



# Surveys as a public service: The need for a two-way flow of data

Calls for the greater availability, transparency and use of public-interest data have resulted in a plethora of new initiatives aimed at making government and publicly funded research data more accessible.

**Gerard Ralphs, Paul Plantinga** and **Goodluck Madisa** write about the importance of surveys as a public service.

In recent years, South Africa has seen the emergence of ground-breaking portals such as [Municipal Money](#), which provides information on finances for each municipality, and [The Outlier](#), which explores policy issues such as COVID-19 and the elections through the lens of publicly accessible data. We have also seen growth in traditionally private-sector methodologies, such as design thinking, open innovation, and hackathons, to promote participation and innovation around data.

South African organisations [Geekulcha](#), [Open Up](#), and the [SA Innovation Summit](#), are among the leading changemakers in the public data and wider civic technology space. At the same time, the Centre for Public Sector Innovation's regular [Public Sector Innovation Awards](#) is an indication that government is looking to promote these emerging approaches and that formal recognition is important to encourage adaptive cultures of service delivery.

Part of the perhaps unacknowledged contribution of these organisations and their work is to reignite public

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Two-way flows of data between researchers and respondents can foster participation and build shared value

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participation, establish trust, and build shared value between the state and citizens, which is a relationship normally characterised by one-way or top-down data flows.

Considerably less attention has been paid in South Africa to how these one-way data flows could become two-way flows that add value to those who supply the data. This is also true for researchers who tend to stop at the dissemination of findings and research reports. In response, the HSRC, as a large social-science research organisation, has begun exploring routes to foster greater participation and realise new societal benefits.



Photo: HSRC

While this practice has led to necessary public debate over the ownership of data, the principle of two-way data flows has become a foundational transactional principle that users apply in their interactions online.

For researchers and public-sector innovation practitioners working in the data space, these concepts and their applications provide some touchpoints.

### **Rethinking HSRC surveys as two-way data flows**

Business surveys carried out by the HSRC, such as the annual [R&D Survey](#) and the three-yearly [Business Innovation Survey](#), struggle with response rates.

Where responses *are* received, our concern is that this is mainly because of a 'compliance culture' at the firm or institution. To promote a more meaningful engagement with the survey process, the HSRC's Centre for Science, Technology and Innovation Indicators (CeSTII) has embarked on a new project with internal and external partners to enhance survey-data generation and support respondents' engagement with innovation data and the analytical products produced from the data as a source of firm-level intelligence.

This project adopts the phrase 'Innovation surveys as a service' (ISaaS) to describe its intent. As part of the survey's online data collection, respondents complete survey questions but can also engage with their firm's unit-level and aggregate survey data using the same platform. The vision is of an interactive online-survey methodology that is easy for respondents to use, that saves them time, and that provides them with a service that enables them to engage their data and compare it with the aggregate. The methodology also helps keep personal information safe and data anonymous, as well as enhances cybersecurity. CeSTII's forthcoming R&D Survey will pilot this approach.

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### **Data transactions**

Rapid and ongoing change in how users interact and transact online can be described using two slightly different business models prevalent in the delivery of web-based services.

[Software as a service](#) (SaaS) refers to services like Google apps that make it possible to work on shared documents in the cloud. [Platform as a service](#) (PaaS), for example Microsoft Azure, allows developers to rapidly build and deploy cloud-based applications on Microsoft data-centre infrastructure.

For PaaS the commercial logic is largely a pay-per-use principle. In contrast, with SaaS, services are often freely available (so-called zero-price products), although the common 'quid pro quo' is that service providers can access user data and user experiences, and use these algorithmically to improve services, launch new products, and develop custom marketing or tools.