Executive summary

Data have emerged as a critical foundation for economic growth and a tool for evidence-informed policies. Data's unique value lies in its ability to fuel innovation, drive the development in scientific research, and facilitate transformative breakthroughs across various sectors. More importantly, data's ability to provide systemic evidence means we can better understand the intricate interplay of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their interconnected impact.

When managed wisely, data have the potential to combat pressing global challenges, ranging from climate change mitigation to pandemic responses, from ensuring food security to disaster risk management. However, it is crucial to remember that like all powerful tools, data come with its set of challenges.

If mishandled, data can widen the disparities in developmental outcomes, magnifying the digital divide and potentially morphing it into a broader developmental divide. If left unregulated, data can inadvertently lead to market monopolies, spawn discriminatory practices, and even pose threats to fundamental human rights, among other issues.

This publication seeks to unravel the multifaceted relationship between data and sustainable development, building on recent work in the context of the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD). It uncovers channels through which data can invigorate development initiatives and inform policymaking.

Arising from the CSTD deliberations, the publication conveys views and experiences on how to maximize the value of data for development and bolster effective and ethical data utilization, through a science and technology policy lens.

It calls for increased investment in data and statistical capacities which can make a significant difference in progress towards sustainable development, especially in low-income countries and fragile states, to bridge the data divide faced by vulnerable populations, and feeding into the efforts coordinated by the UN Statistical Commission with the global statistical system, donors, and stakeholders to strengthen national statistical systems.

The publication refers to the importance of the 2025 update of the System of National Accounts when it comes to data as an asset and free digital services among other digitalization trends, now debated under the UN Statistical Commission.

This contribution also intends to inform and build upon ongoing efforts of the High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) of the United Nations Chief Executives Board to advance international data governance, especially as reflected in their note on 'International Data Governance: Pathways to Progress', adopted by UN Chief Executives in 2023. The seven principles debated by the CSTD also share the values represented by the HLCP work towards international data governance principles grounded in human rights and sustainable development that promote accountability, agility, and fairness.

Developing effective frameworks for global data governance is crucial to leverage data as a powerful tool for sustainable development. Governments and all relevant stakeholders must implement strategies to enhance data literacy, strengthen local capabilities in data analysis and management, and negotiate equitable data management frameworks internationally.

As work proceeds towards the Global Digital Compact (GDC), contributing to the Summit of the Future in 2024, this publication serves as early input to international data governance debates, promoting an integrated approach to science, technology and data, and remains open to adaptation further development in a multistakeholder collaborative effort, notably between the CSTD, as the UN's focal point for science and technology for Development and the UN Statistical Commission, as the primary UN body responsible for the management of statistical information and governance of statistics and data.