COMMENTARIES | DEC 14 2022

India will prioritise data for development at G20

SAMIR SARAN | ANIRBAN SARMA

To share and benefit from development data, it must be accessible, of high-quality, and offered in real time. India at the helm of G20 has much to offer as this will build on principles governing PM Modi's Digital India initiative

| DEVELOPMENT | DIGITAL FINANCIAL | G20 | INDIA | NARENDRA MODI | SDGS |

At the G20 Leaders' Summit in Bali last month, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi pledged that the principle of "data for development" will be integral to India's G20 presidency. New Delhi's commitment to this principle and its vision of strengthening it through international cooperation are already apparent. The first side event of the G20 Development Working Group under the Indian presidency, held in Mumbai on Tuesday, addressed the theme "Data for development: The role of the G20 in advancing the 2030 Agenda". Amitabh Kant, India's G20 Sherpa, emphasised that the country's strategic use of data for governance and public service delivery in its aspirational districts, for instance, has, in three years, wrought a transformation that would otherwise have taken six decades. Data has also powered India's pandemic response, innovations in education, health care, and food security, and enabled digital financial inclusion at a near-population scale.

As a group composed of developed and developing nations, the G20 presents a microcosm of what a concerted global effort to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) might resemble. If the G20is to help accelerate progress towards SDGs, it must vigorously pursue two kinds of data-driven interventions: Rejuvenating legacy datasets using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Big Data analytics, thus converting data to intelligence; and using cutting-edge emerging tech — including drones, geospatial mapping, and AI — to generate futuristic new datasets.

> **The country is about to launch a major data initiative as a part of which it will share anonymised data sets collected under the National Data Governance Framework with the AI ecosystem, and the research and startup communities.**

In both areas, India has much to offer the world. The country is about to launch a major data initiative as a part of which it will share anonymised data sets collected under the National Data Governance Framework with the AI ecosystem, and the research and startup communities. This vast database will be used to train AI models, catalyse innovation, and craft more effective policy and on-ground solutions. In May, NITI Aayog launched the groundbreaking National Data and Analytics Platform to democratise access to public government data by making datasets accessible and interoperable, and providing accompanying tools for analytics and visualisation. Each of these initiatives builds upon the PM's vision of a Digital India characterised by a digitally empowered society and tech-enabled knowledge economy.

The creation of entirely new datasets is also exploding in India. Drones are scanning the country's terrain in minute detail, and this aerial footage is being combined with other kinds of data to create extraordinarily detailed maps. Data generated by drones is also revolutionising agriculture and helping transform existing cities into smart cities. The World Economic Forum estimates that the new data economy resulting from drones could boost India's Gross Domestic Product by $100 billion and create nearly half a million jobs in the coming years.

Indeed, India is rapidly emerging as a world leader in the geospatial sector. Addressing the United Nations World Geospatial Information Congress in Hyderabad in October, PM Modi emphasised that geospatial technology is a "tool for inclusion" that has been "driving progress" and established itself as an enabler across development sectors. In fact, this is a space in which India has already begun to support its South Asian neighbours with communications and connectivity.

> **Across nations, data must be emancipated from its current silos, and progressively larger volumes of data must be made public and easily discoverable.**

As India and its G20 partners forge collaborations centred on data for development, they should adhere to certain core principles. Across nations, data must be emancipated from its current silos, and progressively larger volumes of data must be made public and easily discoverable. To be used effectively, data must be simple, high-quality, and offered in real-time. A culture of experimentation and innovation must be fostered around data operations, and countries must invest in tools for analysing datasets in creative ways. To enhance outcomes, constructive competition could be promoted among stakeholders in the data ecosystem.

Two crucial tasks lie before the G20. Its members will have to try and arrive at a common understanding of sensitive and non-sensitive data, and to reflect on frameworks that could help share data across borders. There is an in-principle consensus that open repositories should be built where nations can store public-value data. But a prudent balance will need to be struck between the imperatives of data sovereignty and protection, and the notion of a data commons that could benefit the global community. Ultimately, the G20's data regulations should embed the norm of reciprocity — nations should be able to share and benefit from development data.

> **A culture of experimentation and innovation must be fostered around data operations, and countries must invest in tools for analysing datasets in creative ways.**

As 2030 nears, the Indian presidency could be an inflection point for the G20's deliberations around data for development. Since 2019, the theme's importance has been consistently reaffirmed by G20 leaders, and the recent Japanese, Saudi Arabian, Italian and Indonesian presidencies have all recognised that the wealth of data produced by digitalisation must be harnessed. But government-to-government dialogue must increasingly be supplemented by systematic engagements with the private sector, civil society, women and young people, if data-led empowerment is to be mainstreamed. This is a key element India could underscore in the G20 playbook, thus shaping past achievements and present priorities into what could become a part of the grouping's legacy to the world.

This commentary originally appeared in _Hindustan Times_.

The views expressed above belong to the author(s).

ORF research and analyses now available on Telegram! Click here to access our curated content — blogs, longforms and interviews.