

DATA RIGHTS IN THE FIGHT FOR OUR ENVIRONMENT

scenarios & tactics for data justice

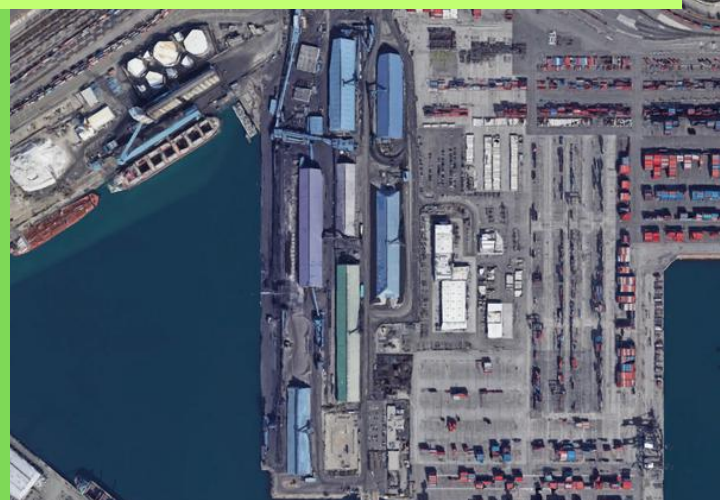




Environmental governance is shaped by data collected and interpreted by governments, corporations, and other colonial institutions.

Whether it's geographic data or anecdotal – quantitative or qualitative – institutions can use data to justify environmental harm based on data narratives that they create.

Sometimes institutions also gatekeep data analysis methods, claiming the final word over which data is considered sufficiently rigorous or legitimate.



Environmental data rights mean we have a right to control use of data about us, our lands, and our people. When we control our data, we can use it to create data narratives that represent our actual environments and experiences.



Source: CalTopo

People can feel when data is being used to misrepresent their experiences.

Institutional narrative

Government agencies or academic research groups conduct soil, air, or water tests for “chemicals of concern” and find that chemicals are present at levels that they believe *do not* pose a threat to health. They don’t release the raw data, only summary results.



Community narrative

Communities use sensors or testing kits to show contamination in their soil, air, or water. In households where chemicals are more present, families publish their own stories and studies over time about mystery illnesses that they know came from chemicals.



Government agencies collect drone footage or aerial photos to define borders when they give land grants or permits out to businesses in extractive industries. The borders in these permits are based on top-down assessments of topographies and ecological zones.



Indigenous tribes & neighboring communities create maps of waterways and animal migrations that demonstrate potential risks to water quality or species health. They present their maps and cultural stories as evidence against extractive permits.

What do we do when people within systems of power use data to spread harmful narratives about our environment?

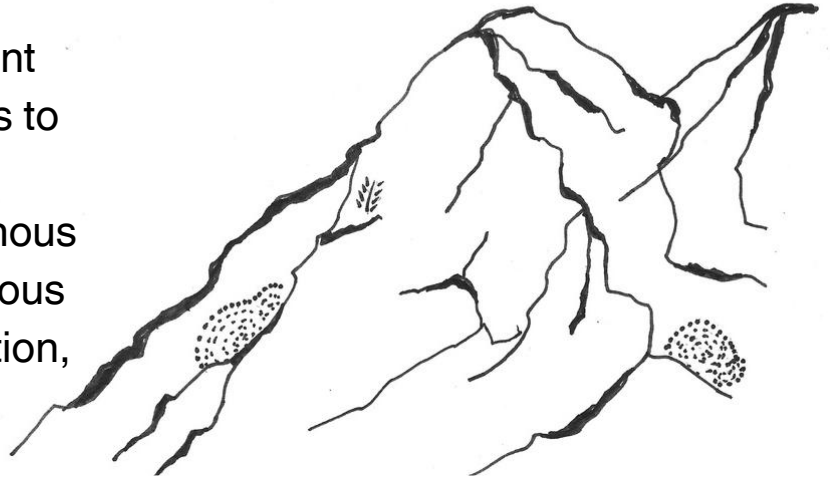


DATA RIGHTS

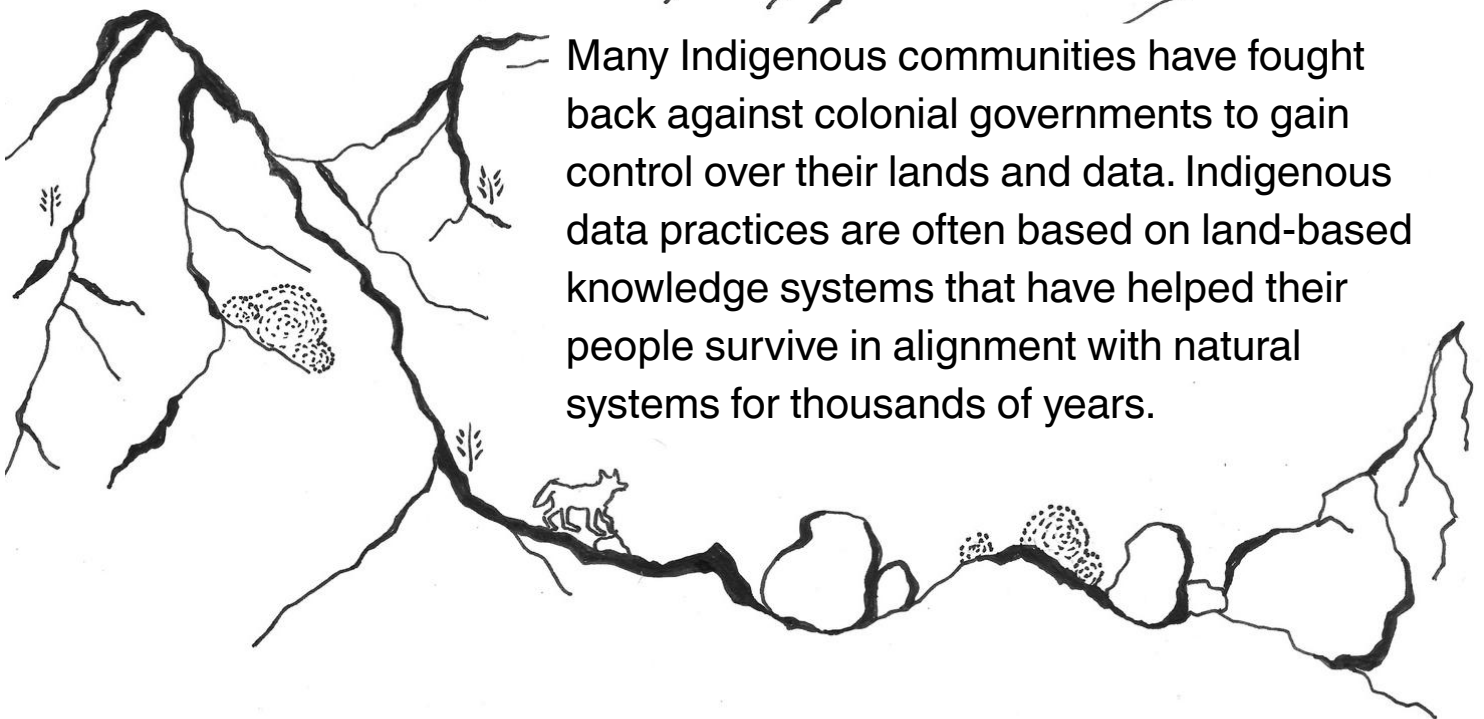
**can be a powerful
tool in the fight for
our environment**

Understanding Indigenous Data Sovereignty as a guide for data rights

Indigenous ownership of environmental data is an important part of Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination. The UN's Directive on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 codifies Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination, including their right to their data.



Many Indigenous communities have fought back against colonial governments to gain control over their lands and data. Indigenous data practices are often based on land-based knowledge systems that have helped their people survive in alignment with natural systems for thousands of years.



Those of us who don't belong to tribal communities can support Indigenous data sovereignty movements as we demand data rights in our own communities. We can challenge top-down collection, interpretation, and use of data on a systemic level to protect our environments and future generations.



HUMAN RIGHTS

Right to health

Freedom of expression

Right to water

Right to assemble

ENVIRONMENTAL

LABOR RIGHTS

Freedom of association

Safe working conditions

Right to privacy

Right to information

Right to privacy and data protection

Rights of data access

Right to cultural knowledge

Right to be forgotten

DIGITAL RIGHTS

DATA RIGHTS

Right to clean water and air

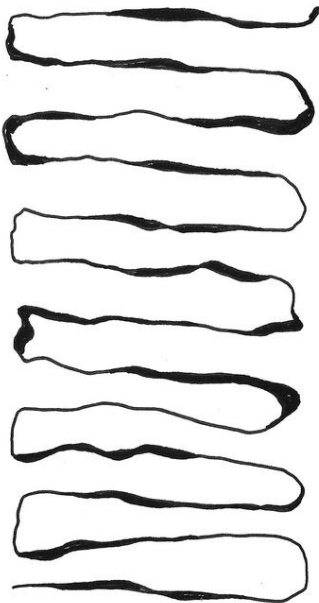
Right to protection

Right to protection from pollution

Right to exist, regenerate, evolve

RIGHTS OF NATURE

Tactics to defend our data rights



Expose bias

Explore the data collection, analysis, or use and unacknowledged bias

Challenge narratives

Use narrative strategies or a mix of quantitative and qualitative data to expose the fact that data doesn't accurately capture lived experience

Educate the public

Come up with accessible ways to talk to residents about their data rights before taking any steps to organize

Fight surveillance

Protect people from emerging algorithmic technologies by advocating for bans or divestment

Block data collection

Reject surveys or coordinate a community wide opt-out of institutional data collection

Enable civic participation

Respond to public comment periods about public reports or presentations that summarize data and share resources for others to join

Free the data

Create data transparency demands and work with your community to convince institutions to release new data to the public

Mitigate risk from misuse

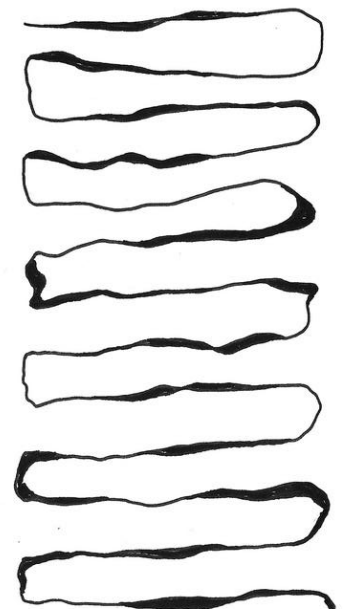
Conduct regular data audits for accuracy and security, and utilize privacy policy templates;
Build upon existing social dynamics to establish clear roles and permissions regarding data management

Prioritize and publicize data values

Create a statement that establishes your values, principles, and practices related to how data is used and shared

Develop legal tools

Work with legal counsel to create data sharing agreements and/or licenses to protect sensitive data



Sample Scenario

DATA DEFENSE IN PRACTICE

Description

A state government issues permits to companies seeking a permission for industrial wastewater disposal. Once issued a permit, companies are required to publish quarterly wastewater reports with actual disposal levels including readings of potentially harmful contaminants. Communities say the company has not published any reports since being issued the permit.

Data Assets

- Permitting data
- Wastewater reports
- Community stories
- Backyard DIY tests
- Academic research

Needs

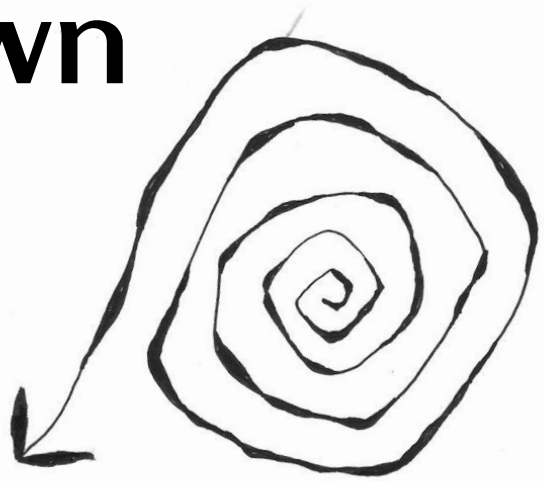
- Standardized water tests
- Access to quarterly reports
- Community storytelling

Relationships

- State permitting agency staff
- Self-organized groups of neighbors
- Corporate representatives
- Local government officials
- University researchers



Map your own data rights scenario!



How to get started:

1. Identify a scenario where someone you know needs access or control over use of their data
2. Scope the scenario by documenting:
 - a. Data assets you have
 - b. Data assets or skills you need
 - c. People who can help
3. Review data rights tactics and decide which tactics are appropriate for the specifics of your scenario

Practice Scenario

DATA DEFENSE IN PRACTICE

Description


Data Assets

Needs

Relationships

DATA DEFENSE IN PRACTICE

Potential Tactics

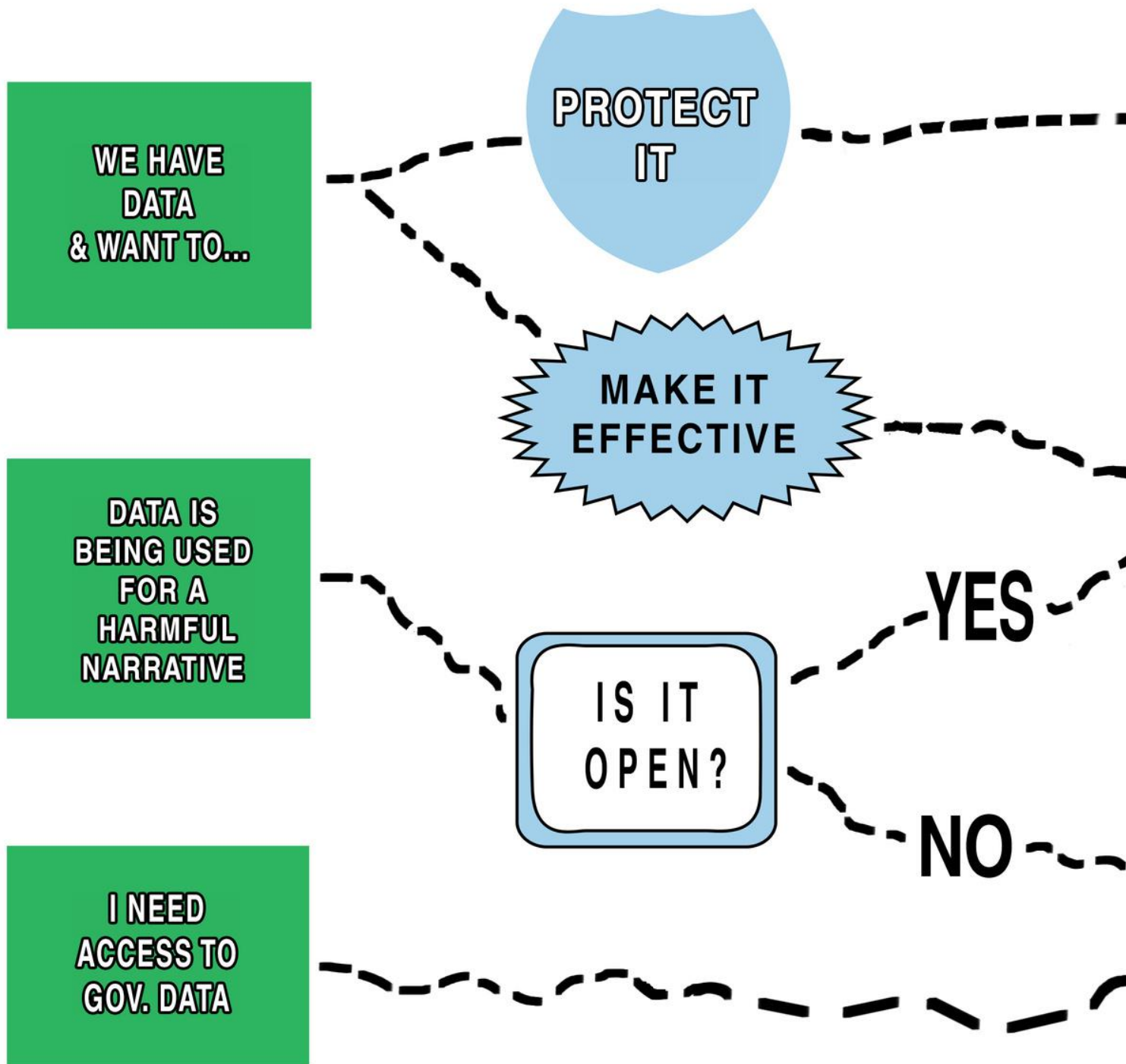


Need help choosing the best tactics for your scenario?

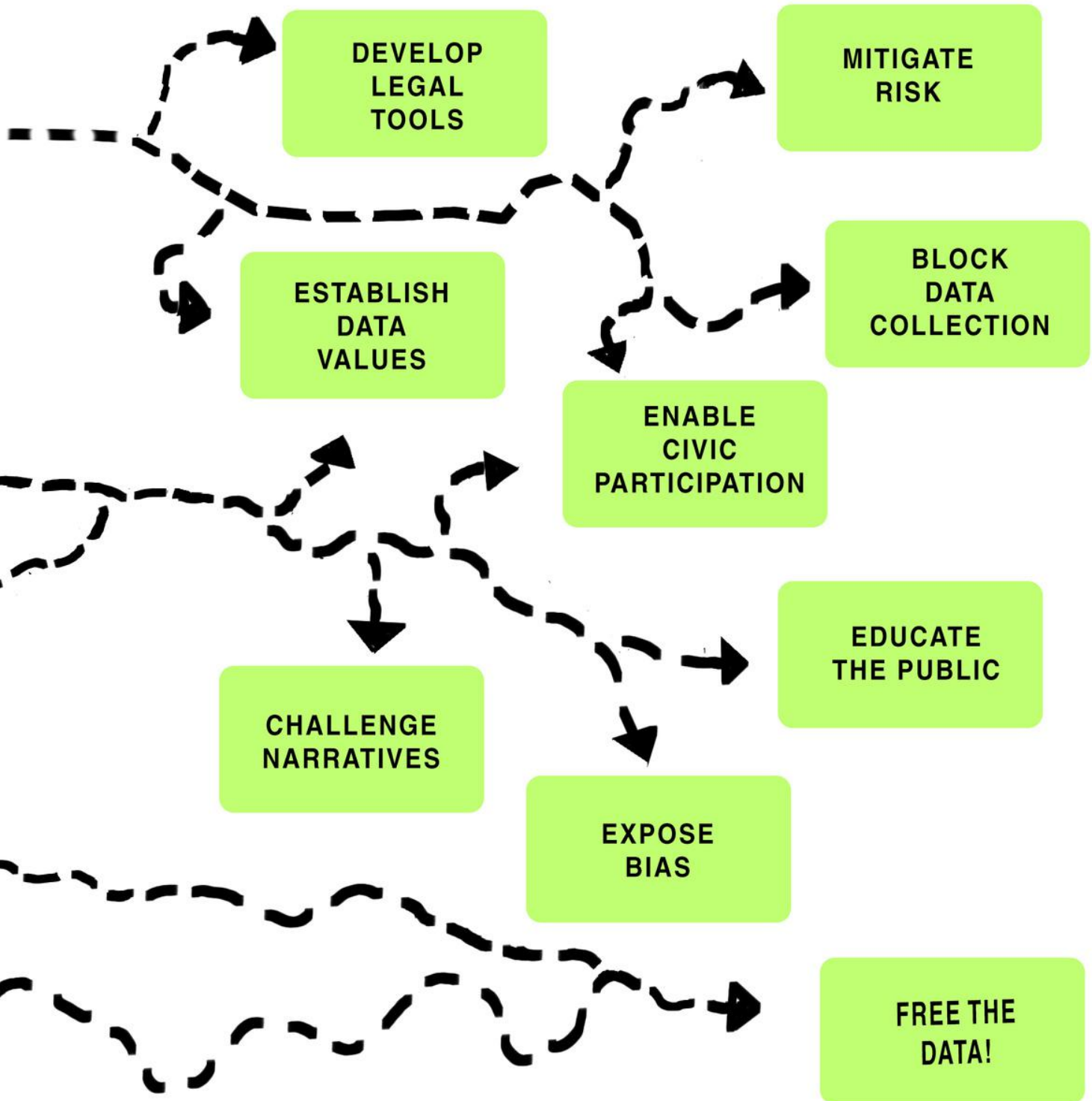


Check out the flow chart on the next page...

FIND YOUR



DATA TACTICS



Start this work in your community!

If you're having trouble mapping a data rights scenario, try doing some digging first. Use the following guiding questions to better understand your data needs.

Where do you come across data in your work?

Who owns it? What are they doing with it?

Are there barriers to accessing data you need?

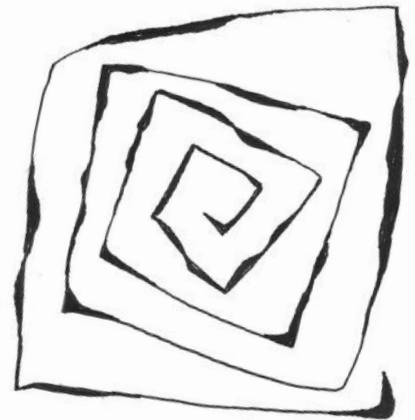
What are the data assets you already have?

What data tools or skills do you have?

What data skills do you need?

Who are the active players?

What are simple first steps?



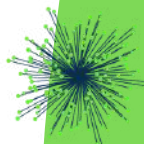


OUR LANDS OUR DATA OUR STORIES

Special thanks to participants of our Data Has a Beating Heart workshop at RightsCon Taipei 2025 for informing concepts in this zine, and to Michelle Cheripka for editing support.

We want to hear from you! Let us know how you're using data rights to protect the environment and your community.

peoplesdataproject.org
openenvironmentaldata.org



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