VNR Lab 14: Strengthening digital government and data governance for a more agile and effective public sector in Africa

17 July 2024, 1:15 – 3:00 PM (S-1522)

The Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government (DPIDG) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) of the African Union co-organized this VNR Lab, which aimed to facilitate peer-to-peer learning by inviting representatives from Burkina Faso, Namibia and Sierra Leone to share different approaches and experiences in fostering digital government and data governance to render the public sector more effective and agile. In addition, a member of the Committee of Experts of Public Administration (CEPA) presented the opportunities and risks of the digitalization of government. Finally, representatives from UN DESA and APRM complemented the discussions by providing insights into related support provided to countries.

Speakers emphasized the critical need for African countries to strengthen digital government and data governance to drive sustainable development. They highlighted the importance of technology in transforming public services, improving efficiency, transparency, and accountability, and meeting the demands of citizens, including the tech-savvy youth, while addressing privacy and security concerns. Despite progress made, a multitude of challenges, such as limited internet access and availability of digital devices, as well as policy gaps, kept Africa lagging behind other regions. The advancement of artificial intelligence might widen this gap even further and was linked to potential significant risks. Speakers, therefore, emphasized the need to regulate new technologies, implement digital strategies, establish standards, protocols and frameworks for data collection, storage and sharing, and increase overall investment in digital government and data governance. Investing in digital skills and key sectors, such as health and education, through digitalization could solve many challenges, while increasing efficiency, reducing costs, and improving accessibility. Speakers presented successful examples showcasing how strategic investment, public sector reforms and policy frameworks could lead to significant progress despite limited resources. Notable digital advancements mentioned included integrated digital tax systems, e-passports, mobile money, telemedicine, e-learning, digital exams, e-policing, and digital marketplaces.

Going forward there was a need to ensure equal digital access, robust internet infrastructure, increased digital literacy as well as continued investment in digital skills and data governance to ensure the participation of African countries in the global digital economy. Ongoing dialogue and regional and international cooperation were required to harness the power of digital government and data governance for a more agile, effective, and inclusive public sector in Africa. Speakers also made an urgent call for more capacity-building, financing and technology transfer support from the United Nations and other development partners to bridge the digital divide and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The exchange of best practices among countries was seen as being valuable and should be continued.

UN DESA and APRM expressed readiness to support African countries in their efforts to leverage digital technology to foster implementation of the 2030 Agenda. UN DESA announced the upcoming launch of the 2024 E-Government Survey in October which would focus on how digital government can drive sustainable development. The E-Government Development Index and UN DESA's UN Peace and Development Fund project aimed at enhancing digital data governance in Asia-Pacific and Africa were also presented. APRM noted that it remained committed to providing political leaders with the skills needed for technological shifts, stressing the importance of education, training, agility, and critical thinking for the future workforce, and presenting different digital governance tools and programs. APRM also highlighted that it was collaborating with CEPA and other partners to enhance public service delivery and good governance in Africa, including by fostering the implementation of the CEPA principles of effective governance for sustainable development.