Data Use Case Study: Using public finance data to monitor sub-national resource allocation in Kenya

John works to help Kenyans understand and participate in national and sub-national budget processes

John Kinuthia is a research analyst working with the International Budget Partnership (IBP) in Kenya. He conducts analysis on public finance in Kenya and contributes to reports that are written in an accessible, easy-to-understand way.

The goal of John's work, and that of IBP, is to enable civil society organisations (CSOs), journalists and citizens to understand and participate in national and county-level budget processes. John also works with others on the Kenyan transparency movement to encourage greater accountability of resource allocation within the Kenyan national and county governments.

"Big decisions about resource allocation should be based on sound evidence" John Kinuthia, Research Analyst

John's work is particularly important right now because the Kenyan government is undergoing major changes in the way it plans and spends its money: Kenya now has a devolved system involving two levels of government with independent but related budgets. John and his colleagues

at IBP write briefings to explain how the new system works. He also holds workshops for journalists and CSOs to help them learn how to interpret county budgets and use that information in their own work.
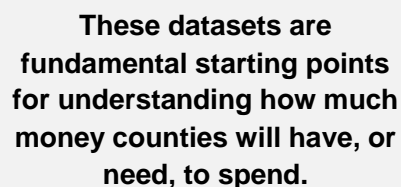
Officials involved in the devolution process are also trying to understand the level of need in their counties by using data on demographics, poverty, health and education levels. Many of the county officials are feeling challenged by the scale of the changes. "Everyone has a lot of new things to deal with as we implement devolution," says John "and I'm trying to help. I'm concerned that big decisions about resource allocation in Kenya should be based on sound evidence." IBP works with other organisations to make budget information available to everyone, including county officials.

John needs public data on national and county spending on services such as health, education and agriculture to inform his evidence base. He wants to present reliable, accurate, objective evidence in his research work, which citizens and county officials can use to make budget decisions and take action. Some of the data he needs is available online, published on the Kenya Open Data Initiative portal (KODI) and government ministry websites.

However, many datasets on the KODI portal are out of date, and a significant portion of data from ministries never makes it online or in a useful format. John often relies on relationships he has developed with officials who hold certain information; going directly to them is sometimes the only way he can access a dataset he needs.

 "I'll arrive at the Ministry and I'm told, 'The data is on so-and-so's hard drive, but you can have it if you want it'. There doesn't seem to be any process for systematically putting public data out there. I have to go and find what I need." Sometimes data is only available in hard copies, which means John laboriously transcribes it; sometimes, as with the annual Kenya National Bureau of Statistics Economic Survey, he has to pay for it too.

John has recently faced significant challenges sourcing core datasets to support his work on devolution. It was not possible for him to find reliable, public data on past spending on all the Kenyan counties disaggregated by sector. The information was merged together, even though disaggregated data is likely to exist, and has been aggregated by ministry and by sector. John has found there is also no publicly available data on the tax base in

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the counties. "These datasets are fundamental starting points for understanding how much money counties will have, or need, to spend. I am concerned the public does not have access to data, which can potentially have a big impact on all our lives".

A major concern for John and his colleagues is the lack of current county-level data on poverty – the most recent available data is from 2005/6. The reason for devolving the budget was to allocate resources more fairly based on need, but without data on poverty needs-based funding will not be possible. Household budget surveys are essential for measuring poverty and allocating funds according to needs, however the most recent household survey was conducted around eight years ago. County-level demographic data is also not regularly available, because it was either not collected or not released. John finds that some of the data that can be used is not always reliable. "Without this data, Kenyan media and citizens concerned with helping poor people are not able to have an informed debate."

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John shares his frustration with many researchers worldwide looking for this kind of data. There is a global problem with data on poverty: 21 of the household surveys used for the 2010 global poverty estimates were conducted as far back as 2003 or before; 37 countries recently examined by IBP were found to make either 'scant' or 'minimal' budget information available to their citizens. John believes that "in many cases, budget transparency could be [addressed by the] simple step of releasing these already-prepared documents to the public." Kenyan ministries – like many governments – collect a large amount of data, however it often either gets no further than ministry computers or is published in a format that nobody can find, access or use. John is concerned that a lack of data in the public domain means that many Kenyan journalists and CSOs would not even think of basing their advocacy or writing articles on public data – leaving little incentive for the government to be transparent. In John's experience, "many journalists have no idea where to look for data; it would never occur to them to use it. I want to tell people that the data exists and about the importance of using it in their work: they are entitled to it, and should be asking for it."

Case study insights

The Kenya Open Data Initiative (KODI) promised much when it was launched in 2011, but has been limited in its data availability and use. National statistics offices are often under-resourced and information is not systematically made available. To support government open data initiatives and the use of open data by citizens, both national governments and international donors will need to focus on developing skills, processes and systems as well as invest in statistical capacity building.

There was limited consultation about KODI with citizens and civil society about what data was needed and how it should be provided. As John highlights, public information sometimes has to be paid for and is often not available in the appropriate format, disaggregated, or timely. For the data to be useful it has to be accessible and the quality needs to be improved.

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This case study is available online at: http://devinit.org/#!/post/using-public-finance-data-to-monitor-sub-national-resource-allocation-in-kenya. A shorter-form version of this case is available from DI's Access to Information programme.

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