5.7 Open data portals

Why invest in open data?

The central aim of the EU 2020 strategy is to put Europe’s economies onto a high and sustainable growth path. To this end, Europe must strengthen its innovative potential and use its resources in the best possible way. One of these resources is public data - all the information that public bodies, at all levels of government, produce, collect or pay for. Examples are geographical information, statistics, business registers, environmental monitoring, education, research, health, cultural heritage and tourism. This information has a significant and currently insufficiently exploited potential for re-use in new products and services, for citizens’ information, for efficiency gains in administrations and for economic growth. Overall economic gains from opening up this resource could amount to EUR 40 billion a year in the EU. Also for job creation, open data is significant. Germany’s market for geo-information reached an estimated size of EUR 1.4 billion in 2007.

EU Member States have different governmental structures, spanning from highly centralised to completely federal. In all cases, a huge quantity of information is generated by public administrations at regional and local level, with the initial objective of fulfilling a specific mandate. Furthermore, organisations at national level can also support and manage portals that host large amounts of data that would otherwise be beyond the capabilities of any single entity.

With the development of easy and fast instruments for accessing, sharing and exploiting information, and in a context of economic crisis and rationalisation of public investments, the maximisation of public sector information re-use is an invaluable opportunity for improving efficiency and boosting the economy. Increased and easy availability of information will also benefit citizens, improving transparency of local governments and facilitating the development of end-user oriented applications (e.g. multimodal local transport routing).

Moreover, regions and national agencies managing ESIF are bound to publish at least a minimum set of information on funded projects and recipients. This information is crucial for enforcing transparency and understanding how public funds are used and what kind of results regional support policies have achieved. While some regions only release a minimum set of information (beneficiary names and total value of projects), more and more public authorities in Europe are taking current regulations as an opportunity to manage EU funds more transparently.

Barriers & Challenges

There is still a lack of awareness among public organisations of the potential of open data. Concerns regarding privacy protection, the ownership of data and, more generally, the fear of ‘losing control’ of data are also still an issue. A better understanding of the opportunities linked to the release of open data, and of the solutions available to address real or perceived issues is necessary. This can be facilitated by initiating a thorough and dynamic dialogue between stakeholders, regional and local administrations together with business actors, including SMEs, and the academic community.

Practical and technical issues also need to be addressed. Data may have been generated and stored in different formats and for different purposes; the lack of interoperability makes their reuse and combination difficult. Data also often exist but are not made available, or their discovery is difficult due to a lack of cataloguing information (metadata) and of discovery tools as web portals.

The availability of the already existing information in a machine-readable format, as well as of a basic layer of commonly agreed metadata would facilitate data cross-reference and interoperability, greatly enhancing their value for re-use. The availability of a technical infrastructure to ensure permanent access and availability is also necessary. This infrastructure should be conceived in a modular and flexible way (e.g. cloud computing), in order to allow public administrations with limited IT capabilities (e.g. small municipalities) to also make their information available. Also regions could support municipalities to collaborate to share infrastructure and costs.

How to act?

1. Analysis: Before choosing open data as a priority, regions and Member States should analyse and understand the potential for the public and private sector, for researchers, consumers and citizens. A first step it to analyse where a member state or region stands in comparison to different benchmarks. An example of this is Cap Gemini’s Benchmarking of Open Data Initiatives that examines the usability of data portals and data availability.

2. Stakeholder involvement: In order to define the actions and priorities, public regional and local authorities should engage with relevant stakeholders, in particular:

   • Re-users (SMEs, non-commercial re-users);
   • Citizens, and their associations;
   • National authorities to see how regional activities can be linked to their activities;
   • Other regions (including where relevant neighbouring regions in other MS), in order to ensure interoperability.

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3. Priority setting:

- Prioritise actions addressing information with the highest impact (high value datasets, high potential for re-use and creation of innovative applications for business and citizens, relevant information for supporting regional specific developments, already addressed by the requirements of national or European legislation);

- Define action plans able to provide the first tangible results quickly, in order to initiate the process, demonstrate the benefits of making open data available for re-use, sustain further demand and evaluate first impacts;

- Support the creation of added value services based on released open data, in particular addressing Member State/regional policy priorities.

4. Policy mix:

**Web portals:** Regional and local authorities as well as public bodies and agencies have in recent years begun to set up portals to provide access in a facilitated and harmonised way to a wide range of information generated in the execution of their public tasks, in line with the open data principles (free access to all, with no technical or legal limitations). While open data portals are being developed at national and European level, the availability of regional or even local portals can also be a necessity, allowing targeting of a community with specific interests in a given region, interests than can only be covered in a general way through a national portal. Since portals are front end sites providing references to datasets and end-user applications, and do not contain datasets themselves, information is not duplicated. EU, national and regional portals may exist to serve different purposes, all referring to the same reference datasets usually stored and maintained by the authority responsible for its collection. The same dataset containing information on public transport in a local community, for example, can be referenced by a portal related to this same local community, by a regional portal and by one or more national portals (e.g. in case of areas with high cross-border commuting). Besides giving access to information, portals can also include applications targeting the specificities of the regional or local communities, e.g. in relation to socio-economic activities, or for promoting and supporting developments in specific areas. Regional authorities can draw inspiration from best practice examples of national portals such as the UK data.gov.uk portal.109

**Applications:** On the basis of one or more datasets discovered and made available in a harmonised way, applications can be developed to target citizens’ specific user needs, e.g. facilitating their relationships with local public administrations or delivering updated information and services. At regional and local level applications can be focused on delivering services tailored to specific needs which could not be covered on a geographically broader scale. Typical examples are applications providing the location of the closest pharmacy or the availability of public parking, accessible both on the open data portal itself of a local community or as standalone applications for mobile devices.

**Open data portal of the city of Ghent**10 - The city of Ghent has developed an open data portal providing a single, comprehensive catalogue of data published by the city, as well as applications for targeting residents and visitors. It also offers functionalities for IT developers, as easy conversion between various data file formats, files in linked data format and interfaces for machine to machine connectivity. To promote the reuse of open data, in collaboration with local, federal and international organisations, competitions for developers (“Apps for Ghent” events) have been organised, where coders and designers meet to use local open data to build applications.

**Helsinki Region Infoshare online service**11 - The Helsinki Region Infoshare project aims to make Helsinki metropolitan area information easily accessible to all, i.e. citizens, businesses, universities, academies, research facilities or municipal administration. The project includes building a web service for fast and easy access to open data sources. The European Commission awarded Helsinki Region Infoshare with the 2013 European Prize for Innovation in Public Administration, with the mention that the City of Helsinki opened access to decision making information by opening an interface to its electronic case management system, offering a great opportunity to activate citizens to be more involved in public decision-making.

5. Monitoring and evaluation: Performance indicators suggested for monitoring the development of an open data infrastructure are:

- Number of datasets accessible through the portal;

- Number of datasets published in a highly reusable format (open format, linked data);

- Usage statistics, cost per visit/download;

- Number of newly developed applications making use of released open data, degree of innovation, relevance to national/regional policies;

- Overall economic impact.

**Further reading**

http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/open-data

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110 http://data.gent.be.