

# IODC2016

## Joined-up Data Standards: evidence of need and emerging solutions

November 2016

*You can feed into our consultation directly via [this form](#) or via email on [info@joinedupdata.org](mailto:info@joinedupdata.org). We hope to receive a broad range of responses to this consultation from international standard-setting institutions, open data standard initiatives, data-producing organisations and the users of development data themselves.*

### Why was IODC2016 important for Joined-Up Data Standards?

In July this year we launched a [consultation paper](#) aimed at starting a discussion on what technical and political solutions to joined-up data challenges could look like at a global level. As part of the ongoing consultation process we recently held and took part in a number of events at the 4th International Open Data Conference (IODC2016) in Madrid, Spain.

It's always been an underlying assumption that joining-up data standards is a complex medley of both technical and political challenges. With this in mind, IODC2016 provided us with a perfect opportunity to engage with technical and policy experts from a wide range of backgrounds.

Our aim at the IODC2016 was to highlight why joined-up data is important for the open data community and to gather feedback on the recommendations we put forward in our consultation paper, including that:

1. the international policy environment is now conducive to joining-up data and that standard-setting bodies should therefore commit to new standards being joined up from the outset and work to enable interoperability between existing standards
2. turning newly agreed principles on the need for interoperability into practice will be a challenge that requires multi-stakeholder leadership
3. technical solutions to interoperability challenges are possible and are in fact urgently needed if the ambitions of Agenda 2030 are to be met.

### Where was joined-up data discussed at the IODC?

Joined-up data was raised and discussed in a number of different sessions at the conference. As a result, we were able to capture useful information to feed back into our consultation process. Some of the main highlights are set out below.

## Deep dive on extractives data

On 3 and 4 October, during the [extractives data dive](#) organised by the Natural Resource Governance Institute (NRGI), discussions took place on how data published by the Extractives Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) could be joined up to data being released under the new mandatory disclosure rules for extractives investments in France and the UK. Following the event, OpenOil's Paul Dziedzic published a [blog](#) exploring this relationship in further detail. In her own [reflections](#) on the event, Development Initiatives' Beata Lisowska highlighted the value that joined-up data could bring to the extractives sector:

*"...at the heart of the data problem in the extractives sector is that similar data is being provided by a number of different data publishers in varying formats: between countries and across subsectors. [...] Comparative analyses are currently challenging and very time-consuming even for experienced users [...]. Imagine though if these data standards were linked in a machine-readable format. What if getting the meaning and translations between definitions would take you seconds rather than days? If you could investigate information even with limited technical capacity at your disposal, what advances are waiting to be discovered?"*

## Standards Day

On 5 October, building on the success of IODC2015, a **Standards Day** was held. After an initial round of lightening talks, the day was divided into three thematic sessions (metadata standards, organisational identifiers and beneficial ownership), each being of particular relevance and offering great insights for our consultation process.

Within the discussions that took place on metadata standards, participants raised crucial questions relevant to interoperability efforts, including on whether guidelines for open data standards are needed, whether interoperability between datasets is needed to improve data discoverability, and whether data standards bodies themselves are needed. The discussion brought together data users and publishers from around the globe and highlighted the capacity and technical disparities that exist. This made the discussions around the need for common guidelines and checklists all the more pertinent and there was agreement that these would be helpful.

## INTEROPERABILITY CHECKLISTS

The idea for an '**interoperability checklist**' first emerged during the drafting stage of the consultation paper.

The rationale is that a checklist of questions and guidance could be an effective way of ensuring that key interoperability issues are given due consideration when new standards are being developed.

Prospective issues that could be covered include:

- Whether there is a clear need and demand for a new standard.
- Whether the need and demand is being met by an existing standard (i.e. does it duplicate existing data?)
- Whether components (building blocks) within the proposed new standard adopt elements from existing standards where possible.
- Whether the data will be available through open, sustainable and easily accessible channels.
- Whether any historical data exists that can act as a reference point for the standard.

Discussions on organisational identifiers were particularly fruitful and set the stage for the launch of the [identify-org initiative](#) on Friday 7 October. The initiative is a collaboration between the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) Secretariat, the Open Contracting Partnership, 360Giving, the Initiative for Open Ag Funding, the Natural Resource Governance Institute and Development Initiatives, through the Joined-Up Data Standards project. The initiative will work to develop a common codelist of organisation identifier lists, containing information on all forms of legal entity and providing a unique code and well-researched metadata for each list. The identify-org website explains the need for this simply: “If my dataset tells you I have contracts with ‘IBM Ltd’, ‘International Business Machines’ and ‘I.B.M’ – how many firms am I working with?”

Last but not least, discussions on what steps are needed to effectively set up registers of beneficial ownership covered the need for effective definitions, establishing timeframes for data collection and agreeing standardised methods for doing so. These steps would be a useful first step towards enabling greater transparency in the extractives sector, for instance where phantom firms are used to hold extraction rights, equipment and other productive assets anonymously while providing an illicit channel for resources to be extracted without the required duties being paid.

### **Joined-Up Data Standards panel: evidence of need and emerging solutions**

On Friday 7 October we held our own side event: ***Joined-Up Data Standards: evidence of need and emerging solutions***. The event sought to explore how the principles of data interoperability and comparability translate into practice in professionals’ day-to-day work. There to help us do this were Amy O’Donnell from Oxfam GB, Seember Nyager from the Public and Private Development Centre in Nigeria and Georg Neumann from the Open Contracting Partnership.

In her presentation, Amy O’Donnell highlighted a key interoperability challenge in the humanitarian sector, namely the absence of a standardised approach – by states and international organisations – to identifying refugees. This results in refugees being allocated multiple identification numbers by international organisations and different countries, making it very difficult for states to trace an individual’s background and movements and also adding further complexity and uncertainty to a very vulnerable group’s situation. Oxfam GB is working with others to develop systems that would standardise the approach.

Georg Neumann then shared insights on how the Open Contracting Data Standard (OCDS) emerged, highlighting that its flexible structure has allowed it to be used in a number of innovative ways. Seember built on this by highlighting how the [Budeshi initiative](#) is effectively using the OCDS to join up procurement and budget data in Nigeria, creating a practical tool that can be used to measure how much public money was budgeted for the completion of a particular project versus how much the contract under which the public money was spent was actually worth.

Following the panel discussion, participants were invited to share their thoughts on our consultation paper recommendations and also our suggestion for the creation of an interoperability checklist. We received some great feedback, including these ideas:

Key suggestions on our recommendations	Key suggestions on our idea for an interoperability checklist
UN agencies should work towards harmonising/standardising their procurement systems, such as ATLAS	Prospective user groups should be identified early on and consulted before a new standard is developed
Funders should prioritise coordination in their grant making and incentivise implementation of interoperable standards	When considering whether proposed components (building blocks) adopt other standards' building blocks, map what already exists and who owns it
Country-level engagement and country-relevant issues should be prioritised	Ensure that political support is forthcoming <i>before</i> developing a new standard: no buy-in means no collaboration
	When considering whether timelines for development, implementation and adoption are realistic, make sure to include time for two rounds of testing the standard
	When considering whether it is realistic that new data can be produced to feed into the standard, make sure to consider where the demand for this data is coming from and also where the capacity to generate this data lies

## What did we take away from the IODC?

As the Open Data Institute's Anna Scott put it in her recent post-[IODC blog](#), "...the tone of the sessions and conversations [...] was reflective and forward-thinking." The Open Data movement has reached a point in its development where it's now asking the right questions about how, where and by whom this data is being used. Whether it is explicit or implied, joined-up data is a part of that conversation – the collaborations described above are testament to that.

The notable observation from the conference was, for the first time in IODC history, the attendance of representatives from 11 statistical offices, invited by Open Data Watch's Shaida Badiie. As we've emphasised in our own blogs following the 2015 [Open Government Partnership Summit](#) and for the [Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data](#), joined-up data requires joined-up conversations between the open data and official statistics communities and we welcome the fact that this is starting to happen.