Continuing the Momentum: Open Debate on Open Data

What is Open Data? Why and For Whom Open Data? This open debate on Open Data is required say open data enthusiasts. An interaction programme with Chief Commissioner of National Information Commission, Krishna Hari Banskota was organized by Open Nepal on the importance of Open Data on May 5, 2016. This Special Series captures summary of the interaction event, introduction to Open Data, Open Data Initiatives Globally and in Nepal, its importance and key aspects to ponder about when endorsing this concept.

Interaction Programme on Open Government Data in Nepal

An interaction programme with Chief Commissioner of National Information Commission, Krishna Hari Banskota was organized by Open Nepal on the importance of Open Data on May 5, 2016. The programme was organized to raise the concerns and recommendations of civil society on issues related to Open Government Data as well as providing a forum for open data enthusiasts to share their experiences on accessing and using government data in Nepal.

The discussion surrounded on data accessibility, reluctance from the government agencies to provide data and the lack of availability of data in user-friendly format and the need for the **data generation benchmarking across the ministries** for standardization and uniformity. Responding to such queries, The Chief Information Commissioner Banskota admitted the lack of stewardship shown by the government to promote open data practice in Nepal. However, he also pointed out the need for awareness at the public level – especially the educated section of the society to be more proactive in terms of seeking information and promoting **demand for information and data** rather than just criticizing the incompetency in the supply of data. He also opined that data can be generated only when we encourage the **practice of documentation** that helps in regularity of data generation.

Mr Banskota also urged the media to be cautious about the right to information and the subsequent effects that the openness of data could create such as encouraging **'yellow journalism'**. On the other hand, he also stressed upon the need not just to focus on openness of data but also the **accuracy of data** so that the data generators who produce and disseminate accurate data are encouraged while those who produce and disseminate wrong data are punished.

What is Open Data?

Open data is the idea that some data should be freely available to everyone to use and republish as they wish, without restrictions from copyright, patents or other mechanisms of control. *In other words,* it *is* the *data that can be freely used, re-used and redistributed by anyone - subject only, at most, to the requirement to attribute and share alike.* Data can be used as a tool to enable governments, donors and other actors to allocate financial resources more effectively to improve development outcomes and end poverty. It can empower citizens to advocate for change, help ensure their needs are reflected in public policy, and drive quality and provision of public services. And it contributes to transparency and accountability of resource flows and everyone is able to see what is being spent where and on what.

Global Open Data Movement

International Open Data Day is a gathering of citizens in cities around the world to liberate data, create open map and write software applications to analyze, visualize and publish the results. The event is an effort to show support for and encourage the adoption of open data policies by the world's local, regional and national governments. Open Data Day is a yearly event that takes place in numerous cities around the world that brings together organizations and citizens based on shared enthusiasm for Open Data.

The open data global movement is a combination of the current trends: the upsurge in global internet connectivity, the rise of citizen engagement and community-centered development, advances in technological computation, and the more systematic collection of more data points. As it relates to government, open data includes socioeconomic indicators, budget information, elections, public services, and more. However, these datasets are so large and complex that they are often hard to collate and analyze, or even upload. Well-meaning actors can invest significant resources into uploading data but the initiative can self-destruct if data is held captive in non-machine-readable format (i.e. PDF files), if there is no plan for regular updates of the datasets, or if there is no guide for accessing and using databases.

In Asia, the open data movement is considered fairly nascent. Though the number of internet users in the region has gone from 418 million in 2007 to over 1 billion in 2012, some governments have been slow to open their decision-making processes and data repositories. Freedom of Information (FOI) or Rights to Information (RTI) Acts are important legislative tools that help build a culture of government transparency and accountability, and a strong backbone for the sustainability of open data initiatives. India, South Korea, and Hong Kong passed such acts in the late 1990s, recognizing the right of their citizens to access state-held public information. More recent enforcements of FOI Acts in Bangladesh (in 2009), Indonesia (in 2010), Mongolia (in 2011), and the Philippines (expected this year) will hopefully herald more open government data portals as well as initiatives by non-state actors. One such project is Open Cities, which aims to gather asset and exposure data in South Asian mega-cities to facilitate the creation of tools and applications that improve urban planning and disaster resilience. Open Nepal is another civil society initiative which features 68 datasets across 19 sectors on its website, with a focus on increasing foreign aid transparency and development budgets.

Open Data Movement in Nepal

The central government of Nepal has been slowly adopting open data as a policy, and has shown commitment through projects such as the Aid Management Platform, Election Data, and interactive visualization available in National Planning Commission website. The enthusiasm is growing, but, has not yet spread to local governing authorities. The Local Open Data Index for Nepal will help in assessing the baseline of availability and nature of open data in Nepali cities. This will help to identify gaps, and plan strategic actions to make maximum impact.

On December 2015 Open Nepal Week brought together members of Nepal's open development community to begin a discourse around the agenda of Open Government. The event introduced, for the first time to civil society in Nepal, is a globally recognized key engine for achieving effective and

sustainable development - the Open Government Partnership (OGP). The event also discussed the role of open government in successfully achieving the recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), showcased the efforts of organizations working to promote transparency of Nepal Earthquake relief funds, and shared findings of the research studies dealing with post-disaster response.

Open Nepal

Open Nepal is an initiative to promote more effective development through the increased use of data and information. It aims to catalyze a revolution in data sharing and usage by building an inclusive information system in Nepal, supported by a dynamic community of stakeholders. It is a collaborative initiative bringing together the experiences and expertise of data suppliers, infomediaries and data users from across the country to help improve development in Nepal.

Together, Open Nepal and its partners aim to:

1. Stimulate greater demand for data by raising awareness of the role and potential of improved access to information, and specifically of open data.
2. Improve the availability and accessibility of useful data by supporting people to safely open up their data.
3. Increase the use of data through developing the capacity to use data, and by the provision of tools, skills and technical support.
4. Identify and share lessons, both nationally and internationally, about the demand for information, its role in supporting development efforts, and the opportunities, challenges and incentives for publishing and using data.
5. Support and grow an inclusive information system of data suppliers and users in Nepal by facilitation collaboration, partnership development, skill sharing and information exchange.

Open Access Nepal

Open Access Nepal (OA Nepal) has been successfully organizing advocacy and grass root campaigns in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. But with time, we felt the strong need of expanding our work outside the capital targeting a larger scale of students and researchers. Currently, OA Nepal is running a project "Open Access: Greater Reach for Research" wherein we are travelling to major universities of Nepal and some acclaimed colleges. OA Nepal will organize three open events in December 2015. One event will be organized in the capital city whereas the rest of the two events will be organized outside Kathmandu valley. OA Nepal will start establishing institutional repositories in Nepal from January 2016.

Open Data Day 2016

Open Data Day 2016 in Nepal was celebrated today on March 5 with a successful event organized by Open Nepal and Young Innovations Private Limited with the support of various government, non-government stakeholders and technology and open data enthusiasts.

Bibhusan Bista, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Young Innovations Private Limited (YIPL) highlighted how the current practice of managing and publishing data in inaccessible formats such as PDF files needs to be changed. He highlighted that the current open data enthusiasts need to advocate on the accessibility and openness of data as he felt that the "crowd has the power to change the scenario". He opined that talks, discussions and discourses on open data is not just limited to technology enthusiasts but a wide spectrum of stakeholders from data generators (researchers) to policy makers

Krishna Hari Banskota, Chief Commissioner of National Information Commission during the pointed out the relevance of open data to promote and implement transparency and accountability and sustainability of national programmes prioritizing achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 2016-2030. The event was marked by presentations by several organizations working in the sector of opening up data, including HERD where Sudeep Uprety – Senior Officer, Research Uptake and Communications made a presentation about how publicly available news were collated and synthesized through a systematic media monitoring.

Importance of Open Data

Open data, especially open government data, is a tremendous resource that is as of yet largely untapped. Many individuals and organizations collect a broad range of different types of data in order to perform their tasks. Government is particularly significant in this respect, both because of the quantity and centrality of the data it collects, but also because most of that government data is public data by law, and therefore could be made open and made available for others to use. There are many areas where we can expect open data to be of value, and where examples of how it has been used already exist. There are also many different groups of people and organizations who can benefit from the availability of open data, including government itself.

It is already possible to point to a large number of areas where open data is creating value. Some of these areas include:

1. Transparency and democratic control
2. Participation
3. Self-empowerment
4. Improved or new private products and services
5. Innovation
6. Improved efficiency of government services
7. Improved effectiveness of government services
8. Impact measurement of policies
9. New knowledge from combined data sources and patterns in large data volumes

New combinations of data can create new knowledge and insights, which can lead to whole new fields of application. Further untapped potential can be unleashed if we turn public government data into open data. This will only happen, however, if it is really open, i.e. if there are no restrictions (legal, financial or technological) to its re-use by others. Every restriction will exclude people from re-using the public data, and make it harder to find valuable ways of doing that. For the potential to be realized, public data needs to be open data. Open government data can also help you to make better decisions in your own life, or enable you to be more active in society. Economically, open data is of great importance as well. Several studies have estimated the economic value of open data at several tens of billions of Euros annually in the EU alone.

Argument For and Against Open Data

The debate on Open Data is still evolving. The best open government applications seek to empower citizens, to help small businesses, or to create value in some other positive, constructive way. Opening government data is only a way-point on the road to improving education, improving government, and building tools to solve other real world problems. While many arguments have been made categorically, the following discussion of arguments for and against open data highlights that these arguments often depend highly on the type of data and its potential uses.

Arguments supporting Open Data:

1. "Data belong to the human race". Typical examples are genomes, data on organisms, medical science, and environmental data.
2. Public money was used to fund the work and so it should be universally available.
3. It was created by or at a government institution (this is common in US National Laboratories and government agencies)
4. Facts cannot legally be copyrighted.
5. Sponsors of research do not get full value unless the resulting data are freely available.
6. Restrictions on data re-use create an anticommons.

7. Data are required for the smooth process of running communal human activities and are an important enabler of socio-economic development (health care, education, economic productivity, etc.).
8. In scientific research, the rate of discovery is accelerated by better access to data.
9. Making data open helps combat "data rot" and ensure that scientific research data are preserved over time.

Arguments against making all data available as Open Data:

1. Government funding may not be used to duplicate or challenge the activities of the private sector (e.g. PubChem).
2. Governments have to be accountable for the efficient use of taxpayer's money: If public funds are used to aggregate the data and if the data will bring commercial (private) benefits to only a small number of users, the users should reimburse governments for the cost of providing the data.
3. The revenue earned by publishing data permits non-profit organizations to fund other activities (e.g. learned society publishing supports the society).
4. The government gives specific legitimacy for certain organizations to recover costs (NIST in US, Ordnance Survey in UK).
5. Privacy concerns may require that access to data is limited to specific users or to sub-sets of the data.
6. Collecting, 'cleaning', managing and disseminating data are typically labor- and/or cost-intensive processes – whoever provides these services should receive fair remuneration for providing those services.
7. Sponsors do not get full value unless their data is used appropriately – sometimes this requires quality management, dissemination and branding efforts that can best be achieved by charging fees to users.
8. Often, targeted end-users cannot use the data without additional processing (analysis, apps etc.) – if anyone has access to the data, none may have an incentive to invest in the processing required to make data useful (typical examples include biological, medical, and environmental data).

Conclusion

Data production, by itself, does not necessarily promote evidence-based decision-making. While improving quality, timeliness, and coverage is important, more should be done to enhance the ability of government officials to use their data effectively. Our findings strongly suggest that GoN officials can get more value from existing government data than they currently do. In sum, if the "Data Revolution" is going to improve development in Nepal, it will also need to be a Data Literacy Revolution.

Across the board, government officials lack both the capacity and incentives to use data more effectively. It is beyond our scope here to recommend structural changes to the public service, and we recognize that incentives are an extraordinarily difficult issue to address. However, we posit that a few well-placed data "champions" within the GoN may do much to change this mindset. High-level dialogue,

promoted and bolstered by senior officials within each sector, should focus on the importance of incorporating data analysis into planning and budgeting processes. These champions can praise and reward the officials who are best-poised to lead data uptake efforts and employ evidence-based decision-making. Carefully targeted training activities are the next important step toward enhancing effective use of data within GoN. The majority of study respondents stated clear demand for more analytical training. Such training could take a number of forms, but we sought to identify the sub-groups within GoN that stand to benefit the most from enhanced analytical skills. Furthermore, in Nepal, citizen participation and using open data often makes more sense and is more powerful at local level as it is local governments that handle all national and international projects for citizens and generates data from it. However, open data is still a new concept in Nepal and the central government has only just started releasing data, with data even less available at the local level.

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