



Responsible Data and the Donor Community

the engine room

Data risks, ethics and strategy

ICTs and the data they generate play a prominent role in many advocacy initiatives. Whether through explicit data collection efforts such as citizen reporting or surveys, through the maintenance of operational information such as organizational member lists, or through the automatic generation of information on teams and communities through the use of communications platforms, data-driven advocacy has become commonplace.

Unfortunately, these developments have not been matched by awareness about risks that data can pose to the privacy and security of advocates and their communities. Generation, communication, and storage of personally identifiable information can pose real threats to individuals and communities if not properly managed. The few anecdotes of things going terribly wrong (community data leading to arrests and torture, funding information leading to reprisals, mapping data leading to harassment) are as damning as they are rare. The lack of incentives to openly acknowledge such failures creates a poor information environment for considering what can go wrong and what can be done to prevent it.

These issues imply responsibilities for people working all along the value chain of human rights, accountability and social change programming. Donors, support organizations advocates all have a responsibility to better understand these risks and take what steps they can to mitigate them. At the end of the day, this is an ethical question about relationships to stakeholders. It is also a strategic issue that needs to be carefully considered in order to develop long-term and reciprocal relationship with communities and stakeholders on the ground.

The [Responsible Data Project](#) is reaching out to each of these groups, to better understand how they experience the issues involved, and identify opportunities within their workflows and decision points to mitigate these risks.

The donor community

We believe that the donor community has a key role to play in bettering practice and disseminating norms for responsible data and to help grantees mitigate risk. We also know that many working within large funding institutions believe that a lot can be done to improve internal standards and procedures for managing data, and that documenting some of the common challenges would help to promote better institutional practice as well.

To help meet these needs, the engine room is conducting a series of interview with donors funding human rights, accountability, governance and other international development work that uses or generates data. We are speaking with program officers, IT specialists and admin staff to better understand how they experience these issues at the project level, in their communications with grantees, and in internal operations.

We will be having between 15 to 20 one-on-one conversations in the course of the summer of 2013. All discussions are informal and off-the-record.

Short brief and long-term work

If you gave us your time and input in a conversation on responsible data, we will be sending you a short brief, summarizing what we learned, and highlighting trends and opportunities to improve practice. Nothing in the brief will be attributable to individuals or institutions.

At the end of the day, this will be a small but important piece of the larger effort towards more responsible data practices in the tech for social good field. But it is an important piece. If everyone who contributed thinks it's a good idea, we'll share the brief more widely to move the larger discussion forward.

Thanks for helping.

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