Open Data in Brazil: budget transparency and people’s rights

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Introduction & method
In Brazil, steps towards open government data have been happening since the launch of a National Transparency Portal in 2004. The availability of data regarding public management has increased since the Access to Information Act was passed in 2011, which dictates procedures to be followed by federated entities to ensure society access to information, and additional regulations apply to disclosure of financial data. This project asked:

• Are governments – at national and sub-national level – actually opening their data in accordance with the law, and with open data principles?
• How can open budget data contribute to promoting the human rights of Brazilian citizens?

To answer these questions, the research carried out a quantitative evaluation of official budget websites at national and sub-national level (27 state capitals, the federal government and the senate) based on eight principles of open government data, operationalised against Brazilian law and regulation on budget disclosure. The study also carried including a qualitative phase investigating the role of open data intermediaries and their perceptions regarding the uses and impacts of open data in securing human rights. This used a ‘follow the data’ interviewing method.

Evidence and findings
The quantitative survey showed that there is still a long way to go. Whilst the information provided is mostly complete (meeting requirements for what should be published), in general the data available are not primary, and most of the governments assessed do not provide timely information. Accessibility of the information is not guaranteed for all, and although progress has been made in relation to machine-readable data, only a minority of websites offer machine-readable data in non-proprietar formats.

Across both the quantitative and qualitative components of the study, data licensing was an area lacking clarity: none of the sites surveyed had explicit information providing an open license, and although intermediaries were aware of the concept of open licenses, few saw this as a relevant factor in their use of data.

The results of the qualitative investigation confirm the findings of the quantitative one in relation to the need to improve the process of opening up data in Brazil. However, despite these limitations, the interviewed believed that progress has been made in the field of human rights as a result of opening up data in the country.

Conclusions & recommendations
A change is under way in Brazil in the debate on open data and, consequently, on different and related fields: the field of public transparency, especially budget transparency; the field of digital technologies and new media; and the field of rights, which crosses the previous two. Paradigms are being broken and elements of governance are being reconfigured and built, with consequence tensions and (re-)negotiations - civil society and governments are key actors in these new processes, each taking on their responsibilities and playing their respective roles in society.

In the policy domain, the public sector, at all levels, needs to improve the open data process, fulfilling the Law on Access to Information and delivering more friendly formats for citizens. In the domain of practice more investment is needed to support reuse tools and promote interdisciplinary networks that can analyze open budget data. Future research needs to monitor the evolution of open data in Brazil, as well as to track access by citizens and its ultimate impact on human rights.