Using Data to Influence Government Decisions

Opportunities and Challenges for User-Centered Design to Improve Governance Data Impact

VERSION FOR DISSEMINATION

REBOOT

Prepared for the Open Society Foundations

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In late 2014, the Open Society Foundations (OSF) commissioned Reboot to conduct a scoping study on the opportunities and challenges in leveraging user-centered design to enhance the impact of governance data initiatives. Focusing on a specific set of governance data communities, the study first sought to understand current program and product design practices used by these communities. Then, it assessed the potential impact that broader design collaborations may have on their ability to influence government decision-making.

The scoping study resulted in a final report for OSF to inform further work on these topics. This document has been adapted from that report to share project lessons with the broader transparency and accountability community. This version aims to be useful for practitioners working on related initiatives to those studied, and to donors seeking to support them. For respondent privacy, it does not include details on specific initiatives.

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Definitions

In the context of this report, the following terms have been used in specific ways:

Data Consumers (or Users): Actors who use information to influence government decision-making (e.g. by integrating data into advocacy efforts). Data consumers can include groups or individuals who also generate new information about government practices and processes.

Data Producers: Actors who generate new information or analysis on government practices and processes that may be used to influence government decision-making.

Data Standards: Agreements on representations, formats, and definitions of common information to help improve their utility, reusability, and actionability.

Governance Data: Information on the structures and allocations of political, economic, and social authority and resources that impact governance processes or outcomes. Such information may relate to topics such as rule of law, legislative processes, public spending, and corporate influence in politics.

Impact: Having observable influence on increasing the social accountability of government decisions, particularly as they relate to public spending and resource allocation. This influence may be direct (e.g. by changing the design or implementation of a policy or program) or indirect (e.g. by shifting institutional norms or culture that, in turn, influence individual decisions).

Multi-stakeholder Initiative (MSI): A governance structure that convenes diverse actors for dialogue, decision-making, and action around common interests or objectives.

User-Centered Design (UCD): A multi-stage problem-solving process that optimizes solutions based on users' needs, behaviors, constraints, and operating contexts. Solutions are repeatedly tested and refined throughout the design and development process before implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The potential of new applications of data to improve government performance and accountability is widely recognized. Data, presented in innovative and widely accessible formats, has the ability to influence how public resources are allocated and accounted for.

As a result, recent years have seen a proliferation of data advocacy efforts and data products that seek to influence governance outcomes. There are now several communities of practice employing data in pursuit of greater government accountability; their efforts span a range of issues including public spending, corporate influence in politics, and natural resources management. Further, multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) are convening actors to develop technical standards for data production and management. In doing so, they seek to make governance data more interoperable and data products more usable.

Yet, despite the significant investments in governance data efforts to date, evidence of their impact on governance outcomes remains thin and far from systematic. Before defining technical norms, it is important to first understand why the data products currently produced have had limited impact. Otherwise, there is a risk of ossifying ineffective practices into widely adopted norms. Technical quality, while important, is secondary to real-world utility. Data standards should be developed based on concrete cases, not theoretical notions, of pathways to impact.

Through consultations with governance and open data experts, and observations of open government fora, the Open Society Foundations' (OSF) Information Program and Reboot began exploring why the impact of governance data has not yet met expectations.[1]

One explanation frequently cited by governance data actors is that they lack clarity on who their users are and why they might use governance data (or not). As a result, their work is largely based on assumptions of how data *could* be used to influence governance outcomes.[2] To help address this issue, OSF and Reboot became interested in helping 'data producers' better understand and serve 'data consumers.'[3] We hypothesized that governance data will be more impactful if producers could identify their priority audiences; articulate how these audiences may incorporate governance data into their work; and optimize products and services based on these audiences' needs, capacities, and constraints.

To test this hypothesis, OSF commissioned a scoping study to gauge the governance data community's interest and ability to engage in an experimental design exercise, and to determine the potential of such a demonstration project in influencing broader open government impact and discourse. The study was conducted by Reboot from December 2014 to March 2015.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 21 respondents; of these, eight were in-person and the rest were via video or teleconference. Respondents included staff and stakeholders of MSIs from diverse functional roles and positions (i.e. leadership, programmatic staff, board members); experts in governance data; and presumed data users.

Beyond surfacing opportunities for further work, this research generated observations on attitudes and ways of working in the governance data community that may be limiting its impact.

This report includes overarching research insights, and presents implications and recommendations for donors who seek to support governance data actors and communities.

1 In this study, "impact" is defined as having observable influence on increasing the social accountability of government decisions, particularly as they relate to spending and resource allocation. This influence may be direct (e.g. by changing the design or implementation of a policy or program) or indirect (e.g.| by shifting institutional norms or culture that, in turn, influence individual decisions).

2 These sentiments were surfaced and reiterated by many respondents and was a key issue driving the function of the Governance Data Alliance. The Alliance has established a User Feedback Working Group, of which Reboot is a member, to help address this issue.

3 For the purpose of this study, the term 'consumer' is used interchangeably with 'user.'

TOWARD A MORE NUANCED APPROACH TO GOVERNANCE ECOSYSTEMS

Governance is ultimately about the structures and allocations of authority, power, and resources. Governance outcomes are determined by complex ecosystems of actors engaged in ongoing contests around the distribution of authority, power, and resources; influencing these outcomes therefore necessitates engaging in these political contests. This research suggests, however, that to do so, the governance data community may benefit from new approaches to conceptualizing and executing its work.

This scoping study elicited two overarching challenges that are limiting the potential of governance data actors:

1. Popular (or commonly used) conceptions of governance ecosystems tend to be overly reductive; as a result, they prevent the strategic targeting of actors who can use governance data to advance desired outcomes.

2. Governance ecosystems are complicated by factors not usually acknowledged in strategic planning and program design processes. Such factors include government incentive structures and political volatility.

This section discusses these findings broadly in the context of the governance data community before offering recommendations for donors seeking to act on them.

Challenge One: **Popular conceptions of governance ecosystems tend to be overly reductive and can hinder the strategic targeting of efforts.**

Governance outcomes are determined by the relationships and interactions between actors of complex, dynamic ecosystems.

Within governance data communities, the commonly used categories of 'data producer' and 'data consumer' represent a convenient but theoretical division of those who may engage with governance data. In practice, the relationship between such actors is not so neatly defined. Use of these labels prevents an accurate understanding of governance ecosystems and the chain of events that influence different decisions.

Current discourse also tends to assume that 'users' are to be 'designed for,' rather than recognizing that there is a range of actors who might be recruited, trained, lobbied, serviced, supported, or otherwise engaged to influence governance outcomes.

The labels of 'producer' and 'consumer' are false binaries and should be discarded.

Rather, it is necessary to map the range of actors who have influence—formal and informal— over a specific governance issue, and to understand how their respective histories, interests, and relationships intersect and collectively shape outcomes. This process helps identify actors with significant influence on a particular issue, whether due to individual positions or to accumulated authority from being at the nexus of networks or processes. Such actors should be targeted as priority data users.

Blurring the Lines Between Data Providers and Consumers

Study respondents, for the most part, rejected the labels of 'data production' or 'data consumption' when describing their work around governance data. A few described starting their journeys in governance data as 'data users' that sought out and used data for a specific purpose. Over time, they began to package and share their interpretations of the data they'd collected and, in the process, became 'data producers.'

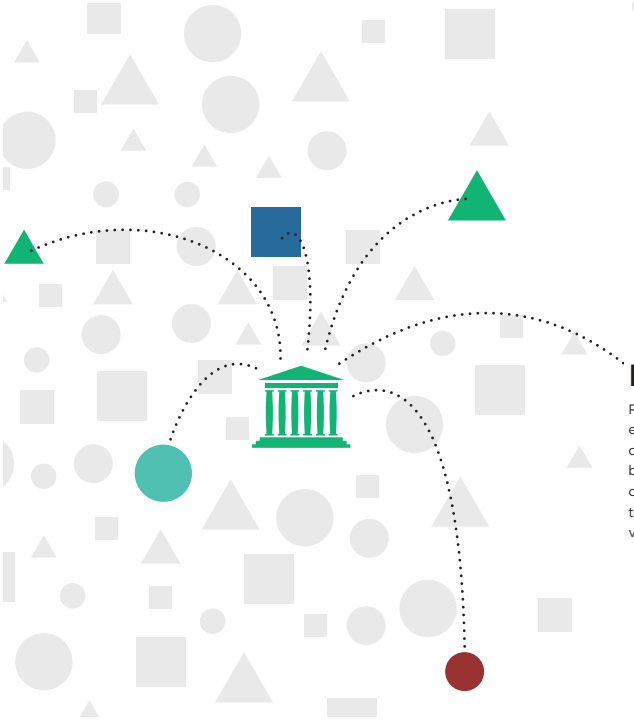
One member of a successful government watchdog group explained how, over a decade, the group grew from being a gatherer of governance data to a leading national producer of original analysis to inform diverse advocacy efforts.

The organization was founded by a group of journalists that wanted to share information in support of their investigative reporting. To assist with its own work, the group began capturing information it received from the government in response to its filed Freedom of Information requests. Its own capacity, however, only went so far in identifying suspicious patterns in received data; consequently, the journalists sought support to expand their audience. The group opened access to its data, with a focus on corporate influence and procurement data. Over time, it developed an open data portfolio which includes tools for data mapping and analysis.

Today, the organization positions itself as an advocacy group that provides access to data, and that uses data to inform its own government engagement. As one staff member explained, "Our open data projects seek to not only create our own internal cases for fighting corruption, but to also generally provide data to others [to achieve the same goals]."

Governance data communities tend to refer to 'users' in broad categories, such as "government," "private sector," "civil society," "media," and others. Recognizing the heterogeneity within each category, and identifying priority actors within them, will be critical to designing data products that advance the desired impact.

While segmenting by sector helps describe the potential universe of governance data users, further specificity is needed to determine which actors are more influential and hence priority targets.



Influential Actors

Rather than breaking the governance data ecosystem along traditional 'supply' and 'demand' divides, it is more useful to categorize actors based on their degree of influence over target outcomes. Influential governance data actors tend to come from specialized or niche groups, and vary across a number of dimensions.

Respondents surfaced many specific types of users that fall under the broad, sector-based, classifications. This can help data providers better understand who they are designing for, how to appeal to their incentives, and how to help them integrate data into existing activities and processes.

Such an exercise will also lead to greater definition of target users beyond the sector-based categorizations that are currently in common use. A more granular understanding of actor categories will allow for more effective engagement. The question then is not, "How do we reach 'users'?" but rather, "Of all the possible actors that may use governance data, who has the most influence over decisions on this issue and how are they exercising that influence? How can we source, package, and share data to encourage them to fit governance data into their existing work?"

Data Users

Certain governance data users are more influential than others. Identifying them requires adding granularity to commonly used, sector-based categorization. Some examples surfaced by respondents include:

GOVERNMENT	CIVIL SOCIETY	MEDIA	PRIVATE SECTOR
• Elected officials	• Advocacy	• Investigative journalists	• Corporations
• Civil servants	• Research	• Data journalists	• SMEs
• Reformers	• Data & technology		• Forensic auditing firms
• Law enforcement			

Challenge Two: **Governance ecosystems are complicated by factors not usually acknowledged in strategic planning and program design processes. Such factors include government incentive structures and political volatility.**

MSI respondents generally spoke confidently about the theoretical and technical dimensions of governance data and with greater hesitation on operational paths toward impact. (The political implications of data production and usage were touched on briefly.) With few exceptions, respondents had less substantive engagements with governments—the actors they sought to influence (i.e. as opposed to with civil society)—which contributed to a limited understanding of their interests and capacities. This suggests a disconnect between how governance ecosystems and processes are structured and operate, and how many governance data actors understand them.

Although the 'governance data community' is loosely defined, members from government tend to represent a minority. Of those from government, anecdotal evidence suggests that many are relatively new to the public sector, reform-oriented, and, as a result, often on the peripheries of power and decision-making. Civil society actors, while open to the idea of engaging with government, lack systematic processes to test their assumptions and to develop empirically grounded, nuanced understandings of how government works.

Peixoto (2013) notes that any accountability mechanism built on disclosure principles requires a minimal chain of events:

1. Governmental information is disclosed;
2. The disclosed information reaches its intended public;
3. Members of the public are able to process the disclosed information and react to it; and
4. Public officials respond to the public's reaction or are sanctioned by the public through institutional means.[4]

Though greatly simplified, this basic model of accountability highlights the limits of current approaches to governance data, which emphasize the first two steps in the chain and largely ignore those after. As previously noted, the governance data community struggles to identify actors with the interest and capacity to use disclosed data to effect change (Step 3). While the community is actively grappling with this question, current efforts do not adequately account for the complexity of governance processes—and specifically, of how governments operate. As a result, they apply linear strategies to dynamic environments and are unable to elicit the desired responses from government (Step 4). Challenges in identifying and targeting actors that have influence within government frustrates the success of

4 Peixoto, Tiago. "*The Uncertain Relationship Between Open Data and Accountability: A Response to Yu and Robinson's The New Ambiguity of "Open Government"*. University of Los Angeles Law Review 2013.

Governance Actors & Their Influence

The influence of different actors on government decisions will invariably change based on the specific issue and context; as such, there are various ways of understanding relative influence.

Motivation and capacity are two critical dimensions in determining influence. Those who are highly interested in affecting specific government decisions (x-axis) and who have extensive resources and know-how in doing so (y-axis) are more influential.

For governance data to be impactful, this framework suggests targeting actors that are highly motivated and highly capable. It also suggests that an actor's influence can be increased by growing its interest in influencing a particular issue (moving it rightward on the x-axis), and/or by enhancing its ability to do so (moving it upward on the y-axis).

To illustrate this point, consider the following scenario: The diagram on the following page is a hypothetical map of different actors' influence on public health policy. In this example, a certain think tank is influential on public health issues. It lacks, however, a policy agenda for universal health coverage; in turn, it does not want to, and is unable to, offer a cohesive or compelling position on the topic.

Under the country's new open data decree, the Office of the President has asked the Ministry of Health to release its data. To derive value from open data, the government benefits from understanding what datasets and analysis external experts need.

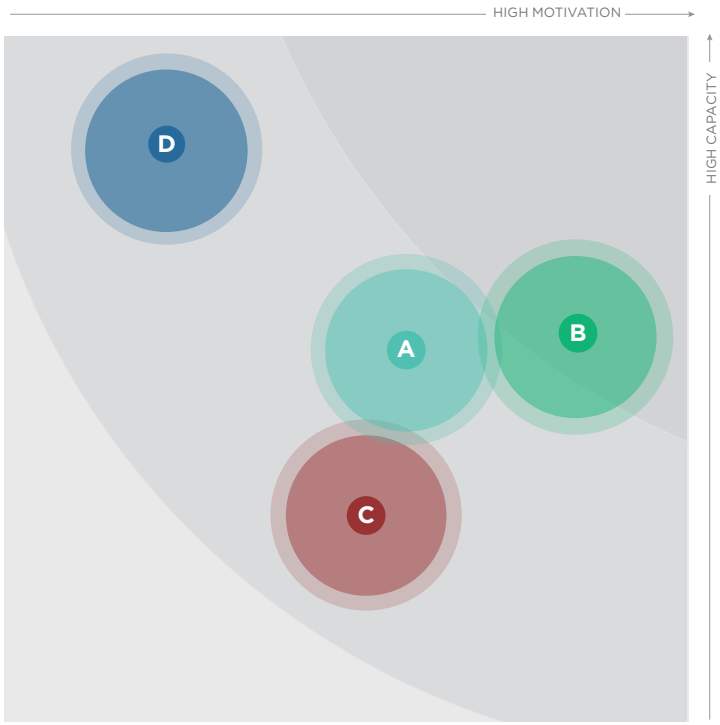
For example, this think tank lacked data on historical national spending on health insurance and outcomes. Now that it has this data, it compares national results with World Bank data from other contexts, including those with universal health coverage. This leads the think tank to formulate a policy position and motivates it to lobby government on this issue.

Once motivated, the think tank uses the evidence to effectively advocate for its position. To increase its capability in doing so, it needs to understand which actors inside government have the mandate and/or authority to influence policy on this issue, which elements of its position will resonate with these actors, and how best to convince them of its argument. This understanding will enable the think tank to design and execute persuasive lobbying efforts.

While this example is theoretical and highly simplified, it helps to illustrate the value of mapping actors' influence. It shows that optimal 'data users' differ by issue and context, and that there are multiple pathways to achieving impact in each scenario. It also highlights opportunities for building the motivations and capabilities of influential data users as ways to affecting change in government, and proposes using deep research to identify mechanisms to doing so.

Motivation to influence government decisions

To what degree are actors motivated and/or incentivized to increase the social accountability of public health policy?



Capacity to influence government decisions

To what extent do actors have the capability and resources to increase the social accountability of public health policy?

A Research Institutions

Motivations: To assess public sector programs and offer policy recommendations for reform.

Capabilities: Considered reputable, and are sought out for policy guidance. May not have in-house expertise to advocate for research beyond its creation.

B Government Reformers

Motivations: To improve public sector effectiveness and efficiency.

Capabilities: Have energy and enthusiasm to push for change from within. Bureaucratic procedures and policies impede their advances.

C Investigative Journalists

Motivations: To surface information that impacts the public good

Capabilities: Are experienced in the process of creating change through information transparency. Have limited human and financial resources.

D Corporations

Motivations: To lobby for public policies that benefit industry.

Capabilities: Have access to a high level of resources. Have established government relationships and extensive experience in lobbying.

accountability mechanisms that use governance data. Current methods of user identification are ad-hoc in nature and limited in scope. Some organizations search for media attributions manually or by using a web crawler, usually at irregular intervals. Some rely on word-of-mouth. Others collect user data through mandatory online registration processes; to date, no significant analysis of such data has been conducted. Beyond journalists—whose usage of governance data is sometimes publicly manifest in their work—no organization interviewed monitors any other user group in a systematic way; some acknowledged this as a constraint to understanding their users.

The governance data community may benefit form more sophisticated approaches to understanding users. There is a growing recognition that approaches aren't working. Some CSOs are becoming more proactive in doing so. Methods used, however, remain largely limited in scope and depth, and tend to target known users. But there are more users then those currently identified.

The lack of user understanding has led some to the notion that both consuming and producing data is the most effective path to impact. Reflecting on a rich career in budget monitoring, one governance data expert contended that successes largely result from marrying data production with consumption. Actors that are most impactful, he said, play roles on both sides of the data coin: "There should be overlap between producers and consumers. The idea of useful data is to create a chain of data consumers who become producers, and producers who become consumers."

Indeed, a data producer that consumes information is more likely to put out useful data and data products because it has a grounded, firsthand understanding of user needs and constraints—its own. Using data themselves helps actors to select, package, and present data to be most useful for peer users. But one need not have to be a user to understand users—design research can surface the same information, while mitigating a producer's bias toward 'users like me.' Any one actor's influence on government decision-making will be limited; as such, the outputs of self-referential design processes will also be limited in utility.

The governance data community can benefit from new approaches to strategic planning and program design. Reflecting on an eight-country review of open government initiatives published in 2013, Khagram, de Renzio, and Fung discuss the analytical process required to determine how and why impact occurs: "The conditions that are likely to be associated with more open government [...] can initially be classified into three broad categories: political, economic, and cultural or historical. In addition, the interactions among these conditions need to be analyzed in relation to country contexts, taking into account the actors involved, their potentially conflicting interests, power, and capabilities, the institutions that shape their behavior, and the incentives that such institutions create. This, in turn, will help to explain how and why specific outcomes occurred (or not)."[5]

To achieve impact, a similarly analytical design process is needed, one that is grounded in politics and accounts for the complexity of governance processes and ecosystems.

Case Study: User Research on Procurement Data

Leading governance data actors recognize the need to better understand their users and some are experimenting with different methods of user research. An anti-corruption CSO in Eastern Europe is one example.

To better understand who is using its tools, this CSO ran a short survey on its website, and conducted follow-up interviews with a subset of respondents. The research focused on three key open data tools: i) an open contracts platform where municipal contract data scraped from government websites is released in user-friendly and searchable formats; ii) is a combination of a public procurement site and company register that acts a search engine for corporate tycoons; and iii) is a database of structured government datasets.

Through research, the CSO found that journalists were using its tools much more than expected—typically on a daily basis as a part of a standard routine. More experienced investigative journalists, however, were not because they tended to be older and were not skilled technology users. The study also surfaced users that the CSO did not previously know about, including forensic auditors and law enforcement, who it believes are driving significant change efforts. For example, forensic auditors are believed to study data on European Union funding and present evidence in court; this impacts how these funds are allocated at a national level.

Based on this research, the CSO has begun strategizing how to reach older influential journalists—and other offline users—and help them use its products. To help integrate its tool into an offline workflow, the CSO is considering the development of a short set of instructions that can be physically posted on desks to direct these users to its tool, and to guide them through its functionality. The CSO is in the process of further analyzing research results to inform other process and tool adjustments.

The CSO's experience demonstrates how even targeted, small investments in user research can surface useful insights to inform strategy and product development.

5 Khagram, Sanjeev; Fung, Archon; De Renzio, Paolo. Open Budgets: The Political Economy of Transparency, Participation, and Accountability. *Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.* April 5, 2013

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS

This research study surfaced several ways in which donors can support governance data actors toward realizing greater impact; many of the recommendations may also apply to broader transparency and accountability initiatives.

Donors play a central role in ensuring that efforts seeking to improve government accountability are impactful. This study surfaced several ways in which donors may be able to support governance data actors in.

- Developing products that are more responsive to user needs and political opportunities; and, as a result, are more likely to achieve greater adoption and impact.
- Encouraging interactions and coalitions across traditional stakeholder divides to build the understanding that is critical for constructive collaboration.
- Improving learning practices across the community to better identify and share what works and doesn't, and to help integrate them into operational practice.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Discourage a 'build it and they will come' mentality
2. Encourage systematic, scalable approaches to learning about users
3. Reduce the risk of "I am the user" syndrome
4. Develop strong social design capacities
5. Facilitate user peer exchange to grow the agency and influence of the data user community
6. Encourage cross-sector empathy building to strengthen learning processes and outcomes
7. Encourage grantees to develop learning agendas based on how target communities of practice actually operate
8. Set specific indicators and targets for tracking a grantee's contributions to broader community learning and process change
9. Steer learning efforts toward community-wide process change (beyond organizational learning and peer exchange)

Develop products that are more responsive to user needs and political opportunities

1. Discourage a 'build it and they will come' mentality

Civic technologists are becoming increasingly skilled at assessing user needs and creating tools to address these needs. However, many continue to assume or anticipate the needs of broadly defined user groups and lack formal processes to test their assumptions. As a result, many tools produced struggle to achieve broader usage and adoption. Resources are invested in their creation and then on incremental technical improvements, but with little evidence of how they influence government decision-making. To discourage the 'build it and they will come' approach, donors can:

Tie grantee support to workplans that prioritize users early and often. Donors can motivate grantees to allocate resources to foundational research and design through contracting mechanisms that require it periodically. A common behavior of grantees who build technological tools is to recognize the importance of user research, but prioritize other technical tasks. It is critical for rigorous user research to precede and inform tool design, and donors can stage-gate support to prompt these activities.

Encourage grantees working on early prototypes or nascent ideas to define and test their use-cases before tools are fully built. Risk aversion often leads donors toward grantees who are comfortable in demonstrating the functionality of their tool. While these potential grantees may make the most convincing pitch, they may also be too far into development to integrate new lessons about users or specific use-cases. Early designs and open questions don't necessarily mean high risk. Instead, donors can see them as opportunities to reduce medium- and long-term risk by using design research to determine precise use cases.

2. Encourage systematic, scalable approaches to learning about users

Governance data initiatives often identify and learn about users through passive, ad-hoc methods. Some limit their scope of inquiry to a subset of presumed users. Many rely on feedback mechanisms that are informal and therefore difficult to strengthen or scale. In this way, initiatives will continue to understand data use through a narrow and potentially misleading lens. To support broader thinking and new practices, donors can:

Encourage grantees to conduct foundational research and development (R&D). The social sector often expects foundational R&D to be completed by the time a group is seeking funding. The funding models for many social organizations then makes it difficult for them to invest in strong R&D; as such, proposals are often filled with untested assumptions. Once funded, grantees are then expected to execute against their proposal and often lack the incentives, resources, and processes to look beyond or pursue alternatives to their early thinking. (By contrast, the private sector tends to make significant investments in R&D at the start of a product's development process, and then continuously over its lifecycle.) Donors can fund early and deep R&D work to ensure initiatives are grounded in (and executing against) an empirically derived understanding of users.

Help grantees select and sequence research, design, and testing approaches, and ensure they are being deployed under a cohesive strategy. Qualitative, macro-view research (e.g. focused on the landscape in which the intervention will operate) is most useful at the start of a project to assess opportunities and set direction. It can also be used to refresh or redirect strategy. Conversely, quantitative, micro-view research (e.g. focused on the mechanisms of and

interactions with the intervention) is more suitable at a later stage to select execution options or refine approaches. User feedback, whether qualitative or quantitative, is best when continuously collected and integrated into ongoing implementation. Donors can help grantees determine which approaches are most appropriate at which stage of their process, as well as learn how to both build successful feedback mechanisms and integrate inputs to ongoing program adjustments

3. Reduce the risk of "I am the user" syndrome

The governance data community recognizes the value of a user-oriented approach to strategy and design. As a result, some hire presumed data users into their teams. This model, however, risks supplanting formative (and often expansive) design research with direction from a single user group. The "I am the user" syndrome may bias work toward needs derived from a limited set of experiences. To reduce this risk, donors can:

Encourage diversity in grantee staffing of and interaction with data users. The more user perspectives represented in an organization, the more likely it is to apply a user experience lens to its work. Donors' wide networks put them in strong positions to identify appropriate user candidates for hire. While hired users should contribute to designing interactions with data and data products, they should not overly influence direction-setting around priority users and use cases. Donors can help identify and introduce a wider array of potential data users to expand grantees' fields of vision.

Set targets for grantees related to identifying a broad and precise set of user needs. Donors can incentivize work through goal setting; 'depth of design research' can be one useful category for target-setting. Ways to assess the quality and depth of design and user research work includes: demonstrated understanding of target issue's historical context; depth of political economy analysis; complexity of relationships surfaced between influential actors; sample size of potential users engaged; range of user needs surfaced; and ability to map a coherent path to influencing target outcomes that engages more than one actor group.

4. Develop strong social design capacities

Governance data actors are interested in user-centered design, but lack appropriate guidance on how to execute such a process. This is unsurprising given that design practices from the corporate sector are ill-suited for the social sector; for example, robust political analysis is rare or wholly absent.

To enable appropriate adaption and application of design practices, donors can:

Provide grantees with operational guidance and resources—not just general principles—on how to execute design approaches in the social sector. For grantees working on issues of transparency and accountability, a politically grounded approach is critical for designing appropriate interventions. Traditional design approaches—often derived from corporate product or service design—do not account for complex governance ecosystems and processes and, as such, will frustrate them. Capacity building for implementing design practices requires 'learning by doing'; donors can help grantees by connecting them to external experts in these approaches to train them and to shepherd hands-on learning processes.

Encourage interactions & coalitions across traditional stakeholder divides

5. Facilitate user peer exchange to grow the agency and influence of the data user community

While many data actors have banded together around shared challenges and approaches to work, current and potential users of governance data—who may be operating in isolated contexts, or are competing over the same limited set of financial resources—lack this cohesion. The result is a community of actors working in similar ways around similar issues, but with little coordination and hence, at times, redundant efforts. Moreover, influencing internationally defined data agendas is difficult without a unified front. Donors can help to address these challenges in the following ways:

Develop inter-donor knowledge sharing platforms to discuss and support coordination mechanisms for data user grantees. Many donors are supporting governance data users working in different countries, across issues areas, and with varying levels and types of datasets. Sharing information around grantees' work can help determine which of them might benefit from informal introductions to one another, or from exploring more formal partnerships.

Support grantees in translating virtual, broad-based stakeholder communities into intentionally interactive user networks. Many loose networks of governance data stakeholders, such as online communities of practice, operate without much guidance. They can be disentangled and appropriate subsets can be intentionally formed. One way of doing this is to bring together user groups who are participating in established online communities and have them co-design new ways of growing their influence. Donors can support this through asking appropriately resourced grantees to coordinate fora to advance these objectives.

6. Encourage cross-sector empathy building to strengthen learning processes and outcomes

'Othering' is a natural human tendency, and stakeholders involved in governance processes are no different. Many that sit outside of government see government actors primarily as targets of advocacy and not also as potential allies. Those in government view outside parties as actors pushing for change with limited understanding of institutional constraints or reform processes. This can prevent governance data actors from constructively engaging with one another.

Efforts aimed at increasing government accountability are often led by actors that, paradoxically, are reluctant to engage with government. Lack of engagement across sectors can result from limited understandings of the context in which an unfamiliar counterpart operates. There are few incentives to encourage cross-pollination of ideas or ways of working across sectors, but donors can help grantees establish more constructive ways of learning about, and working with, different counterparts:

Facilitate cross-sector understanding through immersive research and learning methods. To design a compelling pitch to, or realistic ask of, government, governance data actors need to first understand the interests, processes, and capacities of the institutions they seek to influence. There are several ways of doing so. Some include institutional ethnography and design research done by embedding in government offices, or fellowship programs that bring civil society leaders into government for a time-bound posting or assignment. Two examples of the latter approach are Code for America in the United States and the Agentes de Innovación fellowship in Mexico. Deeper research or direct experience with government can help civil society actors better understand how government works. This will help them target the right actors and processes, and develop compelling messaging and proposals that appeal to their counterparts' interests and are mindful of their constraints.

Offer evidence on the concrete benefits of cross-sector collaboration. Multi-stakeholder collaboration sounds good in theory, and many are willing to try. But efforts are often abandoned once actors experience the pain of doing so without a clear sense of the payoff. After all, working with diverse actors with differing mandates and interests can be a time-consuming, long, and challenging process.

Donors can help grantees understand the enablers and potential outcomes of successful multi-stakeholder efforts. They can do this by commissioning a review of successful past efforts or deep process research into ongoing efforts. The former helps build a body of evidence to encourage actors to collaborate, while the latter can help provide insights on how to do so (e.g. specific protocols and mechanisms for partnership).

Improve learning practices across the community

7. Encourage grantees to develop learning agendas based on how target communities of practice actually operate

"Contributing to learning" can take many forms and organizations often go about it in ways that are familiar to them. Common outputs include: online repositories of case studies, academic white papers shared at 'brown bag lunches' or more formal 'launch' events, and webinars to present findings to an interested group of viewers. These approaches are the norm for most organizations, but they may overlook actors that are influential in their respective operating contexts who are not engaged in these communities of practice.

To address these challenges, donors can **encourage grantees to first pinpoint the sources and channels their target audiences use to get inspiration, design projects, and troubleshoot implementations.** Then, they can interview audiences to understand what makes these channels appealing—is it the selection of topics, the editorial tone, the frequency of new content, or other factors? From there, they can develop learning products and outreach strategies based on audience preferences, not organizational habit.

8. Set specific indicators and targets for tracking a grantee's contributions to broader community learning and process change.

Although it will be difficult to determine correlation and causation between a grantee's activities and wider system impact, setting targets and tracking progress will help grantees prioritize otherwise 'fuzzy' learning activities.

While indicators will, in most instances, track outputs instead of outcomes, donors can **invest resources in analyzing longitudinal changes in thought and practice among target communities of practice.** This measurement exercise can take the form of a process evaluation where incremental steps are defined and used for reflection at multiple points over time.

Take, for example, an online community of practice. Donors can specify ways of measuring 'community' activity—such as through relationships formed and offline engagements spurred between online participants. This will help to drive the initiative to tie immediate outputs (e.g. platform and social media creation) to long-term behavior change.

9. Steer learning efforts toward community-wide process change (beyond organizational learning and peer exchange)

Often, learning for organizations is confined to internal parties or for exchange with peer groups who are familiar (at times, only because they are geographically convenient). There are challenges to influencing beyond one's known sphere of influence including the heavier investment needed to form new relationships, and the trade-offs that arise when allocating limited resources. Credibility in the eyes of the wider community of practice requires an ability to communicate how one has changed the status quo, but this takes time and incremental steps. Donors can help grantees change broader processes in the following ways:

Target support toward learning activities and deliverables in scopes of work. Doing so would be especially important in issue areas where organizations seem to be particularly siloed, there are few other incentives or channels for knowledge exchange, and/or where lessons from a specific organization would greatly benefit a larger community of practice. In communities studied, learning efforts are central to their agendas, however, they lack incentives to share concrete learning with the broader community in a significant way. The rewards of doing so are ambiguous, whereas the cost is clear: precious time

diverted from activities (e.g. fundraising) with more immediate, direct benefits. Donors have an opportunity to prioritize effective learning by supporting these activities in current and core strategic grantee workplans.

Introduce new ways of directing precision in understanding process change. Quantitative metrics and targets are often used to assess process change. For example, to understand the success of community building efforts, donors may select indicators relating to volume of social media engagement, of website visitors, or of case studies downloaded. Qualitative metrics, such as participant responses on a multi-stakeholder workshop, are also used. While these metrics are easy for grantees to report on and donors to review, they provide limited insight into whether and how different activities are contributing to larger process change.

Donors can encourage greater ambition in communications activities armed at enabling wider process change. They can start, for example, by assessing, whether grantees prioritize audiences because they are an 'easy fit', or because they understand user behaviors and considerations of greatest impact. A grantee might target its webinar at the global open government community, a seemingly natural audience for its work. However, donors can ask for more granularity in audience selection based on the grantee's larger impact goals. For example, a government ministry that reserves a bi-weekly timeslot to discuss capacity building is more likely to integrate new learning into its workflow. If learning is to drive impact, not just stimulate conversation, this ministry may be the most suitable target audience.

LOOKING FORWARD

The study highlighted the need for governance data communities to better understand the influential actors and political contexts they seek to influence. Doing so may require wider adoption of strategic planning and program design approaches that appropriately account for the complexity of governance ecosystems and processes.

There is interest and appetite from governance data actors to build upon the strong work that they are currently doing, and to try and test new design approaches. Mechanisms for doing so include demonstration projects that support organizations in applying user-centered and politically grounded design approaches in product development and implementation.

Implementing such projects can happen through eager, influential multi-stakeholder initiatives that are invested in broader sector learning. This will help to ensure lessons from the demonstration projects are shared among wider communities of practices.