

Sensitive Data Sovereignty Conference

Venue: Tangaza University, Langata S Rd, Nairobi, Kenya

Date: Tuesday, January 27, 2026

Organisers: Tangaza University, University of Nairobi,
Africa University on FAIR Open Science, EEPA, VODAN

1. Preamble

We, academics, policymakers, researchers, humanitarian practitioners, technologists, and institutional leaders from across Africa and partner regions, convened under the auspices of the **Africa University Network on FAIR Open Science (AUN-FOS)** to deliberate on the theme:

“Sensitive Data Sovereignty in Africa: Ethical and Technical Considerations for a Humanitarian and Health Data Space.”

The Conference was convened by **Tangaza University College**, in collaboration with the **AUN-FOS**, with the objective of advancing shared understanding on the governance of sensitive health and humanitarian data in Africa. The deliberations were based on tested and implementable solutions proposed by the VODAN group bringing expertise on data sovereignty in Africa.

We recognize that digital data has become a foundational resource for knowledge production, service delivery, innovation, and artificial intelligence. At the same time, we acknowledge that data governance choices increasingly shape questions of **human dignity, institutional trust, national security, and continental sovereignty**.

2. Context and Rationale

The Conference noted that African societies are deeply integrated into **digital systems supporting health, humanitarian assistance, education, migration management, and social protection**. While digitalization has enabled scale and efficiency, it has also surfaced persistent governance challenges, including:

- The adequacy and durability of consent mechanisms, particularly in vulnerable and humanitarian contexts;
- The distribution of control, access, and value arising from sensitive datasets;
- The security implications of centralized, foreign-hosted, or externally mediated data infrastructures.

Participants observed that, although legal and ethical principles governing data protection are increasingly well articulated at national, regional, and international levels, **implementation frameworks remain uneven**, particularly in contexts involving cross-border data flows, donor-funded Programmes, and emergency operations.

3. Core Principles Affirmed

The Conference reaffirmed the following principles as central to African approaches to sensitive data governance:

A. Human Dignity and Public Interest

Data governance frameworks must prioritize the dignity, rights, and legitimate interests of individuals and communities, particularly those in vulnerable situations.

B. Sovereignty and Institutional Responsibility

States and regional institutions retain primary responsibility for governing sensitive data generated within their jurisdictions, consistent with constitutional, legal, and ethical obligations.

C. Community-Aware Consent

Consent mechanisms should move beyond formal compliance toward meaningful understanding, cultural contextualization, and accountability, including recognition of collective dimensions of data generation.

D. Security-by-Design

Data governance and technical architectures should integrate security considerations from inception, recognizing sensitive datasets as components of critical national and regional infrastructure.

E. Responsible Innovation and Ethical AI

The development and deployment of AI systems must be grounded in transparent, accountable, and context-appropriate data governance practices.

F. FAIR Open Science and African Data Spaces

The Conference welcomed the contribution of FAIR principles--Findable, Accessible under defined conditions, Interoperable, and Reusable--as a foundation for responsible data stewardship.

relevance of extended approaches emphasizing:

- Ownership and agency of data subjects;
- Localization and jurisdictional accountability;
- Regulatory and ethical compliance.

FAIR data principles are tested on the potential for federated data control over multidirectional architectures in which data is held under clear Ownership in Locale under Regulatory Compliance in jurisdiction (FAIR-OLR).

The concept of an **African Humanitarian and Health Data Space** was discussed as a promising approach to balancing sovereign data control with collaborative knowledge generation, provided it is anchored in **clear governance, legal safeguards, and institutional oversight**.

4. Institutional Capacity and Collaboration

The Conference underscored the critical role of African governments, universities and research institutions in shaping data governance norms, building technical and legal capacity, and training future data stewards.

Through AUN-FOS, universities across Africa committed to:

- Strengthening interdisciplinary education on data governance, ethics, and technology;
- Supporting research on context-appropriate data architectures for health and humanitarian systems;
- Fostering collaboration with policymakers, humanitarian actors, and international partners on equitable terms.

5. Key Observations

Participants observed that:

- Legal frameworks alone are insufficient without institutional capacity, technical alignment, and governance clarity and legal frameworks need further constitutional development based on the principles of the AU Malabo Convention;
- Cross-border data governance increasingly influences Africa's participation in global research, innovation, and AI ecosystems;
- Prevention-oriented approaches to data governance can reduce downstream harms, institutional disputes, and loss of public trust.

6. Resolution

The Conference agreed to:


- I. Support the continued development of **African-led data governance frameworks** for sensitive health and humanitarian data under the leadership of the African Union Pan African Parliament and other regional organisations.
- II. Promote **implementation-focused research** bridging law, ethics, technology, and institutional practice for societal benefit.
- III. Encourage dialogue between African institutions and global partners on **mutual recognition, interoperability, and trust-based data governance**.
- IV. Strengthen the role of universities as independent conveners with expertise on sensitive data and as capacity builders in data governance, working with **VODAN as a continental-wide centre of expertise on data sovereignty**.
- V. Foster ongoing collaboration through the **Africa University Network on FAIR Open Science (AUN-FOS)** to give leadership towards the implementation of the conference resolutions.

7. Conclusion


This Conference marks an important step in advancing African leadership in the governance of sensitive data based on constitutionalism. Participants reaffirmed that Africa's digital future must be shaped through ethical stewardship, institutional responsibility, and collaborative innovation, grounded in the continent's legal traditions, cultural values, and development priorities.

The Conference calls upon the African Union and the African Union Pan African Parliament, regional institutions, governments, universities, humanitarian actors, and international partners to work together in building trusted, sovereign, and human-centered data spaces and ecosystems that support health, humanitarian action, peace and sustainable development.

Signed:


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