

IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER:

# When is governance data “good enough”?

Takaaki Masaki, Tanya Sethi, Samantha Custer

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## Executive Summary

A growing number of governance data producers are investing significant time and resources to evaluate public sector performance in low- and middle-income countries. Yet, surprisingly little is known about how governance data is viewed by those it is intended to influence and whether the data we have today is “good enough” to usher in the policy change we are looking for. This report presents new evidence from a 2016 Governance Data Alliance (GDA) Snap Poll of public, private, and civil society leaders in 126 low- and middle-income countries to answer four critical questions:

- **Delivery Channels:** How do leaders find or source governance data?
- **Use:** How is governance data used and for what purpose(s)?
- **Influence:** Which governance data do leaders find most useful – and why?
- **Barriers:** What are the most prevalent obstacles to the use of governance data?

Over 500 leaders shared their firsthand experiences in advancing reforms in their countries and the role of governance data in that process. Snap poll participants evaluated 29 governance data sources produced by a wide variety of multilateral organizations, bilateral agencies, and civil society groups. Based upon their responses, we present four key takeaways.

1. **Broad-based communications still have sway, though the delivery channels that leaders use to find governance data varies by where they work**

Government officials and civil society leaders most frequently learn about governance data through active web searches, while development partner organizations are more likely to become familiar with this information through internal and external written communications. This difference could signal

something about the relative breadth and quality of information available to these stakeholder groups. Alternatively, this dynamic could be a byproduct of the fact that few governance data producers directly engage with host government counterparts, which may account for the popularity of web searches as an alternative to access such information.

Overall, participants primarily reported using broad-based communication channels to find governance data, including: external written communications (e.g., reports, memos, or briefs from an external organization), active web searches, or traditional media sources (e.g., magazines, newspapers). By contrast, personalized communications such as email, informal verbal communication, and social media were far less common channels to become aware of new governance data. Despite the fact that producers seldom have proactive strategies to conduct outreach with domestic media outlets, participants point to media as one of the top ways they learn about new governance data sources. This finding suggests that traditional media is an under-utilized dissemination channel relative to its potential.

2. **Governance data is predominantly used to conduct research and analysis; however, specific use cases appear to be shaped by different organizational mandates**

A majority of snap poll participants reported using governance data for research and analysis. At present, governance data is comparatively less well-utilized in planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating governance programs. However, the most important use case for governance data may depend where one sits: governments and development partners use it to plan and implement, while CSOs and think tanks employ it to conduct research. Unsurprisingly, CSOs were more likely to use governance data to support their external advocacy and communications than other stakeholders.

These trends raise important implications for producers. First, rather than asking whether governance

data is appropriate and useful for a single purpose, producers should instead be assessing the fitness of their data products to support a broader range of possible use cases. Since users are likely to have distinct requirements for what they need and want from their governance data, producers need to ensure that their data products and assessments indeed are relevant and useful for answering questions that users care about.

**3. Most survey participants found governance data to be important and helpful in their work, but this data is reportedly most useful when it is also perceived to be relevant and credible**

Importance and helpfulness are barometers of the perceived utility of governance data among its actual user base. Despite the challenge of addressing intractable governance problems and vested interests, the majority of those using governance data found it to be important (80 percent) and helpful (74 percent). Governance data was rated most highly on these two measures among those working in the environment sector, perhaps indicating that environmental reforms are seen as being closely interlinked with institutional arrangements and performance on governance indicators. Comparatively, snap poll participants in social and agriculture sectors found governance data to be less helpful.

Out of a set of 29 governance data sources, developing world leaders were most familiar with the World Bank’s *Doing Business Report* and Transparency International’s *Corruption Perceptions Index*. However, the World Bank’s *Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability* and the International Budget Partnership’s *Open Budget Index* were most highly regarded for their importance and helpfulness among their respective user bases. Snap poll participants iden-

tified that governance data was most useful (both important and helpful) when it was relevant to their work (46 percent) and deemed as a credible source of information (29 percent).

**4. Governance data that fails to take into account the local context is seen as irrelevant and lacks credibility when it is not transparent in methods and assumptions**

The reasons why respondents did not use certain governance assessments in their work appear to be the mirror image of why they found other data to be useful. Prospective data users place a premium on the relevance and credibility of governance data, not only in judging whether it is useful, but also in determining whether they will use a given data source at all. These patterns hold across institution-types, policy areas, and different use cases. Local context emerges as an essential ingredient of policy influence: when governance data does not demonstrate an understanding of the local context, it is perceived as irrelevant. Two other attributes associated with irrelevance were the failure of governance data to provide new insights or concrete policy recommendations. Participants who identified a lack of credibility as a barrier to use specifically pointed to concerns regarding a lack of transparency in methods and assumptions and potential bias in the way that governance data was produced.

In summary, data producers should invest in making data more credible with transparent methods and more relevant through engaging local stakeholders to identify contextually appropriate solutions to governance problems. In adopting some of these best practices, governance data producers are likely to ensure continued loyalty among existing users and attract a broader coalition of new users.

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## 1. Introduction

**“All transparency and accountability initiatives suppose—explicitly or implicitly—that if information is made publicly available, someone will use [it]... I would urge [us all] to immediately articulate...who that someone is.”**

— *Archon Fung (2016), Professor of Democracy & Citizenship, Harvard University*

Once a “lonely landscape”, the work of measuring good governance<sup>1</sup> is now a booming business, from perceptions of corruption to indicators of transparency and much more (Heller, 2013). Seeking to incentivize policy change and lock-in greater accountability, reform-minded officials, development partners, and civil society organizations have invested in an array of data collection exercises and diagnostic tools (e.g., rankings, indices) to assess the performance of governments in low- and middle-income countries (Kelley & Simmons, 2014; UNDP, 2011).<sup>2</sup>

Yet, amidst calls to foment a data revolution for sustainable development<sup>3</sup> and track progress towards the vision of “peaceful societies, inclusive institutions and justice for all”,<sup>4</sup> profound evidence gaps

still remain (United Nations, 2014). Despite a growing number of data producers and investors devoting significant time and resources to evaluate the performance of governments in meeting such goals, surprisingly little is known about the extent to which these assessments catalyze policy change. At the forefront of these discussions are two fundamental questions: how is governance data viewed by the people it is intended to influence, and is the data we have today “good enough”<sup>5</sup> to usher in the change we are looking for?<sup>6</sup>

In a previous report, *Governance Data: Who Uses It and Why?*, Custer et al. (2016) shed light on these questions from the perspectives of nearly 6,750 leaders<sup>7</sup> from 126 low- and middle-income countries who participated in the 2014 Reform Efforts

1 Since the early 1990s, the term “good governance” has gained wide currency among donor countries and agencies. See Grindle, 2004; Khan, 2007; Nanda, 2007; and Masaki, 2016.

2 See also UNDP, 2007 and Knack, 2004.

3 The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda has called for a data revolution: more and better data to be able to monitor progress on the 17 goals, 169 targets, and 230 indicators. See the report from the Independent Expert Advisory Group, *A World That Counts: Mobilising the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development*. United Nations (2014).

4 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 specifically seeks to: promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions.

5 The original phrase “good enough governance” coined by scholar Merilee Grindle (2005) was a reaction against the unchecked optimism and ambition of the good governance agenda. In particular, Grindle (p.1) argued that “not all governance deficits can be tackled at once”, discussed considerations of prioritization and sequencing, and outlined a set of “minimal conditions of governance necessary to allow political and economic development to occur”. In the context of this report, we use the term “good enough” to set up the ensuing discussion of user requirements and use cases for data and evidence to support planning, monitoring, and evaluation of governance efforts in low- and middle-income countries.

6 In this report, we refer to “governance data” as data sources or assessments that provide information on “the structures and allocations of political, economic, and social authority and resources that impact governance processes or outcomes” (Reboot 2015: p. 2). We use “governance data” and “governance assessments” interchangeably throughout the report.

7 The recipients of our June 2016 poll consist of policymakers—or leaders—who are knowledgeable about the government programs and the domestic policymak-

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### Introduction

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Survey.<sup>8</sup> This report builds upon that earlier foundation with new evidence from a June 2016 snap poll of approximately 3,000 prospective users of governance data.<sup>9</sup>

Designed and fielded by AidData at the College of William & Mary, the 2016 Governance Data Alliance (GDA) Snap Poll offers a unique window into the firsthand experiences of these public, private, and civil society leaders in advancing reforms in their countries, and the role of a broad range of governance data in that process. The poll consisted of 11 questions pertaining to user experiences with up to 29 different governance data sources and assessments (see Appendix B for full details on the questionnaire questions).<sup>10</sup> Of 2,913 poll recipients, 514 participated, or a response rate of 17.6%.<sup>11</sup>

There are some limitations to our poll data. First, participation in the snap poll was voluntary and the sample size was modest. Second, the views of our poll participants are a snapshot of policymakers' engagement and experiences with governance data. Their views may have changed over time, but our poll data speaks very little about such dynamic changes.

Despite these limitations, the 2016 GDA Snap Poll

still provides a novel data set with which to answer four critical questions:

- **Delivery Channels:** How do leaders in low- and middle-income countries find governance data?
- **Use:** How is governance data used and for what purpose(s)?
- **Influence:** Which governance data do leaders find most useful – and why?
- **Barriers:** What are the most prevalent obstacles to the use of governance data?

In the remainder of this report, we use the insights from our snap poll participants to answer each of these questions related to: delivery channels (Section 2), use (Section 3), influence (Section 4), and barriers (Section 5). We conclude in Section 6 with a summary of findings and a set of concrete recommendations for governance data producers.

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ing process in their respective countries, such as (1) senior and mid-level executive branch government officials (e.g., ministers, vice ministers, chiefs of staff) who formulate and execute policies and programs in a specified set of policy areas; (2) representatives of bilateral and multilateral aid agencies and foreign embassies (e.g., World Bank, UNDP, etc.); (3) leaders of civil society organizations (CSOs); (4) leaders and members of business associations; and (5) independent country experts who monitor reform patterns and processes and donor relationships with host governments.

8 For more details on the sampling frame and survey respondents in the 2014 Reform Efforts Survey, see the online Appendix of Custer et al. (2015), which is available at <http://aiddata.org/sites/default/files/appendices.pdf>.

9 The 2016 GDA snap poll was sent to the emails of 2,913 individuals that indicated familiarity with at least one of 14 governance assessments included in the original 2014 Reform Efforts Survey. See Custer et al. (2016) for a list of the 14 governance assessments. The poll remained in the field for two and a half weeks in mid-2016.

10 Question 2 in the questionnaire gives the list of all the 29 governance data sources and assessments evaluated in the 2016 GDA snap poll.

11 Our poll participants were drawn from various stakeholder groups, policy areas, and geographic regions (see Appendix C for more details on the demographics of our sample). In terms of stakeholder groups, nearly a third of the poll respondents worked in a government institution or program; 16 percent in universities or think tanks; 15 percent in non-governmental organizations; 14 percent in development partner organizations; 8 percent in the private sector; 7 percent in civil society organizations; 3 percent in the media; and 0.5 percent in labor union and workers association (see Figure C-2). Poll participants' policy areas of expertise are also quite diverse (see Figure C-1). Most respondents specialized in governance (45 percent), followed by macroeconomic issues (22 percent), and social sectors (9 percent). A few respondents also indicated their policy expertise in environmental issues (5 percent). In terms of geographical representation, individuals from sub-Saharan Africa account for the largest proportion of our sample (36 percent), followed by Europe and Central Asia (18 percent) while respondents from South Asia constitute a relatively small share of the sample (8 percent) (see Figure C-3).

## **2. Delivery Channels: How do leaders find governance data?**

Familiarity is a precondition to data use: policymakers and practitioners cannot take advantage of a data source they are not even aware exists. Therefore, the first hurdle governance data producers must clear to get to use is selecting the right channel(s) to disseminate information to their intended audiences. Influenced by varying resource constraints, operating philosophies, and in-country presence, data producers employ a wide range of strategies to reach prospective governance data users. However, there

is little systematic evidence on the efficacy of these approaches in practice (Reboot, 2015).

Which communication channels appear to be most effective in capturing the attention of prospective governance data users? In this section, we analyze the responses of 2016 GDA Snap Poll participants who identified a series of governance data sources with which they were familiar, and subsequently answered how they became familiar with each one.<sup>12</sup>

### **2.1 Broad-based communications still have sway: leaders were most familiar with governance data from external publications, web searches, and traditional media**

Overall, snap poll participants most frequently reported that they had become familiar with governance data through broad-based communication channels, such as: external written communications (defined in the snap poll questionnaire as “reports, memos, or briefs from an organization other than my own”), active web searches, or traditional media sources (e.g., magazines, newspapers). In contrast, more personalized communications such as email, informal verbal communication, and social media were far less common channels through which users became aware of new governance data (see Figure 1).

It is notable that a relatively high proportion of our poll respondents indicated that they used active web search to become familiar with governance data. Governance data that is less prominent on the web may indeed face a major hurdle to uptake (Dou et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2005). Producers of governance data may effectively expand their reach by

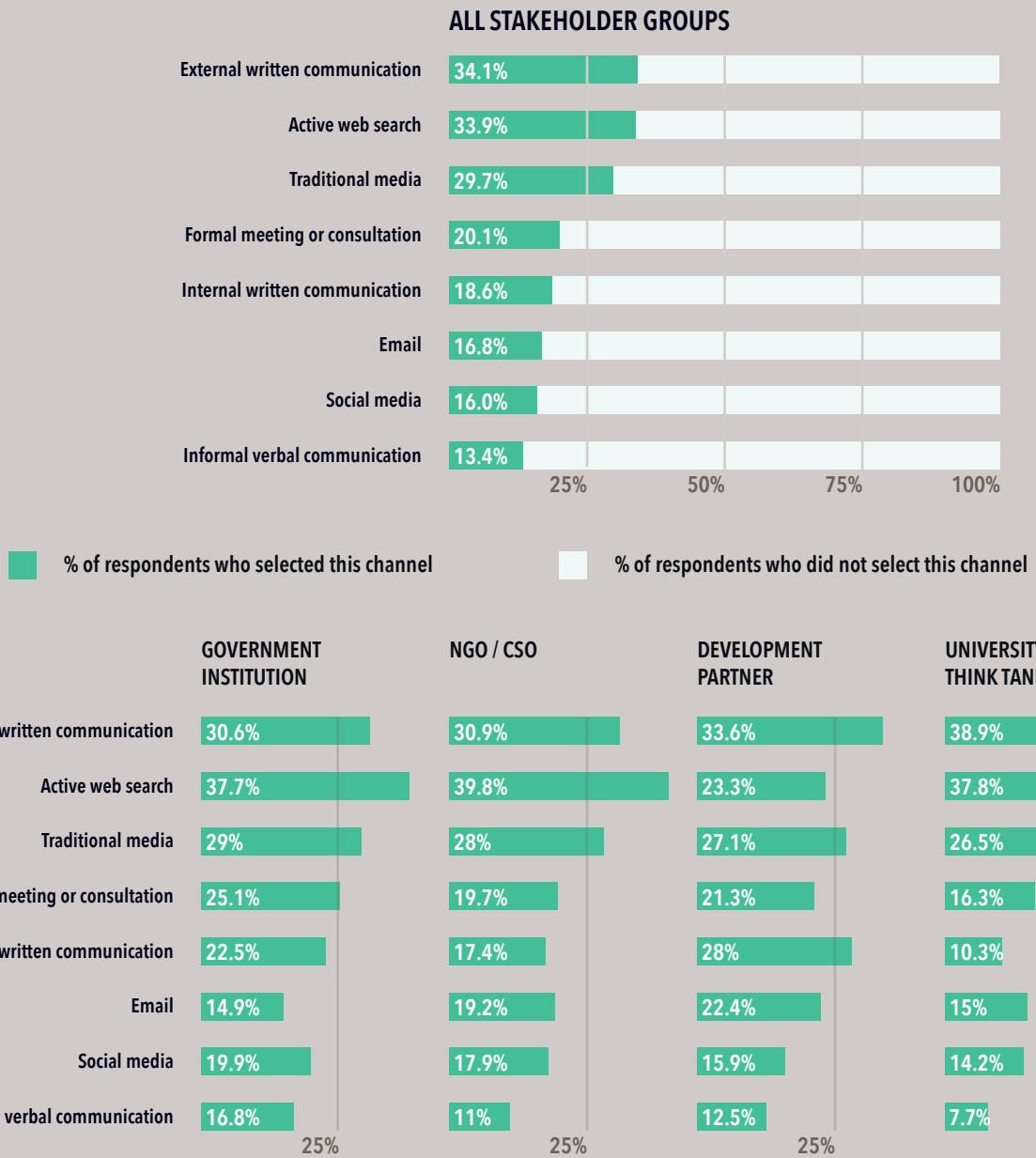
making themselves more “visible” through adopting strategies like search engine optimization.

There are two interesting implications for governance data producers from this finding. First, traditional media appears to be an under-utilized dissemination channel relative to its potential. Despite the fact that producers seldom have proactive strategies to conduct outreach with domestic media outlets (Custer et al., 2016), participants point to media as one of the top ways they learn about new governance data sources. Second, despite being an important source of information in many countries, participants are less likely to find out about new governance data sources via their informal social networks. This could be consistent with a limited on-the-ground presence for many governance data producers that requires them to bypass informal networks in favor of meetings and reports to deliver information.

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<sup>12</sup> This is based upon the frequency with which poll respondents selected each of the delivery channels.

## Figure 1: Which channels of communication do stakeholders use to become familiar with governance data?



### Notes

The figure shows the percentage of respondents who became familiar with governance data through each of the different channels of communication. This figure is based upon the responses of 417 respondents who answered Question 4 in the snap poll, which asked respondents to indicate all the channels through which they became familiar with governance data.

## 2.2 The channels that leaders use to find governance data vary by where leaders work

There are different target audiences for governance data and the main channels by which these stakeholder groups become familiar with new governance data sources vary (see Figure 1).<sup>13</sup> Government officials and civil society leaders most frequently learn about governance data through active web searches, while development partner organizations are more likely to become familiar with governance data through internal and external written communications.

This difference could signal something about the relative breadth and quality of information available

to these stakeholder groups. For example, it could be that it is easier for development partner representatives to share data within their organizations or access information from those outside of their organizations, as compared with their counterparts in host government offices and civil society organizations (CSOs). Alternatively, this dynamic could also be a byproduct of the fact that few governance data producers “directly engage with host government counterparts”, which may account for the popularity of web searches as an alternative way of accessing such information (Custer et al., 2016: p. 2).

## 2.3 Researchers and development partners are familiar with more governance data

Unsurprisingly, given their vocational interest in research and analysis, individuals working in universities and think tanks were familiar with the highest number of governance data sources on average, followed by development partners and the media (see Figure 2). Comparatively, those working in the private sector and labor unions or worker associations were familiar with fewer governance data sources. Government and civil society workers fell in between.

While we did not test this empirically, the number of data sources that individuals are familiar with could be associated with the channels they use to find

governance data. For example, participants working for development partners or universities and think tanks relied more heavily on external written communications to source data, which may facilitate exposure to a wider set of data products. Meanwhile, those familiar with a smaller set of governance data (e.g., governments and CSOs) relied instead on active web searches. Alternatively, this could signal differing expectations for how organizations use data, such as the need to cite multiple data sources to verify and validate arguments in academia versus the imperative to answer questions quickly in other settings.

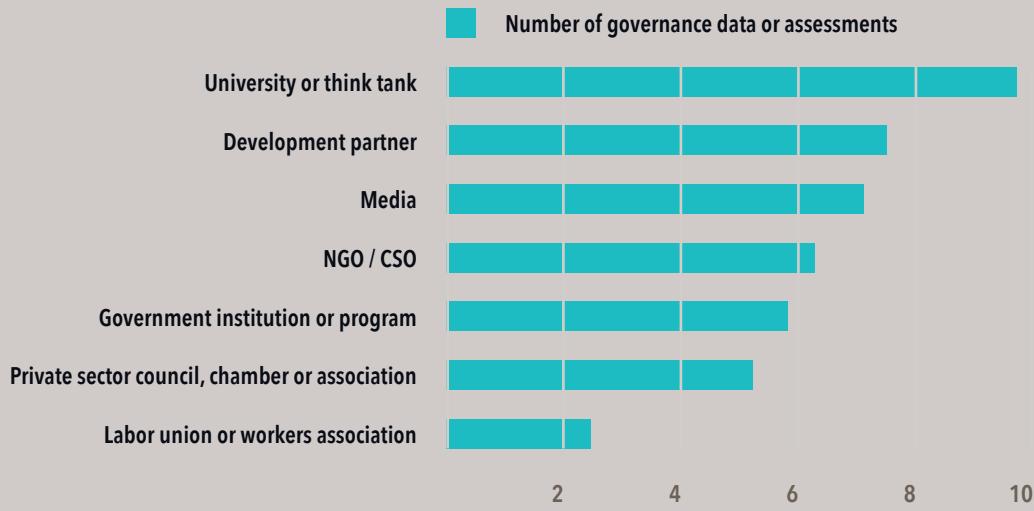
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<sup>13</sup> We found no evidence that the main channels of communication vary by country contexts. Regardless of the level of democracy (measured by the Polity rating), state fragility (the Fund for Peace’s Fragile State Index), or income (GDP per capita), external written communication and active web search were cited as the most prominent means of communication or data dissemination. These findings indicate that the main channels of communication were determined more by the nature of organizations in which respondents worked than by environmental contexts. See Figure A-2 in Appendix, which shows the relative frequency with which each channel of communication was mentioned by respondents under different country contexts.

## Figure 2: How many governance data sources are leaders familiar with?

### Notes

The figure shows the average number of governance data with which poll respondents indicated familiarity.



## 3. Use: How is governance data used and for what purpose(s)?

Governments, development partners, and CSOs often produce data with the aspiration to improve governance and strengthen accountability in low- and middle-income countries. However, increasing the supply of data does not necessarily guarantee its use (Cameron et al., 2016; Dhaliwal and Tulloch, 2012; Custer et al., forthcoming). There is little empirical

evidence about whether and how the intended users of governance data actually use such information in their work. In this section, we analyze responses from the 2016 GDA Snap Poll participants regarding the ways in which they use governance data and at what stages of the policymaking process.

### 3.1 Across stakeholder groups, governance data is predominantly used for research and analysis, rather than program planning, monitoring, and evaluation

Organizations use governance data for many reasons—from internal imperatives to manage risk and efficiently allocate resources to external aspirations to transform or otherwise inform the behavior of host country governments (OECD, 2009b; Wilde, 2011). Forty-two percent of snap poll participants reported that they “most often” used governance data

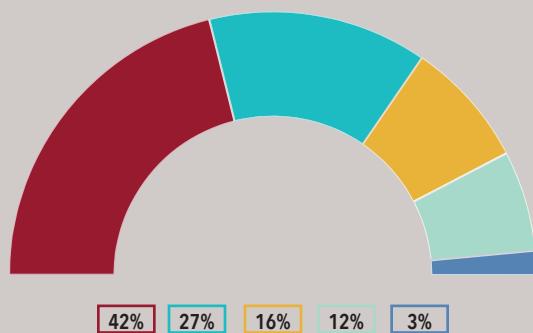
for research and analysis: the most popular use case by far. A relatively smaller proportion of poll participants reported using governance data for planning and implementation (27 percent), monitoring and evaluation (16 percent), or external communications and/or advocacy (12 percent) (see Figure 3).

## In the Eye of the Beholder: When is governance data “good enough”?

Use: How is governance data used and for what purpose(s)?

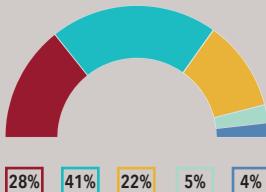
### Figure 3: For what purpose(s) do stakeholders use governance data most often?

RESPONDENTS FROM ALL STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

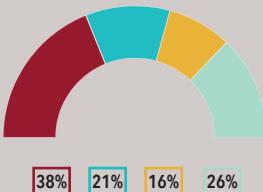


- █ Research and analysis
- █ Program planning and implementation
- █ Monitoring and evaluation
- █ External communications and/or advocacy
- █ Other

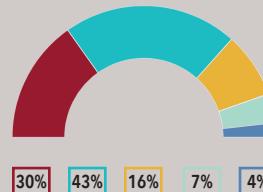
GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS



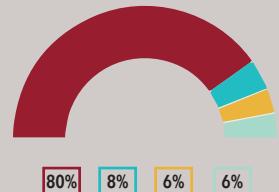
NGO / CSO



DEVELOPMENT PARTNER



UNIVERSITY / THINK TANKS



#### Notes

The figure shows the percentage of respondents who used governance data for each different purpose. This figure is based upon the responses of 405 respondents who answered Question 7 in the snap poll, which asked them to indicate the purpose for which they used governance data most often.

### 3.2 The use case for governance data varies with organizational mandates: governments and development partners use it to plan, CSOs and think tanks for research

The most important use case for governance data may depend upon where one sits. Over forty percent of government officials and development partner representatives participating in the snap poll reported that they most often used governance data for program planning and implementation. In contrast, participants from CSOs and universities/think tanks most often reported using governance data primarily for research and analysis, by 38 and 80 percent respectively (see Figure 3). Not surprisingly, snap poll participants from CSOs were far more likely than other stakeholders to use governance data mainly to support their external advocacy and communications (26 percent).

These trends in the reported use of existing governance data raise important implications for producers. First, rather than asking whether governance data is appropriate and useful for a single purpose, producers should instead be assessing the fitness of their data products to support a broader range of possible use cases. Since users are likely to have distinct requirements for what they need and want from their governance data, producers need to ensure that their data products and assessments indeed are relevant and useful to answering questions that users care about - a key point that we elaborate further in the following section.

## 4. Influence: Which governance data is most useful – and why?

Governance data is diverse and producers make several critical choices along the way, including upstream considerations of what to measure and how to collect data, and downstream decisions about how to present and disseminate results. Public, private, and civil society leaders also have a growing variety of ratings, rankings, indicators and assess-

ments from which to choose. In this section, we address the question: which sources of governance data do these leaders value the most and least – and why? More specifically, we analyze the responses of 2016 GDA Snap Poll participants to assess how they perceive up to 29 different governance data sources.

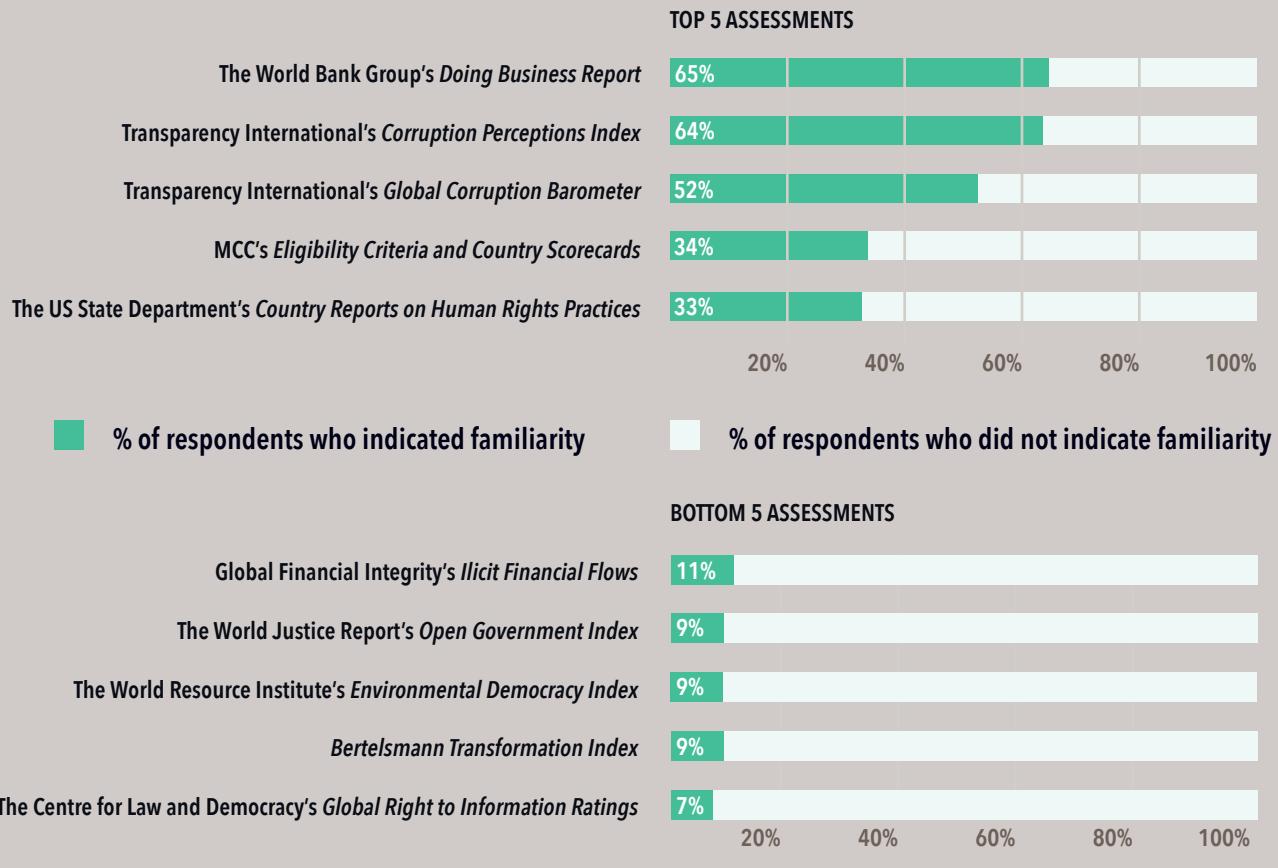
### 4.1 The World Bank’s *Doing Business Report* and Transparency International’s *Corruption Perceptions Index* have high levels of visibility with developing world leaders

The five sources of governance data that most users were most familiar with are produced by three organizations: the World Bank, Transparency International, and the United States Government (USG) (see Figure 4). Over 60 percent of snap poll participants were familiar with the World Bank’s *Doing Business Report* and Transparency International’s *Corruption Perceptions Index*. More than one-third of respondents were familiar with two governance assessments produced by the USG – the Millennium Challenge Corporation’s *Country Scorecards* and the State Department’s *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*.

However, not all governance data sources were equally prominent among leaders in low- and middle-income countries. Consistent with findings in our previous research, only a small percentage of respondents were familiar with data sources produced by civil society organizations such as the *Bertelsmann Transformation Index* (9 percent) or the Center for Law and Democracy’s *Global Right to Information Ratings* (7 percent).

While being familiar with a particular governance data source is a first step, it may or may not imply use. Therefore, we asked our respondents how important and helpful these governance data were to their work.

## Figure 4: With which governance data are leaders most and least likely to be familiar?



### 4.2 The majority of those using governance data find it to be important and helpful

Despite the challenge of addressing intractable governance problems and vested interests, the preponderance of snap poll participants that reported using governance data find it to be both important (80 percent) and helpful (74 percent) in their work. This positive valuation for governance data appears to be fairly consistent regardless of the specific use case (i.e., research and analysis; external communications and advocacy; program planning and implementation; and monitoring and evaluation); however, the rank order preferences among the use cases changed from importance to helpfulness (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). These findings should be welcome news to governance data producers, as the information they are supplying appears to be broadly aligned with user demand in low- and middle-income countries.

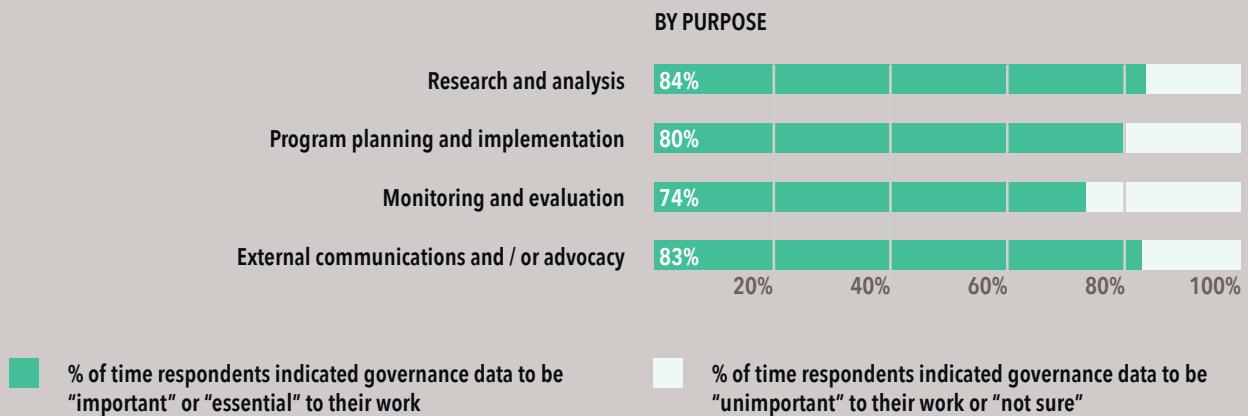
Interestingly, governance data is seen as most helpful and important in the environment sector, perhaps indicating that respondents view progress on environmental reforms as being closely interlinked with institutional arrangements and performance on governance indicators. Comparatively, snap poll participants in social and agriculture sectors found governance data to be less helpful.

When interpreting these findings, governance data producers and investors should be aware of two important caveats. First, participants who report using governance data are likely predisposed to view this information favorably. There is still a remaining challenge for governance data producers to broaden the appeal of this information for those who are not presently using it. Second, these aggregate results

do not imply that all governance data products are equally important or helpful for users. To capture the variation across different sources of governance data, we also assessed how the users of a given

governance data source specifically rated the importance and helpfulness of this information in their work.

## Figure 5: How important is governance data by purpose and policy area?



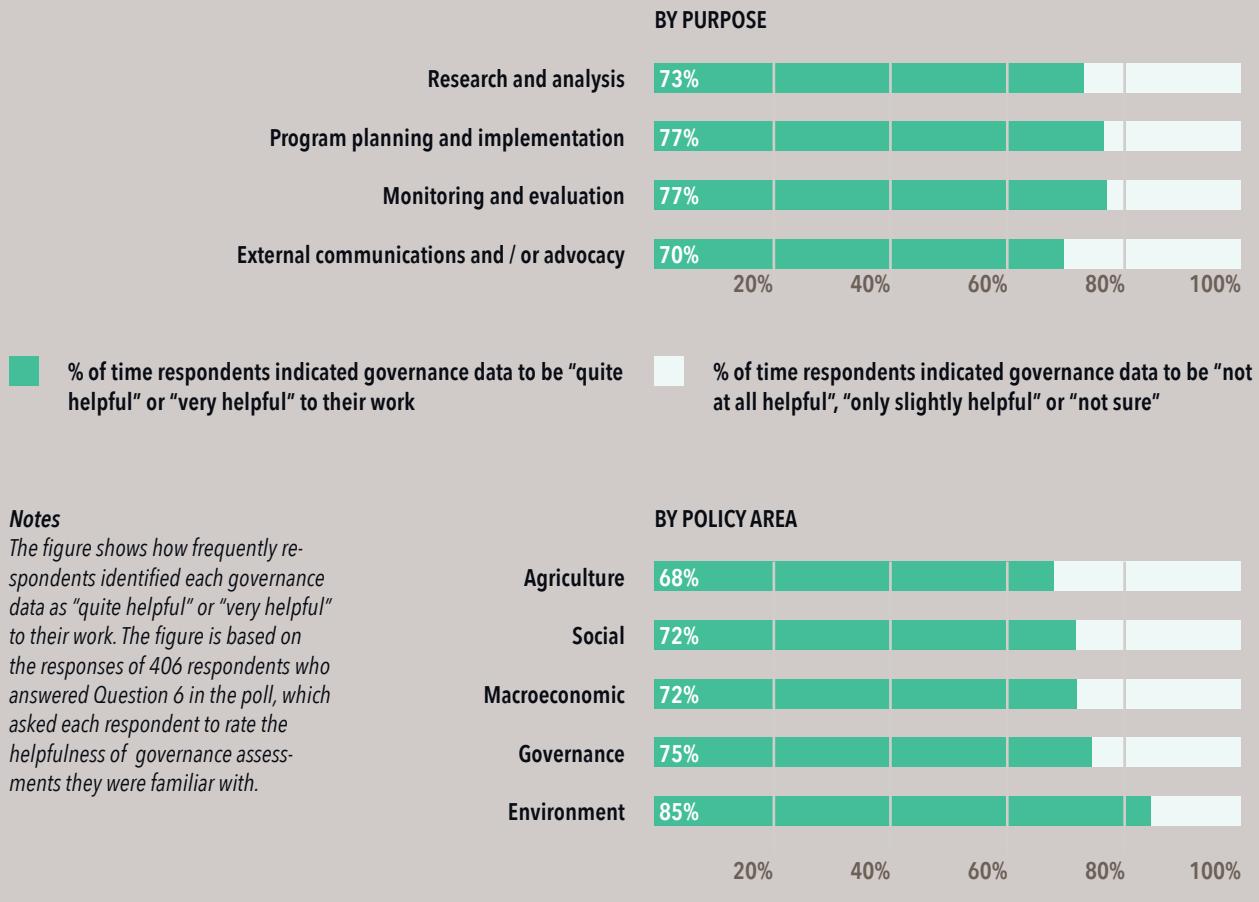
### Notes

The figure shows how frequently respondents identified each governance data as “important” or “essential” to their work. The figure is based on the responses of 408 respondents who answered Question 5 in the poll, which asked each respondent to rate the importance of governance assessments they were familiar with.

### BY POLICY AREA



## Figure 6: How helpful is governance data by purpose and policy area?



### 4.3 The World Bank's *Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability* and the International Budget Partnership's *Open Budget Index* are highly regarded among by their user base

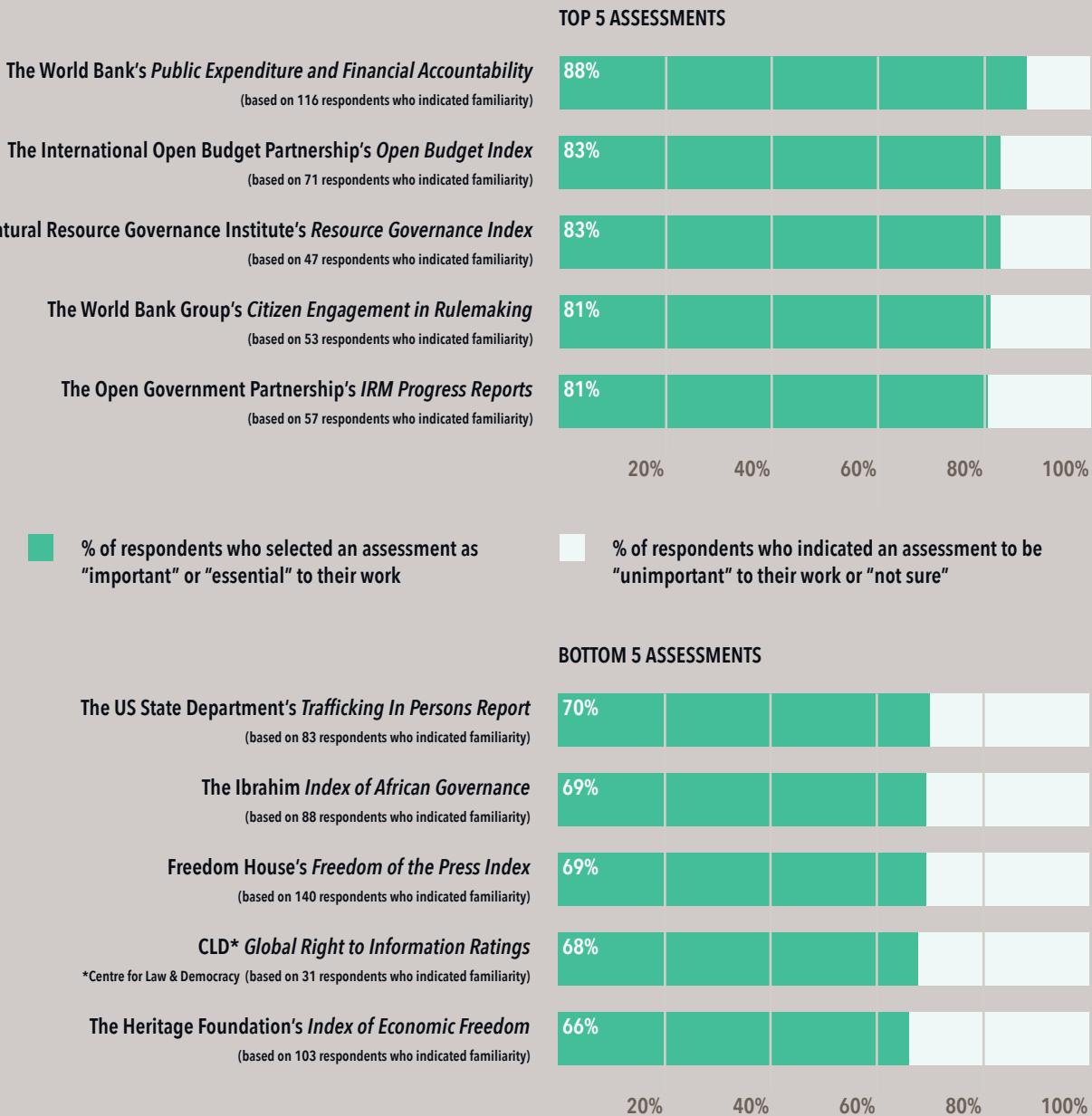
While familiarity indicates the breadth of awareness regarding a particular governance data source among prospective users, importance and helpfulness are barometers of the perceived utility of a given data source among its actual user base. In comparing the performance of various types of governance data, two sources consistently garner high marks from their actual user base: nearly 80 percent of those using the World Bank's *Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability* (PEFA) and the International Budget Partnership's *Open Budget Index* (OBI) found them to be “important” or “quite helpful” to their work (see Figure 7 and Figure 8).

Both PEFA and the OBI involve collaborative data collection efforts with in-country counterparts and provide “actionable” and objective indicators of governance, rather than perception-based measures. Previous research suggests that both of these assessment characteristics positively correlate with in-country policy uptake (Parks et al., 2015). However, the governance data community should exercise caution in celebrating the success of these two assessments. As Andrews (2015: pp. 6-7) notes, “[the] PEFA indicators reward countries for introducing new budget calendars and for writing up plans, which are both largely logistical tasks...[mean-

while] transparency indicators (like the Open Budget Indicators) have been known to reward governments simply for putting up electronic noticeboards

(whether these provided meaningful or transparent information to citizens or not)."

**Figure 7: Ranking of governance assessments by perceived importance**



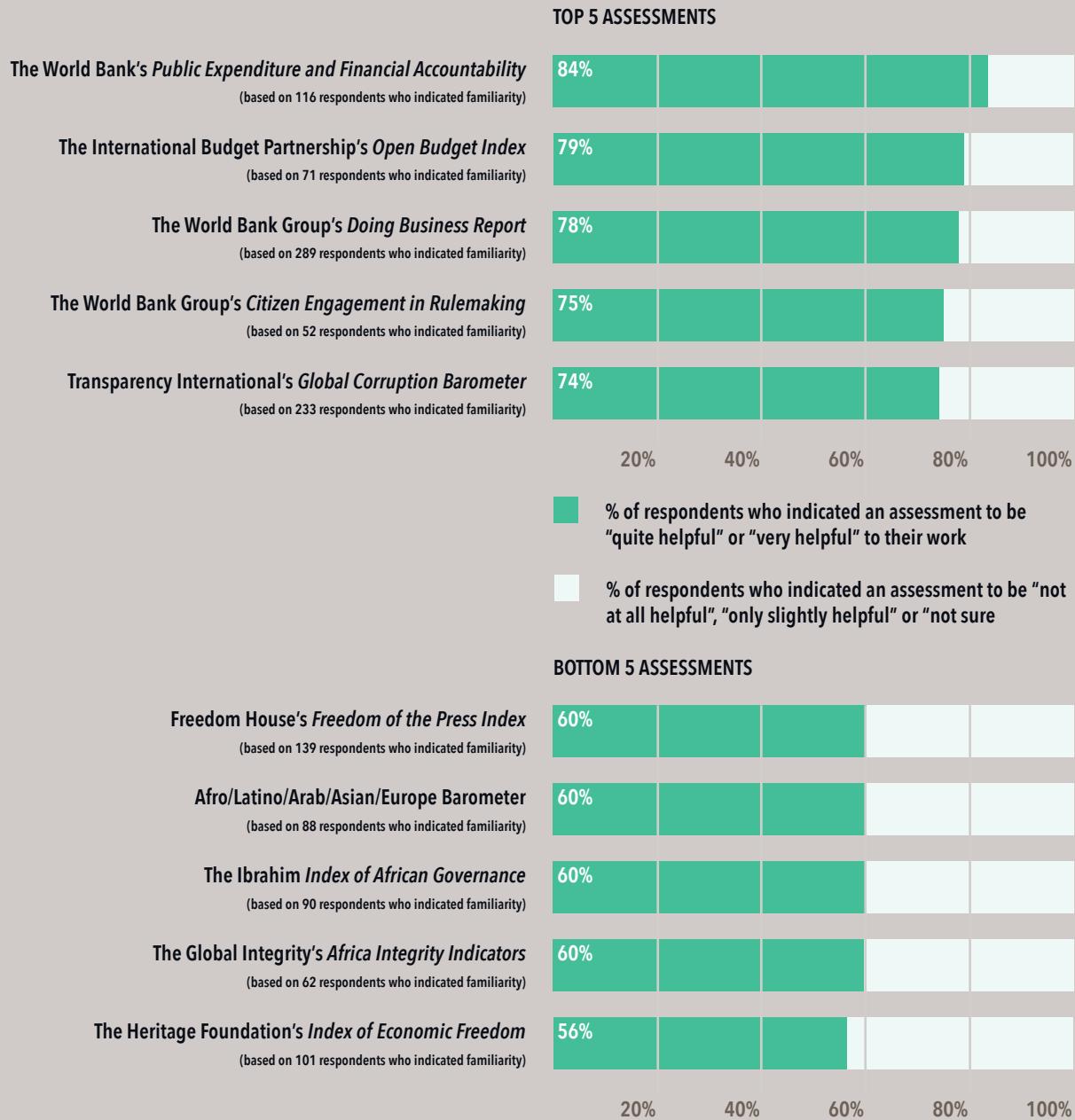
#### Notes

The figure shows the top and bottom five governance assessments and data sources based on how frequently respondents identified each governance data source/assessment as "important" or "essential" to their work. The figure is based on the responses of 408 respondents who answered Question 5 in the poll, which asked each respondent to rate the importance of governance assessments they were familiar with.

## In the Eye of the Beholder: When is governance data "good enough"?

*Influence: Which governance data is most useful – and why?*

**Figure 8: Ranking of governance assessments by perceived helpfulness**



### Notes

The figure shows the top and bottom five governance assessments and data sources based on how frequently respondents identified each governance data source/assessment as "quite helpful" or "very helpful" in their work. The figure is based on the responses of 406 respondents who answered Question 6 in the poll, which asked each respondent to rate the helpfulness of governance assessments they were familiar with. The African Electoral Index is produced by CDD Ghana. This assessment was incorrectly referenced as "Mo Ibrahim's African Electoral Index" in the snap poll questionnaire. Since this may have affected the ranking of this assessment, it has been dropped from this figure.

#### 4.4 Governance assessments are most useful when perceived as relevant and credible

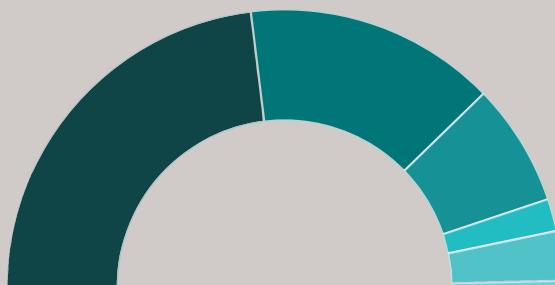
Why is some governance data perceived to be more useful than others? We asked each snap poll participant a follow-up question about the source of governance data they rated the highest on measures of importance and helpfulness. Out of a list of possible attributes, participants identified the most important characteristic about that governance data source which made it so useful (see Figure 9). Two attributes came out on top: the preponderance of respondents identified that governance data was most useful when it was relevant to their work (46

percent) and deemed as a credible source of information (29 percent).

The accessibility of a data source and the ability to unlock tangible benefits (e.g., material, technical, financial) may also influence which governance data people are familiar with and use. However, these factors appear to play a more minor role in the ultimate determination of whether a given data source is seen as useful.

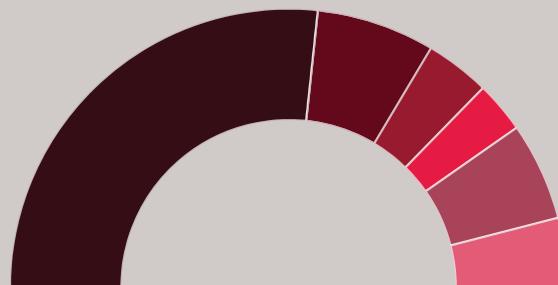
**Figure 9: Why do leaders find some governance data to be more useful than others?**

PRIMARY REASONS FOR USING GOVERNANCE DATA



- 46% - Relevant to the questions I was trying to answer
- 29% - Seen as being highly credible
- 14% - Easy to understand and use
- 4% - Financial, material and/or technical benefits to using the data
- 6% - Other
- 1% - Prefer not to say

PRIMARY REASONS FOR NOT USING GOVERNANCE DATA



- 53% - Not relevant to the questions I was trying to answer
- 14% - Not seen as being highly credible
- 8% - Difficult to understand and use
- 6% - No financial, material or technical benefits to using the data
- 11% - Other
- 8% - Prefer not to say

##### Notes

The figure on the left shows the percentage of respondents who selected a given statement as a primary reason for why they found certain governance data to be particularly useful (based on Question 8, which 399 respondents answered). The figure on the right shows the percentage of respondents who selected a given statement as a primary reason for not using given governance assessments (based on Question 9, which 386 respondents answered).

## 5. Barriers: What are the most prevalent obstacles to the use of governance data?

While governance data producers want to refine the supply of information for their core user base, they also want to broaden the network of people putting their data to use. In this section, we analyze responses from the 2016 GDA Snap Poll participants to identify the main barriers to their use of gover-

nance data. Using these responses, we also identify the most commonly cited reasons for not using governance data in order to inform the strategies of producers that seek to overcome these obstacles and expand the reach of their data.

### 5.1 Perceptions of irrelevance and limited credibility curtail use of governance data

Prospective data users appear to place a premium on the relevance and credibility of governance data, not only in judging whether it is useful (see section 4.4), but also in determining whether they will use a given data source at all.

Fifty-three percent of snap poll respondents reported that they did not use a given source of governance data because “the data was not relevant to the questions [they were] trying to answer” (see Fig-

ure 9). This empirical pattern is consistent with the notion that governance data is primarily used as a tool to facilitate learning and problem solving (on this point, see Parks et al., 2015). The second most commonly cited reason was that the governance data in question lacked credibility (14 percent). These patterns hold across institution types, policy areas, and different use cases (see Figures A-5, A-6, and A-7 in Appendix A).

### 5.2 Governance data that fails to take into account the local context is irrelevant

It is self-evident that if development policymakers and practitioners do not see governance data as relevant, they will not put it to use to answer questions or make critical decisions. However, there are many possible factors that might prompt a prospective data user to determine that a given source of governance data is irrelevant. We use the responses from the snap poll participants to probe deeper to identify these attributes.

In a follow-up question, 41 percent of respondents cited that governance data was irrelevant when it failed to demonstrate an understanding of the local context (see Figure 10). These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that governance assessments relying on local knowledge yield greater policy influence (Custer et al., 2016) and that these diagnostic tools must use local knowledge effectively to be useful in practice (Chowdhury et

al., 2008). This further reinforces the observation that there is an untapped opportunity to mobilize in-country actors to help identify context-appropriate solutions to governance challenges as active participants, rather than passive observers (Custer et al., 2016).

Two other attributes associated with irrelevance were the failure of governance data to provide new insights (26 percent) or concrete policy recommendations (21 percent). This evidence is consistent with the observation by Custer et al. (2016) that leaders want analysis and advice that empowers them to take action. Comparatively, the timeliness of the data (9.3%) and whether it is sourced from the respondent’s government (9.3%) plays less of a role in determining whether people perceive data to be irrelevant.

### **5.3 Governance data lacks credibility if it is not transparent in methods and assumptions**

Data producers have underlying assumptions and make methodological choices that influence how they measure progress on governance indicators and rate government performance. We find that transparent disclosure of these measurement assumptions and methods is not only critical to responsible use, but also to the perceived credibility of governance data.

Snap poll participants who identified lack of credibility as a barrier to use specifically pointed to concerns regarding a lack of transparency in methods and assumptions (51 percent) and potential bias (43 percent) in the way that governance data was produced (see Figure 10). In this respect, prospective data users are putting forth a challenge to good governance watchdogs to practice what they preach when it comes to transparency and accountability.

## Figure 10: Why do leaders find some governance data irrelevant or lacking in credibility?

### Notes

The figure shows the percentage of respondents who selected one or more statements as a reason that made the data particularly irrelevant. The figure is based on the responses of 204 (or 53) respondents who answered Question 9.1 (or Question 9.3), which asked what made certain governance assessments or data sources irrelevant.

### PRIMARY REASONS WHY GOVERNANCE DATA IS IRRELEVANT

**It does not reflect an understanding of the local context**



**It does not provide any new insights**



**It does not provide a concrete set of policy recommendations**



**Other**



**It does not draw upon data or analysis produced by the government**



**It is untimely and out of date**



**% of respondents who selected this reason**

**% of respondents who did not select this reason**

### PRIMARY REASONS WHY GOVERNANCE DATA LACKS CREDIBILITY

**It is not transparent in its methods and assumptions**



**It is seen as biased and untrustworthy**



**It does not contain information that senior officials care about**



**It is not a credible source to support my argument**



**My audience / constituents do not view this data as credible**



**It has not been used by any other governments that we could emulate**



**Other**



## 6. Conclusion

Is the governance data we have today “good enough” to support reform champions, inform policy changes, and improve governance in low- and middle-income countries? Rather than engaging in guesswork, we sought the input of the prospective end users of governance data via the 2016 GDA Snap Poll. More than 500 public, private, and civil society leaders from low- and middle-income countries shared their insights on 29 sources of data produced by multilateral organizations, bilateral agencies, and civil society groups. This report analyzes their responses regarding the attributes that make governance data more and less useful in a variety of applications, as well as key barriers to broader use.

The governance sector may be fraught with challenges of perverse incentives and vested interests, but there is a silver lining for governance data producers: the preponderance of snap poll participants who reported using such data find it to be both important and helpful in a variety of use cases. However, not all governance data sources were as widely appreciated and favorably perceived by leaders in

low- and middle-income countries. Interestingly, the reasons why respondents did not use certain governance assessments in their work appear to be the mirror image of why they found other data to be useful.

Across the board, governance data is perceived to be most useful when it is relevant and credible. In a world of scarce resources, governance data producers would do well to invest in making their data more credible with transparent methods and more relevant by engaging local stakeholders to identify contextually appropriate solutions to governance problems. The World Bank’s *Doing Business Index*, Transparency International’s *Corruption Perceptions Index*, and the International Budget Partnership’s *Open Budget Index* are good examples that effectively integrate local views and publish detailed methodology notes that explain how their indices are constructed. In adopting some of these best practices, governance data producers are likely to ensure continued loyalty among existing users and attract a broader coalition of new users.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The snap poll asked a follow-up question about what made the data particularly relevant and credible to respondents (in Question 8.1 and 8.3) and their responses again were very similar to what we found in Figures 15 and 16, indicating that taking into account the local context and clarifying methods and assumptions employed to devise the data were considered main sources of data relevance and credibility, respectively. See Figures A-11 and A-12, which show how frequently respondents cited a specific factor that made certain governance assessments particularly relevant or credible, respectively.

## In the Eye of the Beholder: When is governance data “good enough”?

*Conclusion*

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# Standing Out in a Crowded Marketplace: Insights from the Corruption Perceptions Index

Author: Agustina Eskenazi

Established in 1995, Transparency International's *Corruption Perceptions Index* (CPI) assesses perceived levels of public sector corruption in more than 160 countries. Over 60 percent of our 2016 GDA Snap Poll participants were familiar with the CPI, and a large share of this user base found this governance data source to be particularly important (77 percent) and helpful (73 percent) in their work. These results hold across occupational types and policy domains of respondents. In this deep dive case study, we examine what funders, producers, and promoters of governance data can learn from the CPI's resonance with leaders in low- and middle-income countries.

For many users, the CPI's perceived relevance - reflected in an accurate understanding of local realities on the ground - is one of the main drivers behind its success. The CPI relies on 12 surveys and assessments from 11 independent Western and non-Western institutions to capture the perceptions of analysts, business people, and experts on public sector corruption. The CPI's favorability among its user base appears to be based on the practice of triangulating diverse data points to create a comprehensive view of corruption.

Another primary reason for the CPI's reported importance and helpfulness is its perceived credibility, particularly due to its transparent methods and assumptions. Detailed documentation of the CPI's methodology and data sources are easily accessible via Transparency International's website in four languages. The methodology reviews each of the four steps that the organization uses to compute the CPI scores, and a data sources document offers a description of the 12 assessments

and surveys, including: how corruption is measured, how scores are scaled, country coverage, and data availability. Transparency International's commitment to openness appears to extend to its methods and assumptions for constructing the CPI, which has helped the organization attract a loyal user base for this governance data source.

While relevance and credibility may illuminate why developing world leaders value the CPI, these reasons do not explain how so many of them found this governance data source in the first place. The majority of snap poll participants indicated that they became familiar with the CPI through traditional media (online and paper newspapers, magazines, etc). Although Transparency International prioritizes engagement with government officials working on anti-corruption to disseminate the CPI's findings, it considers the media, civil society organizations, and its own chapter staff as secondary intended users. Transparency International's outreach strategy for the CPI suggests that leveraging traditional media to promote governance data may be an effective way of reaching more users.

The CPI is well regarded by the public, private, and civil society leaders who participated in the snap poll across measures of familiarity, importance, and helpfulness. However, these results are somewhat dissonant with previous criticism levelled against the CPI. Critics have argued that the CPI lacks an understanding of the local context because the assessment relies upon the opinions of experts and is based upon perceived (not actual) corruption.<sup>12</sup> A TI representative also acknowledged that the CPI's methods are not completely transparent, as some of the underlying data sources used to compute the aggregate

CPI score have only limited information on who provided data and how it was scored.

Transparency International has taken action to address these and other sources of criticism, such as publicly recognizing the CPI's limitations and creating another assessment - the *Global Corruption Barometer* - that surveys ordinary citizens about their experiences with corruption. Despite these flaws, it is possible that the organization's demonstrated willingness to engage with, and act upon, criticism may have enhanced its perceived credibility with the CPI's user base.

There may, however, be other factors that contribute to the prominence of the CPI. Although assessment longevity is not explored in this study, *Marketplace of Ideas for Policy Change* found that the longer an assessment has been publicly available, the more influential it is likely to be with developing country policy-makers.<sup>3</sup> As the CPI has been active for 21 years, its long-standing presence may have led to positive reputational effects among its target audience.

This case study on Transparency International's *Corruption Perceptions Index* offers important lessons for data producers. Retaining current users, while also attracting newcomers, may require a combination of tactics: providing context-specific results, making methods and assumptions transparent, proactively seeking coverage in traditional media outlets, and demonstrating receptivity to feedback. While not a panacea, adopting these practices may be a good starting point for data producers that seek to improve the uptake and impact of their assessments and advice within a competitive market.

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2 Stuart, V. C. (2013). *Perception is Not Reality: The FCPA, Brazil, and the Mismeasurement of Corruption*. Minnesota Journal of International Law, Volume 22(1), 247-281.

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