

Submission: Australian International Development Policy

Submitted by
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Increasing the reach and impact of Australia's aid investment through a strategic, focused approach to using digital technology for social change.

WHY DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY?

The Indo-Pacific region is in the midst of a rapid digital transformation. Already, digitisation is transforming partner government service delivery and the relationship between governments and its citizens, including marginalised groups.

If used effectively, digital technologies hold immense potential to positively impact people's lives and contribute directly to more resilient, self-reliant societies and economies. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased access to and acceptance of technology in all facets of life globally.

LEADING REGIONAL DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Global digitisation is inevitable. This reality presents Australia with a valuable opportunity to take a leading role and support our neighbours in this process. Doing so will benefit both our partner countries and Australia's own national interest.

Following our own digital transformation, Australia has the capacity and knowledge to help our neighbours fast track the digitisation process, increasing efficiencies, maximising impact and avoiding mistakes already learned.

Supporting responsible and well executed use of digital channels will contribute to greater regional security, regulation of misinformation, better democratic processes, utilisation of valuable datasets, protection of free and open media, and so much more.

TECHNOLOGY FOR HUMAN OUTCOMES

Programs and policy supporting technology for social impact must be grounded in a clear understanding that *technology is a tool for change, it is not the solution in and of itself.*

It is only with skilled human resources that these tools can be utilised effectively for positive outcomes and maintained for ongoing impact. To date, co-design with users - considered to be best practice in the commercial tech space - of technology programs has been minimal in the aid sector. At Catalpa, we are working to change this.

Done well, technology-driven programs can improve access to and standards of education, health and other sectors, increase efficacy and accountability in government services, and provide evidence to inform decision making at every level of administration.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The potential of technology is huge, however, there are significant challenges to overcome in terms of access, infrastructure, penetration, operators and affordability.

Addressing practical challenges to access and uptake is crucial for aid policy that supports the use of digital tools. This includes provisions for reliable access to the internet and devices, investment in digital literacy skills, and solutions with cultural adaptability and relevance.

The new policy must address inclusion for people living with disability, as well as take into account the multilayered systems of discrimination or disadvantage many of these communities intersect.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Australia must make greater and better use of digital technology to deliver impactful development outcomes. Recommendations for meaningful investment in digital development:

1. Develop a dedicated digital strategy for delivering development assistance

The Australian Government needs a dedicated digital strategy for delivering development assistance in the Indo-Pacific region. Currently policy in this area is limited to cyber-security and trade. A strategy should:

- Identify and embed good practice in using digital solutions in aid programs
- Ensure investments are bound by a set of governing principles
- Ensure investments in digital products and services are focused on development outcomes
- Align with the Blue Pacific commitment
- Prioritise inclusion and locally-led development
- Prioritise youth development and innovation

Note: USAID is already mobilising large investments in digital development across the Pacific.

2. Establish a dedicated team/or advisory panel to oversee policies and programming for digital, emerging technologies for development

The team / technical panel should be focused on raising awareness of digital development, conducting diagnostics and research, consulting internally and externally, and elaborating on emerging evidence of digital development interventions for inclusion in program design and implementation, and establishing MEL for digital transformation.

3. Establish guidelines for use of digital technologies to meet the needs of all participants and stakeholders in the aid program

The guidelines should provide DFAT staff and partners with practical and actionable steps to maximise the benefit of digital technologies at strategic, activity, and individual user levels. Guidelines should cover items such as:

- Understanding the broad digital needs and challenges of all program participants, including women, youth, persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups
- Using human centred design principles to focus program outcomes on the user
- Assessing the digital ecosystem including digital readiness, digital infrastructure, existing products and services, legal and regulatory considerations
- Tips for overcoming common barriers and silos, and improving efficiency
- Facilitating multi-stakeholder partnerships, including with local stakeholders
- Capacity strengthening to ensure people are not harmed or left behind as new digital infrastructure is implemented

4. Build capabilities and understanding of digital development processes and methodologies

Meaningful technology and digital solutions are achieved through iterative processes and a commitment to continuous discussion and improvement. This is at odds with legacy ways of working which are more aligned to a linear (or 'waterfall') project management approach.

Investing in DFATs own knowledge of human-centred design, design thinking, agile, and adaptive methodologies, along with the ability to manage international development interventions that include digital as a core capability, will be critical to success.

5. Utilise digital technology for skills development and capacity building

DFAT has invested heavily in the development of training courses and capacity building in all sectors over the years. Training quality and reach could be improved through a considered blended learning approach that uses digital tools to:

- Make training materials always accessible for refresher training and onboarding
- Ensure courses are standardised and duplication is reduced
- Streamline course quality and alignment with approved quality standards
- Purposefully address access for disadvantaged groups such as women and persons with disabilities, as well as different learning needs and levels of digital literacy
- Enable adaptation to local contexts and flexibility for culturally responsive content
- Prioritise mentoring and communities of practice to ensure ongoing capacity development

6. Continue to support and promote affordable, secure access to the internet in developing countries

Reliable internet connectivity creates opportunities. It allows individuals to access resources for their own development (such as education), as well as access support services when they need them (such as health, social protection, emergency services). Internet coverage also makes these sectors more equitable and can benefit the most vulnerable people - including women, people with disability and other marginalised groups.

Universal internet coverage is something we see as an inevitability. Supporting this infrastructural development would contribute to Australia's national security, positively influence diplomatic relations in the current geo-political context, while helping to raise the standard of living for many, including the most disadvantaged.

7. Identify sectors and priority areas where digital innovation has already made inroads, and invest in scaling approaches that work

There have been many digital innovations tried and tested across our region and beyond. We can learn from these - whether successful or not - and drive immediate impact for people and communities through capacity to scale. Australian aid is already funding proof of concept programs like the [PNG DIMS/SIP program](#), [PNG healthcare skills training](#), and [Timor-Leste social protection](#). Other technologies such as [natural disaster early warning systems](#), [infectious disease monitoring](#) are widely tested and could be leveraged at pace.

8. Build local teams and invest in capacity building, or invest in those who do

In line with Blue Pacific commitment, the new policy should demonstrate Australia's commitment to regional autonomy and local ownership, and align to the issues and priorities of our partner countries. Meaningful, effective digital programs require close collaboration with users throughout the whole lifecycle from gathering requirements, to codesign, ongoing user testing and revision.

Similarly, achieving sustainable development outcomes is dependent on early establishment of local ownership and engagement. Without programs and technology tools embedded in local institutions, context and capabilities, there is significant risk of discontinuation at the conclusion of the agreed project period due to the ongoing maintenance requirements - user support, bug fixes, software updates, and evolution of functionalities as the context and technology evolves.

Greater openness and planning *with* the aid recipient, more collaboration with local civil society and NGOs, and inbuilt provision for professional development for national staff should all be elements of Australia's renewed approach to aid delivery.

9. Invest in M&E for digital programming to improve accountability

Performance and delivery systems should be designed to promote transparency and accountability, as well as promoting learning to continually improve the efficacy of Australia's development assistance. Increasing knowledge and use of agile and adaptive management (see recommendation 4) will support application of improvement processes including Design Based Implementation Research (DBIR) and M&E methodologies. Consideration should be given to:

- Practical language over highly technical guidance
- Language that promotes inclusivity and equality
- Clearer alignment with the SDGs to ensure a focus on development outcomes
- Independent assessments of overall programs
- Limiting the length of reports and program designs

10. Invest in youth development

Meaningful participation by young people in development programming can be difficult to achieve. However, today's youth are digital natives and this is an opportunity for DFAT to lead the empowerment of young people to devise their own unique and relevant solutions to the problems they face. Investing in the skills, creativity and innovation of young people through digital technologies will provide access to global markets, funding opportunities and jobs for young people, while supporting a pipeline of future local leadership and new economic development opportunities.

11. Invest in inclusive development

Disability is not inherent in an individual but is, rather, a function of the interaction of the person with the social and physical environments¹. Persons with disabilities are often excluded from mainstream education and economic development opportunities purely because they have difficulty accessing them. Technology can create an enabling environment for persons with disabilities, promoting access to education and also provide remote work opportunities allowing countries to tap into this huge human capital that is currently underutilised.

12. Invest in innovation to identify successful and sustainable digital development approaches and scale their impact globally

Technology is an essential part of any organisation's success, including development organisations and donors. Continuous investments in technology are required if DFAT wants to maintain a competitive edge and stay relevant. COVID-19 demonstrated the importance of technology in maintaining development outcomes and created a culture of acceptance of technology globally.

Technology drives innovation which leads to improved outcomes. Australia has always been an innovative country, inventing some of the world's greatest technology eg. WiFi. Investing in digital development through an innovation funding mechanism that includes support for scaling up the impact of successful ventures will have a profound impact globally, helping to realise the SDGs and other commitments. Investment in technology initiatives, including the ability to scale, as part of research and development (separate to program implementation) will further aid impact and knowledge in the area.

¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 1997. Enabling America: Assessing the Role of Rehabilitation Science and Engineering. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/5799>.

13. Increase funding through the proven ANCP initiative

DFAT has funded the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) for over 40 years. At present only an estimated 11% of DFAT funds are implemented through NGOs. This flexible and proven funding model provides accredited and highly professional NGOs with flexible funding to implement innovative programs globally in line with DFAT programming requirements.

ANCP reporting allows for high level oversight and accountability while also providing key information on global impact of DFAT funds. Many NGOs also use this mechanism to fund local partners who have limited access to funds or have burdensome reporting requirements. Increased investment in the ANCP program would allow DFAT to easily scale up on-ground impact, support Gender Equality and Social Inclusion and localisation agendas through a proven mechanism.

ABOUT CATALPA INTERNATIONAL

Catalpa is a not-for-profit development organisation creating change through design thinking, adaptive management and digital technology. Over the past 5 years, we've managed over A\$30 million of international development programming in 15 countries across health, education, skills training, governance, infrastructure and social protection.

A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE DEVELOPMENT AND TECH SECTORS

We bring together highly experienced international development practitioners and sector specialists with technical specialists - including software engineers, interaction and service designers, communicators, and graphic artists. Centralising program and technology design, implementation, and development allows us to deliver programs that can be quickly iterated, and tools that are truly fit for purpose.

A GROWING LOCAL PRESENCE

We are committed to building local teams where our projects are based. Locally-led development increases the integrity of our work, informing projects with a local perspective and embedding programs (and their supporting tech tools) in communities and social structures from the outset. As part of our strategic plan, we plan to increase our support for software and technology training in-country. We employ 70+ staff, and have a legally registered presence in Timor Leste, Australia, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji.

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