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Contribution by Saudi Arabia

**to the CSTD 2026-2027 priority theme on
“Data Governance for Development: From Asymmetry to Equitable Stewardship”**

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1. Can you share challenges that your country face in building and leveraging data capacities, including issues related to infrastructure, ownership and stewardship, free and trusted cross-border flows, and benefit-sharing? (Please provide examples and, where possible, quantitative evidence or indicators of these challenges and their impacts)

From a data management standpoint, we encounter several structural obstacles across the data lifecycle encompassing classification, ownership, interoperability, standardization, and monetization.

1. Lack of a Clear Data Monetization Framework & Policy (Policy Published)

For years, the absence of a comprehensive policy and framework governing the commercial use of government-generated data created significant uncertainty for both public and private sector entities. This vacuum stifled innovation and left substantial data assets underutilized

2. Over-Classification of Data Due to Lack of Clear, Concise Guidelines

A second major challenge is the over-classification of data, driven mainly by insufficiently detailed and actionable guidelines.

SDAIA, through the National Data Management Office (NDMO), has established data classification policies that categorize data by sensitivity and impact severity; however, many entities adopt a risk-averse approach and stance, classifying data at higher sensitivity levels than necessary. This is rooted from the following reasons:

- Ambiguity in the guidance available to data stewards
- An inclination to over-classify to avoid potential penalties for under-classification
- Inconsistent interpretation of criteria across different agencies

This results in difficult cross-border data sharing, data monetization and data for good type of initiatives.

3. No Clear Directive on Data Ownership

A third structural challenge is the absence of a unified national directive on data ownership. Within large cross-sector ecosystems, particularly those involving multiple government entities ownership is often dispersed and confusing.

4. Limited Adoption of Data Standardization Frameworks

The fourth challenge is the slow adoption of existing data standardization framework developed by SDAIA across the ecosystem. Standardization; establishing common formats, definitions, structures, and quality criteria is essential for enabling frictionless data sharing/interoperability, ensuring quality, and supporting AI at scale.

The impact is tangible: a non-standardized ecosystem increases integration costs, elevates security risks, reduces the ability to deploy AI nationally, and delays data-driven innovation.

2. How are inequalities embedded in the processes through which data is generated, collected and used in your country? In particular, how do biases in data collection and use, such as gender data gap, affect policymaking, service delivery and development outcomes? (Please provide examples, evidence and any measures being taken to address these disparities)

Potential inequalities may arise when data is incomplete, insufficiently disaggregated, or not representative of all intended groups, which may affect the accuracy of policymaking, service delivery, and development outcomes. Saudi Arabia addresses these risks through SDAIA's seven AI Ethics Principles: Fairness; Privacy and Security; Humanity; Social and Environmental Benefits; Reliability and Safety; Transparency and Explainability; and Accountability and Responsibility. Principle 1, Fairness, explicitly requires

measures to eliminate bias and discrimination, including on the basis of gender, and to ensure that data used in AI systems is inclusive, diverse, and representative.

These principles are complemented by the Data Sharing Policy, Freedom of Information Policy, Open Data Policy, and Data Classification Policy, which support responsible access, appropriate sharing, transparency, and protection according to data sensitivity. SDAIA has also launched the National Data Index, which assesses government entities' data-management maturity, compliance with the Data Management and Personal Data Protection Standards, and operational excellence, helping identify areas for improvement and promote more consistent practices across government.

3. Has your country implemented national strategies, regulatory frameworks or policy instruments to promote equitable and interoperable data governance? What are the lessons learned? (Please describe any specific challenges, failures or successes encountered during implementation)

Saudi Arabia through SDAIA announced the National Strategy for Data and Artificial Intelligence (NSDAI) on October 2020, that covered “Enact the most welcoming legislation for Data and AI businesses and talents” as one of the nine strategic objectives, which efficiently have been implemented by the following:

- Freedom of Information Policy (version 1.0 – May 05, 2020), grants rights to individuals in accessing or obtaining public information from public entities within the extent permitted by its provisions.
- Open Data Policy (version 1.0 – May 05, 2020), ensures public entities provide public information to the public in accessible manner through the National Open Data Portal without any restrictions on the re-use of data.
- Data Management and Personal Data Protection Standards (version 1.5 – January 2021), aims to manage national data processed by public entities through data management framework and contain fifteen domains cover all stages of data lifecycle.
- Personal Data Protection Law (“PDPL”), enacted by Royal Decree No. M/19 on September 16, 2021, and its amendments, along with its implementing regulations, provide strict privacy protection and grant certain rights for data subject within applicability of the law.
- Individuals are entitled certain right set forth by policies, rules, guidelines, or standards issued and published by SDAIA, or the PDPL, without distinction of any form unless explicitly stated otherwise.

4. Can you share your country's experience in reducing asymmetries and promoting more equitable data stewardship in development sectors such as public services, education, health and agriculture? (Please provide examples, lessons learned and remaining challenges where possible)

Saudi Arabia has made reducing data asymmetries and promoting equitable data stewardship a national priority under Vision 2030. Our approach has been to build shared digital infrastructure that democratizes access to data, rather than allowing it to remain siloed.

1. Building a Shared Foundation

Our flagship effort here is the **National Data Bank (NDB)**. The idea and aspiration was simple: instead of having each agency build its own data infrastructure which would inevitably leave smaller, less funded agencies behind, we built a common platform that everyone could connect to and leverage the data for data-powered decisioning.

The NDB brings together government data assets into unified platforms: a Data Lake, a Data Marketplace, Collaborative Data Labs, Reference Data Platform, and a National Data Catalog. Over

580 data-sharing services are now integrated across the platform, connecting **more than 500 government systems**. The Data Marketplace is particularly important because it automates the sharing process where agencies can browse available datasets and subscribe to them without going through cumbersome, time-consuming manual negotiations.

For the public, the **Saudi Open Data Platform** provides centralized access to government datasets in standardized, reusable formats. As of June 2026, the platform hosts over **22 K datasets** from **347 organizations**, with total downloads exceeding **870K**. This matters because it gives researchers, entrepreneurs, and civil society the same raw material that used to be available only to well-connected insiders.

We were honored to receive the **UN Public Service Award** in 2026 after awarded by WSIS in 2025 for the National Data Bank and Estishraf platforms. Estishraf is our advanced analytics platform that uses AI to support decision-making and anticipate future challenges through indicators, analytics, and predictive insights.

To track our own progress, we developed the **National Data Index (NDI)**, which now covers **214 government entities**, a **49% increase** from the previous cycle. The Index gives us a clear picture of who is progressing and who is falling behind, so we can target support where it is needed most.

Other notable efforts in various sectors are as follows:

NOOR, our national Educational Management Information System. With **more than ~ 12. million users**, it is one of the largest EMIS platforms in the Middle East

Population Health Observatory (PHO) established by the Ministry of Health in 2023 uses machine learning and proactive forecasting to analyze big data for population health

The challenges that still persist as are follows:

- Data fragmentation remains a significant barrier
- Data quality and completeness vary considerably
- Data governance and ownership is progressing lower than expected
- Data Standardization and Interoperability standards across sectors are still in early stage

5. What mechanisms or institutional arrangements are in place in your country to foster collaboration around data governance for development among different stakeholders (e.g., university-industry, private-public, or multi-stakeholder initiatives)?

NDMO has signed (MoUs) with supervisory authorities and sector regulators to strengthen governance arrangements and clearly define roles and responsibilities for implementing the Personal Data Protection Law (PDPL), including across the financial, healthcare, and logistics sectors.

6. What major bilateral, regional, or international partnership has your country engaged in to foster equitable and interoperable data governance? (Please describe the benefits of participating in these partnerships, as well as any challenges related to coordination, capacity, trust, interoperability or benefit-sharing)

Saudi Arabia engages in multilateral frameworks and partnerships that advance equitable and interoperable data governance. The Kingdom's engagement is aligned with the UN Global Digital Compact, particularly Objective 4, "Advance responsible, equitable and interoperable data governance approaches," including its focus on closing data-for-development gaps, strengthening data capacities, promoting responsible data use and sharing, and advancing South-South cooperation. Saudi Arabia, represented by SDAIA, also engaged with the World Bank through the Digital Development Partnership Multi-Donor Trust Fund, covering areas such as data and indicators, digital government, interoperability, cybersecurity, and data protection.



At the institutional level, SDAIA is an accredited member of the Global Privacy Assembly, and SDAIA experts actively participate in the OECD.AI Expert Groups on AI, Data and Privacy and AI Futures. These memberships enable SDAIA to contribute to international work on privacy, trusted cross-border data flows, the interaction between AI and data governance, and strategic foresight on future AI opportunities and risks.

SDAIA views international organizations as important norm-setting and collaboration platforms for Member States. These engagements support the exchange of regulatory experience, strengthen institutional capacity, foster compatible safeguards and practical interoperability, and promote more equitable access to the benefits generated from data, while recognizing differences in national legal systems, technical standards, levels of maturity, and development priorities

7. How can international cooperation strengthen equitable and interoperable data governance to ensure that data contributes to shared prosperity and sustainable development? In what ways can the UN CSTD contribute to this effort?

International cooperation can strengthen equitable and interoperable data governance by promoting practical compatibility between national systems while respecting national sovereignty, domestic legislation, security requirements, and national development priorities.

From SDAIA's perspective, a central objective of international cooperation should be to ensure that high-quality and diverse data, as well as the value generated from it, are equitably accessible to everyone rather than concentrated among a limited number of countries or organizations. This can be supported through trusted data commons, including secure data spaces or data rooms, that enable countries, researchers, and innovators to access and reuse data for public-interest research, innovation, and sustainable development, subject to appropriate safeguards for privacy, security, and national sovereignty.

The UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development can contribute by providing an inclusive platform for Member States and other stakeholders to exchange experiences, identify areas of convergence, and develop practical guidance on data governance for development. Through its Multi-Stakeholder Working Group on Data Governance at All Levels, the CSTD can facilitate collaboration among governments, international organizations, academia, the private sector, civil society, and the technical community.

