

Open data, open government

The “audacity of hope” for a country of a billion aspirations is yet to bear result. The new wave of a technological revolution will not be from pure data or access to consumer behaviour. The application of data and their assimilation with solving social problems, enabling better governance and powering elected governments to serve their citizens better is ushering in a new revolution. When Artificial Intelligence is coupled with open data, a real paradigm shift begins. With choice and information-sharing now redefining consumer behaviour, every company is looking to embrace or at least look like it is embracing the new paradigm of data-driven innovation.

“Datafication” of businesses has also brought to the fore the criticality of developing data management, storage and privacy laws. The European Union with its General Data Protection Regulation has been a front-runner and other countries, including India, have also adopted a collaborative model to develop privacy laws, which includes deliberations with creators of data (the consumer) and users (corporates).

While concerns around privacy and consent have been well articulated, open government data is a silent but powerful movement unfolding globally. Over 100 governments have already signed a charter to proactively share data collected by various government departments, for public consumption. Fostering collaboration, enabling creative innovations and collective problem-solving are giving accountability and transparency a shot in the arm.

Open government data means publishing information collected by the government in its entirety, such as government budgets, spending records, health-care measures, climate records, and farming and agricultural produce statistics. If the advent of data-driven business models was a watershed moment, this is the real pot of gold.

Unfortunately, the potential of this national asset is being grossly underutilised. We need to act on it without further delay for three basic reasons. One, such data collected by governments are for citizen welfare; hence they have an implicit right to benefit from the information. Two, data sets such as government budget usage, welfare schemes and subsidies increase transparency and thereby build trust. Third, and most important, it paves the way to develop technology-led innovations which can unlock massive economic value, thereby benefitting even the poorest of poor, the under-represented and the marginalised.

For instance, availability of data on yearly produce of crops, soil data health cards and meteorological data sets can help companies develop customised crop insurance solutions with specific risk-based pricing. Data points around progress in literacy rates, demographic data and density of educators can help develop customised solutions for villages. Similarly, information on availability of facilities in public hospitals, current occupancy rates, hospital and demographic data can pave the way for curated health-care applications. The cases are endless and technology can have a multiplier effect.

Research by PwC in Australia estimated that open data can add an additional 1.5% to the country’s GDP. In the Indian context, this could conservatively translate to about \$22 billion. A case in point here is Transport for London, a public utility, which has digitised and shared only about 80 data sets, yet this has led to the creation of multiple technology applications for city transport and maps, unlocking estimated economic benefits and savings for the city to the tune of £130 million.

The power of open data has hardly been lost on the Indian government. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has made some laudable efforts, including a policy around open data. India currently houses more than 1.6 lakh data resources and has published over 4,015 application programme interfaces (APIs) from across 100-plus departments. As a result, India's global ranking by the Global Open Data Barometer has jumped.

This is a good start but not enough. A closer analysis of the Open Data project shows good intent but sporadic execution. Hence, while India publishes data points, very little of it is getting utilised by data consumers, scientists and corporates. Naturally, the socio-economic impact is limited.

I have proposed a 5C framework to address the current underlying execution gaps of the Open Data project, and believe it can help India achieve its stated objectives to double farmers' incomes by 2022 and provide universal health coverage and micro loans to micro, small and medium enterprises among others.

The first step is to ensure completeness of data stacks opened for use either through machine-readable formats or direct APIs. Completeness would imply a data set. For example, soil data cards will have data on all relevant aspects as well as current emerging technologies such as Blockchain and the Internet of Things to provide the opportunity to automate data collection.

Comprehensiveness of a data stack or various data sets is essential. For example, a comprehensive agri-data set would have digitised data sets on soil data, rainfall, crop production as well as market rates. Currently, data sets shared in India are somewhat disjointed and not comprehensive.

Clustering of relevant data sets and APIs would be the next step. This would mean combining data sets which can lead to the creation of applications such as farm insurance from weather, soil and crop cycle/sale data. Therefore, technology developers have a road map of "innovations in focus" for national development.

The fourth step is building anchor cases or use-cases to encourage data usage. A case in point is Aadhaar/identity data which has seen exponential growth (post identification in e-KYC). Taking the Aadhaar case further, its API has led to the development of market applications, an Aadhaar-enabled payment system, and direct benefit transfers among others which are clearly pushing the "financial inclusion" drive.

The final step would be setting up a comprehensive governance framework which includes an open data council with cross-sector representation to monitor, regulate and build usage after proportionate oversight.

The time is now ripe for the government to create a data-driven governance architecture by building digital trust in the economy and its intent.

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