

Taking a look at PSI in Finland: data, visualizations and interfaces

Submitted on 26 Jul 2013 by Jarkko Moilanen

More and more public sector data has been opened in Finland during this year. In some areas, such as the [Helsinki Region](#) and the [Tampere Region](#), Municipalities have opened significant amounts of public sector data such as city budgets, information about infrastructure and health care. Yet, most of the municipalities are still taking their first steps towards openness and transparency.

The above reflects the first steps of the Open data movement in Finland - opening data snapshots from various departments and contexts as data blobs, commonly known as files. Opening data is in a good shape at the moment and the momentum to open up even more is rising across Finland. More and more cities and other authorities are understanding the value of open data. Yet, based on discussions with *Chief Information Officers* in the Tampere region, one significant barrier for opening more data is the lack of suitable places to publish opened data i.e. municipalities lack open data catalogs. The same applies to institutions.

Earlier this year, there was a small chance that the national data catalog which will be launched in Jan-Feb 2014 would serve as a place to publish opened data. During the summer 2013 it has become clear that's not the case. According to [Mikael Vakkari](#), National data catalog will not at least in initial form offer data host but acts more like meta data harvester. Big institutions such as Finnish Meteorological Institute have resources to establish, build and maintain own open data catalogs. Smaller, yet equally important institutions do not have the needed manpower, skills or other resources to do so.

This situation leaves municipalities and smaller institutions on their own and we will most likely see more joint open data catalogs established and funded by groups of neighboring municipalities. In the future national data catalog might offer data storage services, but that does not remove the instant needs of several cities.

Snapshot visualizations

Making use of open data in Finland is more or less about visualization. Examples of 'visualization boom' are [various tax trees which visualize city budgets](#). A lot of data is placed on top of existing map services such as [Paikkatietoikkuna](#), google maps, open street maps and maps produced by National Land Survey of Finland (NLS). Visualizing data is a good start, but that alone will not make good use of open data potential. Visualizations rarely produce apps to ease and help every day life of the citizens. Why visualization is booming now in Finland? One of the reasons is lack of application programming interfaces (API). Building APIs is more expensive than opening data blobs. Building a rather simple API might cost 50-100k€. Opening one data blob costs 0-5k€. Since some of the municipalities are still considering joining open data road with Helsinki Region and Tampere, it's no wonder that costs for building APIs are not included in the budgets yet.

More interfaces - more applications

Application programming interfaces enable application building. They enable the next boom of open data usage as mobile applications, browser based services, which utilize map data, location data and several other open data sets. In other words, APIs enable seamless integration. APIs are the

key to make use of open data in every day life. Application programming interfaces enable civic development which [according to Gartner](#) will be responsible for building at least 25% of new business applications by 2014. APIs offer real time data, which are necessity for future applications. This year in Finland has been year of the data blobs. Next year hopefully starts the API boom.