

Open Data in Belgium: "Somewhat Special"

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Belgium's structure: somewhat special

More and more local, regional and national government agencies are opening up their data to the public. The United States, together with the United Kingdom, have been on the forefront of this movement from the very beginning, rightfully arguing that transparency can enhance citizens trust in governments and help them understand how their tax money is being used, drive significant improvements in public service productivity and efficiency, and transform the way in which users interact with government.

However, the Belgian political structure is somewhat special. The U.S., as an example, is a presidential, constitutional federal republic, the UK is a constitutional monarchy, whereas Belgium is a parliamentary democracy with three regions and six governments, each of these six governments with their own laws and regulations. On top of this, the US and the UK share the same cultural heritage and language whilst Belgium has three different language communities. It is to be expected that this institutional complexity and the cultural differences are affecting the evolution of open data efforts in Belgium.

The Present Status of Open Data in Belgium

Belgium has the equivalent of a Freedom of Information Act, requiring our governments to release certain kinds of data and information to citizens on their request. The model followed however is usually one of "release on demand only" rather than active publication ("come and get it"), which is quite different from the open data approach.

As an example, legislation in Flanders on the re-use of public sector information (in the form of a decree) was an adaptation of the 2003 EU rules as defined in the Directive on the re-use of public sector information (PSI Directive). This directive sets out to provide a common legislative framework, which regulates how public sector bodies should make their information available for re-use. The directive, and thus the Flemish decree, states amongst others that the total revenue from supplying and allowing re-use of data shall not exceed the cost of collection, production, reproduction and dissemination of that data, together with a reasonable return on investment.

In december 2010, Geert Bourgeois, minister for administrative affairs, local and provincial government, civic integration, tourism and the 'Vlaamse Rand' (Flemish Periphery) in the Flemish government, organized a round table on "Open Government and ICT".

The purpose of this roundtable was to collect ideas and formulate proposals, showing the Flemish government the direction it should take with regards to an open and transparant government policy and improved (electronic) service delivery through the use of ICT.

Six groups, each focusing on a different aspect of government policy and service delivery, came to the same conclusion: in order to innovate and reap the rewards of the latest ICT developments, the Flemish government must set its data free. All participants agreed that opening up public information on a big scale would increase the potential for the Flemish government to innovate in terms of policy and service delivery.

The minister took this advice to heart and had a [strategy paper adopted by the Flemish government](#), which defines six key “Open Data” principles.

1. Open data will be the norm at the Flemish government. Exceptions (keeping data closed) to this rule will have to be properly motivated.
2. Re-use of this data is under all circumstances allowed, also for commercial purposes, free of charge or at a reasonable cost. Standardized licensing models will apply.
3. Open data will be produced and made available using open standards, open formats and open interfaces.
4. Data is “as collected”, where possible, at the source, resulting in reliable and quality governmental data.
5. The local authorities in Flanders and the Federal government are important suppliers of data. Cooperation across all levels of government is important, thus giving added value.
6. Datasets will be made available through a central register. These datasets will be available as open data.

An action plan was defined and set in motion, based on these key principles.

Within an ambitious three-months timeframe, four of the nine objectives in this action plan have already been realized:

- A [central repository](#) for information on datasets has been set up
- A [knowledge exchange platform](#) has [been created](#). The site has attracted more than 4000 unique visitors in its first month of existence.
- A Belgian working group on open data has been initiated, consisting of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and interested parties.
- Collaboration between the different governmental levels has been realized.

A step closer, but a long way to go. Join us on June 15th!

Although some government entities appear to be in less of a hurry, and despite the many challenges facing intergovernmental cooperation in Belgium, significant progress with regards to opening up data has been made.

Embracing the philosophy of open, the Flemish Government, in collaboration with amongst others OKFN, DDBZ, MOVI, AGORIA, CORVE, V-ICT-OR, the city of Ghent and the University of Leuven organizes an ["Open Data Day" on 15 June 2012](#).

Speakers and workshop facilitators include Andrew Stott, Chris Taggart, Ton Zijlstra, Paul Suijkerbuijk, Katleen Janssen, Tanguy Delestre, Raf Buyle, Bart Rousseau and others.

Organized twice a year, we expect this event to be the start of an exiting “open” future for us all.