

Data dumping for development: Turning stats into stories

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The World Bank's open data policy recently celebrated its first anniversary. The New York Times marked the occasion [with a detailed story by Stephanie Strom](#), outlining the changing attitudes to transparency at the institution, and proclaiming that the Bank's data could one day become more valuable than its lending and infrastructure projects.

Under the leadership of president Robert Zoellick, the Bank has seemed determined to shut down old criticisms that it is a closed shop. [In a speech last year](#), Zoellick outlined how the Bank was aiming to create a new paradigm for global conversations on development economics, shifting the focus away from a top-down, Washington-centric approach.

In this new spirit of openness and collaboration, the World Bank's [data portal](#) provides graphical navigation of more than 2000 development indicators. The treasure trove of numbers can also be examined using [Google's Public Data Explorer](#).

The availability of World Bank data is no doubt highly valuable to donor and recipient governments, academics, NGOs, economists and other development practitioners. But there is one group who seems to have shown little enthusiasm in using the data so far, perhaps the group most crucial in filtering information on the Bank's practices down to the grassroots — journalists.

While grabbing a quick infant mortality statistic or agricultural figure to round out a story is now easily done online, the potential for the data to improve reportage on development and aid issues is limited for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the data is not parochial enough for most news media outlets. Given that the most broadly consumed media types in any given country are typically at the local level, national data provides few avenues for deeper investigation of the issues that are most relevant to these sub-national audiences.

Secondly, the data itself does not provide story angles, so reporters may not be able to identify ways to use it to generate news. In time-pressed newsrooms where budgets are shrinking, there are limited resources for investigation. Additionally, reporters may not have the capacity to interpret the data to generate story leads. Without some direction on how reporters can use this vast database, it easily falls into the too hard basket.

Another beef with the Bank lately has come from bloggers, who have been denied access to embargoed reports and media releases because they are not 'accredited' journalists. As the heritage media shrinks, blogs are now replacing some local newspapers — and a lot of specialised reportage on aid is written on blogs rather than in newsprint. It could be wise for the Bank to reconsider this policy, given its own push to develop a thriving internal blogging culture.

There are several other steps the Bank could take to make its data more useful for grassroots media.

By encouraging member countries, NGOs and academics to share their available country data online at the World Bank's portal, more local detail could encourage local journalism. The Kenyan government is now providing its government data online through the portal and hopefully other countries will follow.

Training and guidance for journalists and bloggers on how to use and explore the data could be delivered online through a portal established either by the Bank, or through collaboration with media development NGOs. A blog highlighting potential angles for media coverage and creative uses of the data could also help.

Finally, the Bank needs to expand on its openness by providing more information online about its projects in ways that are straightforward for local communities and media to interpret.

The Open Data Initiative is a significant step towards greater transparency at the World Bank. However, in order to share data and knowledge across all levels of society, particularly in recipient countries, it needs to strive harder to engage grassroots media and to recognise the limited capacity in local newsrooms. Media outlets don't want to run World Bank press releases, but without some guidance or contextualisation all this newly liberated information could be more baffling than helpful. Without addressing these constraints, bottom-up scrutiny of the Bank's development policies and practice will remain limited.

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