
Data-Related Challenges of Non-Profit Organizations Focused on Human Rights Violations in Mexico

Adriana Alvarado Garcia

Indiana University, IUPUI
Indianapolis, IN
adrialva@iupui.edu

Lynn Dombrowski

Indiana University, IUPUI
Indianapolis, IN
lsdombro@iupui.edu

Abstract

In this position paper, we argue that to design tools for underserved populations, we need to identify the mechanisms developed by the communities themselves to overcome their own challenges, including organizations working from within the community. By identifying their solutions, we learn how they understand their problems and how they would like problems to be addressed. By partnering with communities and organizations, we work with them to design solutions that may help empower this population. We have been working with social change-oriented non-profit organizations (NPOs) focused on human rights violations (HRVs) in Mexico. In our empirical work, we first identified the challenges that NPOs face when dealing with conflicting public data. Second, we identify and classify the information practices with which the NPOs engage when addressing these challenges.

Introduction

Many nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are social change-oriented in that they work towards producing change focused on social concerns like sexism, racism, and other forms of marginalization. These organizations often use public data in their work in different ways in order to

work towards actionable outcomes, including using data to persuade people about the urgency or existence of issues, collecting data when there is conflicting or a lack of data, and so on. In our study, we learned that NPOs experience challenges in translating their data into actionable insight, including resource constraints and unavailable or untrustworthy data, which we will discuss in this paper. In our study, we interviewed fifteen NPOs working to end HRVs in Mexico, in this context we refer to the drastic increment in the murder rates, disappearances, and torture [4]. We recruited researchers, collaborators, and volunteers working in NPOs, human rights organizations and non-profits located in Mexico City and the states of Guerrero, Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas, and Durango, which are all states with high rates of HRVs. Our qualitative interview-based study focused on their access and use of public data, how they work to address social issues, and how they used public data to engage communities towards certain actions (i.e., awareness of HRVs; calling politicians to change policies and law, and so on). Mexico is an ideal place to study such issues because of its low reliability to collect and publish public data and reduced civic participation [4, 2].

In our empirical findings, we learned that these NPOs have several data-related challenges that pervade their ability to work towards meaningful outcomes. Here, we present their challenges, including a lack of data, conflicting data, and obstacles gathering, requesting, and accessing public data that have not been published.

In what follows, we will briefly outline how data issues present key design challenges for NPOs working with marginalized populations. Supporting NPOs working towards social change for marginalized populations is an

important way to foster social change as it focuses on building capacity via a “design from” [1] approach, which focuses on those who experience oppression.

Data Related Challenges

NPOs collect and integrate public data to help identify the scale and propagation of HRVs. Such data also helps them to decide where to allocate resources and how to evaluate the effectiveness of previous interventions. As a result of our interviews, we identified the three major data-related challenges that these NPOs face when dealing with public data in Mexico:

Lack of Data:

In Mexico, there are a number of crimes that are not being officially registered by any government agency. Thus, there is a fundamental lack of data regarding certain crimes. Some of the most relevant crimes that are not documented are: crimes against journalists, human rights defenders, sexual crimes against children, mass graves and, extrajudicial and arbitrary executions. Many of our participants informed us that since there were no official data they were forced to collect their own data.

P13: But about human rights defenders, there is not a national-level record of assaults, not even homicides, there is no one keeping a record. Supposedly, the secretary of human rights was going to start to make a national registry of aggressions against human rights defenders but we have not seen anything yet.

P5: There are no official figures on homicide committed by public servants, in Mexico it does not exist. And what we have is like a whole compendium of statistics of

executions, which we have drawn from conclusions of Human Rights reports, but those are estimated numbers.

Conflicting Data:

Data conflicts when different data sets give vastly different reports on recorded crimes. There are two main official sources that report data on homicides in Mexico. The first source is The National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), a government agency that provides public health records on death, in which the officials identify the cases of homicides and other violent forms of death. The second source is the National Public Security System (SNSP), which provides data from criminal investigations by law enforcement. The main difference between these agencies is that data published by INEGI is based on the number of bodies, while the data from SNSP is based on the number of cases of homicides *investigated* by law enforcement. These homicide accounting discrepancies in the last four years resulted in 8 to 22% difference. For example in the data from 2014, there is a difference between both databases of 21.77%, while in the data of 2015 there is a difference of 8.89% [3, 5]. These discrepancies make it difficult for these organizations to know the depth of the problems.

Obstacles Gathering Data:

We found that most of the organizations faced complications when requesting unpublished governmental data. The most common complications are either it takes long periods of time to the government to allow access to data or the government denies access without explanations.

P8: As a researcher, I have to gather data from all possible sources, so, there are cases where I have to ask for certain data because they are not on the web pages.

But I know that any request of information will take me two or three months, and if they do not want to give the information I [will] have to go to other kind process.

Another common obstacle is the removal of public databases or that organizations no longer collect the data. For example, drug-related homicides were collected and published by the Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) from 2000 to 2008. In 2008, the government stop publishing the data, citing that the data was methodologically difficult to compile [2].

Another database that was removed happened in the transition of former president Felipe Calderon to the current president Enrique Peña Nieto. During Calderon's presidency, the government gathered and published the number of drug-related civilian homicides. However, at the beginning of Peña Nieto's term, the government stopped publishing those numbers and erased the database.

P5: The databases were deleted, only some of us took the precaution of storing the databases, and that's how we can keep some [data] without access, but the databases are no longer there.

Working with data challenges:

These organizations are well aware of these challenges and actively try to address them. These practices include: a) collecting quantitative data from different sources, systematize them and generate independent databases, b) work closely with the victims and collect qualitative data, c) connect with other organizations across the country to share independent databases.

P4: What we are trying to do is basically field work in the community itself, from the community itself, always evaluating and analyzing the context of the communities [...] Our work focus on explain to the community of the mountain in Guerrero what are the processes, the legal tools [they have] to demand their rights, why is it important that they organize themselves, why is important that they stay together, that everyone knows the information to do it.

P9: What we are trying to do is to have contact with people from other agencies and also work in networks connecting with other organizations [...] Connect with the senators or deputies with whom we have contact or affinity and these are some strategies of incidence.

Discussion and Conclusion

Both in the process of design artifacts that encourage social action, and the NPOs' work it is helpful to incorporate public data to recognize the magnitude of social issues and their effect in certain populations. Therefore, the type of public data, its level of accuracy and the context in which it was collected, affect how well the magnitude and scale of social issues are recognized and ultimately deciding the best path to addressing them.

In this respect, most of the research that has been conducted between civics and technology has been done in places where there is already a strong development of public data and platforms that exploited them. However, there is still little work on how data may trigger civic action in developing countries. Therefore, there is an understudied area on how data could help to encourage civic action, specifically, in constrained contexts where public data are not always available and legitimate.

Given the issues identified from the fifteen interviews, we learned that despite the limitations these NPOs face when dealing with public data, they have found a major strength when collaborating with their local communities and other organizations. However, they still have troubles even when working closely with their target population. These troubles are mostly related to their own limitations and constraints as organizations working in a country with low reliability to collect and publish public data.

We propose a design approach focus on supporting and improving the information practices that the NPOs have been developing. We believe that by strengthening their resources to communicate and associate with their local communities and other organizations they may be able to extend their impact and reach their goals.

References

1. Heeks, R. ICT4D 2.0: The Next Phase of Applying ICT for International Development. *IEEE Computer*, 41(6), 26–33.
2. Heinle, K., Molzahn, C., and Shirk, D. Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis through 2014. *Justice in Mexico*. Retrieved October 21, 2016, from: <https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2015-Drug-Violence-in-Mexico-final.pdf>
3. INEGI National Institute of Statistics and Geography. Dataset: Deaths for homicides. Retrieved December 14, 2016, from: <http://www.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/olap/proyectos/bd/continuas/mortalidad/defuncioneshom.aspx?s=est>
4. Open Society Foundations: Undeniable atrocities: Confronting crimes against humanity in Mexico. Retrieved October 21, 2016, from:

<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/undeniable-atrocities-confronting-crimes-against-humanity-mexico/es>

5. SEGOB Secretariat of government: Figures of intentional homicide, kidnapping, extortion and robbery of vehicles 1997-2016. Retrieved October 21, 2016, from: http://www.secretariadoejecutivo.gob.mx/docs/pdfs/cifras%20de%20homicidio%20doloso%20secuestro%20etc/HDSECEXTRV_112016.pdf