

## Data Can Be a Tool for the Greater Good

*I was the ghostwriter of this 2022 blog post for a high-ranking official in the tech space*

When we think about data, we often think about all the personal data we've shared on social media and on the internet and wonder what big tech companies are doing with all that information. Big Tech is probably using your data to sell you things and sell advertisements on its platform, so unfortunately, that data is doing little, if anything, to make your life better.

On the other hand, here's a very relevant example of data used for the greater good: organizations all the way from the health department in the smallest city in the smallest country all the way up to the [World Health Organization](#) are digesting massive amounts of data about COVID-19 and creating visualizations of that data to allow policymakers a way to make sense of that data so they can protect the people of their nations from the pandemic as much as possible. By monitoring the results of these data, world leaders are also able to track the spread of COVID-19 around the world and better assess the level of threat to their countries.

Data has been the backbone of the fight against COVID-19, and the private sector has gotten involved, too. In March of 2020, Google Cloud announced that it would [offer researchers free access to critical coronavirus information](#) through its COVID-19 Public Dataset Program. This made data from a variety of sources, including the Johns Hopkins Center for Systems Science and Engineering (JHU CSSE) dashboard, Global Health Data from the World Bank, and OpenStreetMap data, available to researchers. It also allowed researchers to use its BigQuery ML to train machine learning models at no cost.

Now, nations all over the world have vast repositories of data about the spread of COVID-19 in their countries, as well as information about vaccination rates, case numbers, hospitalization and mortality, and much more—all thanks to data collection and visualization.

As part of UN Global Pulse, the Secretary-General's initiative on big data and artificial intelligence for development, humanitarian action, and peace, predictive and simulation modeling was used to [visualize the potential outcomes of behaviors](#) including masking, quarantining, and opening schools in the refugee settlement at Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. These visualizations allowed the staff at Cox's Bazar to minimize the spread of COVID-19 even in the crowded environment of a refugee camp.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not the first time data has been used for the greater good. At the United Nations, we've realized for quite some time that data has the potential to be an incredibly helpful tool for understanding current affairs; creating important new insights; and potentially forecasting the effect of political decisions on phenomena such as climate change, poverty, and water and food security.

The UN is so committed to data for good that we developed a program called [Unite Ideas](#), a crowdsourcing platform that invites the global community of data scientists to partner with us to harness the power of data analytics and visualization to accelerate discovery and uncover new knowledge. Instead of financial rewards, the UN offers the opportunity to help build a better world.

You might think private businesses wouldn't participate in Unite Ideas because it's not immediately profitable to do so. But private companies, as well as academia and the general public, have responded to our challenges with dozens of open-source solutions. These have ranged from ways to view data to data-based apps that make people's lives better by improving their ability to access basic services.

Many of those solutions have been used by the UN and its member states, including *Is the World a Better Place Today?*, a data visualization application that seeks to produce new insights into the UN's Millennium Development Goals and progress toward achieving those goals; and *WHS Explorer*, which mines data from the UN World Humanitarian Summit to provide a richer, multidimensional view of humanitarian issues and how they differ around the world. More recent challenges include developing a data model(s) to correlate data from financial, criminal, and other open data records to identify, prevent, and counter the financing of terrorism; and motivating Arab youth to become the generation that will stop and reverse land degradation.

I believe the response to Unite Ideas shows that the concept works, that many people are keen to help us solve challenges in this way, and that the results obtained are in fact useful.

Effective use of data can help us expand our knowledge of issues like social and political instability, natural disasters, pandemics, and climate change and allow us to predict—or perhaps even prevent—the next crisis. But data alone is not good enough. We need the kind of public-academic-private collaboration that has happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we need understandable visualizations of data and what it means in context.

The United Nations has taken a major role in the global data revolution through our Sustainable Development Goals and many other initiatives, and I'm very pleased at the level of participation we've had from a variety of stakeholders in both Unite Ideas and UN Global Pulse. We're showing the world that it is possible to use data for good.