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Contribution by ECLAC

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"Data Governance for Development: From Asymmetry to Equitable Stewardship"

United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)
Inputs to the CSTD 30th Session Priority Theme
Data Governance for Development: From Asymmetry to Equitable Stewardship

Introductory Note

This contribution responds to the request for inputs issued by the Secretariat of the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) for the preparation of the issue paper on **"Data Governance for Development: From Asymmetry to Equitable Stewardship."**

The responses draw upon ECLAC's work on digital transformation, particularly the **Latin American Artificial Intelligence Index (ILIA) 2025**, developed jointly with Chile's National Center for Artificial Intelligence (CENIA), as well as the **ECLAC Digital Development Observatory**, which systematically monitors digital transformation across the region.

ECLAC also serves as the Technical Secretariat of **eLAC**, **the Digital Agenda for Latin America and the Caribbean**. Celebrating 20 years of regional cooperation, eLAC has become the region's principal intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder platform for digital transformation, bringing together governments, the private sector, academia, civil society and international organizations to define shared priorities, foster policy dialogue and promote a common regional vision for digital development. Together with the Digital Development Observatory (ODD), the Latin American Artificial Intelligence Index (ILIA) and the Digital Transformation Lab (dLAB), eLAC forms an integrated regional ecosystem supporting evidence generation, policy dialogue, capacity-building and implementation across Latin America and the Caribbean.

1. What key challenges do countries face in building and leveraging data capacities, including infrastructure, ownership and stewardship, free and trusted cross-border data flows, interoperability and benefit-sharing?

Latin America and the Caribbean faces persistent structural asymmetries that limit countries' capacity to generate economic and social value from data. Although both public and private sectors are producing increasing volumes of data, significant gaps remain in data availability, interoperability, governance capacity and digital infrastructure.

Evidence from **ILIA 2025** identifies three major bottlenecks.

First, **data availability is advancing much more slowly than data generation**. Governments, businesses and citizens generate large amounts of information, yet much of it remains inaccessible because of fragmented institutional arrangements, limited open data policies and the absence of common standards. According to the Global Data Barometer 2025 incorporated into ILIA, the regional average for open data availability is only **37.3 out of 100**, ranging from **66 points in Chile** to **11.6 points in El Salvador**. This limits scientific collaboration, innovation and the development of AI solutions adapted to local contexts.

Second, **advanced computing infrastructure remains highly concentrated**. Brazil alone accounts for more than **90% of the region's high-performance computing capacity**, while more than half of the countries still lack advanced GPU clusters or high-performance computing facilities. This concentration reinforces technological dependency and limits AI development in smaller economies.

Third, **human capital shortages constrain effective data stewardship**. Although AI literacy is expanding across the region, specialized talent remains scarce. Thirteen of the nineteen countries assessed by ILIA do not yet include AI competencies in school curricula, and eleven countries still lack doctoral programmes in AI, reducing countries' ability to develop sovereign data ecosystems and advanced data governance capabilities.

Cross-border data governance also remains fragmented. Differences in personal data protection frameworks, cybersecurity capacities and institutional maturity complicate trusted cross-border data sharing and interoperability. At the same time, Latin America and the Caribbean has limited participation in international standard-setting organizations, reducing its influence over emerging global rules governing data and artificial intelligence.

Taken together, these challenges create a persistent risk that countries become primarily consumers rather than producers of data-driven innovation, limiting productivity growth, digital sovereignty and equitable participation in the global digital economy.

2. How do inequalities affect the way data is generated, collected, governed and used for development?

Existing inequalities are reproduced throughout the entire data lifecycle.

Differences in connectivity, digital infrastructure, institutional capacity and technical skills determine who can generate, access, govern and benefit from data. Countries with weaker digital ecosystems frequently lack interoperable public information systems, advanced statistical capabilities and secure computing infrastructure, limiting their ability to design evidence-based public policies.

Unequal data availability further affects policymaking. Fragmented, inaccessible or non-standardized administrative datasets reduce governments' ability to design evidence-based policies, monitor programmes and evaluate development outcomes, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations that already face barriers to participation.

Moreover, unequal access to AI capabilities concentrates productivity gains in countries and firms with stronger digital ecosystems, potentially widening existing development gaps both across and within countries.

Reducing these inequalities requires investments not only in infrastructure but also in open data ecosystems, statistical capacity, inclusive AI education, digital skills and responsible data stewardship.

3. Based on your organization's work, what national strategies, regulatory frameworks or policy instruments have been effective in promoting equitable and interoperable data governance?

ECLAC's work suggests that the most effective national approaches combine **strategic vision, institutional coordination and implementation capacity**, rather than relying exclusively on regulation.

Countries such as **Brazil, Chile and Uruguay** have developed relatively comprehensive national AI strategies supported by institutional arrangements, international cooperation and data governance initiatives. Several have also incorporated public consultations and multi-stakeholder processes into strategy development.

Regional governance mechanisms have also proven essential for supporting national implementation. Through **eLAC,** countries exchange experiences, identify common priorities, promote regulatory convergence and develop regional cooperation initiatives that strengthen national digital strategies while respecting different levels of institutional maturity.

However, ILIA 2025 also reveals a significant implementation gap. Although **nine countries have adopted national AI strategies**, only a limited number have allocated dedicated budgets, established implementation roadmaps or defined measurable performance indicators. Without implementation mechanisms, national strategies risk remaining largely aspirational.

Another important lesson concerns personal data governance and cybersecurity. Countries combining open government policies, updated personal data protection legislation, cybersecurity frameworks and interoperability standards generally provide more enabling environments for responsible AI innovation while maintaining public trust.

Today, **11 of the 19 countries assessed by ILIA have updated personal data protection legislation supported by dedicated supervisory authorities**, and many are converging toward internationally recognized standards such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), facilitating trusted international data exchanges.

Similarly, while **18 of the 19 countries have adopted cybersecurity legislation**, implementation capacity remains uneven due to shortages of qualified personnel and institutional capabilities.

Overall, regional experience demonstrates that regulation alone is insufficient. Effective data governance requires complementary investments in digital infrastructure, human capital, research ecosystems, data availability and institutional capacity.

4. Can you share examples of initiatives that have helped reduce asymmetries and promote more equitable data stewardship?

Several regional initiatives illustrate how cooperation can reduce structural asymmetries and promote equitable data stewardship.

The **Latin American Artificial Intelligence Index (ILIA)**, jointly developed by ECLAC and CENIA, constitutes the first comprehensive regional benchmarking framework covering enabling factors, research, innovation, adoption and governance across nineteen countries. Through more than one hundred

indicators, ILIA supports evidence-based policymaking while facilitating peer learning and regional cooperation.

An especially innovative example is **LatamGPT**, an open large language model designed to incorporate regional languages, cultural contexts and locally relevant knowledge.

Rather than relying on large-scale web scraping, LatamGPT has built its training corpus through voluntary data-sharing agreements with universities, libraries, ministries, governments, research centres and cultural institutions across the region. Coordinated by CENIA together with more than **40 institutions from 12 countries**, the initiative has assembled over **900 gigabytes of curated text—equivalent to approximately 200 billion tokens**—through consensual data partnerships. It demonstrates how collaborative approaches can simultaneously strengthen regional AI capabilities, respect data ownership, promote trusted data stewardship and enhance digital sovereignty.

Additional successful initiatives include regional AI training programmes for SMEs and public servants, such as **Hazlo con IA**, collaborative research networks and open-source software communities that lower barriers to AI adoption.

Sector-specific initiatives also demonstrate the value of responsible data use, including AI systems that optimize urban traffic management to reduce congestion and emissions, and cloud-based digital infrastructure that ensured continuity of judicial services following severe flooding in southern Brazil.

5. What mechanisms or institutional arrangements have proven useful in fostering collaboration on data governance for development?

Regional experience highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder governance. In Latin America and the Caribbean, eLAC, the Digital Agenda for Latin America and the Caribbean, has provided for twenty years a permanent regional platform for dialogue among governments, the private sector, academia, civil society and international organizations. It has facilitated consensus-building, peer learning, policy coordination and regional cooperation, while supporting the development of a shared regional vision for digital transformation. The most successful initiatives typically bring together governments, universities, research centres, international organizations and the private sector to develop common standards, share infrastructure and exchange knowledge

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Examples include:

- Regional AI research networks;
- Public-private partnerships supporting digital and computing infrastructure;
- Collaboration with global technology companies on cloud infrastructure and AI skills development;

- International cooperation promoting regulatory convergence, particularly in personal data protection;
- Open-source communities that facilitate collaborative AI development;
- National inter-institutional coordination mechanisms, particularly in Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, which increasingly incorporate citizen participation into AI and data governance processes.

Regional observatories and benchmarking initiatives—including ILIA and the ECLAC Digital Development Observatory—also serve as neutral platforms for peer learning, policy dialogue and evidence-based decision-making.

6. What major bilateral, regional or international partnerships have helped advance equitable and interoperable data governance?

Regional cooperation has become increasingly important for addressing the growing complexity of AI and data governance.

One particularly significant initiative is the **European Union–Latin America and the Caribbean Digital Alliance**, supported through the European Union's Global Gateway strategy. Through this partnership, ECLAC and its partners have strengthened regional cooperation on artificial intelligence, digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, data governance and digital public policies. ILIA 2025 itself constitutes one of the flagship outputs of this collaboration.

The EU-LAC Digital Alliance has also reinforced the implementation of the eLAC agenda by supporting regional cooperation on artificial intelligence, digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, connectivity, data governance and digital public policies, strengthening eLAC as the region's principal platform for collaborative digital transformation.

Other important partnerships include collaboration with UNESCO, OECD, CAF, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Organization of American States, the United Nations system, academic institutions and global technology companies such as Google and Amazon Web Services.

These partnerships have contributed to:

- sharing good practices;
- developing comparable regional indicators;
- strengthening institutional capacities;
- promoting policy harmonization;
- facilitating technical cooperation.

Nevertheless, important challenges remain, including sustainable financing, unequal technical capacities, interoperability across national data systems and ensuring meaningful participation by smaller countries.

ILIA 2025 also highlights the risk of **"symbolic compliance"**, whereby adherence to international declarations and principles does not necessarily translate into effective national implementation unless supported by concrete institutional mechanisms and adequate resources.

7. How can international cooperation strengthen equitable and interoperable data governance? In what ways can the UN CSTD contribute?

International cooperation should focus on reducing structural asymmetries rather than solely promoting technology diffusion.

Priority areas include:

- strengthening statistical and data governance capacities;
- supporting interoperable digital public infrastructure;
- promoting trusted cross-border data governance frameworks;
- expanding access to advanced computing infrastructure;
- investing in specialized AI and data science talent;
- supporting open science and open-source AI ecosystems;
- developing common indicators and measurement frameworks for equitable data governance.

Supporting established regional cooperation mechanisms such as eLAC can significantly increase the effectiveness of international assistance by providing trusted platforms for policy dialogue, regional benchmarking, peer learning and coordinated implementation. Building on existing regional governance mechanisms helps translate international principles into concrete national and regional actions.

The United Nations CSTD can make an important contribution by:

- facilitating dialogue between developed and developing countries;
- promoting internationally agreed principles for equitable data stewardship;
- encouraging greater participation of developing countries in international standard-setting bodies;
- strengthening South-South and triangular cooperation;
- promoting evidence-based policymaking through common benchmarking frameworks such as ILIA;
- improving coordination across UN entities working on digital transformation.

Overall, ECLAC's work suggests that reducing data asymmetries is fundamentally **a development challenge rather than solely a technological one**. Building equitable data ecosystems requires simultaneous investments in digital infrastructure, data availability, human capital, interoperable governance frameworks and regional cooperation. Countries that succeed in generating, governing and

using data responsibly will be better positioned to leverage artificial intelligence to increase productivity, foster innovation, promote inclusion and advance sustainable development, while ensuring that the benefits of digital transformation are broadly shared.