

Using the internet for research and analysis in advocacy

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The internet is a vast source of data. It can also be used to access and analyse data, to compare and contrast data, and to present data in interactive ways.

Accessing and analysing data

Popular internet sources of data include:

Formal data sets

International institutions including the World Bank and the United Nations present formal data sets in reports such as the annual Human Development Report. Formal data sets can be useful for comparing one country with another. Central statistical offices in specific countries often provide detailed data about different regions within a country on their websites.

- See data.un.org for UN formal data sets.
- See data.worldbank.org for World Bank formal data sets.

Open data

The idea of open data is based on the premise that some data should be freely available to everyone to use as they wish, without restriction. National governments provide open data in a format that allows for the data to be interpreted, applied, adapted, published, and disseminated. Open data can be useful for holding national governments to account for their promises.

- See opengovpartnership.org for information about the global partnership of countries that have signed up to empower their citizens in active governance by providing open data.
- See opendata.go.ke for an example from Kenya.

Freedom of information

National governments will produce data in response to legislation concerning freedom of information, but only when specifically requested by their citizens. This route can be useful for accessing information that would not otherwise enter the public domain. Data will be shared in a format that complies with the applicable national law. Using freedom of information legislation to access data is popular in Brazil and India, as well as in other countries.

- article19.org provides more information on the right to information around the world.

Crowdsourcing

Anyone can start crowdsourcing by asking people to contribute to the collection of data, or the systematisation or analysis of data. In advocacy, this can be done in order to identify and understand a need or problem, and to gain an overview of an issue. No payment is involved. It is important to be aware that crowdsourcing is based on an open call to an undefined group of people, which makes it self-selecting and therefore limiting.

[This useful blog post](#)¹ outlines seven principles of advocacy-specific crowdsourcing:

1. Have a clear understanding of the crowd you need to engage with.
2. Ensure that you reach out to excluded groups to ensure that your data accurately reflects a broad cross-section of society.
3. Understand the way you have framed the question and the implications of the questions you are asking.
4. Be clear about what other data you need in order to understand the information you are collecting.
5. Don't raise expectations beyond what you can deliver on.
6. Involve those who are critical to implementing the decision.
7. Spend time and money upfront to frame the problem, to understand how and when you are going to take the decision and the realistic impact that the public's view will have, and to get all of the key players within the government bought into the exercise.

The website internationalbudget.org has a wide range of resources to help you learn how to collaborate more effectively with others in civil society around the world to analyse and influence government budgets.

Comparing and contrasting data

The best way to compare and contrast data is to track your national government's budget, to monitor expenditure on basic service provision. It is useful because it helps advocates to compare and contrast whether money is being spent in line with planned government commitments and whether the spent money has had the intended beneficial impact on citizens' lives.

In many cases, a government will produce a simple guide and put it online, giving details of what budget they have and how they will spend it, including the amounts they plan to spend, what services and projects they plan to spend it on, and in which communities.

Where this is the case, it is possible to compare and contrast actual versus projected budget expenditure on different services and projects, particularly if different communities log details online of their experiences at the receiving end of these budgets.

¹ involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/crowdsourcing-back-basics

It is also possible to analyse other aspects: for example, whether the people who are making decisions about the budget at each level are doing so transparently, or whether the money is reaching the people it is intended to reach.

For step-by-step guidance, please see our [short introduction to budget tracking](#)².

Presenting data

Online tools and software can be used to present the information and data that has been gleaned from research and analysis about an issue in a compelling and interesting way.

Visualisation

Visualisation refers to ways of communicating messages in a visual form, for example by using images, infographics, diagrams or animations.

There are several advantages to data visualisation:

- It can make the detail of the data come alive for those we are trying to influence.
- It can help us communicate complicated things in a simple way.
- It can be a useful way of communicating across languages, or with communities where literacy rates are low. For example, we might look to plot information onto an online map to show the distribution of how an issue affects a population, with links to photos and videos.

For further information about visualisation techniques that are useful in advocacy work, see [this introduction by The Open Society Foundations](#)³.

A range of free and easy-to-use data visualisation tools are available, depending on your requirements.

These include:

- **word cloud generators**, that can analyse text such as government reports or ministerial speeches and help to highlight key themes and phrases (eg monkeylearn.com/word-cloud)
- template-based **infographic makers** that let you create compelling graphics without specialist design skills (eg piktochart.com)
- access to free data visualisation **tools for public data sharing** including graphs, maps and live dashboards (public.tableau.com)

² learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/tools-and-guides/budget-tracking-for-beginners-an-introductory-guide

³ opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/visualizing-information-advocacy-introduction-information-design

Also in this series

This guide is part of a series of resources on **Advocacy in the digital age**.

Other titles include:

- Using the internet and mobile phones to identify advocacy issues
- Ideas for managing stakeholders' contact details in advocacy campaigns
- Using the internet and mobile phones to mobilise people for advocacy
- Using the internet and mobile phones to advocate in difficult political contexts

Download the series for free from Tearfund Learn:

learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/series/advocacy-in-the-digital-age

The Advocacy toolkit

The **Advocacy in the digital age** series is designed to complement the Advocacy toolkit.

This comprehensive guide to the theory and practice of advocacy contains teaching notes, tools and exercises that will enable any individual or organisation to integrate advocacy into their programmes, in order to bring sustainable, positive change.

Explore the Advocacy toolkit on Tearfund Learn:

learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/series/roots-guides/advocacy-toolkit--a-roots-guide