



Insights into Open Local Governance

A product of the Open LGU Research Project
(<http://www.lguopendata.ph>)

WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ARE APPREHENSIVE TO “OPEN” DATA

The provision of governance information related to local financial transactions in provincial government websites happened in the last two years because of one thing—the Full Disclosure Policy (FDP).

Implemented by the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), the policy requires local government units (LGUs) to post in websites the summary of revenues collected and funds received, disbursed, and appropriated; procurement –related documents; and status and use of funds and projects. For LGUs without websites, DILG launched the Full Disclosure Policy Portal (<http://fdpp.blgs.gov.ph/>) in November 2012, where local government units can post the required documents. Documents uploaded in this portal, and even in LGU websites, are PDF files or pictures, with little or no opportunity for user action besides printing, saving, and viewing.

FDP documents are not required to be published in machine-readable formats. However, documents required under FDP are all prepared using word processing or spreadsheet software. Thus, it is not additional work for local government units to publish them as such. But because LGU personnel fear that data integrity will be compromised, they took the initiative to convert files into PDF or picture format to “secure” them.

LGUs are afraid to share open data because they fear that what they will publish will fall into and be used by wrong hands. Data preparers do not want users to be tampering with the data. In a politically-charged environment especially during election season, this is the least that they would like to experience.

In the past, data suppliers experienced being

called by the media regarding documents that reporters were able to get from their office (or probably provided by politicians of opposing camps). They fear that things will become more complex when data are provided in open formats, as these can be easily changed or manipulated.



Image courtesy of <http://designpublic.in/blog/a-glance-at-open-governance/>

It is acknowledged that data in the hands of government is power and several reasons have been pointed out to refuse to open data – national security, personal privacy, breached confidentiality, among others (Peled, 2011). In the provinces of Bulacan, Bohol, and South Cotabato, the cases covered by this study, the understanding that publishing data in open formats diffuses the power of local governments to make sense of the data and allows others to exercise their own meaning-making, caused the heightened concern for data integrity and protection.

LGUs should be educated that publishing data in machine-readable format does not change the content of original documents, even when users tamper with those that are provided in the websites. Original documents will still be

the legally valid documents. They need to be assured that what subsist as valid data will be those that are contained in their current reporting systems. Anyone preparing false reports can easily be rebuked by original documents.

The fact that the national government already publishes data in open formats will serve as encouragement to local government units. While not all agencies are currently publishing data at <http://www.opendata.gov.ph>, the volume of national data sets that is already currently available will serve as proof to local LGUs that **publishing data in machine-readable formats does not harm the government.**

A more important question, however, that needs to be answered is on incentives. This is highlighted in others studies which suggest that at the local level, there is a need to illustrate the benefits of opening up data to civil servants (Conradi and Choenni, 2012) or to the interests of the agency (Helbig et al 2012).

In the context of the Philippines, the only incentive that exists is the award that DILG will confer to LGUs complying with the FDP. Thus, this is a difficult question to answer because the initiative is still very new, and cases to prove that benefits accrue to governments by opening up data are not yet available or widely communicated. **The challenge now is to accumulate these stories to provide evidence that indeed, open data results to positive benefits to leaders and their communities.**

Further Reading:

Conradi, P. and Choenni, S. 2012. Exploring Process Barriers to Release Public Sector Information in Local Governments. In 6th International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance. Conference Proceedings. Gil-Garcia, R., Helbig, N. and Ojo, E. Ed. Pg. 5-13. * Helbig, N., Cresswell, A., Burke, G. B., and Luna-Reyes, L. 2012. The Dynamics of Opening Government Data. The Research Foundation of the State University of New York * Peled, A. 2011. When Transparency and Collaboration Collide: The USA Open Data Program. Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology. 26:11. 2085-2094



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