

# Data Use Case Study: Transforming data into useful information for transparency advocacy in Liberia

## Joseph works to support local participation in Liberia's budget implementation and policy development.

Joseph Cheayan is a Programme Associate at the Institute for Research and Democratic Development (IREDD) in Liberia. He monitors budgets on service delivery across all sectors, builds the capacity of community-based organisations to monitor budgets, and strengthens the role and capacity of legislators who are representing citizens.

The goal of Joseph's work, and that of the IREDD, is to promote socioeconomic justice, good governance and democracy in Liberia. By conducting advocacy activities around governance and budget tracking, Joseph's work is aimed at improving transparency and accountability in Liberia.



The effect of two civil wars in the past three decades has left Liberia with poor public services, high levels of corruption and limited transparency of information and resources. Joseph recalls when he tried to trace EU funds earmarked to address Liberia's high levels of infant mortality, “We found that the money from the EU came through to the Ministry of Finance but we could not find any information to trace the money beyond this.” Joseph's budget monitoring efforts indicated that the

money never left the Ministry of Finance. “They said they used the money for something else but they have not been able to prove what they spent; this money could have been wasted, misused, or it could still be sitting there. There is no information and nobody can tell us”.

Joseph and his team at IREDD work to increase government accountability, particularly in relation to financial flows and service delivery. They do this by helping to improve the flow of information between the government, the extractive industries and Liberia’s citizens. They work to increase civic engagement, believing that this will help build a democratic society that delivers equitable and sustainable development.

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Joseph’s work involves finding and analysing information on budgets and policies as well as government expenditure and private companies operating in the extractive industries in Liberia. The purpose is to hold these actors to account when they do not provide regular budget performance reports. Joseph monitors government budgets and legislators’ engagement, and he tracks information on service delivery across government ministries. He takes this information to rural communities, helping them to understand their rights, and supports advocacy activities that hold the government and extractive industries to account. He uses the data he gathers from the government for a variety of purposes, including in the preparation of advocacy materials, in-depth reports, and more recently in the development of a legislative scorecard. Liberia is currently undergoing a modernisation process that sets standards for how legislators operate. The scorecard compiles data to monitor these standards, including information on bills introduced, bills passed, loans received, members’ attendance, records of participation, and projected budgets.

Joseph identifies many issues with the available data for his analysis. He obtains the majority of the budget data from hard copies of government budget and gathers legislator information in person through the Office of the Chief Clerk, with whom he has developed a good relationship. The information is not proactively made available by the government online, but “when requested, the Liberian government is usually quite detailed and open in providing planned expenditure details”. The process to obtain the data can be quite time-consuming, but “every government department has an information unit – we can usually get hold of the information we need by going directly to the department secretaries”. Joseph has also used the Freedom of Information Act as a route to obtain the information he needs.

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Joseph often finds that the data is not of good enough quality for his needs. “Sometimes there are gaps in the information and the data is not always up to date”. On occasion, when presenting this information to rural communities, he has discovered that it is not accurate. He is also not always sure if his data sources are reliable. If Joseph finds information from non-government sources he will take it to the ministry for it to

be verified by the government before using it in his work.

A problem that IREDD is trying to overcome is that government and extractive industry information is not accessible to the rural poor. “The Ministry of Finance puts the projected spend on a notice board outside of their building [in Monrovia] for the public to see, but not everybody knows about this”. There is no citizens’ budget released in a way that is consumable by the people in rural communities. Joseph plays an intermediary role and takes the information directly to the communities to enable better flows of information. He takes photocopies of hardcopy documents and, where information is available in PDFs online, he downloads and prints copies of it for the communities. His organisation is not big enough to take this information to all communities, but they take it to as many as their capacity allows. The communities sometimes struggle to comprehend the information due to their lack of familiarity with the data, and also because the data is not in local languages – many of the communities speak a pidgin version of English as their second language. Joseph simplifies the information and breaks it down so that the communities can make sense of the budget figures, understand their rights, and the legal language of the mining laws. He takes the legislative scorecard to the communities so that citizens are able to understand the budget process, follow whether legislators are actually doing their job, and give their feedback on decision-making.

Joseph uses social media, traditional media and radio to communicate with the constituencies, but the majority of the time he communicates with them in person. He spends much of his time in the communities hosting meetings between the residents and legislators, supporting them to give feedback to the government and conducting training to help community-based organisations understand what they are entitled to and how to monitor the services delivered to them. In particular, he trains communities to understand the provisions and processes of the Liberia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (LEITI) to monitor government and extractive industry commitments and raise awareness of educational entitlements they are due to receive from the government. He helps civil society to track service delivery against budget commitments. IREDD has developed a questionnaire that is given to school administrators to help them track disbursements against commitments, for example whether the school has received the correct free school uniform provisions. Joseph feeds the data collected directly from the beneficiaries to the government so that the government is aware of what services are reaching the communities.

Joseph has seen the impact of the IREDD’s work on increasing the flow of information and opening of accountability channels. “Legislators are now becoming more representative to their constituencies because of the public pressure of the scorecard. Now legislators are actually doing their job”. IREDD’s role in coordinating meetings between legislators and community representatives has resulted in increased community participation in the budget processes and an increased awareness of their rights under mining laws. There has also been increased demand from the communities for this information and for the opportunity to give feedback. Through their work to empower the communities IREDD is also playing a key role in strengthening the capacity of the legislators to deliver on their responsibilities. “Now legislators will attend our sessions because they know that we will hold them to account and shame them if they do not”.

## Case study insights

This case study exemplifies many challenges experienced with data. The data and information that is available to those with government connections is often out of date and of poor quality, inaccurate, incomplete, not detailed enough and sometimes unreliable. Data is also not publically available or accessible to the rural poor. The lack of accessible information, together with limited knowledge and data skills amongst local communities prevents accountability. IREDD is playing a key role in bridging information and knowledge gaps. Using innovative tools such as the scorecard, information intermediaries such as IREDD have found ways to make information accessible and understandable to rural communities. This is fundamental to the enable public tracking of budget data and service provision information and to ensure authorities are accountable to their citizens.

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This case study is available online at: <http://devinit.org/#!/post/transforming-data-into-useful-information-the-story-of-a-liberian-transparency-advocate> .A shorter-form version of this case is available from DI's Access to Information programme.

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