

Opening up data to meet local needs

A guide for Open Data Meetups under COVID-19

Meetups are a great way to bring people together around their open data needs. People from civil society and the private sector who are data users or advocates for open government gather with public officials to discuss joint open data projects.

This helps build a community, fosters collaboration in unlocking impact from open data, builds mutual respect and understanding, breaks down the barriers between government and data users, and optimises efforts between the supply and demand of data. It is also a way to bring different perspectives together around data issues for robust debate, insights and joint actions. By starting with user needs, governments can work out what to prioritise and build data pipelines that meet those needs.

In New Zealand, the Open Data Programme coordinates Open Data Meetups in four cities, Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. They can now communicate and engage with hundreds of people as a result.

COVID-19 and going virtual

Under current lockdown or gradual reopening conditions, now is a great time to engage with your local data community, it just takes a different strategy to run the event. In fact a virtual meetup offers a new opportunity for inclusion, such as enabling people from outside urban centres or across communities to join. The challenge is to foster that same opportunity to meet people, and to enable participation and contributions from a diversity of perspectives, rather than a one-way broadcast to a large group.

Meetups in times of crisis

Some countries are still in lockdown while others are starting to move out of it, moving from the response phase to the recovery phase. Many of us along the way are learning that we could have been more “data ready”. During this time of crisis is the ideal time to gather lessons learnt to be more prepared next time. Meetups are a good way to gather those lessons and the needs and ideas people have at a very local level, and understand what data can best help connect needs and solutions.

Through their diverse experiences we may discover different questions that need answering, or problems to solve. The aim of an open data meetup at such a time is not just to find out

what problems governments want to solve, but also what are the questions coming from the people they are trying to protect and support.

If not already in your network, you should look to invite data users from diverse backgrounds: people involved in the health sector; social services; economists; data science; journalists; entrepreneurs; academia, and government.

By running meetups in diverse local communities we can gather together a range of insights and use cases, may be able to solve some immediate problems and can build up a taxonomy and guidance for future readiness.

In a pandemic situation we are looking to gather knowledge of data needed in three themes:

1. Tracking spread of disease and health sector capacity
2. Understanding government actions
3. Identifying impacts on our communities

Tracking spread of disease and health sector capacity

This theme is about what we need to know about the scale of the problem and the resources needed and available to cope.

- What data about the outbreak do governments need to make more informed decisions? For example, whether to start or continue a lockdown? how to define the best exit strategy?
- What do citizens, businesses and communities need to know? Is the level of cases declining? Are numbers declining equally across the municipal/national territory? Should they start preparing to reopen? Are they confident of the figures and data published by public authorities?

What are attributes needed for this data to be useful and trustworthy? How can people use this data once published? For example, to communicate better through visualisation, or to identify vulnerable groups of people to offer targeted support.

Understanding government actions

Transparency and accountability build trust and confidence in government decisions. This theme explores what needs to be communicated through data to ensure that governments are held to account.

- Are figures and data helping build trust and confidence in governments' policies and actions?
- What data is needed to support the decisions that impact on people's lives? Decisions such as activating emergency lockdown; when schools reopen; paying wage subsidies etc.
- What do citizens need to know to have confidence that things are (or getting to be) under control?
- Where is aid coming from and whom is it being paid to? What segments of the population are benefiting from it? Is it enough and going to the right people or businesses? How is the disbursement monitored?
- What is being purchased under emergency procedures and for what purpose?

Identifying impacts on our communities

The wellbeing of people, communities and businesses are affected not just by the disease, but by the lockdown measures to prevent the spread. This theme explores what we need to know to understand and respond to the social, economic and environmental impacts.

Social:

- Are there segments of the population and/or communities under more stress than others?
- Are people missing out because they don't have access to what they need?

Economic:

- What data is needed to predict or measure the economic impacts to support economic policy decisions?
- Where have the wage subsidies gone to for businesses forced to close during lockdown?
- What sectors of the economy are being mostly affected? What sectors are being supported? Who is recovering well? Is anyone being overlooked?

Environmental:

- What has been the impact on our environment, both positive and negative?
- How should the life in our cities be adjusted?

Template

A [template spreadsheet](#) has been set up for gathering people's ideas during breakout sessions during your meetup, make a copy to use in your local meetup.

Questions

Where discussion goes in each breakout group depends on the mix of the people in it, which is part of the value, but here are some questions to prompt the general direction of discussion:

What problem are you trying to solve?

- ☐ Tracking disease spread
- ☐ Developing disease treatment
- ☐ Identifying availability of supplies
- ☐ Guaranteeing protections for workers
- ☐ Understanding public perceptions and behavior
- ☐ Protecting human rights and promoting accountability
- ☐ Supporting post-pandemic re-openings
- ☐ Alleviating pandemic-related unemployment and poverty
- ☐ Fostering business and government solvency
- ☐ Other

In relation to COVID-19:

- ☐ What questions need answers through data?
- ☐ Who are the primary users of the data?
- ☐ Who are potential secondary users, and what are their needs?
- ☐ Are there challenges in using this data, such as access, quality, timeliness, format?
- ☐ Who would most benefit from the use of this data?
- ☐ What open data have you used already?
- ☐ How was the experience of finding and using the data?
- ☐ * Who is responsible for collecting and structuring this data?

- ☐ What could have made it better?
- ☐ * Are there risks in sharing this data and how could they be mitigated?

I'm looking to use data to:

- ☐ Communicate more clearly what's happening for others?
- ☐ Help make decisions for you, your organisation or others?
- ☐ Solve a particular problem in your community?
- ☐ Develop solutions for mitigating the impact of the disease?
- ☐ Create a new business opportunity?
- ☐ Build a model to make predictions?
- ☐ Measure impact?
- ☐ Provide evidence for a new policy?
- ☐ Build a case in advocating for change?

How to manage a virtual meetup session

One approach is to run a meetup following these steps:

1. The host introduces themselves and the purpose of the meetup, and describes how it will be run. If the group is not too big, get people to introduce themselves, where they are from and why they are there. For a large group, leave this step until step 3 in the breakout groups.
2. The host then forms three breakout rooms (for say 20 minutes) of 4 to 8 people for focussed discussion, assigning a topic to each group.
3. Group members very briefly introduce themselves, where they are from, and why they are here, then start discussing the topic.
4. The group records their ideas in the appropriate breakout topic sheet in the Google spreadsheet.

5. Rotate the groups through each topic area through two more breakout sessions so each group can build on what the others have started (the group remains together, but they move their focus to the next breakout tab in the spreadsheet).
6. If you can, have one person as a moderator to stay in each of the three topics, and the host can move them to the next group focusing on their topic at each breakout change.
7. Join back together in the main room to hear from each breakout group in turn about one highlight for them from each topic.
8. Question time - after each group has shared their points, the host opens up to the wider group for questions or comments triggered by what the breakout group shared.
9. The host summarises, highlights any action points and wraps up the meetup.

The breakout group function is very helpful for two reasons, enabling a better opportunity to participate than in a large group setting by video, and it also fosters a chance to meet people and make some new connections.

If practical, it would be very useful if meetup organisers can gather a brief demographic summary of your meetup, including: number present; % government/business/not for profit/academia/other; gender split; notable community representations.

By sharing your anonymised spreadsheet back with us at the ODC to info@opendatacharter.org, we can collate your findings and help inform global norms, policy reforms and good practices - or more specifically, through practical lessons we aim to build a global reference including a taxonomy and guidance for opening data in a pandemic.