# FOSTERING GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY COLLABORATION THROUGH OPEN DATA

**FIVE STEPS FOR USING OPEN DATA TO IMPROVE COLLABORATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY STAKEHOLDERS**

**HOW-TO GUIDE**

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

In most cases, governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) have the same stated aims – to improve the lives of their communities – so working together should be a win-win situation. Yet collaboration between these groups often proves difficult – and is even more complicated when either or both of the parties hold negative perceptions of the other. In particular, governments sometimes feel unfairly criticised by CSOs, while CSOs occasionally perceive governments as undeserving of citizens' trust.

This guide suggests specific steps that can be taken by funding agencies, project implementers, and other stakeholders who want to promote collaboration between government and CSOs through the use of open data. This approach is particularly helpful in a context where there is prevailing distrust and animosity between the two groups, as it can ensure collaborations are based on facts, not opinions. It can also help to build trust. A government's proactive opening of meaningful data is a gesture of transparency, and for CSOs, access to data allows them to tackle challenges and understand better how government functions.

## 1 IDENTIFY A PRACTICAL STARTING POINT: AN ISSUE OR PROBLEM THAT OPEN DATA CAN HELP SOLVE.

Start by identifying a problem or issue that both governments and CSOs want to solve, and that open data could help to tackle. This could be a specific problem, (e.g. poor waste management or a high dropout rate in public schools) or a broader issue (e.g. unspent government health budget).
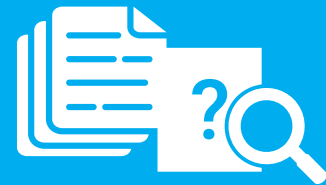
Public opinion research, focus group discussions, media analysis, and expert interviews can all be helpful for scoping these issues. In our experience though, conducting sector-wide consultations allowed for a better grasp of issues that really mattered to people. To do this, we brought together different groups – including government and CSO representatives – to identify the problems and uncover which of these are most amenable to data-driven solutions.

**Practical Tip:** There are two key factors here: ensure that the issue or problem is truly important to people, and make the problem identification process as participatory as possible. This will require careful facilitation to ensure stakeholders agree on the selected issue.

## 2 GET A BETTER SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUE.

Once an issue is decided upon, convene a forum between government and CSO representatives working on the topic identified. In this forum, the issue or problem should be analysed: looking at causes, implications and current initiatives to address the issue. Creating a shared understanding of solutions, goals and hopes for the future is essential, with a clear focus on how open data can help. Through this process, both sides will be able to understand the other's role in addressing the problem and at the same time identify data assets that need to be proactively disclosed to tackle the challenge.

**Practical Tip:** Government and CSO representatives are the key stakeholders in this step. However, it is also worth looking at the added value in inviting others from outside these groups might bring. These could be private sector organisations, citizens and others that have relevant expertise or experience in the identified topic.

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## 3 CREATE JOINT TEAMS TO TURN UNDERSTANDING INTO ACTION.

At the same forum, participants should create 'action teams' comprising CSO and government representatives. These teams will commit to working together to address the specific issue using open data.

**Practical Tip:** It is crucial in this step to have leaders of government agencies and CSOs participate in the process because this is when they will collectively express commitment to work together. However, individuals participating in the action teams do not need to be the leaders, but should be those that are directly developing and implementing solutions within government or the CSO.

## 4 SUPPORT THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS.

To ensure that the action teams work together productively on the problem identified, work with them on a concrete plan to collaboratively address specific aspects of the problem. The action plan should include activities that will help them explore potential solutions based on open data, as well as find the means by which data can be disclosed or accessed.

In most cases, an element of capacity building is also needed in this phase – training the groups on the basics of open data, including data analysis tools and how to design data-based solutions to particular problems. Partner with other organisations which have the expertise on open data and design thinking, when necessary.

The action teams should be provided an opportunity to test the solutions identified and if time and resources permit, these should be implemented at scale.
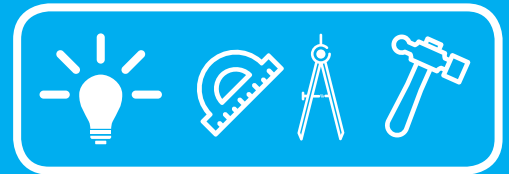
**Practical Tip:** Support should be given to the groups throughout the process and their progress regularly checked, both in terms of the development of solutions and quality of their collaboration.

## 5 SHARE EXPERIENCES: FACILITATE A SESSION WHERE THE ACTION TEAMS CAN REFLECT ON THEIR LEARNINGS.

To learn from the process and use it to inform future initiatives, learning sessions need to be conducted within the action teams. These discussions will be used to identify strengths and weaknesses of the steps taken and identify areas for improvement. In order to gauge the collaboration climate and determine key takeaways, it may be necessary to hold separate sessions for government and CSOs, so that each group can freely and openly provide an honest assessment of the process and how the working relationship between these groups has changed.

**Practical Tip:** The learning sessions should focus on how the products were produced and what can be learned from the process to inform future initiatives. It should also tackle how perceptions of each other (CSOs and governments) changed over time and throughout the project, and how future similar initiatives can be designed in order to promote collaboration.

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**.