Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC

Ways Forward, Assessment Tools and Possible Partners in Digitalisation and Governance

Four stages of digitalisation and governance[1]

Digitalisation is significantly affecting all sectors of development cooperation. Key aspects of social, economic and political life are migrating to online spaces, and so rely on digital devices and connectivity. Use of mobile and internet technologies has enabled a variety of positive digital dividends for development in education, healthcare and livelihoods. It has also, however, resulted in 'digital divides' that negatively affect the most marginalised.

SDC frames its work on digitalisation and governance within a typology of four stages (see Box 1), which are explained in more detail in a separate short Policy Note.

These four stages overlap significantly, meaning a particular initiative may contain elements of one or more stages. Nonetheless, the four stages are recognisable to digital governance professionals and have analytical value in furthering our understanding of ongoing change. In the first stage, the focus is on increasing the productivity of civil servants by digitalising mundane departmental processes and functions. The second stage centres on building government websites and portals that enable citizens to access government services at their convenience, without needing to travel to government offices or queue to see officials. In the third stage, digital tools and online spaces are used to improve government engagement with citizens, creating inclusive, participatory opportunities for citizens to play a meaningful role in the

1 This Practice Note is part of a series on digital governance. The first report, *Key Issues in Digitalisation and Governance*, highlights the key opportunities and challenges arising from digitalisation and a Policy Note with the same title summarises its findings. A second report titled *Main Actors in Digitalisation and Governance* makes specific proposals about potential partners which are most aligned with Swiss strengths and strategic priorities. A third report, *Mapping of SDC's Projects in Digitalisation and Governance*, maps out existing SDC projects. A Practice Note, *Ways Forward, Assessment Tools and Possible Partners in Digitalisation and Governance*, introduces practical tools to help navigate SDC's support in this field.

decision-making affecting their lives. Many of these 'civic technologies' have been built by citizen-led organisations, often in cooperation with government.

While these first three stages involve **proactive initiatives designed to accelerate digitalisation**, the fourth stage involves **reactive initiatives that address the implications arising from the rapid digitalisation** of whole swathes of social, economic and political life. In the new digitalised operating environment, automated data-based decision-making by opaque proprietary algorithms is displacing transparent person-centred dialogic decision-making. A large percentage of the world's social, economic and political life now takes place on digital platforms owned by foreign private monopolies whose algorithms are optimised for private profit, meaning they cannot be held accountable or democratically governed to service the public interest, development or human rights goals. Conducting governance in a digitalised world involves finding ways to mitigate the potential risks arising from digitisation while taking advantage of new opportunities (see the assessment tools on pages 3–7). This includes consideration of how the internet itself is governed and of the monopolies that currently dominate it.

How is SDC currently engaged in digitalisation and governance?

A mapping exercise of SDC-supported projects on digitalisation and governance has shown the depth and breadth of digitalisation and governance initiatives already in SDC's portfolio.

- Although the first category, **digital in government**, is the oldest stage in the typology, it is still a very active area of work. Work in this category may be considered foundational to work in the following stages, as it provides infrastructure, builds skills, and catalyses a culture/approach upon which the other categories can build. Such work may feature inter-governmental exchanges, as well as partnerships with private sector companies and public sector training institutions. In some cases, it may be a relatively safe and 'neutral' space for engaging with governments not fully aligned with Swiss commitments to human rights, decentralisation and inclusive governance. SDC should always, however, be alert to whether any technology introduced or capacity built can be repurposed or leveraged for more sinister purposes.

Box 1. Stages of digitalisation and governance

1 **Digital in government:** The digitalisation of internal government functions, including the adoption of computers, productivity software, and automation of payroll for police and government staff.

2 **Digital government services:** The digitalisation of government services to citizens. Previously called e-government, this includes government websites and open government data portals, and incorporates myriad digital government services, such as online licences, procurement and tax returns.

3 **Digital participation in governance:** The digitalisation of participatory governance initiatives, including online consultations, petitions and inclusive decision-making. Previously called e-governance or e-participation, this includes online participatory budgeting and other civic tech projects.

4 **Governance in a digital world:** The task of governance in an increasingly digitalised world where foreign monopolies have privatised the platforms on which social, economic, and political life takes place. How do we support digital citizenship while avoiding a descent into forms of digital authoritarianism characterised by surveillance and disinformation?

- The second category, **digital government services**, remains a growing sector. All countries now have government websites, albeit with very different levels of functionality and sophistication. Improvements and the further extension of digital government service provision is possible in all countries. Supporting the building of relatively non-contentious government information services could be a useful starting point for SDC to engage with governments. It may also at a later date provide a pathway for adding functionality for open government data or freedom of information requests. If, however, access to government services becomes exclusively digital, marginalised citizens will be left behind; and if biometric digital-ID becomes a prerequisite of access, human rights issues may arise. SDC should therefore ensure that offline mechanisms are also made available alongside digitalised government services, and ask for a detailed analysis of any digital gaps that exist in a partner country.

- The third category, **digital participation in governance**, is a growing area of work closely aligned with SDC values and priorities. Delivering and sustaining increased participation of marginalised groups in governance processes is a medium-to-long-term endeavour. Although all governments are rhetorically signed up to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 16.7 of ensuring 'responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels', in practice more funding is available for the first two categories, which can deliver direct cost-cutting and increases in productivity. Often, initiatives operating in this category are limited to pilot funding, preventing them from scaling up learning and impact. SDC's work with Electronic Governance for Government Accountability and Community Participation (EGAP) in Ukraine and with Decentralisation and Municipal Support (DEMOS) in Kosovo provides useful lessons and templates that can be adopted or modified in other countries.

- The fourth and final category, **governance in a digital world**, is perhaps the most troubling and strategically important area of future work for SDC. Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, social, economic and political life was becoming increasingly digital. Governance of the internet, governance of technology monopolies, algorithmic governance and data governance are urgent issues that present no easy answers. Existing governance mechanisms have proven inadequate in holding foreign corporations accountable or ending the 'pandemic' of digital surveillance, digital disinformation and internet shutdowns. These risks will likely trickle down to the three previous stages. Providing authoritarian governments with new digital tech and infrastructure could lead to increased surveillance and a crackdown on online dissent. An overreliance on unaccountable algorithmic decision-making can lead to biased service delivery that may violate human rights. Misinformation and fake news threaten the integrity of any discussions, voting or participation taking place within digital participation governance initiatives.

How could SDC be engaged in the future in digitalisation and governance?

In its future work on digitalisation, SDC will need to consider what consequences the fourth category may have for the first three stages in order to mitigate any potential risks associated with digital governance initiatives more generally. SDC's use of political economy analysis and existing human rights instruments as guidance are essential elements in the framework needed for analysing and prioritising future work in this space.

Below, we detail three tools that can inspire and inform a broader political economy analysis and/or a human rights-based approach to assessing new projects in the realm of digitalisation and governance.

Tool 1. Regime, capacity and intent analysis

As a first step, it is helpful to determine the 'digital context' in which a project will take place. Given that SDC should always be 'thinking politically' about its digitalisation and governance engagements, this allows different kinds of engagements (along the four stages) to be prioritised depending on the regime encountered. Based on a political economy analysis of a country programme, a variety of governance and digitalisation engagements may be appropriate, as illustrated in Table 1. At the end of this Practice Note, there is a short introduction to some of the key actors in the field of digitalisation and governance.

Tool 2. Inclusive digital governance exercise

Another tool for assessing the quality of a governance and digitalisation project involves visualising the project on a matrix with two axes: the first axis represents a **continuum of technological openness to closed centralisation**, while the second axis represents a **continuum of technology-centred to people-centred qualities** (see Figure 1). The matrix can be used to map existing or potential projects in relation to

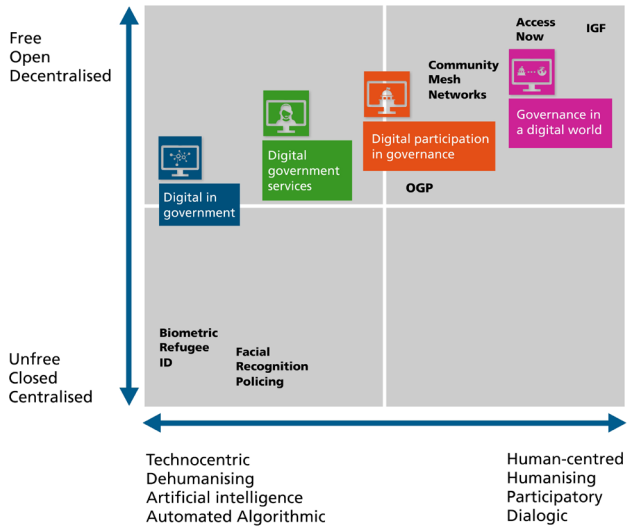
the values SDC is committed to. Here, it important not to over-analyse or over-define the axes, as the process is not intended to be scientifically rigorous, nor to accurately pinpoint the location of a specific initiative. Rather, the purpose of the process is to stimulate discussion and illuminate the relative difference between options in light of such values as inclusion, transparency, participation, accountability and the rule of law.

Tool 3. Ten questions

The third and final tool for evaluating digitalisation and governance initiatives utilises a list of ten questions, as set out in Table 2. Again, the objective of this tool is not to provide a scientifically robust analysis, but rather to **help develop a common language** and support joint processes informing SDC's work in this area.

The ten questions are malleable depending on the context and requirements – anyone making use of them should only use those questions they feel are relevant, and feel free to add additional questions if needed.

Figure 1. Example of inclusive digital governance exercise*



* Community Mesh Networks refer to grassroots peer-to-peer decentralised internet provision – often in underserved areas – which can serve as alternatives to the more common centralized, hierarchal and privately owned networks.

Table 1. Capacity and intent template

Regime	Examples of engagement with government	Examples of engagement with civil society
Authoritarian government Political intent: Centralisation, utilising mass surveillance and internet shutdowns Capacity: Low	Digital in government Assistance to digitalise meteorology services Digital government services Assistance to provide government information online	• Fund inclusion in Internet Governance Forum (IGF) • Fund Access Now's #KeepItOn campaign or similar initiatives (as the FDFA's Peace and Human Rights Division does) • Provide workshops in strategic litigation for civil society partners
Democratic government Political intent: Reproduction of status quo, leading to mass surveillance and disinformation Capacity: Medium	Digital government services Assistance to digitalise open government data and join Open Governance Partnership (OGP) Digital participation in governance Assistance to create online space for inclusive governance	• Fund initiatives such as African School for Internet Governance and/or help build similar schools elsewhere • Promote open data, open access, open source, open government, open development • Support public awareness campaigns about digital rights, surveillance, misinformation
Progressive government Political intent: Reform of internet governance and decentralisation of infrastructure/services. No illegitimate surveillance Capacity: Medium	Digital government services Assistance to create open government portal Digital participation in governance Assistance to facilitate participatory online budgeting Governance in a digital world Assistance to break up digital monopolies, tax digital transactions and prohibit online hate speech	• Support decentralised community (connectivity) networks (e.g. health), non-surveillance media, anonymity tools • Advance digital rights and legal measures against surveillance; introduce legal tools to target misinformation

Table 2. Ten questions

1 Political economy analysis 1: Whose interests will be amplified by the project?

Digital governance initiatives only work where there is existing political will and capacity. Technology in and of itself cannot deliver development outcomes – rather, it merely amplifies whatever human capacity and intent is already present. Moreover, technology is never neutral, with any given digital project advancing some interests over others. Research shows that the use of digital technology tends to reflect, reproduce and often amplify existing social inequalities. **The use of political economy analysis is therefore critically important when it comes to analysing what political intent and capacity exists, the potential this holds to be amplified, and which demographic groups will be (dis)advantaged.** SDC is committed to amplifying those actors working towards a free and open internet, and to avoiding amplifying those who are intent on closing online civic space with shutdowns, surveillance or disinformation. In choosing to support any potential digital governance initiative, SDC will therefore need to pay particular attention to the outcomes faced by those with the least or no access to digital devices or connectivity. For these reasons, political economy analysis will be a more accurate predictor of a project's development value than any analysis of the technological sophistication or degree of innovation involved.

2 Political economy analysis 2: Is the project politically feasible?

The political economy analysis should also inform the project's political feasibility. Digital governance proposals often seek to address political problems with technological solutions – while the technical logic may be sound, the political logic is often flawed. Compared to a technical build, tackling social and political issues demands longer time frames and multi-layered approaches. As such, the following questions should be asked: Does the proposal address any underlying political issues as well as the technical issues? Have appropriate measures been taken to secure the approval or cooperation of any powerful actors (e.g. community leaders, politicians, influencers) needed for the initiative to work? Will funding be sustained until the political issues are addressed or end once the technical build is complete? In the past, though adequate funding has been made available for pilot projects, initiatives often implode once the initial project funding ends. More patient funding – provided on the basis that challenges are likely to emerge – is therefore required.

3 Political economy analysis 3: Is power centralised or decentralised by the project?

Privatisation and monopolisation of the internet has been accompanied by a centralisation of power that has not proven amenable to democratic governance. Very high percentages of internet searches, social media messages and online transactions are governed by relatively few proprietary algorithms, which are hidden and protected from existing regulatory mechanisms. These technologies are influential in shaping opinion about crucial public policy issues, such as vaccinations, immigration and the climate. Moreover, during elections, powerful interests can buy influence by sending in excess of a billion disinformation messages per week to swing voters. Decentralising technologies – include community networks, online policy fora and participatory budgeting platforms – can play a role in curtailing these threats to democracy. With regard to digital-ID, centralised identification registries should be avoided in favour of decentralised card-based systems that leave citizens in control of their own data.

4 **Human rights:** What rights will be affected?

Rights to privacy and freedom of opinion, speech and association are affected by the digitalisation, privatisation and monopolisation of the public sphere, as well as being subject to algorithmic mass surveillance and coordinated disinformation. Existing human rights conventions provide the tools necessary to assess the extent to which digital projects enable or limit fundamental freedoms and entitlements. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the Ruggie Framework for Business and Human Rights (2011), and the Human Rights Council's resolution on the right to the internet (2016) are existing instruments against which digitalisation and governance should be measured. A human rights audit should arguably be a prerequisite for any project involving artificial intelligence, algorithmic decision-making or biometrics, in order to guard against reproducing and reinforcing existing intersectional inequalities. Although commercial interests tend to favour self-regulation, this mode of governance has not protected human rights and falls short of SDG target 16.7, which commits all governments to ensure 'responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels'.

5 **Participation and accountability:** Who participates in digital governance?

Does the proposed initiative promote democratic governance, participation and accountability online? Does the initiative further transparency and accountability? Were marginalised groups represented in the conception, design, development, monitoring and evaluation of the initiative? Is the project's management sufficiently diverse as to reflect and represent the interests and priorities of the whole community? User-centred design approaches (e.g. design thinking, participatory design) should be used not only for reasons of justice, but to ensure uptake and adoption. In terms of languages, being culturally appropriate and building in digital literacy and access, initiatives should be designed at the outset for equity. Non-digital access must remain part of the design to ensure the most marginalised are not left behind. Some people will always be unable to use – or choose not to use – a particular technology. Offline channels therefore need to remain open to those without access to digital devices, connectivity or digital literacy.

6 **Free and open internet:** How does the initiative contribute to a free and open internet?

Given that centralisation of data has become the new source of centralised wealth and power, it is becoming increasingly important to ask: 'Who will own the data?'. Data minimisation, data protection and data safeguarding must be central to planning how best to protect rights and justice. When projects claim to further transparency, openness and inclusion, it is important to ask: 'Open to whom?' and 'Who is excluded?'. Other relevant questions may include:

- **Open data:** Who will own the data that the project produces?
- **Open access:** Will the project documents and reports be freely available?
- **Open source:** Will any software developed be freely available to others?
- **Open governance:** Will the project contribute to open (government) data or transparency?
- **Open development:** Will the process be open, participatory, transparent and accountable?

7 **Corruption:** Is corruption tackled at all levels?

Digitalisation has provided new action possibilities for tackling corruption. In some cases, automating electronic payrolls has removed management corruption, while artificial intelligence has been deployed to identify anomalies in the percentages of subcontracts won in procurement corruption. Moreover, opening government data – and opening corporate data – can increase transparency, making it possible to root out corruption around large government and international corporate contracts. Research shows, however, that technology alone is insufficient to end corruption, especially in authoritarian settings where the political intent for change is absent, the media unfree, and the space for civil society constrained. The 'soft systems' work of raising awareness, shifting social norms, developing a culture of openness and building the capacity of oversight organisations takes more time and long-term support.

8 **Technical feasibility:** Is the proposal technically achievable?

Experimenting with new technologies is inherently unpredictable, especially when tackling complex development problems. A desire to be seen to be using cutting-edge technologies has given rise to 'pilotitis', high failure rates and ethical concerns. Long-term time frames and an iterative, adaptive approach to design and development are required in order to address the emergent challenges inherent to applying new technologies to complex development problems. The experience of refugee data capture by the Taliban has increased criticism of experimenting on vulnerable populations with new technologies.

9 **Opportunities and challenges:** Does the proposal respond to the governance opportunities and challenges arising from digitalisation?

The process of digitalisation has disrupted the status quo in almost every sector, presenting opportunities for innovations that deliver what the World Bank has termed 'digital dividends'. Digital technologies provide new action possibilities for development in part because they allow the processing and sharing of text, image and video content with any number of people, across any distance, instantly, at low cost. This has led to digital dividends in development communication, digital advocacy, participatory budgeting and citizen monitoring. However, the same technology provides new action possibilities for surveillance capitalists to extract users' data, produce digital profiles and micro-target them in disinformation campaigns. For more on this, see the accompanying **Key Issues in Digitalisation and Governance** report.

10 **Governance as a lever and transverse theme:** How does the initiative position governance as a lever and transverse theme?

Digitalisation is perhaps the most important strategic challenge facing governance in the decade ahead. In an increasingly digital world, governing the internet, securing an open and free digital public sphere, and regulating the platforms on which economic and social life take place is of critical importance. Ensuring that those with the least or no digital access are not left behind is a complex challenge. Ensuring 'responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels' (SDG target 16.7) represents a major governance challenge in an increasingly digital world. Ultimately, the criteria for the success (or otherwise) of responses to the governance opportunities and challenges arising from digitalisation should be the level of progress made towards securing digital rights and social justice.

Possible SDC partners for digitalisation and governance

The final part of this Practice Note provides a summary of recommendations regarding potential strategic partners in the field of digitalisation and governance. The key actors and initiatives are summarised in Table 3 and these – as well as others – are presented in more detail in a longer report, *Main Actors in Digitalisation and Governance*.

To date, many of the efforts making use of digital technologies to address governance challenges have been overly focused on such technologies providing a quick fix or silver bullet. Often, the organisations and individuals involved have not been connected to and/or have lacked understanding of the systemic nature of governance change. SDC should therefore consider **supporting the building and development of necessary relationships between existing governance actors and new actors** with digital technology expertise.

Table 3. Summaries of the key actors and initiatives

At the **multilateral** level, SDC may find it beneficial to form partnerships with the following:

The **United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) is the home of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF)**. Strengthening the governance role of developing countries and civil society organisations may be more effective if conducted through this key governance organisation.

The **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** would potentially make a good partner due to its work on Internet Universality Indicators (or ROAM Indicators). This is a novel means of measuring the extent to which a country's digital governance policies and practices are in compliance with human rights (R), openness (O), accessibility (A), and multistakeholder (M) best practice. This presents a valuable possibility for SDC to pursue a series of linked policy objectives together with a respected UN partner.

At the **bilateral** level, SDC may find it beneficial to form partnerships with the following:

In terms of interest in digital governance, there is significant policy overlap between SDC and the Canadian **International Development Research Centre (IDRC)**, the **Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)**, the **Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development/German Corporation for International Cooperation (BMZ/GIZ)**, the **United States Agency for International Development (USAID)** and the United Kingdom's **Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)**. Some countries have, however, recently begun cutting their development funding and diluting their commitments to human rights and multilateral cooperation. In selecting its bilateral partners, therefore, SDC will want to work with agencies that continue to prioritise digital rights and free and open digital spaces in both their policies and practice.

At the **inter-governmental** level, SDC may wish to partner with the following:

The **Freedom Online Coalition (FOC)** (partner of FDFA's Peace and Human Rights Division) provides an interesting space within which SDC can act alongside other countries to further inclusive internet governance. There are also a number of important transparency initiatives SDC could collaborate with, including: the **Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT)**, the **Open Government Partnership (OGP)**, the **Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI)** (partner of SECO's Economic Cooperation and Development division), the **Open Contracting Partnership (OCP)**, the **Infrastructure Transparency Initiative (CoST)**, and **Open Ownership**. Rather than collaborate with transparency organisations directly, SDC may choose to join the **Transparency and Accountability Initiative (TAI)**.

/cont.

At the level of **civil society/research**, SDC may find it beneficial to form partnerships with the following:

SDC's distinctive rights focus and gender commitments make the **Association for Progressive Communications (APC)** a strong potential partner. APC, utilising a prominent gender focus, invests in inclusive and meaningful access, environmental sustainability in the context of digitisation, and human rights. Elsewhere, **Access Now** (partner of FDFA's Peace and Human Rights Division) is an effective global advocate for the kind of free and open digital spaces that SDC values.

At the level of research, organisations SDC may find it beneficial to partner with include **LIRNEasia** (Asia), **Research ICT Africa** (Africa) and **CIPESA** (Eastern and Southern Africa), which all bring regional knowledge of governance realities and a track record of delivering high-quality country reports and in-depth research.

This paper was written by Tony Roberts and Kevin Hernandez, Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. All tables and graphics are authors' own. The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) or the Institute of Development Studies (IDS).