

The logo for 'The 100 Questions' features the word 'THE' in a small, white, sans-serif font above the number '100'. The '1' is a simple vertical bar, and the '00' are two large, white, rounded circles. Below the '100' is the word 'QUESTIONS' in a white, sans-serif font.

UNLESS WE DEFINE THE QUESTIONS WELL...
TO UNLOCK THE POTENTIAL OF DATA AND DATA SCIENCE
HOW CAN WE PROVIDE ANSWERS THAT MATTER?

Have your say! What are the governance questions that really matter, that data can help answer?

By Stefaan Verhulst, Marly Augustine and Nicola Nixon

Data-driven decision making, evidence-based policymaking, collaborative problem solving; these are all goals that are commonly cited by those pursuing better governance policies and practices. Yet they are notoriously difficult to realise, particularly in contexts in which existing governance systems are replete with wicked problems. How can policymakers operationalise data to create community-tailored solutions? What role do citizens play in establishing open governance systems and discourse? How can issues of trust, community marginalisation, and

accountability be addressed through strong data use?

It all starts with asking the right questions.

In December 2020, The GovLab at New York University, the BRAC Institute for Governance and Development, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies Indonesia, and the Asia Foundation kicked off a collaborative agenda-setting and coalition-building exercise to surface pressing governance issues that might be overcome through the more effective use of data. The methodology for this approach has been pioneered by The GovLab through the [100 Questions Initiative](#) and has already successfully been applied to 'domains' such as 'gender' and 'migration'. The project seeks to map the most pressing, high-impact questions in each domain that, if answered with data, could be leveraged for transformational change.

For the 'governance domain', we engaged 132 experts in governance and data science - whom we call 'bilinguals' - to generate these critical questions and prioritise the top 10. Across 50 countries, the bilinguals for the governance domain represent 93 agencies, organisations and platforms, ranging from government representatives from Brazil, Finland, Ghana, New Zealand, and the Philippines, to UN, World Bank and OECD analysts in France, Indonesia, Mexico, Thailand and the US. They include think tanks, non-profit organisations and private sector companies.

Through the first few months of 2021, the bilinguals generated 170 questions across three dimensions of governance: transparency and accountability; efficiency and effectiveness; and inclusion and participation. This initial batch of questions reflected a vast array of context-specific issues and concerns, from the immediate impact of COVID-19 on local health systems to the challenges of mitigating intractable conflicts.

Several of these submissions touched on various crises of political trust; seeking

to understand what data might shed light on how trust in public institutions is gained, lost and maintained. Declining public trust in governance institutions can be linked to the [rise in misinformation, social and political polarisation, and populism](#). For instance in 2019, [only 45% of citizens in the OECD countries trusted their governments](#). The prolonged crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has sorely tested governments' abilities to provide essential services, likely eroding levels of trust even further. Moreover, public trust is not an esoteric consideration: it has real ramifications for the success of public policies, such as vaccination rollout, and for compliance with regulations, such as movement restrictions.

Questions related to trust overlapped with others posed on transparency and accountability and the extent to which open governance agendas can (or indeed should) be pursued and to what ends. Other bilinguals focused more on how and where data might contribute to improving the effectiveness of institutions, public services and policymaking processes - both in terms of how they involve citizens at the front end and provide equitable outcomes at the back end. The importance of equity underlay many of the questions posed from those that sought to understand different dimensions of democratic regression to those that were looking to address the exclusion of women and marginalised groups from policy processes and outcomes.

The full list of questions and their accompanying rationales provided us with a wealth of insights into the most pressing governance challenges in many parts of the world.

The questions were then refined, clustered and re-examined by the bilinguals, who prioritised them in two rounds of voting that has brought us to what we would argue are the top 10 governance questions that can be answered with data. These questions are:

- What is the relationship between transparency of government

performance and public trust in government institutions? Which factors have the most significant impact on increasing public trust in government?

- Which populations/groups are not represented in data that is collected and used for formal government decision-making? Who is most at risk of being excluded from consideration with the rise in data innovations?
- If citizens have greater access to data and information, does that mobilise them to take action and engage politically? Under what circumstances does that happen?
- How are social media and digital communications platforms affecting the way people engage politically and the nature and quality of political debate?
- What are the key factors contributing to effective civic engagement at national and local levels? Which skills or incentives do citizens need to participate in public decision-making?
- Does open governance affect the accountability of those in power; facilitate public debate and participation; and lead to more inclusive, transparent and timely decision-making?
- How can democracies achieve inclusion more effectively, in terms of both process (how decisions are made, whose voices count), and outcomes (how resources, prosperity and well-being are distributed)?
- How does government budget and expenditure transparency at different levels impact community monitoring and the quality of public service delivery?
- Which factors most determine differences in institutional capacity and performance of government agencies?
- How has democratic regression (erosion of democratic norms and standards) affected public service delivery? Does less democratic governance lead to less effective service delivery?

Now we are seeking a much broader view. We have launched a public voting

platform to invite broader inputs on which of the questions are most important. With your input, we can further narrow these to a few priority questions that we will then seek to answer.

Have your say! [Vote on the questions that matter to you.](#)

This post is part of a collaborative series with [The Asia Foundation.](#)

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