

Africa's data revolution probed in UN-backed report

Nairobi, KENYA — Limited capacity, investment and collaboration are among the challenges facing data communities working towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Africa's Agenda 2063, according to the inaugural Africa Data Revolution Report (ADRR).



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The report was presented last month during a panel discussion at the second Africa Open Data Conference held in Accra, Ghana. It cites issues such as legal and policy frameworks, infrastructure, technology and interactions among stakeholder as challenges facing the "data ecosystems" of the 10 African countries studied: Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Swaziland and Tanzania.

The ADRR was jointly published by the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), UN Development Programme (UNDP), World Wide Web Foundation and Open Data for Development Network (OD4D).

"Open data is Africa's biggest challenge," says Nnenna Nwakanma, a senior policy manager at the US-headquartered World Wide Web Foundation, noting that the open data revolution is key to Africa achieving the SDGs.

Speaking to SciDev.Net, Nwakanma, cited open data's benefits such as governments functioning more efficiently, businesses innovating more and citizens participating in governance and demanding accountability.

Serge Kapto, a policy specialist on data from the UNDP, said that frameworks such as the African Charter on Statistics and the Strategy for Harmonisation of Statistics in Africa have laid the groundwork for an African data revolution.

"The report also points out that data is inherently as much a political as a technical issue," Kapto notes. "Therefore, the stumbling blocks that impede progress of the data revolution for sustainable development must be addressed on both political and technical levels."

Kapto adds that Africa is well positioned to reap the benefits of the data revolution for sustainable development, and to adopt 'leapfrog technology' that serves national and regional development priorities.

But, he explains, much work remains to be done to fully take advantage of the opportunity afforded by the data revolution for achieving development plans.

The report affirms the need for strengthening national statistical institutions. Their role includes to support governments' policies and measure their impact, and to coordinate growing and evolving national data ecosystems which are driven by fast-paced, easily accessible technological innovations.

Muliaro Wafula, director of the Information, Communication and Technology Centre of Excellence and Open Data, at Kenya-based Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, says that Africa can benefit a lot if data becomes valued, used and preserved.

"Data storage remains a challenge for governments and research institutions," Wafula tells SciDev.Net, adding that the continent generates a lot of valuable data but does little to preserve and use it to support planning and innovations.

**This piece was produced by SciDev.Net's Sub-Saharan Africa English desk.*

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