Task Force 05
INCLUSIVE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Advocating an International Decade for Data Under G20 Sponsorship

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Abstract

This brief draws attention to the important role of data in social and economic development. It advocates the establishment of an International Decade for Data (IDD) from 2025-2035 under G20 sponsorship. The IDD can be used to bridge existing data governance initiatives and deliver global ambitions to use data for social impact, innovation, economic growth, research, and social development.

Despite the critical importance of data governance to achieving the SDGs and to emerging topics such as artificial intelligence, there is no unified space that brings together stakeholders to coordinate and shape the data dimension of digital societies. While various data governance processes exist, they often operate in silos, without effective coordination and interoperability. This fragmented landscape inhibits progress toward a more inclusive and sustainable digital future.

The envisaged IDD fosters an integrated approach to data governance that supports all stakeholders in navigating complex data landscapes. Central to this proposal are new institutional frameworks (e.g. data collaboratives), mechanisms (e.g. digital social licenses and sandboxes), and professional domains (e.g. data stewards), that can respond to the multifaceted issue of data governance and the multiplicity of actors involved.

The G20 can capitalize on the Global Digital Compact's momentum and create a task force to position itself as a data champion through the launch of the IDD, enabling collective progress and steering global efforts towards a more informed and responsible data-centric society.

collaboratives, Digital social contracts, Sandboxes, Data stewards, UN, Global Digital Compact, Collective progress, Data-centric society.

Introduction

The importance of data for social and economic development is often overlooked in global conversations about the transformative power of technology. This paper draws attention to significant data-related challenges, including issues of accessibility, distribution, coordination, and other asymmetries. While various processes related to data governance exist–convened by international organizations, governments, businesses, and civil society–they often operate in silos, are poorly resourced, and lack effective coordination. This fragmented landscape inhibits progress toward a more inclusive and sustainable digital future.

This brief calls for an International Decade for Data (IDD), leveraging the UN's successful model of international decades, to improve coordination between stakeholders on an issue of global concern that requires additional time, space, and resources.

The UN has used *international decades* to promote coordination between States, the private sector, technical and scientific communities, academia, and civil society organizations on specific issues of global concern. As of 2023, the UN has implemented 52 international decades on a variety of issues, ranging from road safety to disaster risk reduction.

International decades affirm a commitment to action and coordination in areas that do not benefit from sufficient international attention or where coordinated action is essential to advancing a global goal. Notable successes were registered during the Decade of

Action on Road Safety (2011-2020)[1], the International Water for Life Decade (2005-2015)[2], and the International Decade for Natural Disaster Risk Reduction (1990-1999)[3].

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[1] The Decade of Action on Road Safety successfully implemented a holistic and multi-sectoral approach to road safety management. This was achieved through strengthening partnerships, disseminating scientific guidance, and centering the issue of road safety on the global health and development agenda. 108 countries reported a drop in road traffic fatalities during the Decade, with the rate of road traffic deaths falling by 5 per cent since 2010 to 1.9 million annually in 2023 (PAHO, 2023).

[2] At the conclusion of the International Water for Life Decade, 2.1 billion people had gained access to improved sanitation, and 2.6 billion people gained access to improved drinking water sources. This achievement led the UN General Assembly to agree to a standalone goal on water as part of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 (Goal 6: Ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all), representing a victory for the Decade (UN, 2015).

[3] A key outcome of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Risk Reduction was improved coordination between scientists, NGOs, community organizations, youth groups, and radio and television networks in promoting awareness of disaster prevention and reduction strategies. Developments in communications technologies further contributed to coordination efforts in hazard mapping and the exchanging of best practices between the Global North and South.[#] The Decade delivered significant progress in global disaster prevention and mitigation practices, and effectively promoted the use of early warning systems in disaster prevention strategies.

Background

Data is a critical resource for policymaking, innovation, and economic growth (UN, 2021). Yet, we face significant challenges to harnessing data for the global good. These challenges include:

- **Data inaccessibility and asymmetries:** Many datasets are locked behind proprietary systems, limiting access for researchers, policymakers, and organizations that could leverage this data for social, economic, and environmental progress. There are vast disparities in data generation, availability, and quality across regions (Marwala and Passarelli, 2024). Developed countries often have better data infrastructure, while developing nations often lack data collection and analysis capabilities, which leads to data asymmetries that hinder global progress.

- **Data as a protected and sensitive resource:** Data has a dual nature–it is both a resource and a potential source of risk. Privacy concerns arise from the fact that data often contains sensitive personal information. This has led to demands for stringent regulations to safeguard individual rights. Simultaneously, security threats loom large, with data breaches posing significant risks to individuals, organizations, and even national security. Efforts to limit the free flow of data across borders reflect concerns over sovereignty and control, as states seek to protect their citizens' data and assert jurisdiction over digital domains (De la Chapelle and Porciuncula, 2021). Balancing these competing interests requires navigating complex legal, ethical, and technological landscapes.

- **Lack of a unified space:** Existing processes to manage data operate in silos and lack effective coordination. This fragmented landscape inhibits progress toward a

more inclusive and sustainable digital future. A process is needed to bring together diverse stakeholders with a shared interest in coordinating and shaping the future of our digital society. The IDD's ten-year work programme would support convergence on norms and practices by focusing political attention on the issue of data governance and coordination.

A new sense of urgency is required to ensure we do not miss or lock away the benefits of the data century. We need a *global* vision for data cooperation that can simulate international investment, bridge capacity gaps between developed and developing nations, leverage specialist expertise in the private sector, and reduce barriers to data sharing. As noted in a recent UN policy paper, "bringing consistency to the data policy landscape is an enormous task that will require collaboration between all States" (UN, 2023).

The IDD could support safe and systematic data sharing to catalyze economic transformations in developed and developing countries; facilitate analysis for preparedness, planning, and prevention; and more generally, support innovation and the delivery of global public goods.

There is no shortage of examples that illustrate the benefits of pooling and sharing data – it helps prepare for and respond to catastrophic weather events, improves understanding and prediction of mass population movements, and keeps different private and public actors accountable (Georgetown University, 2023). It is also an engine of economic growth, and often described as a key input in modern economic production alongside land, capital, labor, and oil (IMF, 2019).

The G20 can accelerate data governance efforts on a global scale. The 2024 process is a unique opportunity to elevate data governance as a priority issue and make it a unifying

thread across the G20's chosen focus areas on meaningful connectivity, artificial intelligence, digital government, and information integrity (G20, 2023).

Recommendations

In this brief, we advocate the creation of an *International Decade of Data (IDD)*, an initiative first advanced in the report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism developed at the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (HLAB, 2023).

The International Decade for Data

The IDD creates space for convergence on difficult data governance issues such as definitions, scope, and regulatory applications. It creates space to work on nexus challenges, such as promoting rights-respecting data frameworks, the effective management of synthetic data, and private-public sector data sharing (Verhulst, 2023). The IDD achieves these objectives by incentivizing partnerships and networks, and efficiently directing resources toward common goals, including the elimination of capacity and information gaps (Porciuncula, 2023).

Past UN international decades have raised awareness of global challenges. They affirm a commitment to action and coordination in areas that do not benefit from sufficient international attention or where coordinated action is essential to advancing a global goal. The high degree of multi-stakeholder cooperation is a hallmark of previous international decades. It was key to the success of the International Decade on Water Supply and Sanitation (1981-1991), the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (1990-1999), and the Water for Life Decade (2005-2015) (see Appendix 1). The ten-year time

horizon leaves ample room to build confidence across different stakeholder groups by identifying issues of common concern and leaving sufficient time to work out solutions through a deep, iterative engagement process (Passarelli, Siddiqui and Savishchenko, 2023). The IDD can provide a shared mission and vision for the international community, and create space for accelerated action and ownership by all stakeholder groups, underpinned by a common commitment to improving consistency and coherence in the data policy landscape.

The sudden surge in AI regulation and policy increases the urgency of an IDD. Many AI risks and opportunities will be addressed in global governance initiatives focused on data—training data, data security, and data sharing, among others. The more regulations, principles, forums, and governance frameworks multiply, the harder it will be for small public administrations and small companies to navigate the new data policy landscape.

The IDD can be an immediate boon to the Sustainable Development Agenda. UN Member States agreed to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (A/RES/70/1) in 2015. The 2030 Agenda is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and supports the realization of commitments made in numerous international treaties, thus contributing to the global commitment to leaving no one behind and the principles of non-discrimination and equality. The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda depends on data to measure progress against global ambitions and fuel the implementation of those ambitions.

A key step in operationalizing the IDD is defining a set of priorities. It is essential to identify those mechanisms and catalysts that are most resource-effective and most likely to drive positive transformation with a minimum of negative externalities. For example, one area of growing concern is the linkage between data and human rights–how the use of the former can strengthen or undermine the latter. The IDD can build understanding

and adherence to international law and international human rights commitments by socializing UN frameworks like the OHCHR's guide to a human-rights based approach to data.

The following specific priority areas could be envisioned for an IDD:

1. **Upholding Digital Self-Determination (DSD):** DSD seeks to empower individuals, communities, and organizations by extending the traditional notion of self-determination to acknowledge the fundamental role of agency in the digital era. Genuine digital empowerment goes beyond mere consent mechanisms; it involves trustworthy and responsible data relationships. DSD is not only about preventing the misuse of data but also about harnessing its full potential.

2. **Establishing Mutual Commitment Frameworks (MCF) for data:** MCF facilitate responsible data sharing and collaboration among stakeholders. They provide a structured approach to streamline access to data through standard data sharing agreements and protocols, promoting transparency, accountability, and trust in data practices, particularly in times of crisis and on issues of societal importance.

3. **Deploying sandboxes to spur public-private collaboration across borders**: Deploying sandboxes entails creating controlled environments for experimentation with new policies and technologies. Sandboxes can promote innovation and regulatory agility and be used as a mechanism to enhance cross-border and public-private collaboration.

4. **Recognizing and advancing the role and responsibilities of data stewards**: Data stewardship is key for providing systematic access to data, scaling data initiatives, and ensuring ethical, effective data re-use for societal benefit, acting as a vital link in the data value chain. We require comprehensive guidelines and best practices, create

curriculum and training for data stewards, and establish an international network to enhance collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Priorities should be collectively set and implemented with due regard for national priorities and developed in a cascading fashion: international priorities giving rise to national action plans to be reviewed at regular ministerial meetings over a ten-year period. This requires an inclusive, participatory process. The G20 can shepherd such a process through a G20 High Level Task Force on data.

This section explores the benefits and likely impact of an IDD.

Priority Area 1: Digital Self-Determination

The DSD priority will empower individuals, communities, and organizations to control their data, fostering trust and accountability in digital ecosystems. By recognizing the importance of agency and responsible data relationships, policymakers can promote data governance frameworks that prioritize human rights and societal values. Leveraging participatory mechanisms to establish a social license for data re-use can establish trust in how data is made accessible and complement individual consent with collective consensus on how to leverage data.

Priority Area 2: Mutual Commitment Frameworks

The IDD will help implement MCF for data that can facilitate responsible data sharing and collaboration among diverse stakeholders, leading to more effective responses to global challenges, particularly in times of crisis or on issues of great societal importance. By streamlining data sharing agreements and protocols, policymakers can promote transparency, accountability, and trust in data practices, ultimately advancing the SDGs and ensuring greater preparedness ahead of inevitable emergencies and catastrophic events.

Priority Area 3: Sandboxes

The IDD will facilitate the development and use of sandboxes for public-private collaboration, which will foster innovation and regulatory harmonization across borders,

creating a conducive environment for responsible data practices. By providing a controlled environment for experimentation with new policies and technologies, policymakers can promote agility and responsiveness in data governance frameworks, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

Priority Area 4: Data Stewardship

The IDD will support conversations that clarify the roles and responsibilities of data stewards. This will enhance collaboration between data holders and users, fostering innovation and societal advancement. By providing guidance and support for data stewardship, policymakers can promote ethical and responsible data practices, ultimately unlocking the full potential of data for public good while mitigating risks associated with misuse or mismanagement.

Challenges

Measured against the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda and its international human rights foundations, the international community is not doing enough to ensure that no one is left behind in a data-driven world. The IDD can lead to the creation of international and national plans that enhance the participation of individuals and communities in data governance and data sharing, promote data disaggregation, foster transparent and privacy-respecting practices, and greater accountability.

Balancing individual autonomy with collective interests and regulatory requirements can lead to tensions and conflicts in data governance frameworks. Concerns over data privacy, security, and liability have thus far hindered the establishment of a robust data governance framework, which has undermined timely responses to crises.

We acknowledge the complexities of cross-border regulatory cooperation and corporate behavior in the data landscape. A multistakeholder space may encounter resistance from stakeholders resistant to greater corporate involvement in data governance. The IDD helps strike a balance between flexibility and oversight, fostering innovation through deliberation and collaboration and not necessarily governance in the form of hard law.

Conclusion

The urgent need for an IDD emerges from the growing recognition that data's potential for socio-economic development is stymied due to significant unresolved challenges such as data accessibility, distribution, and coordination issues. Additionally, the fragmented data governance landscape, which is characterized by siloed initiatives and insufficient funding, impedes the development of an inclusive, responsible, and sustainable data future. To address these challenges, we advocate in the above for the inclusion of data governance on the G20 agenda and propose the establishment of a G20 High Level Task Force. This task force would be instrumental in deepening the priorities and principles for an IDD, fostering a coordinated approach among G20 Member States and the UNs to data governance that transcends current fragmented efforts. In advocating for an IDD, we draw upon the UN's successful model of international decades, which have historically fostered enhanced cooperation and attention to global concerns.

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