TOWARDS A CARIBBEAN OPEN INSTITUTE:

DATA, COMMUNICATIONS AND IMPACT

Summary of guidelines and recommendations

William Gordon Conference Room, the Jamaica Pegasus Hotel,

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Introduction

The workshop, "Towards a Caribbean Open Institute: Data, Communications and Impact", was hosted by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), June 30 – July 1, 2010 at the Jamaica Pegasus Hotel, Kingston, Jamaica. It brought together international experts and stakeholders in the Caribbean to explore opportunities for strengthening policy-oriented research in the region. The meeting was attended by nearly 40 high-level stakeholders in the area of public policy research from across the region and centered on the themes of Open Data, Communication and Monitoring & Evaluation as specific areas which can influence the application of research for more effective policy making.

Participants examined international experiences and explored the possibilities of collaborating to drive the process of making more data available online in open formats in order to strengthen the work of governments, researchers and civil society. The use of open data is just emerging in some sectors in the Caribbean and effort to understand its potentialities and implications was welcome by representatives of regional and national institutions. The meeting moved towards establishing a vision and exploring possible guidelines for a Caribbean initiative to drive open institutional data approaches.

This document summarizes the initial recommendations and guidelines for the development of the initiative emerging from the meeting. It briefly highlights the general challenges identified, the vision developed by the participants and some initial steps to guide actions in the area of Open Data, Communications and Monitoring and Evaluation.

The group acknowledged substantial challenges related mainly to the effective use of data and evidence in policy-oriented research in the region, such as limitations on the ground data collection, the challenges of translating evidence to the policy influence process and even aspects related to political will of policy and decision makers to acknowledge the value of evidences.

Nevertheless, the group also envisaged the potential contribution of the initiative in the development of a Caribbean Knowledge Economy. Among others, the group propose that (i) Governments in the region embrace Open Data programs as an essential component of their

information dissemination strategies and development goals (ii) Caribbean researchers actively collaborate and engage in dialogue and sharing information; and policy makers use this evidence-based information for decisions, and (iii) the civil society increasing make use of available data to create new services and provide new ways for communicating valuable information and positively impacting and empowering the constituents they serve.

A number of specific recommendations were identified as initial steps to be taken. Some initial steps include the identification of champions working in the Caribbean or from the different Diasporas, sharing of best practices, awareness raising, capacity building, pilot projects, open data repositories, effective use of traditional and new media and support to the Caribbean language diversity. This should be developed inside a framework of monitoring and evaluation that acknowledges complexity and supports learning.

The event concluded that the dialogue will continue in the form of a collaborative network that will promote open data and better communication between stakeholder support for policy-related research, driven by a regional group of researchers and organizations and supported by the IDRC and other agencies and donors. The different institutions will continue and expand the discussion and further detail the next steps of developing, running and facilitating a collaborative initiative, including specific projects and different organizational options.

The Challenges

The following are some of the key challenges which emerged in the discussion:

On the Ground: Challenges in Data Collection

- Limited access to high quality data that is timely and accurate. This can be seen as a challenge of access as well as a challenge of resources to finance the collection of meaningful data.

- Limited availability of structured, current, machine-readable and locally relevant data for public consumption.

- It is sometimes considered that data produced using public resources is the private property of the organization which produced it and, therefore, Caribbean research data is not normally widely available or accessible.

- Strategies are needed for improving the quality of data about the Caribbean through data gathering, data systematization and data analysis.

- There is not enough confidence in local expertise in the generation of research to inform policy.

- There is a need to harness cultural diversity and local expertise in collecting contextually relevant data.

Evidence to Decision: Knowledge Processes in Influencing Policy

- There is a challenge in initiating and maintaining communication across various networks, countries and languages. Researchers may not know how to best collaborate in data collection and analysis. They also may not understand the policy contexts in which they must operate or the importance of developing a communication strategy to support their efforts to have an impact.

- Capacity-building efforts are required within research groups and local/regional institutions to effectively use new technologies to communicate research results and recommendations to policy makers and the public at large.

- There may not be sufficient institutional incentives for research institutions to make data available as well as institutional incentives to communicate research results to policymakers.

- There are also challenges of advocacy towards greater awareness among the policy makers and the public. Networking is not effectively used as a channel towards buy-in and support.

Political Will of Policy and Decision Makers

- There are a number of cultural and institutional limitations that hinder the use data, and other forms of evidence, for policy making.

- A cultural shift is required for policy makers to understand the value of evidence as input to decisions and in the development of well-designed social programs.

- Buy-in from policy makers, public organizations and civil society is needed. However, there is also the problem of internal bureaucracy, conflicting demands, contradictory evidence, little public interest and corruption. They all can hinder the effectiveness of the evidence as basis for policy.

- The effective implementation of policy can be difficult without the use of consistent and appropriate monitoring and evaluation measures. Policy makers need to identify the value of evaluating projects appropriately.

The Vision

We envisage that:

- The Caribbean is a knowledge based society.

- Caribbean researchers are actively collaborating and engaging in dialogue and sharing information; and policy makers are using this evidence-based information for decisions.

- Regional Governments embrace Open Data programs as an essential component of their information dissemination strategies and development goals.

- Research generators and users (including project planners, public organizations, NGOs, civil society) participate in a regional network where members collectively and proactively identify the key development issues, taking advantage of Open Data initiatives to create new services and provide new ways for presenting valuable information and positively impacting and empowering the constituents they serve.

- These same actors also work together to analyze and transform data to solve Caribbean challenges.

- ICT entrepreneurs are actively building creative, content based applications for external and internal markets.

- Research institutes, government entities and civil society are spearheading a range of education, capacity building and sensitization initiatives at the national and regional level to communicate and demonstrate the potential, power and possibilities of Open Data for transforming society and improving the quality of life for Caribbean societies.

In order to contribute to this vision, specific actions related to Open Data, Communications and Monitoring and Evaluation will be carried out by the network of institutions involved in this initiative, based on the guidelines described in the following section.

Open Data, Communications and Monitoring & Evaluation: Initial Guidelines

There are a number of challenges and opportunities for exploiting Open Data, Communication and M&E for the strengthening of the policy-oriented research networks in the Caribbean. This section summarizes the context and the subsequent guidelines for the development of the initiative in each one of these topics.

On Open Data

Challenges and opportunities

At the moment, there is an inadequate investment in statistical data capture, management and analysis as well as weak institutional capacity (leadership/staffing) of public bodies including local research organizations. There is also insufficient coordination of national statistical systems that impacted on the possibility of regional harmonization of statistical strategies, policies and systems with little standardization and consistency of methodology and approach. Currently, government agencies see dissemination as extraneous to the core job and normally authorization is required to disseminate raw data. The collection of data is also a challenge due to the limited degrees of inter-agency data exchange; difficulties extracting data from International Agencies operating in the region; and the consideration of privacy and security laws which may limit the data that can be made available.

Also in the discussion, the challenge in the Access to Information Act as the framework for open data was an issue that was raised. The Access to Information Act does not change much unless you have the time and resources to go through an extended legal process. It is quite an anathema to the idea of open data which would mean being willing to share information even before knowing who would be using it and why. This is a new framework that we would want to endorse.

A paradigm shift is required to recognize the value of raw data. And although leadership is important, the solution cannot be top-down. Civil society can take advantage of raw data and collaborate on its usage. Collaboration will be a by-product of the Open data approach as synchronized initiatives across the region will be required. Regional champions for open data can be used to promote the idea among governments, businesses and citizens. This will foster citizen will as well as political will.

How to Get Started

- In terms of getting started, different strategies need to be used to assess a country's or any institution's readiness for an open data initiative. We should identify organizations already inclined to openness, *champions* (technical, policy, institutional), target groups (NGOs, academia, private sector), open access and open source communities and crowd-sourced data opportunities.

- A forum established among the participant institutions can be a basis for collaboration (sharing stories, requests for help, solutions, etc.) and dissemination of *best practices* (including best practices related to raising awareness, building confidence, implementation, sustainability, applications) and *sharing of lessons* learnt from difficulties and failures.

- *Awareness* need to be supported by engagement with different stakeholders including the topic in high-level meetings (e.g. CTU ICT Roadshow, statistical conferences), and through the engagement of traditional and new media. This would require ROI arguments, stories and other evidences. A set of tools and documents with clear definitions of open data, of the role of the different actors, the benefits expected (best practices), and instruments for assessing the availability of data/readiness of each country/organization will help to guide the process.

- Capacity building need to be supported based on events and workshops (hackfests, bar camps, etc). This will help disseminate open data standards, index of datasets, applications, formats/ ontologies, best practices, sample code, open source tools,

sample implementations, training tools and standards/formats/vocabulary harmonization.

- Pilot projects will also be necessary for proof of concept. This will also attract credit and recognition for contributing agencies. Among the data proposed as good starting points were: trade related data, public works information, agricultural information and geo-mapping, crime statistics, transportation data and ICT data.

- The incentives for organizations to make data open should be identified in order to promote the availability of high visibility, high value raw data. A regional database of statistics on open data and applications needs to be established.

- An engaging with the media is important in order to promote the understanding of the issue in the society. Media has a possible crucial role in sensitizing the public and reinforcing the benefit of open data. In turn, this will support the development of relationships with governments, press, public, academia, NGOs, hackers, and others.

- In the ensuing discussion language was seen as a key area for collaboration. The open data system must cut across the diverse countries and cultures of the region and must be multilingual. At the same time, there is a need for Open data fora able to operate in local languages. Therefore, it is possible that language-based rather than or in addition to region based fora would be useful. In any case, the experiences in any language or region need to be shared outside of those boundaries, since the experiences of one will be valuable to others.

On Communication

Challenges and opportunities

The challenges were seen as internal, external and universal.

Internally (within research organizations), there is not enough knowledge on how policy is made and limited understanding of how policy is influenced. Internal and external communication specialists are not engaged to shape and deliver the message between researchers and policy makers and the general public. This may be because institutional leadership may not fully understand the value of communication in research activities. Little legal framework exists for facilitation of communication of research outputs.

External challenges identified include the problem of gaining access to the policy maker and the channels that can be created. Additionally, there may be a lack of information available on other groups doing similar work. Financing can also be a challenge which can affect communication if the strategy is not considered early in the project. Financiers may not appreciate the costs associated with communicating research outputs.

Among universal challenges are: the lack of awareness of what data is available, data management and storage, and the need for structures to quickly classify and locate data, making it more readily available. In addition, the public perception of research requires attention in order improve the perception that it can add value to individuals, businesses and communities. Communication of outputs is affected by this as it can determine public buy-in. The public needs to appreciate the role of research, evidence-based decision-making and policy.

Nevertheless, there is a strong demand of civil society for information at the local and regional level. Also the availability of technology can facilitate communication. Several new governments currently exist across the region who would be seeking to gain political mileage from innovative policy directions. Finally, an opportunity exists in organizations increasingly recognizing the value of collaboration.

Getting Started

- In terms of getting started, research organizations need to understand the value of having a communication expertise supporting the communication process, to ensure the information is disseminated and that messages are readily understandable by non-technical persons.

- We should also move to understanding how policy is created by conducting research in localized settings and in relevant policy areas. Adaptive learning can be used to reach the policy maker by creating a two-way communication process with high-level policy-makers (politicians, high-level technocrats at government ministries). This type of relationship will assist the researcher to determine the policy priorities of the policy maker. It will also be important where possibly giving the politician an opportunity to improve his/her image and reputation can inspire real influence on policy.

- Caribbean researchers also need to develop capacity in analysis of policy context and influence (including frameworks such as ODI's Research and Policy in Development Programme – RAPID[1]). Research organizations need to design effective communication strategies for their activities. This can be done through developing active online communities and developing the capacity to use available technologies among researchers and users.

- Researchers should also generate evidences on how to use new interactive technologies to link research to policy making and share research outputs and methodologies.

- Targeted communication strategies are needed to guide how best to communicate research outputs and other collaboration-based information for policy matters. This includes communicating the research projects to stakeholders right from the start so that there is the demand for follow-up and for sharing of the information.

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[1] http://www.odi.org.uk/work/programmes/rapid/default.asp

- Communications should also support the movements towards Open Data. Regular meetings should be used as opportunities for creating and sharing data related to ongoing work. Public education should promote the significance of open data within localized contexts and with local Champions.

- Another important starting point is to foster greater institutional interaction. This involves addressing institutional constraints to make data collectively available from government agencies and regional bodies such as CARICOM. It will be important to include the agencies of CARICOM with a view to their reviewing intellectual property commitments. Reciprocal sharing of data between institutions should also be implemented via mutual agreements.

- A communication strategy for open data will involve politicians, government agencies, regional bodies, civil society (i.e. businesses, NGOs, citizens), international funding agencies, academic institutions. It was also seen as an important step that the Diaspora be targeted for the communication of information as they have an interest in regional developments and initiatives.

On Monitoring & Evaluation

Challenges and Opportunities

Currently there is a weak culture of [systematic, holistic] Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) in the region; the flipside to that is the opportunity to define a new reality of an internally driven planning, monitoring, evaluation and impact process in project cycles, programs and institutions, and one that tries out new M&E approaches, frameworks and tools. There is a growing core of professionals who are interested and committed to understanding these new approaches and tools.

To take advantage of fertile ground, we need to focus our M&E efforts by exploring the following:

- What it is that needs to be evaluated (the policy process itself, the impact of policy, Open Data as part of the policy process);

- How to best convince leaders and decision-makers of these different evaluation options (and how to decide which one to focus on) and how we can link outcomes of initiatives to the attainment of national goals;

- The most appropriate methodologies and indicators for M&E (to consider methodological plurality; use qualitative and quantitative methods); how to best employ the appropriate methodology with careful consideration of the problem and desired outcomes of the M&E process;

- How best to garner support for doing evaluations (support from decision-makers; support to finance M&E);

- Making M&E a collaborative, participatory process;

- How to best build regional capacity in M&E (including training, education, mentorship).

Getting Started

- In order to start the process, public awareness and sensitization are needed at all levels. Communication strategies are required to engage partners in order to create a community of support. A survey of the environment is required and data should be collected on existing knowledge in the field. Synergies should be established with existing projects.

- The widest possible community of stakeholders should be engaged including: politicians and public servants, executing departments, National M&E units, civil society & NGOs, boundary partners, beneficiaries/citizens, the media, donors, and community of practitioners.

- There is a felt need in the region to build capacity of local champions in M&E in general (approaches such as Outcome Mapping may be particularly relevant). Local M&E champions should not only be able to carry out M&E activities, but train, coach and mentor others to do the same. Capacity specifically in impact assessment (using a Developmental Evaluation framework[2]) would be of great benefit. Designing and supporting training courses or incorporating and M&E component in university curriculum could help meet these needs.

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1. [2] Michael Quinn Patton, *Developmental Evaluation* (Guilford Press, 2010).

Final considerations

In order to bridge the gap between the challenges and the vision presented here, a careful step-by-step approach would be required to increase chances for success.

First of all, we need to continue the discussion about who will make up the Institute. The participants saw the Open Institute as a rich intellectual cluster of Caribbean thinkers collaborating towards the proposed vision. This can operate in a virtual forum to be called "Caribbean Open Forum" at the first moment. This forum will continue the debate, hone the vision and advance the development of different actions.

Based on the above guidelines, the different institutions will continue and expand the dialogue and further discuss the practical next steps of developing, running and facilitating a collaborative initiative, including specific projects and different organizational options. A moderation process needs to be put in place to facilitate the debate online and promote the development of different activities.

There is a need to further explore how each organization can do to contribute to this initiative, including its promotion in the region. A number of partners already offered to contribute with concrete actions. Bernadette Lewis, Secretary General of the CTU stated that she would begin immediately to introduce this concept of a shift from e-government to o-government promoting it at the highest levels. This would include the Caribbean Internet Governance Forum in St. Maarten in August. Pilot applications are also needed to demonstrate what is possible. Dr. Maurice McNaughton of UWI, Mona offered to assist with the testing of an application for this purpose.

A stakeholder and network analysis could be useful to determine other individuals, groups and organizations that could help push for an Open Data policy in the Caribbean and to set Open Data in motion. This initial map would be useful to determine what capacities lie where, and what capacities need to be strengthened to take on Open Data and to promote its place in the policy process.

In addition, a map of the changes envisaged by individual organizations could allow for monitoring of these changes to reflect upon the process of promoting Open Data for policy making. Possibly, from this analysis, it would be possible to determine a common set of

indicators or milestones could be drawn up. The following participants contributed to these recommendations and agreed that there is an opportunity to be champions of tin this process as a significant contribution towards a Caribbean Knowledge Economy.

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