

**INTERSESSIONAL PANEL OF THE UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION
ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT (CSTD)**

**Geneva, Switzerland
6 November 2026**

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

DISCLAIMER: The views presented here are the contributors' and do not necessarily reflect the views and position of the United Nations or the UN Trade and Development.



Input to CSTD Inter-Sessional Panel Meeting on

Data Governance for Development: From Asymmetry to Equitable Stewardship

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? (Please provide examples and, where possible, quantitative evidence or indicators of these challenges and their impacts)

Many developing countries face a host of challenges for effective data governance and capabilities, including major asymmetries in the capacity to produce, process, store, use and transmit data that have deepened the global digital divide. This is compounded by a stark divide in internet connectivity given that 94 percent of the population in high-income countries use the internet as compared to 23 percent in low-income nations, as per the ITU¹.

Developing nations also have to grapple with limited access to compute and storage, with one advanced economy alone accounting for 45 percent of operational data centres globally². This disparity has been exacerbated even further in recent months, as the extensive buildout of AI-specific data centres has been highly concentrated, with just two countries accounting for 90 percent of the world's AI-specific compute capacity³. This has also had knock-on effects as it has caused a shortage of memory chips globally, which in turn is reducing the availability of low-cost digital devices, and increasing the costs of computing hardware across the world⁴.

On the policy and regulatory front, developing countries have continued to struggle with implementation challenges as their data governance frameworks are comparatively recent. This requires building their institutional capacities for effective enforcement at the national level, while engaging in international cooperation to ensure that their national and citizens' data is handled according to the applicable standards, the

¹ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Facts and Figures 2025. Available from <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2025/10/15/ff25-internet-use/>

² Petroc Taylor, Number of data centers worldwide as of June 2026, by country or territory, Statista, 25 June 2026. Available from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1228433/data-centers-worldwide-by-country/>

³ Independent International Scientific Panel on AI, Preliminary Report, 2026.

⁴ Samuel Gibbs, "RAMageddon': is the era of cheap phones and laptops over?", *The Guardian*, 6 May 2026. Available from <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2026/may/06/ramageddon-cheap-phones-laptops-macbooks-ps5s-ai-chips>

consents associated with the data are respected⁵, and accountability mechanisms operationalised in case of breach or misuse of data.

In exercising their sovereign rights over data, nations need to retain the policy space to regulate cross-border data flows including through data localisation to protect personal privacy, prevent data extraction by foreign entities for commercial purposes, for national security reasons and/or to support the local economy.

Finally, on sharing the benefits of data, it must be underscored that data collection, annotation and hosting have real costs on the data provider, while large multinational actors have been able to capture most of the economic value generated through the processing and use of this data. This is most visible in the case of data that has been used to train AI models. For instance, the case of *Bartz, et al. v. Anthropic PBC* has now resulted in a \$1.5 billion settlement of the class action lawsuit brought by a group of U.S. authors who accused Anthropic of violating their copyright to train its AI model⁶. As similar remedies are not easily accessible to rightsholders in developing nations, better frameworks are required to ensure that developing countries are able to monetise their own data and harness it for their own development needs and priorities.

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

The global digital divide manifests itself first in data and radiates out to other digital technologies. For instance, much of the data generated by developing countries is processed outside their territory by transnational actors. Large tech corporations sell their digital products globally and collect user-generated data which is further monetised extraterritorially. This leads to the Global South data generators being prevented from accessing and sharing the benefits generated from the use of their data⁷.

Another persistent inequality is in the urban-rural divide which is particularly stark in developing nations. As per ITU, in 2024, “of the 2.6 billion people not using the Internet, 1.8 billion lived in rural areas, against 800 million in urban areas”⁸. It further adds that

⁵ Carlos M. Correa, “Data in Legal Limbo: Ownership, sovereignty, or a digital public goods regime?”, South Centre Research Paper 117, September 2020. Available from <https://www.southcentre.int/research-paper-117-september-2020/>

⁶ Blake Brittain, “US judge approves Anthropic's \$1.5 billion settlement of copyright lawsuit”, *Reuters*, 20 July 2026. Available from <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-judge-approves-anthropics-15-billion-settlement-copyright-lawsuit-2026-07-20/>

⁷ See: Marc Stuhldreier, “Data Access and the EU Data Strategy: Implications for the Global South”, South Centre Policy Brief 122, 30 November 2023. Available from <https://www.southcentre.int/policy-brief-122-30-november-2023/>

⁸ ITU, Facts and Figures 2024. Available from <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2024/11/10/ff24-internet-use-in-urban-and-rural-areas/>

“the gap between urban and rural areas thus varies significantly among the countries in different income groups. In high-income countries the gap is almost non-existent (...). In low-income countries, by contrast, it remains a potent force, with just one rural dweller in six (16 percent) using the Internet, barely one-third the figure for urban dwellers”⁹. The lack of connectivity in rural areas of developing countries means that the local data is not even being captured digitally. This then often forces governments to rely on data from other regions and countries, which might be ill-suited for addressing the local needs and conditions of their own rural communities.

Addressing this gap requires provision of appropriate levels of financing, technical assistance and capacity-building to developing countries. On financing, one estimate suggests that closing the connectivity gap by 2030 will require mobilising financing to the tune of 2.6 to 2.8 trillion dollars¹⁰. Furthermore, building the capacities of national data authorities in developing countries is critical for ensuring that data is being used in appropriate ways, and that policy tools such as data localisation and mandatory beneficiation of data at the national level can be used to promote sustainable development¹¹.

Equally important is to have the voice of data generators in this process. For instance, community led bottom-up initiatives for data governance would allow for greater democratic control and participation of the data producers in sharing the benefits of data. This would shift them from being subjects of data extraction to active stakeholders in determining how their data is collected, stored, processed and monetized.

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? What are the lessons learned? (Please describe any specific challenges, failures or successes encountered during implementation)

It is important to underscore that developing countries must have the necessary policy space to devise national legal and regulatory regimes for data governance that are adapted to their own national/regional circumstances, needs and priorities. This can include the adoption of standards that are interoperable with those applied at the international level, thereby enabling the flow of data based on mutual recognition of data standards among jurisdictions, subject to national regulations.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “ITU report details USD 2.6-2.8 trillion cost to connect everyone meaningfully by 2030”, *ITU Press Release*, 1 September 2025. Available from <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/PR-2025-09-01-Connecting-Humanity.aspx>

¹¹ Bilal Zaka, “Digital Transformation: Prioritizing Data Localization”, *SouthViews* No. 206, 25 September 2020. Available from <https://www.southcentre.int/southviews-no-206-25-september-2020/>

Further, experience has shown that in developing countries, the adoption of national and regional data governance frameworks may not automatically lead to their effective implementation and enforcement. In many cases, existing gaps in institutional capacities and the steep learning curve required for officials and policymakers, combined with the paucity of available resources for enforcement, represent considerable barriers to equitable and interoperable data governance. The best designed frameworks without building institutional capacities and providing dedicated financial resources for their work renders them aspirational rather than effective.

A report by the Global Data Barometer underscores that “in Africa there is real momentum on policy reform, especially data protection, but implementation hurdles on infrastructure, funding and institutional capacity remain substantial”¹². It further adds that in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, “countries tend to have stronger institutional capacity and more established digital infrastructure. However, challenges around inter-agency coordination and sustaining political will are slowing progress”¹³.

Another critical aspect is the sustainability of financing for data governance initiatives. In many cases, data governance is not seen as a high-enough priority. However, by prioritising integrated, country-led programmes that strengthen national data governance systems, these can be shown as contributing directly to raising fiscal resources and provide an attractive return on investment into data governance. Ghana, for instance, has proposed setting up of a National Data Fund to finance data production. This could be a multistakeholder initiative, pooling resources from government, donors, and business, with the aim of treating data as core infrastructure; and using public-private partnerships to create mutual value¹⁴.

4. Can you share examples of initiatives that have helped reduce asymmetries and promote 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)

Reducing asymmetries in data governance requires understanding who has control over the data infrastructure, who captures the value it generates, and how benefits from the use of data gets shared and redistributed. This requires undertaking an assessment of the data value chain across its entire lifecycle, as different kinds of data is treated and processed in different ways, and their benefits can vary accordingly. Advancing the use

¹² Global Data Barometer, *The Global Data Barometer 2nd edition: A Shared Compass for Navigating the Data Landscape*, 29 May 2025. Available from <https://globaldatabarometer.org/2025/05/the-global-data-barometer-2nd-edition-a-shared-compass-for-navigating-the-data-landscape/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “GSS Forum Pushes for Establishment of National Data Fund”, *Ghanaian Times*, 16 December 2025. Available from <https://ghanaiantimes.com.gh/gss-forum-pushes-for-establishment-of-national-data-fund/>

of fiduciary models of data stewardship should be considered, as these models require data to be held in a trust and used for the benefit of the data subject¹⁵.

There are plenty of examples of use of data trusts and data cooperatives in the case of agricultural data, which show how to balance access with sovereignty. One of them is the Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition (GODAN) aimed to “promote the FAIR principles—Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reuse—of agricultural and nutritional data”¹⁶. Now based at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, GODAN emphasises farmer-led innovation, using South-South collaboration approaches to *inter alia* “provide access to agricultural data platforms tailored to the needs of the Global South, providing capacity building to equip developing nations to release and reuse data for promoting innovation and economic growth; improved service delivery and governance; and better environmental and social outcomes; and to support the creation of interoperable national-level open data platforms in agriculture”¹⁷.

At the country level, innovative approaches such as India’s AgriStack can be mentioned. AgriStack is a national-level, farmer-centric Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) built by India’s Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare. Through its three federated and authenticated registries (Farmer Registry, Geo-Referenced Village Map Registry and Crop Sown Registry), it “addresses key issues in Indian agriculture such as fragmented data systems, lack of interoperability, inefficient scheme delivery, and limited access to credit, advisory, and markets by creating a federated, farmer-centric, consent-driven digital ecosystem”¹⁸.

In the context of public health, DHIS2 is a useful example of a software platform that enables the collection, reporting, analysis and dissemination of aggregate and individual-level data, widely incorporated into national health digital systems to record health data in more than 75 developing countries. As DHIS2 is open-source and presented as a digital public good, its use allows governments to fully own their systems, infrastructure, data and governance models, thus enabling them to avoid closed ecosystems, proprietary data formats and commercial lock-ins¹⁹. DHIS2 has been adopted, for instance, by the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), with “a partnership structured around four key areas: capacity building, research collaboration,

¹⁵ See: Carlos M. Correa, “Data in Legal Limbo: Ownership, sovereignty, or a digital public goods regime?”, South Centre Research Paper 117, September 2020. Available from <https://www.southcentre.int/research-paper-117-september-2020/>

¹⁶ Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition (GODAN), FAQ. Available from <https://www.godan.info/faq>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare of India, AgriStack. Available from <https://agristack.gov.in/>. See also: International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), “Digital public infrastructure for agriculture: AgriStack”. Available from <https://issca.icrisat.org/scalable-solutions/digital-public-infrastructure-for-agriculture-agristack>

¹⁹ District Health Information Software 2 (DHIS2), “Health intelligence”. Available from <https://dhis2.org/health/health-intelligence/>

strategic initiatives, and integration of the Caribbean into the global DHIS2 community of practice”²⁰.

5. What mechanisms or institutional arrangements have proven useful in fostering collaboration on data governance for development among different stakeholders (e.g., university-industry, private-public, or multi-stakeholder initiatives)?

Institutional arrangements for data governance in the Global South are still largely at a nascent stage, though some developing countries and regional organisations have taken the initiative with a view to foster international and regional cooperation on data governance with the participation of different stakeholders.

In March 2026, the World Data Organization (WDO) was established to “promote global data development and governance practices, facilitate the exchange and utilization of data in a compliant, secure and trustworthy manner, and serve the development of the global digital economy”²¹. Among others, it “aims to ‘break barriers’ around different data policies in different countries by promoting industry consensus, and helping multinational enterprises reduce data compliance costs. It also aims to build ecosystems through applying data in practical scenarios such as medical care, education, and energy to promote project implementation and industrial innovation”²². Reports suggest that the WDO has more than 200 members from over 40 countries, with its membership comprising of “companies, universities, think tanks, international organisations, financial institutions across industries such as finance, medical care, energy, internet and automobiles”²³.

The African Union is currently engaged in implementation of the African Union Data Policy Framework which aims to develop inclusive and harmonized digital and data policies in Africa. This is being operationalised through technical assistance provided by the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) on data governance. The agency organised a series of workshops for countries to better understand their digital ecosystems and priorities and enable the design of a tailored technical assistance solution as part of the implementation of the AU Data Policy Framework through an inclusive and multi-stakeholder approach. Its primary objective is to enhance the institutional capacity and independent oversight capabilities of Data Protection

²⁰ “CARPHA and HISP Sign MoU to Strengthen Public Health and Disease Surveillance Systems Management in the Caribbean”, DHIS2 News, 15 December 2023. Available from <https://dhis2.org/carpha-hisp-mou/>

²¹ The State Council, People’s Republic of China, “World Data Organization established in Beijing”, *Xinhua*, 31 March 2026. Available from https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202603/31/content_WS69cb2a94c6d00ca5f9a0a2db.html

²² “China establishes data organisation aimed at global industry consensus”, *Reuters*, 31 March 2026. Available from <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/china-establishes-data-organisation-aimed-global-industry-consensus-2026-03-31/>

²³ Ibid.

Authorities (DPAs) while fostering stronger cross-border cooperation and a unified commitment to the implementation of the African Union Data Policy Framework²⁴.

6. What major bilateral, regional, or international partnership have helped advance 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)

Global South countries have built several partnerships with different partners, including other countries, international organisations, academia and civil society to improve data governance and regulate cross-border data flows. For instance, at the regional level, the Inter-American Framework for Data and AI Governance is an initiative of the Organization of American States (OAS). It was “inspired by the Digital and Open Government section of the 2022 Summit of the Americas [and] its objective is to guide member states in developing data governance for AI”²⁵. This initiative has resulted in the development of the Inter-American Guidelines on Data Governance and AI²⁶ which cover 12 key themes. Work on a Model Policy on Data Governance and AI is also underway as part of this process.

In the ASEAN region, initiatives like the Singapore – Johor – Batam (SJB) cross-border ecosystem show how ASEAN countries can implement trusted data corridors. One report notes that “SJB has developed into a tri-hub digital corridor leveraging Singapore’s regulatory strengths, Johor’s scalable expansion, and Batam’s Special Economic Zone incentives”²⁷. This will be underpinned by the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), which is “ASEAN’s first region-wide digital economy agreement and a major milestone in advancing the ASEAN Leader’s vision of a digitally integrated, secure, interoperable, competitive, and inclusive regional economy”²⁸. The DEFA is expected to be signed in November 2026.

²⁴ Office of the Data Protection Commissioner (Kenya), “One Continent, One Vision for Data Governance: Strengthening Partnerships Across Africa”, 30 June 2026. Available from <https://www.odpc.go.ke/one-continent-one-vision-for-data-governance-strengthening-partnerships-across-africa/>.

²⁵ Organization of American States (OAS), “Inter-American framework on data governance and artificial intelligence (MIGDIA)”. Available from <https://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/inter-american-framework-on-data-governance-and-artificial-intelligence-migdia>

²⁶ OAS, “Inter-American Guidelines on Data Governance and Artificial Intelligence”, November 2024. Available from <https://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/publications/moduleid/7083/id/1080/lang/1/controller/item/action/download>

²⁷ Rifki Weno et al, “Trusted data corridors and the SJB-SEZ model: ASEAN's blueprint for cross-border digital integration”, *ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ASEAN-BAC)*, 21 November 2025. Available from <https://asean-bac.org/news-and-press-releases/trusted-data-corridors-and-the-sjb-sez-model-asean-s-blueprint-for-cross-border-digital-integration>

²⁸ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), “Statement of the Chairperson of the ASEAN Senior Economic Officials (SEOM) on the conclusion of ASEAN DEFA negotiations”, 1 June 2026. Available from

Another international cooperation initiative to build data governance capacities was supported by the India-UN Development Partnership Fund. Through this project, Moldova was able to leverage experiences “from India and Estonia to enhance registry-based census technologies and conduct the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS). These efforts are improving data accuracy, timeliness, and efficiency, ensuring gender-sensitive and evidence-based policymaking”²⁹. The project thus enhanced Moldova’s technical capabilities and fostered mutual learning, allowing it to share its experiences and contribute to the global conversation on data management and statistical modernization³⁰.

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?

As part of the implementation of the UN Global Digital Compact, the CSTD has an important role to play in advancing international cooperation that addresses barriers to access and enables developing countries to adopt and use digital technologies and AI in a safe and sustainable manner.

For fostering equitable, safe, and interoperable data governance among countries, the CSTD should consider building on the work done by the Working Group on Data Governance at All Levels to produce further guidance on effective data governance frameworks that are suited to the needs and realities of developing and least developed countries. This should be grounded in the principles of data sovereignty and open access to algorithms to make computer code, AI machine learning models, and algorithmic decision-making processes transparent, reproducible and freely available to the public and governments.

The CSTD could focus on leveraging international cooperation to address the financial and other constraints impeding the achievement of digital inclusion for all. By utilising its convening power to bring together governments, multilateral development banks, international financial institutions and the private sector, the CSTD can promote innovative modalities to develop financing mechanisms and incentives to enhance access to and make affordable high-speed internet in Global South countries.

<https://asean.org/statement-of-the-chairperson-of-the-asean-senior-economic-officials-seom-on-the-conclusion-of-asean-defa-negotiations/>

²⁹ Xiaojun Grace Wang, “Leveraging South-South and Triangular Cooperation to Build Statistical and Data Capacities in Developing Countries”, *UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC)*, 5 March 2025. Available from <https://unsouthsouth.org/2025/03/05/leveraging-south-south-and-triangular-cooperation-to-build-statistical-and-data-capacities-in-developing-countries/>

³⁰ “India-UN Fund: Moldova Advances Data Governance Through South-South Cooperation”, *UNOSSC*, 3 September 2024. Available from <https://unsouthsouth.org/2024/09/03/india-un-fund-moldova-advances-data-governance-through-south-south-cooperation/>

Furthermore, South-South cooperation has long been recognised as a practical and proven modality for developing countries to exchange knowledge, experiences and good practices for sustainable development. Given the recent adoption of data protection frameworks in many developing countries and the shared nature of their implementation challenges, the CSTD should actively promote South-South cooperation as a modality for capacity building and regulatory learning on data governance for the developing and least developed countries.

It could also identify possible South-South mechanisms for sharing experiences and lessons learned on data protection, benefit-sharing and enforcement. In addition, the CSTD could propose multistakeholder modalities that would bring together different actors such as international organisations, think-tanks, academia, business and civil society to support technical assistance and capacity-building for the Global South.