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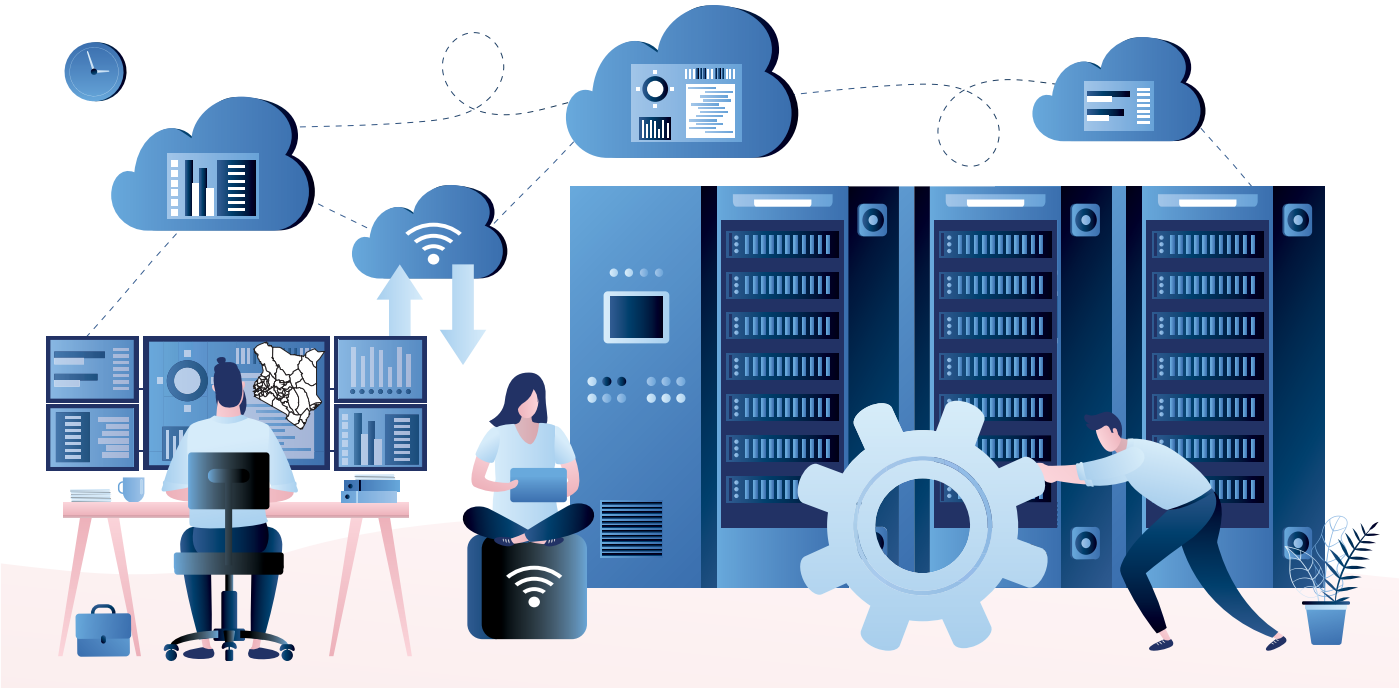
RESILIENCE LEARNING ACTIVITY

MAKING DATA SYSTEMS WORK FOR COUNTIES



Most counties in Kenya's nascent devolved system of governance are struggling with a range of challenges, not the least of which is to prioritize these challenges. It is only when these challenges are structured coherently that it will be possible for the administration to tackle them decisively and deliver services for their people. Sometimes that process may require massive resources, but resources are not always everything. With a greater degree of intelligence, it would be possible to harness existing knowledge to enable the administration to deliver on its pledges.

Today's buzzword in management and organizational administration is big data – large, cumulated volumes of structured but sometimes unstructured data. Data and the ability to manipulate it make a difference in the capacity of a county government administration to deliver services to its constituents in this age of knowledge abundance and Artificial Intelligence. It makes some counties operate at an optimum level, while others struggle with mundane execution in areas where they can do better.

At the heart of big data is the spread of technology, particularly on the internet, that has allowed for the gathering of massive amounts of data across sectors. It has also facilitated the storage and transmission of information across space and in real-time. There is data on almost any subject that one may be interested in. One may know where to search for this data, or the maze of the storage space may be too complicated and confusing for one to locate it. But the data is, in most cases, there. The question of critical importance is the use of this data to the average individual in the organization and, by extension, to the organization's communities.

The data may be of no use for people in an organization for a range of reasons. It could be that there is no knowledge in the organization of the existence of such data. If people do not know that there is data in the first place, then it is of no use to them. Sometimes people in the organization may be aware that the data is there but do not recognize its usefulness. It may be possible, too, not to know the use to which such data may be put. In such cases, an organization may operate, drawing from the existing data that may make it more challenging to deliver on its mandate when such a process could be significantly simplified. The ability of the county governments to execute their mandate in coordinating and monitoring could be hampered if relevant, timely, and accurate data is unavailable.

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2017 COUNTY DATA ASSESSMENT REPORT

A 2017 County data assessment report highlighted significant findings at the county level as highlighted below:

Appreciation for data: There is an appreciation of the value of data in decision-making by politicians and technocrats in the counties, but there are no commensurate investments in robust data production systems to generate what counties need when they need it.

Limited skills: Most routine data collection happens at county and lower administrative levels; however, data processing (analysis and interpretation), dissemination, and use happen at the national level. Therefore, there is a concentration of skills for the initial stages of the data life cycle at the county level and limited skills for the latter stages, which is necessary for the leap from data to knowledge to action.

Data gaps: Data to adequately understand and respond to county development challenges is not readily available. Most data systems are not designed to support decision-making at the county level – whether in scope, coverage, or timeliness.

Incomplete data life cycle: The data life cycle is not completed: as the routine data is processed, often at the national level, it does not always flow back to the counties to inform local decision-making or further collection. The complete data life cycle must be replicated at every level.

Duplicated and uncoordinated efforts: There are many sub-optimal data production arrangements at the county level. A lack of coordination among data producers within the counties and no strategic framework to guide data production and use at the county level. There are multiple duplicative and uncoordinated data collection efforts in most counties, hence competition for limited resources that has led to sub-optimal use of existing expertise and a usurping of roles.

Unconnected data producers with users: There are no clear engagement mechanisms between data producers and end-users within counties. Other than routine data, there are no institutionalized mechanisms to guide data generation, knowledge translation, and evidence use.

Uneven distribution of skills: There is an imbalance in the skill sets available at the county level for all data life cycle functions. While some counties have sufficient data collection capacity, most lack capacity for processing and curating, with the most significant skills gaps in data dissemination and knowledge translation. In addition, counties have varied arrangements for units responsible for data, with some fairly well capacitated and others not.

More data needed: Most of the data available are about inputs. Data on processes, impact, and outcome are also needed.

Lack of clarity of roles: The roles of national data agencies are not clear to all county data teams, and there are no formalized mechanisms of engagement between the representatives of the national data agencies and the county units charged with data production and use.

County leaders who appreciate data will incorporate it into their management and thus create an environment that appreciates and utilizes data to deliver services. They will put in place an entire architecture from the equipment to capture and store data, its preservation, to mechanisms of retrieving it. It would be easy to avoid some repetitiveness, wastefulness, and operations in the dark. Emerging units of governance at the county level would find this reasonably helpful. It is indeed an area to be explored.

Despite the needs and gaps identified in the county data systems, clear opportunities exist to build on current counties' initiatives and partner with national and other data agencies to strengthen the data ecosystem. A couple of counties have established well-capacitated units and integrated data use in their planning cycles; others have strong partnerships with other data agencies.

A knowledge-sharing platform at COG - Maarifa Centre – is a critical building block for a support system for counties. At the same time, the Performance Management Framework for County Governments is a huge opportunity to strengthen institutional frameworks for integrating data and evidence use in decision making. In addition, the COG and counties can leverage existing tools for planning and performance monitoring that counties can harness in different socio-economic policy scenarios.

Moving forward, the critical considerations for counties when implementing development programs and initiatives will include having to;

- Optimal use of critical skills to assist all counties with the implementation of policies aligned to the priority areas.
- Streamline institutional frameworks for optimal data use.
- Improve use of existing data systems, and the data counties generate.
- Upgrade technology to improve county data management and processes, including data capture and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E).
- Move beyond M&E and data dissemination to decision support, performance management, accountability, and learning for adaptive programming.
- Mobilize government and donor technical, financial, and other support for counties aimed at delivery.

Given the devolved system of government, human capital investments must be strategically designed to work within that devolved system. It is the mandate of county governments to strengthen the performance and management of human capital investments to improve development outcomes for long-term economic growth.