

## **Aligning Local Tourism Data Systems with National Priorities: Insights from Fort Portal City**

### **The National Vision for Evidence-Based Tourism**

Uganda's tourism sector is increasingly transitioning toward a data-informed model of planning, performance monitoring, and investment promotion. This shift reflects a broader commitment to evidence-informed decision and policy-making in public sector governance, grounded in the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities (MTWA) sector plans and the Uganda Tourism Policy 2013. These frameworks underscore the necessity of robust statistics and coordinated planning to support sustainable growth.

At the national level, notable progress has been made through the development of standardized tourism indicators and the harmonization of data collection methodologies. These efforts, spearheaded by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) and the Uganda Tourism Board (UTB), aim to improve the reliability and policy relevance of data as a foundation for national competitiveness. These initiatives align with international best practices, as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) highlights that timely and comparable statistics are essential for effective destination management.

### **The Implementation Gap: Fragmentation at the Local Level**

Despite national advancements, significant gaps persist in operationalizing these systems at the local level. Evidence from Fort Portal City illustrates that while valuable data is generated by hotels, tour operators, and destination marketers, it is often captured through fragmented, non-standardized, and manual processes. Because these datasets are generated in isolation, they remain disconnected from national reporting frameworks.

This systemic siloing of information means that data often stays confined to internal business use rather than contributing to sector-wide analysis. As one stakeholder observed:

***“We already collect the information needed, but it is not aligned to any common standard, and it is not connected to a bigger system”.***

Without a coherent architecture to aggregate these decentralized datasets, even high-quality local data remains underutilized.

## **The Integrated Tourism Data Hub: A Strategic Response**

In response to these structural limitations, ToroDev-ODA, under the DataCities Initiative, is facilitating the development of an Integrated Tourism Data Hub. The Hub is not conceived as a replacement for existing business practices, but as an enabling architecture that builds upon them to bridge the gap between national ambition and local implementation.

### **The Hub aims to achieve four primary objectives:**

- **Standardization:** Aligning local tools and templates with MTWA-defined tourism indicators.
- **Digital Transformation:** Moving from manual, paper-based workflows to digital systems to improve data quality, accessibility, and timeliness.
- **Interoperability:** Establishing clear reporting and sharing frameworks to enable integration with national policy processes.
- **Actionable Insights:** Aggregating decentralized data to support both firm-level operations and city-level investment prioritization.

This approach follows a fundamental principle, value is derived not merely from technology itself, but from how it is embedded within existing organizational workflows and decision-making structures.

### **Governance, Trust, and Stakeholder Engagement**

The Fort Portal experience underscores that integrating tourism data is as much a challenge of human behavior as it is of technical engineering. Concerns regarding taxation, competitive sensitivity, and potential data misuse continue to influence the private sector's willingness to share information. As one participant emphasized:

***“Clarity on how data will be used and protected is essential if we are to participate fully”.***

To address these barriers, the DataCities Initiative prioritizes a governance centered approach rooted in transparency and accountability. By utilizing a participatory co-design model, the

project builds ownership and ensures that the final system is context appropriate and practical. Stakeholders have indicated that being part of this design process provides the necessary confidence that the system is a tool for mutual growth, noting:

*“Being part of the design process gives us confidence that the system will work for us, not against us”.*

## **Conclusion**

The case of Fort Portal demonstrates that the foundational elements of a robust tourism data system are already present within Uganda. The central challenge lies in aligning existing local practices with national frameworks through effective governance and sustained collaboration

The Integrated Tourism Data Hub offers a practical mechanism for operationalizing the Ministry’s vision by linking decentralized data generation with national data needs. By strengthening coordination, fostering trust, and enhancing system coherence, Uganda is well-positioned to transition toward a reliable, evidence-driven tourism sector, one capable of attracting investment and promoting long-term sustainability across its emerging cities.