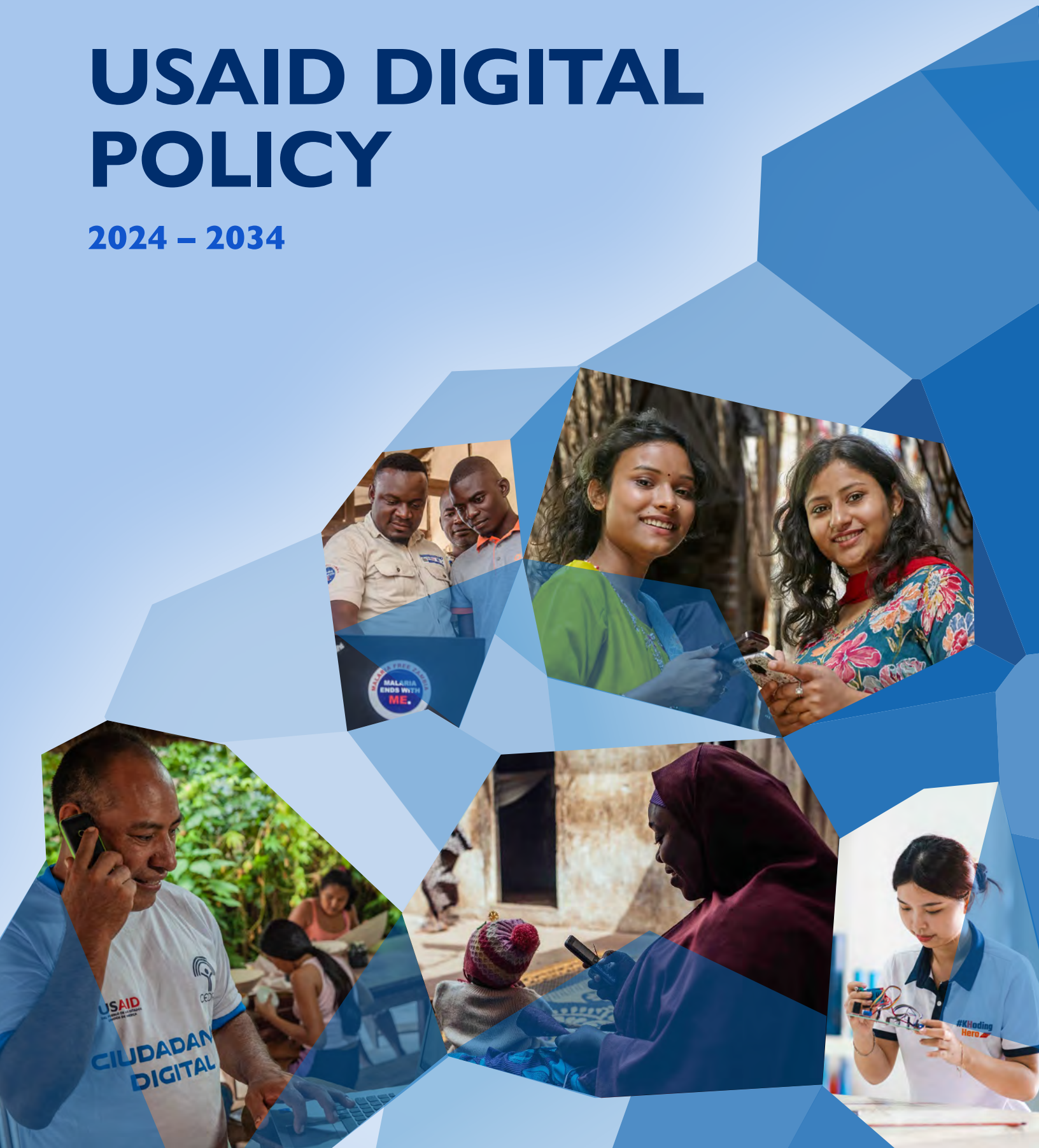
USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

USAID DIGITAL POLICY

2024 – 2034



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A Digital Policy Drafting Team, chaired by the Technology Division within the Innovation, Technology and Research Hub, in the Bureau for Inclusive Growth, Partnerships, and Innovation, led the process to produce USAID's new Digital Policy. The Drafting Team, as well as the Digital Policy Working Group, comprised staff from across the Agency recognized for their knowledge and expertise on these issues. These USAID staff worked intensively and collaboratively in service to this critical policy, and will continue to serve as important resources in the policy's implementation: Allana Welch (IPI), Craig Jolley (IPI), Jaclyn Carlsen (IPI), Chris Doten (DRG), Eric Keys (IPI), Samantha Chen (IPI), and Siobhan Green (IPI).

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Chipema Chinyama for USAID, Soumi Das for USAID, KC Nwakalor for USAID, Sotheapanha Theng for USAID, KC Nwakalor for USAID, Jack Gordon for USAID

A USAID policy is a document that articulates the Agency's vision and direction for a development or humanitarian issue or sector, or a development practice area, and helps organize the Agency to maximize impact and achieve sustainable results. Policies outline evidence-based goals and principles that guide decisions and actions toward a desired end state. Policies are internal-facing and the primary audience is the USAID workforce.

VISION AND PURPOSE

DEVELOPMENT IN A DIGITAL AGE

USAID envisions a world where open, inclusive, secure, and rights-respecting digital ecosystems enable people everywhere to thrive.

In today's digitally connected world, there is a growing recognition that open, inclusive, secure, and rights-respecting digital ecosystems*—and the life-enhancing and lifesaving services they enable—are fundamental components of sustainable development and humanitarian response. Cutting across every sector, geography, and demographic, digital technologies and cybersecurity are a fundamental part of the development journeys of our partner countries and are increasingly crucial to deepening development cooperation, optimizing humanitarian action, and understanding and reacting to conflicts and crises. The digital landscape has shifted significantly in the last ten years as internet usage in low- and middle-income countries has roughly doubled.[1] Internet platform companies now dominate the technology sector; devices have become smarter, smaller, and more ubiquitous; person-level data are being collected at unprecedented scale; and artificial intelligence (AI)[2] is reshaping the way people work, access information, and engage with one another.

Technological progress poses a dilemma for countries and their development partners: how to capitalize on the benefits of technology use while mitigating the risks. Both the opportunities and potential hazards of digital transformation are heightened today; recent advances, such as in AI, raise the prospect of large-scale disruption, and a competition is underway to build the infrastructure,[3] write the rules, set the standards, and articulate the norms that will shape development for decades to come. How countries manage this change will determine what benefits digital technology brings and to whom, and whether it fosters a more open, rights-respecting, and inclusive world. An affirmative vision for digital development can tip this balance along three key dimensions.

First, emerging technologies can unlock new opportunities and pave new pathways to economic resilience and civic engagement, while at the same time unleashing new threats, eroding privacy, undermining employment, and aggravating inequality. Connectivity has improved international commerce, education, and health, but the growing use of digital tools has also come with additional risks. More women and girls are online than ever before, but they face a dramatic increase in technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). Digital data systems have made everyday life more convenient for billions of people, but have brought debates about how to protect privacy, prevent misuse, and responsibly govern data. The use of digital data by governments, businesses, civil-society organizations, media outlets, and even individuals has increased their power and productivity but also put us all at greater risk of malicious cyber activity. Information integrity, which is needed to protect democratic institutions, such as free and fair elections and the rights of civil society and media, is more at risk than ever. Because of

* A digital ecosystem is inclusive of the stakeholders, systems, and enabling environment that together empower people and communities to use digital technology to gain access to services, engage with each other, or pursue economic opportunities. A digital ecosystem is conceptually similar to, but broader than, a digital economy. Although certain aspects of the digital ecosystem have country-wide reach, other features differ across geographies or communities. A robust digital ecosystem includes the following: (1) sound enabling environment and policy commitment; (2) secure and resilient digital infrastructure; (3) capable digital service-providers and workforce (e.g., both public and private institutions); and, (4) empowered end-users of digitally enabled services.

these challenges, USAID has an important role to play helping technology be deployed and used in a manner that reflects our values and benefits all people.

Second, digital development can deliver lower costs, increased transparency, and more responsive services through digital government approaches and financial inclusion, but may also exacerbate digital divides. Indeed, billions of people are still excluded in various ways from an increasingly digital world. Many underserved groups have been left behind due to barriers that prevent people from using technology, such as affordability, knowledge and digital skills, safety and security, and access. While digital connectivity is a prerequisite, it alone is not enough to address the digital divide. In low- and middle-income countries, 785 million women do not have access to mobile internet; 60 percent of those women live in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where men are 30 percent more likely to use the internet than women.[4]

Third, the perspectives that will shape digital ecosystems and the larger digital development landscape for this and future generations are actively contested. Some states, including Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC), are using their technological capacities and influence within international institutions to create more permissive conditions for repressive and authoritarian practices. Authoritarian regimes around the world are leveraging technology to tighten their grips on power through censorship, information manipulation, mass surveillance, and commercial spyware and state-sponsored malicious cyber incidents, which enhance state control over domestic and transnational political and social debate. Techniques of repression and the countries willing to deploy them may evolve in the coming years. As we navigate these developments, our core democratic principles and values will remain central to USAID's work and programming.

Photo credit: Soumi Das for USAID

USAID, in coordination with interagency partners, is at the forefront of advancing democratic, secure, interoperable, and open alternatives to the digital authoritarian models that feature state control, censorship, and violations of individual privacy. As a development and humanitarian agency represented in more than 100 countries, USAID contributes important and unique perspectives that help advance U.S. national security, partnering with governments to undertake critical aspects of their digital transformations. USAID's programmatic and policy leadership and convening power are an indispensable part of the U.S. government's efforts to reinforce open, inclusive, secure, and rights-respecting digital ecosystems around the world.

The coming decade promises changes of significant magnitude, as access to the internet continues to broaden and countries undergo "twin transitions,"[5] where digital transformation supports sustainability efforts by both leveraging digital technology and data and making digital technology more environmentally sustainable. Digital public infrastructure (public investments in modular, foundational digital services such as digital identification or digital payment systems, on which additional digital services can be layered) has been identified as a proven and powerful approach to sustainable and resilient digital ecosystem design. Advances will be made in AI, extended reality (XR), and quantum computing, and as-yet-unimagined technology areas will reshape digital ecosystems. The children and youth of today — who make up the largest portion of internet users — include the first "digital native" generation, and their experiences with digital technologies will have huge impacts on future economies and societies, as well as the environment. Given these realities, the Agency must continue to embrace and harness the opportunities that digital technologies present to our partner communities while mitigating the risks that are inherent in digital technology use. We must work to allow everyone access to the benefits of this new digital world. As USAID looks to the next ten years and beyond, this Digital Policy+ will guide our efforts to innovate thoughtfully, enhance responsibility and accountability, generate reliable and usable evidence, and launch dynamic partnerships that support security, human rights, and economic prosperity for people everywhere.

This Policy, and USAID's approach to achieving it, supports the goals and principles outlined in other key USG policy documents, including the USAID Policy Framework; the USAID AI Action Plan; the USAID Information Technology Strategic Plan; the Department of State-USAID Joint Strategic Plan; the United States International Cyberspace and Digital Policy Strategy; the U.S. National Cyber and U.S. National Security Strategies; Executive Order 14110 on Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence; and other relevant U.S. strategies and policies. For a more fulsome list of U.S. strategies and policies with which the USAID Digital Policy aligns, please see Annex I.

+ The USAID Digital Policy is a development and humanitarian assistance policy document focused on the promotion of open, inclusive, secure, and rights-respecting digital ecosystems and the programmatic use of digital technology in the Agency's development and humanitarian assistance programming, which we commonly refer to as "digital development." While the Digital Policy primarily focuses on enhancing USAID's programmatic activities, USAID's operational components (enterprise architecture and systems) are crucial to executing the Policy. This Policy is a complement to the authorities and responsibilities of these operational entities, including the Bureau for Management (e.g., the Office of the Chief Information Officer [M/CIO], and the Office of Acquisition and Assistance [M/OAA], and the Responsibility, Safeguarding, and Compliance Division [M/MPBP/RSC]); the Office of Human Capital and Talent Management (HCTM); and the Office of the General Counsel (GC), and the Agency's Regional and Pillar Bureaus will execute it in partnership with them.

The implementation of the Policy will be consistent with all applicable laws, including, but not limited to, the Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996, Electronic Government (eGov) Act of 2002/The Federal Information Security Management Act (FISMA) of 2002, the Federal Information Security Modernization Act of 2014, the Federal Information Technology Acquisition Reform Act of 2015, the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act (Evidence Act), and the Grants Oversight and New Efficiency Act.

BACKGROUND

USAID's digital-focused efforts fall into three main areas: integrating digital technologies responsibly across the practice of development and humanitarian assistance; building open, inclusive, secure, and rights-respecting digital ecosystems; and improving the capacity of people everywhere to use technology to meet their socioeconomic and livelihood needs. The Agency is working to help foster environments in which digital technology promotes inclusive growth, supports resilient and democratic societies, advances human rights, and empowers all, including the most vulnerable. As part of these lines of effort, we are also committed to meaningfully institutionalizing the use of secure, sustainable digital technologies into all aspects of our development and humanitarian work, business processes, and outlook.

USAID has integrated technology into its development programming since the 1970s. In 1995, USAID began strategically investing in the digital transformation of partner countries with the Leland Initiative to improve internet connectivity in Africa. Over the following decades, USAID has expanded and diversified its digital approach by establishing dedicated teams, partnering across the development community, and expanding both the range of our digital programming and its integration with traditional development sectors.

In 2020, we released USAID's Digital Strategy, which formalized an Agency-wide vision for development and humanitarian assistance in the world's rapidly evolving digital landscape. Pivotally, with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the world shifted to a far greater reliance on remote communications and digital tools as part of the response to the outbreak. The pandemic necessitated the further use and embrace of digital technologies in much of USAID's programming. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted digital divides and inequality, as many individuals and

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communities found themselves left out of a world that had suddenly gone virtual. More than 1.4 billion children around the world were removed from classrooms, leading to profound and widespread learning loss.[6] In many partner countries, inaccurate

information regarding public health surged online, weakening pandemic responses. Cybercrime became an increasingly profitable industry, harming critical infrastructure key to development. Post-pandemic, many of these harms have persisted or grown: the overall cost of cybercrime skyrocketed to $8.15 trillion in 2023,[7] and the pre-pandemic trend of global democratic backsliding has been accelerated by online information manipulation campaigns, often targeting marginalized groups,[8] particularly women, girls, and LGBTQI+ communities.

We have developed the 2024-2034 Digital Policy amid a geopolitical context increasingly shaped by strategic competition, emerging technologies, and cyberspace capabilities. Because digital technologies are so transformative, building digital ecosystems in developing countries is an area of intense competition. Over the past decade, U.S. strategic competitors have emerged as major sources of technology transformation funding, such as the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Digital Silk Road Initiative. Reliance on PRC-based funding and infrastructure development has often been accompanied by democratic backsliding and an embrace of digital manipulation and repression. Today, with changing economic conditions, BRI has evolved toward smaller, more targeted projects with a narrower focus on digital infrastructure.[9] A combination of cutting-edge technical support, mobilization of private capital, and an inclusive approach to project co-creation will enable USAID to undertake important partnerships with developing countries to advance an affirmative vision for the digital future.

FOCUS TOPIC

Open Radio Access Networks (Open RAN)

Open RAN is a set of wireless networks that offers an entire ecosystem in which operators and firms can design, build, assemble, and operate networks and software solutions from a variety of sources – including local companies as an alternative to closed end-to-end systems. Launched in 2022, the Asia Open RAN Academy is an alliance of academic, government, and industry stakeholders in the Philippines and Indo-Pacific region that share a common objective to advance the growth and commercialization of Open RAN through workforce development. In one year, the Asia Open RAN Academy trained more than 10,000 network engineers, providing opportunities to become part of the wireless supply chain. USAID is now expanding the Academy to include construction of a physical, brick-and-mortar Open RAN 5G interoperability lab in Manila, which will be the first such place in the Philippines for engineers to test interoperability of equipment, develop use cases, and experiment with different equipment and network configurations.

Global digital transformation is also happening amid the accelerating and disruptive impacts of climate change. Digital technologies affect the environment at many stages along the technology supply chain: from sourcing of critical minerals and other raw materials, to manufacturing and use, to disposal of phones and tablets (e-waste), as well as energy consumption by cloud solutions, data centers, and technologies such as blockchain. At the same time, climate-related events pose risks to digital ecosystems, with increasingly frequent extreme weather events threatening critical digital infrastructure. Digital technologies can help nations and communities understand and adapt to climate change, but they can also hurt the environment. This Policy affirms that climate change and technology need to be viewed together rather than as isolated issues.

The past decades of innovation and investment in technology for development and humanitarian work at USAID have already had a tremendous impact. And more recently, technology has become pervasive in the lives of many USAID partners and stakeholders — as well as more indispensable in achieving USAID's mission to save lives, reduce

poverty, strengthen democratic governance, and help people progress beyond assistance. The pace of technological change requires USAID to continuously relearn and reimagine our work, and we recognize that thoughtful use of digital technologies needs to be further integrated throughout all programs. The Agency must also identify areas where we can be catalysts and coalition-builders in key international fora. Building on the 2020 Digital Strategy and the body of digital work that USAID has invested in over the past 50 years, the USAID Digital Policy embraces the use of digital technologies more intentionally and will support and guide USAID's work for years to come.

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GOALS

The Digital Policy aims to prepare USAID and our partners around the world to keep pace with rapid change, adopt digital technologies responsibly, bolster information integrity and resilience, counter digital authoritarianism, and accelerate development progress and humanitarian response using digital technologies. The ubiquitous, networked, artificially intelligent technologies of tomorrow will require us to adapt our ways of working and acting in the world. At the same time, the core concerns of digital transformation will remain unchanged: bridging inequities, broadening inclusion, protecting human rights, and safeguarding human dignity through the incorporation of sound data governance and cybersecurity practices. Together with our partners, USAID will advance U.S. national security by strengthening open, inclusive, secure, and rights-respecting digital ecosystems.

The Digital Policy will pursue three key goals:

BUILD: Propel positive development and humanitarian outcomes through an infrastructural approach[10] (one that is inclusive of the underlying foundation for digital ecosystems) to digital technology and services.

TRANSFORM: Evolve the digital approach of USAID and our partners through proactive improvement of knowledge, skills, policies, and technology.

PROTECT: Promote privacy, security, transparency, equity, and human rights in USAID programming and across the broader digital context.

BUILD

Propel positive development and humanitarian outcomes through an infrastructural approach to digital technology and services

In today's digital age, "infrastructure" no longer only means roads, power grids, or fiber-optic cables, but also the foundational building blocks that underlie digital societies and economies.[11] These building blocks include policies, regulations, human capacity to use and maintain technology, and software and hardware systems. USAID will partner with others to build open, resilient, secure, inclusive, rights-respecting systems through attention to these underlying digital enablers. Some countries, including Ukraine and Estonia, have already embraced this approach. Over the period of the Digital Policy, our programs will evolve to take this approach; we will holistically integrate context-appropriate, sustainable digital technology in all sectors.

While many technology actors pursue a vision of "killer apps" with massive scale and global reach, this approach often fails marginalized communities and can prove unsustainable in resource-constrained

environments.[12] USAID's technology approach will be grounded in rigorous evidence and local realities, leveraging the experience and perspectives of local actors to co-create technology designs that work in context. Because digital inclusion varies widely, we will work to broaden adoption and access responsibly, including to the most marginalized. Understanding that technology can exacerbate existing inequalities, USAID will integrate key priorities, such as protection for human rights, inclusion, and participation, and seek out partners who share this approach. A focus on open standards, interoperability, and responsible reuse of digital investments such as digital public goods[13] will help us to place the proper emphasis on architectures, processes, and systems — rather than potentially unsustainable pilots or momentarily flashy mobile applications.

USAID will:

- Recognize and apply the sectoral expertise of USAID staff and partners to build digital programming that achieves development goals.
- Make holistic investments in the people and processes needed for positive development impact, including strengthening human resources and governance systems, strengthening legislation and regulations, increasing resilience, and adopting safeguards.
- Improve access, affordability, knowledge, and skills to close digital divides related to gender, geography, disability, age, and other societal inequities by partnering with community members, telecommunications providers, governments, and other stakeholders.
- Maximize data investments and address risks by integrating responsible data governance systems and frameworks into our work.
- Support digital public goods[14] and digital public infrastructure when appropriate to the context, as well as understand potential impacts, especially on sustainability, local systems, and stakeholders.
- Promote responsible innovation by strengthening the capacity of local partners, including business owners, content creators, activists, educators, faith-based community leaders, and technologists.

FOCUS TOPIC

Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Development

In India, USAID partnered with Wadhwani AI, a Mumbai-based technology nonprofit, and Nikshay, the Indian Ministry of Health's system for tuberculosis (TB) case management, to leverage AI in patient care.15 The partnership with Nikshay offered nationally representative data and a clear path to integration with existing public health systems, while Wadhwani AI offered innovative new technology approaches. Rather than just "making an app," we took a broad-based approach to reforming and streamlining data systems and creating a pipeline of AI applications that would build on digital public infrastructure used in India's health system, rather than a series of short-lived pilots. This emphasis on data foundations enabled applications, including a screening tool that analyzes cough sounds, to predict TB likelihood. It also supported the creation of a computer vision program for interpreting drug-resistant TB lab results, and a predictive tool for assessing the risk of patients not completing their TB treatment. These tools are tailored to address specific challenges in TB care, such as early detection and adherence to treatment regimens. The cough sound screening tool, for example, leverages deep neural networks trained on a substantial dataset of audio recordings, enabling rapid and non-invasive TB screening in both healthcare facilities and at home. This tool alone has screened over 65,000 individuals, demonstrating its practical application and impact.

TRANSFORM

Evolve the digital approach of USAID and our partners through proactive improvement of knowledge, skills, policies, and technology

Digital transformation involves the mutually reinforcing elements of workforce training, technology application, innovation, policy reform, and thought leadership. In the past, USAID's digital transformation efforts have focused on upskilling our workforce through dedicated training and hiring specialists, such as Digital Development Advisors and Geospatial Specialists, along with targeted activities promoting good digital practices in our development programming. We will continue these efforts, and assertively leverage relevant hiring authorities to recruit people to USAID with necessary expertise, in order to enhance our organizational capacity to act as a high-value partner, effectively supporting the digital transformations of governments, civil society, and the private sector. USAID will emphasize accountability and transparency, working with external thought partners to benchmark and track progress and regularly sharing our status and future plans with our workforce, host-country partners, and the public. We will identify key areas of opportunity and ally with host-country governments, local organizations, civil-society actors, academic institutions, faith-based organizations, and private enterprises that share our vision of an inclusive, equitable, climate-positive, and just digital future. We can make use of the innovation capacity of our own workforce by encouraging, identifying, and scaling new approaches that reduce burdens and improve our work. Members of the USAID workforce will grow their capacities for principled, participatory, and human-centered design (HCD) approaches as they work to strengthen similar capacities across partners. Becoming a stronger partner will require USAID to improve and build our own systems and safeguards, embodying the advice we provide to others and better positioning us to support the digital transformation journeys of our partners.

FOCUS TOPIC

Working with the Private Sector

The Alliance for eTrade Development II ("eTrade Alliance") is a Global Development Alliance between USAID and 15 leading private-sector partners to support micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprise (MSME) cross-border ecommerce development. The eTrade Alliance works to expand trade and further inclusive growth for MSMEs in developing countries by piloting solutions and models that can help MSMEs engage with ecommerce and conduct digital trade at scale. With USAID resources and matching contributions from the private sector, it co-invests with partners to implement activities that support MSME digital development and contribute to partners' business interests, fostering increased engagement in local eCommerce ecosystems and helping companies and public-sector stakeholders more effectively implement activities. In the policy area, the Alliance has worked with USAID on a range of large-scale stakeholder discussions on ecommerce, along with targeted technical dialogues aimed at specific policy improvements. In 2024, the Alliance, with broad USG participation, led and participated in digital trade policy dialogues and capacity-building efforts for countries negotiating the historic African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) Digital Protocol and the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA). This combined approach to capacity building and policy reform will be a key piece of USAID's future approach to growing digital economies—fostering deeper partnerships and building critical guardrails for effective and principled private-sector engagement.

USAID will:

- Develop tools and metrics to understand strengths and gaps in USAID's digital transformation, including a system for tracking digital activities across the Agency, and continuously formulate and update plans for improvement.
- Invest in our workforce's capabilities to design and manage digital programming through peer-to-peer connections, executive fellowships, training opportunities, and by leveraging relevant hiring authorities.
- Build the capacity of USAID staff and partners to analyze the human rights implications of technology deployments and work with partners to conduct human rights impact assessments.
- Co-design approaches, guidance, roadmaps, and tools with key partners to address technology in humanitarian and stabilization contexts, where privacy and security concerns are particularly acute.
- Strengthen partner capacity for deploying and maintaining digital government investments, such as digital public infrastructure.
- Invest in the individual and organizational capacity of partner governments to transform themselves to develop, lead, and sustain digital societies and economies that uphold the values of openness, inclusiveness, and security.

- Leverage USAID's interagency partnerships and international development policy leadership to advance U.S. national security and safeguard open, inclusive, secure, and trustworthy digital ecosystems.

FOCUS TOPIC

Geostrategic Competition

As digital technologies and infrastructure grow increasingly accessible to developing countries, concerns are growing that the PRC is distorting markets to advantage PRC-based hardware, software, and services suppliers, hampering competition and innovation while threatening global security and the resilience of suppliers.

In 2023, Colombia held its first successful 5G spectrum auction after months of engagement between USAID Mission staff and the Government of Colombia on the design and coordination of policy issues, including on trusted vendor requirements.[16] The auction attracted bids totalling $380 million from four private operators, and the spectrum licenses are anticipated to open the door for large-scale private-sector 5G deployment in Colombia and attract further investments over the next ten years. Our ability to build on existing dialogues and nimbly respond to the needs of Colombian regulators have helped position the United States as a valued and trusted partner supporting Colombian regulators to design and implement an open, competitive auction that will foster resilience of suppliers and secure systems. By both building and leveraging the knowledge, skills, and professional connections of USAID Mission-based digital experts, we demonstrated the immediate and enduring benefits of an affirmative approach to digital ecosystem investment.

PROTECT

Promote privacy, security, transparency, equity, and human rights in USAID programming and across the broader digital context

Over the past 50 years of USAID digital investments, we have seen time and again that technology, by default, reflects the power structures that built it. Not all impacts of digital technology are good, and this Policy underscores that our digital interventions must reflect this awareness. USAID's past programs have demonstrated our ability to mitigate digital-related harms including mental health impacts, cybercrime, information manipulation, and technology facilitated gender based violence (TFGBV). **Our technology approach will evolve beyond a focus on programs, building a culture of equity, inclusion, and risk management**. Digital harms exist on a spectrum that goes beyond online harm to include physical violence, requiring attention to intersecting patterns of conflict, repression, and social exclusion. These harms will worsen so long as legal consumer protection frameworks and business practices fail to prevent or mitigate unfair, deceptive, and abusive practices in the digital economy. Malign actors can exploit these risks to undermine the stability and security of our partner countries, particularly through threats to critical infrastructure. Children, youth, women, and LGBTQI+ persons, as well as gender-diverse and gender-nonconforming individuals, are exposed to heightened risks of digital harm and require dedicated focus. In some cases, we can combat digital harms through internet freedom tools such as virtual private networks (VPNs) and secure messaging applications. Mitigating risk and protecting human rights cannot be an afterthought. As development becomes more digital, every activity will need to work with affected communities to advance an affirmative vision of safe, secure, and rights-respecting technology.

FOCUS TOPIC

Information Integrity and Resilience

In Indonesia, USAID aims to improve digital literacy among Indonesians who are coming online for the first time.[17] Part of the Mission's success has come from its deep engagement with local stakeholders and content creators, including by producing videos in consultation with Indonesian digital literacy experts and collaborating with local organizations to share best practices for strengthening information integrity and resilience. Another key tool in strengthening the information environment online has been the Misinformation Early Warning System (MEWS), a cutting-edge AI tool that highlights manipulated online content and determines how it is being spread, empowering people to take action. For example, MEWS surfaced a Chinese bot network that was using female, Western-sounding usernames to promote a misleading narrative about the Xinjiang province of China. This evidence led several social media platforms to remove this content according to their manipulated content standards. Looking ahead, initiatives such as these can help strengthen the digital ecosystem and the integrity of the information landscape in all sectors of development, counteracting malign narratives and promoting tolerance in diverse populations.

USAID will:

- Support the data protection and cyber resilience of partners—including governments, civil society, media, and others—through safeguarding measures, training, rights-based cybersecurity, protection of critical infrastructure, and risk mitigation. By helping to protect the digital systems of our partners, we promote their rights and prosperity while also strengthening U.S. national security.
- Bolster healthy information ecosystems by addressing information manipulation, improving digital literacy and hygiene, and mitigating risks such as censorship or internet shutdowns.

- Support and promote the application of international data privacy, cybersecurity, and cross-border data protection standards in development contexts.
- Respect human rights and safeguard people from potential harm while investing in emerging technologies (such as AI) when appropriate.
- Promote partner compliance with existing requirements related to safeguarding participants and their communities from harm and support capacity-building so that partners are better able to prevent, detect, and respond to incidents of digital harm.
- Mitigate individual-level harms, such as TFGBV, mental health impacts,[18] online scams, and privacy breaches, by partnering with local organizations.

FOCUS TOPIC

Protecting Human Rights and Supporting Democracy

With technology increasingly woven into daily life and government systems — including for digital identification, surveillance, and facial recognition — there is increasing potential for human rights abuses by governments, cyber criminals, or other malign actors.[19] USAID is now helping governments build legal and regulatory guardrails to protect people against the use of technology for repression and instead support democratic institutions as they adapt to our digital age. Across the private sector, we are working with technology hubs, technologists, professional associations, and other local innovators to understand the risks of abuse and build "human rights by design" approaches into digital tools from the beginning. In Zambia, USAID is bringing together government, civil society, and the private sector in multistakeholder discussions on digital development and human rights. Hosted by the government's Public-Private Dialogue Forum, these discussions have led to substantive new government engagement with key stakeholders to jointly shape the local digital development agenda. As an example of this new multistakeholder cooperation, Zambia's Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act is currently being updated following input from civil society.

Photo credit: Bobby Neptune for USAID

PRINCIPLES

The Digital Policy's principles will drive decision making at USAID in support of our vision of a world where open, inclusive, secure, and rights-respecting digital ecosystems enable people everywhere to thrive. Through these principles, USAID also reaffirms the Agency's commitment to existing principles that we have previously endorsed.

PRINCIPLES USAID HAS ENDORSED

- Principles for Digital Development
- Principles for Donor Alignment in Digital Health
- Digital ID Principles
- Donor Principles for Human Rights in the Digital Age
- Digital Democracy Principles as laid out in USAID's DRG Policy

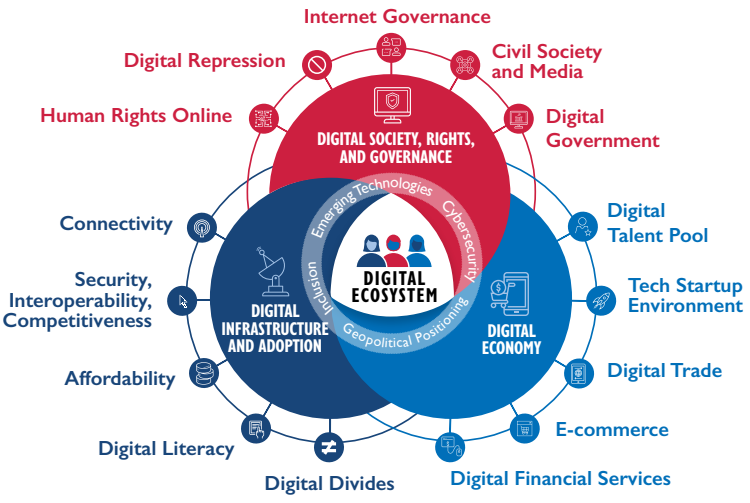
To achieve the Digital Policy vision and goals, USAID will operate by the following Digital Policy principles:

- Understand the Digital Ecosystem
- Put People First and Respect Human Rights
- Strengthen Local Digital Capacity, Infrastructure, and Partnerships
- Embrace Innovation and Adaptation

UNDERSTAND THE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

For USAID to address development challenges successfully, the Agency must understand each country's and region's digital ecosystems. **Digital ecosystems include the stakeholders, systems, and enabling environment, as well as the unique political, social, cultural, economic, and environmental conditions that shape the ability of people and communities to use digital technologies to gain access to services, engage with each other, develop new skills, or pursue economic opportunities**. Understanding a digital ecosystem helps us prevent unintended consequences in our programming, and build the local digital capacity of our partner countries to participate more fully in the global economy.[20] The

USAID's Digital Ecosystem Framework



history of development is littered with wasteful and sometimes counterproductive or harmful results of technology deployment in which donors, program designers, and technologists have ignored the local context. USAID needs to invest the necessary time to understand local conditions, including national strategies, supply- and demand-side constraints, and the knowledge, experiences, challenges, and capabilities of local actors. This means approaching local stakeholders as full partners and integrating their priorities into our own.

FOCUS TOPIC

Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment (DECA) Impacts

The DECA helps Missions understand the state of the local digital ecosystem and can help identify opportunities for Missions to integrate appropriate digital technologies into their programming to create better outcomes for their communities. In Colombia, eight months after receiving a draft version of the DECA report, USAID/Colombia had started to apply 8 of the 12 recommendations. In response to the recommendation to "promote digital security for civil society," the Mission began supporting training and cybersecurity assessments for local implementing partners.[21] The Mission also included digital as a cross-cutting theme in the Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) and is focusing on digital as an integrated approach.

Understanding the digital ecosystem also requires assessing how geopolitical dynamics influence local conditions. Global influences can include emerging standards and good practices, as well as harmful cross-border influences such as hacking, ransomware, and information manipulation, particularly from authoritarian competitors. A deep understanding of digital ecosystems—and the factors that shape them—will be key to USAID's ability to make informed and strategic choices, partner effectively, and respond to the needs of the people and communities we support.

USAID will Understand the Digital Ecosystem by:

- Taking a multistakeholder approach to understand and incorporate local actors' priorities, knowledge, and evidence into our strategies and programming.
- Investing in assessments — including DECAs, sectoral, and issue-specific assessments — to understand the context in which we are operating. This includes investing in evidence that can be relevant to multiple stakeholders, when possible.
- Building awareness of the impact of geopolitics on local digital ecosystems, recognizing the motivations, incentives, and constraints of other countries, particularly strategic competitors, and understanding how technology programming influences existing dynamics.

Photo credit: Bobby Neptune for USAID

PUT PEOPLE FIRST AND RESPECT HUMAN RIGHTS

USAID supports digital transformation that puts people first. As technology advances, so does the risk of cybersecurity attacks, the challenges of information integrity, and the complexity and scope of digital threats. USAID will place "do no harm" principles and respect for people's dignity and human rights at the forefront of the design and management of digital services and the governance of data, committing to protect and prevent misuse of data.[22]

Putting people at the heart of digital design and governance goes beyond consulting with the expected target audience (a system's "users") during the design phase.[23] It involves considering whose needs are being prioritized, whose are neglected, and who makes those determinations. Decisions on technology and data often privilege the perspectives of those who already have power at the expense of those who are marginalized. Exclusion can be even more acute for individuals who experience intersecting marginalized identities and overlapping inequities, and digital divides can magnify marginalization. USAID recognizes the value of integrating diverse perspectives in digital programming.[24] The people who will use or be affected by a technology policy, solution, or system should be engaged throughout the processes of design, deployment, and governance. To put people first, we must apply and manage technology and data in a manner that is open, sustainable, secure, and respectful of democratic values and human rights.[25]

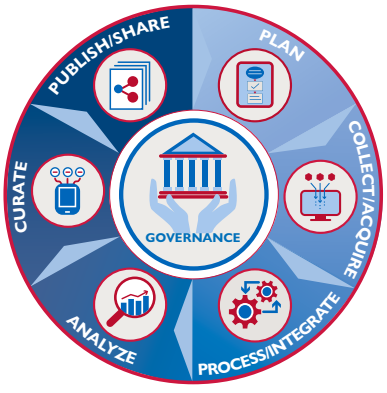
FOCUS TOPIC

Environmental Impacts of AI

Part of USAID's commitment to putting people first is mitigating the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. AI can have important environmental and climate benefits at every scale, from improved analysis of remote-sensing satellite data to nano-scale models that are accelerating the discovery of new materials that can support a clean-energy transition.[26] At the same time, digital technologies including AI, cloud computing, and distributed public ledgers such as Bitcoin require data centers with huge and escalating energy consumption. Other significant environmental and energy costs include the e-waste from discarded digital hardware, impacts of chip manufacturing, and environmental degradation from rare-earth mineral extraction. The user-friendly interfaces of generative AI are likely to make user-facing AI applications more ubiquitous and increase the demand for AI applications (and therefore cloud computing, microchips, and energy) in the coming years. USAID will work with interagency and global partners to promote climate-positive AI innovation, along with hardware and algorithmic improvements that will enable future AI systems to use energy and computational resources more efficiently.[27]

Putting people first also means focusing on their rights and needs when collecting, sharing, analyzing, using, or deleting data across the entire data lifecycle. In this context, "people" includes both those whose data are being used[28] as well as individuals affected by the use of non-personal data (e.g., geospatial, environmental, or economic). Throughout any project, USAID and our partners should monitor and address unintended consequences, including through the creation and maintenance of data-management

USAID Data Lifecycle, from ADS 579



plans.[29] Beyond our own programs, we can work with partner governments to establish legal and regulatory frameworks that support data protection, democracy, and human rights.

Digital technologies have been misused for harm, including to undermine human rights protections and democratic institutions, processes, and norms. These harms range from individual violations, such as TFGBV, doxxing, and misuse of commercial spyware, to systemic abuses, such as censorship, repressive surveillance, information manipulation, and the disruption of essential services through ransomware attacks. Perpetrators range from malicious individuals, to organized criminal groups, to repressive governments. Furthermore, strategic rivals increasingly employ technology to deepen polarization, erode social cohesion, and undermine democracies. USAID must be prepared to address and mitigate the consequences of these proliferating challenges, and we are committed to taking a proactive approach to understand risks associated with technology use and address them by encouraging the development of open, inclusive, secure, and rights-respecting digital ecosystems.

FOCUS TOPIC

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV)

TFGBV is a global threat to health, safety, and political and economic well-being—not just to those who experience it, but to society as a whole. USAID-funded Transforming Digital Spaces (Transform), a three-year global pilot initiative that supports practical approaches to preventing, mitigating, and responding to TFGBV, with a focus on addressing violence experienced by women in politics and public life.[30] In 2023, Transform conducted a foundational landscape assessment that reviewed the global evidence of TFGBV against women in politics and public life and its implications for women's public and political participation. Transform has a newly developed Digital Resource Catalogue, which provides online tools and resources to support survivors of TFGBV.

USAID has a variety of options to address these threats. One (as detailed above in the PROTECT goal) is to promote privacy, security, transparency, equity, and human rights in all our digital development and humanitarian programming, and work to enshrine these principles in development practice. USAID's work to realize a positive vision of open, inclusive, secure, and rights-respecting digital ecosystems aims to build spaces that default to supporting democracy and human rights, making it harder for malign actors to exploit our partners. Consultation with local stakeholders can help reduce the potential for unintended harm resulting from our development and humanitarian work. We can work with partners to make systems secure by design, mitigate bias, protect individuals' data and privacy, and plan for sustainable maintenance and security after project completion.

USAID will Put People First and Respect Human Rights by:

- Prioritizing local knowledge, concerns, and priorities and the perspectives of marginalized individuals to the extent possible when designing technology and data programming, and understanding its impacts.
- Embracing rights-respecting and safety-focused designs as we work with partners, including private-sector technology companies. This will include working with partners to strengthen privacy, safety, security, and equity, in line with existing USAID guidance and responsible data practices.[31]
- Integrating safeguards and human rights approaches into digitally enabled programming. This requires strengthening USAID's and partners' abilities to identify and address human rights risks in the digital age.

STRENGTHEN LOCAL DIGITAL CAPACITY, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND PARTNERSHIPS

As USAID works to improve digital ecosystems, three dimensions of core capabilities are needed in each context. First, **our investments should strengthen local capacity—both human and institutional—to govern, manage, and use digital technologies and data systems**.[32] The process of digitization can significantly increase the volume and velocity of data, necessitating new skills, workflows, and business processes for planning and managing systems and data exchanges. USAID is committed to supporting inclusive workforce training and institutional strengthening, fostering digital literacy, and promoting peer learning and knowledge exchange.

USAID's efforts to strengthen digital ecosystems could fall short of their intended outcomes if we are not intentional about building user capacity to engage with and safely navigate digital tools and services. Digital literacy, along with critical related topics such as cybersecurity and media literacy, need to be considered in any USAID digital intervention. For an individual to participate in their digital ecosystem meaningfully, responsibly, and safely, they must possess digital literacy skills and be able to trust in and have the confidence to use digital tools and data.[33] Digital literacy efforts need to be paired with strengthening consumer protection, privacy protection, and cybersecurity infrastructure. These policies and systems allow individuals, businesses, organizations, and communities to seek redress and receive proactive protections.

The second key aspect of strengthening the digital ecosystem for the long term is to adopt an infrastructural approach to digital investments, as defined in the BUILD goal. **Instead of developing software to address a single issue, an infrastructural approach emphasizes investing in common shared resources, which serve multiple goals over the long term**. Taking this approach enables USAID to move beyond sectoral silos and invest in hardware, software, systems, and policy frameworks that support multiple solutions and competition, which improves a digital ecosystem holistically and, by extension, our development impact. To ensure sustainability, USAID should prioritize investments that use open standards, enable interoperability, and encourage scaling and reuse (for example, investing in digital public goods when appropriate).

FOCUS TOPIC

Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)

Ukraine's Diia (Дія) app is widely hailed as an example of effective government services in the digital age. Diia is an implementation of Ukraine's "State in a Smartphone" policy initiative and was supported through a joint USAID-UKAid effort, which sought to reduce corruption in key public administration functions and services through e-procurement, open data, and the use of online services.34 Diia currently provides over 20 million Ukrainians with one-stop access to more than 120 government services such as paying taxes, registering businesses, applying for support to rebuild damaged homes, and displaying a valid passport on their phones.

Portals such as Diia do not appear overnight. The app sits on top of a range of long-term strategic investments in digitalization across a wide number of government services, processes, and people. More than just an app, Diia is the user-focused layer of robust digital public infrastructure, which includes long-term investments in foundational digital infrastructure such as digital identity, digital payments and mobile banking, data exchange and related data governance systems, cybersecurity and data privacy, and records management. As USAID aims to help our partner governments deliver services more equitably and effectively, similar foundational, responsible digital public infrastructure that is responsive to a country's unique digital ecosystems will be essential for success.

The third major piece of USAID's approach to strengthening digital ecosystems is to foster partnerships. As in other areas of development, USAID cannot achieve meaningful progress alone. **USAID's partnerships will promote positive development outcomes for people, treating local actors as peers rather than beneficiaries**. Nurturing partnerships to achieve these outcomes requires working with a range of partners—governments, technologists, innovators, businesses, advocates, civil-society organizations, donors, academics, and more. It involves working across different scales, from local town halls to multilateral convenings. With responsible partnerships that are guided by shared values, inclusion, and an understanding of risks, we have the potential to harness emerging technologies, such as AI, to strengthen economies, enhance disaster response, improve people's lives, and more. To cultivate digital ecosystems that can be sustainable without relying on foreign assistance, USAID must leverage the tools of development diplomacy by deepening engagements with other donors, responsible private-sector companies, and relevant organizations. Cultivating partnerships, especially with the local technology private sector and civil society, will enable us to pool resources and expertise to advance locally led development. USAID will rely on local stakeholders for guidance on areas of greatest need and to identify collaborators. We aim to create equitable power dynamics in our partnerships with local actors and between implementing partners—both local and international—and communities.

FOCUS TOPIC

Intersection of Climate Resilience and Digital Technologies

Digital technologies can help address the global climate crisis by providing access to data, information, and services that build resilience to the effects of climate change. Digital tools can aid in the design, implementation, and monitoring of climate policy and programming, including broadening participation in decision making.

In Nigeria, USAID promoted the integration of a suite of digital applications (RiceApp, Field Areas Measure, and Plantix) in an extension service delivery model.[35] The deployment of these digital apps enabled smallholder farmers to better access integrated information on improved seeds, farm size, weather, and disease solutions to increase the awareness and adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices. This approach helped more than one million smallholder farmers in the targeted geographies to reduce expenses in fertilizer and labor and combat post-harvest challenges.

USAID will Strengthen Local Digital Capacity, Infrastructure, and Partnerships by:

- Investing in local capabilities to design and manage digital technologies and their governance through peer-to-peer connections, in-service training and skill building, and embedded technical assistance.
- Drawing on USAID's thought leadership and development diplomacy capabilities to shape technology's global governance in a positive way, including standards setting and safeguarding, by deepening engagement in key multilateral and international fora to recognize partner country needs, and supporting local partners to shape and advance perspectives and standards reflective of human rights and democratic values in technical, engineering, and standards-setting bodies.[36]
- Taking a responsible, multisectoral approach to partnerships, including partnering with the private sector, community organizations, youth organizations, faith-based organizations, governments, donors, educational institutions, as well as individuals.

EMBRACE INNOVATION AND ADAPTATION

Digital transformation is changing lives globally, necessitating ongoing evolution within USAID as well. This principle promotes a spirit of innovation within our workforce, while encouraging a responsible approach to technology programming. **There are many pathways to innovation; while USAID's development and humanitarian mission calls for big ideas and bold new approaches, it also requires us to prioritize intentionality over speed**. Rather than "moving fast and breaking things," a popular idiom in the technology sector, USAID's approach to technology innovation emphasizes a multistakeholder approach centered on local needs: bringing in a variety of people to address locally defined development challenges and plan for risk mitigation. To strengthen the discipline of development and improve aid effectiveness, our innovation approach also incorporates collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) practices.[37] Given their understanding of their own context, local actors are often the most effective innovators. USAID will partner with local actors to advance and scale innovative ideas and monitor impact.

Innovation can involve new technology, but just as often being innovative means adapting existing technologies that are already in use, such as by modifying and applying established software in a new context or in a new sector. While technology evolves, USAID will continue to encourage contextually relevant ideas and approaches to addressing development challenges. We will support partners in their creative efforts to build, reuse, improve, and strengthen the systems and data that help people create positive impacts and to understand when open practices—such as the use of open standards, open data, open source—are appropriate.

USAID will strengthen our workforce's digital capacity and incentives to apply technology creatively. We will do this through training, professional development, and the reduction of administrative barriers to innovation. This approach will involve guiding our staff to understand, adopt, and adapt approaches to technology and data that are relevant to the development outcomes that they aim to achieve. It will involve making sure they are able to adapt and apply those approaches within the Program Cycle. By fostering a culture that supports continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning, we aim to empower our workforce to drive digital transformation.

Sustainability is a critical complement to innovation in development. Building for sustainability does not mean that all products, services, or policies should last forever, but rather, that USAID takes an intentional approach to sustainability choices. It means considering the long-term financial costs of maintaining and overseeing technology and data systems, including costs for technology licenses, operations, and maintenance. It also means clearly understanding how initiatives will be funded in the future: by donors, host governments, commercial means, or a blend.[38] Ecological sustainability also requires considering an initiative's potential to help people adapt to the changing climate and minimizing the environmental impact of technology.

Photo credit: Usman Ghani for USAID

FOCUS TOPIC

Innovation in Artificial Intelligence

AI has the potential for transformative impact in many areas of development, and recent advances have put AI tool development within reach for many of USAID's partners. Consistent with the overall U.S. government approach, USAID is actively encouraging innovation in AI.[39] At the same time, we must manage risks that can stem from reckless adoption and inflated expectations. AI and machine learning depend on data; biased, unrepresentative training data can lead to AI systems that don't work well for marginalized populations and can perpetuate existing inequities[40]. Complex AI systems, including generative AI, can suffer from unpredictable outputs and a lack of transparency, necessitating the development of new tools for testing, evaluation, and safety. Recent AI advances offer new ways to automate tasks in a range of fields and may significantly reshape the future of employment, with serious implications for democracy and social stability. In addition to concerns about automation and displacement, today's AI systems depend on the labor of "data enrichment" workers — based primarily in many of our partner countries — who label, annotate, and curate data and correct faulty model outputs. While estimates of the number of data enrichment workers remain elusive, this is a growing area of employment, with the potential to have an economic impact similar to international business process outsourcing. At the same time, there are concerns about exploitative working conditions, algorithmic management, and mental health impacts of reviewing disturbing, violent, or abusive content. Ensuring a dignified future of work for people at all stages of the AI value chain will be a major policy challenge in the coming years. Working together with partners, USAID will leverage a combination of technological acumen and development expertise to promote AI innovation at a safe speed and in a pro-development direction. Continuous adaptation will help us to learn from deployment experiences and research advances, then adjust our approach accordingly. A balanced approach, grounded in the USAID AI Action Plan,[41] the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) AI Risk Management Framework,[42] and evolving U.S. policy around AI will emphasize due diligence guidelines for AI and human rights, careful monitoring of performance and accuracy, and strengthening ecosystems for responsible innovation.

Digital ecosystems are constantly changing; USAID will intentionally adapt to these changes through a commitment to learning. As our partners and programs innovate, it is crucial to learn what succeeds—and what will at times inevitably fail. We will responsibly collect the minimum amount of data we need to learn from our experiences and responsibly share findings and scale successful innovations. Intentional learning and adaptation will help us to be responsive to the needs of our partner countries as they navigate the changing technology landscape.

USAID will Embrace Innovation and Adaptation by:

- Transforming the capacity of USAID's workforce to operate in a digital age. This will be done through professional development, removing administrative barriers, and fostering a culture of learning and innovation.
- Removing barriers for potential partners to work with us on innovation by simplifying procurement and partnership models (consistent with regulatory requirements) and adopting agile activity management.
- Prioritizing the protection of vulnerable populations from the risks associated with evidence generation and data gathering in innovative activities and pilots.
- Equipping our workforce and partners to understand and assess the hype around new and emerging technologies. Without shying away from potential innovations, we should avoid both extremes of blindly adopting or uncritically dismissing new technologies in favor of an approach that is nuanced, empirical, and risk-aware.

LEARNING AGENDA

The Digital Policy learning agenda employs continuous learning activities to adapt implementation, keep the Policy current, and respond to actual conditions as documented in annual and other reporting. In doing so, it asks an overarching learning question based on the Digital Policy vision statement:

How can USAID support global actors, partner countries, and local leaders in creating "a world where open, secure, and rights-respecting digital ecosystems enable people everywhere to thrive"?

LINKAGES TO THE USAID AGENCY-WIDE LEARNING AGENDA

USAID's Digital Policy Learning Agenda addresses the operational learning needs of Missions, Bureaus, and Independent Offices (M/B/IOs) as they respond to the USAID Agency Learning Agenda and report their digital activities. Missions and other Operating Units are encouraged to use a variety of research and evaluation methods such as user feedback, developmental evaluation, AI-powered analysis, and impact evaluation (with cost analysis) to adapt and learn about the impact and cost-effectiveness of digital technology and cyber tools and approaches to Operating Unit needs and to meet our vision. Furthermore, the Agency Learning Agenda serves as a link between the Digital Policy and other whole-of-Agency policies.

LEARNING AGENDA ACTIVITY GUIDANCE

USAID's Digital Policy Learning Agenda offers guidance for learning over the lifespan of the policy to address our evidence gaps, unintended consequences, and progress. USAID will:

Use existing learning tools, indicators, and methods as appropriate and adapt these as needed. Embrace innovative tools, such as AI and other approaches, when these enhance organizational learning and adaptation;

Harmonize metrics and goals with partners and other stakeholders to build a broad knowledge base that describes and analyzes national, regional, and global patterns of digital technology as part of development and humanitarian efforts; and

Commit to rigorous and continuous evaluation and assessment, including an externally executed mid-course policy assessment supported by frequent, low-lift portfolio reviews.

EVIDENCE GAPS

The Digital Policy Learning Agenda links to the Digital Policy goals and identifies priority evidence gaps. Addressing these gaps will help us understand how to achieve the Digital Policy vision. The following evidence gaps are starting points rather than an exhaustive list. USAID will use evidence gathered through research and learning activities to design and adaptively manage USAID activities, while contributing to the broader knowledge and evidence bases on digital development.

GOAL	EVIDENCE GAPS
BUILD: Propel positive development and humanitarian outcomes through an infrastructural approach to digital technology and services.	How can USAID best facilitate open, interoperable, rights-respecting, safe, and sustainable approaches that lead to development and humanitarian outcomes that benefit local communities, especially marginalized groups? How can USAID optimize the enabling environment to enhance the purposeful construction of digital ecosystems that align with USAID and partner values and capabilities, and how are these sustained following activity and project termination?
TRANSFORM: Evolve the digital approach of USAID and our partners through proactive improvement of knowledge, skills, policies, and technology.	What is the best way for USAID to identify, train, and equip diverse adaptive-management-oriented staff to keep pace with the scale and pace of change in digital technology and cybersecurity? What USAID and partner adaptations are needed to allow staff to address the most critical digital needs of stakeholders — civil-society organizations, implementing partners, and other groups, especially those least empowered?
PROTECT: Promote privacy, security, transparency, equity, and human rights in USAID programming and across the broader digital context.	How does USAID's commitment to democratic and inclusive principles serve as a comparative advantage relative to other common design approaches in terms of security and privacy, and how does this commitment contribute to desired outcomes for digital development and economic benefit?

Photo credit: Riaz Jahanpour for USAID

POLICY INTO PRACTICE

Requirements and recommendations for the Digital Policy focus on three areas: programs (development outcomes), people (capacity and skills), and learning (evidence).

PROGRAMS

DIGITAL ASSESSMENTS – REQUIREMENT

Missions, Regional Missions, and Country Offices: Missions, Regional Missions, and Country Offices need a comprehensive understanding of relevant aspects of the digital ecosystem as it relates to their programming. Priority Missions and Country Offices[43] that have not already conducted a DECA[44] or DERA must complete one within 18 months from the release of the Digital Policy Implementation Plan and integrate DECA and DERA findings and recommendations into their Regional and Country Development Cooperation Strategies, Project Development Documents, and Activity Approval Memoranda. DECAs and DERAs can provide the evidence base to formulate digital strategies for the Mission and guide projects and activities. Missions, Regional Missions, and Country Offices are encouraged to update their assessments periodically to remain informed on changes in their digital ecosystem.

- ***Recommendation***: Non-priority Missions, Regional Missions, and Country Offices are encouraged to also complete DECAs and DERAs.
- ***Recommendation***: All Missions, Regional Missions, and Country Offices with dedicated sectoral funding are encouraged to undertake sectoral digital assessments, such as in digital agriculture or digital health, to better design programming to advance the digital ecosystem in these areas.

Washington Pillar and Regional Bureaus: Pillar and Regional Bureaus must prepare Digital Action Plans[45] with the participation of relevant Regional Platforms, Missions, and Pillar Bureaus that articulate regional priorities and opportunities. Technical Centers in the Bureau for Inclusive Growth, Partnerships, and Innovation (IPI) must also develop Digital Action Plans for core technical areas that would benefit from an in-depth analysis of sector-specific technology and digital approaches. These Action Plans must be completed within 18 months from the release of the Digital Policy Implementation Plan.

- ***Recommendation***: Bilateral programs should refer to these Regional and Pillar Digital Action Plans as they develop their own strategies and project/activity designs, while Regional and Pillar Bureaus should refer to relevant country-level DECAs and DERAs.

MISSION ORDERS – RECOMMENDATION

All Missions, Regional Missions, and Country Offices are encouraged to adopt or update a Mission Order (MO) on Digital Development within one year of the release of this Policy and every five years thereafter.[46]

PEOPLE

DIGITAL-FOCUSED POSITIONS – REQUIREMENT

Missions, Regional Missions, and Country Offices: Priority Missions, Regional Missions, and Country Offices must hire, contract, or appoint a **Digital Development Advisor (DDA)**[47] or a **Digital Specialist**[48] with a majority allocation of their overall time (i.e., level of effort [LOE]) dedicated to work on digital and cybersecurity programming,[49] determined by their annual program budget.[50] DDAs and Digital Specialists must have the necessary technical skills, competencies, and experience, with responsibilities explicitly included in their job descriptions. If hiring of a DDA or Digital Specialist is extremely

burdensome to the Mission, including due to funding constraints, the Mission may work with its Regional Bureau to determine shared coverage through a regional Operating Unit that covers that Mission. The expectation is that these DDAs and Digital specialists will predominantly be Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs), but could be a different mechanism depending on Mission circumstances. Priority Missions will have 18 months from the release of the Digital Policy Implementation Plan to meet the LOE requirements for DDAs/Digital Specialists. *(NOTE: To alleviate the administrative burden of every Mission determining the roles, responsibilities, and qualifications of DDAs, HCTM has pre-classified three Standard Position Descriptions for DDAs at the FSN-10, -11, and -12 levels, which are available on ProgramNet and on HCTM's SPD page with a guidance document.)*

» ***Recommendation***: It is recommended that non-priority Missions, Regional Missions, and Country Offices also hire, contract, or appoint a Digital Development Advisor (DDA) or a Digital Specialist with an allocation of their overall time (i.e., LOE) dedicated to work on digital and cybersecurity programming, determined by their annual program budget.

Washington Pillar and Regional Bureaus: All Pillar and Regional Bureaus must hire, contract, or appoint a **Digital Specialist** with a majority allocation of their overall time (i.e., LOE) dedicated to work on digital and cybersecurity programming,[51] tiered by the annual program budget of the Bureau.[52] Digital Specialists can be hired through any staffing mechanism (Foreign Service, Civil Service, and programmatic funds, such as Foreign Service Limited or Institutional Support Contractor, etc.). Digital Specialists must have the necessary technical skills, competencies, and experience, with responsibilities explicitly included in their job descriptions. Operating Units will have 18 months from the release of the Digital Policy Implementation Plan to meet the LOE requirements for Digital Specialists. (NOTE: A repository of Position Descriptions in Washington and at Missions can be found on the Digital Cadre page on MyUSAID.)

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION TRAINING – REQUIREMENT

The Agency workforce, including all hiring and contracting mechanisms (in accordance with contract terms and conditions), must complete the Digital Policy 101 training course,[53] an introductory online course on the role of digital technologies in USAID's development and humanitarian programming, within two years from the release of the Digital Policy Implementation Plan, and new hires within a year of their start date.

DIGITAL COMPETENCIES – RECOMMENDATION

In line with existing Executive Orders and National Security Memoranda on USG technology policies, for every Operating Unit position and role inclusive of all staffing mechanisms and sectors:

- **Existing Skills** – staff should identify and managers should validate position digital development competencies (baseline data) and manage competencies development progress (performance management);
- **New Skills** – staff involved in workforce planning should identify Operating Unit skills gaps to inform Agency workforce planning and Operating Unit hiring justifications; and
- **Positions** – managers should incorporate digital development skills in position descriptions, such as AI, data science, cybersecurity, geospatial, and other digital development skills to achieve development and humanitarian objectives.

ADDITIONAL TRAINING – RECOMMENDATION

- **Technical Digital Trainings**: It is recommended that the Agency workforce, including all hiring and contracting mechanisms (in accordance with contract terms and conditions), complete the Digital Development 101 (in-person or online), Responsible Artificial Intelligence in International Development, Gender Digital Divide, Cybersecurity in Programming, Digital Literacy, Digital Government, and any other sectoral digital training, such as the Digital Health: Planning National Systems course, within three years of the release of this Policy.

- **Additional Training**: Missions, Bureaus, and Independent Offices should incorporate specific content on digital development (or approaches), inclusive of technologies, AI, cybersecurity, and other topics, into broader technical or sectoral training they manage. The Digital Policy owners can provide technical support to M/B/IOs in this process. It is recommended that all Operating Units incorporate digital and cybersecurity into training plans annually and complete learning across diverse topics, such as geospatial, data science, AI, cybersecurity, digital ecosystems, and more to stay current on changing dynamics in digital development and industry technologies that affect development.

LEARNING

GLAAS TAG – REQUIREMENT

All M/B/IOs must identify obligations made to digital and cybersecurity programming in the Global Acquisition and Assistance System (GLAAS) by selecting "Yes" in the GLAAS field: "Does this award include Digital Development activities?"

REPORTING – REQUIREMENT

All M/B/IOs must also attribute funding in each fiscal year to all applicable Operational Plan Key Issues ("Digital Technology" and "Cyber"). All M/B/IOs must work with implementing partners to collect data as part of their regular program reporting and report on all applicable standard indicators that cover digital programming and cybersecurity in the OP Plan and annual Performance Plan and Report (PPR).

MEL INDICATORS – RECOMMENDATION

All Operating Units should adapt targets and indicators for tracking and measuring progress toward the four Policy objectives during strategic planning and project design at all geographic levels. All Operating Units should develop custom digital and cybersecurity indicators with implementing partners that provide the quality and range of information necessary to thoroughly assess progress and impact of digital technologies on development and humanitarian programming. Furthermore, USAID will explore adopting standard outcome indicators related to digital and cybersecurity.

Photo credit: Teamwork.MD for USAID

CONCLUSION

For nearly 50 years, USAID has been a leader in supporting digital transformation around the world. This Policy now sets the course for USAID to continue advancing development and humanitarian outcomes in an ever-accelerating digital age. The Agency will strive to improve our ability to meet the needs of our partner countries, transform USAID's digital approach as technology continues to evolve, and protect the communities we serve from harm within these new and evolving contexts. To achieve the Digital Policy vision and goals, USAID is committed to fostering innovative and adaptive approaches to advance open, inclusive, secure, and rights-respecting digital ecosystems in the countries where we work, put people first and respect the human rights of the populations in the countries we work in, and strengthen local digital capacity, infrastructure, and partnerships. Through collaboration with our global partners, continual evolution of our current digital approach, and collective dedication to our mission and vision, we will contribute to a more inclusive digital world for all.

Photo credit: Soumi Das for USAID

ANNEX I

U.S. STRATEGIES AND POLICIES RELATED TO DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND CYBERSECURITY

White House

1. U.S. National Security Strategy (2022)
2. U.S. National Cyber Strategy (2023)
3. Executive Order 14110: Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence (2023)
4. U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security (2023)
5. National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality (2021)
6. White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse (2022)

U.S. Agency for International Development

1. Department of State-USAID Joint Strategic Plan (2022-2026)
2. Policy Framework (2022)
3. AI Action Plan (2022)
4. Information Technology Strategic Plan (2024-2028)
5. Rule of Law Policy (2023)
6. Private Sector Engagement Policy (2022)
7. Anti-corruption Policy (2022)
8. U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education (2024-2029)
9. Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity Strategy (2019-2023)
10. Geospatial Strategy (2024-2028)
11. Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Policy (2024)
12. USAID Risk Appetite Statement (2021)

U.S. Government-wide

1. United States International Cyberspace and Digital Policy Strategy (2024)
2. U.S. Strategy on Global Women's Economic Security (2022)
3. U.S. Strategy to Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally (2022)
4. Roadmap for the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse (2023)
5. NIST Risk Management Framework (2018)
6. NIST Privacy Framework (2020)
7. NIST AI Risk Management Framework (2024)
8. OMB: Advancing Governance, Innovation, and Risk Management for Agency Use of Artificial Intelligence (2024)
9. U.S. Strategy to Prevent, Anticipate, and Respond to Atrocities (2022)

ANNEX II

BRIEF HISTORY OF DIGITAL PROGRAMMING AT USAID

Since the 1970s, USAID has integrated technology for development outcomes into its programming and has played a vital role in informing U.S. government global digital policy. USAID's commitment to leveraging digital technologies for development impact began as a strategic focus in the 1990s. Alongside the Leland Initiative (1995), USAID also became a funder of CSPro (1998), a digital census survey data-collection tool now used in 193 countries, and the United States Telecommunications Training Institute (USTTI), which was founded to train generations of telecommunications regulators. USAID implemented the White House's Internet for Economic Development Initiative in 1998, supporting internet access and usage in 21 developing countries. Global activities, such as LearnLink, the DOT-COM Alliance, Global Broadband and Innovations Program, and the Last Mile Initiative, furthered these achievements in the early 2000s, addressing connectivity and legislative, educational, and applied usage of digital technology for development challenges. In 2003, USAID founded an Information Communication Technologies (ICT) team that conducted a worldwide survey to understand how the Agency was investing in ICT, resulting in the 2004 Information and Communication Technology for Development: USAID's Worldwide Program report that documented 95 percent of Missions had at least one ICT for development activity, with a total of 351 across the Agency.

Despite the long-term impact of these early USAID investments in digital transformation (many of these organizations and products are still in use today), it was the 2010 Haiti Earthquake — during the advent of the mobile revolution — that spurred USAID to embrace specific approaches to digital technology more intentionally by creating the Mobile Money team, the first digitally focused team in the Agency. During the Haiti response, USAID also began leveraging geospatial analysis to "crisis-map" the impact of the earthquake and determine how best to direct support, as well as the Agency's first public-private partnership focused exclusively on digital technologies, specifically closing the gender digital divide. Throughout the early 2010s, USAID ramped up investments in digital health and electronic supply chain solutions; put digital tools in the hands of farmers, educators, students, and many others; launched the GeoCenter to institutionalize the use of geospatial data analytics at the Agency; supported broadband and mobile network expansions; partnered with other U.S. government agencies on affirmative digital policies and approaches; and created or joined international alliances to advance the adoption of digital technologies in developing countries, such as the Better than Cash Alliance, the E-Trade Alliance, and the Alliance for Affordable Internet.

Throughout the 2010s, USAID continued to elevate the importance of digital technologies in development, co-creating the Principles for Digital Development and leading a global endorsement campaign for their adoption, and later partnering with other leading global health funders to create the Principles for Donor Alignment in Digital Health. USAID implemented the Technology Leadership Program, partnering with the State Department, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA), the Department of Treasury, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), and others to mobilize U.S. government technical expertise for developing countries. During the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa, the Agency invested heavily in information systems that supported real-time decision making and enabled health workers to respond to the outbreak more effectively.[54] In 2016, USAID co-founded the Digital Impact Alliance, along with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Sweden's Sida agency, and the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO). In 2017, we held

the first Digital Development Awards (the Digis) to recognize USAID projects and activities that embrace best practices in the application and utilization of digital technologies and data-driven approaches to achieve development objectives and catalyze an inclusive digital economy. That same year, the Agency also co-founded Digital Square, an organization focused on strengthening country efforts to develop national digital health infrastructure.

Also in the mid-2010s, the GeoCenter launched the YouthMappers program, creating partnerships with universities all over the world to help young people map their communities and use geospatial data to inform local policies. The Agency partnered with GSMA to create the Connected Women program (formally mWomen), and later launched the WomenConnect Challenge, working to close the gender digital divide by bringing women and girls online. USAID also launched the All Children Reading Grand Challenge, which advanced EdTech innovation and research to improve reading outcomes for marginalized children in low-resource contexts. As the adoption of technology swelled in the late 2010s, the Agency published technical papers on responsible data use, digital identity, AI, and blockchain use in development; launched the Fall Armyworm Tech Prize; issued a Procurement Executive Bulletin on the use of digital payments in USAID programs; and created the Digital Development Advisors program.

In 2018, USAID and the Department of State launched the whole-of-government Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership (DCCP) initiative to expand and increase secure Internet access in targeted emerging markets by enabling market entry (or expanded market access) for U.S. or like-minded technology companies; increase adoption of policies and regulatory positions that encourage open, interoperable, reliable, and secure digital infrastructure; promote exports of U.S. ICT goods and services and increase U.S. company market share in targeted markets; and increase adoption of cybersecurity best practices in targeted countries. Activities under DCCP promote both policy-level and grassroots-level digital interventions.

In April 2020, USAID launched the Digital Strategy, charting an Agency-wide vision for development and humanitarian assistance in the world's rapidly evolving digital landscape. It set a path to equip the USAID workforce, empower partners, and shape effective programming that supports partner countries on their digital transformation journeys. The Strategy reinforced USAID's deliberate and comprehensive commitment to improve development and humanitarian assistance outcomes through the use of digital technologies that strengthen open, inclusive, secure, and rights-respecting digital ecosystems. In doing so, the Strategy outlined how USAID would change the way we did development — including embracing digital technologies by default — in a manner that reflected evidence, local context, and best practice. To carry out the Digital Strategy, USAID stood up a Digital Sector Council, consisting of digital representatives from every Bureau and technical unit across the Agency, to provide a forum for USAID technical experts to share knowledge, coordinate actions, advocate for the sector and Agency staff working on digital, and discuss issues related to USAID's work in digital programming.

During the years of the Strategy implementation, USAID accelerated digital programming facilitated by the release of additional pivotal policy documents related to digital, including an AI Action Plan, the first-ever Geospatial Strategy and Digital Health Vision, a Cybersecurity Primer, and a Gender Digital Divide Primer. USAID took a leadership role in multilateral fora, joining the Digital Public Goods Alliance, supporting Digital Square and GovStack, and co-creating the Charter for Digital Public Goods and the Donor Principles for Human Rights in the Digital Age. The Agency provided cybersecurity capacity building and rapid-response support to 200 partners in 20 countries through the Digital APEX mechanism; supported the creation of the World Health Organization's SMART guidelines to establish normative health standards; created a Digital Youth Council to provide a platform for children and youth from around the world to better access key digital ecosystem stakeholders and decision makers; and at the 2021 Summit for Democracy, USAID announced the Advancing Digital Democracy Initiative, aimed at

promoting democratic values and human rights, while also addressing geopolitical competition and the malign use of technology. The White House announced the Women in the Digital Economy Fund (WiDEF), a joint effort between USAID and the Gates Foundation to accelerate progress on closing the gender digital divide. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, USAID supported the expanded use of the country's mobile application and online government portal, Diia, to support Ukrainians during wartime. Diia is so successful that, with support from USAID, Ukraine is now sharing this technology with other countries.

After the USAID Digital Strategy was released in April 2020, the pace of USAID's investments in technology accelerated. Under the Strategy, 33 Missions conducted Digital Ecosystem Country Assessments (DECAs) and 18 completed digital agriculture assessments to better understand the opportunities and impacts of digital technologies within their programming. Additionally, five Bureaus and Operating Units completed Digital Strategy Action Plans to guide their digital programming. Since 2020, USAID has supported more than 1.4 million women's increased access to digital financial services, supported 19 digital public goods, implemented digital programming in 75 instances to enhance digital ecosystems, and trained more than 65,000 people in digital technology and cybersecurity.

Across this entire history, USAID has partnered with other U.S. government entities, such as the White House, National Security Council, State Department, Federal Trade Commission, Federal Communications Commission, Commerce Department, and the Department of the Treasury to help shape and implement U.S. digital policy that affects development outcomes. USAID provides vital input into multilateral negotiations, such as with the G7 and G20 Digital Working Groups, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), and the Internet Governance Forum. USAID also provides input into global and bilateral discussions on how best to include digital into sectoral programming, such as digital health, education, agriculture, democracy, peacebuilding, and humanitarian response. Our deep history and experience in implementing digital development across the decades has made us a valuable partner for the decades to come.

KEY LESSONS FROM THIS HISTORY

Across USAID's more than 50 years of digital programming, we have identified some key lessons that informed the creation of this Digital Policy. Notably:

1. **We are not new to this**: USAID has a long history of using technology for development, beginning even before a dedicated office or team was created. **In the last ten years, development and humanitarian assistance programming has come to incorporate digital technologies by default as we have moved into a digital age**.
2. **We cannot sit on the sidelines**: **Digital investments in development contexts will go forward regardless of USAID's involvement or strategic leadership**. But without that leadership, development outcomes that meet democratic values and U.S. national security interests are less likely. Where there is not an explicit focus on key development and democratic objectives, digital transformation has reinforced existing inequality and can even be harmful.
3. **We must innovate intentionally and responsibly**: USAID has been most successful in our digital programming when we have innovated while prioritizing intentionality and responsible deployment of technology. **Evidence-based approaches can help us contribute positively to development outcomes without causing harm**.
4. **We must invest in infrastructure**: **Thriving digital ecosystems are built on inclusive connectivity, robust data governance, and the rule of law**. Human values are always embedded in technology, and we need to build democratic values into the foundations of the systems we support.
5. **We must partner for the long haul**: **Because technology never stops changing, digital transformation is never "done."** Our partners need steady, ongoing engagement to help them manage their digital transformations

and achieve the long-term societal outcomes they desire.

6. **We must always strengthen capacity**: We need to recognize where people, organizations, and communities have achieved digital development successes, as well as understanding their barriers and needs. **Investing in local capacity strengthening is vital for sustainability, local ownership, and long-term impact**.
7. **We cannot neglect governance**: Legal and regulatory systems are usually scrambling to keep up with technology advancements, and our programming can help close the gap. **Strengthening our partners' capacities for data governance, data privacy, and strong cybersecurity is the best way to help them manage digital risks**.
8. **We need in-house expertise**: There is no substitute for development professionals who understand technology and are committed to its responsible use. **While our partners are crucial, responsible USAID investments in technology begin with us**. Our workforce must have the knowledge and ability to operate in a digital world.

KEY TERMS

ADOPTION: The widespread use of an innovation or technology at the desired scale and sustained by the relevant ecosystem of actors, once that innovation or technology has proven its ability.[55]

ARCHITECTURE (SYSTEMS): Systems architecture is a conceptual model that defines the structure and behavior of a digital system and its components. A system architecture can include multiple hardware and software elements that interoperate to achieve the system goals.[56]

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI): The science and technology of creating intelligent systems. Machine learning (ML) often enables AI systems, which apply data-derived predictions to automate decisions. While ML focuses on learning and prediction, AI applications often create, plan, or do something in the real world.[57] Automated decisions might be directly implemented (e.g., in robotics) or suggested to a human decision maker (e.g., product recommendations in online shopping).

BLOCKCHAIN (DISTRIBUTED LEDGER TECHNOLOGY): An example of a distributed ledger technology (DLT), which is a type of shared, peer-to-peer computer database that enables all network participants to agree on a set of facts or events without needing to rely on a single, centralized, or fully trusted intermediary party. Blockchains are the most common form of DLT and require data on the "chain" to be structured in linked, sequential "blocks."[58]

CENSORSHIP: The suppression of free speech by governments or private institutions based on the assumption that said speech is objectionable or offensive. In addition to hard forms of censorship (handed down officially through laws and regulations), soft forms of censorship exist (applied through financial and/or reputational pressure).[59]

CIVIL-SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOs): Organizations including formal nongovernment organizations (NGOs) as well as formal and informal membership associations (labor unions, business and professional associations, farmers' organizations and cooperatives, and women's groups). CSOs articulate and represent the interests of their members, engage in analysis and advocacy, and conduct oversight of government actions and policies.[60]

CYBER ATTACK: According to NIST, a cyber attack is "an attack, via cyberspace, targeting an enterprise's use of cyberspace for the purpose of disrupting, disabling, destroying, or maliciously controlling a computing environment/infrastructure; or destroying the integrity of the data or stealing controlled information."[61]

CYBER THREATS: According to NIST's Computer Security Resource Center, a cyber threat is "any circumstance or event with the potential to adversely impact organizational operations (including mission, functions, image, or reputation), organizational assets, or individuals through an information system via unauthorized access, destruction, disclosure, modification of information, and/or denial of service. Also, the potential for a threat-source to successfully exploit a particular information system vulnerability."[62]

CYBERCRIME: According to Interpol, cybercrime "refers to crimes against computers and information systems, where the aim is to gain unauthorized access to a device or deny access to a legitimate user."[63]

CYBERSECURITY: The prevention of damage to, protection of, and restoration of computers, electronic communications systems, electronic communications services, wire communication, and electronic communication, including information contained therein, to ensure its availability, integrity, authentication, confidentiality, and nonrepudiation.[64] As the Cybersecurity Strategy of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) emphasizes: "Cybersecurity is not an end unto itself, and efforts to mitigate cybersecurity risks must also support international commerce, strengthen international security, and foster free expression and innovation."[65]

DATA EXCHANGE: Systems that support the sharing of data generated from and stored in different sources using central mechanisms, standards, and approaches (also referred to as consent-based sharing).

DATA GOVERNANCE: The people, policies, and processes that provide direction, goals, and oversight into how data are used and decisions are made.

DATA MANAGEMENT: The execution of day-to-day management tasks regarding data within an organization. Sometimes also referred to as data processing.[66]

DATA PRIVACY: The right of an individual or group to maintain control over, and the confidentiality of, information about themselves, especially when that intrusion results from undue or illegal gathering and use of data about that individual or group.[67]

DIGITIZATION: The act of converting analog data or documents into digital data or documents.

DIGITALIZATION: The use of digital technologies to change a process or provide value-producing opportunities.

DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM: The use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations.[68] This term describes governments that use digital technologies such as social media, AI-powered surveillance systems, and big data collection and analysis capabilities for repression and social control.[69]

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY: A context in which digital technology and data systems are designed, developed, deployed, used, and governed in alignment with human rights and democratic values. This is in opposition to digital authoritarianism or digital repression, where technologies are used to repress, control, censor, and surveil people.[70]

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT: Development programming focused on building and expanding secure, open, and inclusive country-level digital ecosystems and the programmatic use of digital technology in development and humanitarian assistance.[71]

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY: This term describes the intersection of diplomacy and digital policies. In the context of foreign policy and international development, digital diplomacy is the work done to advance U.S. interests while leveraging digital technologies. An example of digital diplomacy is U.S. investment in a country's connectivity infrastructure by funding the upgrade from 2G to 5G wireless. Another example is the work the United States does to advance democratic regulations of digital technologies in international fora.[72]

DIGITAL DIVIDE: The gap between those who have access and can use digital products and services and those who are excluded from them. It often results in, and is simultaneously exacerbated by, low digital literacy, prohibitive access costs, strict social norms, and minimal available or relevant content in local languages. The digital divide often stems from the intersection of gender, economic status, geography, age, and many other factors.[73]

DIGITAL ECONOMY: The use of digital and internet infrastructure by individuals, businesses, and government(s) to interact with each other, engage in economic activity, and access both digital and non-digital goods and services. As the ecosystem supporting it matures, the digital economy might grow to encompass all sectors of the economy—a transformation driven by both the rise of new services and entrants, as well as backward linkages with the traditional, pre-digital economy. A diverse array of technologies and platforms facilitate activity in the digital economy; however, much activity relies in some measure on the internet, mobile phones, digital data, and digital payments.[74]

DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM: The stakeholders, systems, and enabling environment that together empower people and communities to use digital technology to gain access to services, engage with each other, or pursue economic opportunities. A digital ecosystem is conceptually similar to, but broader than, a digital economy. Although certain aspects of the digital ecosystem have country-wide reach, other features differ across geographies or communities. The critical

pillars of a digital ecosystem include the following: (1) sound enabling environment and policy commitment; (2) robust and resilient digital infrastructure; (3) capable digital service-providers and workforce (e.g., both public and private institutions); and, (4) empowered end-users of digitally enabled services.[75]

DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM COUNTRY ASSESSMENT: The Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment (DECA), a flagship initiative of the Digital Strategy, identifies opportunities and risks in a country's digital ecosystem to help the development, design, and implementation of USAID's strategies, projects, and activities. It informs USAID Missions and other key decision makers about how to better understand, work with, and support a country's digital ecosystem.[76]

DIGITAL FINANCIAL SERVICES: Digital Financial Services (DFS) (also called "financial technology," or FinTech) are financial services enabled by or delivered through digital technology (e.g., mobile phones, cards, the internet). These services (e.g., payments, credit, insurance, savings, advisory) can be offered by a range of providers, from banks to a host of non-bank financial institutions, such as microfinance institutions, digital credit providers, payment providers, FinTech companies, and electronic money issuers.[77]

DIGITAL IDENTITY: The widely accepted Principles on Identification define identity as "a set of attributes that uniquely describes an individual or entity." Digital identification (ID) systems often require registering individuals onto a computerized database and providing certain credentials (e.g., identifying numbers, cards, digital certificates, etc.) as proof of identity. Government actors can set up these systems to create foundational, national ID programs, or donors or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can use them for functional purposes to identify beneficiaries, e.g., for humanitarian assistance and service-delivery.[78] Digital ID is considered a foundational DPI.

DIGITAL LITERACY: The ability to "access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networked technologies for participation in economic and social life. This may include competencies that are variously referred to as computer literacy, information and communications technology (ICT) literacy, information literacy, and media literacy."[79]

DIGITAL PUBLIC GOODS (DPGs): Open source software, open data, open artificial intelligence (AI) systems and data sets, open standards, and open content that adhere to privacy and other international and domestic applicable laws, standards, and best practices, do no harm, and help attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[80]

DIGITAL PUBLIC GOODS STANDARD ("DPG Standard"): A set of nine indicators maintained by the Digital Public Goods Alliance that are used to determine whether open-source software, open data, open AI systems, and open content collections are digital public goods. Those meeting the standards criteria are then listed in the DPG Registry.[81]

DIGITAL PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE: DPI is a digital architectural approach for government systems that uses a combination of technology building blocks, governance, and multistakeholder engagement to provide foundational digital services available for use by a variety of actors. These foundational digital services include, but are not limited to, data exchanges, digital identification, and payments rails that are intended to provide broad public benefit and are open to many different actors and uses. DPI investments are rarely "end to end" solutions but rather essential and reusable building blocks that allow a variety of innovations to be developed faster, cheaper, and safer. A DPI investment is not solely a software investment; it is a digital services solution that may include different software and hardware components as well as the associated governance and community engagement elements required for the public benefit from these investments.[82]

DIGITAL REPRESSION: The intentional use of digital tools and technology to suppress or violate human rights.

DIGITAL REVOLUTION: Term commonly used to describe the development of digital technology,

moving from mechanical and analog systems and processes to digital ones. This period encompasses the Information Age (mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first century) when digital computers and digital record keeping became the norm.

DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE: Refers to the use of digital technology to monitor the behavior or movement of people in public and private places. Governments, private companies, and other organizations can use it to target, intimidate, or otherwise influence individuals or groups.[83]

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY: This Policy uses the term "digital technology" not only to describe a type of technology but also to refer to the platforms, processes, and range of technologies that underpin modern ICT, including the internet and mobile-phone platforms, as well as advanced data infrastructure and analytical approaches.[84]

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: The innovation and adoption of digital products, services, and processes to disrupt, transform, and improve the ways in which economies, governments, and societies function.[85]

DISINFORMATION: A piece of information that is intentionally false or misleading and deliberately used by the producer to achieve a specific social, economic, and/ or political objective. Disinformation is often confused with misinformation, which is false or misleading information shared by error or mistake.[86]

DO NO HARM: Consciously looks for and seeks to avoid or mitigate negative impacts on conflict dynamics (the context in which tensions exist in a given setting)—for example, unintentionally worsening divisions among identity groups or reinforcing structural or systemic marginalization.[87]

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT: Refers to the conditions that must be in place for robust access to and use of digital technologies to take place. Fundamentally, this includes meaningful connectivity, i.e., when access to the internet and connected devices is affordable and reliably available. Other foundational enablers include digital literacy (when people have knowledge of how to access and use digital technologies and devices for their benefit) and rights-respecting regulations of digital environments that increase inclusivity, rather than diminish it. A skilled workforce, business-friendly practices, adequate higher education opportunities, and open and inclusive government policies are also key enablers for the uptake and adoption of digital technologies.

EXTENDED REALITY (XR): An umbrella term for any technology that alters reality by adding digital elements to the physical or real-world environment to any extent and includes but is not limited to, augmented reality (which overlays perceptual information on top of real-world environments), mixed reality (which allows real and virtual elements to interact in an environment), and virtual reality (in which users experience wholly virtual immersive environments).[88] XR broadens digital interfaces beyond traditional screen-based devices to include headsets, eyeglasses, and other wearable devices (e.g., Pokémon Go, or Apple Vision).

GLOBAL GOODS: Digital tools that are open source, have no barrier to access for services or available under open content licenses, are supported by an anchor organization/strong community, have a clear governance structures, have been deployed at scale, are used across multiple countries, have demonstrated effectiveness, are designed to be interoperable, and are on a continuum toward sustainability for the tool/service. There are three types of digital global goods: software, services, and content. Software global goods are mature Digital Public Goods (DPGs).[89]

GOVERNANCE (DATA): Data governance refers to the people, policies, and processes that provide both direction and oversight into how and why decisions about data are made. These decisions are executed via day-to-day management of the data lifecycle—steps and stages that include planning, acquiring, processing, analyzing, curating, publishing, and sharing data. Unlike data management, data governance considers the strategic, legal, and regulatory frameworks needed to minimize risks,

promote accountability, and optimize data assets within and across data ecosystems. In the context of digital development, data governance deploys data to unlock social and economic opportunities while minimizing risk and harm.[90]

GOVERNANCE (DIGITAL): Digital governance refers to the act or process of governing or overseeing the control and direction of systems and processes used to manage our digital presence, including:

- Establishing clear operating rules;
- Defining responsibilities and lines of authority; and
- Creating mechanisms to ensure those rules and authorities are followed.

Digital governance clarifies who is responsible for the management and operation of digital services. It includes content, design, technical infrastructure, security, funding, and product, project, and program management.[91]

GOVERNANCE (INTERNET): Internet governance refers to the rules, policies, standards, and practices that coordinate and shape the internet. These include management of global data communication protocols, such as Internet protocol, Transmission Control Protocol (TCP), Domain Name System (DNS), and Border Gateway Protocol (BGP).[92]

HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN (HCD): Also referred to as "user-centered design," this is a methodology that incorporates feedback from the people for whom one is designing throughout the design process. The goal of human-centered design is to end up with a solution that is tailored to meet people's needs, with little wasted effort and reduced risk.[93]

HUMAN RIGHTS: A set of rights inherent to all people regardless of place of birth, nationality, and/or citizenship, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the rights to life, liberty, and security of person; freedom from slavery and torture; freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly; as well as the right to access work and education.[94]

INFORMATION INTEGRITY: The accuracy, consistency, and reliability of information.[95]

INFORMATION MANIPULATION: A set of tactics that alter, modify, or mischaracterize data to shape public opinion, undermine trust in the authenticity of information, or disrupt democratic decision making. The U.S. government prefers the use of "information manipulation" over terms such as "disinformation" or "misinformation." Information manipulation broadly encapsulates these other terms.[96]

INFRASTRUCTURAL APPROACH: The underlying foundation or basic framework of digital services. These digital investments are intended to be building blocks for national-scale innovation and digital solutions; can use public, private, or a combination of both business models; and will affect both public and private ecosystems. These building blocks include policy, regulation, and human capacity along with software and hardware systems.

INNOVATION: Novel business or organizational models, operational or production processes, or products or services that lead to substantial improvements (not incremental "next steps") in addressing development challenges. Innovation may incorporate science and technology but is often broader, to include new processes or business models.[97]

INTERNET OF THINGS (IoT): Refers to a network of physical devices, vehicles, appliances, and other physical objects that are embedded with sensors, software, and network connectivity, allowing them to collect and share data.[98] IoT forms a global infrastructure for the information society that enables advanced services by interconnecting physical and virtual things based on existing and evolving interoperable information and communication technologies.[99]

INTEROPERABILITY: The ability of data to be exchanged, combined, and layered on top of each other. Interoperability can refer to:

- **Technological**: computer systems or software are able exchange and make use of data from other systems in automated ways, such as using an API or exchange layer.
- **Semantic**: data sets use the similar enough definitions, data formats, taxonomies, and classifications — i.e., dates come in date formats, indicators are measured the same way, groups are aggregated in the same groupings.
- **Syntactic**: data sets use similar enough data formats — i.e., spreadsheets use Excel, CSV, or Sheets; images use PNG, JPEG, or GIF.

Operational: data sets meet expected data structures, quality, and completeness expectations for specific operational usage — for example, interoperable payment systems allow digital transfers of money between different financial service providers. Each player in the system has a specific operational role in the data being exchanged, which is reflected in how the data are recorded and shared.

KILLER APPS: A term originally coined in the late 1980s, a "killer app" is an application or technology product that is considered indispensable or is the default for a particular category of product for a period of time. For example, Microsoft Excel or Word for Windows were killer apps in the 1980s and 1990s; they were present and necessary on all personal computers. More recent "killer apps" include Amazon, Gmail, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, mainly due to their ubiquity globally and brand recognition.[100]

LGBTQI+: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex people. The "+" in LGBTQI+ represents additional sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) that do not fit within the "LGBTQI" identity labels.[101]

LOCALIZATION (DATA): Legal requirements or policy preferences for data to be hosted locally (i.e., not in a Cloud server hosted in a different country).[102]

LOCALIZATION (DEVELOPMENT): The set of internal reforms, actions, and behavior changes that we are undertaking to ensure our work puts local actors in the lead, strengthens local systems, and is responsive to local communities.[103]

MACHINE LEARNING (ML): A set of methods that train computers to learn from data, where "learning" generally amounts to the detection of patterns or structures in data. ML approaches begin by finding patterns in a subset of existing data and using the patterns to make predictions for new, unseen data.[104]

MARGINALIZED GROUPS: Marginalized groups may include, but are not limited to: women and girls; youth; children in adversity and their families; older persons; persons with disabilities; LGBTQI+ people; persons impacted by geographical location, such as rural communities; displaced persons; migrants; Indigenous Peoples and communities; non-dominant religious, racial, and ethnic groups; people of castes traditionally considered lower; people of lower socioeconomic status; and people with unmet mental health needs.[105]

PARTNER: An organization or individual with which/whom USAID collaborates to achieve mutually agreed upon objectives and to secure the participation of ultimate customers. Partners include host-country governments, private voluntary organizations, local and international nongovernmental organizations, faith-based organizations, universities, other U.S. government departments and agencies, the United Nations and other multilateral organizations, professional and business associations, and private businesses and individuals.[106]

PHISHING: According to CISA, "phishing attacks use email or malicious websites to infect your machine with malware and viruses in order to collect personal and financial information." An ODNI factsheet has more information, as does this "Stop, Think, Connect" campaign video.[107]

PLATFORM: A group of technologies used as a base on which other technologies can be built or applications and services run. For example, the internet is a platform that enables web applications and services.[108]

QUANTUM COMPUTING: An alternative method of computation that exploits the laws of quantum physics to efficiently solve some problems that are difficult to solve through classical computing.[109]

RANSOMWARE: An ever-evolving form of malware used to elicit a ransom. The malware itself is designed to encrypt files on a device, rendering any files and the systems that rely on them unusable. Malicious actors then demand ransom in exchange for decryption. Ransomware actors often target and threaten to sell or leak exfiltrated data or authentication information if the ransom is not paid.[110]

RESPONSIBLE PARTNERSHIP: A partner engagement that aligns to the Agency's values and mission, democratic principles, and respects human rights. In practice, this can mean USAID choosing partners to work on a given program who best fit the needs and context of that program.

RESPONSIBLE DATA: Describes a number of specific practices in data management, including collection, storage, analysis, sharing, and usage. Using data responsibly in development programs ultimately requires balancing prioritization of three broad thematic areas: data use, privacy and security, and transparency and accountability. These three areas are frequently in tension with one another; improved data precision for better analysis can create privacy risks and increase security needs while transparency and accountability often relies on retaining a lot of — often sensitive — data. Understanding these tensions and working to balance them based on specific contexts can help development practitioners work responsibly and highlight questions about risk and benefit surrounding data.[111]

RESPONSIBLE DATA GOVERNANCE: This term refers to the application of responsible data principles and development values such as transparent, rights-respecting, and inclusive data oversight (i.e. traditional data governance systems and practices) to improve development outcomes and reduce the risk of data misuse and harms.[112]

RIGHTS-RESPECTING: Term adapted from the longer phrase, "respecting human rights." Respecting human rights in the design, development, deployment, use and governance of digital technologies and data requires conducting due diligence to avoid adversely affecting human rights. This includes establishing policies and systems to identify, avoid, mitigate, and manage potential or actual adverse human rights impacts.[113] Rights-respecting digital systems and data-driven technologies are those that are developed, implemented, managed, and governed in a way that respects the fundamental human rights of persons and societies. Governance regimes for rights-respecting digital systems and data-driven technologies can be contrasted with authoritarian governance regimes.

SAFEGUARDING: Safeguarding is the implementation of preventative, protection, and compliance measures for populations that may be at an increased risk from harm across an organization's operations, for the purposes of preventing harm, including but not limited to exploitation, abuse, and violence.[114] Digital systems and data-driven technologies developed, designed, deployed, used, and governed in accordance with safeguards that conform to accepted international standards can be referred to as "rights-respecting" as described above.

SOCIAL COHESION: The sense of shared purpose and trust among members of a given group or locality and the willingness of those group members to engage and cooperate with each other to survive and prosper.

STAKEHOLDERS: Individuals and groups that have an interest or equity in the work of USAID. This can include government representatives, civil-society organizations, the private sector, industry, academia, faith-based organizations, multilateral organizations, government donors, and philanthropy organizations, or distinct people groups such as youth, LGBTQI+, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and women, as well as individuals who are directly or indirectly affected by USAID's work. Key stakeholders are determined based on the context of work being done and will look different project to project.[115]

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (TFGBV): A threat or act of violence committed, assisted, aggravated, and amplified in part or fully by using information and communication technologies or digital media that is disproportionately targeted at women, girls, and gender non-conforming individuals. It is a continuum of multiple, recurring, and interrelated forms of gender-based violence that take place both online and offline. Examples can include online harassment and abuse; non-consensual distribution of intimate digital images; cyberstalking; sextortion; doxing; malicious deep fakes; livestreamed sexual violence of children, youth, and adults; rape; death threats; disinformation; intimate partner violence; and recruitment into trafficking and abusive labor.[116]

TWIN TRANSITION: The huge and largely untapped opportunity for technology and data to drive sustainability goals, especially as they relate to the environment. Rather than treating digital and sustainability in isolation, a twin transition combines these critical functions to unlock benefits in terms of efficiency and productivity. A twin transition can make a positive impact by "greening" technology, data assets, and infrastructure while accelerating sustainability.[117]

USER (END): Individuals who interact directly with the final software application, hardware device, or digital service, utilizing its features and functionalities to meet their specific needs or requirements.[118]

USER-CENTERED DESIGN: Design approaches and tools that center the user experience. This iterative process focuses on users and their needs at every stage in the design and implementation process, with different forms of user testing and analytics integrated into the development work plan.[119]

VIRTUAL PRIVATE NETWORK (VPN): A network that protects its users by encrypting their data and masking their IP addresses. This hides their browsing activity, identity, and location, allowing for greater privacy and autonomy.[120]

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49 This is different from the role of the EXO and IT support staff and should not focus on internal Agency systems or those operated on behalf of the Agency, which are overseen by M/CIO. This role should be program-focused. It is possible that an IT specialist at a small Mission could serve as a part-time DDA, but the roles are distinct (internal operational vs. external programmatic focus). "Digital programming" can refer to general digital programming work or sector-specific digital programming work, such as digital health.

50 Criteria for determining LOE requirements will be provided in the Digital Policy Implementation Plan.

51 This is different from the role of M/CIO and should not focus on internal Agency systems, which are overseen by M/CIO. This role should be program-focused.

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