

Policy Briefing

Lessons for Open Data for Development Programmes

Open data programmes – that support the access, distribution, and effective use of data by everyone for free – are a relatively new area in global development. As more initiatives emerge, there is a need for stronger evidence to inform effective design and implementation that can mitigate inequities in access and maximise the development potential of open data. To address this evidence gap, this *IDS Policy Briefing* draws lessons from a performance evaluation of the Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition (GODAN) initiative to make recommendations for funders and managers of similar open data development programmes, as well as for those influencing governmental or organisational data policy.

Key messages

- Open data programmes must address both political and technical drivers of change, combining political advocacy with technical capacity development.
- Open data ecosystems are complex. Programmes should invest time in understanding the needs and motivations of each stakeholder group, paying particular attention to those that may be marginalised.
- Focusing on influencing data policy in a particular sector (e.g. agriculture, education or health) may help ground conversations in empirical cases that demonstrate the potential of open data.
- Programmes must specifically address gender and other power imbalances in the effective use of open data, with concrete measures that secure equity.
- Policy change takes time and will require programmes to sustain policy and technical engagement over the long term.

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About GODAN

The **Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition** (GODAN) initiative aims to empower the open data ecosystem through high-level advocacy, deliver research and capacity building projects, and convene a global network of organisations that promote food security by opening up agriculture and nutrition data for everyone. The initiative aims to impact the lives of 12 million smallholder farmers around the world. In its first phase, GODAN had two components:

1. The **GODAN Secretariat** provides learning and high-level advocacy to promote policy and regulatory environments that support open data in the agriculture and nutrition sectors. It has established a network of over 1,000 institutional members globally and supported numerous open data initiatives.
2. **GODAN Action**, a consortium of seven partners that operated from 2016–20. GODAN Action focused on strengthening open data standards and interoperability, measuring the impact of open data initiatives and developing the technical capacities of a wide range of stakeholders.

Lessons for open data programmes

This *IDS Policy Briefing* draws lessons from a performance evaluation of both the GODAN Secretariat and GODAN Action, carried out from January–April 2020. The evaluation team surveyed respondents across 28 countries and interviewed 49 of GODAN's stakeholders, including staff members, network affiliates, funders, and external observers. The evaluation also included a literature review of the open data for agriculture and nutrition ecosystem.

The GODAN evaluation identified six lessons for other open data programmes and for those influencing organisational and governmental data policy. While these lessons draw on evidence from the agriculture and nutrition sectors, they may also apply to other sectors using open data.

Lesson 1: Address both the political and technical drivers of change

The production of data is the result of political decisions about what to record, which

inevitably reflects the priorities of decision makers. Open data is innately political and open data programming cannot be seen as a solely technical intervention. Programmes should combine political advocacy – to support an enabling policy and legislative environment for open data – with technical capacity development that builds skills and opportunities for innovation.

GODAN's work in Kenya provides a good example of this in practice. In 2017, the initiative convened the Nairobi Declaration, where 15 African ministers committed to open data collaboration in the nutrition and agriculture sectors – a significant political achievement. Alongside this, GODAN provided technical support to staff from Kenya's Ministry of Agriculture and delivered multiple training events. To effectively drive both political support and technical capacity for open data, programme managers should:

- Devise a theory of change that explicitly articulates how policy-influencing activities will support open data initiatives as well as facilitate new products and services – and crucially, lead to impact.
- Develop a communication strategy that builds awareness of the open data expertise across the network of stakeholders and identifies opportunities for collaboration between political and technical stakeholders, across local, national and regional levels.

Lesson 2: Take time to understand the programme's stakeholders

Open data programmes often operate within complex ecosystems. In the case of agriculture and nutrition, the sheer scale of the sectors and complexity of relationships between their many and overlapping specialist groups and sub-sectors, presented a challenge to GODAN. Programme managers should:

- Conduct a stakeholder analysis of relevant groups and organisations considering each stakeholder's needs, motivations, and resources. Plan how the programme will build and strengthen connections to

support data sharing across different parts of the ecosystem.

- Pay special attention to disadvantaged groups so that they do not get left behind.
- If the programme's theory of change relies on intermediary organisations to promote the benefits of open data to end users, ensure that this assumption is clearly articulated and measurable, including plans to build capacity where necessary.

Lesson 3: Generate evidence of the benefits of open data

Policymakers and funders require much stronger evidence of how open data effectively supports development outcomes. Developing an evidence base of the broader benefits (and limitations) of open data interventions can provide a useful entry point for engagement and expand the support base as well as adding value to advocacy efforts. Programme managers should:

- Develop illustrative case studies of impact that demonstrate the contribution and potential of open data and digital technologies.
- Track how different stakeholders access and apply specific open data tools and resources in their activities. For example, GODAN Action developed an impact evaluation approach to support open data initiatives to demonstrate the benefits and explain the processes and contextual factors that support success.
- Stronger emphasis on robust evaluations that demonstrate the social and economic impacts and explore the causal pathways of open data are needed.

Lesson 4: Find the right balance between breadth and depth of focus

Networks built around a common agenda, such as agriculture and nutrition, can have a strong convening power and create effective channels and entry points to political conversations around open data. Broader transparency and accountability campaigns, which advocate for governments to open up **all** of their data, can meet resistance or provoke backlash from governments. However,

GODAN's sector-specific agenda allowed it to circumvent certain politically charged conversations. Programme managers should:

- Clearly and consistently create a shared vision of what the programme is trying to achieve through its network building and engagement.
- Ensure that strategic decisions strike the right balance between the big picture vision and the depth of engagement needed to deliver on the details.
- Support communities of practice that create opportunities for communication and coordination to support innovation in response to shared challenges and emerging opportunities.

Lesson 5: Address power imbalances and marginalisation

The use of digital technologies can reflect and amplify existing power imbalances, such as those relating to gender, disability, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Open data initiatives have potential to actively redress power imbalances, but the benefits are unlikely to just 'trickle down' to marginalised groups. Proactive efforts and investment to specifically address gender dynamics, power imbalances, and other intersectional challenges will be required. To address this, open data programme managers should:

- Develop a strategy to address gender – or any other relevant power imbalances – from the start of the programme and regularly review its effects at every level of intervention.
- Build awareness and digital literacy ability among marginalised communities to enable them to make effective use of open data.
- Disaggregate monitoring data by gender and other relevant demographics to make sure interventions adequately meet the needs of all groups and measure progress over time.

Lesson 6: Embed sustained capacity on the ground

The pathway from advocacy to policy change and eventual implementation is

slow and complex. To strengthen global and national advocacy efforts over time, GODAN identified and supported national open data champions, who are implementing capacity building projects in their respective countries. For example, in Kenya and Ghana these champions are continuing to provide technical

support to government staff and other open data users. Programme managers should:

- Ensure sustained follow-up support is made available to local champions who advocate for policy commitments and provide technical support for open data initiatives in their regions.

Policy recommendations

Funders and managers of open data development programmes should:

1. **Address both the political and technical drivers of change.** Devise a theory of change that clearly explains how policy-influencing activities will promote technical innovation. Facilitate communication between stakeholders.
2. **Take time to understand the programme's stakeholders.** Analyse the motivations of different stakeholder groups and how the programme can meet their different needs. Strengthen connections between stakeholders and focus particular capacity building attention on marginalised groups.
3. **Be an evidence broker.** Decision makers require stronger evidence that open data can impact development outcomes.

Curate and synthesise evidence that demonstrates the usefulness of open data and digital technologies.

4. **Balance breadth and depth of focus.** A clear strategic vision is important for network building but sustained engagement is essential to deliver the benefits. Thematic specialisation can provide focus and help avoid politicised arguments for or against open data.
5. **Address power imbalances and marginalisation.** Develop clear strategies to address power imbalances, which are regularly monitored and reviewed.
6. **Embed sustained capacity on the ground.** Influencing open data policies takes time. Ensure follow-up and technical support are provided to local champions who are engaged in open data initiatives in their respective regions. ■

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Further reading

Clark, L.; Higdon, G.L.; Roberts, T.; Barnett, I.; Hernandez, K. and Martin, P.P. (2020) **Performance Evaluation of the Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition Programme**, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (accessed 10 September 2020)

Lokers, R.; Berdou, E.; Ayala, L.M. and Mey, L. (2019) **Guidelines for Analysing Pathways to Impact: Evaluation of Open Data for Development**, GODAN Action Learning Paper, Montreal: GODAN (accessed 10 September 2020)

Mey, L.; Berdou, E.; Ayala, L.M. and Lokers, R. (2019) **Open Data Impact Narratives – Stories of Impact of Open Data in Agriculture and Nutrition**, GODAN Action Learning Paper, Montreal: GODAN (accessed 10 September 2020)

Roberts, T. and Hernandez, K. (forthcoming, 2020) 'Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition: A Literature Review and Proposed Conceptual Framework', IDS Working Paper

This IDS Policy Briefing was written by **Louise Clark, Grace Lyn Higdon, Alan Stanley and Tony Roberts** and edited by **Sarah Nelson**. It was produced as part of the Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition (GODAN) initiative, funded by the former UK Department for International Development (DFID).

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or the UK government.

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ISSN 1479-974X