

Open Data Working Group
Convening #3 | 22 January 2021
Discussion Notes

Convening Three | The ‘Demand Side’ of Open Data in India

An initiative of the International Innovation Corps (The University of Chicago Trust) and the Data Governance Network (anchored by IDFC Institute), the Open Data Working Group hosted its third convening on Friday, January 22nd. During the Working Group’s last discussion, participants examined the ‘Supply Side of Open Data’ - that being the government - as well as the various levers, such policy, legislation, political culture, and norms that frame India’s experience with Open Data.

During this convening, participants examined ‘Demand-Side Stakeholders,’ referring to any parties that consume and leverage Open [Government] Data. Several participants voiced that certain obstacles in the Open Data context - notably the status of legislation and policy - are simply not tractable for the time being. However, with that said, the group concluded that there are likewise a range of domains where Demand-Side Stakeholders - from academic institutions to civil society organizations to startups - can feasibly contribute to improving and advancing the state of the Indian Open Data ecosystem.

To this extent, participants explored barriers in launching initiatives, as well as the factors that tend to contribute to their successes. They also unpacked the nuances of Co-creation, with a focus on how the government and the public can work together to inform decision-making, or produce value from Open Data. The state of international Open Data initiatives, with a focus on how insights from successful precedents may be relevant to the Indian context, was also examined.

Building Multidisciplinary Teams

Even though India’s Open Data platform has addressed some ecosystem demands, significant gaps in capabilities and access remain. In recent years, some gaps have been filled by one or a collective of proactive non-governmental organizations, who have led initiatives, like [OpenBudget India](#) and [India Data Portal](#), that effectively make more data available to the public. One of the primary factors that has contributed to the relative success of these initiatives is that they were developed by multidisciplinary teams of economists, technologists, designers, policy scientists, etc, who were able to leverage insights and best practices from their respective fields for a common goal.

Motivating the Release of Data via Quid Pro Quo

A common issue that non-governmental Open Data initiatives attempt to address is the ineffective release of data from government agencies. Participants voiced that one effective way to solve this was via a process of de facto quid pro quo, namely helping the government solve their data-oriented problems in return for greater release. While there can be reluctance from government agencies to proactively share data, building and leveraging relationships, for example through a period of CSO-government co-creation, can motivate its release. Stakeholders, such as journalists, can also appeal to government agencies and bureaucrats to open and promote data that reflects positively on them to the public, as a means of ‘igniting the flow’ of data release. It should be noted that these tactics may also present serious ethical concerns. For instance, such arrangements might lead to selection bias with the release of datasets that reflect positively on government performance prioritised. This approach also has practical limitations, given its micro-level applicability.

Building Relationships and Networks

While well-known CSOs possess the credibility and networks required to get their foot in the door with the government, newer organizations are likely to struggle with the aforementioned, especially if they lack sufficient reputation and institutional and / or personal relationships. One participant suggested that CSOs in this position would be best served by utilizing an interdisciplinary team, offering to support bureaucrats as a means of forging new relationships, or partnering with a higher-capacity, better-connected organization to facilitate relationship-building and programming. It is also critical that organizations commit to investing in long-term relationships with government partners, as well as securing funding partners that are committed to the Open Data agenda and understand the protracted, challenging nature of such initiatives. This is a painstaking process since relationships built with key bureaucrats run the risk of being reset due to transfers or role re-allocations. Institutional buy-in and partnerships are more durable. That said, finding champions within the relevant ministries and departments is a necessary first step.

Building a Demand-Side Constituency for Open Data

The idea of Open Data is relatively niche on the demand side due to citizens’ lack of access and poor levels of technology literacy. A lack of broad-based demand reduces the incentives for government and bureaucrats to invest significantly in improving Open Data frameworks, processes and outcomes. Participants felt that it is therefore incumbent on civil society actors -- such as the media and policy centres -- to highlight the value of such outcomes by utilizing datasets released by the government in contexts that are relatable to citizens. For instance,

public service delivery data could be of significant interest if presented in an easily understood manner, particularly if disaggregated to more local levels.

Adoption of International Precedents

International precedents of government-public collaboration in the field of Open Data pose novel insights with applicability to the Indian context. To this extent, the group primarily explored the mechanisms that lower the barrier of entry for producing and releasing Open Data. To date, the Indian OGD Platform platform has created functionality that enables the public to request specific datasets. It would also be beneficial - as is possible on the Open Data platforms in Brazil and Estonia - to enable the public and government to co-create datasets. This entails the ability to not only further clean available data, but also to upload additional data collected by both the government and public. Such an initiative would also be helpful in skill building at every level of the government, by allowing officials to work with and learn from technical experts in civil society and the private sector.

While international practices certainly provide food for thought, participants voiced that their disparate, ranging contexts can limit their potential for application in India. Stakeholders should also make sure to explore local precedents from various Indian states and municipalities, as they are likely to be more feasible to replicate.