



## Spotlight 8.1

### The need for a new global consensus on data: A call to action

**A global consensus is needed to ensure that data are safeguarded as a global public good and as a resource to achieve equitable and sustainable development.**

Many stakeholders around the world have concluded that some sort of global charter or convention is now required to realize the benefits of data in a safe and secure way and to avoid destructive beggar-thy-neighbor strategies. The World Economic Forum is hosting a Global Future Council on Data Policy to examine data architecture and models that promote an appropriate balance of creativity, innovation, responsible use, and efficiency. The Rockefeller Foundation has posited that institutions may be needed to help to manage artificial intelligence (AI) responsibly and has called for a Bretton Woods for AI. Microsoft has called for a Digital Geneva Convention. These efforts parallel similar efforts to reach a global consensus in other contexts,<sup>1</sup> particularly natural resources management and cultural protection.<sup>2</sup>

A global consensus would give individuals and enterprises confidence that data relevant to them carry similar protections and obligations no matter where they are collected or used. It would effectively establish a social contract that would strike a balance between the use of data for development and the protection of data in terms of security, privacy, and

human rights of the individual. It would also establish ground rules for the exchange of data between commercial use and the public good.

The consensus would constitute an integrated set of data values, principles, and standards that define the elements of responsible and ethical handling and sharing of data and that unite national governments, public institutions, the private sector, civil society organizations, and academia. A global mechanism is needed to provide incentives for applying these principles and overseeing their consistent application across different communities.

The global data consensus might build on some of the following ideas to go beyond principles and create an architecture of standards, incentives, and institutions that can implement them.

- International human rights and other areas of law already provide a good starting point, with many of the necessary values and principles for thinking about the impacts of data on people and commerce. These laws should be augmented.
- Learning from existing conventions and treaties can help to define effective mechanisms that encourage communities to respect common data values and principles, while discouraging noncompliance.<sup>3</sup>
- The way in which data are collected, used, and reused changes quickly, as do societal attitudes and practices regarding data. Thus, principles should be supported by clear and precise expectations.

This spotlight was written by the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA). The CCSA is composed of international and supranational organizations whose mandate includes the provision of international official statistics in the context of the United Nations Statistical Commission Principles Governing International Statistical Activities (see <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ccsa/>).



- To maintain and update these data standards and expectations, global institutions are needed to embrace the broad global community of data providers and users, including national governments, the private sector, and civil society as well as stakeholders from not only the traditional data ecosystems but also from the new ones of AI and digital and information technology services. Such institutions can oversee accountability frameworks and support mechanisms to facilitate the exchange and responsible use of data.
- There will be value in establishing universal values, principles, standards, and expectations for data use and reuse, regardless of sector or type of data. However, it will be necessary to address specific sectors or types of data. Opportunities are currently present to build on ethical principles and standards that already exist in many specific data communities.
- National legislation could be complemented and inspired by a voluntary international governance framework to which all stakeholders could become signatories. Such an architecture would ideally protect and encourage data exchange and facilitate trade mechanisms between entities that adhere to the same standards.

A global consensus could provide the basis for promoting open data and data exchange, helping to address public health crises and other development

goals, deal with the weaponization of data, and think about the trusted use and reuse of data.

A series of high-level dialogues is necessary to test and build this idea in 2021 and beyond. To be effective, the consensus will need to embrace the broadest global community of data providers and users, including national governments, the private sector, and civil society as well as stakeholders from every community that collects and uses data.

## Notes

1. See <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/digital-platforms-require-global-governance-framework>.
2. Examples include the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal, and the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.
3. These conventions establish a mutual commitment of parties to (1) protect a certain resource; (2) facilitate regulated use and trade among parties; (3) establish sanctions if the principles of the conventions are not followed (typically, national laws defining administrative or criminal sanctions are needed); (4) make each party accountable to the principles of the convention and sanction parties that do not follow the principles (for example, parties can stop trading the commodity with those that do not follow the provisions of the conventions); and (5) report to a monitoring system.