Kol Sherut - Lessons on Israeli Civil Society Data in War Times

The first couple of days that followed October 7th events in Israel were chaotic. People were mourning the loss of loved ones while others did not know if their family members were dead or alive. Thousands of people were evacuated while others were conscripted to the army and had a few hours to get everything in their life sorted and dash out the door into the unknown. Israel was unable to supply all the basic social services needed to assist people, and hundreds of civil initiatives started to pop up across the country without coordination.

Our team wanted to help. For the past two years we developed _Kol-Sherut_ (or in direct translation to English – Every service), a tool that allows users to search social services near them. We therefore had the basic infrastructure ready to be deployed to help people find, in the midst of a war, all the services they needed. So, on Monday, October 9th, we started to work on Kol-Sherut Emergency.

Rewind again. What is _Kol-Sherut_?

Kol sherut is a website created by Kol-zchut, an Israeli NGO that was established with the aim of significantly improving the exercise of rights by the public in Israel, through the creation of a database that consolidates the rules of the various rights and the way to implement them in Israel. Kol-Zchut's main website is used by the government, NGOs and consumers of rights (welfare, education, health, etc.) to understand their rights. Millions of users use the site annually, and in 2023 it had 25 million visits. Since 2021, the project has been endorsed and funded by the Israeli Department of Justice.

Kol-Sherut is a separate and connected project for the main Kol-Zchut website. The site aims to help residents of Israel to find social services that are relevant for them. The site uses different government open data datasets as sources of information. It then sorts the data from them in a standardized way and tags services with a bespoke taxonomy.

There are three main datasets that the website uses:
1. Guidestar Israel – The only Israeli government-approved platform of Registered Non-Profit Israeli Organizations. Besides basic data on nonprofits entities in Israel such as a company number, name and address, Guidestar Israel allows

organizations to add their projects and social services to the site. Those services are then shared via an open API.

2. [Social Procurement Data](#) – An open dataset that was created as part of a project led by the Prime Minister Office in the Israeli government. The project collects data manually on social services procurement in three ministries – Welfare, Health and Education. The project shows providers and budget overtime for the services.

3. [Meser](#) Dataset (Welfare frames) – Meser is a system of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs. The system is a payment system to providers of social services, and the dataset derived from it allows us to show services locations and providers in a detailed way.

We also use a fourth source, Click Lerevaha (Click to welfare), but the source is unavailable for the last three months. In addition, occasionally, we will use manual data, data that is curated by the knowledge managers of Kol-Zchut. Before October 7th, our website had 8,313 services.

When an emergency happens, automation is not an option anymore

The perfect data scenario is that all data is standardized, ready in an API and updated on a regular basis. We all know that even in times of peace this doesn't happen often with government open data. Moreover, in times of emergency and chaos, having enough attention and human resources to take care of data quality and availability is even more of a struggle. To add more complications, the vacuum in terms of services started to fill up by informal volunteer initiatives. Those were great projects, but none of them were regulated or had enough data literacy to think about data regarding their project.

In addition, we were not the only ones who tried to help people find services. We counted more than 20 different initiatives that listed services as portals, and each had its own data schema and metadata.

We therefore couldn't rely on any automation for time sensitive data and had to start collecting data manually. This proved to be a challenge, however, contrary to the belief that manual data quality is not as good as an automated one, the emergency services list is now one of the largest and most reliable data sources we have.

So what was our data strategy?

1. **Define what you collect** 📝

As a first step, we had to define what an emergency social service is. This was a big task, since there is no one official definition of what is a social service in peace times. Defining what is an emergency social service was a step we couldn't skip in the case of manual data collection, since it helped volunteers and staff in deciding what service goes in the database in the first place, and improved the data quality on our site which enhanced the user experience.

We defined emergency data service as *"A service that is intended for a person or a family who has an emergency need and within the framework of which they **receive** help. The assistance is usually initial, immediate and usually ends after a short period of time."*

To help our volunteers who helped us entering the data, we also defined what is NOT an emergency service –
*"We will not present on the site an initiative in which a person **provides** assistance to another person in an emergency. For examples –*
- *volunteer initiatives – we are looking for services and answers for people in need, not places for people to volunteer. For this there are other initiatives.*
- *Initiatives that are looking for donations – money, blood or food.*
- *We will not add a service provided to groups such as services to localities (lobby, security)."*

In addition, we proactively decided to collect data that can help marginalized communities in Israel, focusing on Arab communities. This approach helped us to be more inclusive and give value to more people in Israel.

We also made changes to our taxonomy, adding more emergency categories so we can organize the data better. While we are usually reluctant to change a taxonomy, new services popped up for needs we had not anticipated, and adding a new category was helpful. For example, most countries do not need to deal with families of hostages, so we didn't create a category for this situation before. Now they needed services to support them, and we made sure we can categorize them so they can find those services easily during these dark times.

2. Organize the information into data blocks 🧱
Our database is on AirTable, but since we had volunteers to help us, and we didn't have time to teach them how to use a new platform, we decided to use Google Sheets as a data collection platform. This was something they were already familiar with. This spreadsheet was structured like an open data standard, and contained fields which are mandatory and optional. It was divided into three type of data –
- **Service Mandatory fields**
  - Service Name
  - Category (Based on a narrow taxonomy)
  - Description
  - Status
- **Additional description (optional)**

- Requirements for service
- Target population
- Language (up to 5 languages)
- Contact info – Services should have one of the following –
  - Phone
  - Email
  - URL
  - Address (can be also a national service that is given nationwide).
- **Operator Information (optional)**
  - Name
  - Company Number
  - Phone
  - Email
  - URL
- Internal data notes **(optional)**
  - Source of data
  - Name of the person who updated the data
  - Notes

This light data structure allowed us to standardize the services we found and make sure that the user gets good quality data so they can find what they are looking for.

3. Collect data! 🧺

We started by copying services from service portals that we found, but also by having google notifications on specific strings, looking at social media, and getting leads from people we know.

In addition, we created a template based on our main spreadsheet and outreach to other organizations and asked them to become owners of data. The idea was that organizations would not be dependent on our volunteers to enter or modify data. In addition, this is the best data governance outcome, as Kol-Zchut only collects data, not the creator of services, and should not, in theory, be responsible for data on services and its accuracy.

To help volunteers and organizations to fill in our data template, we created a guide for data entry in Hebrew.

As time passed by, one of our automated sources, Guidestar Israel, also collected emergency services data from nonprofits, which we then uploaded to our *Kol Sherut* too.

Lastly, we already had many services that we uploaded to the system in the last two years that were relevant to the crisis and war time. We then tagged them as well as emergency services so users can access them easily too.

4. **Make sure you are data responsible** ⚖️

In all data collection processes, we had to make sure that the data is responsible and does not harm users or people whose data may be published. We established **Red Flags** 🚩 rules for services–

1. If the service provider is an individual, we need to verify that they do exist and that they give that service. We do not want to put people in a vulnerable position in a risky situation or scam.

2. WhatsApp groups – During an emergency, many people use them as they are easy to operate and send information. We know however, that these can be dangerous as well, so we need to verify them as well before adding them.

5. **Allow users to access information quickly**

We have made changes to the site UX so people can access information about emergency services quickly. We created a section on the home page with emergency categories that allows people to get to services information quicker. We also made sure that services that are given in Arabic have a quick link on the home page in Arabic so people can get access to them (sadly our site is only in Hebrew now but we hope one day we can offer it in Arabic too).

The site homepage translated to English. We added the red tags to allow people to get to certain types of emergency services quicker.

In the past six months we kept tweaking the UX for emergency situations, based on volunteers and users feedback so we people can gain more information for the site and get what they need. For example, we learned that most emergency services are given on a national basis, and not local basis like in normal times. In fact, 96% of ALL the national services in Kol-Sherut are also emergency services. So we changed the search algorithm and UX to help people find those services.
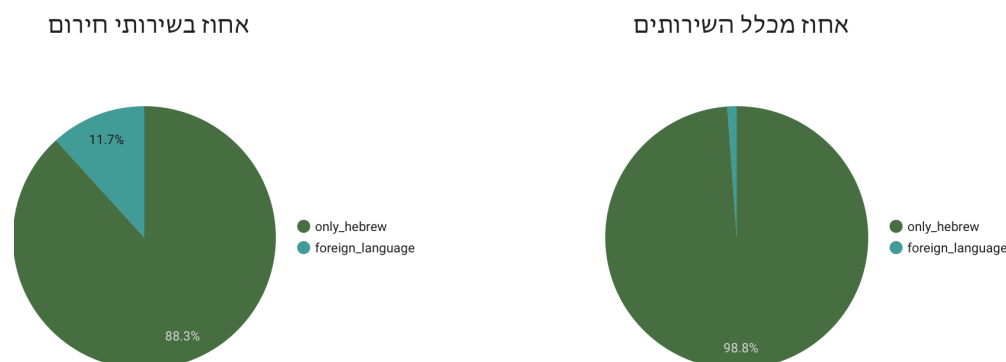
6. Learn from your own data

We understood that we have a gem of a dataset in our hand, so we have created a dashboard out of it. We wanted not only to understand if we have any collection gaps in the emergency data, but also hoped that others can use the data for planning of future services and research.

We learned, for example, that we do not have many routine services that are not in Hebrew. However, there were a good amount of emergency services in foreign languages. This is probably a mix of the approach we decided to take in the data collection definition stage.

In the visualization below you can see that in the circle on the right, only 1.2% of all services in the system are in a foreign language. The left circle represents the emergency services sub dataset, where 11.7% of services are not in Hebrew. 10 times more than routine services.

אחוז בשירותי חירום

אחוז מכלל השירותים

11.7%

88.3%

• only_hebrew
• foreign_language

98.8%

• only_hebrew
• foreign_language

Our learnings in the past year

The last six months have been a lot for us and we have done many things to the website that we have not dreamt to do before. Our main takeaways are –

1. **Taking the time to define and plan, even during chaos, saves time** – One tendency in emergency situations is to run with the data and create something quick and dirty that later leads to issues in the data pipeline and user experience. Having taken a couple of hours to look at possible tricky places and create definitions helped us to be not only faster in data collection in the long run, but also avoiding critical data governance issues, like privacy in the long run.
2. **Agile working** – Our team has been working in agile methods for the past two years. Having regular stand ups and scrum meetings helped us to reflect on our assumptions, fix stuff on the go and pivot if we needed.
3. **Manual data input is important sometimes** – We now understand where issues with manual data can happen, and we are trying to deploy more manual data input in places where there is no capacity for automation.

4. **We need to move to the local level too** – we have focused in the past six months on a broad umbrella of services all over the country, but we know there are a lot of local government services we are missing. However, local governments have a lot of services to provide and not a lot of working hands to publish data on those services. We are thinking on how we can collaborate with city halls to collect this data in the future.

5. **Standard matters** – We are able to have rich data on emergency services due to our structured data model. We have drawn inspiration from [Open Referral](#) who have been working with services data in the US and the UK. Our data shows that standardisation can be powerful, and we hope that it will help us to get better information in the future from the government.

(Suggested text) We want to extend our gratitude to Joint Elka for stepping in during the early days of the emergency, allowing us to scale up for the benefit of all Israelis. Joint Elka strengthens Israel's public systems through partnerships with government, local authorities, NGOs, philanthropy, and business sectors. Elka initiatives drive sustainable change, bridging social and economic gaps for a more equitable society.

Want to help us get more services? Want to discuss with us about what we have done?
Contact us –info@kolzchut.org.il