



## **Position Statement**

# **Privacy and the Pandemic: Rebuilding Responsibly in a Post-COVID World**

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers around the world have attempted to balance immediate crisis demands with routine community needs. This juggling is compounded in some low and middle-income countries where already-limited resources have been redirected to emergency response while regular, still critical development obligations continue to pile up. For example, in many countries, in-person health surveys and census preparations were (or remain) paused and postponed.<sup>1</sup> In their place, one-off COVID-19 assessments, data collection, and technology have proliferated. After the pandemic such singular initiatives may or may not be repurposed within the health sector, or outside of health data silos to benefit other sectors.

While the pandemic may not fully “conclude” for some time, the immediate state of emergency is slowing. Ten months into the pandemic, how do technologists, governments, and development partners – particularly in low resource settings – lay the foundation to repurpose and integrate pandemic data and technology into ongoing equitable development efforts?

## **What We’ve Learned**

**Emergency safeguards should aim to build upon routine data privacy obligations rather than becoming a new, parallel structure.** Development Gateway has learned through our data strategy advisory work that if institutions do not have policies in place to protect data privacy during “normal”, routine data collection, it is difficult to develop and agree upon the processes needed in the middle of an emergency.<sup>2</sup> The World Health Organization is working to follow this approach, having developed data sharing principles to guide the organization’s data governance framework for routine and emergency data collection.<sup>3</sup>

**It is difficult to plan for integrating limited use tools into existing, longer-term priorities.** For example, in the agriculture sector we have seen the power of mobilizing quickly to help decision-makers use available data through new digital tools.<sup>4</sup> We collaborated with numerous stakeholders across Africa’s fertilizer sector to visualize the impact of COVID-19 on fertilizer supply chains. However it has been a challenge to identify how to integrate the dashboard with existing data collection efforts, such as around crop-specific fertilizer use.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. “Highlights from a global COVID-19 survey of National Statistical Offices.” Available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/covid19-response/covid19-nso-survey-report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Learn more about Development Gateway at <https://www.developmentgateway.org/about>

<sup>3</sup> Data Ready and Development Gateway. “Case Study: Advising the WHO on its data sharing practices in non-emergency contexts.” 2020. Available at <https://dataready.org/casestudy/advising-the-who-on-its-data-sharing-practices-in-non-emergency-contexts/>

<sup>4</sup> See for example the International Fertilizer Development Center COVID-19 Africa Fertilizer Watch Dashboard. June 2020. Available at <https://africafertilizerwatch.org/#/en>

**Data used to target immediate COVID-19 interventions need not be divorced from longer-term goals to improve health and economic outcomes.** Our work in tobacco control to increase available data for decision-making has underscored the ties between short term COVID strategies and the need to reduce long term impacts of tobacco use on communities.<sup>5</sup> In a typical year, tobacco use kills over 8 million people.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, growing evidence suggests that smoking and/or vaping is a factor in the length and severity of COVID-19 diagnoses.<sup>7</sup> Measures to control tobacco use are an urgent need not just for long-term health and economic benefits, but also as governments tackle COVID-19 in real-time.<sup>8</sup> **By connecting—earlier and more frequently— COVID-19-related data and technology to longer-term health, education, and other sectoral priorities, we can minimize interruptions to development goals and increase the likelihood that data and technology will be (re)used responsibly after the pandemic ends.**

### Future Research Priorities

As governments and communities continue to face COVID-19 challenges, we have identified three research topics to help stakeholders plan and transition short term data collection and technical tools for use within the broader health sector and beyond.

1. **An analysis framework to assess how individual data collection processes and/or specific tools can be repurposed without violating privacy rights.** Some items to consider include:
  - a. Who, why, and for what purpose will data continue to be collected after the pandemic?
  - b. How can COVID-19-specific tools connect to existing strategies and plans?
  - c. How could COVID-19 tools upgrade, replace, or streamline preexisting tools and processes?
  - d. How would transitioning to a new system or tool impact data quality, trust, and engagement with the public?
  - e. How will tools shift back towards higher quality methodology and data metrics, where some protocols may have been suspended in order to make data available more quickly?
  - f. Which vulnerable groups were excluded<sup>9</sup> from the data collection process or tool, and how can stakeholders redesign to better integrate these groups?

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<sup>5</sup> Learn more about the Tobacco Control Data Initiative. Available at <https://www.developmentgateway.org/blog/tcdi-launch>

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organization, “Tobacco”. May 2020. Available at <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/tobacco>

<sup>7</sup> Vardavas, C., and Nikitara, K. COVID-19 and smoking: A systematic review of the evidence. March 20, 2020. Available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32206052/>

<sup>8</sup> Staid, M. Tobacco Cessation: Another Tool for Governments Fighting Coronavirus? 2020. Available at <https://www.developmentgateway.org/Covid-TCDI>

<sup>9</sup> See for example how Singapore overlooked its migrant community, which led to a damaging coronavirus outbreak. Mokhtar, F. How Singapore Flipped From Virus Hero to Cautionary Tale. Bloomberg News. April 21, 2020. Available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-21/how-singapore-flipped-from-virus-hero-to-cautionary-tale>

- g. What will be the boundaries of data reuse? How will stakeholders determine whether full, partial, or restricted access is appropriate?<sup>10</sup>
2. **How can new and/or limited use technology be repurposed in other sectors with critical needs such as education, disaster preparedness, or transportation?** Additional research could consider, in light of climate change and ongoing natural disasters, how contract tracing infrastructure could be repurposed to bolster warning and communications systems.
3. As vaccine delivery increasingly becomes a priority in the next phase(s) of the pandemic, **how can we learn from COVID-19 vaccine delivery supply chains to improve targeting and problem solving for the delivery of other types of vaccines?** In the same vein, some countries, such as Senegal, have developed a rigorous pandemic response in spite of limited resources and a weakened health system.<sup>11</sup> **How can lessons learned from emergency response be reapplied to standard health service delivery in low- and middle-income countries?**

## Conclusion

It takes time to plan for an appropriate transfer/ramp down from an emergency response. Now is the time to consider how data and technology can be used not only in the continuing pandemic response, but beyond, as sustainable development goals remain essential to support healthy communities. Rather than add more datasets and technical platforms to the “graveyard” of unused tools, the global community can use innovations developed during the COVID-19 pandemic to continue building robust ecosystems in which the demand, supply and use of data drive better decision making for everyone.

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<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Pasquetto, I. V. Beyond privacy: the emerging ethics of data reuse. Workshop presented at the Cochrane Colloquium 2018, Edinburgh. Available at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/92k1b265>

<sup>11</sup> Shesgreen, D. “Senegal's quiet COVID success: Test results in 24 hours, temperature checks at every store, no fights over masks.” USA Today. September 6, 2020. Available at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/09/06/covid-19-why-senegal-outpacing-us-tackling-pandemic/5659696002/>