

A Roadmap for Cross-Border Data Flows

PROJECT CASE STUDY
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Project overview

The World Economic Forum partnered with the Bahrain Economic Development Board and a steering committee-led project community of organizations from around the world to co-design the Roadmap for Cross-Border Data Flows, with the aim of identifying best-practice policies that both promote innovation in data-intensive technologies and enable data collaboration at the regional and international levels.

Creating effective policy on cross-border data flows is a priority for any nation that critically depends on its interactions with the rest of the world through the free flow of capital, goods, knowledge and people. Now more than ever, cross-border data flows are key predicates for countries and regions that wish to compete in the Fourth Industrial Revolution and thrive in the post-COVID-19 era.

In the roadmap, the project community of globally diverse industry experts proposes what best-in-class data flows policy looks like. For some countries, very little will be needed in the way of upgrading, as they have inspired the core principles by their own actions; for others, the roadmap may represent a full suite starting point. To cater for varying degrees of ambition, the project first crystallizes the most essential building blocks, and then offers scope for the most ambitious and advanced economies to future-proof their policy-making in this area.

Project phases

Assess

Cross-border data flows offer keys to new economic growth, but policy barriers exist to achieving global interoperability. This becomes especially problematic in regions where opportunities exist for collaboration between nations to increase the international competitiveness of a region, but are stifled by lack of consensus or incentivization. The project originally sought to uncover policy levers to unstick regional cooperation around data flows, but sovereign nations can never be forced to cooperate with each other, so the project sought instead to find ways to improve policy interoperability.

The Bahrain Economic Development Board seconded a fulltime fellow to the World Economic Forum's Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution for the duration of the project. Bahrain's interest in this project stems from its recent success in launching national policy frameworks to facilitate the flow of data across its borders, including the Personal Data Protection law, Cloud Computing Services to Foreign Parties law, removal of legacy localization requirements and expansion of connectivity infrastructure. Bahrain is continuously exploring best-in-class policies on data flows in order to benefit from deep cooperation in the international data economy.

Design and develop

The roadmap was socialized, workshopped and refined at sessions at various Forum events, including the World Economic Forum on the Middle East and North Africa 2019, Sustainable Development Impact Summit 2019 and World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2020, and underwent an evolution as a result. A project community survey helped establish the relevant building blocks for the roadmap while the project lead and the fellow created the first draft of the roadmap. The establishment of the steering committee of industry experts identified further future areas for exploration to further future-proof the roadmap through their regular meetings.

The appointment by the steering committee of a chair and co-chair instilled leadership and ownership of the project among Forum partners and allowed the steering committee to divide the workload by way of respective expertise, with every steering committee member being responsible for drafting specific sections of the roadmap. COVID-19 reshaped the international environment for data sharing policy and the project lead, fellow and steering committee took the decision to pivot the roadmap to respond to this new reality

Unlike most efforts around cross-border data flows which are predicated on international agreement, the roadmap takes a bottom-up approach and focuses on steps that individual countries can take to become more trusted players in the international data ecosystem, by improving trust with business and then in turn becoming more trustworthy in respect of each other. The roadmap was published in white paper format and launched on 9 July 2020 to much international attention.

Adoption

The roadmap is under active review by the Bahrain Economic Development Board, as well as other countries, to explore implementation. For some countries, this is as simple as modernizing at least one of the policy areas referred to in the roadmap such as cybersecurity, data protection and privacy law or digital connectivity infrastructure. Despite the project being designed primarily for a government audience, a number of businesses that were not involved in the original project community have expressed interest in further developing the roadmap, or have found it useful as a playbook.

Monitoring and evaluation

Given the wide scope of the roadmap, including multiple policy levers, and the roadmap's ability to meet countries where they are on the development cycle, success may look different in different nations. While adoption of the roadmap is an obvious success factor, a highly developed nation may adopt the roadmap in full, or in full but only for a specific use case; a less developed nation may consider it a full suite solution to establishing a foothold data economy. The roadmap is a highly complementary tool to international dialogue and in that respect a key success factor is also the robustness of usefulness of the roadmap in an ever-evolving geopolitical environment.

Key learnings

The project's strength lies in the diversity and harnessing of expertise behind it, and the establishment of a diverse and proactive steering committee was a key success factor in this regard. Switching to a geographically neutral approach empowered the fellow to embrace the interests and strengths of the Bahrain Economic Development Board while being grounded in what was fundamentally a project that was not about the board. This clever balance provided for robust objective thinking grounded in real lived examples. This same approach was taken with respect to the project community which was invited to be use case neutral when offering views.

Next steps and scale

The Forum is exploring how best to support governments and affiliate centres that wish to deploy elements of the roadmap, including how to support any international collaborations which use the roadmap.