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Open City: Local Government & Open Data

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Keywords

Open city; local government; data; transparency; accountability; participation; policy

Abstract/ Executive Summary

This monthly topic report will provide with a structured and holistic picture of the concept of Open City. It will briefly discuss the definitions, suggest types of data and information that typical municipal units possess and should release as open data, discuss ways of promoting citizen participation and, most importantly, offer the very first sets of aspects for municipal leaders to consider before formalizing city transparency policies. It is intended to help municipal officials take first steps in creating municipal transparency and openness policies.

Open City: Open Local Government

The term „open government“ has never been used more often than in the last decades during the so-called transparency revolution. Many organizations, such as Open Government Partnership, Transparency International, Open Knowledge Foundation and many others put the term on the tables of many government cabinets, parliaments etc. all over the world. Local governments are indispensable part of any government structures worldwide and concepts of openness, transparency, accountability, participation etc. have also found many shapes in local contexts. As a result, terms, such as open cities or open local governments also came into existence. When defining local government or open city, we may use the standard definition of open government applied to local contexts. Nathaniel Heller, for instance, uses the following description of what open government means:

- **Information Transparency:** that the public understands the workings of their government;
- **Public engagement:** that the public can influence the workings of their government by engaging in governmental policy processes and service delivery programs; and
- **Accountability:** that the public can hold the government to account for its policy and service delivery performance.

Many of open data and ICT initiatives can be placed in one or more of the concepts above. The term open city has been used a number of times by various actors – it should be understood as open local government. The term itself is not as widespread as the term smart city, for instance - they are both much interlinked. However, smart city is often used in a context of data re-use for economic purposes aimed at making citizens life easier by providing them with data-driven services. Open city is different in a way that it encompasses social concepts, such as participation, accountability and openness.

What does the concept of open city entail?

In line with the term open government, open local government or open city encompasses three key concepts: Transparency, Participation and Accountability.



Transparency is directly linked to openness of information and data cities possess and it largely encompasses open municipal data release and to some extent re-use aspects. Levels of transparency are possible to measure and many organizations worldwide have attempted to create municipal transparency standards and measure local governments’ performance (see below). Participation is linked to openness of decision making processes – it is also possible to measure. Accountability is significantly harder to measure as the term is about relationship between local governments and citizens. However, grasping and measuring level of transparency and participation can provide with a fair picture of how accountable governments are to their citizens. In this report we will use the above breakdown of the term open city and will cover all related concepts separately.

Municipal Transparency

What information cities possess?

There is no one ultimate resource suggesting types of data and information a typical municipality possess and should release as open data. However, there have been attempts in the US and a number of the EU countries to list the most transparency-relevant types of data – these published lists then can serve as guidelines for city governments for data release prioritization.

Open data census

The US City Open Data Census is an ongoing, crowdsourced measure of the current state of

access to a selected group of datasets in municipalities across the United States. Any community member contributes an assessment of these datasets in their municipality at any time. Census content is peer-reviewed periodically by a volunteer team of Open Data Census Librarians led by the Code for America Brigade and the Sunlight Foundation.

Open Data Census serves as an indication for the US (and beyond) governments as to priority types of datasets to be released to the public as open data. The Census not only lists types of datasets, but also explains data that may be contained in these datasets and provides with useful tips on searching them. The full list of tips and samples can be found at <http://us-city.census.okfn.org/>. We will include in this report only essence of datasets to draw a picture of types of data for governments to be aware of when considering data release priorities.

U.S. Open Data Census: what city-owned data should be open?

Asset disclosure

Asset disclosure data should include the following elements: name of top-level government officials, title, investment information, prior and current business relationships, real estate interests, and personal income (including gifts and travel or speaking payments).

Budget

Open budget data is important to share to communicate how tax money are intended to be spent and to compare against policy plans and actual spending. EPSI Platform offers a detailed topic report on fiscal transparency and open government data that can be [found here](#).

Business listings

A directory of all licensed businesses in the municipal area, including key information such as: name, address, contact information, business type.

Campaign finance contributions

Campaign finance disclosure is an essential public accountability mechanism. Providing access to open campaign finance data about the flow of money in politics empowers oversight and accountability in the government decision-making process. Campaign finance contribution data should be a structured dataset that details: the amount contributed to each candidate and by whom.

Code Enforcement Violations

Building code inspection data surfacing reports on particular properties from code enforcement officials.

Construction permits

Construction Permits and locations of issued construction permits.

Crime

Open crime data helps communities make informed judgements about public safety, as well as providing transparency into how local police power is being exercised. For US City Open Data Census purposes, crime report data includes at a minimum the following elements: date, time, location, incident type, and narrative information.

Lobbyist activity

A complete suite of lobbying data should include information about registration and activity. For more resources on municipal lobbying data standards use Sunlight Foundation's [guidelines here](#).

Parcels

Parcel data is the geographic boundaries of property. Parcels are the most specific units of geodata that governments maintain.

Procurement contracts

The full text of municipal contracts with vendors, including amount, awardee (name, address), date awarded etc.

Property Assessment

Open property assessment data provides transparency into real estate values which informs property tax allocation and returns.

Property deeds

The recording of property sales, mortgages, and foreclosures.

Public buildings

Locations of city owned buildings.

Restaurant inspections

Outcomes of food safety inspections of restaurants and other similar providers of food to the public.

Service requests

Open service request data provides transparency about what types of requests are being requested and where, as well as how quickly requests are resolved. Non-emergency service requests, (that some cities request by dialing 3-1-1), including requests to resolve: graffiti, non-working traffic lights, noise complaints, parking law enforcement, and potholes.

Spending

Open spending data informs citizens, journalists, and government officials alike as to just how public funds are being spent. Spending data should include a complete list of city expenditures at a detailed transactional level (including: tax breaks, loans, contracts, grants, and operational spending).

Transit

Open transit data provides transparency and legibility to when and where public transit is running. Timetables (schedules), locations of stops, and real-time location information of all municipally run or commissioned transit services (buses, subway, rail tram etc).

Zoning

Zoning impacts the most physical elements of our communities and daily lives — from the location of your local supermarket (and what you can purchase there) to the size and height of your home. Having access to the mapped zone (GIS) shapefiles of designated permitted land use where you live can help empower a better understanding of the forces shaping your community.

Web analytics

Web analytics are one of the most useful data sets for understanding direct interaction between local governments and citizens. Data collected using programs like Google Analytics, KISSMetrics, or other similar programs can allow cities to make better decisions about web development priorities based on citizen needs. In the hands of civic hackers, web analytics can also be used to advocate for better accessibility for all residents and to demonstrate challenges that both the city and the civic hacking community should address.

Advocating for municipal transparency: an example

Indexes, such as Open Data Census first of all demonstrates to local governments the good open data standards and encourages them to release data by ranking them on well-defined criteria. There have also been other good practice examples in this regard - Transparency International Lithuania (TI Lithuania) developed the municipal transparency index that ranks all 60 municipalities in Lithuania according to publicity and availability of certain types of information on their websites (www.jurgiokepure.lt). The methodology developed by TI Lithuania distinguishes a number of information categories that are most transparency-relevant. All of these categories were determined taking into account a representative survey of Lithuanians about their interactions with city governments and information priorities. With the help of citizens and good governance / transparency experts, TI Lithuania developed a list of datasets that are central in promoting accountability in local governments. The relevant data types include:

- **Information about organizational structure**
 1. a list of employees and their contact details;
 2. job/position descriptions;
 3. government employees' interest declarations;
 4. senior politicians' and staff asset declarations;

- **Information about city council activities**
 5. individual voting record;
 6. individual voting record of previous term government;
 7. council meeting minutes;
 8. council meeting minutes of previous term government;

- **Information on anti-corruption policies and activities**
 9. anti-corruption programme/plan;
 10. information about tools/initiatives that are part of anti-corruption programme;
 11. code of ethics;
 12. gift/travel policy;
 13. information about whistleblowing procedures and availability of whistleblowing

- channel;
14. information about processes related to reports submitted by whistleblowers;
 15. list of interest groups met in course of service ;
- **Information on municipality-owned companies**
 16. list of municipality-owned companies ;
 17. list of company senior management staff;;
 18. proportion of shares held in these companies;
 19. list of companies providing public services in its territory;

 - **Information about municipal finances**
 20. annual budget;
 21. annual budget of previous years;
 22. annual financial reports;
 23. annual financial reports of previous years;
 24. municipal debts and reasons behind;

 - **Information about public procurement**
 25. planned public procurements;
 26. associated procurement technical specifications;
 27. selection committee interest declarations;
 28. list of procurement winners;
 29. list of services (to be) procured;
 30. monetary value of services (to be) provided;
 31. justification behind winner selections;
 32. property owned by municipality and associated rent prices;

 - **Information related to public participation in a decision making**
 33. opportunities and venues to engage into public consultation;
 34. suggestions/feedback received through public consultations;
 35. decisions taken after public consultations;
 36. information about planned council meetings, agenda and related documents;
 37. information about feedback mechanisms;
 38. information on processes related to received suggestions/feedback from citizens;

Not all of the information above can be released as open data as some of it is related to open processes. However, TI Lithuania's index proved to be a successful tool in promoting municipal transparency - during the course of the research, every fifth municipality in Lithuania significantly improved its transparency levels by simply following the good standard provided.

Municipal data reuse examples

In order to make sense of Lithuanian municipal transparency index, TI Lithuania developed an online tool www.jurgiokepure.lt that helps Lithuanians to see compositions of their municipal councils and considerable amount of associated information, such as assets declared, party affiliation, employment, marital status etc. It also shows possible interest connections that council members have by linking them based on their current or previous place of employment.



Municipal Participation

Transparency within council activities

As mentioned above, one of the prerequisites to a meaningful participation in decision-making processes is availability of information and data about city council activities and in particular information related to council agenda, timetable, related documents etc (among all other information and datasets listed in the above section).

In addition to transparency and openness of data and information possessed by municipalities, a significant key to unleashing potential of citizen participation is creating convenient participation channels both online and offline that can be used for proposal or feedback submission by citizens. Easier said than done – many governments have already created such channels but fewer meaningfully enable real citizen participation. Participation education and well-based promise to treat participation seriously is a challenge many governments still cannot tackle.

Public feedback & consultations

Various models of public consultations have been functioning in many modern democracies. Technology provides with a unique opportunity to conduct public consultations with minimum physical effort required on citizen side. Many governments created advanced public consultation systems that not only allows for submissions, but also for tracking progress of them etc.

The city of Helsinki has been one of the best examples in creating infrastructure of citizen participation with multiple channels serving multiple purposes.

To start with, at www.hel.fi visitors are offered a thorough description of multiple ways of engagement, including offline and online venues and are provided with clear instructions on how to engage in public decision-making. One of the tools offered by the municipality is „Tell it on the Map“ tool (kerrokartalla.hel.fi) that provides with a user-friendly platform for citizens to submit their proposals ranging from local politics issues to everyday running of the city of Helsinki:

kerrokartalla.hel.fi



Kerrokartalla

Kuntalaisten oma osallistumiskanava

Kerrokartalla -osallistumiskanavalta löydät Helsingin kaupungin eri virastojen julkaisemat karttapohjaiset kyselyt ajankohtaisista aiheista ja alueista. Voit merkitä mielipiteesi kartalle, vastata kysymyksiin ja keskustella muiden kommenteista.

Alla olevista linkeistä näet mitä kyselyitä on meneillään. Myös suljettujen kyselyjen kommentteja voi lukea. Voit tilata sähköpostiisi ilmoituksen uudesta kyselystä klikkaamalla oheista painiketta.

[Tilaa/peru ilmoitus](#)

Avoimet kyselyt

Eri aiheita koskevia avoimena olevia kyselyitä. Tarkemmat tiedot kustakin kyselystä löydät kyselyn aloitussivulta.
Ei avoimia kyselyitä

Aluesuunnitelmien

Rakennusvirastolla on mene laadinta. Niihin liittyvien pa kommentteja ja kehittämise
Ei kommentoitavia karttoja.

Another good example a citizen engagement and initiative tool is <https://www.kuntalaisaloite.fi> – an online platform where citizens can initiate policy suggestions on both national and local levels:



HOW DO WE TEACH PARTICIPATION?

Creation of an online consultation channel is far from being the most significant challenge in cities' efforts to engage their citizens. Many cities have created channels that are technically feasible, but still struggle with engaging a substantial part of their populations. There are series of questions many cities still may ask when it comes to public participation, such as how to fight civic apathy, how to demonstrate feedback relevance and how to make sure every citizen that engages with his/her local governments feels appreciated etc.

One of the first steps cities could take before any kind of real engagement promotion efforts is planning an education campaign about importance of engagement and venues to participate in public decision-making. We will only take a look at a couple of good practice examples that can illustrate types of steps cities can take in promoting civic participation.

Policy crowdsourcing competitions / challenges

With the help of the European Commission back in 2012, Paris, Amsterdam and Helsinki

announced a crowdsourcing challenge inviting interested individuals to suggest ideas related to public matters, such as reorganization of the Red Lights district in Amsterdam, for instance. (http://opencities.net/crowdsourcing_challenge). The challenge attracted hundreds of submissions and now serves as a good example of how to not only crowdsource good policy ideas, but also demonstrate to citizens that their input can contribute to real policy making.

Participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a different way to manage public money, and to engage people in government. It is a democratic process in which community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget. It enables taxpayers to work with government to make the budget decisions that affect their lives. The process was first developed in Brazil in 1989, and there are now over 1,500 participatory budgets around the world. Most of these are at the city level, for the municipal budget. PB has also been used, however, for counties, states, housing authorities, schools and school systems, universities, coalitions, and other public agencies.

Municipal Accountability

None of the abovementioned concept of transparency or participation make a lot of sense if they do not lead to more accountable local governance. Accountability means ensuring that officials in local governments are answerable for their actions and that there is redress when duties and commitments are not met. Meaningful accountability is only possible when not only transparency and participation are promoted and ensured, but also complex mechanisms of ethics systems, control mechanisms and checks and balances between society and municipal governments are ensured. Covering these systems in full is outside the scope of this report. In short, Transparency and Accountability Initiative explain accountability in the following manner:

Standard setting: setting out the behaviour expected of the government and the criteria by which they might validly be judged.

Investigation: exploring whether or not governments have met the standards expected of them.

Answerability: a process in which government officials are required to defend their actions, face skeptical questions, and generally explain themselves. This applies both to negative or

critical as well as to positive feedback.

Sanction: a process in which officials are in some way punished for falling below the standards expected of them (or perhaps rewarded for achieving or exceeding them).

Expressed like this, the accountability process sounds very formal and like a legal trial, but most accountability sequences are not as formal, and/or do not include all these stages.¹

Recommendations: Institutionalizing Open Cities

Many local politicians play transparency and accountability card during elections – there is hardly a political speech nowadays that would not include promises on more transparent and accountable governance. The biggest challenge lies with promise-keeping and a big question to transparency promoting organizations is how to sustain good practice examples and make transparency policies stick for a number of consecutive terms so a culture of accountability becomes indispensable from local governance.

Declaration of Open Government Principles²

Any governmental openness policy must first of all start with guiding principles and a spirit for regulations to follow. The Declaration of Open Government Principles sets out the most important principles any government should follow when chosen to initiate and formalize transparency policies:

[City] is committed to transparency. [City] should adopt policies, practices, and procedures that allow citizens to have access to understandable, accurate, reusable, and auditable data and information about government operations and decision making (with updates available as they are made, whenever possible). City departments should use new technologies to put information about their operations and decisions online. Departments should also seek public feedback to identify information of greatest use to the public. The city should operate under a presumption of openness and accessibility, while also maintaining privacy, confidentiality, security and compliance with all relevant laws. These policies, practices, and procedures will increase accountability, promote informed public participation, and create economic

¹ <http://www.transparency-initiative.org/>

² <http://opengovernmentinitiative.org/declaration-of-local-open-government-principles/>

development opportunities.

[City] is committed to meaningful public participation. [City] believes members of the public have a valuable role in governing their communities and should have opportunities to take part in government decision making. [City] supports establishing guidelines and practices that will enable the public to contribute opinions and ideas regarding political, economic, management, and other decisions using a variety of methods, as conveniently as possible for citizens. These guidelines and practices will create more informed and effective policies and enhance and expand opportunities for the public to participate throughout decision-making processes.

[City] is committed to collaborating with the public and across government. [City] should create opportunities to work jointly with individuals as well as public, non-profit, academic, and private sector groups to address the needs of the community. The city should also enhance and expand its cooperation among city departments and other governmental agencies in order to more effectively fulfill the city's obligations to citizens. Furthermore, citizens are encouraged to contribute their time and knowledge. The city will take steps to provide efficient and effective methods of participating and collaborating, and the city commits to incorporating citizen feedback into decision making processes.

[City] is committed to sharing best practices and software and other resources with other government entities.

[City] acknowledges that, in the face of budget decreases, government entities at every level must cut costs and find efficiencies. An enormous cost-saving opportunity exists in the city's information technology resource acquisition practices. [City] supports collaborating with other government entities to share technology resources, lessons learned, and best practices; reform procurement practices, policies, and procedures; and learn to function not only as a provider of services but as a source for other government entities, the public, and other organizations to add value to the city's services.

Open Government Directive: These commitments require that the city create a legal framework that will institutionalize the principles of transparency, participation, and collaboration into the culture and work of [City] government. Therefore, the [Mayor or City Manager or City Council] shall establish [an Open Government Directive] [alternative: a citizen and government open government planning group] within [90 days] to guide the implementation of open government.

Having made an initial step by taking a firm stand for openness the next question is about actual regulations and functioning of the policy. While there are numerous resources providing useful policy making tips from countries of the EU, including an excellent resource guide at Open Government guide (<http://www.opengovguide.com/local-government/>), for the purposes of structured approach to city transparency policy making, we will use an analysis conducted by San Diego Regional Data Library that analyzed 10 municipal openness policies from the U.S.

First and foremost, it analyzed motivations behind formalizing openness standards and included the following to the list:

- **Transparency.** Increasing government openness and the availability of information about government and its proceedings.
- **Participation.** Allowing and encouraging citizens to participate in government and civic life.
- **Collaboration.** Improving the extent to which city departments work together, or the city government works with private organizations.
- **Innovation.** Interest in civic applications, new ideas, and new solutions to problems.
- **Progress.** Civic development, economic improvement, or other aspects of community growth.

The analysis goes onto analyzing the content and structure of city transparency policies and distinguishes a number of recurring sections that, perhaps, serves as an indication of aspects to consider before developing local openness policy:

(1) Ensuring administrative resources

The analysis lists the following key aspects to administrative resources cities should think about before enacting a policy document:

- **Regular Reporting.** Departments must report on release schedules, compliance, or other aspects of implementing the program.
- **Reasonable Effort.** The document states that departments shall make a “reasonable effort” to release datasets.
- **Develop Guidelines.** Data-producing departments, the central IT department, or the advisory committee are instructed to create guidelines for technical or administrative policies.

- **No Restrictions.** There shall be no restrictions on who can access or use data, and the website where the data is published shall not require registration before accessing data.
- **Privacy Preserved.** The document explicitly states that when publishing data, existing requirements regarding privacy remain in force. Data that would not have been releasable to the public previously due to privacy controls still cannot be released.
- **Keep Current.** Departments are instructed to ensure that after data is published, it is updated on a regular basis.

(2) Form of Publication

Documents would normally specify that relevant data will be published in non-proprietary format. It is of immense important to explain in the document itself definitions of open format, open license or open source etc.

(3) What data is released

One of the bigger challenges when releasing data and information is prioritizing various datasets. There are many ways to determine priorities, such as public questionnaires, using feedback channels or following good practice examples from other cities. Most importantly, when local government announces release of certain datasets it creates legitimate expectations not only for ordinary citizens, but also for business and other target groups that may be interested in re-using open data.

(4) Creating feedback / data request channel

Many policies now encompass a duty to create a mechanism that would allow interested stakeholders to express their data needs and would help governments to allocate resources to release data that is on a citizens' priority list.

About the Author

Karolis Granickas works with Transparency International Lithuania. His focus is on open government and people engagement using ICT. He coordinates Chapter's digital initiatives such as www.manoseimas.lt (parliamentary monitoring tool) and www.parasykjiems.lt (freedom of information tool) among others. Karolis is also an Independent Researcher with the Open Government Partnership Independent Reporting Mechanism. Karolis has LLB degree in International Law from Westminster University, London, and LLM degree in EU Law from Maastricht University, the Netherlands.

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