

Lessons from Open Nepal – Year One

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Introduction to Open Nepal

For the past year, Development Initiatives (DI) has been working with partners on an initiative called Open Nepal¹. The initiative supports a vision for a more open, participative and citizen-centred approach to development by increasing access to information about key development issues. These include the financial resources available for development processes; how and where these resources are being used; the services that are currently available; and the impact of development activities. This paper provides an overview of some of the lessons learned during the process and recommendations on how to build the movement into the future.

Our theory of change

DI believes access to better information will lead to more effective development. For example, it can:

- Enable more evidence based scrutiny and accountability mechanisms through the media, parliament, and civil society
- Support the development of a more informed citizenry, which can increase levels of engagement, participation and feedback
- Enable more evidence-based decisions and policies by the government, donors and non-governmental organisations (NGO)
- Lead to more effective resource allocation by improving development coordination, targeting of development activities and increased sharing of lessons and experiences.

Open Nepal is particularly focused on increasing the availability and accessibility of development data, and providing support to data users (such as civil society organisations (CSO), parliamentarians and journalists). The aim is to democratise data and maximise its use by promoting an open data approach where data is published in a way that is free to use, available online in accessible, non-proprietary, machine-readable formats, and licensed in a way that it can be freely used, reused and redistributed by anyone. By opening up the underpinning data, lots of diverse initiatives can translate the data into information and develop services that make it widely accessible to all.

An emerging open development community

Open Nepal was launched in June 2013 and has been raising the awareness of open data among key stakeholders, increasing the availability and accessibility of data through the Open Data Portal² and aidstream³, running capacity development workshops, and working on case studies with journalists, district-level CSOs and the tech community, covering topics such as education budget analysis, traceability of aid from donor to the intended recipient and the recent national assembly elections.

¹ Open Nepal is a CSO-led partnership. For more information see <http://opennepal.net/about-us>

² <http://data.opennepal.net/>

³ <http://aidstream.org>

It is early days, and hard evidence of impact is still some way off⁴, however, we have worked hard to engage with, and connect, a number of groups, individuals and initiatives working in this area, and we feel there is now a vibrant community and solid foundation to build on. For example,

- There is an increasing vibrant community working on transparency and accountability issues. The Government has opened up their Aid Management Platform. Meanwhile, the National Information Commission is exploring links between open data and Right To Information.
- CSOs like Freedom Forum and NGO Federation of Nepal, are exploring the opportunities of open data to advance their agenda. Meanwhile emerging actors such as the Local Interventions Group are looking at how Open Government and data-driven solutions can lead to change in public services.
- The technology community – led by Young Innovations and Open Knowledge Foundation Nepal – are pushing boundaries and developing solutions that increase data availability and accessibility.
- International initiatives such as International Aid Transparency Initiative, Open Contracting, Integrity Action's Development Check and Open Aid Partnership are working with partners in Nepal to ensure they are designed to work in Nepal's country context.

Lessons learned

The below outlines ten lessons learned by DI during the first year of the Open Nepal initiative. The ongoing monitoring of challenges, opportunities and evidence of impact is a key component of Open Nepal, and we expect to build on these findings during the coming year.

1. There is widespread interest in the role of data in improving the effectiveness of development

We have found that there is significant interest from a cross section of actors – CSOs, government, journalists, donors, ICT entrepreneurs – and have had high levels of engagement⁵ and positive feedback about the initiative. However, there is more to do to translate interest into action. There is also a need to move the discourse and perception from 'technically-oriented innovation' to become a mainstream policy dialogue and policymaking tool.

Barriers and challenges for demand and use:

2. Few are currently using data

Despite widespread interest, we found that there is limited use of the data that is currently available. For most, accessing and using data is not part of their day jobs. There is widespread acknowledgement that using data to support their aims would add value, but the lack of experience and expertise means that demand is difficult to articulate and therefore remains latent.

3. There are significant barriers to access and use data

Despite there being legal framework in place for Right To Information, there remain significant challenges for accessing and using data. This ranges from practical issues such as language and format to issues relating to access and digital divide. There are also equality issues (e.g. gender, ethnicity) that need to be considered. These are serious issues, and if not dealt with, could result in the increase of data availability having unintended consequences and a negative impact – for example, further empowering an already powerful elite.

4. Open data should support existing initiatives

Open data and open development initiatives are too often driven by supply, and exist in isolation from what is happening elsewhere. More effort is required to ensure open data initiatives support existing mainstream initiatives, for example, social accountability projects.

⁴ Although we are starting to see some emerging such as the education budget analysis study uncovering a miscalculation in the official budget documents

⁵e.g. 80 attended aid transparency workshop, 100 attended Open Nepal Launch, 200 attended open data day

Barriers and challenges for data providers to supply the data:

5. A wide range of data is needed

We quickly found that access to aid data alone (our initial focus) is not enough, and there is a need for a wider range of data: planned budget, public expenditure, data about services...and more. We also found that data needs to be disaggregated, and crucially, localised as much as possible.

6. There is limited open data currently available

A readiness assessment by Open Nepal partners Young Innovations found that there is currently a lack of open data. Where data is available, there are limitations on how the data can be accessed and used. Firstly, data sources are rarely openly licensed, so users are not clear whether they can use and redistribute the data. Secondly, the format is not always machine-readable. Much of the data resides in PDF files or websites. Thirdly, where the data is machine readable, it is not detailed to an adequate level. Too often, data that is available is aggregated and national.

Four items we need to keep in mind:

7. Capacity is required at all levels

Both data providers and data users have relatively low capacity. Data providers often don't have the data capture and management systems or data quality processes that enable publication of quality data. They are also often unaware how to publish data to maximize its accessibility. Many potential data users lack basic data literacy skills. There is also widespread lack of awareness about where and how to access data, and the tools and skills they need to use that data.

8. The role of infomediaries is critical

Most 'users' don't want to handle raw data, but they need it translated into accessible information. This 'infomediary' role can be played by journalists, CSOs, research or ICT organisations. Further effort is required to develop and support a cadre of data literate infomediaries. Conversely, we need to find a way to communicate and engage with non-data-savvy or technical users without using overly technical language.

9. Long-term commitment is needed

It is clear from our initial work in this area that this is early days, and we need to look to the medium / long term to assess development impact. Even then, we have found that finding and attributing evidence of impact is challenging. We need a research framework that recognises this.

10. Establishing an effective, collaborative 'open data ecosystem' is critical

The final point is not a new lesson, it's been a key objective of the Open Nepal initiative, but something that has often been highlighted during our experiences at Open Nepal. There are many stakeholders involved in the open data ecosystem: data providers (e.g. Government, donors, NGOs, private sector); data users (e.g. CSOs, parliamentarians, citizens); infomediaries (e.g. journalists, ICT, research orgs); advocacy / political pressure; coordination, facilitation and support (e.g. Open Nepal). None of these roles make sense in isolation: they all depend on one another and need to interact to demand, create, share and use data. As highlighted above, there are a number of initiatives and organisations that contribute to this ecosystem, and there is great potential for collaboration.

Recommendations and next steps

The following are five recommendations on how to respond to the opportunities and challenges identified, and suggestions for the role Open Nepal might play in the 'open data ecosystem':

1. Increase awareness of the role and potential of data and stimulate demand for data

The initial interest expressed from both potential data suppliers and users' needs to be translated into commitment to act. Further work is required to inspire people with what can be achieved with data in terms of improved transparency, accountability and improved effectiveness of development efforts, and to help people understand what they need to do to make it happen. Engaging with a wider community, and identifying potential 'change agents' that can help influence a change of behaviour would help.

Open Nepal role: Increasing efforts to raise awareness, educate and inspire by running events (open data day, hackathons etc), online communications (via newsletters, blogs and social media) and developing materials to relay Open Nepal's key messages. Open Nepal could form a central information hub for the data community in Nepal, highlighting data opportunities and events, sharing lessons and promoting stories that highlight the impact of using data for effective advocacy / accountability / decision making. Open Nepal also has a role to help find 'open data champions' to spread the word and influence both data providers and users.

2. Increase the availability and accessibility of open data

The initiatives mentioned above – AMP, Open Nepal Data Portal, IATI - have gone some way to increasing the availability data, but there is a long way to go. The Government own many of the key datasets (e.g. budget and public expenditure data), but CSOs, private sector and journalists can also be a valuable source of data. Awareness, education and support with capacity is required.

Open Nepal role: Continuing efforts to increase the availability and accessibility of data in Nepal by supporting the development of the Open Data Portal and identifying, collecting, curating and publishing high value datasets in open format, including data about aid, government budgets, development statistics and public services. Open Nepal also has a potential role to encourage data disclosure by government and non-government agencies in Nepal by providing tools and support.

3. Develop the capacity to use data

Skills, tools and technical support are required for those wishing to use data to support advocacy, accountability and policy development. Specific focus on developing the capacity of infomediaries is required.

Open Nepal role: Refining the training materials and education materials previously developed and make them publicly available for others to benefit from. Open Nepal should also develop plans for a data-literacy capacity development programme targeted to increase data usage by journalists, CSOs and parliamentarians in the first instance. This could be expanded to Government and other non-state users over time. An example of this is a data desk that offers technical assistance to organisations and individuals wishing to access and use open data. Finally, Open Nepal should continue to support the development of tools to improve the accessibility of data.

4. Deepen the understanding of the demand for information; its role in supporting development efforts; and the opportunities, challenges and incentives for publishing and using data

The publication and use of open data is a relatively new concept to many, so we need to continue to learn about the drivers and challenges in making data available and accessible and how to increase its use. Further research is required on which interventions, incentives and methods work and which do not, and what the conditions for success are. There should be particular focus on the cultural and contextual issues, and how to avoid unintended consequences.

Open Nepal role: Working with partner organisations to document the opportunities, challenges and impact of their work. Develop case studies to assess the availability, accessibility, use, and demand for data, and continue to develop links and share lessons with other national open data initiatives, for example, in Kenya and Uganda.

5. Increase collaboration, coordination and development of the open data ecosystem

As described in the section above, there is potential for far greater collaboration. Bringing these actors together can result in useful cross-sector learning, a shared understanding, and a realisation that there are mutually beneficial incentives for working together. This requires coordination.

Open Nepal role: Supporting the open data ecosystem by identifying key players, increasing our outreach and furthering our engagement with the tech community, journalists, parliamentary staff, NGOs, sector actors, government agencies and other related initiatives. Open Nepal could play a convening role for these actors and identify and support collaborative initiatives and common solutions for more effective development. By encouraging collaboration, partnerships, skill sharing and information exchange, Open Nepal will help to build a community to catalyse data use in Nepal.

Contact:

Victoria Room, Programme Manager, DI Bristol Office
T: +44 (0) 1179 272 505 | E: victoria.room@devinit.org | www.devinit.org