

Combatting Land Corruption

the role of open data

Corruption is the abuse of entrusted power to acquire illicit benefit for private gain. Corrupt practices in the context of land administration and land management have come to be known as ‘land corruption’. As with all other forms of corruption, it thrives in the dark corners of closed systems where transparency is lacking, and accountability can be avoided.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide the opportunity and the means to reimagine how land-related data is stored and accessed. Technology can help to shine light into the darkest recesses of the systems used to record and track land ownership and management. The global land governance community has piloted a series of initiatives using ‘open data’ – information that is available, accessible and usable by everyone – to counteract land corruption around the world. These initiatives are helping to increase transparency and foster accountability, at all levels, through the use of new and emerging digital technologies.

Open data is information that anyone can freely access, use, modify, and share for any purpose, according to the Open Knowledge Foundation. Derived from and contributing to ‘open knowledge’, it refers to concepts of data availability, accessibility and (re)usability for everyone, as well as the need for traceability over the whole data life cycle, from the original data sources to the final usage.

Despite growing consensus around the use of open data and information systems as effective anti-corruption tools, the extent of their impact on land corruption remains unclear even as these initiatives reach maturity. At the same time, securing funding for the continuation of open data initiatives relies on being able to demonstrate, measure and track impact.

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Evidence, Opportunities and Challenges

A study commissioned by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH (*The Role of Open Data in Fighting Land Corruption: Evidence, Opportunities and Challenges*, January 2021), arrived at new insights into the current data revolution and the important role it can play in realising sustainable land governance. In particular, it focusses on the impacts achieved by open data information systems and transparency initiatives on the various forms of corruption that affect the land sector.

The study findings are organised into two main categories: a) areas of consensus, where evidence from literature and expert interviews typically match up; and b) trade-offs and tensions that need to be resolved if initiatives are to maximise their anti-corruption potential.

Areas of consensus

1. There is insufficient evidence to measure the impact of open land information systems and to track their anti-corruption achievements. Open land data initiatives must harness the rapidly-growing knowledge pool in this area to establish a baseline against which progress and impact can be measured.
2. A significant gap remains between the potential and the actual impact of open land data projects, suggesting untapped potential and underlining the need for improved monitoring and evaluation.
3. The success of open data and information systems depends on how well they are designed and implemented, and the presence of various preconditions. **Technical preconditions** include: common data standards, interoperability of sources, digital infrastructure, and technical capacity. **Institutional preconditions** include: the political will to use open access land information for anti-corruption, the legal legitimacy of data included, enforceable rules, and participation of diverse stakeholders in the system design.

Trade-offs

1. Land information systems typically contain sensitive personal and business information, creating tension between the importance of transparency and legitimate privacy concerns.
2. Open data systems are able to make the vast (ever-growing) quantities of land records available to everyone. They must also ensure this complex and detailed information is equally accessible to different users with diverse needs and levels of expertise.
3. The fight against corruption requires global coordination and concerted cross-border action, however, land corruption is strongly influenced by historical, socio-economic, cultural and institutional factors at the local/national level, which require locally-specific and appropriate solutions.
4. Gaps between official and unofficial sources of land data require multi-stakeholder participation to legitimise unofficial sources and encourage uptake by public authorities.

Key recommendations

The study also provides a series of useful recommendations for the private sector, land and development practitioners, donors, governments, and civil society:

Ensure all land data is 'open by default'. The land sector needs to reject the 'closed by default' approach that has dominated for too long, and embrace the open data principles and standards needed to increase transparency and achieve anti-corruption goals.

Create an open land data ecosystem. Open data initiatives require a functional information environment including an enabling legal framework and political will.

Engage multiple stakeholders throughout. The full potential of open data systems can only be realised with the active participation of different user groups at all stages of the data life cycle: from inception through to using data for accountability and anti-corruption purposes.

Ensure women and disadvantaged groups participate.

Those currently on the margins of land information systems must not only be given access to the data, but also contribute to the creation and evolution of the ecosystem itself.

Scale up monitoring and evaluation. New and existing initiatives must increase their M&E efforts and improve their impact assessments, helping to make the case for interventions at the intersection between open data, land governance and anti-corruption.

Speak with one voice. A simple, powerful, and evidence-based advocacy message from initiatives around the world is necessary to promote open data in the fight against land corruption.

Open data and ICTs are not a magic bullet to ensure greater transparency and curb land corruption, but there is no doubt that much can be achieved when these tools are used widely, effectively and responsibly. Existing initiatives have proved their potential to counteract land corruption over the last few years and are entering a crucial phase where they are called upon to scale-up, measure and magnify their impact.

There are risks and challenges associated with these initiatives, there is room to improve existing systems, and none are enough to eradicate land corruption on their own. Despite these limitations and caveats, it remains very hard to imagine corruption-free and sustainable land governance without an open data ecosystem that enables the free flow and reuse of relevant data and information.

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