State Comptroller of Israel | Annual Report 71C | 2021

Systemic Topics

Accessibility of government and public data bases to the public

Accessibility of government and public data bases to the public

Background

Government authorities hold databases containing an enormous volume of information about diverse topics, including education, health and transportation. The transition to an information age and an information economy is turning the government's information into a national economic resource. The approach is that cooperation between the government sector, which holds considerable information, and the private sector and civil society organizations, which possess advanced skills and technological capabilities in generating value from information, will leverage each sector's advantages and enable diverse target audiences to generate value from the information and develop innovative services and tools.

Considering these insights, the Israeli government passed Resolution 1933 in 2016, which stated that all government ministries and support units must publish all databases in their possession by 2022 ("Government Resolution 1933" or "the Government Resolution"). The Government Resolution defined implementation milestones, including mapping of the databases, preparing a work plan for publishing them, guidelines for publishing particular databases and more.

Key figures

2016

The year that the Government Resolution to make all government databases accessible by 2022 was made.

850

The number of databases made accessible on the data.gov website, as of October 2020.

18

Israel's ranking in 2019 on the OECD Survey on accessibility of Government Data (out of 34 countries included in the survey).

32%

Of the government ministries and subsidiary units partially completed the mapping of their databases or did no mapping at all, as of May 2019.

28%

Of government ministries and subsidiary units did not prepare a work plan for publishing databases, as of May 2019.

157,000

Users browsed the data.gov website between April and August 2020.

1.3 million

File downloads from the data.gov website between April and August 2020.

43.5 million

Instances of data consumption via API (Application Programming Interface) from the data.gov website between April and August 2020.

Audit actions

From March to October 2020, the Office of the State Comptroller audited aspects relating to the accessibility of government and public databases in Israel, and examined the mode of implementation of Government Resolution 1933. It also examined the issue of the accessibility of databases relating to legislation and real estate. The audit was performed in the Government Information and Communications Technology Authority ("ICT Authority"). Supplementary examinations were performed in the Knesset, in the Survey of Israel, in the Freedom of Information Unit in the Ministry of Justice, in the Israel Police, in the Ministry of Education and in the Ministry of Interior. Conversations were also held with civil society organizations that are promoting the issue of improving the accessibility.

Key findings

Database mapping and preparing a work plan for the accessibility of databases – Government Resolution 1933 requires government ministries and support units ("Government Ministries") to complete the mapping of the databases in their possession by the end of 2017 and to prepare a multiyear work plan for publishing them. ICT Authority data show that, as of May 2019, approximately one third of the Government Ministries had partially completed the mapping or had done no mapping at all, and approximately; 28% had not prepared a work plan as stated.

Quality and completeness of the database mapping file – The mapping file, which includes a field for the target dates for making databases accessible, is designated; to serve as an up-to-date catalogue of all government databases and as a multiyear work plan for making databases accessible by 2022. As of September 2020, the current mapping file has not been improved or validated (since the last validation in May 2018). As a result, it is quite difficult to obtain a reliable status report about the government databases or to produce valid insights from the current mapping file.

Extent of accessibility of databases on the data.gov website – In general, government databases around the world are accessible to the public on a designated information website (data.gov websites). As of September 2020, there are databases in Israel that were made accessible on websites other than the data.gov website (on the unified government website and on websites of government ministries and subsidiary units that have not yet been included in the unified government website). This decentralization of the process of making the databases accessible is inconsistent with Government Resolution 1933 and makes it difficult for the public to find databases and use them. Furthermore, ICT Authority data show that, as of May 2019, 10% of the ministries (four ministries) have not published their databases on the data.gov website.

Prioritizing the databases to be made accessible – The Government Resolution stated that the process of making the databases accessible should be prioritized according to several indicators – the public's interest in the publishing of the information, the economic benefits that the public may receive from publishing the information and more. The ICT Authority does not know how many of the databases actually published on the data.gov website were defined as high priorities or whether the Government Ministries are achieving the targets specified in the ICT Authority's instructions for publishing databases it defined as being of high priority. Furthermore, as of August 2020, the ICT Authority has not yet completed the professional process it initiated to classify databases according to internationally accepted criteria for prioritizing the accessibility process.

👎 **Anonymity of databases containing private information anonymous −** As of August 2020, no policy regarding data anonymity has yet been published. No guidelines or tools have been defined for implementing this process**.**

👎 **Quality of the accessibility of databases −** The Government Resolution and the ICT Authority's guidelines issued instructions regarding the quality of the published databases and stated, inter alia, that the databases are to be published in a format that may be freely processed in order to enable data retrieval, processing, dissemination and re-use. As of September 2020, no analysis has been performed of the quality of specific databases that were made accessible on the data.gov website.

👎 **Incentivizing the Government Ministries −** With regard to approvals of budget requests, the sums approved for the Government Ministries during each of the years 2017 to 2022 were 30% to 80% lower than the sum specified in the Government Resolution (NIS 15 million) for allocation each year. The funds were designed to incentivize the Government Ministries to make their databases accessible and for information transfers.

👎 **Accessibility of other public bodies databases −** The Government Resolution also required the performance of an examination regarding extending the obligation to publish databases to public bodies that are not subject to the Government Resolution (such as local authorities and institutions of higher education). As of September 2020, no examination has been performed.

👎 **Accessibility of the police crime database −** The Government Resolution also required the Israel Police to make its crime database accessible by the end of 2017. As of September 2020, this database has not yet been made accessible.

👍

The Office of the State Comptroller commends the ICT Authority's efforts to specifically monitor the implementation of the Government Resolution. This is a complex process being performed in conjunction with many government ministries and subsidiary units. This requires collection and validation of an enormous volume of data.
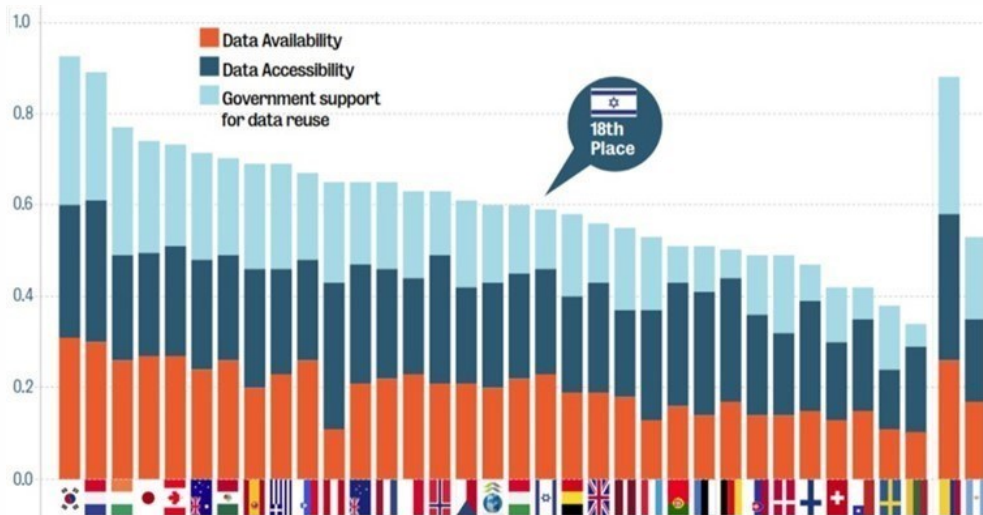
Key recommendations

💡 The mapping of databases is supposed to reflect the government's information assets. Government Ministries that have not yet completed the mapping of the databases in their possession or the preparation of the multiyear work plan for making them accessible should complete these tasks, considering that the target date (the end of 2017) have passed four years ago. Furthermore, the mapping of databases is a long and complicated process that should be performed continuously so that the mapping of the databases held by the Government Ministries is complete and up-to-date. The Government Ministries should regularly update their mapping.

💡 The ICT Authority should continue advancing the processes of classifying the databases, mapping subjects and topics that are of value to the public and should formulate a plan for prioritizing the accessibility of the relevant databases..

💡 It is recommended that the ICT Authority formulate a detailed plan for advancing the data anonymization process, which should include details of the tasks and the parties that should be involved in performing them, while taking into account the deadline defined in the Government Resolution for completing its implementation – 2022.

💡 The ICT Authority should perform an orderly process examining the issue of the accessibility of public bodies databases not subject to the Government Resolution. A process should be initiated for mapping core databases in the possession of public bodies that are not government ministries and subsidiary units, and an orderly plan should be formulated that includes milestones and timetables for advancing the accessibility of such databases, while prioritizing those databases that have the greatest public value.

💡 The ICT Authority should perform a survey among users to identify the improvements and revisions required to the data.gov website and identify valuable databases whose accessibility should be prioritized.

💡 Israel is ranked 18th in the OECD's Survey on Open Government Data (out of 34 countries included in the survey). In order to achieve the targets defined in the Government Resolution, the ICT Authority should consider how to continue its efforts to explain the importance of this matter in general, and particularly among the management echelons in the Government Ministries. This will encourage Government Ministries to prioritize the accessibility of their databases.

OECD Survey on the Accessibility of Databases (2019)

Source: The OECD.

Summary

The accessibility of Government databases is one of the principles of open governance that considers government-held information an asset belonging to the public. The Israeli government declared its commitment to this principle and its commitment to provide the public with maximum access to its databases so that the public can process and improve the information contained in them, and it passed a resolution to make all databases of government ministries and subsidiary units accessible by 2022. The findings of this report include partial implementation of the actions defined in the Government Resolution and in the ICT Authority's guidelines and inadequate responses to the various challenges involved in accomplishing this mission.

Rectifying the deficiencies and implementing the recommendations specified in this report should facilitate the realization of the potential benefits that may be obtained by making government databases accessible. Therefore, a deeper commitment to take more extensive action is needed in relation to numerous aspects in this regard, including: cooperating with the public and with civil society organizations; extending the obligation to make databases accessible to public bodies not subject to the Government Resolution, including local

authorities; ensuring that the quality of the accessible databases while focusing on the accessibility of valuable databases; contending with the challenges and barriers in the process of making the databases accessible; encouraging the public to use the databases; and evaluating the benefits deriving from this. The ICT Authority is tasked with advancing this matter and is responsible for performing some of these actions. However, without the cooperation of the Government Ministries, stemming from their recognition of the inherent value of making databases accessible - this matter can't be optimally advanced.

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Chapter 2

Government Offices