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The Time Is Now

Establishing a Mutual Commitment Framework (MCF) To Accelerate Data Collaboratives

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The Need for a Mutual Commitment Framework

In our increasingly interconnected and crisis-prone world, harnessing the power of data-driven solutions is more critical than ever to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and address pressing global challenges in areas such as health, disaster risks, and climate change. Yet, the potential of data (particularly, but not exclusively that which is sourced from private sector institutions and novel sources) remains severely constrained. Those who require it frequently encounter barriers to accessing and reusing it effectively. The key to unlocking the value of data lies in responsibly lowering the barriers and shared risks of data access, re-use, and collaboration in the public interest. [Data collaboratives](#), which foster responsible access and re-use of data among diverse stakeholders, provide a solution to these challenges.

Today, however, setting up data collaboratives takes too much time and is prone to multiple delays, hindering our ability to understand and respond swiftly and effectively to urgent global crises. The readiness of data collaboratives during crises faces key obstacles in terms of data use agreements, technical infrastructure, vetted and reproducible methodologies, and a clear understanding of the questions which may be answered more effectively with additional data.

Organizations aiming to create data collaboratives often face additional challenges, as they often lack established operational protocols and practices which can streamline implementation, reduce costs, and save time. New regulations are emerging that should help drive the adoption of standard protocols and processes. In particular, the EU Data Governance Act and the forthcoming Data Act aim to enable responsible data collaboration. Concepts like data spaces and rulebooks seek to build trust and strike a balance between regulation and technological innovation.

Creating a Mutual Commitment Framework (MCF) in advance of a crisis can serve as a necessary and practical means to break through chronic choke points and shorten response times. By accelerating the establishment of operational (and legally cognizable) data collaboratives, duties of care can be defined and a stronger sense of trust, clarity, and purpose can be instilled among participating entities. This structured approach ensures that data sharing and processing are conducted within well-defined, pre-authorized boundaries, thereby lowering shared risks and promoting a conducive environment for collaboration.

Possible Use Cases

A Mutual Commitment Framework (MCF) could benefit the rapid establishment of operational data collaboratives in a variety of use cases and pivotal areas, such as⁴:

⁴ This is a non-exclusive and comprehensive list.

Pandemic preparedness:

- **Early Warning Systems:** Establishing an MCF could galvanize a multi-stakeholder collaborative to create a real-time syndromic surveillance and Early Warning System. By defining data sharing protocols and ethical guidelines, an MCF could facilitate timely sharing of critical data on emerging infectious diseases, thus enabling early detection and rapid response.
- **Vaccine distribution:** An MCF could steer a coalition of public health authorities, pharmaceutical companies, logistics providers, and local governments to share data and coordinate efforts for efficient vaccine distribution, ensuring equitable access and overcoming logistical challenges.

Humanitarian disasters:

- **Resource allocation and coordination:** Through an MCF, humanitarian agencies, governments, and private sector entities could join forces to share real-time data on disaster-impacted regions. An MCF could guide data sharing on resource availability, needs assessments, and logistic channels, enabling a coordinated, effective response.
- **Rescue operations:** An MCF could expedite the formation of a data collaborative for sharing real-time information on affected populations, emergency service locations, and safe routes, thus enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of rescue operations.

Climate change mitigation:

- **Emissions monitoring:** Establishing an MCF among environmental agencies, industries, and researchers could facilitate the sharing and analysis of emissions data, and decarbonization efforts. By setting the guidelines for data sharing, an MCF could foster a collaborative effort to monitor and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Innovative sustainable practices:** An MCF can catalyse collaboration among academia, industries, and governmental bodies to share data and insights on sustainable practices. Through a predefined data sharing protocol, stakeholders can jointly develop and promote innovative solutions for climate resilience and sustainability.

Improving the wellbeing of children:

- **Education quality monitoring:** An MCF could be instrumental in forming a collaborative among educational institutions, government education departments, and non-profits to share and analyse data pertaining to education quality. By outlining the parameters for data collaboration and analysis, an MCF could contribute to identifying gaps, sharing best practices, and devising interventions to enhance educational outcomes for children.
- **Child health and nutrition:** Formulating an MCF among healthcare providers, nutrition experts, and local authorities could foster a data collaborative aimed at monitoring and improving child health and nutrition. An MCF could guide data sharing on vaccination rates, malnutrition indicators, and access to healthcare services, enabling targeted interventions and policy adjustments to better cater to children's health needs.

Gender data analysis:

- **Gender disparity in workplaces:** Establishing an MCF could mobilize a multi-stakeholder collaborative involving corporations, labour unions, and gender equality advocates to share and analyse data on gender disparities in formal and informal workplaces. By setting the standards for data collaboration and privacy protection, the framework could assist in uncovering pay gaps, promotion discrepancies, and other forms of gender inequality, paving the way for informed advocacy and policy reform.
- **Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) prevention:** An MCF could facilitate a data collaborative among law enforcement agencies, women's rights organizations, and community groups to share and analyse data on violence against women and girls. An MCF could delineate ethical guidelines and data sharing protocols to ensure sensitive data is handled responsibly, aiding in the identification of high-risk areas and the evaluation of intervention strategies.

What is the Impact of *Not* Having a Mutual Commitment Framework?

The absence of an MCF leads to substantial delays in setting up data collaboratives which can have several far-reaching implications:

- **Inefficient crisis response:** Delays in data collaboration can hinder timely and effective responses to urgent global crises, such as natural disasters, pandemics, or humanitarian emergencies. As a result, vulnerable populations may face prolonged suffering and inadequate support.
- **Inequitable access to data and insights:** The delays in establishing data collaboratives may disproportionately affect smaller organizations and resource-poor stakeholders who lack the capacity to overcome the barriers on their own. This can lead to an uneven distribution of data-driven insights and innovations, perpetuating existing asymmetries and inequalities.
- **Wasted resources:** The lack of established protocols and practices for data collaboratives can result in increased transaction costs, lengthy negotiations and duplicated efforts as stakeholders continuously start from scratch. This inefficient use of resources could be better allocated to addressing the challenges at hand.
- **Erosion of trust:** Delays and inefficiencies in data collaboration can contribute to eroding trust among stakeholders, reducing opportunities for shared learning, making future collaboration more difficult, and further exacerbating the barriers to effective data sharing and re-use.
- **Missed opportunities for innovation:** When data collaboratives are delayed or impeded, the potential for discovering novel solutions and insights to address global challenges is diminished. This can lead to missed opportunities for breakthroughs in areas like disaster preparedness, disease prevention, climate resilience, and conflict resolution.

How Can a Mutual Commitment Framework Facilitate the Rapid Formation of Data Collaboratives?

At its core, having a Mutual Commitment Framework can help:

- **Facilitate pre-authorized data sharing:** By having pre-authorized agreements which address the operational, legal, and technical aspects of the collaboration, the involved parties have a better understanding about what data can be shared or made available for analysis. In particular, the MCF would eliminate the time and resources that would otherwise be spent on negotiating access on a case-by-case basis.
- **Reduce risk and increase incentives for private sector data providers:** By providing a trusted risk mitigation framework and clear rules and standards, the framework provides a reasonable balance between legal and ethical exposure for private data providers and the positive interest in being seen as beneficial public actors, particularly in times of crisis.
- **Increase engagement with multilateral institutions:** The framework serves as a formalized agreement that can be presented to multilateral institutions, indicating a serious commitment to data collaboration. This can expedite the engagement process with these institutions and potentially attract more stakeholders.
- **Facilitate real-time data and analysis sharing:** Real-time data sharing and analysis is often crucial for timely decision-making and action in tactical situations requiring a rapid response. The framework would elucidate protocols for sharing real-time data or derived analysis, thereby facilitating seamless and prompt communication among collaborators. At the same time, the scenario of data providers being constrained by language barriers or insufficient technical infrastructure poses a genuine concern when considering building a framework that truly facilitates real-time data and analysis sharing, making the data collaboratives more efficient and inclusive. For instance, if the data is available only in a specific language or if the data providers do not possess the requisite infrastructure or training to share data efficiently, it could potentially delay the real-time sharing and analysis of crucial data. Addressing these challenges will require a combination of capacity building, technological innovations, and collaborative partnerships.
- **Increase scalability and replicability:** With a standardized framework in place, the model can be easily replicated and scaled to accommodate more data actors and projects, thus accelerating the creation of new data collaboratives.

What Are Some Baseline Commitments to Consider?

An MCF for data collaboratives would serve as a foundational document to ensure a structured, ethical, and effective data collaboration and processing environment. Here are the baseline commitments across three main areas that should be covered in such a framework, which all parties should agree to:



Commitment to providing success to data for re-use at times of crisis, including:

- Defining priority use cases where rapid access may be needed.
- Ensuring timely access to relevant data for re-use during emergencies or crises, while adhering to data protection standards.
- Determining that wherever data sharing cannot be agreed to for data which includes personal identifying information, essential analysis can be facilitated through the development of federated learning and differential privacy applications.
- Establishing predefined protocols for data sharing during such times to support rapid response and decision-making, and to foster collaborative efforts towards crisis resolution and management.
- Encouraging the sharing of data in open, machine-readable formats, adhering to common standards and best practices for data release or clearly defined analytical use within protected data structures.

Commitment to transparency and meaningful engagement, including:

- Defining the roles, responsibilities, and inter-relationships among all stakeholders involved in the data collaborative.
- Sharing capacity and upskilling personnel technically to better access, analyze, and manage data shared within the collaborative.
- Engaging with the broader public, promoting awareness, and ensuring that a social license is acquired so that the data collaborative serves the public interest.

Commitment to accountability and responsibility, including:

- Taking measures to minimize possible harms to vulnerable individuals and communities, adhering to a human-rights-based approach to data sharing.

- Establishing accountability mechanisms for responsible data collaboration and handling, and ensuring transparency in data practices.
- Establishing mechanisms for raising concerns, reporting issues, and resolving conflicts that may arise during the collaborative process.

These advances are the result of having:

- **Defined standards for processing and safeguards:** Establishing predefined standards for data processing and ethical safeguards can better ensure that data, and the resulting data products, are handled in a consistent, responsible, and secure manner. This not only protects the data but also builds trust among the collaborators on how it will be used. Both are crucial for the long-term success of data collaboratives. Further, the development of these standards should not be a unilateral or isolated endeavour. Instead, it calls for a consultative process that encompasses a diverse range of stakeholders. This includes the inclusion of representatives from the Global South, and other actors who stand to be significantly impacted by data misuse. Their insights and experiences are vital in forging standards that are not only robust but also equitable and just.
- **Clarity on data transfer limitations:** A mutual commitment framework would clearly delineate the limitations regarding data transfers, thus preventing miscommunications or misunderstandings that could hinder the collaborative process. In many cases, if well planned in advance, data transfers may not even be required for federated learning architectures with predefined rules for differential privacy.
- **Ground rules for data actors and intermediaries:** Setting out ground rules provides a common playbook for all data actors and intermediaries, ensuring that everyone is on the same page regarding how data should be shared and communicated. This uniform understanding accelerates the collaborative process.
- **Compliance assurance:** By adhering to a mutual commitment framework, data collaborators can ensure compliance with legal, ethical, and institutional standards, which is vital for the longevity and effectiveness of collaborations.
- **Conflict resolution mechanisms:** A well-defined framework will also include mechanisms for resolving conflicts, which is essential for maintaining a cooperative environment and ensuring the continuous flow of data sharing.

How to Establish a Mutual Commitment Framework?

Creating a Mutual Commitment Framework (MCF) will require identifying several critical use cases where the cost of not having access to the most accurate, timely, and comprehensive data is likely to result in the loss of lives and livelihoods (see examples earlier). With alignment on clear, compelling, and likely use cases, a multi-stakeholder community will need to be established, as well as a coordinated approach, that embraces the diverse interests, expertise, and perspectives of all involved parties.

Steps toward developing and deploying an MCF include:

Identifying and engaging stakeholders:

- Identify all potential stakeholders, including data providers, data users, intermediaries, governmental bodies, multilateral institutions, and civil society organizations.
- Engage these stakeholders in preliminary discussions to understand possible use cases and their interests, concerns, and expectations regarding data sharing and collaboration.

Establishing a steering committee:

- Form a steering committee comprising representatives from different stakeholder groups to oversee the development of the MCF.
- Ensure that the committee is diverse and inclusive, representing the broad spectrum of interests and expertise within the collaborative.
- Empower the steering committee with agency and the ability to assign appropriate resources, manage operations, and assume accountability throughout the project lifecycle

Conducting a needs assessment:

- Conduct a thorough needs assessment to understand the data sharing, processing, and safeguarding requirements of respective use cases.
- Identify the legal, ethical, and technical considerations that need to be addressed in the framework.
- Ensure that the underlying economics and incentive structures are in place to deliver impact over a long-term horizon

Drafting the framework:

- Develop a draft framework that outlines the baseline commitments to accelerate data collaboration across a range of possible use cases.
- Include clear guidelines on data transfer limitations, real-time data sharing, use of derived data products, and engagement with multilateral institutions.

Soliciting and incorporating feedback:

- Share the draft framework with all stakeholders and solicit their feedback.
- Organize multistakeholder workshops and consultation sessions to discuss the draft framework and gather inputs for improvement.
- Incorporate the feedback received to revise and fine-tune the framework.

Pilot testing:

- Pilot test the framework with a small group of diverse stakeholders during a real use case to identify any practical challenges or areas for improvement.
- Collect feedback from the pilot testing and make necessary adjustments to the framework.

Finalize and adopt:

- Once the framework has been thoroughly vetted and revised, seek formal adoption from all stakeholders and make it a default framework for the UN system.
- Publish the finalized framework and disseminate it widely among stakeholders and the broader community.

What are the Expected Outcomes and Benefits of Having an MCF?



- **Streamlining processes:** An MCF could provide standardized procedures and protocols for data collaboration, processing, and analysis. This standardization can minimize redundancy, reduce errors, and expedite the overall data access process.
- **Improving trust and transparency:** By having a well-defined framework of commitments, stakeholders can have a clear understanding of how data will be managed, who has

access to it, and how it's being utilized. This transparency can foster trust among stakeholders, which is crucial for successful collaboration.

- **Accelerated problem-solving and innovation:** With a structured collaborative framework, innovative ideas can be shared, tested, and refined more efficiently. This conducive environment can foster creativity and lead to the development of novel solutions to complex problems.
- **Global data collaborative community:** An MCF can provide a platform for different sectors to collaborate, be it academia, industry, government, or non-profit organizations. This cross-sector collaboration can lead to a richer understanding of problems and more holistic solutions.
- **Culture of collective learning, innovation, and problem-solving:** The collective learning and problem-solving culture fostered by an MCF can enhance the ability of the global community to address pressing challenges. The collaborative nature of the framework encourages continuous learning, sharing of knowledge, and the pooling of resources to address global issues more effectively.

Conclusion

The urgency of addressing global challenges through collaborative efforts around data cannot be overstated. There is a need to enable the rapid creation of data collaboratives to drive transformative change and improve the well-being of communities worldwide. Only by enabling rapid data collaboratives, leveraging a mutual commitment framework, can we harness the power of data-driven solutions to tackle some of the most pressing issues facing our world today.