

Reducing open government data asymmetries in the Global South: a perspective from Latin America

Lucía De Zan, Natalia Aquilino, and Emiliano Arena

Key messages



High-quality open government data (OGD) strengthens transparency and vertical accountability. The result is improved decision-making and citizens' enhanced trust in state institutions, which are crucial to reach a 'renewal of the social contract,' as proposed in the UN Secretary-General's our common agenda (OCA) report.



Data collected in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico revealed that the quality of OGD regarding the spread of the COVID-19 virus varied among national and subnational governments across the region (in terms of accessibility, timeliness, disaggregation, and reusability) due to the lack of standardised criteria and variations in state capacities for the collection, systematisation and publication of data.



Overall, Argentina and Mexico national states performed better than the average of their subnational counterparts, while Brazil experienced the opposite. The analysis showed that these governments had a better performance on data accessibility and timeliness than they did in terms of data reusability and disaggregation.



Attaining established OGD standards may not be possible for governments that do not have the infrastructure needed to collect, systematise, and publish information. Enhancing multilateral collaboration to develop open data frameworks is crucial to achieving standardisation in information publication.



To strengthen trust in governments and institutions, it is crucial to maintain high standards of integrity in OGD. Standardised and rigorous data monitoring and evaluation by external bodies need to be pursued to ensure integrity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed economic and social inequalities across the world and exposed the vulnerabilities and fragilities of nation-states. In the Global South, the public response to related challenges has been insufficient. Many factors could explain this, including absence of governmental planning, weak public management, poor information management, and lack of evidence-based decision-making. This weak response to the crisis elevated the public's loss of confidence in their public institutions and political leadership. Moreover, the achievements of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been further diverted, less than a decade away from their intended realisation (United Nations, 2021).

In this context, the UN Secretary-General launched Our Common Agenda (OCA) as a call to action designed to strengthen and accelerate the implementation of existing agreements, including the SDGs, building on 12 commitment areas identified by member states in the UN75 Declaration. Leaders from various sectors have become cognisant of their shared weaknesses and the interconnection between their sectors. Therefore, to emerge from this crisis, it is crucial to reinforce the importance of multilateralism and the inclusion of actors such as youth and thought leaders, UN member states, civil society, etc. (United Nations, 2021). In facilitating this interconnectedness, the importance of high-quality open government data cannot be overlooked. The OCA report highlights the need for a global code of conduct promoting integrity in public information and its relevance in delivering global public goods (United Nations, 2021).

Making government data available to all is a keystone in improving public transparency and accountability. 'A renewal of the social contract,' as it is termed in the OCA report, implies enhancing public confidence in institutions. Not only do citizens have a right to access public information, but also, in doing so, they can understand, judge, and make demands to their representatives about government processes and decision-making. Open data allows ordinary people to be more involved in policymaking, which enables greater civic participation in public affairs. This is crucial for improving public trust in governments and international institutions. Furthermore, having timely access to quality data that is properly collected and processed is essential to making policy decisions that have an impact on citizens' wellbeing. This is particularly important for improving health security and preparedness for future crises. As well as epidemiological information, all data records that helped inform social, health, educational, and economic policies have been vital to addressing complex issues during the pandemic. Public institutions produce and commission immense quantities of data and information. Fostering their systematisation through integrated information systems could

enable the use of this knowledge as assets for faster decision-making. Furthermore, having quality data available allows the production of impact evaluations of policy interventions, as shown in one study in Barrio Mugica, a slum in Buenos Aires, which analysed the city's strategy in containing COVID-19 using available data (Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth [CIPPEC], 2020a). Open data also strengthens a government's preparedness to confront crises, as they often must create new structures and systems to collect and disseminate information to the public. Having these institutions already in place before the arrival of a crisis may be crucial for a faster and more effective response.

This policy brief attempts to understand in more depth how different countries, at the national and subnational levels, have published information related to the development of the COVID-19 pandemic over time, and present generalised conclusions and recommendations to improve OGD in federal countries of Latin America. First, we present our case studies (Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico) and the OGD principles that are being compared among them and measured: accessibility, disaggregation, timeliness, and reusability. Second, we measure each country's performance at the national and subnational levels: i) by comparing each country's performance amongst the other case study countries and ii) by comparing the performance of each case study country at the national and subnational level against a high performing federal country of the Global North—in this study, being Canada. In doing this, we identified different government strategies and challenges. Lastly, we aim to address some of the main issues surrounding the transparency of governments, as well as their direct impact on some key points underscored in the OCA report, by providing policy recommendations for reducing OGD asymmetries.

■ OGD asymmetries in the Global South: The case of federal countries in Latin America

At CIPPEC, we have analysed and proposed ideas and public policies to prevent, mitigate, and manage the political, economic, and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020. In particular, we have been researching how the political debate regarding COVID-19 has placed the importance of the production and dissemination of quality public information at a global level. In Latin America, states generated and used public information and data to inform epidemiological evolution and to justify prevention, containment, and reduction measures (such as preventive and compulsory social isolation).

In our first analysis, in May 2020, CIPPEC examined what the national and subnational governments from Argentina were doing regarding the

issue of producing data, as well as how information was being presented publicly. We sought to find the data portals where COVID-19 information was being published, both at national and subnational levels, in order to find similarities and differences in the quality of information (CIPPEC, 2020b). However, we found some deficiencies such as delays in loading, duplication of records, lack of precision in reading the data, and a lack of syntactic and semantic standardisation.

This brief compares three Latin American countries—Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico—to better understand existing OGD asymmetries among governments and propose actions needed for future improvement. We chose to focus on federal countries as they may present more challenges in gathering and systematising information from subnational governments due to coordinating obstacles between them and the national government. However, by focusing on more decentralised systems, which may encounter these issues more frequently, we can also extrapolate and apply the findings and recommendations to centralised states.

As stated in the previous section, an underlying idea in this analysis is that OGD is a crucial resource to foster confidence in institutions and improve a nation's preparedness to respond to crises. In order to do so, we propose an ideal for information that involves publishing data on public websites and whose data fulfil certain quality standards. To assess the latter, we measured the content being published in open data portals on their accessibility, disaggregation, timeliness, and reusability. The principles are defined as follows:

- **Accessibility:** Ensuring accessibility involves refining the user experience of consuming government data, e.g., by means of upgrading file formats, publication procedures, and ensuring high levels of data quality and interoperability. In essence, data accessibility is about making government data available to everyone and for all possible purposes. It must be easily discoverable and accessible, and made available without bureaucratic or administrative barriers that could deter people from accessing the data.
- **Disaggregation:** Standardised data disaggregation is vital to the assurance of interoperability, meaning the capability for users to simultaneously operate with more than one dataset and connect different sources of information in order to create a better understanding of a situation. Furthermore, it facilitates comparison when these resources have been produced by different governments or government sectors.

■ **Making government data available to all is a keystone in improving public transparency and accountability.** ■

- **Timeliness:** This, as a principle of open data, means ensuring that the information being published will be permanently active online and frequently updated so that users can trust its validity. In order to be released on a timely basis, OGD needs to be handled according to consistent information lifecycle management practices while ensuring that historical copies of datasets are preserved, archived, and kept accessible as long as they retain value.
- **Reusability:** OGD needs to be released in a manner that can be interpreted and re-interpreted by social actors. It should also be presented in structured and standardised formats to support interoperability, traceability, and effective reuse. The reusability principle stands for assuring data release in machine-readable, structured, and non-proprietary formats (e.g., CSV and JSON), and being free of charge, with open licenses¹. The release of open data in formats and procedures that make reuse extremely difficult or impossible can be viewed as a form of 'openwashing' (Open data Barometer, 2016), which means an intention of appearing to be offering open information to the public but not complying with one of its basic standards, such as reusability.

With the COVID-19 pandemic affecting countries across the world, a common understanding arose around the value of measuring and collecting data, and then placing it at the disposal of every citizen through public data portals. However, every government approached this differently according to their specific capabilities and standards, leading to a multiplicity of structures in which governments displayed information on the pandemic's development. In this context, the Open Data Charter developed a COVID-19 data taxonomy, which has been made available to governments who want to take it into consideration for their own data portals, with the clear objective of promoting more standardisation across countries (Open Data Charter, Development Bank of Latin America, & Sustainable Development Center, 2021). The structure presented at the Open Data Charter was also a reference point taken into account in this policy brief.

The findings presented in this policy brief draw upon the COVID-19 data collection and analysis conducted by CIPPEC across Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico in 2021. Canada was used as a reference point, given that it is a developed federal state from the Global North with a long history of involvement in the open government partnership (OGP) initiative, and it is currently the country with the best score on the Open Data Barometer, alongside the United Kingdom (Open Data Barometer, 2021).

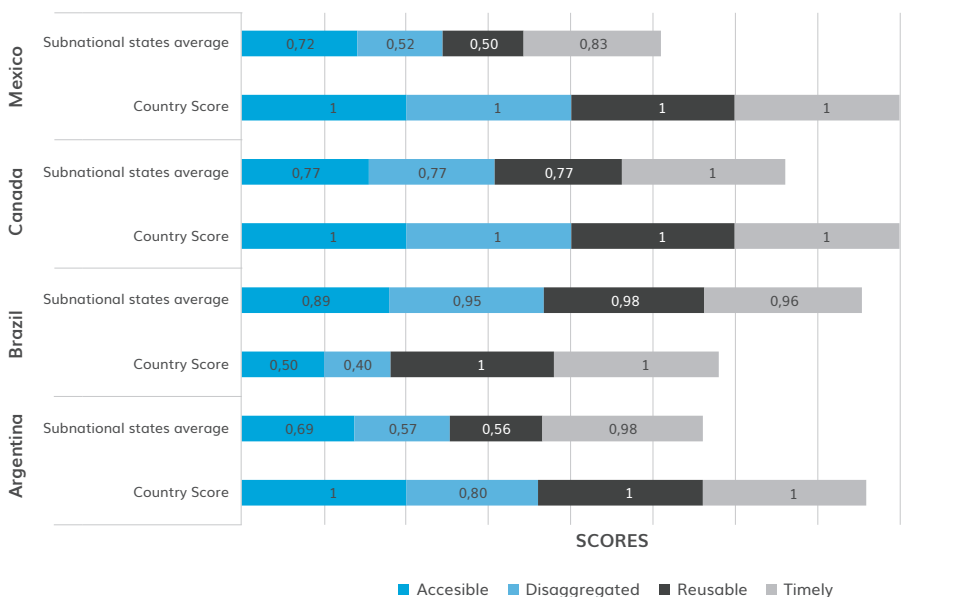
¹ Given the general delay on open data standards, we made a methodological choice while considering this aspect and decided that XLSX datasets would be considered in the same category as CSV or JSON archives.

Measuring COVID-19 OGD

As stated earlier, this policy brief attempts to understand in more depth how different countries, at the national and subnational levels, have published information related to the development of the COVID-19 pandemic over time, and present generalised conclusions and recommendations to improve OGD in the future. To do this, we analysed the websites where each country and each subnational government inside the aforementioned countries have their COVID-19 information published. We did this while considering the four principles described earlier, and developed an index composed of the average scores each page received on each one of the items under evaluation. Furthermore, we observed some particularities that contributed to a deeper understanding of what happens inside an open data portal. Throughout this analysis, we aimed to realise the differences between the Global North and the Global South by comparing these three Latin American countries with Canada. We then looked into potential disparities among the three states from the Global South, and what occurred at the subnational levels, whether the provinces did or did not follow the national government's example.

The results of the first part of this evaluation are summarised below in Figure 1. The figure shows a better performance of national levels against subnational ones for all four principles in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Canada. However, in the case of Brazil, the national level performs worse than the subnational (average) in terms of the accessibility and disaggregation of OGD. Subsequently, we shall examine the implications of the results of the study along each of the four overriding principles.

Figure 1. Country scores regarding OGD principles



Note. Original data elaborated by authors from diverse sources

Accessibility: For everyone and for all possible purposes

In regards to the accessibility principle, governments took one of three paths, which we present in descending order, starting with the most accessible:

1. Establishing a new website on which they published all or most of the information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic;
2. Leveraging existing health or government platforms by adding a COVID-19 section to publish this data and/or publishing-related news; or
3. Using official social media platforms to publish information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic

Table 1 below illustrates how each country performed on this principle. Canada, Argentina, Mexico, and most subnational governments (52.1%) opted to establish a new website. This was expected given the impact of the pandemic and the increased demand for information from citizens. The national government of Brazil and 40.4% of the subnational governments studied chose to publish COVID-19 news on the existing websites of their governments or health departments. Finally, the remaining 7.5% used social media to inform its citizens about the evolution of the disease, new measures, etc.

■ **Table 1. Accessibility measurements of national and subnational governments**

Unit of Analysis	New website on COVID-19	Existing health/government website	Social media platforms
Canada	1	-	-
Brazil	-	1	-
Argentina	1	-	-
Mexico	1	-	-
National total	75%	25%	-
Canada (subnational average)	7	6	0
Brazil (subnational average)	18	5	2

Argentina (subnational average)	9	15	0
Mexico (subnational average)	15	12	5
Subnational total	52.1%	40.4%	7.5%

As noted earlier, the pandemic has been an extreme circumstance, which, among other things, prompted an impressive but also unprecedented demand for data. Citizens desired to understand what was happening, why strict measures were being implemented, what their governments were doing, and how the situation was evolving. Public information was needed to create transparency but also to legitimise the decisions taken by states. As a result, governments took steps to make COVID-19 data accessible to all. As states have now shown some capability in providing high-quality open data, they should be required to do so for other sectors, such as health (besides COVID-19), security, public finances, etc.

The world is now aware that even in extreme crisis situations, governments are capable of establishing open data portals. It can be observed that states differ in their capacity to do so and that there is a need to adhere to a unified standardisation. In this sense, publishing information should not be the end goal but the starting point for a broader, deeper discussion about what information should and needs to be published, and how it should be done. In analysing the three remaining principles, we try to address these issues.

Disaggregation: For interoperability and better analyses

We evaluated the disaggregation of the dataset of COVID-19 cases in four categories: sex, age, region, and hospitalisation. According to the data, Argentina and Mexico scored higher and closer to Canada than Brazil. Argentina and Mexico had a perfect score in this category, while Brazil was missing information specified by sex and age.

The average disaggregation score of Canadian provinces is 0.77, which is lower than its perfect national score of 1. On the opposite side, Brazil's states performed better overall than the national government, which received a score of 0.40, presenting an average score of 0.95. Lastly, in Mexico and Argentina, even though some states had published disaggregated information in all the variables under analysis, the tendency was the opposite, achieving averages below 0.60 on both the country and state levels. The differences between these web pages are extensive.

The disparities include not only the structure of the web pages per se, but the graphs, tables, and key performance indicators (KPIs) presented had no visible commonalities. For example, while on one website, the government reported disaggregated information on accumulated, active, and hospitalised cases and deaths, another one analysed active cases and deaths using different variables, and simply presented the total numbers of accumulated cases and hospitalisations.

As researchers, we desire to see the publishing of quality information, not just raw information with no value. Data disaggregation must have a purpose, and every variable must tell us something valuable. This should be established via thorough investigation and, most importantly, be agreed upon and produced collaboratively by utilising as many government sectors and levels as possible. From the start, it is vital to have data collected and registered with these disaggregation levels, which would allow for standardised publication at a later stage.

Timeliness: To enhance the validity of information

The ideal regularity of data updates varies depending on the specificities of every case, with varying needs and capacities for recollecting and uploading new information. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic calls for information to be renewed as frequently as possible. Consequently, we gave perfect scores to portals with daily update frequency or one day shorter than weekly updates; a middle score to those updating weekly; and the lowest scores were given to portals that updated information less than once a week or had discontinued publication. Both the national and subnational government levels achieved their best results in the timeliness category. 100% of the federal governments and 90% of the subnational governments that were reviewed, updated their COVID-19 data daily or on a less than a weekly time frame.

With the spread of a new, dangerous, and very contagious disease being continuously monitored, having valuable information open to every person affected by the pandemic is a priority. However, this makes one ponder why these apparent capabilities of governments to collect and publish information are not utilised in other sectors. A quick and simple examination of open data portals reveals how outdated many datasets are. Some data portals examined had not been updated for years.

Reusability: For broad social engagement

In this regard, all the national governments in this study are aligned, having downloadable datasets containing cases per row and columns with various characteristics (such as the date when the symptoms began, test result, current situation, hospitalisation, and demographic

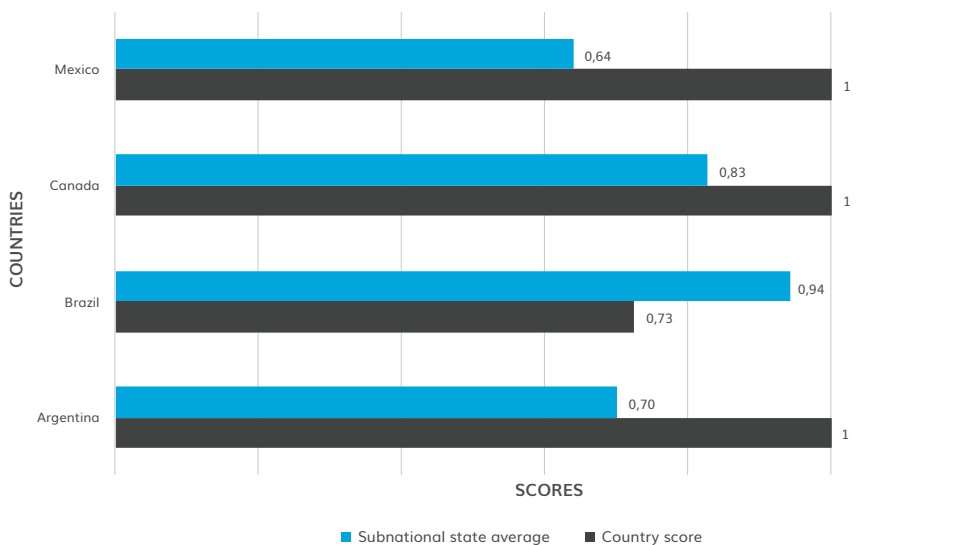
information). Observing the subnational governments, the differences increased. Common trends were found in two groups of countries: Canada and Brazil, with an average score of 0.77 and 0.98, respectively, in this principle for their provinces; and Mexico and Argentina's provinces average scores of 0.50 and 0.56, respectively, in each level of government.

The level of disaggregation and the number of variables these datasets were presented with is highly variable not only between different states but also in comparison with other publications by the same governments. Reusability is required in order to allow citizens to reconstruct the information that governments have utilised and to conduct their own analysis. However, if there is no common structure through datasets—regardless of the open license on which they are published—it would be impossible actually to use it. In this sense, the 'pandemic data cards' (Open Data Charter et al., 2021) promote the importance of using some kind of ID variable that links datasets and commonly used geographical codes.

■ Additional differences and lack of standardisation

Through this analysis, we could measure the extent to which many governments shared information about the COVID-19 pandemic with their citizens. Some practices, such as creating websites or publishing and constantly updating reusable datasets, are common across governments. However, besides the differences already described, there are other outstanding issues that we came across while navigating the different web portals, which should be taken into account to better understand the situation around COVID-19 open data.

■ **Figure 2. Countries index scores of national versus subnational governments**



Note. Original data elaborated by authors from diverse sources.

First, based on the pandemic data cards recommendations (Open Data Charter et al., 2021), we looked for any kind of structure or implied standardisation at the national level to observe if they adhere to the example of countries from the Global North, and at the subnational level with the national state as a reference. In these Latin American countries, subnational governments do not seem to adhere to the example of their national governments, while in Canada, many subnational governments have been definitively influenced by the structure of their national counterparts. These influences include utilising the same software to publish interactive dashboards with the data and performing analysis based on the same variables. In the case of Brazil, the provinces did adhere to the national government's steps, with a notable spread of data panels and some variables being shared across them, such as cases by race and detailed analyses of SARS patients. As we observed earlier, Mexico's subnational governments had an average score far below the national counterparts in general. However, it is worth noting that most of them stated in their open data portals that the information came from the country's data sources.

Second, noticeable differences can be observed in other areas that revolve around how the information is published, in terms of the level of explanation about each variable, methodological descriptions on how they were constructed, the data sources they came from, and even the detail and level of analysis of more comprehensive reports. While appealing panels with multiple graphs and charts are a very engaging way of presenting information, governments need to consider the importance of the content, its source, what each variable represents, and include an explanation of the results. This may enhance citizens' trust in the data they find and allow them to further understand what is being presented while providing them with better accountability tools. The trustworthiness of this information is crucial to legitimise the transparency of governments and the decisions they made in relation to the presented data.

On a final point, going one level further from the accessibility principle, we analysed how easy it was to navigate the COVID-19 portals. Our analysis showed that in some cases, the multiple webpages one has to visit to get a clear picture of the data were often disorganised and lacked a logically structured integration of data. Even though the information is being published, the manner in which it is displayed can improve the possibilities for citizens to easily understand the data, and thus enable them to hold their governments accountable.



The world is now aware that even in extreme crisis situations, governments are capable of establishing open data portals.



■ Conclusions and recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed governments toward publishing more public information, and their efforts to do so have been evidenced in our analyses. However, we can also distinctly address the differences among federal and subnational governments. The variance in the quality of information places restrictions on the benefits that OGD may entail. If data fails to be accessible, disaggregated, timely, and reusable, the capacity of citizens to utilise and trust the data is diminished. As a result, public participation and the goal of creating a new social contract, as referenced in the OCA report, is diverted. Furthermore, governments themselves might not be able to take advantage of these sources of information, impeding the proliferation of evidence-based decision-making, which would strengthen their capabilities to confront future crises.

These differences, we propose, are rooted in two types of difficulties:

1. Lack of widely accepted and utilised OGD standards across national and subnational governments. There is no common ground on how to collect, measure, and publish information on public websites. Even though open data publication is thriving, there is less understanding and focus on how data should be published to ensure it is relevant for users, up-to-date, and in formats that allow users (including government officials) to extract as much value as possible. 'Adding value' usually comes from linking information from different sources, and therefore, it is crucial to promote interoperability.
2. Difficulties in enforcing some standardisation among different governmental levels due to their (in)capabilities to generate coordination and compliance among them. Furthermore, even when governments desire to follow a common path, they may be unable, given a difference in resources. The advances regarding OGD, at least regarding COVID-19, have shown that states have some capabilities required to gather and publish information. Yet the differences in the quantity, and more importantly, quality of these publications also show the asymmetries among them to produce open data portals that provide information in ways that promote transparency, citizenship involvement, and evidence-based policymaking.

In order to improve these deficiencies, we propose that the subsequent actions are required:

1. Adopt international OGD standards such as the one proposed by the Open Data Charter regarding 'disease surveillance' and provide detailed information on the published data on each OGD

website. In order to make the open data policy more transparent, in addition to the date of publication and authentication, the data published should include a description of the source from which it originated. Being cognisant of the characteristics of the data we work with is essential to estimate the limits of the derived conclusions.

2. Enhance regional, federal, and subnational collaboration frameworks in terms of standardising and publishing public information. In this regard, it is recommended to develop a vertical coordination strategy (between the federal government and subnational governments) and a horizontal coordination strategy (between the different federal agencies) to develop common criteria for systematising and publishing data. Coming together, whether nationally, regionally, or internationally, to discuss and reach agreements on what, how, and why we need to collect and publish public information is fundamental. Multilateralism must be a fundamental component of any possible breakthrough from the pandemic experiences and lessons. As stated by the Secretary-General in the OCA report, "...we must recognise that humanity's very future depends on solidarity, trust, and our ability to work together as a global family to achieve common goals" (United Nations, 2021).
3. Develop a federal open data policy that allows balancing the capacities of subnational governments to produce, systematise, and publish data. National regulatory frameworks on open data should be advanced and enhanced to ensure the quantity and quality of data is shared horizontally, through different government areas, and vertically, among all government levels. Addressing each state's limitations is crucial to allowing national, regional, or international standards on open data to be achieved by all governments. The concept of 'leave no one behind' must be internalised in the open data community to ensure OGD potentials for promoting transparency and enabling better-prepared governments to be fulfilled on a global scale.
4. Develop national COVID-19 OGD monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess its effectiveness, efficiency, and adherence to regulatory frameworks regarding personal data, cybersecurity, and transparency. Federal councils or coordination spaces between federal and subnational governments can be utilised for reaching consensus on a framework and criteria for evaluating open data policies. In this sense, the OCA proposal of a global code of conduct on public information publication, created collaboratively by states, media, regulatory bodies, and the UN, should be considered.

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About the authors

Natalia Aquilino is director of the CIPPEC Monitoring and Evaluation Programme. She has a degree in Political Science and postgraduate degree in Public Policies and Local Development (National University of Rosario).

Emiliano Arena is coordinator of the CIPPEC Monitoring and Evaluation Programme. He has a degree in Political Science (University of Buenos Aires) and postgraduate degree in Management and Control of Public Policies (FLACSO).

Lucía De Zañia is an analyst of the CIPPEC Monitoring and Evaluation Programme. She has a degree in Political Science and Government (Torcuato Di Tella University). Lucía is also a data scientist at Digital House.

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SOUTHERN VOICE

Southern Voice
Website: www.southernvoice.org
E-mail: info@southernvoice.org

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