Sustainability Canvas

A conversation guide for data
initiatives working towards
long-term impact

ODS Labs

Introduction

Working on a data initiative often means navigating complexity – technical, sectoral, organisational, political and human.

Sustaining that work over time takes purpose, relationships, feedback, and the ability to shift when conditions change. Long-term impact comes not from certainty, but from the ability to reflect, adapt and stay aligned.

- **Purpose and strategy** – how clearly the initiative is oriented, and how well it can shift as the context changes.

- **Resourcing** – the mix of financial, institutional, and relational capital that keeps it viable.

- **Adoption** – how policy, practice, and advocacy turn intent into meaningful uptake.

- **Infrastructure** – the technical and social foundations that make data usable and reusable.

- **Governance and operations** – the structures that enable learning, decision-making, and delivery.

How to use this canvas

You can use the canvas as an interactive <u>Miro board</u> or a printable workbook. Use it on your own, with your team, or with partners.

You don't have to fill in every section.
You don't have to agree.

What matters is surfacing what's strong, what's shifting, and what's stuck, so that you can move forward with more alignment.

Each section includes a short framing, an exercise layout, and an optional tip box to support facilitation. You can move through them in order, focus on one or two, or use just the final reflection section to draw themes together.

Purpose & Strategy

What do our recent choices suggest we care about most?

Sustainability starts with a shared sense of purpose.

That might take the form of a mission, a set of goals, or simply consistent, intentional action. Over time, initiatives need ways to check whether their mission is relevant, and strategy is still working.

Use the matrix below to look at your initiative through what you do – not just what you say.

Use the columns to separate high-level strategy from day-to-day work. Use the rows to show whether actions support your purpose.

	Strategic decisions	Day-to-day work
Aligned with our purpose		
Not aligned with our purpose		

On defining (or redefining) purpose

Shared purpose matters – but that doesn't mean having the perfect statement up front.

Some teams define it early; others let it emerge.

If you do name it, keep it plain and specific.
If it sounds like a slogan, try again.

Resourcing

Are we investing in what matters – now and next?

Sustainability means knowing where your time, funding and energy are going, and what that says about your priorities.

It also means being honest about what's not yet possible, and what may no longer be worth pursuing.

Use the space below to map your current resourcing landscape.

Use the rows to separate what's supported now, what you'd like to make space for next, what may come later, what's out of scope – whether by necessity or by choice.

Now Things we can realistically sustain today.	
Next Things we see as important or emerging, but not fully resourced.	
Later Things we'd like to revisit, but aren't a focus right now.	
Never Work we're choosing not to pursue, or to stop resourcing.	

On choosing where to focus

Not everything has to move forward.
Clarity about what's not resourced (and why) can be just as valuable as knowing what is.

It helps focus energy where it matters most.

Adoption & Advocacy

Who is engaging – and how deeply?

Sustainability relies on engagement and momentum.

That might mean working with publishers, users, intermediaries, or policymakers. It might mean formal mandates or informal champions.

Add key people, organisations, or institutions to the space below.

Place them based on how deeply they're engaged – from early awareness to active alignment or co-creation.

Aware heard of us	
Interested asking questions	
Using tools, data, or ideas	
Advocating sharing, championing, or integrating	
Co-shaping Helping steer direction, policy, or strategy	

On mapping engagement

Look for patterns, not just positions:

Who's moved recently?
Where is adoption symbolic vs meaningful?
What's helping or getting in the way?

Governance & Operations

Are we set up to deliver – and to adapt?

Sustainability requires clear roles and the ability to make decisions, stay aligned, and adapt over time.

That might mean formal governance. Or it might mean shared responsibilities, working relationships, or unwritten norms.

Use the space below to take stock of how work and decisions are held.

Use the rows to separate roles and responsibilities that feel clear and sustainable from those that are stretched, unclear, or missing.

Clear or sustainable	
Stretched, unclear or missing	

On what keeps things running

Not all roles are formal.

Use this space to name what's actually keeping your initiative going – and where that might be fragile, improvised, or unclear.

Making Sense

What are the patterns – and what should we do now?

Sustainability relies on how each of these parts connect, reinforce, or strain against each other.

This is your space to step back, look across the previous sections, and notice what's emerging.

Use the space below to cluster what feels strong, stuck, or shifting.

Place things that are high priority on the left, and things that feel low priority on the right.

Strong	
Stuck	
Shifting	

On moving forward

If you could only act on one thing — what would create clarity, unlock momentum, or make other parts easier?

About Open Data Services

Open Data Services partner with governments, multilaterals, charities, academics, social innovators, and other purpose driven entities who share our vision of using data to deliver lasting impact in communities worldwide.

Over the past decade, we've helped over 50 organisations build impactful data initiatives.

We bring extensive experience in data initiative design, including developing tools and guidance that's practical, user-centred and designed to help users take action.

If you're thinking about how to apply these ideas in your own initiative, we'd be glad to help.

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