CSEA POLICY BRIEF

Addressing Lack of Public Engagement in Africa's Data Governance Practices

TOMIWA ILORI
SONE OSAKWE
ADEDEJI ADENIRAN (PHD)

Summary

This brief considers why public involvement or contribution to data governance processes and outcomes in African countries is minimal, and strategies for using public awareness as a tool for increased public participation. Some of the barriers to effective public awareness and participation in driving data policies in Africa are; lack of strategic direction and transparency by policymakers, limited understanding of specific functions of various stakeholders in data governance ecosystem, low data and digital literacy levels, negative public perception on public policy development. To address these issues, the study proposes:

- Collaboration between strategic state and non-state actors, to mainstream public awareness and education into national digital and data governance strategies;

- Extensive capacity building, which includes provision of easily accessible informative resources to the public, digital literacy and online security training, tailored awareness campaigns for different audiences, and a peer-learning system for African stakeholders;

- Public data sharing for increased transparency, information and research purposes.

Background and Research Context

Public participation is an integral aspect of ensuring effective and advanced data governance practices. African countries are largely in need of strong and efficient data governance systems. To build such systems, there is an urgent need to carry the public along in policy formation, development and output. A prerequisite for active public engagement in data policy making is a citizenry that is aware and knowledgeable about data issues. This involves deliberate commitments by policymakers and relevant stakeholders, in ensuring that the public has complete information regarding their data rights and responsibilities, and are empowered to influence data governance policies. It is therefore important to understand if the public has the requisite level of awareness and information, if there are gaps, and if yes – actions required to close these knowledge gaps, to enable the public contribute meaningfully to data governance processes.

In examining these issues, this study employed a combination of consultations with strategic stakeholders in eleven African countries - Benin, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra-Leone, Tanzania, South Africa and Uganda, and desk research.

Main Findings

- Most respondents noted there is very little public involvement in developing data governance policies in African countries. While governments tend to lead data governance initiatives, necessary measures to facilitate public participation in such initiatives are not incorporated.

- The major reason for this trend is that the public lacks awareness of their data rights and role in formulating and envisioning a strategic agenda for the data ecosystem.

So, why is the public so unaware?

a. **Lack of strategic direction and transparency by policymakers**: Nine out of the eleven countries surveyed showed that there were no defined national strategies on how to use public awareness to galvanise public participation in data governance. This shows that there is no actual commitment especially on the part of policymakers to seek and utilise public feedback on developing data governance policies.

b. **Limited understanding of specific functions of various stakeholders in data governance ecosystem**: There are limited or no information on the various responsibilities of both state and non-state actors with respect to data governance.

c. **Lack of strategic direction and transparency by policymakers**: Nine out of the eleven countries surveyed showed that there were no defined national strategies on how to use public awareness to galvanise public participation in data governance. This shows that there is no actual commitment especially on the part of policymakers to seek and utilise public feedback on developing data governance policies.

d. **Limited understanding of specific functions of various stakeholders in data governance ecosystem**: There are limited or no information on the various responsibilities of both state and non-state actors with respect to data governance.

e. **Low data and digital literacy levels**: Most respondents consulted noted that there is limited understanding on the use of data by the wider public in their various contexts. This challenge suggests that there will be minimal engagement by the public on issues related to how their data is governed.

f. **Negative public perception on public policy development:** There is a general lethargy among the wider public, in being involved with public policy development. This is largely due to the fact that there are usually no evidence that governments value the input of the public in shaping their policy decisions.

g. **Low evidence-based research output:** Effective policies are built on thorough, rigorous and objective research. Currently, there are hardly any committed engagement in building thorough research focused solely on ensuring effective data governance in African countries. This also contributes to how the public participates in such issues as such research are very limited to educate and inform the public.

h. **Slow-paced regional leadership on awareness on data governance:** While there are commendable initiatives by regional institutions such as the African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020-2030), these initiatives seem slow and rarely have specific and follow-through commitments on mainstreaming public awareness into data governance especially in African national contexts.

Implication of Findings

- African countries need accountable and transparent data governance systems. These systems cannot be achieved without the people being aware of their rights to be able to fully participate in shaping policy outcomes on data governance.

- This awareness and participation is not only necessary so as to protect data rights of Africans but also to ensure that the growing interests of both state and non-state actors in data-driven commerce is backed by human-centred approaches.

- Such need cannot be effectively met without data governance systems that actively involve more Africans through public awareness and public participation.

Policy Recommendations

This brief highlights four necessary actions required to improve public awareness, and by extension, spur participatory data governance. These include:

a. **Mainstreaming public awareness and education into national strategy**: There is need to embed a roadmap that details stakeholders' commitment and roles in increasing public awareness and participation into national digital or data strategy documents. This will provide a step-by-step guide for monitoring how these commitments are fulfilled. Data protection authorities can champion this.

b. **Maximising multi-stakeholder collaborations:** This involves working with diverse actors to expand the reach and impact of public awareness campaigns linked to data governance.

c. **Capacity building for stakeholders**: Some specific forms of capacity building initiatives may include:

   i. **Providing easily accessible informative resources to the public**: While it is important to provide informative resources on data governance issues, such resources need to be accessible. Accessibility in this context may refer to the ease of use by the intended recipient of such resource. For example, local languages have proved highly useful in South Africa to reach the wider public on data governance issues.

   ii. **Carrying out digital literacy and security training**: Incorporating digital literacy and cyber security information into educative resources could help improve awareness on data governance issues in African countries.

   iii. **Developing a peer-learning system for African stakeholders**: A peer and dialogic system that could help African stakeholders learn best practices from each other, which could be useful in improving delivery of public awareness campaigns.

   iv. **Tailoring awareness campaigns for different audiences**: Some of the ways this can be done is by carrying out targeted trainings for strategic stakeholders including parliamentarians, government agencies, civil society, private sector and several others.

d. **Promoting public data sharing**: Using public data to provide more accessible public services could improve public awareness on the importance of data use and misuse. While such public use may be necessary, they should be done in such a way that it does not discriminate against any member of the public.

In conclusion, data governance policies require bottom-up approaches i.e. the people need to be actively involved in the rules that guide how their data is used. This primarily requires truly engaging the public to participate in various aspects of policy formation, development and output.

Note: Adapted from CSEA's recent research study on how to maximise public awareness for participatory data governance in Africa.

https://cseaafrica.org/maximizing-public-awareness-for-participatory-data-governance-in-african-countries/