

Pulse on the Principles Episode 0 Final Transcript

Thanks for joining us for "Pulse on the Principles." I'm one of your hosts, Allana Nelson. This episode is intended to be a primer on the principles for digital development, how they came to be, and how they're put into practice. Feel free to visit this episode as often as you need.

To start off, what are the principles for digital development? They're a set of nine living guidelines meant to help guide the creation of technology-enabled programs and tools so that development organizations can efficiently reach more people with life-enabling services and produce more sustainable outcomes. When we say the principles are intended to be living guidelines, we mean that they were designed to be updated over time as technology and the development sector evolves and changes. Over a decade ago, international development practitioners sought new ways of including digital tools in their programming to improve outcomes. While these efforts were initially successful, many failed for reasons like siloed sectors, uncoordinated actors, inefficient policies, inflexible funding, lack of participation and representation by local communities, and pilotitis. Failures were often predictable and preventable. Blending the lessons learned from these common challenges with guidance from hundreds of international development and humanitarian practitioners, governments, and individuals, the digital principles were created by the digital development community for the digital development community.

As Ann Mei Chang, former executive director at the Global Development Lab at USAID once said, "Principles are valuable because they synthesize existing guidance in order to create a common vision about how to institutionalize lessons learned in the use of digital technologies to support development." So, what are the specific principles? They are, design with the user, understand the existing ecosystem, design for scale, build for sustainability, be data-driven, use open standards, open data, open-source, and open innovation, reuse and improve, address privacy and security, and be collaborative. I'll be sharing what each of those principles mean in practice. An important note. While we believe all of the digital principles are crucial to ensuring successful development and deployment of technology in the development sector, we also understand that they may not all be applicable to your specific context.

First and foremost, practitioners must consider which principles are most relevant to their current situation and then act accordingly. And if you ever have a question about the principles, the digital principles team at DIAL are always here to help. Let's jump into it. We're going to get started with what's probably

the most popular principle, design with the user. Too often in international development technology tools are created without sufficient input from the stakeholders whose engagement and ownership are critical to long-term success. User-centered design starts with getting to know the people that you are designing for through conversation, observation, and co-creation. By designing with the users and not for them, you can build digital tools to better address the specific context, culture, behaviors, and expectations of the people who will directly interact with the technology. Examples of how to design with the user include incorporating the voices of multiple user types and stakeholders, developing context-appropriate tools informed by user's priorities and needs, considering sensitivities and needs of the traditionally underserved, incorporating feedback frequently and iterating as needed, and allowing users to opt out of participation.

Understand the existing ecosystem is the second principle. And this one is really about getting to the heart of local contexts. Dedicating time and resources to analyze the ecosystem helps to ensure that selected technology tools will be relevant and sustainable and will not duplicate existing efforts. Ecosystems are defined by the culture, gender norms, political environment, economy, technology, infrastructure, and other factors that can affect an individual's ability to access and use a technology or participate in an initiative. Examples of how you can understand the existing ecosystem include coordinating with other implementing organizations, civil society, and government, aligning with existing technological, legal, and regulatory policies, involving community members, local governments, and other implementers, and monitoring the ecosystem for any changes you need to adapt to.

Next up is design for scale. Many international development projects fail to move beyond the pilot stage or to reach anticipated scale. Achieving scale can mean different things in different contexts, but it requires adoption beyond a pilot population and often necessitate securing funding or partners that take the initiative to new communities or regions. Designing for scale means thinking beyond the pilot and making choices that will enable widespread adoption later, as well as determining what will be affordable and usable by a whole country or region, rather than by a few pilot communities. By designing for scale from the beginning, your initiative can be expanded more easily to new users, markets, regions, or countries if the initiative meets user needs and has local impact. In practice, you can design for scale by keeping your designs simple, flexible, and modular identifying partners early who can help to scale your tool or approach, considering your funding model, including revenue generation options, social business models, and cost per user, and fully validating that your initiative is appropriate for scale.

Related to scale is our next principle, build for sustainability. Oftentimes projects fail to factor in the physical, human, and financial resources that will be necessary for long-term sustainability. Building sustainable programs, platforms, and digital tools is essential to maintain user and stakeholder support as well as to maximize long-term impact. Sustainability ensures that user and stakeholder contributions are not minimized due to interruptions such as loss of funding. For many digital initiatives, institutionalization by a non-governmental organization, private company, or local government is the ultimate goal in achieving long-term positive impact. For others, institutionalization is achieved by developing a business model that has sustainable revenue generation. Examples of how you can build for sustainability include identifying and implementing a sustainable business model, using and investing in local technology service providers, engaging local governments and integrating national strategies, collaborating instead of competing, and building a program that can be adapted.

Be data-driven is one of the better-known principles. This principle is about making informed decisions in a timely manner designed to make the most impact. Despite how obvious it sounds, many international development projects fail to fully leverage data to support project planning and decision making. When an initiative is data-driven, quality information is available to the right people at the right time, and they're using that data to take action. Actions that you can take to be data-driven include identifying and using open data in interoperability standards, collecting and using data responsibly according to international norms and standards, designing programs that are measurable, posing knowledge gaps by contributing data to the development community, using quality real-time or timely data to support rapid decision making, presenting data in formats that are easy to interpret and act on, prioritizing capacity building and data use efforts with stakeholders, and being holistic about data collection and analysis.

Our next principle is comprised of four parts: use open standards, open data, open-source, and open innovation. This principle is about taking advantage of existing investments in technology in order to increase collaboration and prevent duplication of work. This is critical because scarce public and international development resources are spent investing in new software code, tools, data collection, content, and innovations for sector-specific solutions that are then locked away behind licensing fees with data only used by and available to specific initiatives. An open approach to digital development can help to increase collaboration and avoid duplication. Programs can maximize their resources and ultimately, their impact through open standards, open data,

open-source technologies, and open innovation. By taking advantage of existing investments when you're able to, you can apply finite digital development resources towards creating global goods. What being open means for your initiative will depend on practical and technical constraints, security and privacy concerns, and the dynamics of the people and networks in your space. And don't forget, use includes sharing what you create too. You can be open by understanding the context your users are operating in and doing what is right for them, adopting and expanding on existing open standards, sharing non-sensitive data after ensuring privacy needs are addressed, using existing open platforms where possible, investing in software as a public good, and enabling innovation by sharing freely without restrictions.

Our next principle is my personal favorite, reuse and improve. Essentially, it embodies that great old adage, "don't reinvent the wheel." Instead of starting from scratch, programs that reuse and improve look for ways to adapt and enhance existing products, resources, and approaches. Reuse means assessing what resources are currently available and using them as they are to meet program goals. Improve means modifying existing tools, products, and resources to improve their overall quality, applicability, and impact. Reusing and improving is about taking the work of the global development community further than one organization or program can do alone. You can reuse and improve by identifying the existing local and global technology tools, data, and frameworks being used by your target population in your geography or in your sector, developing modular interoperable approaches instead of those that stand alone, and collaborating with other digital development practitioners.

Addressing privacy and security is our next principle. While user privacy has become a hot button issue recently, the digital principles advocated for this consideration from the early days of technology use in development. This principle is really about keeping the best interest of end-users and individuals whose data are collected at the forefront, or as I like to say, pretend like it's your information and handle it accordingly. Addressing privacy and security in digital development involves careful consideration of which data are collected and how data are acquired, used, stored, and shared. Organizations must take measures to minimize collection and to protect confidential information and identities of individuals represented in data sets from unauthorized access and manipulation by third parties. Addressing privacy and security can be a more costly principle to adhere to. You can do it successfully by defining data ownership, sovereignty, and access before any data are collected or captured, performing a risk-benefit analysis of the data being processed, minimizing the collection of personally identifiable information, creating a plan for mid and post-project destruction or secure offline storage of sensitive data, explaining to

end users how you will use and store their data, obtaining informed consent prior to data collection, and protecting data by adopting best practices for securing and restricting access to that data.

Our last but certainly not least principle is be collaborative. In some ways, this is the most foundational principle we have. And while it sounds obvious, it's surprising how few organizations do collaborate with one another, either because of competitive advantage or because they don't know who their best partners can be. Being collaborative means sharing information, insights, strategies, and resources across projects, organizations, and sectors leading to increased efficiency and impact. People working in digital development have a shared vision to create a better world, and collaboration is essential to making this vision a reality. By collaborating, those working in digital development and beyond can pull their resources and expertise, not only to benefit each initiative but also to strengthen the global community. Collaborating does not just happen accidentally, it requires time, planning, and dedicated resources to look for and develop opportunities. Examples of how you can be collaborative include understanding how your work fits into the global development landscape, engaging diverse experts and partners across disciplines, countries, and industries, building collaborative activities into proposals, work plans, budgets, and job descriptions, and documenting work, results, processes, lessons learned, and best practices, and then sharing them.

So, those are the principles for digital development. If you would like more information on any one principle, you can visit our website at digitalprinciples.org, where you will also find numerous job aids, training, advocacy tools, resources, and case studies. My organization, the Digital Impact Alliance or DIAL is the current steward of the digital principles. What that means is that DIAL is charged with facilitating dialogue amongst the digital development community, curating the exchange of new ideas and resources, and promoting adoption and new endorsements of the digital principles. In this role, we seek to foster community engagement and interaction, provide practical, relevant how-to guidance for digital development practitioners and increase awareness about the digital principles themselves. Our aim is to produce relevant and useful content organizations and individuals who are implementing digital development programs can use to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of their programs. To do all of this, we rely on the diverse members of the digital principles community to share their thoughts, insights, and experiences with us to grow our understanding of development challenges, best practices, and how they fit into specific contexts. Being steward also means that we are here to assist you in your digital principles needs. We are now in the fifth year of the digital principles current iteration and our community has

grown from an initial 54 endorsing organizations to nearly 230 from all over the world as of this podcast recording. We hope that you will join our community as well. As we like to say, "Practice, Endorse, Engage."

Thanks for hanging with me on this episode. And I hope you enjoy more "Pulse on the Principles."

