

Who owns Africa's biological data?

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For decades, Africa's debates about sovereignty have centred on familiar territory: land, minerals, oil, and military bases. Yet in the 21st century, another question is quietly emerging, one that many governments have not yet fully confronted.

Who owns Africa's biological data? In an age shaped by biotechnology, pandemics, and global medical research, biological samples and health data are becoming increasingly valuable strategic resources.

Recent reports surrounding negotiations between Zimbabwe and the United States have sparked an uncomfortable but necessary conversation about what exactly African countries may be giving away when they enter global health partnerships.

According to reports circulating in Zimbabwe, President Emmerson Mnangagwa's government halted discussions over a proposed US health partnership reportedly worth hundreds of millions of dollars after concerns emerged about provisions relating to the sharing of national health data and biological samples.

Whether every detail of that negotiation proves accurate or not, the episode raises an important question: in the modern scientific economy, what is the real value of the biological resources African countries routinely share with the world?

For many years, global health cooperation has been an essential part of Africa's development landscape. International programmes such as the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) have financed treatment, laboratories, and disease surveillance systems that save millions of lives across the continent.

Few would dispute the importance of such partnerships.

Yet cooperation also has a dimension

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Gertrude Kamya Othieno

Biological data



that is rarely discussed publicly. Modern medical research increasingly depends on vast collections of genetic material, pathogen samples, and epidemiological data gathered from populations across the world.

These resources allow scientists to track disease mutations and develop vaccines, medicines, and diagnostic technologies that shape a global pharmaceutical industry worth billions of dollars.

In this emerging scientific economy, biological data is not simply research material. It is increasingly a strategic resource. This is where the language of "partnership" deserves closer scrutiny.

Washington's global outlook has increasingly been shaped by the political philosophy associated with the slogan "America First." The message behind that phrase is straightforward: national interests come first. But if global policy is guided by "America First," a fair question arises for Africa.

Where exactly does that leave African countries whose biological data contributes to global medical research?

The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic provides a sobering example. Countries such as South Africa and Kenya participated in clinical trials that helped advance the development of Covid-19 vaccines. Their populations contributed valuable scientific data to research that benefited the entire world. Yet when vaccines became available, most African nations found themselves at the back of the queue, waiting months for meaningful access while wealthy countries secured the majority of early supplies.

The lesson many observers drew from that experience was that participation does not necessarily guarantee priority access. This is where a new concept begins to emerge in policy discussions, health sovereignty.

African governments already treat military sovereignty as a non-negotiable principle. Uganda, for example, has repeatedly emphasised that it will not host permanent foreign military bases on its soil, arguing that national security must remain firmly under domestic control.

But if territorial sovereignty matters, shouldn't biological sovereignty matter as well? In the modern world, genetic databases, pathogen samples, and health data may prove just as valuable as oil fields or mineral deposits. They fuel the discoveries that will shape the medicines of the future.

If Africa does not begin asking who controls those resources today, the answer may be decided elsewhere tomorrow.

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... to grow?