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# OPEN DATA IN DEVELOPING ECONOMIES

Toward Building an Evidence Base  
on What Works and How

Stefaan G. Verhulst and Andrew Young  
*The GovLab*

**JULY 2017**





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## ABOUT THE GOVLAB

The Governance Lab (GovLab) is an action research center based at New York University. Our work seeks to build evidence on how to strengthen the ability of institutions and people to work more openly, collaboratively, effectively, and legitimately to make better decisions and solve public problems. GovLab studies and curates new findings relevant to institutional innovation, and develops and tests new methodologies for institutions to solve problems in a more open and collaborative manner. To increase the innovation capacity of institutions, GovLab also trains public entrepreneurs in new approaches to tackle societal challenges, and builds networks of innovators to help match the supply of expertise present in society to demand in the form of public problems.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**A**cross the world, governments are acting on the belief that systematically making data more accessible can provide an important new asset to usher in positive social and economic transformation. This trend is not limited to countries with more developed economies. Although the bulk of data in terms of quantity has thus far been released in developed countries, a growing number of developing economies — in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America — have also been adopting open data plans and policies, and publishing government datasets that previously remained locked away in closed databases. This move toward open data is part of a broader global trend toward more data-driven decision making in policymaking and development — a manifestation of what is sometimes called the “data revolution.”

The growing enthusiasm surrounding open data gives rise to several questions about open data’s unique features to foster change. Can it truly improve people’s lives in the developing world — and, if so, how and under what conditions?

The goal of this paper is to map and assess the current universe of theory and practice related to open data for developing economies, and to suggest a theory of change that can be used for both further practice and analysis. We reviewed the existing literature, consulted with the open data community and sought to collect evidence through a series of 12 in-depth case studies spanning multiple sectors and regions of the world. In particular, we sought to answer the following three questions:

**What makes open data uniquely relevant to developing economies?**

**How can the impact of open data in developing economies be captured and evidence be developed?**

**How can open data be leveraged as a new asset for development?**



## WHAT MAKES OPEN DATA UNIQUELY RELEVANT TO DEVELOPING ECONOMIES?

Although there has been much focus on the potential of data to usher in change, what makes open data different is often not as well recognized, with supporting analysis often speculative or anecdotal. Understanding the distinguishing features of open data is important to subsequently document how open data works — its mechanisms and pathways — and in doing so, to build a more solid evidence foundation for open data in development. Based on our review of the existing narratives and theories in the literature, we identified six unique features that are believed to make open data specifically relevant — or potentially powerful — in the context of developing countries. They reflect some of the features that are often also associated with the value of open source or open innovation in a developing context; and explain why open data is closely connected with the twin trends of open government and open development.

## HOW CAN THE IMPACT OF OPEN DATA IN DEVELOPING ECONOMIES BE CAPTURED AND EVIDENCE BE DEVELOPED?

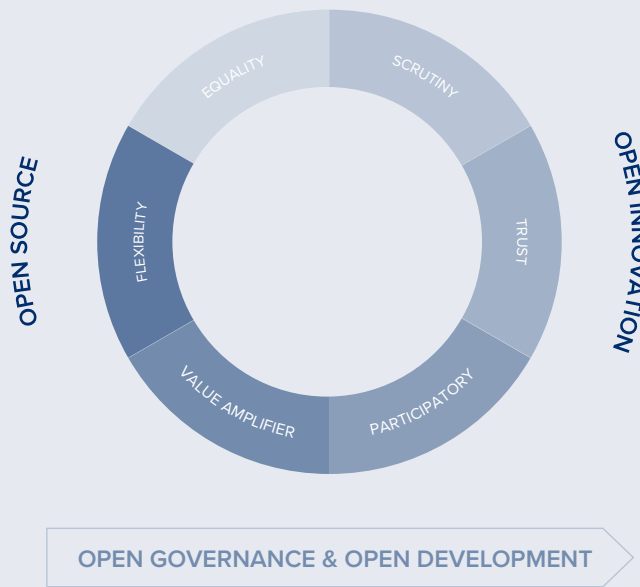
To analyze and capture existing evidence and to inform future comparative analyses across sectors and countries, we developed, expanded, and sought to start testing the following Change Theory and/or Logic Model:

Open data (supply), when analyzed and leveraged by both governmental and non-governmental actors (demand), can be used in a variety of ways (actions and outputs), within the parameters established by certain enabling conditions (and disabling factors), to improve government, empower citizens and users, create economic opportunity, and/or solve societal problems (impact).





## THE UNIQUE FEATURES OF OPEN DATA



### Participation

By facilitating citizen participation and mobilization, open data can allow a wider range of expertise and knowledge to address and potentially solve complex problems.

### Trust

Because open data increases transparency and avenues for citizen oversight, unlocking data can lead to higher levels of trust throughout societies and countries.

### Equality

Open data can lead to more equitable and democratic distribution of information and knowledge — though, several observers have also pointed out that just releasing open data can play a role in further entrenching power asymmetries related to access to technology and data literacy.

### Scrutiny

Because open data is subject to greater scrutiny and exposure than inaccessible institutional data, there is potential for enhanced review and improvement in the quality of government data by actors outside government.

### Value Amplifier

Opening government datasets in a flexible and equal manner can amplify the value of data by filling — and identifying — important data gaps in society.

### Flexibility

When released in an interoperable, machine-readable manner, open data is easier to repurpose and combine with other pieces of information, which in turn means that it is more flexible, with secondary data potentially yielding innovative insights.

## LOGIC MODEL OF OPEN DATA

This logic model is built around the premise (informed by the case studies) that high-impact open data projects are the result of matching supply and demand so that open data can be effectively used to inform specific activities and outputs aimed at improving development. These outputs and activities can, in turn, serve a broader and more diverse group of users and objectives.



We categorized open data's (intended or realized) impact on development along the following pathways:

- ▶ **Creating economic opportunity**, by enabling business creation, job creation, new forms of innovation, and more generally spurring economic growth
- ▶ **Helping to solve complex public problems** by improving situational awareness, bringing a wider range of expertise and knowledge to bear on public problems, and by allowing policymakers, civil society, and citizens to better target interventions and track impact
- ▶ **Improving governance**, for instance by introducing new efficiencies into service delivery, and increasing information sharing within government departments
- ▶ **Empowering citizens** by improving their capacity to make decisions and widen their choices, and by acting as a catalyst for social mobilization

We found that there is wide variability of documented evidence. Much of the literature remains focused on the potential of open data to bring about positive benefits — absent real evidence and data. Little distinction is made between intent, implication, and impact, blurring our understanding of what the true value may be of open data. Several of the cases we analyzed did provide evidence that open data had an impact on people's lives while some failed to achieve notable, scalable impact, or worse, created new harms or risks.

To address the variability in evidence, and start focusing on testable premises of how, and under what conditions, open data works best in developing economies, we subsequently identified 27 enabling or disabling factors within the following five categories:

- ▶ **Problem and Demand Definition:** whether and how the problem to be addressed and/or the demand for open data are clearly defined and understood
- ▶ **Capacity and Culture:** whether and how resources, human capital, and technological capabilities are sufficiently available and leveraged meaningfully
- ▶ **Partnerships:** whether collaboration within and, especially, across sectors using open data exist
- ▶ **Risks:** whether and how the risks associated with open data are assessed and mitigated
- ▶ **Governance:** whether and how decisions that affect the use of open data are made in a responsive manner

By combining these factors we developed a “Periodic Table of Open Data's Impact Factors” that can be used (and further fine-tuned) as a canvas or checklist toward designing open data initiatives. Together with the logic model, the periodic table can also be used as a framework for analyzing and capturing key evidence of what contributes to “successful” open data efforts in developing economies.

## PERIODIC TABLE OF OPEN DATA IMPACT

Problem and Demand Definition	Capacity and Culture		Governance	Partnerships	Risks
U User Research	Di Data Infrastructure		Od Open by Default	Dh Data Holders	Pr Privacy Concerns
C Causes and Context					Ds Data Security
Rf Refinement	Pu Public Infrastructure	Se Skills & Expertise	Fi Freedom of Information	I Intermediaries	Dm Poor decision-making due to faulty information
Bg Benefit and Goals	Lp Tech Literacy & Internet Penetration	Fl Feedback Loops		De Domain Experts	Pa Entrenching power asymmetries
Da Data Audit and Inventory	Rb Cultural/ Institutional Roadblocks	Rs Resource Availability & Sustainability	M Performance Metrics	Co Collaborators	Ow Open washing
			Rm Risk Mitigation		





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## HOW CAN OPEN DATA BE LEVERAGED AS A NEW ASSET FOR DEVELOPMENT?

Despite the variability in evidence, we identified several key take-aways enabling us to make the following specific recommendations for open data practitioners and decision makers, including donors like USAID, on how to better leverage open data as a new asset for development.

**Focus on and define the problem, understand the user, and be aware of local conditions.** The most successful open data projects are those that are designed and implemented with keen attention to the nuances of local conditions; have a clear sense of the problem to be solved; and understand the needs of the users and intended beneficiaries. Projects with an overly broad, ill-defined or “fuzzy” problem focus, or those that have not examined the likely users, are less likely to generate the meaningful real-world impacts, regardless of funds available. Too often, open data projects have less impact because they are overly data-focused rather than problem- and user-focused.

**Focus on readiness, responsiveness, and change management.** Implementing open data projects often requires a level of readiness among all stakeholders, as well as a cultural transformation, in the way governments and institutions collect, share, and consume information. For development funders, however, this important determinant of success can imply difficult decisions regarding high-potential open data initiatives in developing economies that lack clear institutional readiness or demonstrated responsiveness to feedback.







**Nurture an open data ecosystem through collaboration and partnerships.** Data does not exist in isolation. The success of open data projects relies on collaboration among various stakeholders, as well as collaboration with data scientists and topic or sector experts. During the problem definition and initial design phase, practitioners and funders should explore the types of collaborations that could increase uptake and impact. Such partnerships could, for example, take place with other data providers (perhaps from different sectors), like-minded international or local organizations, and established intermediaries such as journalists or industry groups.

**Have a risk mitigation strategy.** Open data projects need to be mindful of some of the important risks associated with even the most successful projects. Notably, these risks include threats to individual privacy (for example, through insufficiently anonymized data or commingling multiple datasets to create new privacy issues), and data security. Funders should ensure that projects that deal in information that is potentially personally identifiable (including anonymized data) have audited any data risks and developed a clear strategy for mitigating those risks before proceeding with the project.

**Secure resources and focus on sustainability.** Open data projects can often be initiated with minimal resources, but require funding and additional sources of support to sustain themselves and scale up. It is important to recognize that access to funding at the outset is not necessarily a sign that open data projects are destined for success. A longer term, flexible, business model or strategy is a key driver of sustainability, and should be developed in the early stages of the design process.

**Build a strong evidence base and support more research.** As demonstrated in this paper, of perhaps even greater importance is the development of an evidence base that can provide feedback and indications of what works and what doesn't work, to maximize the impact of the (often scarce) resources available. The analytical framework provided in this report could act as a starting point for developing more systematic and comparative research that would allow for more evidence-based open data practice. In addition, to turn insights gathered into more evidence-based practice we need to translate these findings into new methodologies or checklists of key steps and variables (leveraging the Periodic Table provided in this paper).

In conclusion, given the nascent nature of existing open data initiatives, the signals of open data's impact in developing economies are still largely muted, as evidenced in the examples discussed in our paper. Our goal in this paper was not to use these examples as the ultimate proof of open data's importance for development; rather, we have picked up these signals and placed them into an analytical framework to enable further practice and analysis going forward. It is only with this type of structured analysis that we can gain a systematic and comparative evidence base of if and how open data is having meaningful impact on conditions on the ground in developing economies.

## THE OPEN DATA FOR DEVELOPING ECONOMIES CASE STUDIES

In this table, we list the case studies developed to inform this paper, identify the intended impact of each, and note which of the key take-aways described above are represented in the projects studied.

Case Study	Summary	Intended Impact	Clear Problem Definition	Readiness, Responsiveness and Change Management	Open Data Ecosystem and Partnerships	Risk Mitigation Strategy	Resources and Sustainability
<b>Burundi: Open Results and Performance-Based Financing</b>	Results-based financing (RBF) in Burundi is an instrument that links development financing with pre-determined results, aimed to strengthen accountability and transparency in government expenditure.	Improving Government	✓	✓	✓		✓
<b>Cambodia: Opening Information on Development Efforts</b>	Open Development Cambodia helps to improve the public's awareness of current and historical information on development efforts through a data-driven online platform.	Improving Government		✓	✓		✓
<b>Colombia: Establishing Climate Resilience in Agriculture</b>	The Aclimate Colombia project processes, analyzes, and publishes open government datasets to help farmers access climate and market data to improve their decision making and livelihoods.	Creating Opportunity	✓	✓	✓		
<b>Ghana: Empowering Smallholder Farmers</b>	Esoko is a for-profit communication tool that provides farmers repackaged data from different sources (including government and crowd-sourced data) via mobile phones to empower smallholder farmers.	Creating Opportunity	✓	✓	✓		✓
<b>India: Open Energy Data</b>	The Electricity Supply Monitoring Initiative (ESMI) collects real-time power quality information in an effort to monitor power quality in urban and rural India.	Improving Government	✓	✓		✓	✓
<b>Jamaica: Open Data to Benefit Tourism</b>	Jamaica uses open data to increase and improve its tourism sector, particularly by combining crowdsourced mapping data with open government data to create more participatory tourist maps.	Creating Opportunity	✓		✓		✓



Case Study	Summary	Intended Impact	Clear Problem Definition	Readiness, Responsiveness and Change Management	Open Data Ecosystem and Partnerships	Risk Mitigation Strategy	Resources and Sustainability
<b>Kenya: Improving Voter Turnout with Open Data</b>	In the lead up to Kenya's 2013 general election, Code 4 Kenya published election data on the website GotToVote!, which provided citizens with voter registration center information, and easy-to-access information about registration procedures.	Empowering Citizens	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<b>Nepal: Open Data to Improve Disaster Relief</b>	A number of crowdsourced and open mapping data platforms helped humanitarian relief efforts in the wake of Nepal's 2015 earthquake.	Solving Public Problems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Paraguay: Predicting Dengue Outbreaks with Open Data</b>	The National Health Surveillance Department of Paraguay opened data related to dengue morbidity, which was used to create an early warning system.	Solving Public Problems	✓			✓	
<b>South Africa: Code4SA Cheaper Medicines for Consumers</b>	Code for South Africa uses data from the National Department of Health for its Medicine Price Registry Application (MPRAApp), an online tool that helps patients identify and access cheap medicine.	Empowering Citizens	✓	✓	✓		
<b>Tanzania: Open Education Dashboards</b>	Two portals in Tanzania publish education data in efforts to improve Tanzania's schools. The first, the Education Open Data Dashboard (educationdashboard.org), supports open data publication, accessibility and use. The second, Shule (shule.info), attempts to use open data to catalyze social change in Tanzania.	Empowering Citizens		✓	✓		
<b>Uganda: Opening Health Data to Improve Outcomes</b>	Uganda's iParticipate project uses open data available from government portals and other sources to analyze health service delivery and public investments in health projects.	Improving Government	✓	✓	✓		✓

**LIST OF ACRONYMS**

BBW	Banana Bacterial Wilt
BODI	Burkina Open Data Initiative
CIAT	International Center for Tropical Agriculture
DFID	Department for International Development, United Kingdom
EITI	Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
ELOG	Elections Observation Group
EOSDIS	Earth Observing System Data and Information System
ESM	Electricity Supply Monitor
ESMI	Electricity Supply Monitoring Initiative
EITI	Extractives Industries Transparency Initiative
GODAN	Global Open Data Initiative for Agriculture and Nutrition
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IEBC	Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission, Kenya
IMCO	Mexican Institute for Competitiveness
MERC	Maharashtra Electricity Regulatory Commission
MPR	Medicine Price Registry, South Africa
MPRApp	Medicine Price Registry Application
NERC	National Ebola Response Centre
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OD4D	Open Data for Development
ODC	Open Development Cambodia
ODI	Open Data Institute
OGP	Open Government Partnership
OSM	Open Street Map
PEG	Prayas Energy Group
PHC	Primary Health Care Centre
PII	Personal Identifiable Information
RBF	Results Based Financing
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TAP	Transparency, Accountability and informed Participation
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WOUGNET	Women of Uganda Network



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