Data vs Corruption:

Exploring Barriers to Data Use in Nigeria

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This report has been prepared by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative secretariat and members.

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Report designed by Zak Bickel. Photo on page 2 courtesy of CODE/KC Nwakalor

Abuja workshop participants share stories on how they have used data to fight corruption.

Using Data to Fight Corruption

Transparency and Accountability Initiative (TAI) is a collaborative of funders working to expand the impact and scale of transparency, accountability, and participation initiatives. Our members (Ford Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Omidyar Network, Open Society Foundations, and the UK Department for International Development) have long supported efforts to open government data. They agree on the importance of the remaining challenge of ensuring use of that information to reinforce public accountability. How can that be done practically? To explore that question, TAI members agreed to examine how data is used in a specific country context. This brief headlines findings from the first such country deep dive in Nigeria, focused on use of anti-corruption data.

Why Nigeria?

TAI members have current investments in Nigeria related to the anti-corruption agenda (for example, it is the primary focus of MacArthur's On Nigeria program). An exploration of data use therefore offers opportunities to inform the effectiveness of existing programming supported by TAI donors. Simultaneously, the Nigerian government's public commitment to anti-corruption efforts is helping to drive an uptick in the number of disclosures. More information should be available — albeit with many limitations. This should create opportunities to test ways to circumvent barriers to data use in an influential country context, building on the mix of approaches already in play.

Objectives

Consequently, in fall 2017, a working group of TAI's members came together to further their understanding of how data could be better utilized and how it could support anti-corruption efforts in Nigeria. We agreed on four key objectives:

- Learning if and how grantees and their allies (primarily civil society and the media) are using data to advance their work in promoting accountability, especially in relation to fighting corruption

- Understanding the barriers and challenges that grantees face to this end

- Learning how data partnerships and collaborations with other actors in this space are (or could be) part of grantee efforts to tackle corruption

- Clarifying the ways current donor engagement is helpful (or not) and learning specific ways in which funders may be of more support to grantees and their allies

What Did We Do?

TAI pursued a combination of desk-based research (including preceding studies and assessments)a grantee survey and in-country consultations in Abuja and Lagos in winter 2018 reaching approximately fifty Nigerian organizations (primarily civil society, but also some government and media). Targeted follow-up conversations were held throughout spring 2018 to further clarify barriers to the use of anti-corruption data and pinpoint fundable opportunities to boost data uptake. These opportunities include taking advantage of new data coming online — such as open contracting data and beneficial ownership data soon available through the Nigerian government's commitments to the Open Government Partnership (OGP) — and tracking the use of that data, targeting specific stakeholders.

Data users want to tell stories that connect intellectually and emotionally with a range of audiences.

Headline Findings

The following findings reflect what TAI members heard from the grantees and other anti-corruption actors in Nigeria.

Data Availability and Accessibility

¬ **Government data related to anti-corruption issues is still hard to get.** This shortage reflects such challenges as weak government capacity to collect and publish data, misaligned incentives for disclosure, and low societal awareness. Officials in several anti-corruption-related agencies noted significant technical barriers to effectively making data available (within government and to the public) in a timely fashion. Some information remains only paper based, and even digital data has its challenges. For example, information systems for different agencies (there are 14 different anti-corruption agencies alone) cannot directly communicate with one another. While some public datasets are being developed in fully open formats that should aid their use (e.g., the forthcoming Nigeria Open Contracting Portal, compliant with the Open Contracting Data Standard {OCDS} template), they appear to be the exception and not the rule.

Though the FOI law should offer some measure of recourse to request and access data, in practice, it is difficult to navigate.

¬ **Though the freedom of information (FOI) law should offer some measure of recourse to request and access data, in practice, it is difficult to navigate.** A pervasive culture of secrecy within the Nigerian government makes it difficult to obtain data through government disclosures or FOI requests. Civil society organizations (CSOs) expressed difficulty finding the staff time and resources necessary to navigate the complex FOI legislation to access information. This lack of resources is compounded by slow government responses; participants reported that government regularly fails to even acknowledge requests, and acknowledgement is no guarantee of any subsequent information response.

¬ **The politicization of data has serious implications on data release.** Numerous examples were given of public officials keen to highlight and use data when it was helpful to their agenda, but equally vociferous in seeking to bury or question data when its conclusions were unflattering. This extends to decisions on publication in the first place. For example, an agency may be more willing to release information that will get favorable notice from donors.

¬ **Yet entrepreneurialism pays off: anti-corruption activists continue to access and make use of existing data through creative means, often by supplementing public disclosures with additional sources.** Civil society actors are not waiting passively for proactive government disclosures. Despite its

Barriers to Data Use for Anti-Corruption

What are the most pressing challenges or barriers you encounter in taking advantage of data to tackle corruption?
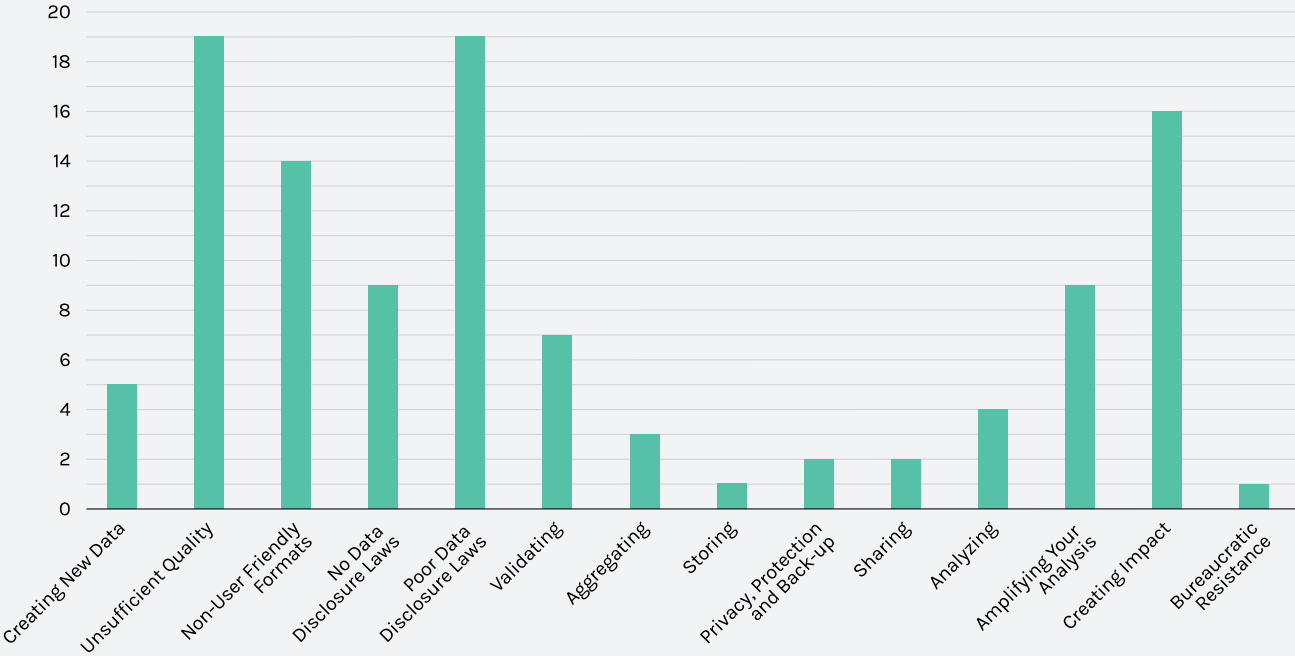
Results are reported from TAI survey – respondents were asked to select top three barriers

limitations, some have become adept at navigating the FOI system to successfully fill data gaps. Anti-corruption-focused CSOs regularly make informal information requests of officials (over 25% of TAI survey respondents have done this), obtain information from other CSOs or international sources, conduct their own research in-house to plug the gaps, or leverage Nigeria's commitments to international transparency initiatives to pressure the government to release information.

The poor quality and user-unfriendliness of datasets is among the biggest barriers to data use

Data Quality

¬ **The poor quality and user-unfriendliness of datasets is among the biggest barriers to data use, according to TAI survey respondents.** This further complicates the issues CSOs face in trying to use data to support their work. They must first identify a source of useful data, a challenge on its own, and then make sense of data that may be outdated or incomplete (inconsistent with other government datasets, or requiring additional data for proper analysis), opaque (methodology not reported or not disaggregated to a useful degree), or presented in an inaccessible format (such as PDF). These quality and comprehensiveness issues are seemingly consistent across anti-corruption agencies. Failings in formatting and accessibility reflect a lack of attention to how individuals will use the information. This is a reflection of, and exacerbated by, an absence of local user-centric design expertise for data producers and publishers to draw upon. Despite the challenges, there are bright spots of agencies and government officials working to improve data integrity and quality, such as Chief Statistician Yemi Kale's efforts to generate and release high-quality national statistics.

Data Analysis and Uptake

¬ **A widespread lack of hard data skills necessary to turn data into knowledge (e.g., cleaning, triangulating, and validating data) persists throughout government and civil society.** Despite awareness of the need to obtain these technical skills to conduct rigorous analysis, the greatest demand was actually for better data visualization skills. Data users want to tell stories that connect intellectually and emotionally with a range of audiences. Though data visualization is only one of many paths to accomplish this, a few national organizations working on anti-corruption and related issues have demonstrated ways to render complex information digestible, inspiring like-minded CSOs (and even government agencies) to follow in their footsteps.

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¬ **The credibility of a CSO is predicated, at least in part, on the quality of their data analysis — a task complicated by the relatively low level of data management skills in-country.** This dearth of skills can even deter usage in the first place. CSOs noted that accurate data processing and analytical skills are central to their credibility and thus their effectiveness as advocates. If organizations are not confident that they have the skills needed to overcome poor data quality, the risk of delegitimizing their work might outweigh the pros of working with more information.

¬ **Media houses are underfunded and often request payment for publishing stories; those with more resources and access to data disproportionately influence which stories are shared and how.** Media houses are often characterized as "mouthpieces" for special interest groups, reducing their credibility to report objectively on a topic. There are clear exceptions to this paradigm, but journalists know that having the data for a story does not mean it is "fit to print."

¬ **There are bright spots of local expertise, in both data management and visualization, that have and can be leveraged.** A few organizations have invested in in-house data expertise and are starting to act as "service providers" to the broader anti-corruption and transparency field. Their knowledge and extensive networks could be more actively marshalled to build broader capacity in the field.

Data-Driven Collaborations

Trust is the indispensible ingredient in a successful collaboration.

¬ **Though participants readily acknowledged the critical role of partnerships in fighting corruption, siloes between professional users of data persist.** Organizations often lack the resources or are not sufficiently aware of one another's work to collaborate effectively and build trust between organizations. For example, there were many CSOs present at TAI's gatherings who had similar approaches to fighting corruption but lacked detailed knowledge of each other's programming.

¬ **However, meaningful partnerships to fight corruption do exist, and there is potential to expand on these.** Participants pointed to efforts to leverage complementary roles and skills — such as those between CSOs and journalists — not least to informally share information. For example, members of the Civil Society Network Against Corruption take the stories of investigative journalists (often drawing on whistleblower information) as starting points and then explicitly use them to submit legal petitions based on the revelations to spark government response. Journalists can also supply a platform for CSO research and advocacy, providing a megaphone for their work.

¬ **Trust is the indispensable ingredient to successful collaboration.** Participants underscored the importance of working with complementary, trusted partners toward a clear, shared set of goals. Trust is crucial to navigating what Nigerians described as an environment of mutual suspicion, where a CSO's success is initially attributed to their involvement with a special interest. Throughout our conversations, we found that trust and CSO credibility went hand-in-hand; by consistently producing quality work and engaging with others, CSOs build the credibility, and subsequently trust, to form coalitions with others.

¬ **Building trust with government officials and reformers through constructive engagement is not without its challenges, but it is worthwhile.** Frequent, constructive engagements can help shift the culture within government to be more supportive of engaging with civil society, helping to build trust between two camps at times seen as at odds. Collaborations — albeit often discrete or limited, e.g., partnering on visualization of a particular dataset — are happening among a variety of government agencies and civil society

groups. Most of the referenced examples were sparked by personal relationships between decision makers, but at least they are happening. For example, one national CSO developed a template for FOI responses and data collection efforts for ministries, departments, and agencies, building on the OCDS. The organization shared this template with government officials, hoping it could be used to meet their FOI-mandated disclosure requirements. The template was well-received and reportedly has been put into practice.

Cross-Cutting Insights

¬ **There was a clear demand for donors to engage more proactively with civil society, particularly around knowledge management.** Nigerian participants expressed a desire for international donors to facilitate their work by helping CSOs more effectively share information, address key communication skill gaps, and foster a more cohesive community of anti-corruption data users.

¬ **The convening power of donors, and the positive externalities of these gatherings, can help CSOs achieve their individual mandates while strengthening the field overall.** Meetings and large gatherings would allow grantees to share their experiences, insights, and challenges with like-minded grantees with whom they might not connect otherwise and would help spark new partnerships. These events, which support more regular interaction between organizations, help to build trust and foster institutional partnerships.

¬ **Storytelling is an important and underutilized method of forging connections across anti-corruption activists, and of sharing lessons with other grantees and with citizens.** Nearly all participants wanted to learn how to become better storytellers to a wide range of audiences — including Nigerians who lacked internet access and spoke a different language than themselves — and across varying levels of citizen literacy on anti-corruption issues.

From Challenges to Opportunities

Throughout the scoping exercise, participants and experts were frank about the challenges circumscribing data use for anti-corruption purposes. Yet despite these challenges, there are many reasons to remain optimistic. We heard many specific requests and ideas for furthering data use, several reiterated by multiple actors. The text following provides a snapshot of those opportunities that had resonance among those consulted.

CHALLENGE
Data Availability & Quality

OPPORTUNITIES

¬ Share practical tips and approaches with CSOs and media for navigating the FOI system to increase the chances of accessing useful data, such as providing "just in time" support or embedded support.

¬ Support government data disclosures related to OGP national action plan commitments. For example, support the release of procurement or beneficial ownership information in an open format. The government is in the process of determining the level of detail and accessibility of databases for both.

- Conduct user research to inform the design and testing of specific dataset portals and the proposed integrated platform of OGP-related data.

¬ Reinforce the work of data champions in government — not least the role of the statistician general and the National Bureau of Statistics — to champion data integrity and quality.

CHALLENGE
Data Analysis / Uptake

OPPORTUNITIES

¬ Reinforce the capacity of "data savvy" CSOs and tech hubs to build the skills of, and be a resource to, other organizations. They can act as anchors in the anti-corruption "data ecosystem."

- Incubate a "skills hub" that builds on pockets of data expertise and fosters peer exchange in Nigeria. Resources would be invested in

augmenting the data know-how of key organizations so that they can provide just-in-time support to data users (not stand-alone trainings), akin to a community of practice.

- Build relationships with data and computer science communities in Nigeria and the region to tap the emerging pool of local data expertise.

¬ Support preparation for use of forthcoming datasets — e.g., the new procurement portal or beneficial ownership register — and then track usage and outcomes. In effect, develop an action learning process around publication and use of a particular anti-corruption-relevant dataset.

- Invest in user-centric research that can be integrated into the development of a dataset to ensure it is responsive to user needs, including those of the private sector

- Explore opportunities to bring complementary datasets together — such as using national and international data to aid in stolen asset recovery or effectively using beneficial ownership disclosures alongside procurement and asset data.

CHALLENGE

Strengthen Collaboration

OPPORTUNITIES

¬ Building on ad hoc arrangements, generate more systematic mechanisms to share expertise across government, civil society, and media, such as embedding expert tech/innovation fellows and conducting trainings with a mix of public and private attendees to promote the exchange of knowledge and perspectives.

- Consider training tech fellows with soft skills (e.g., change management, communications) and providing continuous support to ensure they can be impactful in their new environment and foster lasting change in the institutions.

From Challenges to Opportunities (Continued)

¬ Foster linkages among law enforcement, media, and civil society organizations to exploit complementary roles, e.g., from investigation and awareness raising, to litigation or advocacy work, to prosecution and reform.

¬ Align funding to ensure support for data disclosure and use. For example, fund interventions and CSOs that complements World Bank financing to federal and state governments for data disclosure.

- Document lessons of donor collaborations to date, e.g., Trust Africa joint anti-corruption funding.

CHALLENGE
Cross-Cutting

OPPORTUNITIES

¬ Strengthen knowledge management among funders to capture, store, and share details of funding and the lessons of grantees' work on anti-corruption in Nigeria among the pool of grantees.

¬ Invest in more regular, well-defined convenings of grantees across TAI members, for example, meetings focused on a shared policy issue.

¬ Build further awareness of digital security and data privacy concerns among Nigerian grantees and help them implement such measures so they can protect themselves and their sources and partners.

¬ Invest not just in platforms for anti-corruption actors to hear each other's stories, but also in efforts to build storytelling skills (e.g., The Moth community programs).

What's Next?

TAI members hope to announce two pilot projects in fall 2018 designed to improve our understanding of how data aids in the fight against corruption. In particular, our collaborative will be exploring the following:

- How user-centric design and research can increase the use of open contracting data by the private sector (on the federal level) and by civil society (on the subnational level).

- Engaging key stakeholders — such as members of the Nigerian diaspora, state-level CSOs, researchers, and journalists — on the availability and use of information to recover stolen assets.

TAI's strong commitment to learning will underpin both of these pilots. The TAI secretariat will work closely with a learning partner to capture the insights gleaned from both projects. These lessons will be shared within Nigeria and more broadly as we continue our data use work.

Although TAI donors are unable to take action on all needs and opportunities that surfaced through our survey, research, and consultations, that feedback offers important insights into how data can be harnessed for greater accountability. We hope this informs the approaches of other donors and practitioners, both those with anti-corruption programming and those interested in harnessing data use in support of greater accountability.

Transparency and Accountability Initiative is a collaborative of leading funders of transparency, accountability and participation worldwide. It envisions a world where citizens are informed and empowered; governments are open and responsive; and collective action advances the public good. Toward this end, TAI aims to increase the collective impact of transparency and accountability interventions by strengthening grantmaking practice, learning and collaboration among its members. TAI focuses on the following thematic areas: data use for accountability, strengthening civic space, taxation and tax governance, learning for improved grantmaking.

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