Statement by Manuela Bora (Italy,SOC), Congress' rapporteur on open data for better public services

Check against delivery

1.   Dear chairman, dear colleagues, It is my pleasure to present this report on Open data for better public services to the Congress.

2.   Let me begin by a tribute to Sian REID, our former British colleague, who left the Congress last year. She proposed this report and steered it through the committee stages. She put a lot of work into this and I am honoured to take over as rapporteur.

3.   Our lives and societies are affected by digital information as never before. In recent few years we have seen a growing tendency to release and re-use public data to facilitate transparency, accountability, public participation, public service delivery, innovation, efficiency and economic growth.

4.   More and more cities are recognising the potential that open data can bring. The release and re-use of this data can give local governments the opportunity to transform themselves into more transparent, democratic and effective authorities.

5.   But first things first: what exactly is open data? Open data is defined as information which can be freely used and shared by anyone, for any purpose. This involves the removal of legal and technical restrictions for re-use. Legal restrictions to re-use may include copyright and related rights. These may be lifted by means of licenses, legal tools or legal statements such as the Creative Commons licenses.

6.   It is worth noting that while open licenses and legal tools can remove certain sets of restrictions and legal obligations, they do not remove others, such as privacy protection for personal data.

7.   There are also technical barriers to re-use, including technical mechanisms restricting access to data. To be useful, information needs to be made available in "machine readable" formats.

8.   Public open data represents a huge opportunity for European cities. They can offer greater transparency and accountability, and create new chances to strengthen and develop the relationship between local government and civil society.

9.   Our report has lots of examples of how this is being applied. Open data can first be used to improve public service delivery, providing citizens with analysis, insight and tailored information to enhance their use of public facilities.

10.   The variety of applications enabling citizens to locate all kinds of public services is astonishing. From recycling points to public toilets, parks to kindergartens or schools to restaurants: you will have an application that will help you find this service.

11.   Other projects build on public data to create or improve channels of dialogue between citizens and municipalities and facilitate more inclusive decision making processes between citizens and municipal authorities.

12.   For instance, citizens may be involved in generating openly accessible data on public services. Some applications enable them to send complaints or reports about infrastructural issues like broken streetlights and transport issues to the relevant institutions.

13.   The data tell municipalities and citizens where and how issues occur, and enable public institutions to locate and handle issues more responsively. It then allows the municipalities to update citizens about how their issue is being dealt with. Here, the contributions of citizens, through the use of open data, leads to more inclusive, tailored and responsive policies.

14.   Open data is also used in cities to strengthen local democracy and promote good governance. This is part of our fight against corruption. Although we prepared this report long before our 2016 Roadmap of activities for preventing corruption and promoting public ethics, this report anticipates a lot of the issues that we cover in that roadmap.

15.   Open data is about transparency. In the Governance Committee we are now preparing a report on transparency in procurement and another on transparency in open government – which will develop some of the issues we treat here.

16.   Many city data initiatives aim to increase transparency, accountability and public participation, including through "e-democracy" projects and local data journalism initiatives.

17.   Some projects aggregate information about local politicians and political parties to help citizens make informed decisions about who they vote for. Others provide data about lobbying activities directed towards local politicians and institutions, enabling public scrutiny of interactions between lobbyists and officials.

18.   Data about local public finances has been used in numerous projects from journalists and civil society organisations to help citizens understand where money comes from and how it is allocated and spent. Publishing this data makes it easier for civil society to scrutinize public spending and detect corruption.

19.   All in all, open data is creating new opportunities to strengthen and develop the relationship between local government and civil society groups, who are finding that they can work together to develop new tools and application for promoting good governance in their towns and cities.

20.   For those of you not yet convinced of the benefits of open data, it also has economic potential. Recent estimates have put potential benefits of open data at more than 1% of global GDP. Indeed, it

can be useful for local businesses in creating their products and services and can serve and stimulate economic innovation and growth.

21.   Open data is not just for rich countries. Earlier this month the UN reported that more and more lower income countries are exploiting open data and demonstrating that they can save money by doing so.

22.   Dear colleagues, We need to realise that open data has already arrived and that its use is already well advanced in many cities. Each year our cities are releasing more and more datasets into the public space, providing more and more opportunities for those who are working to develop smart cities. We focus in our report on how such data can help develop green cities, identify sources of pollution and reduce traffic congestion.

23.   Often it is the younger computer literate generations who are doing much of the running, and who have the highest expectations. So here we are also seeing signs that these new applications – many of which function on smart-phones – have potential to re-engage the younger generations in local public and political life and make them aware of how they can contribute to their communities.

24.   For these reasons I propose a resolution in which we encourage local authorities of our member states to develop strategies to make local authority information open to the entire population in machine readable formats, to create partnerships with business and civil society groups and to consult citizens and civil society on data publication priorities.

25.   There is also the issue of privacy data protection, for example when it comes to health data. However, we do not need new regulations in this case - we just need to ensure that we respect the existing ones. This is why we ask local authorities to ensure that data protection and privacy laws and policies are strictly adhered to when data is made available to the public.

26.   In the Congress we should commit ourselves to support and encourage the local authorities in the re-use of public authority data through open data initiatives, and assist them in gathering feedback from the citizens and civil society, through the organisation of public events, workshops and consultations, to understand the interests and needs of different user groups.

27.   In the recommendation we ask the Committee of Ministers to recognise the importance of open data for improving local democracy in increasing transparency, accountability and citizen participation and propose that they develop guidelines for member states on open data standards and strategies.

28.   We recognise that a 'digital divide' remains between those who have access to such data and those who do not, and ask the Committee of Ministers to address the risk of a digital gap in open data use caused by this divide.

29.   We also ask the Committee of Ministers to call upon member states to create awareness about the advantages of sharing open data and to support open data initiatives by local authorities by minimalizing legal barriers, and provide guidelines or policies for the re-use of local authority data.

30.   These are the main points of the resolution and the recommendation. I urge you to support them. Thank you for your attention.