Government records management and access to information: reflections on the 2013 Integrity Action Summer School

Violet Matangira
University of Namibia, Namibia
vmatangira@unam.na

James Lowry
International Records Management Trust, United Kingdom
jlowry@irmt.org

This article provides a brief report on the proceedings of the 9th Annual Integrity Action Summer School's policy lab on *Government Records Management and Citizen Access to Information*, held in July 2013 at the Central European University, Hungary and attended by international experts in records management and access to information advocacy. The lab covered international good practice in records management, the value of records management in providing access to reliable information, and the role of information access in participatory democracy.

Between 1st and 6th July 2013, the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, hosted the 9th Annual Integrity Action Summer School: *Leadership and Management for Integrity*. The summer schools are an initiative of Integrity Action, an independent non-governmental organisation that works with governments, business, academia and civil society on integrity issues, and the Central European University, founded in 1991 with the aim of helping the process of transition from dictatorship to democracy in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The *Leadership and Management for Integrity* summer school is intended to impart the principles, strategies and applied skills necessary to equip people to effectively identify corruption and to implement strategies for addressing it.

The summer school takes an inter-disciplinary approach to raising integrity standards in public and private institutions. It is organised into morning plenary sessions, centred on experiences in solving specific problems in particular settings. The afternoon sessions are devoted to specialist policy labs that explore practical solutions to specific integrity challenges and contexts. In 2013, three policy labs were offered: SMEs and Social Enterprises - Doing Business with Integrity in Emerging Markets; Integrity Education - Teaching Integrity and Improving the Integrity of Higher Education; and Government Records Management and Citizen Access to Information - Bridging Communities of Practice. This report considers the proceedings of the latter policy lab. The learning objectives of the lab were that participants should:

- Understand the value of records as evidence of government activity, the strategic importance of records management and the vital role of records management in the context of government transparency.
- Develop the ability to identify gaps in the regulatory framework and capacity needed to manage government records in the hard copy and digital environments.
- Learn how the management of records as evidence can contribute to national integrity frameworks, including Open Government, Access to Information, Open Data and anti-corruption initiatives.

The policy lab was principally aimed at public servants, civil society representatives and

citizens' rights advocates who have responsibility for or interest in government records as evidence, particularly as the basis for citizen access to information through Freedom of Information and Open Data. The course was attended by records and openness experts from Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, the Maldives, Nepal, Namibia, the Philippines, Tajikistan, and the United Kingdom. The policy lab comprised three major components: international good practice in records management, records and the openness agenda, and meeting citizens' information needs. This structure provided a technical grounding in records management theory and practice, then drew back to look at how the theory and practice supports the openness agenda, before drawing back again to consider the crucial role of information in participatory democracy.

The lab examined the requirements for ensuring that accurate and reliable government records are created and remain accessible for as long as required, providing participants with knowledge of international standards, infrastructure requirements and tools that can be used to strengthen records management in support of openness. Governments need to have good record-keeping systems so that they can find and provide relevant, accurate, and up to date information. There is no way that governments can achieve accountability with poorly managed records. For this reason, it is imperative for organisations and governments to consider records as strategic resources at the same level as finances, human resources, etc.

The lab included of an exploration of the relationship between record-keeping and government openness, including:

- administrative traditions and inherited public service cultures of secrecy
- information security needs and privacy obligations
- the development of the openness agenda (the Freedom of Information, Open Data and Open Government movements)
- the effect of poor or dilapidated record-keeping systems on government openness and responsiveness.

The policy lab addressed the significance of records as the evidence citizens need to take ownership of and participate more fully in their governments, and to build integrity in citizen / state relationships. In particular, it explored the significance of well-managed records for meaningful approaches to transparency and accountability, including reactive disclosure (Access to Information) and proactive disclosure (Open Data). Trustworthy and accessible government records are the basis for demonstrating and monitoring transparency and accountability; they are the legal foundation upon which openness is built. Openness rests ultimately on governments' ability to create and maintain reliable and accurate government records as evidence of government policies, actions and transactions, and on citizens' ability to access them. Public authorities need to know what information they hold, to be able to retrieve the information efficiently and to account to their citizens through this information. Testifying before a US Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, David Ferreiro (US Archivist) stressed that the backbone of a transparent and accountable government is good records management and emphasised to the committee that the government cannot be accountable if it does not preserve and cannot find its records (Ferreiro, 2010).

Government departments and senior government officials need to understand that the records their organisations create are national assets that must be effectively managed and secured so that the public can be assured of the authenticity of the records. The lab highlighted that citizens need to know that they can trust the information their governments provide, that this information will help to protect their rights and entitlements, and that it can be used to help them scrutinise what their governments are doing. It is often assumed that trustworthy records

are available to support initiatives for strengthening openness, but in many countries, government records are not managed to meet international standards, and in some countries even basic records management controls are not in place, particularly where the use of digital technologies has outpaced government capacity to manage digital records. Unmanaged, digital records and data do not survive long. There are numerous consequences for citizens. Poorly managed records can result in the misuse of information, cover-up of fraud, misguided policy and misplaced funding. Government service delivery cannot be monitored, the delivery of justice can be impaired, and corruption becomes difficult to prove. The public cannot make an informed contribution to the governance process.

Access to information rights are of limited value if information cannot be found when requested or, when found, cannot be relied upon as authoritative; Open Data initiatives lack credibility when data cannot be substantiated by tracing it to a reliable source. If governments are to be transparent and accountable and citizens are to engage with their governments meaningfully, on-going access to reliable, accurate and authentic records is essential. Through case studies, presentations and group work, the policy lab developed participants' understanding of the essential contribution that trustworthy records should make to the goal of raising standards of integrity. The lab brought together knowledge and good practice developed by the international communities concerned with records management, Access to Information and Open Data to explore ways of addressing the gaps between expectations for access initiatives and the realities of government information management.

The lab found that, through the openness movement, records management could play its rightful part in supporting good governance. Thurston (2012) sees a huge opportunity for making a more substantial contribution to transparency, accountability, anti-corruption and citizens' rights and economic development by linking Open Data to accurate, reliable, trustworthy records. The Open Data movement uses the power of technology and the Internet to proactively disclose government generated information. However, in countries where governments do not address records management, citizens accessing data through Open Data portals may receive partial, incomplete or misleading information (Thurston, 2012). Records management is critical to the integrity of Open Data initiatives.

The role of records in the anti-corruption drive is also very critical. Good, reliable, authentic, up to date and complete records deter corruption and help fight it. Poorly managed records, on the other hand, create loopholes for corruption to manifest and the fight against corruption becomes difficult. The loss of control of financial records creates opportunities for fraud, leads to loss of revenue, and impedes fiscal planning. It makes it difficult, if not impossible, to preserve an audit trail of decisions, actions, and transactions. Well managed records provide a cost-effective deterrent to fraud and corruption. Records systems provide controls on access to records; track the movement of records through organisations; and provide reliable and authentic audit trails. Records can serve as evidence to identify abuse, misuse, and non-compliance with financial instructions and other laws and regulations. Without well-managed records, anti-corruption strategies are impaired.

The lab covered the role of reliable information in participatory democracy, looking at the openness movement in the context of Western political thought. Participants explored ways of addressing the gaps between expectations for access initiatives and the realities of government information management through an exegesis of the African Union Model Law on Access to Information. Anirudra Neupane of Freedom Forum also presented a case study of Freedom of Information in Nepal. The ensuing discussion identified a number of citizen-centered requirements for access to information. These included:

- the right to ask for and receive information that cannot be obtained in the public domain
- the freedom to ask for information without explanation
- easy access to information
- timely access to information
- affordable access to information
- understandable information
- information from a range of organisations
- guidance on where to look for information
- simple information request processes
- to know that their requests are being dealt with and how they are being dealt with
- the ability to appeal information release decisions
- the protection of personal and commercial information

The policy lab served as a forum for the exchange of knowledge about information management and use developed in diverse contexts. Yet, around the world, governments are being asked to be more transparent, open, and engaged with their citizens. Citizens want to be able to trust their government, and they expect it to function in a manner that engenders this sense of trust. Records, and the evidence they contain, are the instruments by which government can promote a climate of trust and demonstrate an overall commitment to good government. Therefore, the foundation for accountability lies in well-managed records. Records are vital to virtually every aspect of the governance process. The effectiveness and efficiency of the public service across the range of government functions depends upon the availability of and access to information held in records. In order for any government or organisation to be in position to provide equitable access to information, provide open data, fight corruption, and above all, operate with integrity, good records management is essential.

References

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