LEVERAGING OPEN DATA FOR GREATER FISCAL TRANSPARENCY

FIVE STEPS TO HELP CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS
PUT OPEN DATA TO WORK

HOW-TO GUIDE

OPEN DATA LABS JAKARTA

WORLD WIDE WEB FOUNDATION

SEATTI | Southeast Asia Technology and Transparency Initiative

HOW-TO GUIDE:

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Five Steps to Help Civil Society Organisations Put Open Data to Work

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Open data is a powerful tool that could help civil society groups enhance their advocacy work, establish or strengthen their credibility, or ease their work by converting complex data into actionable information. Unfortunately, a vast number of organisations are still left unaware of open data and its potential.

This How-to Guide is intended for organisations with expertise in open data, who would like to help civil society groups strengthen their fiscal transparency work through open data. It is also intended for government agencies with established open data initiatives who want to strengthen user engagement and increase citizen participation. This How-to Guide was developed based on the lessons from the Web Foundation's Open Data Lab Jakarta project "Promoting the Use of Open Data to Strengthen Fiscal Transparency in Indonesia and the Philippines" (hereinafter OD4Transparency). The project was done with funding support from the Southeast Asia Technology and Transparency Initiative (SEATTI), and together with civil society partners from both countries. While we focused specifically on fiscal transparency, many of these lessons will have broad applicability.

The Open Data Lab Jakarta designs and tests approaches that harness the power of open data to address real problems. For more details about the project, please visit labs.webfoundation.org or contact us directly at info@labs.webfoundation.org.

In Southeast Asia, open data as a means for increasing public fiscal transparency is a new concept, although there is a long-standing tradition of holding governments accountable, which is typically achieved through participatory budgeting, social auditing, procurement monitoring, and budget analysis, usually undertaken by civil society organisations.

Open data is a powerful tool that could enable these same groups to be more effective in advocating for transparency, make social audits more efficient, or facilitate real-time procurement monitoring. By infusing open data into existing ways of working, civil society can discover new means of driving fiscal transparency and government accountability. We have created this guide to describe the steps we used to make this to happen in four pilot projects in Indonesia and the Philippines. ➔

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IDENTIFY A PARTNER ORGANISATION THAT HAS SPECIFIC SECTORAL EXPERTISE AND AN APPETITE TO LEARN AND ENGAGE USING DATA.

STEP 1

As a starting point, select one or more civil society organisations that are experienced, skilled, and established as credible in specific sectors and issues relevant to the project's theme. For example, in the case of the OD4Transparency project, we selected trusted groups whose work deals with fiscal transparency in their localities.

↘ PRACTICAL TIP

Identifying partners is an important step in this process. While an open call for partners is the easiest way, we find that conducting a rapid assessment of organisations with the right thematic expertise, searching for positive recommendations, and initiating preliminary discussions with potential partners will result in a better selection of potential partners to work with. Following this initial step, you should invite these partners to submit a proposal to respond to a well-defined terms of reference.

UNDERSTAND THE ISSUES THE PARTNER ORGANISATION TACKLES, THEIR PROCESSES AND APPROACHES, AND HOW OPEN DATA CAN ADD VALUE TO THEIR WORK.

STEP 2

Having picked an organisation with existing expertise in a specific sector, it is important at this stage to understand the organisation's actual capacities, strengths, and skills. This includes knowing how they use data in their work, and the level of technical skills of their personnel in using the Web, spreadsheets, or data analysis and visualisation software.

It is also critical to take a closer and deeper look at the issues they are tackling, and how open data could be leveraged to strengthen their activities and advocacy. For example, in one of our fiscal transparency projects, data processing techniques were used to save time in converting hardcopy budget and spending data to machine-readable formats, which were easier to analyse, translate into informative visuals, and share via online portals. Machine-readable data can also facilitate better analysis and provide insight by linking multiple datasets.

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↘ PRACTICAL TIP

The most critical thing at this stage is to understand the processes of the organisations selected in Step One, and how open data can have the biggest impact on their work. This can be done by reviewing previous projects by partners, conducting meetings, informal discussions, and visits to the partner's office or areas of work.

STEP 3

DESIGN A PILOT PROJECT THAT WILL BUILD CAPACITY AND HELP MAINSTREAM OPEN DATA IN THE WORK OF YOUR PARTNER ORGANISATION.

Using the findings from Step Two, design a capacity building program that has two specific objectives. The first is to build the open data capacity of the partner organisation. This leads to the second objective, which is to strengthen their sectoral expertise through the use of open data, by creating practical applications for their newly gained skills for their projects and in their particular contexts. With the OD4Transparency project, we found it best to do this by designing bespoke pilot projects with each of the individual organisations, suitable for their contexts and working environments.

Keep in mind that at the end of this capacity building process, it is important that the partner organisation is able to independently plan how they will use open data in their work.

↘ PRACTICAL TIP

A combination of trainings, on-site mentoring, and online coaching from key experts in the sector is desirable for effective capacity-building. Close assistance should be provided to the partners in conceptualising and designing their pilot projects, to ensure that it is in line with and would make use of their newly acquired open data knowledge and skills.

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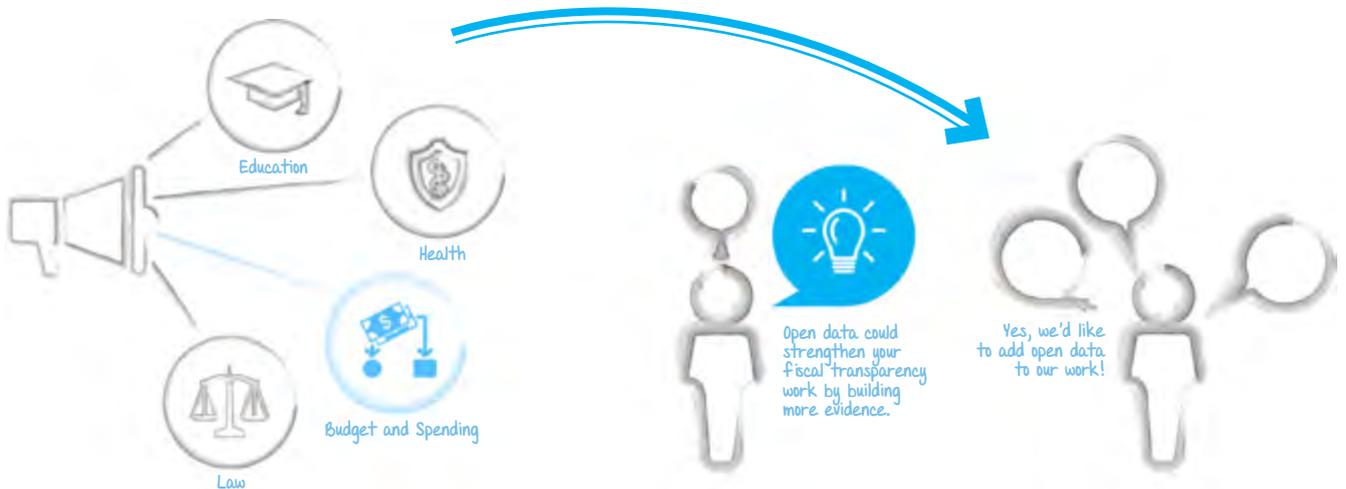
1 Identify a partner organisation with sectoral expertise and interest to grow their work using open data.

2 Understand their advocacies, processes, and approaches to see how open data could add value to their work.
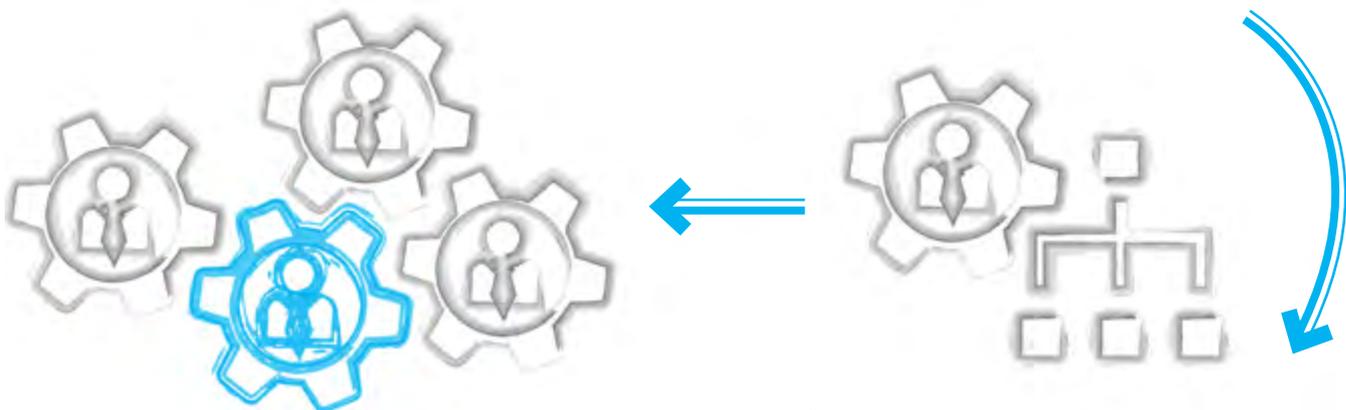
4 Jointly implement the pilot project and monitor its progress.

3 Design a pilot program that will build the capacity of the partner organisation and integrate open data in their work and processes.
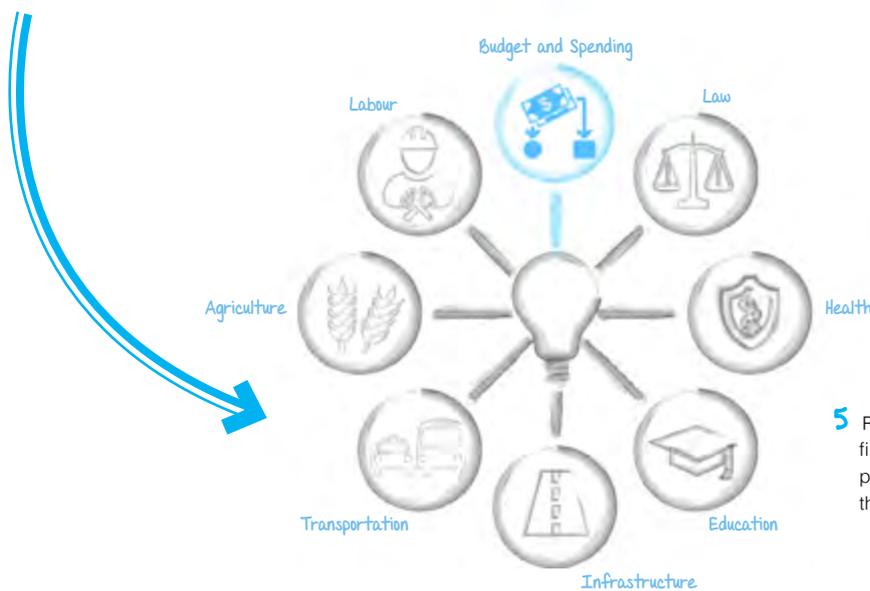
5 Reflect on the approach used and project findings to gather lessons learned, or to see possibilities for scaling the project or applying the experience to another project.

End

JOINTLY IMPLEMENT THE PILOT PROJECT, THEN MONITOR THE PROGRESS TO SEE, UNDERSTAND, AND EVALUATE OPEN DATA IMPACT.

Work together to implement the designed pilot project in Step Three. It will act as a test to see how effectively open data could be mainstreamed and integrated in the work of your partner organisation.

It is important that the project implementation is closely monitored for several reasons. First, it will allow for timely identification of problems and a search for appropriate solutions. Second, it will help you and your partner organisation identify any capacities or skills that need further strengthening, and thus support can be promptly provided. Third, the implementation poses an opportunity to assess the organisation's modifications in processes using new tools, and to gauge the impact of these changes on their work. Lastly, by tracking the progress, you will be able to evaluate the impact on citizen reach and engagement, particularly in regard to the specific social issue at hand, such as fiscal transparency.

↘ PRACTICAL TIP

Monitoring in this case is intended to assist partners in shaping or reshaping their pilot projects in a timely way. In the OD4Transparency project, we assigned experts as mentors for our partners. These experts regularly held meetings with them, while a project manager checked on their progress. Based on the results of these, we conducted monitoring visits that we also used as an opportunity to further build the capacity of the organisations to implement the projects better.
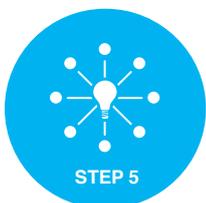
REFLECT ON THE APPROACH USED TO DETERMINE INSIGHTS AND LESSONS THAT COULD INFLUENCE FUTURE WORK.

For the last stage, reviewing and assessing your own and your partner organisation's experience of the pilot project implementation is crucial. In doing this, you can identify the strengths and weaknesses, as well as areas for future opportunities or threats.

For this step, there are two crucial questions to resolve. First, you need to objectively assess if the approach could be exercised by other civil society groups in the same but also in other sectors. This points to the adaptability of the method, and the ease by which other organisations could use and apply

it. Second, you need to know if the approach could be scaled by integrating it into the philosophy, activities, and implementation processes of your partner organisation. Affirmative answers to these two questions will indicate the value of open data in their work, as well as the sustainability of the approach within the organisation.

↘ PRACTICAL TIP

It is important that reflection processes are built into project implementation, so that you and your partner organisation can continuously look at processes, re-focus or re-design interventions, and solve challenges as they occur. In the OD4Transparency project, this was a process facilitated by mentors using a learning process guide.

We encourage you to test the approach outlined above so that we can build evidence of how the approach can work in different sectors and different contexts. If you have questions regarding this guide and its accompanying resources, email us at **info@labs.webfoundation.org**.

↘ If you want to learn more about the project, email us at **info@labs.webfoundation.org**

↘ If you want to look at other open data projects, see **labs.webfoundation.org**

↘ If you want to give it a try and implement the approach - with or without us - let's talk!

RESOURCES:

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You can find the resources we created, tested, and used for this project on our website at labs.webfoundation.org/resources. These include:

↘ Sample Workshop Design for Building Capacity of Partners

↘ Workshop Design for the Learning Workshop with Partners that we used for this project

↘ Sample Guide for Gathering Lessons Learned

We hope you find them as useful as we did! Feel free to download, use, and adapt them. Let us know if you have any suggestions for further resources, would like our insights to co-develop and make changes to any of these toolkits to fit your own projects, or simply want to give us feedback on them.

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