

THE EAST AFRICAN DATA GOVERNANCE
SUMMARY REPORT
26TH-27TH FEBRUARY 2025
NAIROBI - KENYA



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APHRC:	African Population and Health Research Centre
AI:	Artificial Intelligence
BETA:	Bottom Up Economic Transformative Agenda
CAJ:	Commissioner on Administration of Justice
CAK:	Communications Authority of Kenya
CIPIT:	Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law
CSOs:	Civil Society Organizations
DPGSK:	Data Protection & Governance Society of Kenya
DPI:	Digital Public Infrastructure
EAC:	East African Community
HER:	Electronic Health Records
GPSDD	Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data
PDPC	Personal Data Protection Commissioner
IFWG	Intergovernmental Fintech Working Group
ICT	Information and Communication Technology.
IDRC	International Development Research Center
IDL	Icon Data Learning
IOT	Internet of Things
IP	Internet Provider
IRB	Institutional Review Boards
LDRI	Local Development Research Institute
ODPC	Office of the Data Protection Commissioner
NITA	National Information Technology Authority
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
SRHR	Sexual Reproductive Health and Right
PETs	Privacy-enhancing technologies
NLP	Natural language processing
TMC	Tech & Media Convergence
KNBS	Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
PWDs	People Living with Disability
NSOs	National Statistical Offices
VNR	Voluntary National Reviews
WGSS	Washington Group Short Set

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The East African data governance conference, one of its kind, brought together key stakeholders from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and beyond to address the most pressing challenges and opportunities in data governance. The conference was organized by Amnesty International Kenya and The Open Institute and attended by over 150 participants drawn from across 7 countries including sub national representation from Kenya most of whom attended in person and others virtually. Of the 129 physical attendees 60 were men while 69 were female. The purpose of the conference was to foster collaboration, knowledge sharing, and discussions on data governance practices within the EAC member states, beginning with Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and the region at large. The opening session laid the groundwork for deeper discussion around practical challenges and policy solutions in subsequent panels. By centering voices from across East Africa and focusing on real-world barriers to information access, the session reinforced that:

- Data governance must be inclusive by design, not as an afterthought.
- Regional collaboration is essential to scale effective, people-centered solutions.
- Laws and policies must translate into tangible impact for all citizens - especially the most marginalized.

Exploring effective governance mechanisms and policies for managing data assets and enabling data-driven governance in the East Africa Community countries. This is critical as it addresses the needs for data management, policy compliance, and socio-economic development. Establishing effective governance mechanisms enhances the quality and integrity of data as it ensures data-driven decision-making processes which is essential for sustainable development. A well-defined governance framework enhances transparency in data management practices as it holds organisations accountable for their data handling mechanisms thereby building public trust and confidence in institutions. With the rise of data protection regulations regimes, a robust data governance framework helps East African countries comply with legal requirements thereby minimizing risks related to data breaches and misuse. With the rise of technology and the increasing importance of data, there was a need for joint discussions on data protection and privacy in the EAC region. Whereas some discussions have already started taking place, there was a need to bring in even more stakeholders – bearing in mind different expertise from both the data for development constituency and data rights constituency.

The conference focused on the complexities and opportunities surrounding data protection, digital rights, and cross-border collaboration within the East African region. Key themes centered on how countries can better navigate data governance, build awareness, and work towards more cohesive regional data policies. One of the significant reflections shared during the conference was the need to shift how data protection regulations are perceived. The effective implementation of data governance frameworks is crucial for enabling CSOs, academic institutions, and think tanks to fulfill their roles in promoting transparency, accountability, and socio-economic development. This must however include government agencies, private sector entities, international development partners, and the research community itself. However, data governance

continues to present both opportunities and challenges for civil society organizations (CSOs) and academic institutions. The keynote panel discussion underscored the importance of regional dialogue and cooperation. Despite national differences, East African countries face similar tensions between digital innovation and data protection. The session set the stage for further discussions on harmonized regional frameworks and collective capacity-building efforts. The conversation continued to highlight the role of inclusive governance, collaborative regulatory development, and shared learning as central to advancing responsible data use in the region. The session underscored the importance of collaboration, capacity-building, and innovation-friendly regulation in fostering an environment where technology can thrive while respecting the rights of individuals. This high level regional conference provided opportunities for participants to engage with expert presentations, case studies, presentations and conversations that not only enhanced their knowledge on data governance and supportive policies but provided frameworks for cross border partnerships and opportunities to harness and leverage on data, AI and technology.

NOTABLE QUOTES FROM CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

- ✓ Ms. Kassait "The digital era demands that we put people at the center of data. Let us work together to shape a future where innovation and rights protection go hand in hand—and where no one is left behind."
- ✓ "Regulations become effective when you achieve some level of compliance. And compliance is not accidental—it requires investment in people, systems, and shared knowledge." – Ms. Loise Ochanda
- ✓ "We must create spaces where innovators can test their ideas while regulators assess the public interest and compliance." – Ms. Kassait Immaculate
- ✓ "The key is to find a balance that supports innovation while still protecting individuals' rights." – Dr. Elisa Nnko
- ✓ "The challenge is not only about having the law in place, but also about ensuring there are resources and mechanisms for enforcement." –David Sabiano
- ✓ "While we may not be able to control everything, we can position ourselves to influence the development and application of AI in ways that benefit the country." – David Sabiano
- ✓ "We're not just facing technical challenges. We're siloed in our thinking—and that's where we must begin to shift."
- ✓ "This is not just about systems—it's about mindsets. Data collaboration starts with trust, and trust begins when we stop working in isolation."
- ✓ "People are tired of giving information and seeing nothing come back. How do we make data speak for them, not just about them?"
- ✓ Data is the new oil. Edna Kasozi Uganda Data Protection Office

CONFERENCE BACKGROUND

Data is essential for the development of any modern economy and can improve decision-making, increase efficiency, and drive innovation. However, data also presents several challenges, including data privacy and security, data quality and interoperability, and data ethics and responsible use. Data protection regimes in East Africa, specifically in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda, have gained increasing importance in recent years. Each country has taken steps to establish legal frameworks and regulations to

safeguard the privacy and security of personal data. In Kenya, the Data Protection Act of 2019 was enacted, providing comprehensive provisions for the processing, storing, and protection of personal data. The Act established the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner, which is responsible for enforcing data protection laws and promoting awareness. In Uganda, the Data Protection and Privacy Act of 2019 regulates the collection, processing, and use of personal data, and establishes the National Information Technology Authority (NITA) as the regulatory body. Tanzania enacted the Data Protection Act in 2023, which sets out rules for the processing, storage, and transfer of personal data. Additionally, Rwanda has the Law on Personal Data Protection, which governs personal information collection, use, and disclosure. These data protection regimes aim to ensure individuals' privacy rights are respected, promote data security, and foster trust in the digital economy. In an era of digital governance and data-driven decision-making, the tension between access to information and data privacy has become a critical issue. Governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), and other stakeholders must balance transparency and protecting individuals' rights. In Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, legal frameworks exist to safeguard personal data while ensuring public access to crucial information. Still, challenges persist in implementation, especially for marginalized groups such as women. With the rise of technology and the increasing importance of data, there is a need for joint discussions on data protection and privacy in the EAC region. Whereas some discussions have already started taking place, there is a need to bring in even more stakeholders – bearing in mind different expertise from both the data for development and data rights constituencies. The conference fostered collaboration, knowledge sharing, and discussions on data governance practices within the EAC member states and beyond.

Conference Objectives

The conference brought together professionals, policymakers, and stakeholders from the EAC region to explore and enhance data governance practices. The objectives of the conference were to:

- Facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration among multiple stakeholders drawn from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania on data governance best practices.
- Address challenges and opportunities related to data sharing, collaboration, and governance within Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.
- Promote sustainable development, regional integration, innovation, and the future of work through effective data governance.
- Foster partnerships and networking opportunities among participants for future collaborations in data governance initiatives.

Conference Theme

The main theme of the conference was to explore data governance frameworks exploring effective governance mechanisms and policies for managing data assets and enabling data-driven governance in the East Africa Community States.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS AND CONFERENCE OPENING

The conference was officially opened with a powerful keynote address delivered by Ms. Immaculate Kassait, The Data Protection Commissioner, Kenya. She commenced by recognizing the presence of dignitaries and representatives from partner organizations including Open Institute, Amnesty International, and delegates from Uganda, Tanzania, and other participating countries. Ms. Kassait emphasized that digital transformation

and data governance lay at the core of Kenya's development agenda, particularly through:

- The Kenya Kwanza Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA)
- The Kenya Digital Blueprint
- Regional frameworks such as the East Africa Customs Union Protocol and the Common Market Protocol, both key to liberalizing trade and enhancing economic integration across the region.

She further contextualized the rapid growth of Africa's digital economy, highlighting the urgency to reinforce data protection strategies, develop robust legal frameworks, and ensure regional cooperation in line with Africa's Agenda 2063. The Commissioner stressed the dual imperative of harnessing emerging technologies - Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), blockchain for socio-economic advancement, while mitigating the associated data privacy risks. To achieve this balance, she called for the development of effective data governance frameworks that are people-centered, inclusive, and trustworthy. She raised critical concerns over the erosion of digital trust caused by privacy violations, underscoring the need to anchor cybersecurity, mobile security, and digital ethics as foundational pillars of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI). Ms. Kassait called for deeper understanding and harmonization of data protection laws across the East African region, particularly with regard to: Cross-border data transfers, Social media regulation, Consumer protection, Cybersecurity frameworks and based on international best practices. She also acknowledged the existing legal instruments such as: Kenya's Data Protection Act (2019); Uganda's Data Protection and Privacy Act (2019) and Tanzania's Data Protection Act (2022). She called for regional integration in data governance by emphasizing the need for a unified regional data governance framework in East Africa through:

- Collaborative policymaking between government, civil society, and the private sector
- Consultation and coordination mechanisms to ensure interoperability and consistency
- Recognition of privacy as a fundamental right, grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

As she concluded her remarks, Ms. Kassait reiterated that data processing is central to innovation, and urged all data handlers to strike a fair balance between user privacy and the need for development. She encouraged all stakeholders, researchers, civil society, academia, technologists, and policymakers from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania to view digital transformation not just as a trend rather as a shared responsibility. Noting that it was only through inclusive dialogue, shared learning, and coordinated policy action that the region can fully realize the potential of a well-regulated, human-centered digital future.

KEYNOTE PANEL DISCUSSION ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DATA GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS IN ADVANCING SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN EAST AFRICA, MODERATED BY MR. IRUNGU HOUGHTON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR-AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

The high level panel speakers included:

1. Ms Immaculate Kassait – Office of the Data Protection Commissioner (ODPC).

2. Dr. Noe Elisa Nnoko - Director of Data Protection Research and Technology – Personal Data Protection Commission (PDPC)
3. Viola Ochola – Commission on Administrative Justice (CAJ)
4. Ms. Loice Ochanda – International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

The opening panel session brought together a diverse group of stakeholders from across East Africa and beyond, to explore emerging issues and regional experiences in the field of data governance. The panel, moderated by Irungu, was centered around the theme of balancing innovation, development, and data protection. The session served as a platform for discussing the harmonization of standards, capacity gaps, public trust and transparency, and compliance with existing legal frameworks. The conversation opened with a question directed to the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner (ODPC) in Kenya, represented by Immaculate. The inquiry focused on how regulators navigate the perceived tension between data protection and development imperatives, particularly in innovation-driven environments. Immaculate highlighted the following strategic approaches:

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** An inclusive approach is essential. Regulators must bring innovators, private sector actors, and government stakeholders to the table early in the process.
- **Awareness and Paradigm Shifts:** The narrative around data protection needs to shift. It should be seen not as a hurdle but as a means to build consumer trust and drive sustainable growth.
- **Clear and Strategic Messaging:** Young innovators, often seen as informal or outside the legal framework, need to understand the value of data governance in terms that resonate with their entrepreneurial goals.
- **Enforcement and Compliance:** While collaboration is key, the necessity of enforcement must not be downplayed. Regulatory consequences serve to reinforce the seriousness of compliance.

While sharing Tanzania's perspective on navigating innovation and privacy, Dr. Nnoko emphasized the fact that Tanzania is focusing on strengthening its legal and regulatory environment to ensure data protection laws are aligned with innovation policies. There was strong coordination between government departments and agencies in aligning innovation initiatives with data protection objectives. Focus on capacity building, public education and building technical capacity in both public and private sectors was critical to ensure that data protection was not only enforced but also understood and internalized. The panel session delved into 4 main dilemmas faced by regulatory bodies and public entities in East Africa concerning data governance, privacy regulations, and legal compliance. The panelists provided real-world insights into the complexities of balancing technological innovation with data protection, as well as the difficulties in enforcing legal standards in regions with varying resources and capacities. The session provided valuable insights into the complex challenges of balancing innovation, legal compliance, and data protection in East Africa. Each panelist shared real-world dilemmas faced by their respective countries. **Dilemma 1** was shared by Ms. Kassait on Data Protection and Financial Innovation in Kenya before 2023 regarding the rapid rise of cryptocurrency trading and digital currencies. **Dilemma 2:** on Cross-Border Data Transfers and Legal Compliance in Tanzania was presented by Dr. Nnoko outlined a major

challenge faced by Tanzania's Personal Data Protection Commission regarding cross-border data transfers. **Dilemma 3:** Access to Information and Digitization Challenges in Uganda, The Speaker from Uganda shared a significant dilemma regarding the country's Access to Information Law, which requires all public entities to digitize their records within three years of the law's enactment. The law, which came into force in 2020, set a deadline for full digitalization by 2023, but many public entities struggled to comply due to resource constraints and the absence of clear standards for digitization. **Dilemma 4:** David Sabiano shared insights on the finalization of the AI strategy and the ongoing efforts to establish frameworks for data governance in Kenya. He emphasized the need for collaboration between developers and those responsible for public safety to ensure that AI is applied ethically while also benefiting the country's development.

The discussions around digital literacy were crucial in understanding how to address the digital divide in the region, despite considerable advancement in Kenya's digital landscape, many people still faced challenges in understanding and utilizing digital tools. Therefore, data protection regulations must not only be designed to protect individuals but also to ensure inclusivity. It was emphasized that capacity building should focus on empowering people at the grassroots level to understand and benefit from these regulations. The importance of educating students and young people on the relationship between law and technology was highlighted emphasizing the need to introduce data privacy and digital rights education early in schools and universities and preparing the next generation of legal and tech professionals to navigate this complex terrain. However, as cross-border data flows become more prevalent, panelists underscored the importance of building political will for regional collaboration calling for a unified regional data policy, which could foster smoother data sharing across borders while respecting privacy and security standards.

Another vital point of discussion revolved around strengthening public institutions and records management and the preparedness of public institutions, particularly at the county level, to handle data efficiently. A speaker from the Commission for the Administration of Justice shared insights into the challenges faced by counties in terms of record management and ICT infrastructure. Many counties, including Samburu and Isiolo, were found to lack proper systems for managing data. The need for robust records management was emphasized as essential for ensuring the integrity of data and facilitating efficient government decision-making. This discussion also linked back to the importance of capacity building, where institutions must be equipped with both human resources and technical support to manage and utilize data effectively. The key takeaways from this session including need for regional Collaboration, adequate resources for Capacity Building, awareness and compliance with digital rights and responsibilities, promoting innovation through Sandboxes, integrating Data Protection in education promoting responsible AI: development and deployment in an ethical and inclusive manner, respecting data protection regulations; cross-border data sharing; simplifying legal jargon to make data protection policies more understandable and better compliance with data protection laws.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

The breakout sessions were a mix of panel discussions, roundtable discussion, paper and poster presentations and presented under different tracks and topics covering diverse topics and presentations related to data governance.

Track 1 on data sharing and collaboration had three topics and moderated sessions included three topics:

Topic 1: on governance by design for Impact: Putting society at the center of digital public infrastructure and data exchange and was a panel discussion convened by Caribou Digital.

Topic 2: on Data x Migration-Perspectives of Africans on Data & Migration, Roundtable discussion convened by the Lawyers Hub. The session looked at best practices for cross-sectoral and cross-border data sharing, enabling data-driven collaborations for regional development and overcoming challenges in data sharing and collaboration.

Topic 3: on Beyond Data Protection: Data Governance in a Research Institution. Experiences of the African Population and Health Research Centre, and was convened by APHRC. The session opened with a comprehensive overview of APHRC's commitment to responsible data governance, highlighting its multidisciplinary team comprising data scientists, social scientists, policy engagement specialists, and capacity-building professionals. The presenter emphasized that data was APHRC's most valuable asset, and as a research organization, they were deeply invested in ensuring its responsible use to inform evidence-based policy and decision-making. The center's thematic programs included:

- Health and Well-being
- Human Development (including education and early childhood development)
- Population Dynamics and Urbanization (covering demography, fertility, aging, and urbanization)
- Data Science Program, established two and a half years ago

He highlighted the tension between protection and access, especially when excessive regulatory restrictions hinder data sharing, research, and innovation—particularly in contexts such as mental health or cross-border collaborations. He further warned of the dangers of over-protection and data monetization, which can lead to limited data access for under-resourced researchers, fragmentation of international research efforts and slow innovation due to restrictive licensing and paywalls. Such practices created an uneven playing field and hindered global health research, especially in low- and middle-income countries. APHRC advocated for a balanced model—protecting data rights while enabling equitable access through open science. The role of AI was discussed with a cautionary note. While AI is a powerful tool, its outputs are only as good as the data that feeds it. He noted that APHRC was actively evaluating AI platforms and emphasizing the need for critical appraisal of AI-generated insights, reiterating the importance of not letting AI replace your thinking but rather to be used to enhance work, noting that quality data management was essential for building ethical and effective AI systems. The session focused on the critical balance between data privacy and data access—an increasingly important challenge in research and evidence-based policy-making.

Track 2 was on data governance for sustainable development and the topic covered was: Ijue Data Yako: Youth Led Activism for Digital Rights & Data Protection. This track took a round table discussion format and was convened by Icon Data Learning (IDL).

Track 3 on Data governance for regional integration had a topic on the Role of Data Protection Practitioner Societies in East Africa in Ensuring Organizational Compliance with Data Privacy Laws and Safeguarding Human Rights. The session was a panel discussion convened by Data Protection & Governance Society of Kenya (DPGSK). Discussions centered on harmonizing data governance frameworks across EAC member states, data interoperability and standards for seamless data integration, strengthening cross-border data flows and partnerships for regional integration. There was discussion on the need to make a distinction between theory and practice and customize data protection laws to individual country contexts for easier operability.

Track 4 on Data governance for innovation had a topic on Product Privacy – Demonstrating Practical Privacy-by-Design leveraging a client's project use case in health tech and was convened by Technical Privacy Advocate. The discussions focused on promoting data-driven innovation ecosystems, supporting startups and SMEs through data governance initiatives, data marketplaces and monetization strategies for fostering innovation

Track 5 on data governance for the future of work was presented under the topic: Fair Digital Kazi: A Manifesto on the Future of African Tech and Data Work(ers). The format was a workshop which was convened by Policy. The discussions centered on addressing the impact of automation, AI, and advanced technologies on the workforce, ethical considerations in AI-driven decision-making and workforce management, upskilling and reskilling initiatives for the future of work. This session aimed to deepen participant engagement in developing an advocacy framework grounded in Pan-African feminist political economy to strengthen labor movements and policy influence. A key goal was to shape political ideologies and policy demands that will inform and regulate digital labor governance across Africa, with specific attention to gendered and socioeconomic disparities. The participants were introduced to the concept of an *Afrofeminist lens* as a critical framework for analyzing digital labor.

The research presented was rooted in five Afrofeminist principles adapted to digital labor work:

- **Fair Pay:** Ensuring that all workers, regardless of employment status, earn a decent and livable income.
- **Fair Conditions:** Establishing platforms and policies that protect workers from foundational risks.
- **Fair Contracts:** Making contracts accessible, readable, and legally sound.
- **Fair Management:** Creating transparent and inclusive grievance and feedback systems.
- **Fair Representation:** Ensuring that all workers have a voice in governance structures and are heard, irrespective of employment classification.

The session highlighted several systemic barriers undermining fairness and equity in digital labor across Africa:

- **Language Accessibility:** Many workers are unable to understand terms and conditions of employment, as contracts are predominantly written in English and not in local or widely spoken African languages.
- **Online and Offline Violence:** The research revealed widespread experiences of gender-based violence. Women workers reported instances of sexual harassment,

cyberbullying, and physical threats, including kidnapping and assault—particularly among older female drivers and gig workers.

- **Invisible Labor and Care Burdens:** Women in platform-based work continue to shoulder disproportionate care responsibilities. This “invisible labor” undermines their ability to participate fully and equitably in the digital economy.

POSTER AND ABSTRACT PRESENTATIONS

Presentation 1: Improving Data Collaboration among CSOs in Kisumu County which was presented by Ongati Gloria & Zeddy Misiga. This session focused on a research study exploring data sharing and collaboration practices among civil society organizations (CSOs) working in mental health and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) in Kisumu County, Kenya. The speaker framed the session within the broader theme of collaboration in data ecosystems, emphasizing the African proverb that *“you cannot walk alone”*, to illustrate the importance of collective effort in driving impact. They highlighted that purpose of the study was to:

- Understand current practices in data collaboration and sharing among CSOs in Kisumu.
- Identify opportunities and gaps in data governance, especially for organizations working in SRHR and mental health.
- Explore barriers to collaboration at both policy and operational levels.

The Key Findings were that there was:

- **Lack of Standardization:** A recurring barrier was the absence of standardized procedures for data collection and sharing. This created duplication of efforts and inefficiencies across organizations.
- **Infrastructure and Skills Gaps:** Disparities in technological infrastructure and data management capacity further hindered effective collaboration. Some organizations lacked even basic knowledge of how to comply with data protection standards.
- **Low Awareness of Data Governance Processes:** Many participants reported uncertainty about data certification, compliance with governance frameworks, and even the identification of relevant indicators for monitoring.
- **Absence of Statistical Policy:** The absence of a guiding statistical policy at county level was cited as a key impediment. Without such a policy, stakeholders were unclear on which data indicators to track, especially in areas like SRHR and mental health.
- **Silo-ed Operations:** The study highlighted that many CSOs and government agencies operate in isolation, undermining opportunities for synergy. This echoed broader concerns shared by national commissioners and stakeholders at the forum.

The recommendations presented from the study included:

1. Prioritize Data Sharing at all levels
2. Develop County - Level Statistical Policies
3. Strengthen Infrastructure and Capacity Building
4. Encourage Peer Learning and Integration

Presentation 2: Community Networks, Internet Connectivity and Data Governance in Kenya presented by Rapudo Hawi of Kijiji Yeetu

Presentation 3: In a lively and interactive presentation, *Amutorine Morine* launched the Africa Sandboxes Outlook Report, a key milestone by the Data Sphere Initiative aimed at fostering responsible innovation across Africa. The report explores the role of regulatory and operational sandboxes in supporting data governance, privacy-enhancing technologies (PETs), and AI-driven innovation, while promoting collaboration among governments, innovators, and communities. The presenter, Maureen set the tone for her talk by sharing two global stories that illustrated the practical utility of sandboxes—one from Indonesia's health sector and another from Singapore's PETs sandbox. These stories provided real-world grounding for the African audience to better grasp the often-abstract concept of regulatory sandboxes. Sandboxes are safe, controlled environments that allow for the testing of new technologies or governance frameworks under oversight. The Data Sphere Initiative categorizes sandboxes into three types:

1. Operational Sandboxes – Data-access environments for innovators to test products using real or synthetic data.
2. Regulatory Sandboxes – Collaborative spaces involving regulators, innovators, and stakeholders to experiment with new approaches to policy or compliance.
3. Hybrid Sandboxes – Combine elements of both operational and regulatory models.

While sandboxes have historically been concentrated in fintech, the report argues for their expanded use in areas like health, data privacy, and AI governance. Maureen revealed that through their research, the Data Sphere Initiative mapped 25 national sandboxes across Africa. Key findings include:

- 24 of 25 are focused on fintech, indicating a sectoral concentration that limits wider innovation potential.
- All mapped sandboxes are regulatory in nature—none currently expose datasets for direct innovation.
- Only two regional sandboxes exist, including Ecobank's Pan-African model.
- There is a significant gap in regulatory sandboxes outside of fintech, with Kenya being a notable exception with a focus on ICT.

She presented three African Sandbox Case Studies namely Ecobank Pan-African Sandbox, South Africa's Intergovernmental Fintech Working Group (IFWG) Sandbox and Kenya Communications Authority Regulatory Sandbox. The report identified several critical gaps and learnings including:

- Limited sector diversity: Sandboxes are overly concentrated in the financial sector.
- Lack of transparency and follow-up: Many sandboxes are launched with minimal documentation on progress or outcomes.
- Skills gaps among regulators: Many lack the technical expertise to assess innovations, especially in AI or privacy-enhancing tech.
- Low awareness: Innovators often misunderstand the purpose and function of sandboxes.

Recommendations

1. Broaden the Scope of Sandboxes by encouraging regulatory experimentation beyond fintech—to health, agriculture, AI, and data governance.
2. Enhance Communication and Documentation by promoting transparency and learning by regularly publishing results and lessons from sandbox programs.
3. Build Capacity among Regulators by equipping public sector bodies with technical knowledge to conduct due diligence and evaluate emerging technologies.

4. Pilot Regulatory Innovation, Not Just Technical Innovation
Encourage sandboxes that help refine or build new regulatory models, especially around sensitive data use and AI.

DAY 2

Keynote Address by Dr. Melissa Omino, Director at the Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law (CPIT) on Bridging Heritage and Innovation: Data Governance as a Catalyst for Africa's AI Future

Dr. Omino of CIPIT delivered a keynote speech titled bridging heritage and innovation: Data Governance as a Catalyst for Africa's AI Future and commenced by situating the discussion within a recent socio-political moment: the 2023 protests against Kenya's Finance Bill. These demonstrations, largely driven by Gen Z, used digital platforms to raise awareness and translate complex legislative content into local languages. This act, the speaker noted, exemplified the practical link between language and data access. Influencers and grassroots actors recognized that without accessible linguistic tools, public participation and informed civic engagement were stifled. This example set the tone for the speaker's central argument: that African languages must be integrated into data governance and AI development, not only as a right to representation but also as a functional necessity for equitable digital futures.

Three core principles were proposed to remedy this imbalance in heritage and innovation included:

1. **Community Ownership and Participation:** Language data must be co-created with and governed by the communities it originates from.
2. **Fair Benefit Sharing:** Local communities must benefit beyond the mere end-use of the AI tool.
3. **Cultural IP Protection:** Language is not neutral—it carries cultural knowledge. African languages should not be governed using the same frameworks as global lingua francas like English.

She further added that governance of language data was not merely a technical challenge but an opportunity to reimagine Africa's digital future through the lens of equity and heritage. Emphasizing that data governance must not only consider how data is stored and processed but also who it serves, who contributes to it, and who benefits. Without this shift, Africa risks perpetuating digital inequities that mirror past injustices. Dr. Omino concluded her keynote address with a call to action to honor Africa's linguistic richness as a pillar of its digital future and to embed language justice at the heart of data governance strategies and only then can Africa build technological systems that reflect its peoples, cultures, and aspirations.

Fireside Chat on data protection, scenario in Uganda: Al Kags and Edna Kasozi

interrogated the issue of real compliance with data protection policies vis a vis ticking the boxes which has made implementation of data protection laws progressively slow. The biggest priorities identified under this included awareness creation, sensitization and training on the data protection laws and policies for duty bearers, citizens and policy makers.

Panel Discussion on advancing both Access to data and data protection and privacy concerns in East Africa moderated by Al Kags

Speakers:

1. Dr Melissa Omino – Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law (CIPIT)
2. Diana Mwanzia – Transparency International Kenya
3. Kipkorir Birgen – Bajeti Hub
4. Asha D. Abinallah – Tech & Media Convergency (TMC)

The panel discussion emphasized the importance of data, noting that data was essential for the development of any modern economy and could be used to improve decision-making, increase efficiency, and drive innovation. They however noted that data also presented a number of challenges, including data privacy and security, data quality and interoperability and data ethics and responsible use. They explored models for effective governance mechanisms and policies for managing data assets and enabling data-driven governance in the East Africa Community countries. These included data management, policy compliance, and socio-economic development, noting that effective governance mechanisms enhanced the quality and integrity of data to ensure data-driven decision-making processes essential for sustainable development. They underscored the importance of a well-defined governance framework to enhance transparency in data management practices, holding organisations accountable for their data handling mechanisms thereby building public trust and confidence in institutions. The panel underpinned the fact that with the rise of data protection regulations regimes, a robust data governance framework could help East African countries comply with legal requirements thereby minimizing risks related to data breaches and misuse.

Panel Discussion on: Tensions between access to information; data privacy/protection had participants from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, county representatives and Civil Society Organizations and was moderated by Benjamin Charagu who introduced the speakers as highlighted below:

Speakers:

1. Ms. Glory Nkatha – the Local Development Research Institute
2. Ms. Serah M. Ndunda – Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS)
3. Ms. Karen Bett – the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD)
4. Mr. Wilfred Kazungu – Kilifi County Government
5. Mr. Robbert Kipngetich Kirui – Nandi County Government
6. Ms. Florence Syevuo – SDG Kenya Forum

This high-level session explored the legal, technical, and equity dimensions of data governance in East Africa. The discussion focused on ensuring that digital transformation upholds inclusion, transparency, and trust particularly for marginalized groups including women, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and low-literacy communities. The session centered around three key themes:

1. **Legal and Policy Frameworks** – Exploring existing policies on data protection and access to information, identifying gaps, and highlighting inconsistencies in implementation across the region.
2. **Practical Challenges and Inclusive Solutions** – Drawing on real-world case studies and lived experiences, with a focus on how marginalized groups are accessing or being excluded from digital services.

3. **Regional Collaboration and Future Directions** – Promoting cross-country learning and policy harmonization among Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya to advance inclusive and rights-based data governance.

The moderator emphasized that access to information was not merely a technical or legal issue, but a fundamental matter of equity, trust, and civic empowerment. Special recognition was given to the unique information access challenges faced by women, persons with disabilities, and communities with lower literacy levels, reaffirming the commitment to inclusive, rights-based governance. The session further explored the challenges and opportunities in fostering equitable access to information while ensuring data protection within East Africa's evolving digital governance landscape. Key highlights from the discussions included: Practical Challenges in Open Data Access were identified by Local Development Research Institute (LDRI) who opened up the discussions by identifying persistent barriers to open data access:

- **Data usability:** Public information is often available in complex, highly technical formats that are not user-friendly or accessible to non-experts.
- **Discoverability issues:** Government websites were poorly structured, making data retrieval a frustrating "treasure hunt."
- **Low public awareness:** Many citizens were unaware of their data rights, including the right to access public information.
- **Government hesitance:** Fear and misconceptions around open data persisted among civil servants, often linked to concerns about scrutiny or political sensitivity.

The proposed solutions to the barriers included: simplifying datasets, enhancing visualization, and running community-based sensitization initiatives to demystify open data and promote its responsible use. There was need to engage marginalized communities in data conversations to address the disconnect between data producers and local communities, which include:

- **Low literacy levels** and limited exposure to digital tools impede access to data in meaningful ways.
- **Ineffective communication:** Official data is often produced without considering local contexts, languages, or visual literacy needs.
- **Tokenistic inclusion:** Communities are rarely involved beyond being data subjects, leaving them out of processes that affect them directly.

The proposed approaches to addressing the disconnect included:

- Investing in data visualization tools and materials in local languages.
- Facilitating community forums and participatory methods where citizens can ask questions and interact with the data.
- Developing civic education programs focused on data rights and digital literacy.

The segment on balancing access to public information with data privacy introduced reflections from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) on how to uphold data protection while ensuring transparency. The session underscored the need for openness in official statistics, the obligation to protect personal and sensitive information and ensuring data interoperability without compromising on privacy. This session served as a critical reminder that inclusive data governance was not just about systems—but about people too.

How county governments are leveraging data to improve transparency, trust, and service delivery—while balancing the need for data protection insights from Nandi and Kilifi Counties

The speakers unpacked the tensions between data openness and protection, outlined key technological initiatives underway at county level, and reflected on how these interventions were transforming the relationship between governments and citizens. Robert Kirui – ICT Administrator, Nandi County Government began by reaffirming the vital role of technology as a game changer in transforming governance at the county level. He noted that Nandi County had prioritized innovation and data-driven systems to improve transparency and citizen engagement. While providing some key insights, he noted that:

- **Data Protection vs. Transparency Dilemma:** The county constantly grappled with how much data to disclose while protecting sensitive information. However, technology has enabled them to anonymize data sets effectively, addressing these concerns.
- **Government Culture and Trust:** Resistance to open data remained embedded in government culture—captured by the phrase “Serikali ni siri kali” (government is secretive). But over time, proactive disclosure was changing this mindset.
- **Digital Innovations for Engagement:**
 - o **Open Data Portal:** Nandi County had launched a public data access platform that allowed civil society and citizens to easily retrieve key information, including on budgets, tenders, and service delivery.
 - o **SASA Platform:** A toll-free 24-hour citizen engagement line where residents could call for information or assistance. This had significantly boosted citizen trust and improved responsiveness from the government.

The next speaker, Wilfred Kazungu, the Health Records Officer, Kilifi County Government while speaking from a health systems perspective provided a case study on the practical challenges of data access and protection in the health sector which as was noted was a particularly sensitive domain. He shared some of the challenges and solutions to include:

- **Manual Data Collection at Lower-Level Facilities:** Most dispensaries and health centers still relied on paper-based records, making it difficult to convert service data into usable, shareable public information. Data masking and anonymization remained a challenge at this level.
- **Data Sensitivity in Clinical Interactions:** Health workers collected highly personal data and ensuring privacy and ethical handling of this information was critical.
- **Digital Health Transformation:** The county was currently implementing a county-wide Electronic Health Records (EHR) system, which captured patient-level data, anonymizing it, and allowing for secure aggregation.

County governments are proving that with the right leadership, tools, and community engagement, inclusive and ethical data governance is not only possible. Key observations made from the county presentations included:

1. **Counties were making significant strides** in embracing open data and digital governance despite internal resistance and infrastructural challenges.
2. **Trust and transparency are intertwined**—digital platforms like Nandi’s SASA line were building stronger, more responsive ties between governments and citizens.
3. **Healthcare data management was particularly sensitive** but also vital for service improvement. County-level EHRs and dashboards were setting new standards in public health accountability.

4. **Inter-departmental data collaboration** (health, agriculture, meteorology, etc.) was essential for meaningful, cross-sectoral problem-solving.
5. While progress is being made, **manual data systems remain a bottleneck**, especially in rural and primary-level facilities. Full digitalization is a key next step.

The next panelist Karen Bett's presentation tackled the complexities surrounding data access, the limitations of official statistics, and the need to rethink data systems to serve equity, inclusion, and rights-based development. She highlighted the following complexities and limitations:

- ✓ Gaps in Data Availability and Representation:
- ✓ Underuse of Existing Data
- ✓ Value of Alternative and Citizen-Generated Data
- ✓ Inclusive Data Production Processes:
- ✓ Policy and Legal Frameworks
- ✓ On her call to action she emphasized that

The next panelist presented on the role of Civil Society Driving Policy Change, providing practical examples from Kenya on successful initiatives.

- **Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) & Access to Information Act:** In 2016, Kenya's first VNR on SDG implementation included civil society contributions as annexes to the government report. Through coordinated advocacy, CSOs successfully lobbied for the adoption of the Access to Information Act, aligning with recommendations in the VNR. This demonstrated the power of coordinated multi-stakeholder lobbying, especially when civil society presents a united front.
- **Disability Data and the 2019 Census:** Advocacy by the disability movement led to the adoption of the Washington Group Short Set (WGSS) of questions on disability in Kenya's national census. Despite initial resistance from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, civil society persisted—even taking officials to Ghana to observe how other countries had successfully integrated the WGSS. This exposure was instrumental in changing minds and ultimately reforming national data collection standards.

CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

The conference outcomes were based on the 3 result areas focusing on Policy and Legislation, Collaboration and sensitization and capacity building proposals and recommendations. These included:

- a) Policy and legislation: A call to action for African governments to support evolution of laws alongside the labor market recognizing digital labor while actively designing inclusive, feminist, and care-centered frameworks that honor the rights, needs, and dignity of all workers, especially women and marginalized communities and identification of gaps in existing data governance policies and regulations, leading to the development of improved frameworks to be harmonized across EAC member states.
- b) Collaboration and partnership: A call to action for increased political will, collaboration, and education to ensure the region's readiness for the digital future. The conference established partnerships for joint data governance initiatives including development of robust data sharing frameworks, addressing challenges associated with cross-sectoral and cross-border data sharing.
- c) Sensitization and capacity building to enhance knowledge and understanding by the participants of the data governance principles, best practices, and emerging

and a deeper appreciation of how data governance is vital for sustainable development, regional integration, innovation, and the future of work.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the curtains came down on the 2 day East African data governance conference some of the notable key takeaways touched on the need for data governance to strike a balance between privacy, protection and open access, urging the regulatory bodies to provide a clear guideline and framework to guide this balance. The need to tailor institutional frameworks to local needs was identified as a critical need with the need to pair this with building critical and adaptive technological capabilities to enhance data access. In view of the rapidly changing digital space responsible AI use is not possible with high quality and a well governed data space and knowledge of data protection policies. Leveraging on the opportunities for collaboration across public, private and academia and investing in local research infrastructure and capacity building. This is likely to enhance data sharing and innovation while enhancing discussions that shape the future of data protection and digital rights in East Africa. Panelists agreed that the way forward involves not only enacting laws but ensuring that these laws are well-understood and effectively implemented to protect the digital rights of individuals while encouraging innovation and economic growth. Tracking legislative advocacy across the East African countries while building cross-sector collaborations toward inclusive, feminist-informed digital labor governance was also a key way forward.