6th OECD Expert Group Meeting on Open Government Data

Open Data & Covid-19: Looking forward towards government readiness & reform

Summary Record

OECD Virtual Meeting
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"Open Data and COVID-19: Looking forward towards government readiness and reform"

The OECD Expert Group Meeting on Open Government Data takes place annually and brings together public officials from OECD member countries and non-member countries responsible for open government data policies. The 6th annual meeting, hosted on 11-12 June 2020 [GOV/PGC/EGOV/A(2020)1], focused on the role of open government data policies in addressing COVID-19, and thereby forms part of the wider OECD effort to support countries as they tackle the pandemic and its economic and social ramifications.

The meeting benefited from the participation of 32 countries, including 26 OECD[1] member countries and 6 non-member countries.[2] Eight partner organisations participated, including the International Open Data Charter, Open Contracting Partnership, Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency, Inter-American Development Bank, Development Bank of Latin America, Open Ownership, the Open Government Partnership, and the Governance Lab at New York University (GovLab).

Data Blitz: collaborations with GovLab and the International Open Data Charter

The first session presented findings from the call for evidence launched by the OECD and GovLab on the release and use of open data to address the COVID-19 crisis[3] . In addition, in-sights are drawn from the international collaboration led by the OECD and the International Open Data Charter to identify data needs and develop an Open COVID-19 Data Taxonomy .[4]

It has been identified that open data initiatives to address COVID-19 are so far largely focused on immediate pandemic response, which resonates with the reports of the meeting partici-pants that the main purpose of open data initiatives to address COVID-19 are to communicate and share updates with the public (see Figure 1, Annex A). In line with the focus on pandemic response and communication, situational analysis remains at the core of current initiatives.

A noticeable challenge around Open COVID-19 data initiatives is that there appear to be few end-to-end projects. It signals the need for better taking into account data demand in the planning of open data release, and that there is also adequate support provided by governments to the re-use of these data.

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[1] Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.
[2] Argentina, Brazil, Georgia, Peru, Qatar and Uruguay.
[3] See https://www.oecd.org/internet/digital-government/use-of-open-government-data-to-address-covid19-outbreak.htm
[4] See https://medium.com/opendatacharter/open-covid-19-data-461e1cbefbba

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the need of good public sector data governance. Although countries with more mature open data policies in general have taken an "open data by default' as opposed to 'information by default' approach, most countries are facing the same type of challenges in relation to insufficient data governance frameworks and practices. For example, although a large majority of OECD countries have included the implementation of open data initiatives at the local/regional level as part of their open data policies,[5] the COVID-19 crisis has revealed difficult challenges in coherent and coordinated release of public health data, as well as other critical data of public interest.

The need to advance mechanisms and standards that can facilitate the outreach to relevant stakeholders in times of crisis has become evident. International collaboration to identify the types of data that can be categorised as "high-value" in a crisis and support readiness, response, recovery and reform policies has become a priority. Standardised data management would also help increase cross-government, multi-level government and cross-border interoperability of and for public sector data sharing, a key instrument for leveraging data to respond to a global crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis has further stressed the value of open data for policy inclusion, including the ability to analyse rapidly the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable communities and minorities. While the analysis of data has been at the heart of public sector response, the interpretation of different data is still largely fragmented, which calls for more attention to the communication of open data and need for increasing data skills across society.

Breakout sessions

Four parallel breakout sessions were organised on broad topics relevant for open government data policies to aid in crisis response. The sessions allowed delegates to divide into smaller groups, thereby facilitating the direct exchange of practices and experiences around the questions and challenges covered as part of the sessions.

Data and its purpose: Governments as publishers of open data

The discussions on demand-driven data publication focused on the need for governments to consult both internally and externally on the types of data needed given the different national contexts in COVID-19 responses. Relevant data can be separated into those already available (e.g. census and national statistics), and data that needs to be collected or consolidated for public release. Communication and visualisation of the available data is an additional aspect relevant for targeting different demands. A key point is considering the data source and reflect on how users may become aware of the data and its potential use, regardless of it being collected with the explicit purpose of addressing COVID-19 or not.

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[5] See page 3 in https://zenodo.org/record/3978270#.X0ytZ8gzY2w

Other insights from the session concerned the heavy reliance on external actors to aggregate and release timely, comprehensive and relevant open government data on COVID-19 (for example the [COVID-19 Dashboard by the CSSE at Johns Hopkins University](#) and the [Our World in Data](#) website). While governments are holders of large amounts of the needed data (e.g. testing, confirmed cases, health care capacity, fatality rates), there are still gaps in terms of having the right competences, skills, resources and governance frameworks in place to know how to effectively use that data and make it available.

This applies also to the critical need for enhanced collaboration among health authorities, digital government and data bodies, and National Statistical Offices – across local, regional, national government levels - to secure the generation, consolidation and aggregation of scattered data, and the publication of interoperable data through coherent processes that promote data consumption.

In line with the above, the need for consistent cross-government and multi-level standards is key. Seeing the large media coverage and debate around the comparability of data (e.g. the comparison of d and infection rates across different countries), the standardisation of data management and publication procedures during crises like COVID-19 is highlighted. As governments and public agencies vary in their level of open data maturity, it is important for clear and concise standards to be established and adopted. With the sometimes complex allocation of public service delivery (including public health) across government levels, the crisis has also emphasised the benefits in issuing multi-level government standards to reinforce national crisis management. In relation to sound data governance and the ethical release of open data, arguments were raised on the need to appropriately balance data protection compliance with the release of granular open data on COVID-19, and without making this an excuse to not publish relevant government data.

Data and its purpose: Governments as users of open data

The second breakout session discussed the different mechanisms in place to facilitate the access to, sharing and use of relevant data from external sources by governments in responding to COVID-19.

The systematic use on non-governmental open data by governments is rare. In general, there is a need to make non-government data a more integrated part of crisis response and data governance frameworks. External actors, including news companies, mobile providers, banks, and supermarkets, collect a wide range of relevant data that can inform governments about habits, opinions, lifestyle and consumption patterns, and thereby provide the basis for a more evidence-informed policy response.

For non-government data to become part of governments' crisis response there are several challenges and questions that need to be addressed. One of these is clarifying data demand. Another is to document the positive impacts of data sharing for both governments and external actors to establish clear incentives. It was argued that the sharing and opening up of data by non-governmental actors could come with some immediate concrete benefits, for example in the fiscal area.

In order to establish effective and sustainable cross-sector data collaborations, leadership, accountability, and updated regulations and protocols are essential. For instance, specialised teams or individuals could act as data stewards and take on the responsibility for projects concerning the access to, sharing and use of external data. Governments should also evaluate whether existing data protection regulations are sufficiently adapted to allow for the re-use of personal data [as collected by both governments and external stakeholders] through solid anonymization techniques, and security and permission protocols.

Finally, there is an urgent need for establishing direct channels and platforms that facilitates a discussion about non-governmental open data and data sharing with relevant external actors. This could be realised through the hosting of open data events, establishing governance bodies/advisory boards to leverage external advice and data as part of a government response, and by building specific integrated discussion platforms on the opening and reuse of non-government data.

To leverage the use of non-governmental open data and data sharing for crisis response, governments should take inspiration from existing Business-to-Business (B2B) model agreements for data sharing, and attempt to join these ecosystems with government registers. Additionally, governments could tap into the many platforms and innovative partnerships already initiated as part of COVID-19 response, both to learn from and to use as a basis for new partnerships on open data and data sharing.

Trust – Open data and financial integrity

The session focused on how open data can strengthen financial integrity of public institutions as they respond to various crises and emergencies, with lessons drawn from the COVID-19 crisis.

Although open data is often part of transparency policies and programs, meaningful transparency should aim to concretize and address the most pressing issues that affect public trust. Governments' COVID-19 crisis responses have not been as transparent as expected, something that causes concern seeing that emergency projects are particularly vulnerable to corruption and fraud.

While data on public health budgets and emergency contracting are being made available by an increasing number of governments in response to COVID-19, other types of data related to public finance, such as changes in market demand (oil prices, taxes, resources, revenues), have remained relatively unaddressed. In the fiscal sphere, transparency issues can be partly explained due to unexpected changes in the middle of fiscal years and the lack of data infrastructure to publish and gather relevant data effectively.

Governments need to secure improve financial transparency as part of crisis readiness and securing public trust. However, open public finance data is not only

important for transparency, but can also serve as an effective tool for safeguarding efficient allocation of public resources, identifying fiscal risks, strengthening information channels, preventing corruption, and for increasing public participation.

Successful cases of open data publication [in relation to public finance] have often adopted a user-driven approach. In many of these cases, governments have asked external actors what kind of data they need. Listening to users to identify the right data and formats, and establishing coalitions of change with Ministries of Finance (MoFs) and other relevant actors within government has proven critical.

To ensure timely and high-quality data, the role of data governance to set up the right infrastructure and horizontal coordination between MoFs and open data coordinating agencies is important. This includes analysing how open by default can be integrated into broader financial management integrity system and procurement processes. Another element is to work more closely with data protection offices, and securing technical and operational skills related to data security and data ethics. COVID-19 has demonstrated that lacking data infrastructure has proven a major weak point the use of data by governments, which leads to less effective data-driven responses to emergencies and crises. Governments need to evaluate and rethink what they want to get out from open data and what data infrastructure they need to make that happen.

The foundations – Data governance in times of crisis

The session focused on the role of data governance in securing effective release and use of open government data as part of crisis management.

The COVID-19 crisis has shed new light on many of the organisational and cultural challenges for establishing a data-driven public sector. It includes the need to coordinate rapidly with different ministries and actors to collect data, which has proven a big challenge in a public health crisis, since public health data are commonly collected and held by regional and local government authorities.

Varying levels of sensitivity to the need of data standardisations also poses a major challenge. The willingness to standardise data is not only related to resources and skills, but also to whether public sector organisations view themselves as data owners or data custodians. As culture

and habits are part of making open data possible, ensuring a data governance framework that addresses these questions is increasingly important. Although multi-level governance will always be an issue, there needs to be more leadership, guidance and collaboration, and for officials at the central and local levels to agree

on central concepts related to data ownership and its use.

The cultural and organisational challenges to data-driven responses within governments are also affected by the need for balancing data protection and data re-use. In some countries, there have been rollbacks in terms of incompliance with data protection regulations. In others, laws for access to information and data protection are not always both in place simultaneously, which may cause an imbalance towards one of these crucial regulations. While for many countries within the European Union, the GDPR framework has formed an important basis for managing and sharing personal data, it is increasingly recognized as an impediment to rapid deployment of data-driven responses and innovation. A central instrument missing for government bodies responsible for open data when complying with these frameworks as part of crisis response was the management and use of sensitive data, including how to ensure the anonymization of personal medical data.

With emergency laws and regulations enacted to facilitate crisis responses, there are critical concerns raised over democratic legitimisation. In many cases, arguments are divided into having a crisis responses that either protects public health, or democracy and personal privacy. Good data governance should facilitate the achievement of both objectives at the same time. Privacy by design is criti-

cal, and having policies, regulations and frameworks in place that promotes data ownership and privacy of citizens, while at the same time encourages agile and responsive crisis management enabled by enhanced access to and sharing of government data.

Apart from addressing concerns with personal privacy, data governance is essential to establish and strengthen the coordination and collaboration needed to identify what data should be collected, shared, released and used during the different stages of the pandemic. For instance, as discussed in the introduction of the meeting, this could be supported by creating special teams to steer the "data management" of crises, and to work across policy sectors, and to report directly to the national crisis function of the country. It would also include working closely with skilled professionals (including data scientists) to put forward immediate and well-thought data-driven government responses.

In line with the more technical and tactical elements of data governance, good data governance supports scalable and shareable data infrastructure that would facilitate data-driven decision-making in times of crisis. In addition, the lacking alignment of national data governance frameworks and infrastructure for data sharing impedes cross-border and national data-driven crisis response, which have proven to be critical for effectively facing a global crisis of this scale.

Where do we go from here?

A majority of OECD governments consider the biggest challenge related to the release of open data in response to COVID-19 to be technical, with the lack of sound data infrastructure, standards and interoperability. At the same time there are reported challenges in leadership and strategy in prioritising data and effectively coordinating open data with central health authorities, prime minister's offices and local governments. These hurdles indicate that

data governance and open data policies need to be further developed and adapted for crisis management.

To strengthen the release and use of open data in crises, short and long run deliverables should be set. In the short run this includes data release, stakeholder engagement and communication. In the long run, organisational capacity should be strengthened and gov-ernments should invest in mapping and displaying the benefits, costs and incentives of open government data. An additional possible long-term action is making open data an integrated part of health policies.

Delegates agreed that OECD best could help them in addressing the above challenges through practical toolkits, local government assessments and broader regional work.

Updates from the OECD Secretariat

The OECD Secretariat shared updates on its work on open data, including plans for the 2021 edition of the Open, Useful and Re-usable data (OURdata) Index, the progress in the devel-opment of the draft Recommendation on Enhanced Access to and Sharing of Data (EASD) [COM/DSTI/CDEP/STP/GOV/PGC(2020)1] and the draft Good Practice Principles for Data Eth-ics in the Public Sector. The Secretariat also shared plans on an upcoming project on open government health data and public communication.

Delegates were invited to share their comments to the draft Good Practice Principles for Data Ethics in the Public Sector by June 19th, 2020, and to express their potential interest in participating in a new taskforce on open data for revising the OECD Open Government Data Survey by June 26th 2020.

Annex A.

Programme

Opening Remarks:

- Janos Bertok, Acting Director, Public Governance Directorate, OECD
- Barbara Ubaldi, Deputy Head of the Open and Innovative Division and Head of Digital Government and Data Unit, OECD

Moderators:

- Barbara Ubaldi, Deputy Head of the Open and Innovative Division and Head of Digital Government and Data Unit, OECD
- Arturo Rivera Perez, Policy Analyst, Digital Government and Data Unit, OECD
- Benjamin Welby, Policy Analyst, Digital Government and Data Unit, OECD
- Felipe González-Zapata, Policy Analyst, Digital Government and Data Unit, OECD

Speakers:

- Stefaan Verhulst, Co-Founder and Chief Research and Development Officer, The GovLab
- Ania Calderon, Executive Director, Open Data Charter
- Arturo Muente-Kunigami, Innovation for Citizen Services, Inter-American Development Bank (IADB)
- Paul Stone, Open Data Programme Lead, NZ Open Data Programme, Statistics New Zealand, New Zealand
- Enrique Zapata, Principal Specialist Digital Innovation of the State, Development Bank of Latin America (CAF)
- Aleš Veršič, Head of Open Data Portal, Information Society and informatics Directorate, Ministry of Public Administration, Slovenia
- Juan Pablo Guerrero Amparán, Network Director, Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT)
- Lorena Rivero, Manager for Technical Collaboration and Cooperation, Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT)
- Sergio Pancorbo, Leader Digital Services, Secretary of Digital Government, Prime Minister's Office, Peru
- Nati Carfi, Deputy Director, Open Data Charter
- Mathilde Hoang, Open Data Officer, Etalab, Ministry of Economy and Finance, France
- Karine Badr, Policy Analyst, Open Government Unit, OECD
- Cecilia Emilsson, Junior Policy Analyst, Digital Government and Data Unit, OECD.
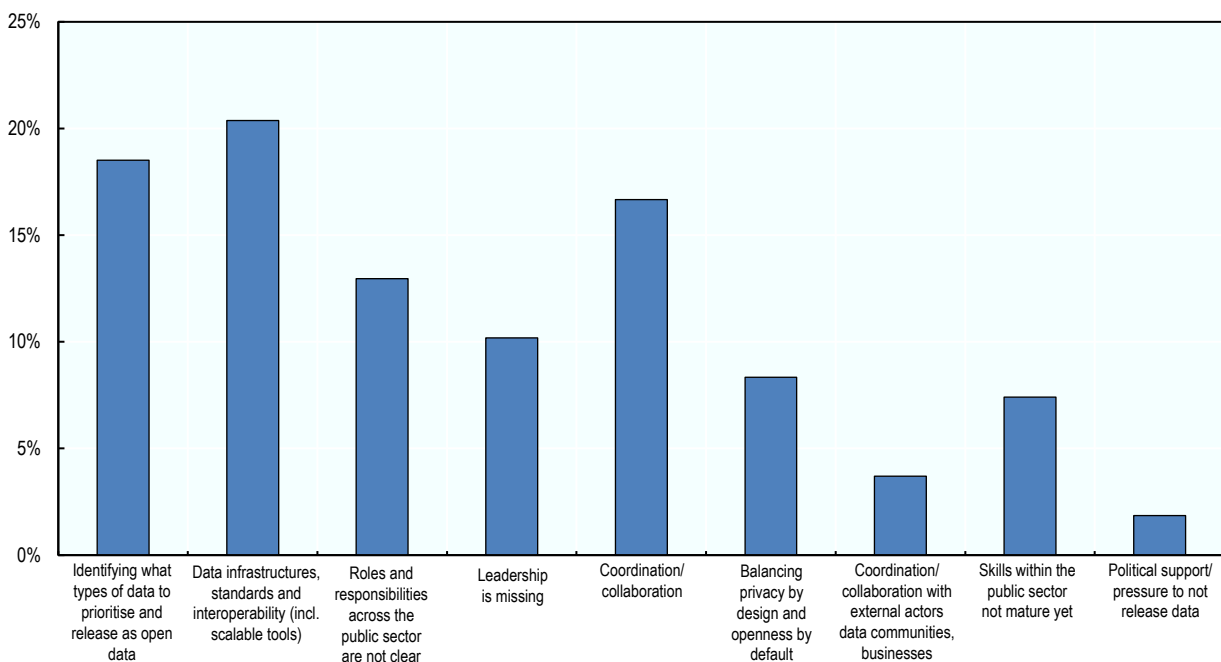
Results of live polls

Figure 1. What has been the main purpose of open data initiatives as part of responding to COVID-19?
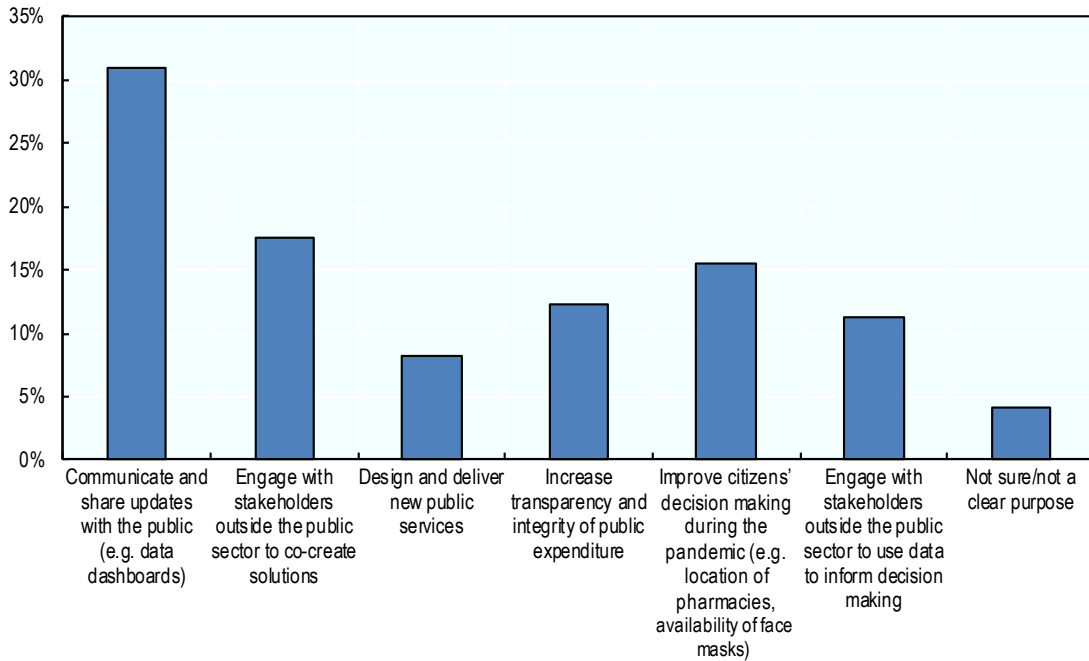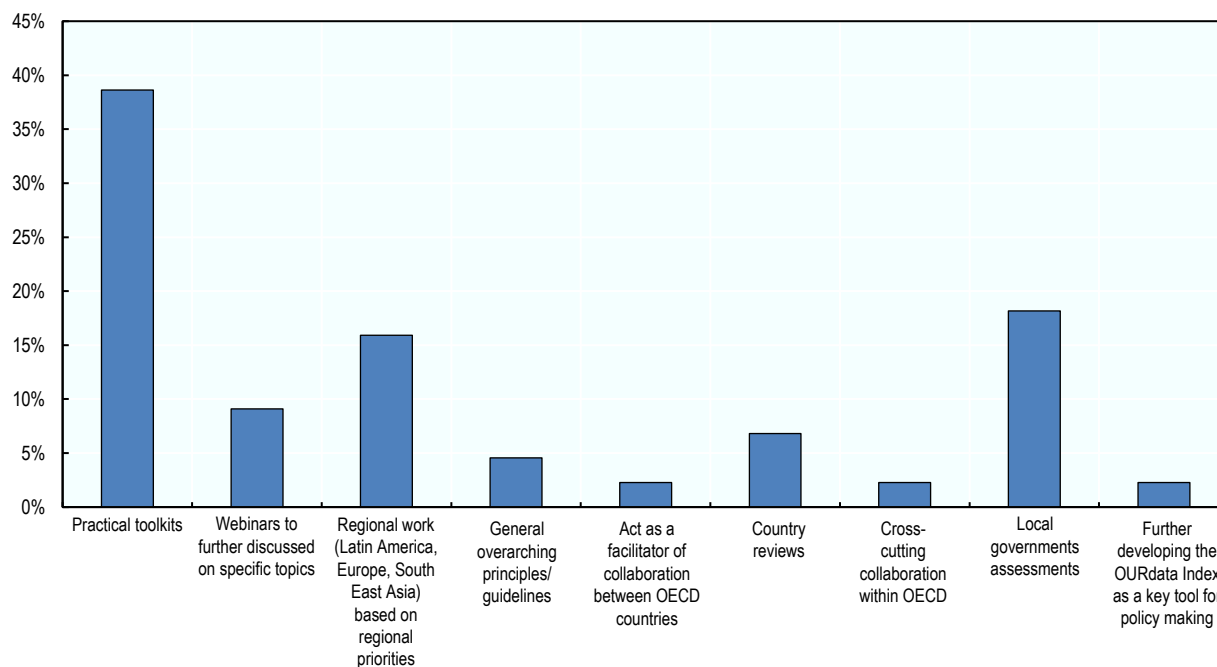

Note: Respondents could choose max two options. 100 % does not equal votes of all the meeting participants.

Figure 2. What have been the three biggest challenges in using open data policies as part of crisis response?

Note: Respondents could choose max three options. 100 % does not equal votes of all the meeting participants.

Figure 3. Looking forward, in what form can the OECD best assist you in solving the challenges mentioned today?

Note: Respondents could choose max two options. 100 % does not equal votes of all the meeting participants.

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