



# African Statistics Day 2014

18 November 2014

## Media advisory

### Open data for accountability and inclusiveness

African Statistics Day is held every year on 18 November. The main objective is to raise awareness among the public about the important role that statistics play in all aspects of social and economic life in Africa. It provides an opportunity to advocate for systematic and increased use of statistics for evidenced-based decision-making, with a view to ensuring the relevance of statistics, mainstreaming statistics into national development plans, using statistics in the design of country programmes, and monitoring the Millennium Development Goals effectively. Each year, the Day is observed under a different theme to underscore the importance of that particular thematic subject for the development of statistics on the continent. This year, the theme is “**Open data for accountability and inclusiveness**”.

### What is “open data”?

The Open Knowledge Foundation defines open data as data that can be freely used, reused and redistributed by anyone.

The key characteristics that make data open are:

Availability and access: the data should be available to the public either free of charge or at a very low price, and in various formats, including as an Internet download that allows for interoperability and processing, and as a hard copy available in public places such as libraries.

Reuse and redistribution: there should not be restrictions on the use and sharing of the data; the data must be provided under terms that allow their reuse and redistribution, as well as their intermixing with other datasets.

Universal participation: the principle of universal participation states that there should be no discrimination against the categories of uses of the data or against certain persons or groups in the use of the data. One example is restriction for only non-commercial use of data.

### How can open data improve inclusiveness?

Open data improve inclusiveness by giving citizens the information they need to participate in public decision-making. The Guidelines on Open Government Data and Services stress that open data provide the foundation to enable citizens to better understand the way their Government works, how tax revenue is spent, and the decision-making process behind the allocation of central and local government budgets. By involving citizens in decision-making, Governments can achieve more efficient and equitable outcomes. The right to access public information is the prerequisite to exercising rights and mechanisms of participation. It is necessary, therefore, to remove barriers hindering access to information in order for political participation to be carried out by informed citizens.

In particular, open data can improve inclusiveness by:

- Helping citizens to better understand their Governments’ decision-making processes and increasing their sense of responsibility, since with better information, they are in a better position to actively take part in public debate;
- Empowering citizens to make informed decisions by helping them to understand one another’s priorities and values;
- Giving civil society and citizens more resources to carry out public policy analysis, which will in turn help decision-makers to make better, fact-based policy decisions;
- Increasing collaboration between Governments, citizens, academia and the private sector.

## How can open data improve accountability?

Open data improve accountability by giving citizens the information they need to review the outcomes of government policies and to evaluate how effectively and efficiently public resources are being used. Extensive use of information and communications technology (ICT) and wide accessibility will reduce the cost of dissemination and operating expenses required for specific datasets. Information sharing and use of ICT tools should be a priority in the design of national development plans, through a wide consultation process.

More specifically, open data can improve accountability by:

- Increasing the sense of responsibility of citizens, since with more information, they are in a better position to actively take part in public debate and scrutinize public policy;
- Allowing citizens to assess for themselves the extent to which their Government's actions are in line with its stated policies;
- Giving citizens the same information as Governments for evaluating the successes and failures of public policies.

## Major challenges of open data

The principle of respecting the confidentiality of individuals' data is enshrined in the fundamental principles of official statistics and all statistical acts of African Governments. Open data must, therefore, respect the law on confidentiality. Advanced anonymization techniques can ensure the privacy of individuals' data; meanwhile, the various statistical acts need to be updated and a memorandum of agreement drawn up to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

For these reasons, the statistical community is encouraging African countries to update their statistical acts in line with the African Charter on Statistics, which entered into force in 2014, in order to promote open data and guarantee confidentiality through anonymization.

One key assumption of the open data initiative is that the data are not biased in favour of any one political party or faction. However, the selection of which datasets should be made accessible to the public depends on several factors, including the political will of the sponsor and the controller of government departments or statistical agencies. These issues need to be resolved to ensure that the open data initiative really benefits the majority.

## African initiatives to improve open access to data

Among the initiatives that have been undertaken to improve open access to data, the efforts of international organizations should be noted, many of which collect and compile statistical data about countries for their own use and for the public. Very often, international organizations produce estimates based on available data when series are not complete. Most aggregated and estimated data, previously classified for internal use only, are now declassified and available freely to the public in open formats, thanks to new data storage and dissemination technology. Currently, the United Nations, the African Development Bank and the World Bank all have open data portals. In addition, the Economic Commission for Africa and the African Development Bank provide technical assistance to countries in the areas of data technology, including use of mobile phones for data collection and design of open data portals.

**For media inquiries, please contact:**

