

# Principles for Digital Development Refresh

Draft for Public Comment

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## Preamble (New)

The Principles for Digital Development serve as a compass for those working to promote sustainable and inclusive development (hereby referred to as policymakers and practitioners.) They help navigate the issues and opportunities within today’s complex digital landscape. Using these Principles as a starting point, policymakers and practitioners will be better equipped to ensure that all people can positively benefit from digital technology and data.

Originally developed in 2014, the Principles were updated in 2023 to recognize that people largely interact with technology outside of development programs. Today, all people – even those who do not yet have access to or use technology – live in societies that are increasingly shaped by digital ecosystems that can bring both benefit and harm. When designing, deploying, or implementing a policy, solution, system, or intervention (hereby collectively referred to as initiatives), endorsers of these principles commit, at minimum, to do no harm, and at best, to ensure their work maximizes the agency of people and communities to drive their own development. This is achieved by striving to align with the following nine principles:

	<b>Current</b>	<b>Suggested Revision</b>
1	Design with the user	<b>Prioritize participation and engagement</b>
2	Be collaborative	Understand outcomes for people
3	Understand the existing ecosystem	<b>Understand the existing ecosystem</b>
4	Design for scale	<b>Design for inclusion</b>
5	Build for sustainability	<b>Optimize for sustainability</b>
6	Be data-driven	<b>Put people first in data practices</b>
7	Use Open Standards, Open Data, Open Source, and Open Innovation	<b>Foster open and transparent practices</b>
8	Reuse and improve	<b>Share, reuse, and improve</b>
9	Address privacy and security	<b>Anticipate and mitigate harms</b>

## Suggested Principle 1: Prioritize participation and engagement

Draft subtext:

- The people who will use or be affected by a given technology policy, solution or system, should be engaged throughout the design, deployment, and governance of those solutions and systems.
- In all cases, there will be more than one group of relevant stakeholders (including those who ideally benefit from the initiative and those who will maintain/administer the initiative), each of whom need to participate and engage in the initial design phase and in subsequent iterations.
- Initiatives can encourage participation and engagement by creating opportunities for people to innovate on top of products and services; establishing avenues for feedback and redressal that are regularly monitored and addressed; and committing to agile methods that allow for continual improvement.
- Otherwise, initiatives are unlikely to gain trust of the communities they seek to reach, and will quickly become irrelevant and unused.

## Suggested Principle 2: Understand outcomes for people

Draft subtext:

- Over time, good practices in understanding outcomes have evolved from measuring access to usage to, now, ideally, outcomes. In other words, to understand the impact of a given technology, it's not sufficient to only know how many people can access the technology, or how many people actively use the technology.
- To understand outcomes for people, it is necessary to use a variety of methods, including those that gather both quantitative and qualitative data, to get a holistic view of the impact of technology on people's lives. This also includes providing redressal channels for people to submit feedback and complaints, which are regularly monitored, addressed, and analyzed.
- Understanding outcomes is critical to an agile or iterative design approach through which policies, systems, and solutions are continually updated and improved.
- At best, people are involved in the design and implementation of the monitoring and measuring of outcomes as well, so that the outcomes being measured are relevant and meaningful to them.

## Suggested Principle 3: Understand the existing ecosystem

Draft subtext:

- Digital ecosystems are defined by the culture, gender and social norms, political environment, economy, technology infrastructure and other factors that can affect an individual's ability to access and use a technology or to participate in an initiative.
- Understanding the existing ecosystem can help determine if and how we should engage, as ecosystems can have both positive dynamics (i.e. a strong culture of support for entrepreneurs) and negative dynamics (i.e. power dynamics that drive resources solely to entrepreneurs from a certain background).
- Through this understanding, initiatives should adapt in order to support, to the extent appropriate, existing technology, local actors who are already working to tackle key challenges, and existing government policies and efforts to expand foundational digital public infrastructure.
- When initiatives do not first understand the ecosystem they are operating in, it can hinder uptake, adoption, and trust. It can also lead to unintended consequences, such as exclusion, loss of trust, or reinforcement of harmful power dynamics.
- Digital ecosystems are fluid, multifaceted and ever-changing, requiring that digital development practitioners regularly analyze the context to check their assumptions.

## Suggested Principle 4: Design for inclusion

Draft subtext:

- When leveraged intentionally and to its fullest potential, technology can overcome, rather than exacerbate, existing inequality. To design for inclusion is to seize the opportunity for digital initiatives to drive social progress by dismantling systemic barriers related to gender, income, geography, and other factors.
- Regardless if a technology initiative intends to reach a small or large number of people, it should be designed to be accessible and usable for a diverse range of people, including those with disabilities, low digital literacy, those who speak different languages, or those from different cultural backgrounds.
- This can be achieved by adopting iterative methodologies (such as agile) and by leveraging redressal systems to quickly identify - and address - challenges that negatively impact certain groups of people can be addressed quickly.
- In many cases, designing for inclusion requires ensuring that the benefits of an initiative accrue even to those who are not online, often by offering equitable analogue services.
- Designing for inclusion requires considering the opportunity to strengthen capacity for those who do have the skills or tools necessary to benefit from a given initiative, as well as the affordability of services (in the short and long-term).

- Without following inclusive practices in the design of digital initiatives, we risk amplifying existing inequalities, creating unforeseen harms, and excluding segments of the population from participation and opportunity,

## Suggested Principle 5: Optimize for sustainability

Draft subtext:

- Sustainability here is defined broadly to account for financial, operational, and ecological sustainability, all of which are important to avoid service disruptions for people.
- When initiatives are designed to be sustainable, policymakers and practitioners think beyond the pilot and make choices that will enable widespread adoption later. Optimizing for sustainability means attempting to ensure that an initiative will outlast a given project timeline, set of government officials, or other temporary factors.
- Operational sustainability requires considering staff capacity, availability of external support when needed, and long-term ownership.
- Financial sustainability requires thinking through the cost of ownership, fee structures, and long-term revenue potential or other financing streams.
- Ecological sustainability requires considering an initiative, solution, or system's potential to help people and communities adapt to the changing climate. At the same time, they should seek to minimize the environmental impact of any initiative, solution, or system, particularly the CO2 emissions generated by any hardware or software during the entire lifecycle from production to disposal.
- Optimizing for sustainability does not mean that all products, services, or policies will last forever. Optimizing for sustainability may result in consolidating services, transferring knowledge, software, and/or hardware to a new initiative, planning for the secure transfer (or deletion) of data at the end of a project, or helping clients to transition to a new, more relevant product or service.

## Suggested Principle 6: Put people first in data practices

Draft subtext:

- Digital services and initiatives generate, rely on, and/or use data derived from people or their assets. This principle emphasizes the need to avoid collecting data that is used to create value (financial or otherwise) for a company or organization, without delivering any direct value back to those people from whom the data is derived.

- It is thus critical to consider *people* and to put their needs first when collecting, sharing, analyzing, or otherwise using data. In this context, ‘people’ includes those who directly interact with a given service, those whose data was obtained through partners, and those whose are impacted by non-personal datasets (such as geospatial data.)
- Policymakers and practitioners should make data practices transparent and accountable, so that people can understand and control how their data is being used. Products and services should seek to obtain explicit and informed consent from people before collecting, using, or sharing their data. In many cases, this will entail investing in people's capacity to navigate the tools, redressal systems, and data practices.
- When collecting data, it is important to consider and follow relevant data standards and guidelines set at the international, regional, national, or local level. This includes considering good practices for data collection, practices that are sensitive to gender, those with disabilities, and the unique circumstances of other marginalized groups.
- When sharing and storing data, this principle requires following local regulations and policies, as well as global good practices, for data protection and cybersecurity.
- In all cases, data collection, sharing, and use should create value for people.
- Thus, data collected should be shared back with people, so that they have agency to use this data as they see fit. People should also, ideally, have access to individual, secure data histories that they can take with them from one service provider to the next.
- When this principle is violated, people may be subject to undue and unpredictable harms, stemming from data breaches, exclusion from services, or discrimination based on their digital data trail.

## Suggested Principle 7: Foster open and transparent practices

Draft subtext:

- To establish and maintain trust in the digital ecosystem, it is necessary for all people—whether or not they are direct users of a given service—to have confidence in digital policies, services, and systems. This confidence is nurtured through open and transparent practices, which in turn foster accountability.
- Transparency is achieved through multiple channels, including but not limited to: technical design, clear and accountable governance structures that define roles and responsibilities; open and proactive communication; decisions, policies, and practices; mechanisms that allow stakeholders to provide feedback, ask questions, and raise concerns; and quick and transparent responses to feedback.
- Using open standards, open data, open source (in particular, digital public goods), and open innovation can foster open and transparent practices (although these strategies may not be appropriate in all circumstances.)

- When organizations do not prioritize transparency and openness, it results in a lack of or loss of trust. Trust is critical to encourage participation, and without it, people will rationally choose to avoid the risks associated with engaging with digital services and sharing their data. This means that many individuals will miss out on the benefits of the digital economy, even if they have access to the necessary tools and services.

## Suggested Principle 8: Share, reuse, and improve

Draft subtext:

- To share, reuse, and improve is, in essence, to collaborate. Collaboration is essential to achieving our shared vision of a more equitable world. We have the most impact when we share information, insights, strategies, and resources across silos related to geographies, focus areas, and organizations. By sharing, reusing, and improving existing initiatives, we pool our collective resources and expertise, and avoid costly duplication and fragmentation. Ideally, this leads to streamlined services for people.
- This principle encourages building upon existing resources and practices, rather than starting from scratch. This can apply to technology products, services, research, or policies.
- This requires organized and accessible documentation, and is greatly facilitated by adopting open standards that allow for interoperability and making software code open source, where appropriate.
- Following this principle can save time and money, promote collaboration and the sharing of knowledge, and lead to better products and services through continuous improvement.
- Forgoing this principle in favor of do-it-alone approaches leads to wasted resources (particularly problematic in the case of public donor funds), limited innovation and improvement, and undue burden on people that can hinder trust and participation.

## Suggested Principle 9: Anticipate and mitigate harms

Draft subtext:

- Technology is now part of our everyday lives: no program or technology solution operates in isolation. Therefore, to live up to the commitment to *do no harm*, policymakers and practitioners need to anticipate and work to mitigate harms, even those that may occur outside of a given initiative.
- There are a number of potential harms that may arise from any given technology, and any list offered here will prove to be insufficient. Examples of harms include enabling digital repression (including illegal surveillance and censorship); exacerbating existing digital divides associated

with, for example, gender or geographic location; undermining local civil society and private sector companies; strengthening existing power inequalities; and amplifying existing, harmful, social norms.

- While harms are present with all technology, these harms are particularly relevant, and the impacts are less known, when it comes to machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI). Thus, organizations need to take special care and follow the most-up-date good practices on use of generative AI to take advantage of opportunities while mitigating harms.
- Harm mitigation is also context-specific, and usually requires a multi-faceted approach. Examples may include implementing cybersecurity measures to reduce the risk of cyberattacks and keep their data and systems secure; implementing responsible data practices such as minimizing the amount of personal identifiable and sensitive information collected; creating and implementing security policies that protect data and uphold individuals' privacy and dignity; creating safe online spaces free from disinformation, bullying, and other forms of harassment; and, where relevant, creating an end-of-life policy for post-project data management.
- Without these types of safeguards, specific groups of people may decide to disengage (for example, women may avoid online discourse in the face of cyberbullying) or systems may be used to intentionally target certain groups of people, undermining all sustainable development goals.

## Background

The Principles for Digital Development (“the Principles”) were drafted in 2014 to guide the use of digital technology in international development and have been stewarded by the Digital Impact Alliance (DIAL) on behalf of the digital development community since 2016. The Principles have been officially endorsed by more than 300 organizations and, over the past decade, have informed both funder procurement policies and the design and implementation of development programs.

The Principles represent a shared commitment to responsible digital technology use in service of development goals. They have helped establish a common language and framework among digital development practitioners and have facilitated collaboration and innovation across organizations and countries.

Acknowledging the many contributions of the Principles to improving the practice of digital development, we also recognize that digital technology has evolved substantially over the past decade. During this time, we have increased our collective understanding of both the opportunities and the risks that digital technology presents to people, markets, and the public sector. This understanding led to an inquiry process, through which DIAL and partners opened a dialogue about the need to revisit the Principles to ensure they remain relevant and effective as a guiding force for investments in digital technology for development.

As steward of the Principles, DIAL spoke with partners and members of the Principles community over three months to assess *if* the Principles need to be refreshed. This process consisted of numerous informal conversations, as well as four structured consultations.

Overall, consensus from these initial consultations was clear:

1. The Principles **need to be updated** to better capture the risks and opportunities associated with digital technology design, deployment, and governance as understood today;
2. Nevertheless, this exercise should **refresh rather than overhaul** the Principles to ensure fundamental continuity for the 300+ organizations that have formally endorsed them; accordingly, the focus and intent of the nine principles should be respected.

## Consultation List

~300 people consulted over 15 consultations

Target Audience	Location	Hosted by	Date	Number of attendees
West Africa	Accra, Ghana	TechSalon	October 11	20
Africa	Virtual	DIAL + TechSalon	October 18	45
Asia/Asia Pacific	Virtual	DIAL + TechSalon	October 18	10
SIDA staff and partners	Virtual	SIDA	November 13	10
Spanish-speaking countries	Virtual	DIAL + TechSalon	November 15	10
USAID staff	Virtual	USAID	November 15	17
East Africa	Nairobi, Kenya	DIAL	November 17	31
USAID staff	Virtual	USAID	November 17	10
GIZ staff and partners	Virtual	GIZ	November 18	15

*Initial consultations (yes/no refresh)*

1. In-person PDD Workshop, held in partnership with TechChange in Washington, D.C. at the Global Digital Development Forum (GDDF) on April 27

2. Virtual PDD Workshop, held in partnership with TechChange, with participants from the Global South on May 18
3. In-person consultation at the Stockholm Internet Forum (SIF) hosted by SIDA; participants included members of the right-based development community, May 31
4. In-person TechSalon DC focused on the Principles (summary [here](#)) held on July 18