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Why We Need an International Decade for Data

Lorrayne Porciuncula

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Introduction

As the world hurtles forward in the digital age, data is setting the pace of innovation, driving economies, catalyzing research, and shaping societies. Its influence is ubiquitous, offering both unprecedented opportunities and formidable challenges. Yet, as we navigate the dynamic terrain of data governance, the ongoing discourse has largely fixated on individual privacy and economic gains. This narrow perspective fails to capture the diverse dimensions of data's potential. It's time for a transformative shift, a rallying cry that transcends these constraints with agility and embraces a holistic vision of data governance. The UN could have a role to play by calling for an International Decade that responsibly unlocks the value of data for all.

Harnessing the Power of International Decades

Throughout history, the United Nations has harnessed the power of International Decades¹ to address global imperatives. These strategic initiatives, such as those dedicated to Water, Education and Road Safety, have demonstrated the world's capacity to unite around critical issues and forge meaningful change. In the face of our digital future, an 'International Decade for Data' would be a powerful international tool to guide our path through the data-driven landscape.

The Imperative of a Data Decade

The exponential surge of data promises boundless horizons, yet it also amplifies vulnerabilities. The call for an International Decade for Data (formulated as one of the recommendations in the report of the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, *A Breakthrough for People and Planet: Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future*²) should be seen as a resounding call to action for global leaders to set a transformative agenda; an agenda that acknowledges the interconnected nature of data's potential and underscores the collective responsibility to wield it conscientiously.

Connecting Data and AI Decisively

In the grand tapestry of our digital age, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force, ushering in a new era of innovation and advancement. But AI is only as effective as the data it is fed. An International Decade for Data aligns seamlessly with the AI zeitgeist, recognizing that unlocking data responsibly isn't just about governance; it's about propelling responsibly AI-driven breakthroughs that touch every aspect of our lives. To harness the full potential of AI, we

¹ "International Decades," United Nations, last accessed on 7 November 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/international-decades>.

² High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB), *A Breakthrough for People and Planet: Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future* (New York: United Nations University, 2023). Accessible at: <https://highleveladvisoryboard.org/breakthrough/>.

must lay the groundwork with a robust and trustworthy data governance framework. The Decade could serve as a bridge that connects the dots between data's intrinsic value and AI's transformative power, fostering an ecosystem where both thrive in harmony.

Embracing Data's Multidimensional Value

The conventional narrative surrounding data governance tends to gravitate towards opposing extremes: open data and the maximization of economic returns on one side and erecting barriers on data sharing and shielding personal privacy on the other. While these are unquestionably paramount objectives, they represent a limited dichotomy, and reflect only a fraction of data's true worth. To unlock the full scope of data's multidimensional value, we must broaden our outlook. The International Decade presents an opportune juncture to embrace the multiplicity of data, spanning personal and non-personal data, as well as the insights gleaned from it. Beyond numbers and algorithms, this encapsulates the potential to redefine societies, enable informed decisions, and confront intricate challenges such as healthcare and climate change. This reorientation underscores the necessity for a data governance framework that transcends binary debates, acknowledging the capacity of data to enrich societies beyond mere financial gains and individual rights.

Forging Agile Cross-Border Solutions

The current global landscape is marked by an array of disparate data regulations, a situation that presents substantial impediments to businesses, governments, and individuals alike. Rather than pursuing an unachievable homogenization of regulations, an International Decade for Data opens the door to a more pragmatic approach: the interoperability of regulations through the creation of agile cross-border processes. The concept of sandboxes — an environment for controlled experimentation with new policies — assumes pivotal significance here. Sandboxes allow governments to trial new regulations, analyze their implications, and iteratively refine them in real-world scenarios. This approach ensures regulations evolve in tandem with technological advancements and emerging challenges, mitigating the risks associated with abrupt and sweeping changes. By embracing agile regulatory frameworks, we cultivate a more adaptive and responsive approach to data governance, one that can promptly address emerging issues while fostering innovation. Implementing sandboxes across borders could mean enabling countries to craft regulations that are able to coexist and harmonize across borders. This strategy recognizes the cultural, legal, and technological diversities that necessitate tailored approaches, all while upholding the core tenets of responsible data utilization. In a rapidly evolving digital landscape, static regulations can swiftly become obsolete. The International Decade for Data offers the ideal catalyst to adopt agile regulatory processes.

Incentivizing Corporate Responsibility

Corporate behavior plays a pivotal role in data governance. The Decade should promote better corporate practices: the integration of digital dimensions into Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) frameworks could incentivize businesses to adopt responsible data practices. This multidimensional approach can shape better data practices that align with broader societal goals.

Amplifying Civil Society Voices, Especially Underrepresented populations

For far too long, discussions on data governance have been monopolized by governments and corporations, inadvertently sidelining the very individuals and communities these policies affect most. This has been the case even when those individuals have led various initiatives on setting principles³ for the access and governance of resources they generate, including data. What is more, the prevalence of English in data-related debates brings a number of challenges, and especially within the development context and for societies where the collective and the community are core structural units. For instance, concepts such as Data Stewardship, Data Brokers, Data Literacy, or Data Trusts can be difficult to translate into other – local, regional, and national – languages; not only from a semantic perspective but also because they bring with them a number of cultural assumptions, legal traditions, or economic and development priorities, amongst other issues. The prospect of an International Decade for Data presents an unparalleled opportunity to embrace inclusivity. It's a platform to amplify the voices of civil society organizations, academia, and grassroots movements, ensuring that a diverse range of stakeholders shape the global data governance narrative. By involving civil society in policy discourse, we bridge the gap between technocratic decisions and the real-world experiences of people. This inclusivity engenders transparency, builds trust, and enhances the legitimacy of data governance measures.

The Journey Ahead

The UN General Assembly, where nations converge to deliberate global priorities, offers an unparalleled platform to spearhead an International Decade for Data. Against the backdrop of monumental shifts in our digital landscape, the General Assembly provides the perfect arena to galvanize international leaders to endorse an agenda that recognizes the potency of data, its pivotal role in fueling AI advancements, and its vital role in shaping the future.

³ Carolina Rossini and Mariana Rozo-Paz, “Grasping the expanding world of data governance principles,” Datasphere Initiative, 13 January 2023, <https://www.thedatasphere.org/news/grasping-the-expanding-world-of-data-governance-principles/>.

In the spirit of global cooperation, Member States of the United Nations should seize this unique juncture and take the reins in steering humanity towards a future where data serves as a catalyst for collective advancement, a wellspring of innovation, and a harbinger of positive change. The choice is unequivocal: we can either watch the data revolution unfold from the sidelines or actively shape its trajectory. The moment for action is now, and an International Decade for Data stands as the compass guiding us towards an enlightened and responsible tomorrow.

United Nations University - Centre for Policy Research

767 3rd Ave Floor 35, New York, NY 10017

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