[**Data for governance**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1723179/data-for-governance)

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ON Barack Obama’s first day as president, he pledged to make information about government operations readily available to US citizens. He then “signed an executive order that made open and machine-readable data the new default for government information”. Since then, the US administration has made significant progress in opening up its administrative data, and as envisaged, the openness has resulted in improving the efficiency of government agencies and strengthening their democracy with more informed civic engagement. The data was already there, however, the political will and leadership changed attitudes towards it and nourished a culture where the government started to use data as an asset by making it more available and usable.

While many legal and policy changes were adopted to achieve this cultural change, one of the first and most critical step was the development of a centralised government data portal (in May 2009, where different government agencies made large amounts of information available to the public. The portal provided easy access to public, policymakers, researchers and data developers to thousands of computer-readable government data sets. The UK soon followed in January 2010, and since then many countries have adopted the philosophy.

A survey by Open Data Barometer suggests that the majority of the countries in the survey (55 per cent) now have an open data initiative in place. Pakistan, however, was in the bottom 10 along with Yemen, Swaziland and a few other developing countries. The barometer ranked the countries on many indicators such as data availability, openness, accessibility, usage and impact. Pakistan’s most disappointing results were on implementation and impact where we scored just four (out of 100) and zero (out of 100) respectively. This implies that most of our data is either unavailable (or not machine readable) and there is absolutely no impact of the data on increasing government efficiency and effectiveness.

This inability to govern effectively is also evident from our ranking on the World Bank’s collection of development indicators where we are currently ranked at 37.5pc (percentile), and our score on government effectiveness is -0.4 — this was around 0.68 in 1996. On the other hand, India, which inherited a similar governance structure, has improved its score from -0.11 in 1996 to 0.28 in 2021. More worrying is the fact that instead of improvement, the state of affairs is getting worse with time. Moreover, with the current bleak outlook for local and global economies, with high inflation and slowing growth, it is even more pertinent now to spend wisely. We need more openness, more transparency, more accountability and more data. And we need the will, leadership and capacities to use this data scientifically for better planning and policymaking.

We need more openness, transparency and data.

To be fair, we do produce a lot of data on population, demographics, health, education and other key indicators. However, most of the data is available in hard or PDF formats at different locations (websites, government offices, personal computers) which are hard to turn into usable information. For efficient and effective usage, we need central data platforms or open data portals where government departments can share information easily and prevent silos from emerging.

Eventually, data should be collected and stored digitally, to reduce errors and increase the speed with which it can be made publicly available. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Bureau of Statistics has taken the first major step towards this digitisation, with the KP Data Portal where all the available administrative data for the last 20 years has been digitised and made available for both policymakers and general public. They have been supported on this by The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. Other bureaus, including the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, only have their data available in PDF format of their websites which users cannot easily access and modify, thus severely restricting their usage.

McKinsey has estimated the value of open (accessible government data) data at $3 trillion a year globally, which has the potential to improve government spendings, bring more transparency and countability, reduce spendings, improve services and create new businesses, digital service and innovation. With a young, digitally connected and tech-literate population, we have the potential to improve our policymaking and planning processes through data and evidence. However, for this to happen, we need to produce more timely and relevant data; make the data more accessible by developing a PBS-led central data portal with machine-readable data; and build capacities in government on data usage for planning and policymaking.

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