

Open data in Finland - bottom up and middle out, but not yet from top down

Antti Poikola, HILA Open Ltd, Finland

Abstract

The re-use of public sector information or open government data, whichever term is used, has recently been under close attention both in Finland and in the European Union in general. This topic report summarises the state of debate and the state of actions, and briefly discusses some legal and practical issues in the area of making government data available for re-use in Finland.

Keywords

Finland, open data, innovation contest, data catalogue, policy

About the Author

Antti Poikola is a start-up entrepreneur and independent consultant at HILA Open Ltd. He is active and widely connected in eParticipation and "Open data" movements both in Finland and Europe. He was the main author of the "Public data – an introduction to opening the information resources" - guidebook¹ which was published by the Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communications. Before becoming a full time entrepreneur Antti worked as a researcher in media technology at Aalto University.

© 2010 European PSI Platform - This document and all material therein has been compiled with great care; however, the author, editor and/or publisher and/or any party within the European PSI Platform or its predecessor projects the ePSIplus Network project or ePSINet consortium cannot be held liable in any way for the consequences of using the content of this document and/or any material referenced therein. This report has been published under the auspices of the European Public Sector Information Platform.

The report may be reproduced providing acknowledgement is made to the European Public Sector Information (PSI) Platform.

The [European Public Sector Information \(PSI\) Platform](#) is funded under the European Commission [eContentplus programme](#).

1 Poikola, A., Kola, P., & Hintikka, K. A. (2010). *Julkinen data*. Publication of the Ministry of Transport and Communications. <http://www.julkinendata.fi/>.

Introduction

"More has happened in the last four months [in terms of change in attitudes towards opening up the public sector data resources] than I believed would happen in four years"

Jyrki J. Kasvi (Feb. 2010) - Member of the Finnish parliament

The general atmosphere for opening Public Sector Information (PSI) resources for re-users is positive in Finland. The discussion has become more coherent and integrated into the mainstream discussion on the development of the information society. Most importantly, it is starting to reach also the top level decision makers.

In spite of the general positive atmosphere and even some high level statements, progress in identifying PSI resources, opening new datasets and promoting - re-use is rather slow in Finland.

Most activity in this area is connected to the implementation of the Infrastructure for Spatial Information (INSPIRE) Directive 2007/2/EC. Other initiatives in the area of PSI re-use include the Apps for Democracy -innovation contests and ongoing data catalogue projects

A number of laws, directives and recommendations apply to public sector information and to publishing it. These include the freedom of information (FOI) legislation, privacy protection legislation, the act on the criteria for charging for public sector goods and services, copyright law, international recommendations and competition law.

None of these laws explicitly prevents opening up and re-using of government data, but unfortunately the current interpretation and practice doesn't support it either.

State of the debate: Reaching for high level political attention

The benefits of distributing government data resources more openly can roughly be divided into three categories: 1) *transparency and democracy*, 2) *innovation and business* and 3) *efficiency within the administration* (the public sector is the biggest re-user of public data). These benefit areas are widely accepted, but still the actual progress in opening the data resources has been painfully slow in Finland.

The Public Sector Information (PSI) directive 2003/98/EC had minimal effect in Finland². In 2005, a working group under the Ministry of Finance came to the conclusion that the existing national legislation in Finland already met the framework set out in the Directive. At that time, the political discussion about the re-use of public sector information resources was not very active.

However, the public debate around the topic has gained a lot of power during 2009 and 2010. The current situation in Finland reflects the developments driven by the global "open data" movement with visible initiatives like the data catalogues and application contests. The current movement could be named as a second wave in the discussion that has been going on for quite some time.

Characteristics of this second wave include enhanced public visibility of the topic and wider interest of civic groups and so called open data advocates. Even the terminology used in the debate is changing.

2 Corbin, C. (2008). Finland National Meeting
http://www.epsiplatform.eu/content/download/14947/187104/file/ePSIplusNationalMeeting_Finland_V1.pdf

Public Sector Information (PSI) means information resources collected, produced and held by the public sector. Recently in the discussion, the term open data is increasingly used to underline the machine readability of those information resources. For many re-users, the term open data also carries the notion of the data being made available completely free of charge and easily accessible without any signed contracts even by individual programmers.

Traditional PSI re-use lobbyists representing established industries are often not so enthusiastic about these requests of "free of charge" and "no signed contracts". For existing companies, it is often crucial to have contracts that guarantee the continuity of the data service and they think that it is ok to pay a reasonable price for that.

In Finland there has not been strong organized lobbying from the data re-use industry. The earlier PSI related debate has taken place mostly between public administrations and a few individual companies. It has also focused mostly on better internal information management within the public administration and potential economic benefits of the larger information markets. Recently, also the first mentioned argument "transparency and democracy" has gained more attention.

Now both the civil society and the private sector are seen as potential innovators and re-users of government data - civic groups, active individuals, scientific researchers, industry associations and some politicians are joining the second wave of the debate.

At the national level during 2009 and 2010, several governmental working groups were set up and high level statements made on reviewing the current legislation and practices related to public sector information.

- Ministry of Education and Culture - PSI in scientific research - a cross-sectoral project (May 2009 - December 2010)³
- Ministry of Transport and Communications - Enhancing access to public information with focus on general framework conditions and the demand side - a working group (February 2010 - December 2010)⁴
- Ministry of Finance - Access to public sector information and promotion of re-use with focus on public sector IT architecture and the supply side - a working group (February 2010 - December 2011)⁵
- Ministry of Finance - Interfaces to public sector base registries - a working group (February 2010 - December 2011)⁶

The National Audit Office has criticised that this many working groups under various ministries may be an inefficient way to deal with the topic.⁷ The functions and responsibilities related to public sector information of the various ministries seem to be unclear. Also the above mentioned three benefit areas have different importance in different ministries.

3 Ministry of Education and Culture (2010). Press release: Access to the national information resources should be enhanced....

http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Tiedotteet/2010/03/Tutkimuksen_tietoaineistot.html

4 Ministry of Transport and Communications (2010). Press release: Political decision is needed for opening public information resources.

<http://www.lvm.fi/web/fi/tiedote/view/1166185>

5 Ministry of Finance (2010). Project register entry: Access to public sector information and promotion of re-use. http://www.hare.vn.fi/mHankePerusSelaus.asp?h_iId=14220

6 Ministry of Finance (2010). Project register entry: Interfaces to public sector base registries. http://www.hare.vn.fi/mHankePerusSelaus.asp?h_iId=15360

7 National Audit Office (2010). Tarkastuskertomus 158/2008 Alueellisten tietoyhteiskuntahankkeiden toteutus. http://www.vtv.fi/files/2310/Jalkiseurantaraportti_tietoyhteiskuntahankkeet_julkaisu.pdf.

Hopefully the criticism proves to be wrong and the working groups manage to come up with strong policy recommendations also on harder technical, financial, legal and practical issues related to PSI re-use.

One strong message about the political will is an action point included in the Government's statement to the Parliament on the Government's programme - when the Prime Minister changed in June 2010.

"Information systems used in public administration will be harmonised as quickly as possible. ICT management in the public sector will be centralised and strengthened. The Government will give decisions which provide for the opening and availability of data in the possession of the public sector without compromising data security."

Statement from the Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi's Government Programme⁸

The national level debate is one thing, but of course, the real action towards opening the data sources takes place inside individual public organisations. The regional and local administrations have a very important role since significant amounts of public sector information is produced at this level of government. In the level of knowledge, awareness and attitudes related to PSI re-use, the variation between the individual organisations is immense.

State of actions: Building capacity

Data itself is not interesting for most of the people, including the politicians and civil servants. It is the real applications using government data that are noticed. Without data, however, it would be difficult to create solutions that prove the benefits.

The first Apps for Democracy Finland competition was arranged in 2009 with the goal of finding show cases and new uses for information provided by public administration. The competition followed the tradition of similar contests in many other countries. In Finland it seemed to have a positive impact in the discussion about re-using public sector information.

The contest as a concrete event brought different stakeholders together. The organisations and individuals (public institutions, companies, researchers and citizens) that were involved in the 2009 competition are still very much driving the movement of PSI reuse in Finland.

For example:

- (Co-organizer of the contest) the public service portal Suomi.fi is currently hosting and developing the Finnish data.gov style national data catalogue data.suomi.fi⁹
- (Sponsor of the contest) the Libraries.fi portal have just released the catalogue meta data of all 680 000 items that can be found in the Helsinki region (Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa and Kauniainen) City Libraries.¹⁰
- (Represented in the Jury) The Ministry of Transport and Communications has published a guidebook about open data for the public sector organizations.¹¹

8 Government Agenda (2010). Finland towards a consistent path to growth, employment and stability. Government Programme of Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi's Government. <http://www.valtioneuvosto.fi/hallitus/hallitusohjelma/pdf/en.pdf>

9 Suomi.fi. (2009). Finnish national data catalogue. Finnish service portal Suomi.fi. <http://www.data.fi>.

10 Libraries.fi. (2010). Catalogue meta data Helsinki region city libraries. <http://data.kirjastot.fi/>

11 Poikola, A., Kola, P., & Hintikka, K. A. (2010). *Julkinen data*. Publication of the Ministry of Transport and Communications. <http://www.julkinendata.fi/>

- (Co-organizer of the contest) Forum Virium Helsinki (a regional development organisation) is running the ambitious Helsinki Region Infoshare project.¹²
- (Winner of the apps contest idea category) Peter Tattersall is developing the TaxTree idea¹³ further and aiming to start a company.

These are just few indirect results of a rather small competition with 23 participants and a total of 13.000€ prize money. Many other groups and individuals who were involved are also continuing to contribute to the emergence and development of the Finnish open data ecosystem.

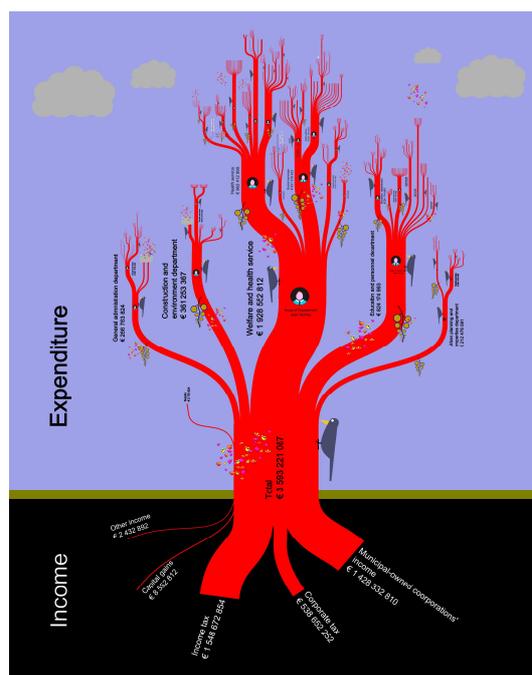


Illustration 1: The winner of the Ideas category in the Apps for Democracy Finland 2009 competition, Tax Tree by Peter Tattersall, visualises public administration budgeting with an easy-to-grasp tree metaphor. The roots of the tree represent budget income from different taxes. The tax money flows into the trunk of the tree and spreads to the branches that represent expenses. Finally the leaves and fruits are the achieved benefits from the public spending. The width of the roots and branches represent the amount of income and expenses.

The Apps for Democracy Finland competition had two categories: one for ideas and a second one for implemented applications. This was because of the fact that there are still not enough open datasets in Finland so that the competition could focus solely on the applications.

12 Forum Virium Helsinki (2010). Helsinki Region Infoshare.
<http://www.forumvirium.fi/en/project-areas/smart-city/helsinki-region-infoshare>.

13 Tattersall, P. (2009). The Tax Tree (presentation). Slideshare.
<http://www.slideshare.net/ptatters/tax-tree>

During the past year numerous data catalogues around the world have been launched. Most well known ones are the national level catalogues in UK and USA. Also many regional, citywide, thematic and independently run catalogues are up and running already and many more initiatives are under development.

A question raised by all this catalogue development work is how the interoperability of the different data catalogues could be achieved so that the national, regional and independent catalogues could produce together a universal, but distributed open government data catalogue. In Europe the issues of data catalogue interoperability was discussed in the ePSIplus Network "towards a pan-European PSI registry" meeting¹⁴ and more in the recent topic report by Rob Davies¹⁵.

In Finland there are currently four groups that are developing data catalogues for different purposes:

- The national data catalogue data.suomi.fi
- Helsinki Region Infoshare project is preparing to deploy a regional data catalogue and working to establish a clearing house concept to support a partnership between 14 municipalities in the capital region to harmonize and publish their information resources.
- The Finnish Network Democracy Association will soon launch a developer oriented independent catalogue which would include also metadata of known, but not yet open public sector data sources and also useful data outside of the public sector.
- The Semantic Computing Research Group (SECO) of Aalto University develops tools (including catalogue) to publish and re-use public sector data following the Linked Data concept.

Finland is in a good position to develop solutions for interoperability on the technical and practical level since the above mentioned four projects are being developed at the same time. All of these projects are independent, but the development goes on iteratively and in loosely coupled collaboration.

Challenges and bottlenecks

The Finnish FOI legislation requires that public documents are open, but does not say anything about the technical and legal re-usability of the data. The Act on Criteria for Charges Payable to the State (150/1992) stipulates that in many cases, there is a charge for the use of public sector data.

Finland has a long history of freedom of information (FOI) legislation, which dates back to the world's first FOI legislation adopted by the Swedish parliament in 1766, when Finland was part of Sweden.¹⁶

Finland's FOI regulation has on a number of occasions been referred to as an example of good practice. However, Treating PSI re-use as an extension of freedom of information issue has not led to significant progress in actual opening up of the public sector data resources.

14 Green, B. (2009). Thematic Meeting Report PSI Asset Registers: towards a pan-European PSI registry
http://www.epsiplatform.eu/psi_library/reports/epsiplus_thematic_psi_re_use_meeting_reports_2006_to_2009/information_management_standards_meeting_3_report

15 Davies, R (2010). PSI Portals: Overview of Progress (Part 1)
http://www.epsiplatform.eu/topic_reports/topic_report_no_8_psi_portals_overview_of_progress_part_1

16 Mustonen, J. (2006). The World's First Freedom of Information Act. Anders Chydenius Foundation (p. 103). Anders Chydenius Foundation. http://www.access-info.org/documents/Access_Docs/Thinking/Get_Connected/worlds_first_foia.pdf

In practice, most organisations make the information in their databases available on their websites or as publications and documents, but they do not publish the data itself. The distribution of *data* is often neglected, while organisations focus on fulfilling their obligations to publish *documents*.

In many cases, the decision of publishing a dataset openly falls in between the traditional roles and responsibilities of officials within public sector organisations. Those who technically understand opening data sources (the IT department) are typically not authorised to make decisions about the content, those who are usually responsible for publishing information (the communications department) may not understand at the first hand how publishing data in legally and technically re-usable form differs from publishing documents on the organization's web portal.

Conclusions

The author of the topic report from Norway, Olav Anders Øvrebø said that the Scandinavian countries are potential open data champions. His comment is based on the favourable conditions including good quality public registries, long history in transparent governance and the FOI legislation. I must agree with this positive view about the potential, but at the same time admit that the potential is still far from being fulfilled in Finland.

During 2009 and 2010 we have been witnessing in Finland as in many other countries newly raised awareness of the possibilities offered by public sector data. I call this open data movement as the second wave in the discussion on the access to and re-usability of public sector information.

Better public visibility of the topic, including the international examples of data catalogues, applications and innovation contests has boosted the debate and activity in Finland. The open data ecosystem is getting more powerful and more people from politicians to public administrators, entrepreneurs and active citizens are joining forces.

In order to raise public and political interest in opening the data resources it is crucial to see the potential of PSI from wider societal and democratic perspective rather than merely from the economic "open information market" -perspective.

On the other hand, the needed decisions, which will change the funding models of some public organizations and division of labour between public and private actors will need a solid economic case.

It may be that the current wave of public enthusiasm will pass before the real benefits of open public data appear. Hopefully the debate which has started and actions are strong enough to cause permanent structural changes so that the social, democratic and economic benefits will be seen in the future.