Chapter 15

Citizen Access and Use of Government Data: Understanding the Barriers

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Government data has a value to citizens. That value may be economic – helping citizens improve their employment or income-generation potential – or it can be personal/social – helping the citizen to improve their home or community. Citizen access to government data can therefore be seen as an important component of both economic and social development. Yet that access can be a problematic process. This chapter, therefore, analyses the barriers that need to be understood and addressed if citizen access to government data is to become a more widespread reality.

DATA AVAILABILITY

A pre-requisite for citizen access to government data is that the government first makes that data available to citizens. On this, different governments have taken different views, some of which create access barriers. These views can be represented as lying anywhere within a triangle between three extremes, summarised in Figure 1 (Heeks, 2001).

Figure 1: Government Viewpoints on Public Sector Data

- **Data is a public asset.** Public sector data is owned by everyone since it has been gathered about and from everyone, often compulsorily. The view here is that data should, in general, be made freely available as it can assist both social and economic development. Data should either be made available freely or at a charge that merely reflects the cost of output and transmission. Citizens have a right to see the data held about them and other government data, with certain exceptions.

- **Data is a private asset.** Public sector data is owned by the department which owns the computer on which that data resides. The view here is that the public sector has invested money in producing data which often has considerable commercial value. Data should therefore be sold at the highest possible price to earn valuable revenue for the public sector. Citizens may see the data about themselves and some other items of data so long as they pay.

- **Data is not an asset.** Data is not seen as important enough to warrant open consideration of issues of ownership, value and charging. Where used, data is virtually a personal asset of particular public sector staff. Data is not generally made available and citizens do not have rights of access, except perhaps through ‘under the counter’ payments.

Different governments take different viewpoints. These different views will present differing hurdles to accessibility: very low barriers under a ‘public asset’ regime; much higher barriers under a ‘private asset’ regime. Growth of the Internet and its ‘data must be free’ philosophy may favour the ‘public asset’ view.

**TECHNOLOGY AND OTHER ACCESS RESOURCES**

If citizens can overcome the first hurdle – of having government data made available – they must then have the resources necessary to access that data. Some important access resources are rarely discussed. They include:
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