



Data and Accountability

A Primer for Activists Monitoring Political Processes

Introduction: How Data can be used to make Government more Accountable

Activists have a plethora of tactics and tools at their disposal to hold their governments accountable. One of the most versatile and influential components of an activist's toolbox is data.

Data is a set of facts or evidence collected and gathered for the purpose of developing objective analysis. Public awareness and advocacy campaigns based on evidence and documented facts can help you develop a reputation as a credible organization and as a source of unbiased information. Data, if collected using well-established practices and rigorous methodology, can be the most versatile tool in your toolbox.

Civil society often gets a negative reputation for developing advocacy and policy recommendations based on what is perceived to be subjective analysis. And often this reputation is well-earned and can affect an organization's credibility. Activists are frequently fueled by their passion on an issue, leading others to feel that their actions are emotion-driven, opinion-filled, and biased. One way an organization can overcome this is by building a reputation as an organization whose work is built upon data-driven, evidence-based calls to action. Using rigorous data collection methods can help you build an irrefutable case of analysis that is often hard for your stakeholders to ignore.

Process monitoring is efforts made by citizens or civic groups to monitor and report on the activities of governments and their officials, with the goal of making these actors more accountable. [Nabz-Iran](#) houses a library of resources that citizens can use to build their own accountability efforts, including monitoring, and this manual is intended to complement those resources. For further background on the fundamentals of monitoring, you can refer to Nabz-Iran's online courses on "[Budget Monitoring at the Local and National Level](#)" and "[Service Delivery Monitoring: How to Hold Government Accountable](#)", including the latter's complementary pocket guide. Later on in this document, we also share case studies of actual monitoring projects in various countries.

One of civil society's roles is to hold governments accountable to the needs of the citizens who elected them to office. By conducting political process monitoring activities that use rigorous methodology in collecting data and evidence, civil society can press for greater government transparency and accountability. This type of data-driven action has the potential to reshape civil society's reputation, strengthen relationships across stakeholder groups, and instill confidence in the community that both government and civil society are working toward the greater common good.

Political process monitoring initiatives, through the use of methodical data collection, can have a significant impact on the policy recommendations your organization is advocating for. Developing public information campaigns that are grounded in verifiable data can have a powerful effect of persuasion on decision-makers. It's difficult to argue against hard evidence. Basing advocacy campaigns on the observed impacts of government reform will go further in convincing stakeholders that the changes you are asking for have merit.

In this primer you will find top tips for collecting data, best practices on how data can be used by activists, lessons learned on the challenges of collecting good data, how data can be used to amplify your existing work, and a list of useful resources.

The Importance of Data-Driven Action

Monitoring initiatives should be viewed as a means to an end—not the end itself—and as complementary to the existing work of an organization. The findings and recommendations that come out of your monitoring efforts can almost always open up other opportunities to create change through further action.

While monitoring can evolve out of existing public awareness or advocacy campaigns, the data you collect may also lead you to develop new advocacy efforts or contribute to ongoing ones.

Nabz-Iran has compiled some examples of successful monitoring initiatives from other countries, including case studies on:

- Democracy and Governance in **Albania**: [A Budget Monitoring and Tracking and Campaign-Related Monitoring Vignette](#)
- Participatory Budgeting and Expenditure Tracking in **Indonesia**: [A Budget Monitoring, Tracking and Advocacy Vignette](#)
- **Zimbabwe**: [Monitoring Government Follow-Through](#)
- **Jordan**: [Parliamentary Monitoring Project](#)

Monitoring initiatives can also create opportunities for you to build constructive relationships with both government officials and citizens. By grounding your analysis in data and well-documented evidence, you are able to build confidence in your analysis.

Monitoring government is a continuous, ongoing process, and collecting and analyzing data are cyclical tasks. While the methods are specific and often very linear, data collection as it relates to monitoring government is frequently iterative, and informs the next steps for your action. ‘Listening’ to what your data has to say can help you make more informed choices about the appropriate steps you may want to take as you develop your action plans. Let the evidence or facts guide your work.

Understanding Data: What Exactly is Data?

Data is a complicated term and can mean different things to different people across different contexts. Data is a lot of things. It is facts and statistics. It is information collected through interviews, surveys, and questionnaires. It is observations. It is documents and reports and official policy. Data comes in as many forms as you can think of. What makes data so important and useful is that it is documentable. You can feel it, touch it, or see it in some variety. If you conduct an interview, you can record the person's answers via a recorder or through transcript notes. If you observe something, you may be able to document it with pictures or a detailed eyewitness account. If you have an official budget from your local municipal council, you can see exactly what resources are allocated across community priorities.

Types of Data

When you think of the term data you likely think of numbers—like the height of a building, the number of doctors employed at a hospital, the median score on a test, or the amount of money allocated to trash collection in your city. This type of data is called quantitative data. It is easily measured and is often about 'quantity' – how many, how much?

But there is another type of data—qualitative data. Qualitative is descriptive, it is observed and is often varied in nature. It is based on 'quality'—it tells a story that provides the color to the numerical quantitative data. When conducting political process monitoring activities you are most likely to rely primarily on qualitative data.

In this guide, when you see the term 'data' we mean both types—quantitative and qualitative. By analyzing this information together, you will get a more vivid picture of the issues that you are monitoring. Let's use the following example to understand where data can come from and how to use it effectively.

Case Study: Municipal Environmental Protection

Your organization is committed to environmental protection. You are interested in developing a new advocacy and public awareness campaign to push for new local regulations that punish the dumping of chemicals and waste in the local river. You recognize the utility in basing your campaign in knowledge of what the municipal government has previously done to protect the local river as well as current practices. Therefore you develop a two-pronged approach—one that focuses on research of what has been done previously and one that monitors current practices.

Let's take the first component – local history of environmental protection. For this, you may look back at all municipal legislation, official government statements, and budget resources allocated to environmental protection in your community. This is research – you are looking back to see what they have done. This is data. You may look back at media reports to see if there have been any articles describing local dumping of waste by factories or industries in the area. You may also survey communities to better understand their

historical perspectives on the health of the local river water. This is data. But this is also a form of research.

To complement this background research, you are also interested in monitoring current practices. You gather staff or volunteers to conduct monitoring activities—meeting with current officials to understand their challenges and current policies; deploying monitors to photograph and document the river itself. This is data.

Understanding the different types of data available to you is important. Most political process monitoring initiatives combine different types of data: data collected from research (or what has happened in the past) and data collected from monitoring (or what is happening now that you can observe and document in the present).

The Value of Data

Data is a valuable asset. It needs to be found or gathered and it can come at a price. Sometimes you need to buy data and you usually need permission to use it one way or another. Although some government agencies may produce and publish data for free, they may wish to limit how it is used or disseminated. Accessing or using some data could land you or others in trouble. For your monitoring project, first identify the type of data that you may need and see if you have the necessary permission(s) to use it. Sometimes, you may find pirated data for free on online platforms, but as you may not have the necessary permission, using this data could lead to trouble for you or your colleagues. So always make sure that you possess the rights and permissions to use the data. There may even be cases where you need permission to collect the data, such as if you choose to implement surveys or other data collection activities. Always consider government officials and agencies as stakeholders in your project, and better to include them from the start (as much as necessary) and secure the required permissions upfront, rather than leaving them surprised by the results of your monitoring efforts.

Using Data to Push for Greater Accountability: Opportunities and Challenges

As mentioned previously, using data as a basis for pressing for greater government accountability is a smart tactic. Often the data collected by a civic group may actually prove that the government is doing the right thing. And that can help the group establish a reputation as a civic organization that is a resource—not just to validate government, but also to highlight when things aren't working as well.

By using data to create a balanced reputation, your work can be amplified. This can help you build off existing activities or work that your organization is already doing. Monitoring government and using well-documented evidence and data in your analysis can amplify your issue. Analysis based on facts is much more powerful than analysis that is viewed as subjective or based on opinion.

A few examples of how data can be used to **create opportunities** for greater government accountability:

Policy Implementation Monitoring

Freedom of Information (FoI) and sunshine laws demand that government decision-making processes, as well as the decisions made, are accessible to citizens. Public meeting laws often require governments to give citizens access to government meetings, agendas, and meeting minutes. These types of laws open up the necessary political space for citizens and CSOs to effectively monitor political processes. The passage of such laws and policies would create a particularly good opportunity for legislative and budget monitoring. By collecting these official documents and observing public meetings, you are able to have hard evidence of what was said and whether government officials pushed for community needs to be addressed.

Elections

Elections are mechanisms for holding government officials accountable and are arguably the most visible manifestations of democracy. This can present opportunities for citizens to engage in political processes beyond voting. Citizens can create records of candidates' platforms and positions on citizen priority issues in the period leading up to an election, then track changes over time or use the records to hold newly-elected officials accountable post-election.

But with these opportunities come **risks**. Monitoring government is inherently risky. Even in its most non-confrontational form, by monitoring government, you are essentially 'grading' government. And when the political environment is restrictive, this can be even trickier. We can all think of countries where the political environment is not favorable to civic activism. And while this may point to an even greater need for caution as

you consider political process monitoring activities, if you don't take the following into account, it won't matter how solid your data and evidence are.

Political Space

The openness of political space within a country is a key factor in determining the successfulness of monitoring. In order to implement a political process monitoring initiative, you need to have a certain amount of access to information. Monitoring is challenging, and in some cases impossible, if you are unable to access public documents or observe legislative or budgetary meetings and committees.

If the media is restricted and citizens are afraid to participate in surveys or interviews, then even data collection that does not directly involve the government would be difficult. Limited political space would also limit the extent to which you may be able to raise awareness of your findings and use those findings to create concrete changes. In a restricted political space, it could be dangerous to publicize documents that are critical of the government.

Institutional Limitations

In some cases, there may be political will within the government to increase citizen participation in decision-making processes, but there may be institutional limitations. Government may not have the capacity to meet the needs of groups conducting political process monitoring. For instance, government officials may be unaware of public access to information laws, or local government agencies may not have the systems in place to provide information to the public. The capacity of government institutions should be examined before conducting any monitoring initiatives, otherwise you may become frustrated when you are not able to gain full access to the information you need.

You should also be aware of the government's ability to absorb monitoring findings and recommendations. Institutional problems, such as internal organizational issues or party politics, may limit the ability of government bodies to implement your recommendations. In such cases, both citizens and local government are likely to become frustrated and see political process monitoring activities as ineffective, even when these recommendations are based on well-documented evidence and data. Being aware of these potential institutional limitations is important as you develop strategies for achieving your organization's goals.

Data Collection Methodology: How will you Collect your Data?

Once you have a monitoring project in mind, what is your strategy, methodology, and data collection plan? Will you primarily collect data and information through available government documents or will you be conducting firsthand data collection – maybe through interviews or direct observation? Will your data be qualitative, quantitative, or a mix? Will you have one data source or many?

These are important questions to ask of yourself and your team before you get started. This will help you identify and develop the most appropriate tools, and it will also help you map the possible data sources—government agencies and, if possible, the department or person you need to speak with to get official documents, observation locations, and key informants for interviews.

Most of these questions will depend on the type of monitoring you are doing. Here is a handy chart to help you think through where to find your data and what data collection tools you may want to use.

Type of monitoring	Data source	Tool
Legislative monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official documents (agendas, minutes, draft legislation, etc.) • Observer reports • Key informant interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checklists • Observer forms • Interview questionnaires
Budget monitoring ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official documents (budgets, financial statements, audit reports, etc.) • Observer reports • Key informant interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checklists • Observer forms • Interview questionnaires
Campaign monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official documents (budgets, financial statements, audit reports, etc.) • Observer reports • Media reports • Key informant interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checklists • Observer forms • Interview questionnaires • Pledge cards

¹ As a reminder, budget monitoring can also encompass *service delivery monitoring*. For more information specifically on service delivery monitoring, please refer to Nabz-Iran's online course "[Service Delivery Monitoring: How to Hold Government Accountable](#)" or to the related "[Service Delivery Monitoring Pocket Guide](#)".

Type of monitoring	Data source	Tool
Policy implementation monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official documents (budgets, financial statements, audit reports, etc.) • Observer reports • Media reports • Key informant interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checklists • Observer forms • Interview questionnaires
Shadow reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official documents (budgets, financial statements, audit reports, etc.) • Observer reports • Media reports • Key informant interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checklists • Observer forms • Interview questionnaires

Whatever tools you decide to use, you will want to ensure that you have clear instructions for your data collection teams and that all tools are standardized. This means that the same information is being collected across data sources. You may want to field test your tools before finalizing them to make sure they capture the exact information that you are looking for. Often, your first attempt isn't exactly right and you will need to revise and retest your tools a number of times before settling on a final version.

For example, the same information your monitoring teams are collecting through their direct observation forms of municipal council meetings should be the same broad information that is collected through key informant interview questions with council members. The questions might be worded slightly differently due to how you are collecting the information, but the data the question generates should be the same. This will help you eliminate any bias in your data.

Standardizing your data collection tools and processes (see next section) is a critical step. This will help you have credible analysis based on documented facts. If you do not put into place best practices in standardization and data management, you can jeopardize the effects of your hard work.

Data Management

Developing sound data management processes and procedures is an important part of your project. Establishing a data collection plan that includes clear, easily understandable instructions for your data collection team will help keep your data free from bias. At the same time, you won't be able to do any analysis if your data is corrupted, lost, or destroyed.

Data Collection Procedures

Before you begin collecting data for your monitoring project, you should create something easy to understand for everyone involved in your project—your staff, volunteers, and analysts. This includes instructions on how each tool should be used, what types of information you are expecting each tool to capture, guidance on 'digging further' should a respondent not understand the question being asked, and a standard introduction that every data collector leads off with.

You should also establish procedures for how your monitors (or data collection teams) will send the information back to you. Will they send data via mobile phone, SMS, Internet, or fax? It is also a good practice to provide guidance to your monitors on how frequently you expect data to come back—hourly, daily, weekly?

You will also want to determine who will input data into your central hub. Will this be one person or many people? How many people you will need will be dependent on the size of your monitoring effort. Regardless of the number of data entry staff, a best practice is to have at least one data manager to oversee the data entry process. This can help ensure that all the data that comes into the central hub is complete.

Securing Data—Data Management Plans

Once you have your data collection tools finalized, you will want to create a centralized spot for all of the raw data. This may be in a database or in some other organized fashion. Determine what is easiest and most efficient for you—in terms of data collection from your monitors but also for analysis.

Once you have your central hub established, you will want to develop procedures to secure your data. A best practice is to have your data stored in more than one location should there be a fire, theft, or flood, or should the electronic files be corrupted. You may

Securing data is a broad topic and requires a treatment that is outside the scope of this manual. You can find further information about this in Nabz-Iran's [course on Digital Security](#), specifically in [Lesson 3: Storing Data Securely](#).

decide to keep a paper file in a safe in a secure location. You may decide to have several backup electronic files saved on flash drives or in the cloud. It is up to you to determine the best method, but having at least one backup of your master file is a best practice.

Data Validation

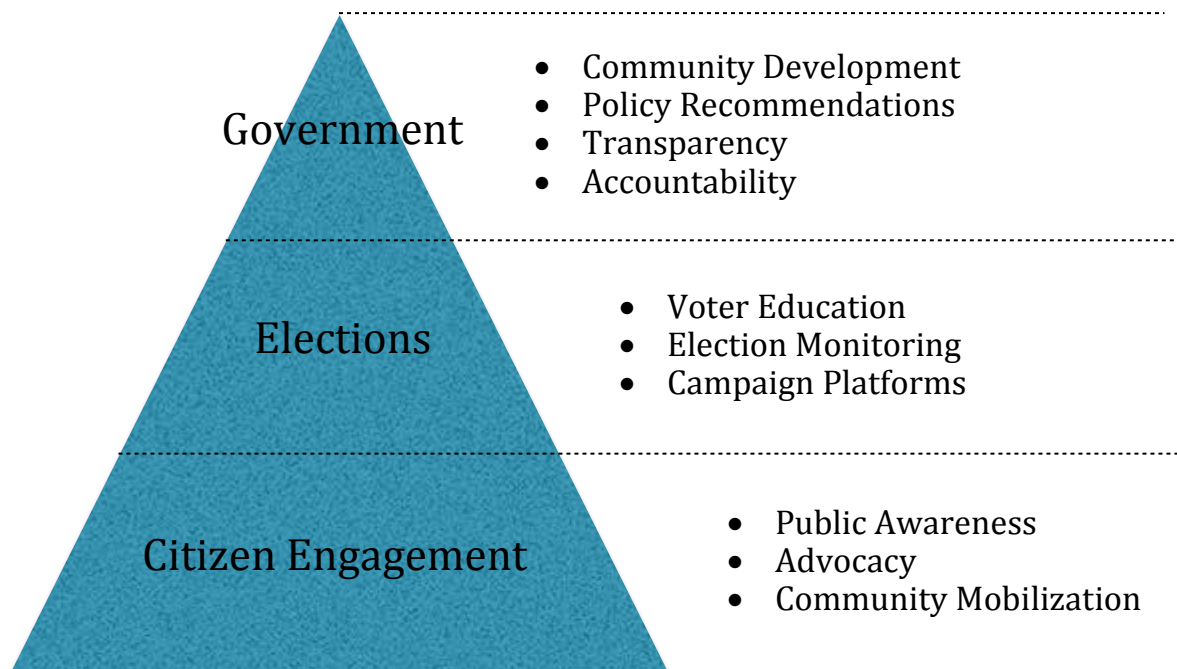
Because of the risks mentioned earlier, you will want to establish a data validation process. This can take many forms but often, the most controversial data may need to be checked against multiple sources or verified by a second monitor.

Using the Data for Action

The data you have collected through your monitoring initiatives can be used for a variety of purposes. For example, data can be an input for your monitoring, or a tool to help you better understand the current situation and analyze processes. But data could also be the product of your work, to be presented at the end of your monitoring efforts. You may wish to publish the collected data to share with government officials or the public, in the form of a raw dataset, or you could use it to draw a bigger picture of what is happening.

Conclusions formed from reliable data can help community development efforts, inform policy recommendations, or make processes more transparent and authorities more accountable. Data as evidence provides a more concrete basis for your stories and analysis, and advocates can use it to raise public awareness as well as to mobilize the community. Data can be managed and kept up-to-date over time to demonstrate trajectories and trends along the processes being monitored.

Quick snapshots of the ideas introduced in this guide are presented in this graphic. This is certainly not exhaustive and you are encouraged to check out the resources section to get an idea of all the different ways you can use your monitoring data for action.



Keep in mind that data is everywhere around you, and all you need to do is to find or collect the relevant data and use it—with the necessary permissions and through secure methods, of course.

Resources

This guide is intended to be an introduction to data and accountability. The following resources provide a more in-depth look into government accountability techniques and using data for action.

Political Process Monitoring: further explanations and sample tools

- National Democratic Institute: [Political-Process Monitoring: Activist Tools and Techniques](#)
- Nabz-Iran: [Service Delivery Monitoring: How to Hold Government Accountable](#) (online course)
- Nabz-Iran: [Budget Monitoring at the Local and National Level](#) (online course)

Using Data for Action: an in-depth look at evidence-based advocacy

- Nabz-Iran: [Using Data Effectively for Advocacy](#)
- JumpStart Georgia: [A Beginner's Primer for Data-Driven Advocacy](#)
- Peoples Action for Just and Democratic Governance: [Using Advocacy to Establish Accountability](#)