

IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER:

When is governance data "good enough"?

Takaaki Masaki, Tanya Sethi, Samantha Custer

AIDDATA
A Research Lab at William & Mary



**GOVERNANCE
DATA ALLIANCE**

Executive Summary

A growing number of governance data producers are investing significant time and resources to evaluate public sector performance in low- and middle-income countries. Yet, surprisingly little is known about how governance data is viewed by those it is intended to influence and whether the data we have today is “good enough” to usher in the policy change we are looking for. This report presents new evidence from a 2016 Governance Data Alliance (GDA) Snap Poll of public, private, and civil society leaders in 126 low- and middle-income countries to answer four critical questions:

- **Delivery Channels:** How do leaders find or source governance data?
- **Use:** How is governance data used and for what purpose(s)?
- **Influence:** Which governance data do leaders find most useful – and why?
- **Barriers:** What are the most prevalent obstacles to the use of governance data?

Over 500 leaders shared their firsthand experiences in advancing reforms in their countries and the role of governance data in that process. Snap poll participants evaluated 29 governance data sources produced by a wide variety of multilateral organizations, bilateral agencies, and civil society groups. Based upon their responses, we present four key takeaways.

- 1. Broad-based communications still have sway, though the delivery channels that leaders use to find governance data varies by where they work**

Government officials and civil society leaders most frequently learn about governance data through active web searches, while development partner organizations are more likely to become familiar with this information through internal and external written communications. This difference could signal

something about the relative breadth and quality of information available to these stakeholder groups. Alternatively, this dynamic could be a byproduct of the fact that few governance data producers directly engage with host government counterparts, which may account for the popularity of web searches as an alternative to access such information.

Overall, participants primarily reported using broad-based communication channels to find governance data, including: external written communications (e.g., reports, memos, or briefs from an external organization), active web searches, or traditional media sources (e.g., magazines, newspapers). By contrast, personalized communications such as email, informal verbal communication, and social media were far less common channels to become aware of new governance data. Despite the fact that producers seldom have proactive strategies to conduct outreach with domestic media outlets, participants point to media as one of the top ways they learn about new governance data sources. This finding suggests that traditional media is an under-utilized dissemination channel relative to its potential.

- 2. Governance data is predominantly used to conduct research and analysis; however, specific use cases appear to be shaped by different organizational mandates**

A majority of snap poll participants reported using governance data for research and analysis. At present, governance data is comparatively less well-utilized in planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating governance programs. However, the most important use case for governance data may depend where one sits: governments and development partners use it to plan and implement, while CSOs and think tanks employ it to conduct research. Unsurprisingly, CSOs were more likely to use governance data to support their external advocacy and communications than other stakeholders.

These trends raise important implications for producers. First, rather than asking whether governance

data is appropriate and useful for a single purpose, producers should instead be assessing the fitness of their data products to support a broader range of possible use cases. Since users are likely to have distinct requirements for what they need and want from their governance data, producers need to ensure that their data products and assessments indeed are relevant and useful for answering questions that users care about.

3. Most survey participants found governance data to be important and helpful in their work, but this data is reportedly most useful when it is also perceived to be relevant and credible

Importance and helpfulness are barometers of the perceived utility of governance data among its actual user base. Despite the challenge of addressing intractable governance problems and vested interests, the majority of those using governance data found it to be important (80 percent) and helpful (74 percent). Governance data was rated most highly on these two measures among those working in the environment sector, perhaps indicating that environmental reforms are seen as being closely interlinked with institutional arrangements and performance on governance indicators. Comparatively, snap poll participants in social and agriculture sectors found governance data to be less helpful.

Out of a set of 29 governance data sources, developing world leaders were most familiar with the World Bank’s *Doing Business Report* and Transparency International’s *Corruption Perceptions Index*. However, the World Bank’s *Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability* and the International Budget Partnership’s *Open Budget Index* were most highly regarded for their importance and helpfulness among their respective user bases. Snap poll participants iden-

tified that governance data was most useful (both important and helpful) when it was relevant to their work (46 percent) and deemed as a credible source of information (29 percent).

4. Governance data that fails to take into account the local context is seen as irrelevant and lacks credibility when it is not transparent in methods and assumptions

The reasons why respondents did not use certain governance assessments in their work appear to be the mirror image of why they found other data to be useful. Prospective data users place a premium on the relevance and credibility of governance data, not only in judging whether it is useful, but also in determining whether they will use a given data source at all. These patterns hold across institution-types, policy areas, and different use cases. Local context emerges as an essential ingredient of policy influence: when governance data does not demonstrate an understanding of the local context, it is perceived as irrelevant. Two other attributes associated with irrelevance were the failure of governance data to provide new insights or concrete policy recommendations. Participants who identified a lack of credibility as a barrier to use specifically pointed to concerns regarding a lack of transparency in methods and assumptions and potential bias in the way that governance data was produced.

In summary, data producers should invest in making data more credible with transparent methods and more relevant through engaging local stakeholders to identify contextually appropriate solutions to governance problems. In adopting some of these best practices, governance data producers are likely to ensure continued loyalty among existing users and attract a broader coalition of new users.