DATA TALKS SEPTEMBER 2017: *CLOUD COMPUTING & SDGs*

On Monday, 18 September, DiploFoundation and the Geneva Internet Platform organised the first Data Talks session. The Data Talks are monthly meetings among actors in International Geneva on the potential, as well as risks, related to data management in international affairs. By sharing best practices experiences, the meetings aim to distil lessons learned across silos and institutions.

The September meeting kicked off with a focus on cloud computing in the UN system, which will be the topic of new research by the UN Joint Inspection Unit. Ambassador Petru Dumitriu, who will be leading this research, discussed how international organisations and other experts can contribute to his research. In his view, the effective use of cloud computing in the UN System could enhance the UN system's elasticity, scalability and portability. In addition, he argued that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer an opportunity to address data management issues more proactively.

The advent of digitalisation also poses organisational challenges for international organisations. An 'executive digital divide' might exist between managerial level decision makers with limited digital knowledge and skills, and more junior level staff. This gap might be overcome by training. In addition, digitalisation and data management risks are often addressed in isolated groups, inhibiting harmonisation and leaving other sections behind in the process. According to Ambassador Dumitriu, issues as digitalisation, cloud computing, and data management can better be addressed across an organisation to increase efficiency within existing bodies, rather than in separate, additional divisions.

The discussion that followed touched on several important aspects. One participant pointed out the risk of silos within organisations, in particular between the legal and technical departments. Legal units are regularly developing contracts on data-related agreements without sufficient awareness of data security, privacy, and preservation. In addition, many organisations do not even have up-to-date data policies or cloud computing policies in place. Finally, another participant pointed out that one of the most overlooked challenges in digitalisation is data preservation.

Next, the session tackled the way in which data is discussed in relation to the SDGs, sparked by DiploFoundation's new policy brief on Data and the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). According to the study, data has become increasingly prominent in discussions at the HLPF. Data is predominantly discussed in the context of 'data disaggregation', and there is a growing focus on big data. Yet there is a lack of corresponding discussion on the operationalisation of data disaggregation and the challenges of using big data.

One of the participants pointed out that open data might have potential for SDG monitoring. Yet others warned that digital data might provide a skewed picture, as it only represents those with access to the Internet. In addition, open data could present data protection challenges, as anonymisation of data is (almost) impossible.

In January, a summary document will be provided with the main lessons learned and final recommendations.