

Advancing Good Governance Seminar

June 13, 2014 – 10:30-11:30am

Big Data: Threats and Opportunities for Advancing Democracy and Transparency

This session explored the role of so-called “Big Data” in advancing international development and society more generally. The session: (1) attempted to define Big Data, (2) identified the relevant actors, and (3) explored the opportunities and risks Big Data poses to those engaged in advancing international governance and the current balance among Big Data, transparency and privacy.

Key Points from the Session

- 1 Defining Big Data.** “Big Data” describes the proliferation of large, complex sets of digital data made possible by recent technological advancements and includes both the active generation of data (such as through a person’s internet search history or smart phone usage) and passive generation (such as through CCTV cameras using face recognition). Analysts have described the attributes of Big Data as the four Vs: (a) volume (the massive accumulation of Big Data); (b) velocity (the rate at which Big Data is being produced); (c) variety (the many different forms in which it is produced); and (d) veracity (the uncertainty surrounding its accuracy).
- 2 The actors.** Citizens often share their personal information with governments or corporations in exchange for services, including government services or social media applications (such as Facebook). Key concerns include whether the citizens are receiving a good bargain in exchange and whether their information is secure. Corporations have historically desired information about the citizenry from governments, but, increasingly, governments are attempting to extract information about citizens from corporations.
- 3 Big Data and international development.** Big Data presents opportunities for international development. If handled correctly, it has the potential to assist decision-making in areas such as healthcare, economic productivity, law and order, security and resource management. The publication of Big Data might also improve transparency, thereby helping to combat issues such as bribery and corruption in emerging economies. However, the use of Big Data in the international development field is not without its pitfalls: (a) the use of Big Data in developing countries may not be as heavily regulated as it is in more mature jurisdictions, presenting a risk that data may be mishandled or misappropriated, even by well-intentioned governments; and (b) developing countries may lack the infrastructure and capacity to effectively safeguard and maintain Big Data, potentially exposing this data to actors with nefarious purposes.

Emerging Questions

- 1** How can we best harness Big Data in the developing world, particularly given the associated risks to privacy and the fact that those governments are often weak and unable to protect their citizenry? What assistance can we provide to developing nations in order to enable them to use this information effectively?
- 2** How does Big Data – and the knowledge that everything said or done could be recorded – affect innovation and social interaction?