

## **Harnessing the Power of Data: A Commitment to Strengthening Access to Information in the Digital Age**

The global conference to commemorate the International Day for Universal Access to Information (IDUAI) organised by UNESCO and the Government of Ghana at the Alisa Hotel, Accra, Ghana, on 1-2 October 2024 underscored the critical role of access to data, which includes statistics, datasets, statistical reports and research findings, and any data collected or generated by public bodies and other relevant private institutions, in facilitating access to information and upholding universal access to information.

The participants at this landmark event recognise that the foundation of a just, informed and equitable society in digital times rests particularly on the availability and transparency of data. Accordingly:

### **DATA DRIVING DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY**

- We acknowledge that, as a crucial pillar of information, data forms an essential part of the right to information, which is vital for democracy and essential to promote more transparent, accountable, efficient, and responsive institutions. As part of the right to information, access to data entails that data should be openly available, easily discoverable, accessible, used, shared and disseminated by anyone for any purpose.
- We acknowledge that data harnessing is increasingly shaping our daily lives and impacting global technological, socio-economic and political dynamics. Insights gleaned from data can inform evidence-based policies and interventions, and enable governments, citizens, researchers and civil society and private sector organisations to make better informed decisions, and promote public participation and strengthen trust in public institutions.
- We reaffirm that open data initiatives and access to data for a public good can foster innovation, encourage collaboration, and empower the public to engage actively in governance and decision-making. These can also support the achievement and evaluation of progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.
- We recognise that media practitioners utilise data to inform, and educate, and guide the public on important matters affecting public interest, while researchers are especially invested in open data, including as a component of open science.
- We reaffirm that for data held by public institutions and other bodies receiving public funds or pertaining to the use of public funds, or where there is an overriding public interest in access to private data holdings, such assets should be made publicly accessible by default in line with the principle of maximum disclosure and in an open, timely, comprehensive, and transparent manner, including in machine-readable formats, subject to limited exceptions in accordance with human rights standards.
- We acknowledge the critical role of timely data access in addressing global challenges such as pandemics, climate change, conflicts, and other crises. Data collection, access, and dissemination, all based on human rights, enable individuals to exercise their rights, fully participate in society, and hold institutions accountable. This approach also empowers public watchdogs to monitor, expose wrongdoing, and ensure transparency and accountability across both public and private sectors.

### **DATA QUALITY AND PRECONDITIONS**

- We recognise that data quality is important in unlocking the full potential and maximising the value and utility of data across various sectors. High-quality data serves as the foundation for informed decision-making, innovative research, and effective policy development. By prioritising data quality, we can harness insights that drive progress and enhance outcomes in diverse areas.
- We also emphasise that access to quality data is integral in combating the pervasive challenges associated with threats to information integrity including disinformation and misinformation. Quality data empowers individuals and organisations to discern facts from falsehoods. By ensuring access to reliable data, we can uphold information integrity, an important element of the information ecosystem.
- We reaffirm the need to invest in data quality as a strategic priority for all stakeholders. This investment, including the establishment of data centres in Africa, enhances the accuracy and reliability of data and also builds trust among users. By implementing rigorous data governance frameworks and quality assurance processes, we can ensure that data remains a valuable asset for analysis, decision-making, and accountability.
- We acknowledge the essential fundamental and foundational preconditions for data access such as continued connectivity and access to the requisite tools and infrastructure like electricity. Governments should refrain from internet shutdowns and other network restrictions that limit access to data and the free flow of information, especially but not limited to elections, conflict and other moments of heightened activity.
- We also acknowledge the challenge of fragmented data protection and privacy frameworks which is particularly acute in Africa. While some countries have comprehensive data protection regulations, many lack such laws and others have outdated ones. This lack of harmonization creates significant difficulties for cross-border data transfers, and organizations operating in multiple African countries face a complex web of regulations, often conflicting with each other. It also increases the risk of inconsistent data protection standards, making it difficult to enforce adequate privacy and security safeguards for citizens' data across borders.

## DATA ACCESS PRINCIPLES

- We recognise the need for data collectors, controllers, users and practitioners to adhere to ethical principles and best practices in data collection, purpose-specification for personal data, intellectual property rights, and utilisation. They also need to ensure accountable innovation by considering societal impacts, biases and ethical implications. Access to data must take into account the need to protect personal privacy and other types of sensitive information, necessitating measures for accountable handling, storage, and transmission in compliance with privacy laws and technical security protocols.
- We reaffirm that restrictions on access should only apply to protect privacy and other legitimate interests, based on international standards, and then be subject to a harm test and public interest override. All other data should be openly accessible. In other words, restrictions on access to data are only justifiable if they meet the criteria of legitimate purpose,

proportionality, and public interest override as stipulated under international human rights standards on access to information.

- We reaffirm that in our interconnected world, upholding principles of data equity, ethics, transparency, environmental protection, gender equality, anti-colonialism and inclusivity is crucial for harnessing the transformative potential of data. A commitment to these principles fosters conditions where data can be used to stimulate positive change in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, promote innovation, develop evidence-based policy solutions and advance human development for all members of society.
- We acknowledge that, despite their enormous potential, Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems and automated decision-making processes, where they are based on data which incorporate underlying social biases, often reinforce structural inequalities, and frequently also do so in an opaque manner. As such, barriers and entrenched inequalities, which often impact the initial collection of data, continue to obstruct data's potential to enhance lives, adversely affecting many individuals belonging to disadvantaged groups.
- We emphasise that ensuring transparency and explainability in data usage and automated decision-making is crucial to addressing concerns with bias. By implementing effective safeguards, such as regular audits and clear documentation of algorithms and data sources, we can better understand and mitigate such biases. These measures foster accountability and also empower affected communities to challenge and rectify unfair practices, ultimately promoting a more equitable and inclusive approach to data collection, ownership and utilisation.
- We recognise that, to harness the full potential of data, it is also crucial to overcome barriers and ensure equitable access for all, especially marginalised, underserved and vulnerable people. Unequal access to data exacerbates existing inequalities and creates new forms of inequalities. Efforts in the data realm must address existing social and economic digital divides and align with international human rights standards to promote inclusive data access.
- We reaffirm that establishing independent oversight mechanisms to hold data custodians accountable is essential. Independent oversight bodies are vital in promoting trust and confidence in data governance frameworks and ensuring the fair application of rules and standards. Oversight bodies should monitor and evaluate data governance practices, providing essential support through transparency measures and public audits to ensure accountability and build trust in data systems.

## DEPLOYING DATA

- We reaffirm that national, regional and international data systems should be designed with interoperability and interconnectedness in mind, enabling public-interest oriented exchange and integration of information across different platforms, domains, and jurisdictions while ensuring security and protecting privacy.
- We reaffirm our commitment to prioritising security and privacy while emphasising decentralisation. Distributing data across multiple nodes reduces the risk of misuse and combats data monopolies. This approach promotes diverse solutions and innovations, enabling various stakeholders to collaborate without central authority barriers. It also promotes equitable access to information, particularly for marginalised communities, enabling everyone to benefit from available data.
- We recognise the importance of co-creating learning tools and knowledge to help open collaboration with industry professionals and ensure that data is well governed and managed. At the same time, we acknowledge that the trustworthiness of data can vary based on its

source and analysis, highlighting the need for standardised practices that ensure data credibility across industries and regions.

- We recognise the shortage of skilled professionals, such as data scientists, statisticians, and IT specialists, particularly in Africa, for managing and analysing data, which undermines implementation and maintenance of robust data governance systems and results in poor data management practices, such as incomplete or inaccurate data collection, limited quality checks, and challenges in interpreting data. Addressing this requires investment in training, university curricula, and professional development to equip local talent with essential skills for maintaining high-quality data systems.
- We recognise the importance of building data literacy and digital skills among the public, policymakers, and stakeholders. Priority should be given to developing educational and capacity-building programs, including the training of public officials on open data access, and to empower them to navigate the data landscape effectively, thereby promoting meaningful engagement with data.
- We further reaffirm the significance of a data-literate society that is better prepared to tackle contemporary challenges. We, in this regard, recognise the importance of building data literacy and digital skills among the public, policymakers, and stakeholders. This requires literacy and capacity-building programmes that equip individuals and stakeholders with the skills necessary to navigate the complex data landscape. These initiatives promote critical thinking and analytical abilities, enabling interpretation of data meaningfully, engaging with data-driven insights, and contributing to a culture of informed decision-making.
- We reaffirm the necessity for decision-makers to fully leverage relevant data sets to drive quality decision-making and call for the public sector to invest more strategically and thoughtfully in enhancing access to data.
- We acknowledge that various stakeholders, including developers, entrepreneurs, civil society and private sector organisations, academics, media representatives, and government representatives, play an important role in facilitating and promoting access to data.
- We also recognise that collective efforts and stakeholder collaboration are crucial for creating more sustainable outcomes that address the needs of diverse communities effectively. Through multi-stakeholder approaches, we believe we can unlock the full potential of data to drive positive socio economic and political change. Collaborative approaches bring together expertise from different sectors, ensuring that policies are well-rounded and reflective of the needs of various communities. Engaging stakeholders also helps in early identification of potential challenges, encourages innovative solutions, and enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of policies.
- Lastly, we emphasise that public funding should be allocated to support the development of data and data access.

Join us in our commitment to harnessing the power of data as we advocate for:

a) Open data initiatives that facilitate the sharing of information across sectors and communities

- b) Policies that prioritise transparency and accountability in governance, and ensure that data is accessible to those who need it most.
- c) Collaboration of stakeholders from diverse backgrounds to develop innovative solutions that leverage data for good.
- d) Empowerment of individuals with the skills and resources to navigate and utilise data effectively.

## STAKEHOLDER STATEMENTS

- 1) *"The African Alliance for Access to Data is a pioneering force for championing data transparency and openness as a cornerstone for sustainable growth and innovation in Africa. By uniting a diverse coalition of groups and individuals, the Alliance advocates for proactive access to data in public and private spheres, recognising it as an essential element of the right to information. Grounded in the widely accepted principles of the Open Data Charter, the Alliance promotes data that is open by default, timely and comprehensive, accessible and usable, comparable and interoperable, and aims for improved governance and citizen engagement as well as inclusive development and innovation. Through regular meetings and impactful programmes, the Alliance elevates the importance of data access for advancing the African agenda, and also emphasises its growing relevance for regulators, researchers, media, political parties, and civil society. The Alliance is committed to leveraging data as a catalyst for progress and social equity, ensuring that every stakeholder benefits from a more open and connected data ecosystem".* (African Alliance for Access to Data)
- 2) *"The African Network of Information Commissions (ANIC) supports the IDUAI Statement. The principles enshrined in the statement place all access to data and access to information stakeholders in good stead to chart a way forward for access to data and access to information in a rapidly changing information and data ecosystem. As access to information regulators, we are facing challenges that could not have been imagined decades ago when access to information laws began to be adopted. The Statement frames the challenges correctly and enables us to reimagine our role and responses as access to information regulatory authorities."* (Adv. Pansy Tlakula, Chairperson of the African Network of Information Commissions)
- 3) *"Access to open data is a key component of the right to information and crucial for achieving the SDGs. It empowers governments, citizens, civil society, and the private sector to improve public services like health, education, and environmental protection. ARTICLE 19 believes that creating partnerships between governments, civil society, private sector organisations, and multilateral institutions will accelerate progress towards these goals by enhancing the free flow of information, transparency and accountability of public institutions, and the fight against corruption."* (Ilaria Fevola, Legal Officer, Law & Policy, ARTICLE 19)
- 4) *"Through our on open contracting in Malawi, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Nigeria, we have learnt a number of lessons, first that whoever creates data, has an interest which quite often compromises the integrity of the data and all other decisions made based on this data, second, access to data has helped us to analyse and turn it into compelling information to highlight issues for the attention of procuring entities and regulators. It is therefore imperative that access to data becomes a norm in Africa".* (Gilbert Senduga Executive Director of Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC))
- 5) *"As we move further into a digitised world, data access continues to be of importance for the realisation of human rights, equitable governance structures, and life-enabling systems. We have witnessed first hand how historically marginalised people are left behind while others*

*escape pool accountability due to existing data and information sharing practices. Stakeholders including governments and private companies, thus have a responsibility to actualise the right to access information by creating operationalizing legislation, removing vague and restrictive frameworks, incorporating transparency measures with respect to their data, and ensuring policies are made with due regard to their effect on fundamental rights”* - (Bridget Andere, Access Now Senior Policy Analyst)

- 6) *“Equitable access to data is crucial to advancing platform accountability. For instance, with transparent and accessible data, it becomes easier to identify patterns of online abuse, harassment, or exploitation and develop targeted interventions and policies to protect people especially vulnerable groups from online harms, ensuring that their digital rights are upheld. Practitioners need evidence to challenge or improve platforms, amplify the voices of marginalised communities, and drive transparency and monitoring efforts. Access to information, enhanced by equitable access to data, is needed for evidence-based policy making, policy advocacy, consumer awareness, and even corporate pressure which can push platforms to operate with greater accountability, ultimately leading to safer and more equitable digital environments across the continent.”* - (Olanike Osho (Manager, Community of Practice for Online Safety))
- 7) *“Building an evidence-base for digital policy, which is central to Research ICT Africa’s mission, depends on collecting, surfacing and analysing data. This is key for mapping digital inequality, understanding the use and abuse of biometrics, the datafication of elections and the development of AI in Africa. Data is at the heart of our efforts to ensure a more equitable distribution of digital public goods - from digital statistics, to spectrum and data itself. It is central to contributing to the development of an enabling environment for public and private value creation on the continent in the African Union’s Data Policy Framework”.* (Alison Gillwald, executive director, Research ICT Africa)
- 8) *“Equitable access to data is not just a technological or economic issue; it is a matter of rights and justice. Without timely, transparent, and inclusive access to data, many are left behind—unable to participate fully in the digital economy, assert their rights, or benefit from technological advancements. Communities already marginalised by geography, gender, income, or ethnicity are disproportionately excluded, deepening the digital divide and perpetuating inequality. Through equitable access to data, stakeholders across the continent can ensure that Africans have the tools to drive their own innovation, protect their rights, and secure their prosperity.”* (Adeboro Odunlami, Coordinator, African Internet Rights Alliance)
- 9) *“FOIANet is the largest global network of civil society organisations and individuals promoting the right to access information held by public authorities or the right to information. We see open data as a key element of the wider notion of the right to information, and an increasingly important element as technology continues to evolve and make greater and greater use of data, including through artificial intelligence. FOIANet very much welcomes this important IDUAI statement, the first to focus specifically on issues relating to open data. We note that it establishes key principles relating to open data, including in relation to both what needs to be done to fulfil its potential and what practices need to be avoided.”* (Toby Mendel, Chair, FOIANet and Executive Director, Centre for Law and Democracy)
- 10) *“Access to data should not be a preserve for a few elites but a right for all citizens including marginalised and vulnerable groups such as rural communities, those who live in informal settlements, and persons with disabilities. Access to data enables access to information on digital platforms, which is necessary for all citizens of the world to participate in democratic activities and claim their civil, political and economic rights in the digital age. Addressing the*

*digital divide and data deserts, particularly in Africa and other regions of the world where digital inequalities exist requires collaborative efforts by government, civil society and tech companies to pool resources and provide adequate funding for a universal and inclusive internet ecosystem. We are of the firm belief that by advocating for and advancing access to data alongside access to information, African nations can assert their position in the global data landscape and contribute to their overall development and democratic progress”.* (Mr. Hajo Lanz, Director - Fesmedia Africa)

- 11) *“Access to information must remain a public good, even as technologies evolve. As we commemorate the International Day for Universal Access to Information (IDUAI), we must not lose sight of the fact that information is a public good. Data governance and transparency should enhance the public's ability to access and utilise this good for informed decision-making. This is crucial as technological shifts, such as the growth of artificial intelligence, present challenges around privacy, information integrity, and the role of media as a source of verified information”.* (Dr Tabani Moyo – MISA Regional Director)