



COVID-19 AND STORYTELLING - A SERIES OF WORKSHOPS IN KOSOVO AND NORTH MACEDONIA

Considering the workshops took place during the Covid-19 pandemic a lot of the participants' feedback reflected the situation at the time. But, as data was so important to paint a picture of the current situation it was imperative information was presented in a way normal people could understand.

Although naturally a tough time for everybody, this gave us a unique opportunity to humanise data or at least see it like that. The situation mentally placed participants in the shoes of some of the poorest in our society and how we can use data to identify social trends to help alleviate these issues. It also asked us the question of how we could mobilise community groups to help authorities collect data and offer valuable engagement with it.

“Open Data outreach to NGOs is immensely important during this period of uncertainty due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While conducting open data outreach extends the possibility of data-driven approaches and informed decision-making, it also enables a more sustainable, innovative, and transparent ecosystem.” - Paulina Behluli, Open Data Kosovo

The pandemic has in many ways forced us to revisit how we work, such as how we interact with the people we support to even the office environment. As we start to come out of the Covid-19 crisis, we may be able to look back and learn some lessons from how we lived under various lockdowns and restrictions, from how the environment reacted with less cars on the road, to reconnecting with the sense of community in our neighbourhoods and in this case the importance of good data and the power it can wield.

During this time we have noticed a change in digital social culture, from the jobs market to interacting with our older generation. Local Government, who have been working on channel shift for the last ten years in some cases are starting to see success, admirable it has been by force but this is something Local Government will look to build on would it be over.

As you will read in the raw data, the impact of Covid-19 was a big debate topic during the workshops activities and we used this momentum to create an offshoot project called Open Data Vs Covid-19, teaming up with Open Data Kosovo in the countries capital of Pristina and The Metamorphosis Foundation in North Macedonia, which was funded by The United States Agency for International Development in North Macedonia, The National Endowment for Democracy in America and The U.S. Embassy in Kosovo - this was 3 workshops over 2 weeks in September 2020.

This was a stand alone workshop that presented covid related feedback from The Gov Data Project to a host of government officers and third sector staff from Kosovo and North Macedonia, as well as examples of good practice.

“The participants found very helpful the recommendations that Nathan provided about how we can communicate our open data agenda to community groups and how we can bring them on board going forward. In this regard it was said that open data shouldn't be a closed club just for those who are in the know, it should be open to all. From what was discussed it was concluded that it is really important to know your market and to tailor how you explain open data.” - Marija Nikoloska Arsovska, The Metamorphosis Foundation

With the Open Data vs Covid-19 workshop we had the opportunity to shine a light on some of the issues on trust in data and their thoughts on humanising data which participants can carry forward and potentially implement some of that learning to influence future policy driver projects in Kosovo and North Macedonia.

We relayed some of this during 3 workshops, 2 with Kosovan participants and 1 with participants from North Macedonia.

The Kosovan workshop only had one activity on data driven decision making and it was over 2 days. Considering the workshops had slightly different participants, the first being mostly government officers and the second was facilitated for NGO workers, we slightly tweaked the question for each, the first we asked them to think about strategy creation and the second cohort we wanted them to envisage they were forming a social campaign - we did this to collect a slightly different sample from each event.

With a third of the population of Kosovo thinking that Covid-19 is a hoax according to a report in Euronews September 2020, it was an interesting opportunity to gauge how decision makers interact with its citizens who are dubious about the data being released.

Here is the feedback from Kosovo:

- Using data on park visitors to get more people to stay active post covid
- Using Data to raise awareness on the importance of hygiene
- Using the data for open businesses that produce agricultural products to advertise their products for sale, so that there is no accumulation in the markets
- Using data to identify public procurement fraud during the times of the pandemic
- Policy makers, in consultation with civil society members, must assess the possible trade-offs in data utilisation during this crisis
- High number of students in Classes - post-pandemic issue
- using data to raise awareness of the different forms of violence against women and domestic violence
- Data on the capacities of the hospitals on tackling the Covid-19
- Supporting the initiatives and projects aimed at improving the lives of ethnic minority in the Republic of Kosovo
- Investigate businesses that ha experienced significant economic downturns during the COVID-19 pandemic, collect data on which businesses have been damaged, whether the number of employees has been halved, how many have been laid off, whether there are businesses that have closed completely and Based on the collection of this data, the Government should assist these businesses to open or return employees to their jobs
- Local NGOs to collect data on dog mess within parks and how to solve going forward with surveys
- For NGO-s to collect data on alternative ways of travel other than public transport, data on how this is used during lock down will help to make it feasible - for new bike strips and other alternative transport means - for the local government.
- Collect data from air agencies for number of people who request to fly to and from Kosovo and find ways to find possibilities to fly safely to Kosovo according to Airport capabilities

- Seek/collect for data on donation capabilities or readiness of local or int. organisations for covid-19 related operations donations and provide accurate information to all parties (this is good to be done even for small donations)...
- Collect data on public procurement procedures during the Covid-19 to track any misuse of public funds
- the number of people with antibodies of COVID-19, and how many of them will be immune to the virus in the next months.
- collect data on unemployment and eventual new openings during pandemics, and further this could help on analysis the new specific for this period - jobs come during pandemics and the possibility to eventually change the job for people
- Creating a special platform where information would be placed on the consequences caused by the COVID 19 pandemic, in the economy, education, health and in all areas where it has affected. This platform would be good to be made and updated by institutions in cooperation with NGOs.
- Personally, I think that in such a topic of misuse, the relevant institutions (prosecutor, etc.) should be dealt with because it has to do with criminal offenses and violations of the law that in a way affects us as well, since those funds are bought with our taxes, ie when we are abuses in public procurement
- collect data on the number of drivers using their car horns after 16:00 and find ways to reduce those numbers (we love to use our horne



The North Macedonian workshop consisted of 2 activities:

The first looked at how we can utilise citizens to collect data that can be sometimes hard to reach, those personal stories that are a consequence of the coronavirus data we see in the news.

“A number of themes emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic such as: stories from people who have had to isolate, the effect of COVID-19 on people’s mental health, the increased usage of alcohol, the effect of job losses in the country and the impact of business restrictions on small business owners.

Participants deliberated on some of the repercussions of the Coronavirus crisis has caused in communities across North Macedonia and how communities can be included in gathering evidence to document the effects.” - Marija Nikoloska Arsovska, The Metamorphosis Foundation

This is the what the participants discussed:

- Green spaces have been used more - maybe we can ask local res to doc their fav thing about their local space.
- People started using more bikes and alternative methods of transport - maybe it is time to work on the infrastructure of the city.
- People don't socialize as much; they are more lonely - there was a discussion for help lines
- Since we are traveling less, the local government of the touristic cities in North Macedonia can work on promotion of their tourist attractions.
- Anonymous boxes in pharmacies – There was a case study from one of our partners in Croatia, how did one NGO wanted to help victims of domestic violence. During the lockdown the statistics showed that the domestic violence has jumped, unfortunately. So, the victims of violence could leave a note in the local pharmacies in order to get help.
- Access to education was limited, need to work more on open educational resources
- Education is a burning issue. At the moment, there is this number – approximately 40 000 students do not have computers, and the Ministry of Education introduced a national online platform for studying. The technical resources, expertise and knowledge of digital tools needs to be improved. Rural communities are way behind from the urban.
- People were riding their bikes more often- this increased the discussions over having bike friendlier cities

The second activity asked the same question as we did to the Kosovan cohort on the subject of how we can put a human face on data.

- New business and retail trends - education and support for targeting the future business possibilities in the new normal period
- Has MKD lockdown worked in other countries? For example, has curfew permits worked and what has been personal reflection
- Data about lost jobs - targeted training and support programs
- Sharing TRUE stories. I remember I have read about the famous battle cry of President Bill Clinton's 1996 re-election campaign: It's about the economy, stupid! SO, if it is about people, connect it with people, TRUE stories, real examples.
- Data about using bikes vs. cars - improving city infrastructure (making it more bike friendly)
- Conspiracy theories, what are personal reflections on them and did any resonate in MKD?
- Data about lost businesses - campaign about using local products and services
- Do front line workers feel valued? What are their reflections of COVID from feeling not important before to know, how would THEY like to see how it is sustained?

As we come to the end of the pandemic, we are learning that data can be given a human narrative. Heartbreakingly in this case, it has been statistical data on loss of life, but the media and politicians have used data as a powerful tool to illustrate how data can tell a story and why it's important we take notice.

We'd like to argue that adding a storytelling strategy to open data outreach will make it easier for NGOs to relate to, in this case it has rallied all aspects of society to use data and more get involved, from 3D printing ventilation gear and using data to identify which areas need it the most to recognise areas of social isolation and offering volunteer support.

So, could this approach lend itself to other areas such as housing, communities and the environment if the story is told correctly? We believe so, a lot of these subsequent activities may be small, but it will go a long way to evidence community engagement and showcase open data actually being used within our neighbourhoods.

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