

Kenya's Low Consumption of Open Data

BY IHUB ADMINISTRATOR IHUB RESEARCH

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by Christine Mahihu **Background** The Kenya Open Data initiative was launched in July 2011 and hosts more than 430 government datasets on opendata.go.ke . The purpose was to make key government data freely available to the public through a single online portal. Unfortunately, this initiative has shown low success rates with users mostly due to factors such, lack of political goodwill, unfavourable social settings, low technical skill among the users, lack of readily usable datasets and outdated data. In an effort to further understand low uptake of the platform from an end user point of view, iHub Research carried out an assessment of applications currently used by a sample of the Kenyan population. Key questions revolved around: device assess, information citizens access or hope to access; information desired within certain sectors of water, education and health; and the general knowledge and awareness levels of the Kenya Open Data initiative. This baseline survey is part of an overall assessment on the [impact of open data applications and technologies in promoting access to information](#) coordinated by the World Wide Web Foundation and funded by grant 107075 from the [International Development Research Centre](#) (IDRC, Canada). **Key Findings** Majority of those surveyed have access to desktop computers, laptops, and phones with television being the most popular. This was a critical sample group given the aim of the study to assess impacts of technology open data intermediaries. With regards to phones, most of our responders owned phones which were Internet enabled and were either feature phones or smart phones. The most common applications used by the respondents were Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and Opera mini. As mentioned above, one of the objectives of Kenya Open Data was to open up government data to its citizens. We therefore wanted to understand how our survey responders currently interact with the government and how they obtain and receive information. Sixty two percent of the respondents do receive information on services from the government including information related to the ministries, their various programs, and the services they offer such as youth fund, census, security, health services, trainings etc. Unemployment in Kenya is fairly high with the latest reports placing it at [40%](#) . The government is also one of the biggest employers in the country so it was not surprising that information on job opportunities and tender information came a close second with 30%. Surprisingly, 23% said they also get information on politics from the government (Figure 1). Seventy five percent of this information is received through traditional media which includes newspapers, television and Radio and another 54% receiving their information online, which includes both social sites and government websites (Figure 2).

platform, almost all the people surveyed were not aware of the initiative and the few who were, do not use it. Students based in Nairobi, despite having access to internet, television and radio had never heard of the initiative. Of interest was that despite the lack of knowledge of the open data initiative, our survey respondents still desire to access information, especially on the three thematic areas we highlighted - health, education and water. Many people are interested in information on water availability and connections, and if not, the reasons why. Supply issues have been raised mostly due to water rationing where some communities go without water for weeks on end. Information on safety was critical as well as information on water sources. Easy access to bill payment services and other costs was also desired. When it comes to health, an overwhelming number of respondents were interested in services provided, quality of staff available at health facilities and their costs. This was closely followed by general health information, and location of specialized hospitals. More than half of the respondents would like educational administration information. This includes information on the schools performance, number of teachers and their qualifications, type of school (public or private), student admission information, costs, scholarships and bursaries available. From all the responses garnered, it is increasingly clear that demand for information is very high. What was now necessary was to understand how our respondents preferred to receive this information. High phone penetration throughout the country was evident as mobile platforms were the most preferred mode to receive information such as visuals/diagrams/pictures; 46% selected mobile web while another 36% selected mobile applications. This clearly shows that there is potential for open data applications as technology intermediaries. In our literature review, we did identify that there are existing applications already addressing this information access needs that respondents have including those built in the [Code4Kenya](#) program such as the Star Health and [FindMySchool](#). The greatest challenge therefore facing open data intermediaries is the low awareness levels. Due to the fact that traditional media is still very influential, we suggest popularizing applications built on the open data platforms through traditional media to increase awareness. This is even more necessary in areas of high population where amenities such as water and health services are unreliable or inadequate. Media houses can also play a big role in not only popularizing the portals but in helping to disseminate the information provided. Most responders seemed more aware of e-government and sometimes confused it with the Kenya Open Data Portal. The government should perhaps use the same strategy they used to popularize e-government and other initiatives such as the crackdown on unregistered sim cards, to increase awareness among citizens. Cyber Cafs are also a good source of information as they are usually the go to places for people wanting to know more about specific government programs. To make the information easily accessible, the files should be compressed to the smallest size for cheaper and faster downloads. Social sites such as Facebook and Twitter are also popular among feature and smart phones users and would also be a great avenue to advertise or even display information from the open data portal, especially to the youth demographic in low income areas who mostly own feature phones. While there are still challenges facing the open data movement in Kenya, there is still [hope](#) for the portal and entrepreneurs building applications on the data to realize the intended impacts. **Photo Credit for featured image: [openhalton.ca](#)*



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