

Chapter 1

Records Management and Open Data in Healthcare Provision in Africa: Reflections and Lessons for Botswana

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ABSTRACT

Governments in Africa have made huge ICT investments which have been intended to improve the governance process hence their uptake of e-government. One of the benefits derived from all this has been the open data initiative through which some countries in Africa have empowered citizens to better inform themselves and others through access, harnessing and reusing government held data. Another of the benefits has been enhanced open government which has an array of access to information platforms. While indications are that open data can lead to improvements among lives in the Continent arising from availability and access to healthcare data, this chapter advances that a critical element of open data which is often overlooked and little regarded most times, is records management. Arising from the fundamental role of records management in open data, the Republic of Ireland through the Programmable City Working Paper 3 avers that open data must among others be seen as a component part of records management (Lauriault, 2014). The chapter argues that the key elements of open data notably: availability of data, in other words information content in the form of data must be available on platforms which are easily accessible and easy to manipulate for purposes of use and reuse; transparency of the open data process; information security; information privacy, and finally trust which could lead to acceptance, reuse of data and also emerging encouragement among citizens that data is worth accessing, using and reusing, are all made possible by good public sector records management. Records management, this chapter shows, is a clear means through which effective open data especially in healthcare may be achieved. While the chapter draws out lessons which Botswana could learn from and makes recommendations for workable open data in the country's public health sector, these are nonetheless applicable to many African countries and others in the developing world.

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INTRODUCTION

There is growing enthusiasm among public servants, academia and politicians on the prospects and challenges that open data emanating from the governance process brings about. The Open Data Barometer (2015) discerns that nation states need to generate, use, and make accessible complete data for purposes of motivating both the democratic and developmental processes. Following the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from which data was seen as essential, the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data was inaugurated in 2015 to “strengthen the inclusivity, trust, and innovation in the way that data is used to address the world’s sustainable development efforts,” and this is driven by a 2030 vision which expresses the need to meritoriously use data, and nurturing trust and accountability in the way data is shared and disseminated (Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, 2016). To complement efforts of the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, the Open Data Charter in 2015 issued the International Open Data Charter that enunciated six (6) principles on which open data must be founded on. In Africa, the African Union in 2015 also adopted the Africa Data Consensus which was meant to enhance data collection and use in the Continent. Prior to this adoption, the Center for Global Development in 2014 produced a report titled *Delivering on the data revolution in Sub-Saharan Africa* which stated that there was need for better data in Africa because “data quality is low and improvements are sluggish, despite investments from country, regional, and international institutions to improve statistical systems and build capacity” (p.1) adding further that: “To be valuable to policymakers, citizens, and donors and enable the cycle of accountability to work, data building blocks must be accurate, timely, disaggregated, and widely available” (p.1).

The uptake of open data initiatives by countries across the globe has created additional means through which governments can proactively disclose information to citizens (Thurston, 2012) thereby contributing added impetus to attempts at open government. One must appreciate the fact that open data presents more avenues towards proactive disclosure of information because there are other means, and one such is Freedom of Information (FOI) also known as Right of Access to Information (RTI) (Sebina, 2006). Both open data and FOI are intent on improving the transparency of government however the main difference between them is that FOI presents and protects a right of access to information in the form of recorded information (Sebina, 2006) while open data focuses on “data that are held in government databases, and they are concerned with both the technical and legal issues related to access, use and re-use of these datasets” (Ubaldi, 2013:5).

That notwithstanding, open data through its functionality of proactive disclosure of government generated and held data, has brought about further avenues through which citizens can “better understand what the government does and how well it performs, and to hold it accountable for wrong doing and unachieved results” (Ubaldi, 2013:4). This should not however be construed to mean that accountability within the open data realm is all about holding to account for purposes of detecting or correcting wrong doing or about addressing results and other governance issues that have not been achieved. It is much broader and encompasses holding to account even for things that have been achieved and have been done right with a view of understanding how they were done and how to better sustain them. The Open Data Barometer (2015) also suggests that open data “is not just a tool to hold governments accountable” (p.6) but one that drives innovation in the various sectors of the economy inclusive of healthcare provision. Open data therefore is a measure that aims at improving and sustaining the performance of government and leads to improved citizen participation in the governance process, a perspective which has resulted in citizens becoming not just passive participants but active collaborators in matters of governance.

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