



Chief Executives Board for Coordination

Advance unedited version

Distr.: General
4 November 2024

Original: English

Second regular session of 2024

Manhasset, New York, 7 and 8 November 2024

Proposed Normative Foundations for International Data Governance: Goals and Principles

United Nations system contribution to the advancement of international data governance

I. Introduction

1. HLCP approved at its 45th session (March 2023) the paper "*International Data Governance – Pathways to Progress*"¹, which was subsequently endorsed by the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) in May 2023. The paper outlined a vision and steps towards the promotion and protection of data through a multistakeholder approach to international data governance that responsibly unlocks the full value of data for the global public good. As a next step, HLCP requested the Working Group to “explore the normative foundations of an international data governance framework, with a view towards developing international data governance principles grounded in human rights and sustainable development that promote accountability, agility, and fairness”². This document responds to the request from HLCP and builds on *International Data Governance – Pathways to Progress*, which emphasized the urgent need for a values- and principles-based approach to data governance that would ensure the flexibility and adaptability required for a rapidly evolving digital landscape and the diversity of countries’ legal, developmental, and social contexts.

2. In October 2023, the paper ‘*Draft Normative Foundations for an International Data Governance Framework: Goals and Principles*’ was presented to the HLCP for deliberation during its 46th session. At the meeting, the Committee supported the overarching goals of value, trust and equity, as well as the principles contained in the document and the need for global data governance more broadly. There was agreement that the goals and principles were useful for the United Nations system but could also serve as a contribution for the international community more broadly. Reflecting on the changing nature of data and the

¹ CEB (2023). International data governance: pathways to progress. Available at: [International data governance - Pathways to progress | United Nations - CEB \(unsceb.org\)](https://www.un.org/development/desa/pubs/2023/04/2023-04-international-data-governance-pathways-to-progress/)

² HLCP Report of forty-fifth session, March 2023, CEB/2023/4

need for consultations, the co-leads of the working group were encouraged to leverage other relevant forums for engaging with stakeholders on the proposed goals, values and principles.

3. As suggested by the HLCP, the co-chairs engaged with relevant fora to discuss the proposed goals, values and principles and contributed to discussions on international data governance at the 55th session of the United Nation Statistical Commission (February 2024 – New York), and the 27th session of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (April 2024 - Geneva). Contributions were also made at a number of consultative meetings, including the Global Digital Compact (GDC) stakeholder consultations (February 2024), a special ‘Global Digital Compact - Data Deep Dive’ convened by United Nations University in collaboration UN Economic Commission for Africa (May 2024 - Addis Ababa) and the UN High-level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence (March 2024 – Geneva).

4. Building on these efforts, this document outlines a proposed set of common goals and principles as a normative foundation for international data governance. Hence, the aim of the document is not to present universally agreed goals and principles – that could be developed only through large multi-stakeholder consultations – but to provide solid starting blocks for future arrangements on international data governance. The document incorporates comments received during the 46th session of the HLCP and during other fora and meetings noted above. This updated proposal also incorporates some elements of the principles to advance data governance for development proposed by the CSTD secretariat³.

5. Recognizing the rapidly changing data and digital environment, and under the broad chapeau of data stewardship, the document seeks to build on the themes and clusters of principles identified earlier by the Working Group by advancing the normative foundations articulated in *International Data Governance: Pathways to Progress*.

6. These include considerations that the goals and principles:

- Be forward-thinking and adaptable, all the while fostering consistency in data governance across international actors and countries;
- Be appropriate to the context: the data type, its use, and ensuring relevance and effectiveness in diverse settings;
- Promote equitable access to data for sustainable development and ensure that data benefits all;
- Support, promote and align to globally recognized frameworks and objectives such as international human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- Align with and support shared goals, such as value, trust, and equity; and
- Adopt a multistakeholder approach that brings together diverse stakeholders and mobilizes support for complex policy reforms and interventions.

7. The document also seeks to complement standards and principles already developed and work currently underway across the United Nations system on artificial intelligence (AI). This includes the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and its Data Policy Action Area, adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in 2021, the *Principles for the Ethical Use of Artificial Intelligence in the United Nations System*,⁴ adopted by the CEB in 2022, the Global Digital Compact annexed to the Pact of the Future, and work under the

³ UNCTAD (2024). Data for development. Report of the Secretary-General to the 27th session of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development. E/CN.16/2024/2. Available at: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ecnl62024d2_en.pdf

⁴ CEB (2022). Principles for the Ethical Use of Artificial Intelligence in the United Nations System. Available at: <https://unsceb.org/principles-ethical-use-artificial-intelligence-united-nations-system>

HLCP Inter Agency Working Group on AI. As data is foundational for AI development, data governance is an important component in the responsible development and use of AI and other technologies. Notwithstanding the linkages between data and AI, the current document does not focus on AI or address the issue of AI governance. It is nevertheless worth noting that in as far as is practicable, the principles proposed in this paper are aligned with the *Principles for the Ethical Use of Artificial Intelligence in the United Nations System* which make explicit the link between AI governance and data governance. The UN High-level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence, in their final report ‘Governing AI for Humanity’⁵ has also reaffirmed that link in their guiding principles. Their third principle states ‘AI governance should be built in step with data governance and the promotion of data commons’. The values and principles presented in this paper align with the Global Digital Compact, which reiterates that Member States will continue discussions in the United Nations, building on the outcomes of the GDC and recognizing the ongoing work of other relevant bodies and stakeholders, including the United Nations Statistical Commission, in their efforts to pursue common understandings for data governance at all levels, as relevant for development.⁶

8. Advancing the normative grounding of international data governance is timely, as techniques to realize economic and social value from data are evolving at a rapid pace, particularly in the private sector. Advances in AI, for example, pair potential opportunities for growth and inclusive development with the risks of creating new forms of exclusion and inequality or exacerbating existing ones⁷. The ability to harness these techniques for inclusive development in a way that addresses data protection and privacy concerns and enables oversight and transparency depends on the availability of representative data to develop solutions fit to function and serve populations across the globe. Conversely, lack of data gives rise to a lack of solutions or solutions that work less-well for some, usually those already at risk of being left behind. For example, emerging techniques for data processing have the potential to widen existing inequalities. International data governance sets one of the necessary foundations to unlock value from unused data and to responsibly leverage emerging techniques to accelerate inclusive development, address future challenges, and further the realization of human rights.

9. The why, what and how of international data governance have been extensively covered in the paper "International Data Governance – Pathways to Progress" with the understanding that this remains a field that continues to evolve in response to technology advancements and societal changes. The same paper documented international initiatives and intergovernmental fora relevant to data governance. The aim of this proposal is to provide a concrete offer for a set of universal principles that could form a normative basis for starting discussions on an international architecture for data governance. The principles proposed here reflect the body of literature that is building up from the many data governance initiatives documented in the Pathways to Progress paper.

II. Normative foundations for international data governance

A. Goals

10. The proposed normative structure and principles articulated below set out the foundations for data governance under the chapeau of three overarching goals: value, trust,

⁵ United Nations (2024). Governing AI for Humanity. Final Report of the Secretary-General’s High-Level Advisory Board on Artificial Intelligence. Available at:

https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/governing_ai_for_humanity_final_report_en.pdf

⁶ United Nations (2024). Pact for the Future, annexed Global Digital Compact, Paragraph 49.

Available at: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sof-the-pact-for-the-future.pdf>

⁷ Patel, K. (2024). Ethical reflections on data-centric AI: Balancing benefits and risks. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence Research and Development*. 2 (1): 1-17. Bell, SA and Korinek, A. (2023). AI’s Economic Peril. *Journal of Democracy*. 34 (4): 151-161.

and equity. These goals apply across the full data lifecycle (from collection, extraction, storage, processing, analysis, sharing, dissemination, use, archiving, deletion and disposal) and at international, national, regional and organizational levels.

- a) *Value*: Maximize the value of data across all data domains (e.g., sustainable and inclusive development, peace and security, human rights, and humanitarian assistance) through increased responsible data use and reuse. This can be done by fostering a culture of data quality and appreciation, as well as promoting data flows and technical interoperability both within and across borders. It also involves identifying, assessing and managing, rather than avoiding, the risks inherent to data production and dissemination, mindful of the need to maximise the benefit and minimize the risks of data. Harmonizing definitions, classifications, and standards (for example, through thematic taxonomies) across stakeholders and data assets is essential to achieve interoperability and enable the effective (re)use of data.
- b) *Trust*: Enable trust by ensuring secure environments for data across the data lifecycle and by protecting individuals and groups from the risks and harms arising from data misuse. Establishing trust requires adopting a human rights-based approach to data governance, prioritizing safeguarding and personal data protection and privacy, ensuring responsible data practices that involve enhancing transparency, accountability, data quality, and the security of data and its infrastructure.
- c) *Equity*: Ensure equitable distribution of benefits from increased and responsible access, use and reuse of data. In the case of personal data, engage in efforts to return the benefits of data use to the people the data is from and about. Promoting equity includes representation and participation of individuals and communities, including vulnerable and marginalized groups; preventing bias and discrimination in data collection, analysis, and use; and respecting individuals and communities' agency, rights, interests, and preferences throughout the data lifecycle. Strike a balance between individual and collective needs by empowering data subjects to access and control their personal data and its uses where appropriate. The aspiration of equity involves responsible data stewardship, including the ethical use and reuse of data for the public good and evidence-informed decision making.

B. Principles toward achieving these goals

11. The principles below seek to advance the overarching goals of value, trust, and equity for sustainable outcomes through a multistakeholder approach⁸. They provide the foundation for international data governance grounded in international law, including international human rights law. These principles provide practical and ethical guidelines and serve as guidance for the design and development of future global data governance, and for evaluating its effectiveness.

i. Value

12. Maximizing the value of data requires:
 - **Enabling Environment for Data Use and Reuse**: Foster a culture and systems (i.e., processes, methods and tools) that value and promote appropriate access and responsible use and reuse of data (e.g., with the adoption of responsible open

⁸ See WDR2021, Data for Better Lives, Chapter 8 on multistakeholderism. "Multistakeholderism" is an approach to data governance, not an end in itself. It is intended to facilitate better, more sustainable outcomes by enabling all stakeholders to undertake their roles in a coordinated manner. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35218/9781464816000_Ch08.pdf

data standards). This principle includes providing equal access to the benefits of data and its technologies, devices and tools. This principle also envisages educating and empowering individuals, communities, and organizations to produce or co-create, work with, inform decisions with, derive benefits from, and understand data effectively.

- **Interoperability:** Promote data interoperability and portability by adopting standardized and open formats, common metadata elements that enable data transfer and re-use, protocols, taxonomies, and interfaces. This principle can contribute to improved consistency and integration across different systems, both to enable effective data collaboration and sharing and to simplify the extraction and compilation of data from multiple sources.
- **Mutuality and Solidarity:** Encourage data governance approaches that prioritize mutual benefit and solidarity for people across geography and generations so that data can be used for the greater good of society, considering both individual and collective needs, interests, and responsibilities.

ii. Trust

13. Enabling trust requires:

- **Human Rights-Based approach to data:** Respect, protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms as defined in international human rights law. This should apply across all elements of data governance, including data protection and privacy, particularly for children or other vulnerable groups who may not be in a position to make determinations for themselves and rely on others to act in their best interests. This principle emphasizes the need for a fair and legitimate processing, purpose specification, proportionality and necessity, retention, accuracy, confidentiality, security, transparency, transfers and accountability.
- **Accountability:** Articulate clear accountabilities, roles and responsibilities over data assets and processes, including assigning responsibility to explain outcomes, and to ensure that individuals can access and control their data. Appropriate oversight, impact assessment, audit and due diligence mechanisms should be put in place to ensure accountability. Additionally, data subjects must have clear rights of redress to ensure accountability. Governance structures should enhance ethical and legal responsibility and accountability at every stage of the data lifecycle.
- **Data Quality:** Take the necessary measures to ensure data quality throughout the data lifecycle. This involves treating data in context (i.e., using it with an understanding of the context and conditions in which it was produced)⁹, ensuring that accurate, reliable, timely data and meta-data are available, and promoting data governance practices that maintain data integrity and prevent data corruption, manipulation, or distortion.
- **Data Security and Infrastructure Protection:** Safeguard the infrastructures and systems for data over the entire lifecycle, from design and collection to use, transfer and sharing, dissemination, and archiving and destruction to ensure the security and integrity of data and data flows. This principle involves implementing appropriate organizational and technical safeguards, procedures and systems to prevent, mitigate, report and respond to security breaches or misuse of data (including unauthorized or inappropriate internal access or

⁹ Data are influenced by the conditions in which they are produced. To make fair decisions using data, it's important to understand the political, cultural, social, economic context and limitations (e.g., legal frameworks, data infrastructure, data type etc.).

manipulation, accidental disclosure, damage, alteration, loss, and other security risks related to data management).

iii. Equity

14. Promoting equity in data governance requires:

- **Digital Self-Determination:** Recognize the principle of digital self-determination¹⁰, empowering individuals and communities to have control over their personal data and its uses. This principle involves enabling individuals to make informed decisions about their data, enabling them to exercise their right to access, correct, delete, and agree to the purposes of data processing and use.
- **Fairness and Non-Discrimination:** Reduce data poverty and correct for bias and discrimination throughout the data lifecycle, and take measures to promote the fair distribution of the data benefits and avoid the unfair distribution of data risks. This principle includes responsible open and equal access to data, as well as improved disaggregation where relevant to describe and understand specific characteristics, leaving no one behind.
- **People-centred:** Ensure that people are at the centre of data governance decision-making. Empower people to access, analyse, and use data through inclusive and participatory decision making and better assess the risks and implications of data issues. Consultation should be meaningful, identifying and testing underlying assumptions, determining benefits, capacities, risks, harms and adverse impacts, and adopting prevention and mitigation measures.
- **Encourage Data Stewardship:** Establish and resource responsible data stewardship frameworks (with appropriately skilled capacities) to properly manage, curate and protect data and to maximize data (re)use for the public good.

III. Steps moving forward: towards operationalization of the principles

15. The proposed goals and principles for international data governance, set out above, aims to address the needs for minimizing fragmentation, updating existing frameworks to incorporate shared values, and ensuring relevance to a rapidly changing data and digital ecosystem, including artificial intelligence. By adopting goals focused on value, trust, and equity, this work aims to foster a multistakeholder approach to effective data governance, promote fairness, and promote and protect individuals' and communities' rights. These goals and principles are intended to inform ongoing intergovernmental deliberations and processes, including follow-up to the outcomes of the Summit of the Future. But the recognition of these principles as universal, their consideration and uptake in intergovernmental discussions and, finally, their practical implementation would require multiple actions and actors outside of HLCP, including:

- **Participatory Consultative Processes:** To create buy-in for these goals and principles, and for data governance more generally, additional and wider consultation and multi-stakeholder engagement is required. This includes engaging policymakers, businesses, academia, nongovernmental organizations, technical communities, civil society and other relevant groups. Public consultations and feedback processes should be implemented to obtain valuable insights that can inform international data governance.

¹⁰ See Velhust, S. (2023). Operationalizing digital self-determination. Data and Policy. Vol 5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/dap.2023.11>.

- **Communities of Practice:** foster collaboration and learning between organizations, including with the private sector. Such forums can be used to leverage the governance frameworks as well as the principles guiding the development of data governance frameworks and systems.
- **Visible Leadership:** To drive positive change, visible support and leadership from the UN system will be required, including the vital importance of including data governance in discussions on digital transformation, AI, and AI governance.
- **Harmonization of Meanings:** To operationalize the goals and principles effectively, it will be necessary to harmonize the terms and definitions that give meaning to the principles across countries, sectors, and organizations while recognizing national and cultural autonomy.
- **Provision of Practical Guidance:** To implement the principles, specific and actionable guidance is needed for policymakers and data producers and users to align their practices with the principles. This would include data standards, taxonomies, and mechanisms for implementation, including monitoring, enforcement, and redress provisions. A comprehensive assessment of readiness in terms of the infrastructural, technical, legal, regulatory, economic and other relevant dimensions, using the available tools and methodologies, would help identify gaps that need to be addressed to align policies and practices with these principles.
- **Investment in data and data systems:** To operationalize data governance and improve data systems, investments are needed in data and technological infrastructure, and in skilled workforces capable of collecting, processing, analyzing, storing and transferring data safely and securely. Data should be treated as an asset.
- **A stepwise, multilayered approach:** With common principles, the UN system could support and facilitate a multistakeholder approach towards an international data governance architecture in different ways, working towards an internal governance framework and supporting international data governance initiatives. In terms of international data governance approaches, Member States have started to deliberate on this issue within the context of the Global Digital Compact.¹¹ As also envisaged in the Global Digital Compact,¹² the UN system stands ready to support member States in the implementation of the GDC and other intergovernmental and multistakeholder processes on data governance at all levels, including within the context of the UN Statistical Commission, the Commission on Science and Technology and the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development.¹³

IV. Conclusion

16. HLCP, at its 48th session in October 2024, approved the set of proposed goals and principles that are offered as a normative foundation for international data governance.

¹¹ The first iteration of this paper, presented at the HLCP in October 2023 and the work of the HLCP group on data governance was instrumental in developing the UN coordinated input to the first draft of the GDC.

¹² United Nations (2024). Pact for the Future, annexed Global Digital Compact, Paragraphs 48 and 49. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-the-pact-for-the-future.pdf>.

¹³ [Working Group on Data Governance - Broadband Commission](#)