

Practice Note - Ways forward, assessment tools and possible partners in Digitalisation and Governance

Four stages of digitalisation and governance

All sectors of development cooperation are being significantly affected by digitalisation. Key aspects of social, economic, and political life are migrating to online spaces and rely on digital devices and connectivity. The use of mobile and internet technologies has enabled a wide range of positive digital dividends for development in education, healthcare and livelihoods. It has also resulted in 'digital divides' that negatively affect the most marginalised.

SDC frames its work on Digitalisation and Governance along four stages, which are explained in more detailed in a separate short [Policy Note \(link\)](#):

Box: 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, open government data portals and online licenses, procurement, tax returns and a myriad of other digital government services.
- 3. Digital 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:** in a digitalised world where foreign monopolies have privatised the platforms on which social, economic, and political life takes place, how do citizens hold power to account and avoid digital authoritarianism characterised by surveillance and disinformation?

These four stages overlap significantly. A single initiative may contain elements of more than one stage. Nonetheless the four stages are recognisable to digital governance professionals and have analytical value in furthering our understanding of on-going change. In the first stage digitalisation is focused on increasing the productivity of civil servants inside government by digitalising mundane departmental processes and functions. The second stage of digitalisation centres on building government websites and portals that enable citizens to access government services day or night, 365 days of the year without needing to travel to government offices and queue to see government officials. In the third stage digital tools and online spaces are used to improve government engagement with citizens and create inclusive, participatory opportunities for citizens to play a meaningful role in decision-making that affects their lives. Many of these 'civic technologies' have been built by citizen-led organisations, often in cooperation with government. These first three stages involve **proactive initiatives designed to accelerate digitalisation**.

The fourth stage involves **reactive initiatives addressing the implications of 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 foreign digital platforms owned by private monopolies whose algorithms are optimised for private profit, cannot be held accountable, or democratically governed to service public interest, development, or human rights goals. Conducting governance in a digitalised world involves finding ways to mitigate potential risks arising from digitisation while taking advantage of new opportunities (see assessment tools below in this Practice Brief). This includes consideration of governance of the internet itself and of the monopolies that currently dominate it.

How is SDC currently engaged in digitalisation and governance

A [mapping exercise \(link\)](#) of some SDC projects on digitalisation and governance have shown the depth and breadth of digitalisation and governance initiatives in SDC's existing portfolios. (maybe we can somehow use an imagery to link the presentations of projects in the four stages to the figure above with the four stages?)

- Although the **digitalisation of internal government functions** is the oldest category in the typology, it is still a very active area of work. Work in this category may be considered to be foundational to work in the other categories as it provides infrastructure, builds skills, and catalyzes a culture/approach on which other categories may build. It is an area of work which can feature inter-governmental exchanges, and 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 that are not fully aligned with Swiss commitments to human rights, decentralisation, or inclusive governance. However, SDC should always consider whether any technology introduced or capacity built can be repurposed or leveraged for more sinister purposes.
- The **digitalisation of government services** is still a growing sector. All countries now have government websites, albeit with very different levels of functionality and sophistication. Improvements and 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. This could be seen as providing a pathway to later add functionality for open government data or freedom of information requests. If access to government services becomes only possible digitally, marginalized citizens will be left behind and if biometric digital-ID is made a pre-requisite of access, human rights issues may arise. SDC should ensure that offline mechanisms are also made available alongside digitalised government services and ask for a detailed analysis of the digital gaps that exist in a partner country.
- **Digital participation in governance** is a growing area of work that is closely aligned with SDC values and priorities. Delivering and sustained increased participation of marginalized groups in governance processes is a medium to long term endeavor. Although all governments are rhetorically signed up to the SDG 16.7 target to 'ensure more responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels' in practice more funding is available for the previous two categories, which can deliver direct cost-cutting and productivity increases. Oftentimes, initiatives working in this stage are often limited to ~~only~~ pilot funding leaving them without prospects to scale learning and impact. SDC's work with EGAP in Ukraine and with DEMOS in Kosovo provides useful lessons and templates for adoption and modification in other countries.
- **Governance in a digital world** is perhaps the most troubling and strategically important area of future work for SDC. Even before the Covid19 pandemic, social, economic and political life

was increasingly digital. Governance of the internet, governance of technology monopolies, algorithmic governance and data governance are urgent issues for which there are no easy answers. Existing governance mechanisms have proven to be inadequate for holding foreign corporations accountable or for ending the ‘pandemic’ of digital surveillance, digital disinformation and internet shutdowns. These risks are likely to trickle down to the three previous stages. Providing authoritarian governments with new digital tech and infrastructure could lead to increased surveillance and cracking down on online dissent. An over-reliance on unaccountable algorithmic decision making can lead to biased service delivery that threatens to violate human rights. Misinformation and fake news threaten the integrity of any discussions, voting, or participation taking place on digital participation in governance initiatives.

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

For its future work on digitalisation, SDC will increasingly need to consider the consequences the fourth stage may have on stages 1, 2, and 3 to mitigate any potential risks associated with digital governance initiatives more generally. SDC’s practice of political economy analysis and its use of existing human rights instruments as guidance are essential elements in the framework needed for analysing and prioritising future work in this space.

Below, there are three tools that can inspire and inform a broader political economy analysis and/or a human rights based approach to assess 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 in what kind of “digital context” a project will take place, in order to prioritise different kinds of digitalisation engagements (along the four stages) with different regimes. SDC will always be “thinking politically” about digitalisation and governance engagements. Based on a Political Economy Analysis of a country programme, different kinds of engagements on governance and digitalisation might be appropriate. The table can help to think through these different kinds of engagement. At the end of the Practice Note, there is a short introduction to some key actors in the field of digitalisation and governance, and there is **a longer report** that outlines key actors with their profiles and overall goals in the field.

Figure 1: Capacity and Intent Template *(can you maybe make it graphically more interesting, not so large - more overview-like?)*

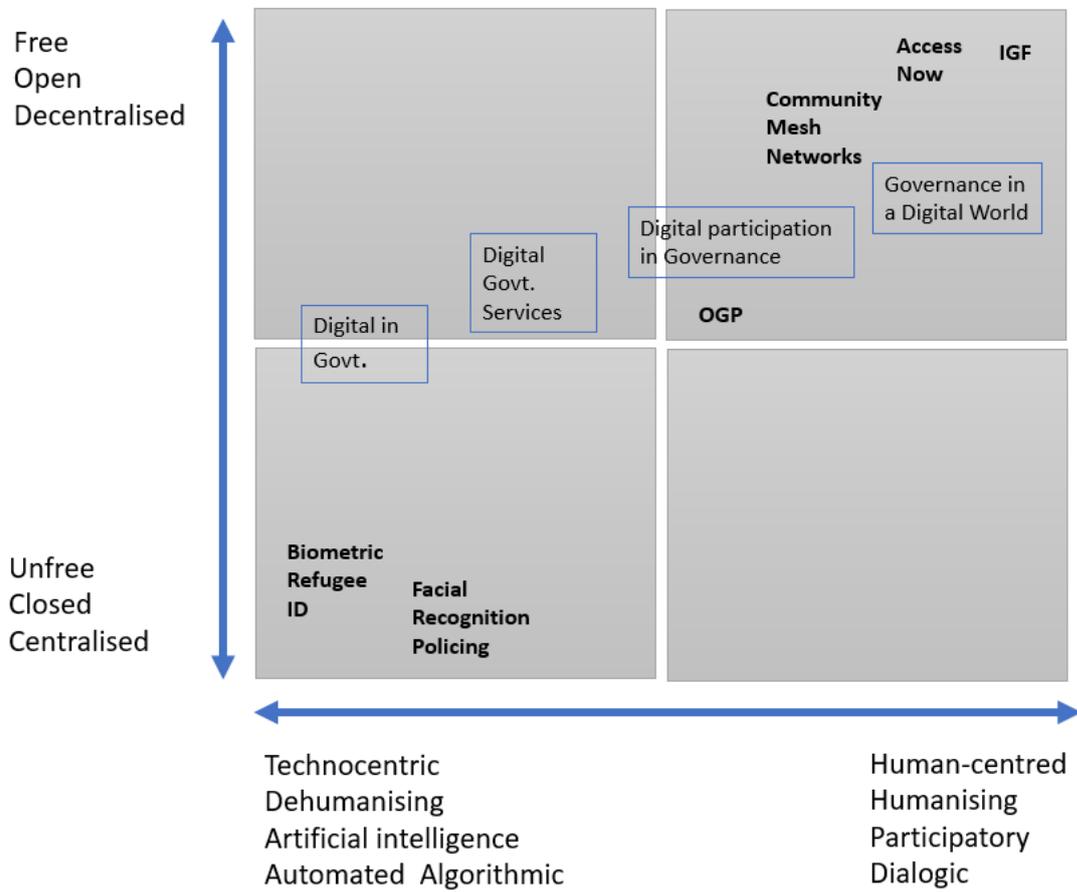
Regime	Engagement with Government	Engagement with Civil society
<p>Authoritarian Government</p> <p><i>Political Intent: Centralisation and mass surveillance and internet shutdowns.</i></p> <p>Capacity: low</p>	<p>Digitalisation in Government e.g. Assistance to digitalise meteorology services.</p> <p>Digital Government Services e.g. Assistance to provide government information online.</p>	<p>e.g. Fund inclusion in Internet Governance Forum.</p> <p>e.g. fund Access Now #KeepItOn or similar initiatives <i>*as Division Peace and Human Security does</i></p> <p>e.g. provide workshops in</p>

		strategic litigation for civil society partners.
<p>Democratic Government</p> <p><i>Political Intent: Reproduction of status-quo, leading to mass surveillance and disinformation.</i></p> <p>Capacity: medium</p>	<p>Digitalisation in Government -</p> <p>Digital Government Services e.g. Assistance to digitalise open government data and join Open Government Partnership.</p> <p>Digital Participation in Governance e.g. Assistance to create online space for inclusive governance for a.</p>	<p>e.g. Fund initiative such as African School for Internet Governance or help build similar schools elsewhere.</p> <p>e.g. Promote open data, open access, open source, open government, open development.</p> <p>e.g. Support public awareness campaigns about digital rights, surveillance, misinformation.</p>
<p>Progressive Government</p> <p><i>Political Intent: Reform of internet governance and decentralisation of infrastructure/services. No illegitimate surveillance.</i></p> <p>Capacity: medium</p>	<p>Digitalisation in Government</p> <p>Digital Government Services e.g. Open Government Portal.</p> <p>Digital Participation in Governance e.g. Participatory Online Budgeting.</p> <p>Governance in a Digital World e.g. Break up digital monopolies, tax digital transactions, prohibit online hate speech</p>	<p>e.g. Support decentralized community (connectivity) networks (i.e. health or other), non-surveillance media, anonymity tools.</p> <p>e.g. Advance digital rights, legal measures against surveillance, introduce legal tools to target misinformation.</p>

Tool 2 - Inclusive Digital Governance Exercise

Another tool that helps to assess the quality of a governance and digitalisation project is to visualise the project on a matrix in relation to two dimensions: Along one axis we can imagine a **continuum of technological openness and closed centralisation**. Along the other axis a continuum from **technology-centred to people-centred** qualities. The matrix can be used to map existing or potential projects in relation to the values that SDC is committed to. *Don't try to over-analyse or over-define the axes; the process is not scientifically rigorous*. It is not important to accurately pinpoint the location of a specific initiative. The value of the process is to stimulate discussion and to illuminating the relative difference between options in relation to the values of inclusion, transparency, participation, accountability and rule of law.

Figure 2: Example Inclusive Digital Governance Exercise¹ (maybe also here we can use the colours of the four stages to show where projects in these stages are located in the matrix)



¹ Community Mesh Networks refer to grassroots peer to peer *decentralized* internet provision—often in underserved areas—which can serve as alternatives to the more common centralized hierarchal and privately owned networks.

Tool 3 - Ten questions

The third and final tool to evaluate digitalisation and governance initiatives are the following list of questions. Again, the objective of this tool is not a scientific exercise, rather, it is the aim to **help develop a common language** and support joint processes through shared tools to inform SDC's work in this area. Please improve the questions as well as the two above tools for your context and suiting your needs, only use those questions that are relevant or add new ones if you think they are relevant.

(we can also put them in a box or table, or arrange around a pic - landscape format, ...)

1. **Political Economy Analysis 1:** Who's interests will be amplified and is the project politically feasible?

We know that digital governance initiatives only work where there is existing political will and capacity. Technology itself cannot deliver development outcomes. Technology can only amplify existing human capacity and intent. We also know that technology is never neutral and that all digital projects advance 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 to analyse what political intent and capacity exists and has the potential to be amplified and which demographic groups will be (dis)advantaged.** SDC commits to amplifying those actors who are intent on a free and open internet and to avoid amplifying those intent on closing online civic space with shutdowns, surveillance or disinformation. SDC will want to pay particular attention to outcomes for those with no access or the least access to digital devices or connectivity in any digital governance initiative. For these reasons political economy analysis will be a more accurate predictor of a project's development value than an analysis of its technological sophistication or degree of innovation.

2. **Political Economy Analysis 2:** Is the project politically feasible?

The political economy analysis should also inform the political feasibility of the project. Digital governance proposals often seek inappropriately to address political problems with technology solutions. The technical logic may be sound, but the political logic is often flawed. Tackling social and political issues demands longer timeframes and multi-layered approaches when compared to a technology build. Does the proposal address the underlying political issues as well as addressing technical issues? Have appropriate measures been taken to convince powerful actors (e.g. community leaders, politicians, influencers, etc.) whose approval or cooperation may be 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 there has been much funding available for pilot projects but initiatives often implode once initial project funding ends. More patient funding is required that expects challenges to emerge and is prepared to adapt and iterate.

3. **Political Economy Analysis 3:** Is power centralised or decentralised by the project?

The privatisation and monopolisation of the internet has been accompanied by a centralisation of power that have not proven to be amenable to democratic governance. Very high percentages of internet searches, social media messages, and online transactions are governed by relatively few proprietary algorithms hidden and protected from existing regulatory mechanisms. These technologies are influential in shaping opinion about crucial public policy issues such as vaccinations, immigration, climate and during elections powerful interests are able to buy influence by sending in excess of one billion disinformation messages per week to swing voters. In addition to curtailing

these threats to democracy, decentralizing technologies include community networks, online policy fora and participatory budgeting platforms. With regard to digital IDS, 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, freedom of opinion, speech, and association are affected by the digitalisation, privatisation, and monopolisation of the public sphere and its subjection to algorithmic mass surveillance and coordinated disinformation. Existing human rights conventions provide the necessary tools to assess the extent to which digital projects enable or limit fundamental freedoms and entitlements. The UNDHR (UN 1948), the ICCPR (1966) and the Ruggie Principles on Business and Human Rights (2011) and the Human Rights Council's (2016) resolution on the right to the internet, are existing instruments against which digitalisation and governance should be measured. Human rights audits should arguably be a pre-requisite of any projects involving artificial intelligence, algorithmic decision-making or biometrics 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 the SDG 16.7 objective that 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 this initiative? Is the composition of the project management sufficiently diverse that it reflects and represents the interests and priorities of the whole community? User-centered design approaches (e.g. design thinking, participatory design, etc.) should be used both for reason of justice but also to ensure uptake and adoption. Initiatives should be designed for equity from the outset with regard to languages, culturally appropriate, and build in digital literacy and access. Non-digital access must remain part of the design to ensure that the most marginalized are not left behind. Some people will always be unable – or chose not to use – any particular technology. Offline channels need to remain open 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?

It is increasingly important to ask “who will own the data?” as centralisation of data has become the new source of centralised wealth and power. Data minimisation, data protection and data safeguarding need to be central to planning 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?”. 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. Automating electronic payroll has removed management corruption in some cases. Artificial intelligence has been deployed to identify anomalies in the percentages of sub-contracts won in procurement corruption. Opening government data - and opening corporate data – can increase transparency and make it possible to root out corruption around large government and international corporate contracts. However, research shows that technology alone is an insufficient condition of ending corruption, especially in authoritarian settings where the political intent for change is absent, the media is 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 capacity of oversight organisations take more time and longer term support.

8. Technical Feasibility: Is the proposal technically achievable?

Experimenting with new technologies is inherently unpredictable, especially when tackling complex development problems. The desire to be seen using cutting edge technologies gave rise to ‘pilotitis’, high failure rates, and ethical concerns. Successful innovation requires longer time frames and an iterative, adaptive approach to design and development. This is necessary due emergent challenges inherent to applying new technologies to complex development problems. The experience of refugee data capture by the Taliban has increased the criticism on the practice 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 (2016) has termed ‘digital dividends’. Digital technologies provide new action possibilities for development in part because of the ability to process and share 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 and in participatory budgeting, and citizen monitoring. However, the same technology provides new action possibilities for surveillance capitalists to extract user data, produce digital profiles, and micro-target them in disinformation campaigns. For more on this, see the accompanying [Policy Note on ‘Key Issues in Digitalisation and Governance.’](#)

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. Making sure that those with no digital access - and those with the least digital access – are not left behind is a complex challenge. Ensuring “responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels” (SDG 16.7) is a major governance challenge in an increasingly digital world. Successfully responding to the governance opportunities and challenges arising from digitalisation should ultimately be measured against the criteria of progress towards securing digital rights and social justice.

Possible SDC partners for Digitalisation & Governance

This last part of the practice note summarises recommendations about potential strategic partners in the field of digitalisation and governance. There is a **longer report** where summaries of these and additional key actors and initiatives in digitalisation and governance are presented in more detail.

Generally, many efforts to utilise the potential opportunities of digital technologies have overly focused on digital technology as a quick fix or silver bullet to address governance challenges - and often the organisations and individuals involved have not been connected to and have lacked an understanding of the systemic nature of governance change. SDC should consider the need to **support the building and development of the necessary relationships between existing governance actors in the system and new actors** who have the digital technology expertise.

(We could also organize these key actors in a table form or other interesting graphic way)

*At the **multilateral** level SDC may find it beneficial to form partnerships with ...*

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 through this key governance organisation.

UNESCO would make a good potential partner because of their work on Internet Universality Indicators (or ROAM Indicators). This is a novel means to measure 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 could be a valuable possibility for SDC to pursue a series of linked policy objectives in partnership with a respected UN partner.

*At the **bilateral** level SDC may find it beneficial to form partnerships with ...*

There is a significant degree of policy overlap and interest in digital governance between SDC and the Canadian **IDRC** (International Development Research Centre), **SIDA** (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), **BMZ** (German Federal Ministry for Economy and Development)/**GIZ** (**German Corporation for International Cooperation**), **USAID** (U.S. Agency for International Development) and **FCDO** (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office). However, some countries have recently been cutting their development funding and diluting their commitments to human rights and multi-lateral cooperation. SDC will want select bilateral partners who continue to prioritise free and open digital spaces and digital rights in both their policy and practice.

*At the **inter-governmental** level SDC may wish to partner with ...*

The **Freedom Online Coalition** (**FOC**) is an interesting space where SDC can act alongside other countries to further inclusive internet governance (**partner of Division for Peace and Human Rights*). There are a number of important transparency initiatives SDC could collaborate with: The Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (**GIFT**), Open Government Partnership (**OGP**), the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (**EITI**) (**partner of seco's economic development division*), the Open Contracting Partnership (**OCP**), The Infrastructure Transparency Initiative (**CoST**), or **Open**

Ownership. Rather than collaborate with transparency organisations directly, SDC may choose to join the Transparency and Accountability Initiative (TAI).

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

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

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