



Switzerland: open government data becomes a reality

The Confederation has embarked on a process to gradually provide free and uniform access to all official public data. For the federal government, the aim is to make its administration more efficient and transparent, as well as to promote certain segments of the economy.

Population statistics, election results and road maps are just some of the data sets already published by the federal government on its ministerial websites. But these data account for only a small proportion of government information. Consequently, and due to incompatible formats, there has been very little value added in accessing this information before now.

Since its creation in 2012, the association Opendata.ch – a member of the international Open Knowledge Foundation – has been tasked¹ with providing unified, free and easy access to all public data. According to its Vice-President, Hannes Gassert: "These data offer new perspectives. Because they represent an asset for the entire community, their integration in information systems has been financed with public money. We have a duty, therefore, to put them on the web so that third parties can reuse them for other purposes".

A decision with a strong economic impetus

The federal administration estimates that only 10% of data is accessible at present. The Open Government Data (OGD) strategy adopted by the Federal Council on 16 April 2014² aims to provide free access to all public data whose use is not restricted by laws governing private information. The government has several objectives in this regard. Peter Fischer of the Federal IT Steering Unit (UPIC)³, who has been tasked with drawing up this strategy, says: "We hope that open access to public data will help make our country's economy even more innovative... Greater transparency in political and economic processes and, better still, a much more efficient administration".

A study⁴ conducted in June 2013 by a university college in Berne assessed the economic potential of opening up public data at between CHF600 and 1,800 million. A very optimistic figure according to certain specialists, including Niklaus Stettler, head of the Swiss Institute for Information Science, HTW Chur⁵, who feels the financial gains cannot be measured so easily, nor can the "immediate benefit" of the creation of 20,000 new jobs, which the study claims.

Three days after the annual Open Knowledge conference in Geneva on 16 September 2013⁶, during which Federal Councillor Alain Berset announced the future strategy⁷, the Confederation opened a pilot portal: opendata.admin.ch. Several federal departments (environment, meteorology, public healthcare, statistics, topography) are presently working on the project⁸ along with the Federal Archives, the National Library, the Federal Chancellery, the

1 <http://fr.opendata.ch/manifeste/>

2 <https://www.news.admin.ch/message/index.html?lang=fr&msg-id=52688>

3 <http://www.isb.admin.ch/index.html?lang=fr>

4 <http://www.wirtschaft.bfh.ch/de/forschung/aktuell/newsdetails/article/studie-zu-open-government-data-in-der-schweiz/1100.html>

5 <http://www.htwchur.ch/informationwissenschaft/uebersicht.html>

6 <http://okcon.org/>

7 <http://webarchive.okfn.org/okfn.org/201404/press-releases/vers-plus-de-transparence-pour-la-suisse/>

8 <https://www.news.admin.ch/message/index.html?lang=fr&msg-id=52042>

association of municipalities and regions, and also the canton of Zurich, a pioneer in the field, since it opened the first access portal to the country's public data in June 2012⁹.

The importance of combining confidentiality and transparency

Still ranked only 21st worldwide – with a score of 41 out of 100 – in a 2013¹⁰ report by the Open Data Research Network, Switzerland has sought to rapidly improve its position in the arena of access to public data (according to the report it lagged behind 11 European countries). This was a real challenge for it but it was also a sensitive operation for a country that puts a high value on data confidentiality, having inscribed this fundamental right in Article 13 of its Constitution¹¹.

The report submitted to the government in September 2013, and which inspired the current OGD strategy, concludes that there is "no major risk that justifies opposition to the development of open government data". It also stated that while freely accessible data is anonymous, it may be cross-checked and associated with identified persons. And it recommended that user rights and licences be defined at federal level and applied uniformly by all administrations.

The law on transparency (LTrans), which came into force in 2006, already allows citizens to consult all federal administration documents, barring a few exceptions. In practice, few requests for information are sent to the federal commissioner for data protection and transparency (Préposé fédéral à la protection des données et à la transparence - PFPDT)¹² and the rate of rejection by the administration is fairly high. Denis Masméjan, a journalist with *Le Temps*, explains: "The culture of secrecy remains strong in our society". Nevertheless, to follow through on its commitment to exhaustiveness and transparency, the government must publish more public data, such as those related to the budget, state assets, and legal and administrative information.

Strategic skills and communication management

After completion of the project's pilot phase at the end of 2014, the strategy provides for "a permanent, dedicated and user-friendly OGD portal for the Confederation, cantons, municipalities and other public-sector organisations to centralise the publication of their data. During the annual OpenData.ch conference in Zurich on 18 September, Juan-Pablo Lovato, project manager in the "Swiss eGovernment structure"¹³, announced that the Federal Archives¹⁴ would oversee the portal's coordination and operational management.

Before this arrangement, which incorporates the entire government administration, the project partners want to establish unified terms of use and make final standardisation adjustments to ensure compliance with international standards in particular. The government, for its part, is looking at options for the compensation of departments that currently offer data as part of a paid service. It is focusing in particular on communication¹⁵ to foster a change of culture, both within and outside the administration, in favour of free access to data.

Hannes Gassert points out that "if we compare Switzerland with pioneers like the UK and the US, it does lag behind". However, he is optimistic about the future, adding: "Thanks to its excellent universities and their innovative learning programmes, our country has potential in open government data that is only waiting to be fully exploited".

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⁹ <http://data.stadt-zuerich.ch/content/portal/de/index/ogd.html>
¹⁰ <http://www.opendataresearch.org/dl/odb2013/Open-Data-Barometer-2013-Global-Report.pdf>
¹¹ <http://www.admin.ch/opc/fr/classified-compilation/19995395/index.html#a13>
¹² <http://www.edoeb.admin.ch/?lang=fr>
¹³ <http://www.cyberadmin.ch/>
¹⁴ <http://www.blog.ch.ch/tag/open-data/>
¹⁵ <http://www.admin.ch/aktuell/00089/index.html?lang=fr&msg-id=54889>