g., aggregate, disaggregated, or personally identifiable information. **Plotting** the practices based on these types of data on a spectrum can be a useful visual tool (**FIGURE 1**).

During the discussion, **take notes on stickies** on the flipchart, and at the natural end of the discussion, ask participants to verbalize any notes on stickies and place them on the flipchart.





To end the discussion, **take a moment for clustering**: ask 2-3 participants to come to the flipcharts and group similar “whys” together. Then, ask them to suggest single-word or -phrase names for each cluster.

### Reflect and establish next steps.

This conversation will likely provide a sense of the team’s understanding of the how and why of data collection, use, and sharing within the project.

To wrap up the discussion, ask participants to **reflect on the values and “whys”** on the first two flipcharts. Ask them to take three stickers and place them next to the values clusters and “whys” that resonate most with them.

Allow for time to think, write, and place stickers. Assess which values and “whys” have the most stickers—this will give you a good sense of which values to prioritize when writing the statement.

Thank the participants and give appropriate next steps for creating the data values statement, e.g., approaches to adapting this information, opportunities to review drafts, timeline, or implementation.

#### A NOTE ON CONSENSUS:

A data values statement is only effective if it reflects the perspectives of the organization it represents. A certain degree of consensus is needed within the workshop, and we urge workshop facilitators and statement drafters to provide ample opportunity for review and comment before publishing.

## A TEMPLATE FOR A DATA VALUES STATEMENT

This is a very simple template for a Data Values Statement, which can be adapted to suit different needs and styles. After you conduct a workshop similar to the one outlined in this zine, you can input the information gathered into this template.



[SCAN TO VIEW ON  
GOOGLE DOCS](#) ↗

### Why and How We Share Data

Data supports \_\_\_\_\_ [organization/project]’s commitment to \_\_\_\_\_ [organization value #1], \_\_\_\_\_ [organization value #2], and \_\_\_\_\_ [organization value #3]. [If necessary, you can provide more context on organization values.] We collect, use, and share data in order to fulfill the following goals:

- 1) [Why #1]: [provide one sentence of clarification and context]
- 2) [Why #2]:
- 3) [Why #3]:

→ An example of a Why and clarification: “To connect our users to resources: Data supports our understanding of a given community or individual context, which allows us to tailor solutions to and generate resources for participants.”

The way that we use and share data is based on our core values. The following values dictate our practices surrounding data of all types.

1) [Value #1]: [provide one sentence of clarification and context]

2) [Value #2]:

3) [Value #3]:

→ An example of a value and clarification: “Privacy and confidentiality: We respect your privacy and confidentiality and have practices that safeguard your data as it relates to use and sharing. This is an extension of our principle to protect and serve communities, and so responsible stewardship of data is built into our workflows and governance.”

We collect, use, and share different types of data, including [data types (e.g., aggregate data, individual and property-level data, personal identifiable information, and contact information)].

1) [Data type #1]: [provide one sentence of what this type of data is] [provide one sentence on how this data is used, what you will or won't do with this type of data]

2) [Data type #2]:

3) [Data type #3]

→ An example of a data type explanation and use: “Personal identifiable information (PII): Personal identifiable information is the most sensitive type of information and can include personal contact information like individual address, date of birth, or phone number. We share this data internally, and in some cases, with funders in required grant reporting.

# COMMUNICATING AND USING A DATA VALUES STATEMENT

A data values statement has many uses, both internally with your team, and externally with collaborators, sharing partners, community stakeholders, or funders. It should be a living document that can be made publicly available, but also integrated into new collaborations, or re-considered as strategic decisions are made.

## Considerations in creating and using a data values statement include:

- Whether the document should be translated to a language other than your team's working language in order to reach specific collaborators or community stakeholders.
- How this document will be made available online or otherwise, or how it will be integrated into workflows related to new stakeholders joining the project or collaborators interested in accessing data.
- How your organization will manage updating this data values statement in the future, including the process of update and the timing of the review schedule.

## Example use cases for the data values statement:

- A team member can reference this statement in an introductory meeting with a university researcher that is interested in accessing and using your data to ensure that their values related to community improvement are aligned.
- When approaching new program participants who are wary of sharing personal information, a

team member can use this statement to communicate organizational commitments to certain security measures, ownership conditions, or not monetizing the data.

- Team members applying for a grant can use this statement to demonstrate that their organization has taken steps to formalize their data stewardship practices and are deliberately using and sharing data.

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## FURTHER RESOURCES

The following resources are available to explore other writing about data values and principles.

To read about an initiative that sets forth a set of sample commitments that can be made related to data, see [Better Deal for Data ↗](#).

To read about the conceptual underpinning of data values statements, see The Value of Having Values: Artifacts of Normative Knowledge, Instruments for Collective Self-Governance of Data Flows (forthcoming in late 2025, will be published [here ↗](#))

To read about a resource developed for considering ethical issues surrounding data for practitioners of community and citizen science, see the [AAPS Data Ethics Toolkit ↗](#).

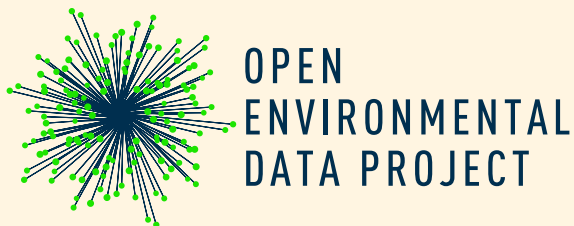
To read about concepts surrounding data as a resource and potential extractivism, see [Digital capitalism is a mine not a cloud ↗](#).

## IMAGE KEY

SATELLITE IMAGES VIA [CALTOPO.COM ↗](#)

- FRONT COVER** **Houston, Texas** — Bayou City Waterkeeper uses data on sewer overflows, demographics, and income to [map the connections ↗](#) between the city's sewage overflows and who is affected regularly.
- PAGE 9** **West Anniston, Alabama** — The West Anniston Foundation is working with Thriving Earth Exchange to conduct an [environmental risk assessment ↗](#) to understand the extent of local and legacy PCB contamination.
- PAGE 11** **Tonawanda, New York** — [Community scientists partnered with university researchers ↗](#) to hold the Tonawanda Coke Plant accountable for decades-long industrial pollution in the air and soil by collecting quantitative and qualitative information.





If you are interested in learning more about Open Environmental Data Project, please scan the codes below or email us at [info@openenvironmentaldata.org](mailto:info@openenvironmentaldata.org).



[OPENENVIRONMENTALDATA.ORG](https://openenvironmentaldata.org) ↗



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