

SENSITIVE DATA SOVEREIGNTY CONFERENCE

27 JANUARY 2026

TANGAZA UNIVERSITY

NAIROBI

KENYA

**HIGH-LEVEL OPENING ADDRESS BY
H.E. CHIEF FORTUNE CHARUMBIRA,
PRESIDENT OF THE PAN AFRICAN
PARLIAMENT**

- Vice-Chancellor of Tangaza University, Rev. Prof. Dr. Mwania,
- Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nairobi, Prof. Dr. Hutchinson,
- Vice-Chancellor of Equator University on Science and Technology, Prof. Dr. Mpezamihigo,
- Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Mekelle University, Dr. Eyasu Yazew,
- Your Excellency, Apostolic Nuncio, Mr. Van Megen,
- Hon. Dr. Frederick Ouma Oluga,
- Esteemed Prof. Dr. Khama Rogo, Dr. Edris Omundi, Prof. Mirjam van Reisen,
- Dear esteemed guests,
- Ladies and Gentlemen
- All protocol observed.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1. Allow me to begin by commending Tangaza University, the University of Nairobi and the Africa University Network on FAIR Open Science (AUN-FOS) for timeously convening this important conference on **sensitive data sovereignty**. Indeed, the convening of this conference could not be more opportune coming as it does at a time when the global conversation on data privacy, security, and sovereignty has become more imperative due to the rapid technological revolution and the growing influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in our daily lives and livelihoods. In this digital revolution, technology and information have become both powerful assets and critical centres of socio-economic and political vulnerability if they are not properly managed. It is urgent and imperative, therefore, for Africa to ensure that the digital transformation that is sweeping across the globe does not come at the expense of our nations' sovereignty and the fundamental rights of our people.

2.0 WHAT IS DATA SOVEREIGNTY?

2. In Africa, we find ourselves at the crossroads of immense opportunity and unprecedented challenges. We have the chance to leapfrog traditional development paths, to embrace digital technologies that can accelerate economic growth, enhance

governance, and improve the lives of millions. However, with these opportunities come significant risks.

3. Our continent is rich in data—both in terms of our vast population, our cultural diversity, and our emerging digital markets. But this data, particularly sensitive personal information, is increasingly stored in data centres far beyond our borders. The question, therefore, is: **WHO OWNS OUR DATA? AND MORE IMPORTANTLY, WHO CONTROLS IT?**
 - Sovereignty over digital data, which is the raw material of AI, refers to who controls the authenticity of data, who controls the financial gains and benefits gained from the AI?
 - Sovereignty over digital data refers to who controls the political and social issues that are presented to us and what solutions are considered in AI.
 - Sovereignty over digital data also refers fundamentally to how we can protect and promote our African identity in the midst of this inexorable digital revolution. Data sovereignty is a matter of cultural heritage and preserving African epistemology and traditional knowledge systems.
4. In summation, sensitive data sovereignty refers to the right of a nation to control, protect, and regulate the data of its citizens, particularly when that data has the potential to impact national security, economic stability, or the privacy of individuals. In an era of cross-border data flows, the lack of control over sensitive data can result in exploitation, surveillance, and breaches of privacy. But it is not just a matter of national security, it is a matter of human dignity and respect.
5. As PAP, it is our firm conviction that if we do not control the data that goes into AI, we will not have any control over our AI. If we do not have control over our narratives, we cannot control the issues that are dear to us including even our thought processes, the substance of our deliberations and, ultimately, our decision-making. As the African proverb goes, **“Until the lion learns how to write, the story will always glorify the hunter.”** Therefore, we need sovereignty over our digital data

6. For Africa, this is even more urgent and imperative given that our continent is not only a vast source of raw data but is also increasingly the target of foreign powers and multinational corporations who seek to extract, control, and profit from this data. There are growing concerns about data colonialism, where our resources—whether they be natural, human, or digital—are harvested without fair compensation or regard for the long-term consequences.

7. The risks are clear and inevitable if we do not take measures to control our own data:

- **Privacy Violations:** The personal data of African citizens could be misused, leading to the erosion of privacy rights.
- **Economic Exploitation:** The control of data can lead to economic exploitation, with African nations receiving minimal returns while foreign entities reap the rewards.
- **Political Manipulation:** Sensitive data can be weaponized for political purposes, undermining democratic processes and national stability. For instance, examples abound where external forces have tried to use access to the voter database to manipulate elections and force regime change in Africa. Africa must remain wary of these machinations.

3.0 THE ROLE OF THE PAN AFRICAN PARLIAMENT

8. As President of the Pan African Parliament, I am here today because the AU has placed Data Sovereignty and AI at the highest level of its developmental agenda, Agenda 2063. The Pan African Parliament, as the legislative arm of the African Union, is committed to the advancement of digital rights across the continent. In 2018 and again in 2025, with the assistance of the Value-driven Ownership of Data and Accessibility Network (VODAN) and the African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC), the PAP adopted a resolution calling for the establishment of a continent-wide digital legal framework that will prioritize data sovereignty, data protection, and privacy laws. To that extent, we will shortly begin work on a Cyber Security and AI Model Law in conjunction with our partners to protect citizens' data and preserve their sovereignty and dignity.

9. I have also been invited to speak at this important occasion as the Patron of the Africa University on FAIR Open Science (AUN-FOS). AUN-FOS comprises the Grand Bassa University in Liberia, Great Zimbabwe University in Zimbabwe, Mekelle University in Ethiopia, the Equator University on Science and Technology in Uganda, and the University of Nairobi and Tangaza University in Kenya. African Universities are our guardians of independent thought, independent ideas, and independent innovation, that support Africa's future steeped in African values and heritage. I, therefore, commend AUN-FOS for establishing an African-wide network of large and relatively smaller universities, that stand for Africa's interests globally.

4.0 THE ROLE OF EEPA & VODAN

10. I also wish to sincerely thank the Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA), for collaborating with African universities and organisations. EEPA has also for many years collaborated with the PAP on issues that fundamentally touch on the human dignity of the people of Africa and Europe. I recall that about ten years ago EEPA published a book on **Human Trafficking and Slavery between Africa and Europe**. This important work spoke then to the obligation to preserve the fundamental freedoms and human dignity of African vulnerable populations. It identified how vulnerable people were lured into human trafficking networks through digital gadgets and social media. We were reminded that we do not want to return to the dark days of colonialism and imperialism and further that there is neither a place for human slavery nor for digital slavery on our continent.

11. Today, I also recognise the work of AUN-FOS and EEPA with VODAN. PAP has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with VODAN, a group of African engineers, who came together during the COVID pandemic to create real options to test and implement data architectures that keep ownership of data in Africa. They had learned the importance of health data protection during the Ebola crisis in Liberia in 2014. The VODAN network, working with researchers at Leiden and Tilburg Universities in The Netherlands, is showing us today that we can combine data ownership with AI solutions, keeping control over our data and keeping control over what we do with our data. VODAN has opened our eyes to the imperative of breaking the chains from digital

data imperialism. I, therefore, commend VODAN because it takes the best of Africa and the best of global innovation, to make sure that Africa can benefit from innovation. Africa can create new digital solutions without losing control over its fundamental obligations: to curate its information, to protect its obligation to cherish African identity and to implement the inevitable responsibility to make home-grown decisions.

12. VODAN's solutions are about understanding that digital data has provenance, and that ownership and responsibility for the data lies with those to whom the data pertains. Sovereignty over data handling means that we need to have rules and regulations in Africa to decide on what can happen with our data. For instance, when my private health record is transferred to the United States without my consent, and they can decipher there that I have a particular type of illness, or this genetic composition, or this treatment, then this violates my fundamental rights as a human being. Such transfers of data are in violation of our core beliefs in Africa, that is, that we protect our people, our communities, our nations, and we do not share private information externally.

5.0 THE AU AND DATA SOVEREIGNTY

13. We must also acknowledge and appreciate that the AU was among the first institutions to recognise the importance of data sovereignty. This recognition is at the core of the AU Malabo Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection, adopted as early as 2014. It recognises the need for:

“the establishment of an appropriate normative framework consistent with the African legal, cultural, economic and social environment; and that the objective of this Convention is therefore to provide the necessary security and legal framework for the emergence of the knowledge economy in Africa”

14. The Malabo Convention also stresses:

“that at another level, the protection of personal data and private life constitutes a major challenge to the Information Society for governments as well as other stakeholders; and that such protection requires a balance between the use of

information and communication technologies and the protection of the privacy of citizens in their daily or professional lives, while guaranteeing the free flow of information;”

15. and is concerned with:

“the urgent need to establish a mechanism to address the dangers and risks deriving from the use of electronic data and individual records, with a view to respecting privacy and freedoms while enhancing the promotion and development of ICTs in Member States of the African Union;”

16. The Malabo Convention establishes unequivocally that its goal is:

“to address the need for harmonized legislation in the area of cyber security in Member States of the African Union, and establish in each State party a mechanism capable of combating violations of privacy that may be generated by personal data collection, processing, transmission, storage and use; that by proposing a type of institutional basis, the Convention guarantees that whatever form of processing is used shall respect the basic freedoms and rights of individuals while also taking into account the prerogatives of States, the rights of local communities and the interests of businesses; and take on board internationally recognized best practices;”

17. The Malabo Convention is, therefore, a foundational document on African homegrown standards and norms on the information society and personal data protection. It is precisely under the obligations to uphold the Malabo Convention that PAP is playing its part by developing Model Laws on Cyber Security and AI to protect these African norms and standards.

18. Africa has progressed in domesticating the spirit and the letter of the Malabo Convention and in further detailing data protection in the countries' jurisdictions but there is room for improvement, particularly as AI advances rapidly.

6.0 OUTCOMES OF THE CONFERENCE

19. In view of the aforesaid, in this conference the Kenya Crime Prevention Initiative Trust (CPIT) will remind us of the legal obligations we have adopted in Africa to uphold the norms and standards that protect our African people. I commend the CPIT for the work it is carrying out in reminding us of the responsibilities that we have under the legal frameworks adopted in our respective jurisdictions and on our continent.
20. The work to uphold available norms and standards is facilitated by consensus on this issue in Africa. Accordingly, in PAP we resolved to ensure that data sovereignty and data autonomy are actively advanced in Africa including concerns related to sensitive data as well as the protection of Africa's vulnerable communities. This is why this conference is timely and strategically important for us.
21. The framework of standards and norms needs to be able to protect against those preying on Africa's valuable data, genetic data, and other valuable health and sensitive data concerning all of us and the most vulnerable communities among us. Preying on this digital data feeds new forms of digital colonisation and digital imperialism. Today, we must affirmatively declare that we do not want to be subjected to digital slavery. We, therefore, implore African universities to help us to generate and preserve knowledge and curate valuable data. Our universities must also help our citizenry to understand how AI can operate while maintaining full data sovereignty.
22. In concluding my remarks, let me restate that we need a viable dream. We need to think big and to combine vision and implementation. We need an African Data Space where knowledge can be generated without losing control over the ownership of the data. We need an African Health Data Space where our most sensitive data pertaining to our bodies, minds and our health, is safe. The conference organisers must show us today, that a secure African Data Space is feasible. We demand today that African Universities foster African collaboration on the development of an African Data Space. This engineering should be African engineering for Africa, with like-minded partners.

23. This is why personally I am very proud to be the Patron of the Africa University Network on FAIR Open Science (AUN-FOS) together with Her Excellency, Mme. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. This is why the PAP stands ready to support its initiatives.

24. To address the challenges of data sovereignty, it is critical that we work together—governments, private sector actors, civil society, academia and international partners. No nation, no matter how powerful, can tackle the complexities of data sovereignty alone. We need a unified, coordinated approach. I, therefore, make a clarion call on each of you here today whether from the public sector, the private sector, civil society or the academia, to commit to this shared vision of data sovereignty. Together, we can build an Africa where data is not just protected but is used to empower our people, galvanise our economies, and secure our collective future. As always, our operative mantra remains “**ONE AFRICA, ONE VOICE.**”

25. It is, therefore, my distinct honour and pleasure to declare this Sensitive Data Sovereignty Conference officially open.

Thank you. Merci beaucoup. Shukran. Asante Sana!!