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Digital Government

DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND GOVERNANCE

Photo by KC Nwakalor for USAID / Digital Development Communications

Introduction to Digital Government in Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG)

Digital technology has transformed most aspects of people’s public and private lives, and it’s also driving immense change for governments. Governments are using digital technologies to set measurable administrative goals, improve public service delivery, make data-driven decisions, enact evidence-based policies, ensure greater accountability and transparency, and engage with the public.

What does Digital Government look like in the DRG Sector?

Digital government looks different across sectors. Broadly, it is how governments use digital technologies to **manage** internal systems and processes, **deliver** services, and **engage** with stakeholders. In DRG, digital tools and technologies can strengthen democratic institutions and processes by enhancing transparency and accountability of governments, improving the provision of public sector services, and engaging key stakeholders such as citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs), media, youth groups, or political parties. However, while digital technologies have produced profound benefits, the rapid pace of technological innovation has often outpaced the ability to assess and constrain potential digital harms; the same digital technologies mentioned above can also widen the digital divide, introduce new cybersecurity vulnerabilities, or be used to restrict political freedom.

Accordingly, to combat digital authoritarianism and foster open, secure, and inclusive digital ecosystems that advance—rather than undermine—democratic values and human rights, USAID launched the [Advancing Digital Democracy \(ADD\) initiative](#) in 2021. ADD seeks to advance and embed democratic values through legal and regulatory frameworks and technology development, design, and deployment, as well as to increase government and private sector accountability for respecting and protecting human rights and fostering democratic values. Furthermore, in 2020 USAID and several partners launched [Civicspace](#).tech, an interactive online resource that serves as a knowledge hub for international development practitioners, citizens, CSOs,

“Digital government” is the use of digital technologies as an integrated part of government strategies.

USAID developed the [Digital Government Model](#) to help USAID staff and partners understand and engage with the goals and components of digital government.

and government actors and provides information necessary to guide decision-making surrounding the positive and negative components of new technologies in democratic and civic spaces.¹

USAID's Digital Government model can be applied to the DRG sector:



MANAGE: Systems and processes related to managing the daily work of government. In Ukraine, civil society, the private sector, and government launched a national and municipal public sector e-procurement web portal called “ProZorro” as part of an effort to reduce an estimated UAH 50 billion (USD \$2 billion) in losses due to corruption,² and to increase transparency and trust as a cornerstone of Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity movement. ProZorro, an official open data resource that offers free access to all public purchasing data on all tenders, has received international acclaim as an exemplary e-procurement solution.³ Following the Russian invasion in February 2022, ProZorro+ was designed to optimize military, business, and humanitarian supplies procurements during the war.⁴



DELIVER: Platforms to allow stakeholders access to government services. Niger’s Ministry of National Education partnered with a local company, i-Futur, to launch “Lauréat”, an innovative digital platform to organize and manage school exams. Lauréat’s software and programs have digitized processes for national examinations and competitions, including online registration fee payments, enrollment, and digital issuances of transcripts and certifications. The Niger Baccalaureate Office used Lauréat to organize its baccalaureate and advanced vocational training examinations, and may also deploy Lauréat to organize and manage state-run competitions and examinations.⁵



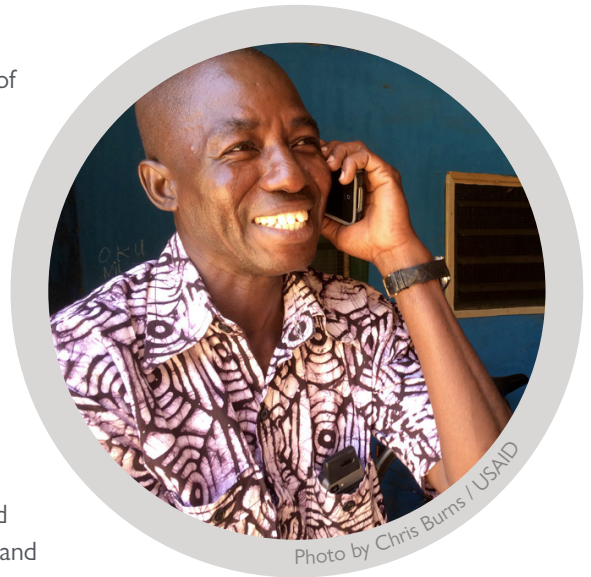
ENGAGE: Platforms for stakeholders to contribute to policies and processes. In North Macedonia, the Ministry of Information Society and Administration launched the [Open Government Partnership web platform](#), with support from USAID under the [Civic Engagement Project](#).⁶ The platform enables citizens, CSOs, and the private sector to access open data related to government budgets, public procurement, staffing, tax revenue collection, and vehicle registry and informs their engagement in the policy-making process. Overall, the platform aims to improve public services and increase the accountability of public institutions.

Digital Government Trends in the DRG sector

As digital technologies evolve, the following key trends are at the intersection of digital government and the DRG sector:

Integration of systems on national and sub-national levels.

The integration and interoperability of digital planning and management systems can reduce inefficiencies, enhance citizen engagement, and improve governance across national and local levels. National interoperability is especially critical in decentralized government systems to ensure that local communities retain control of their data while still integrating into national systems. As part of its efforts to institutionalize public sector systems that respond to citizen’s needs, the [USAID/Tanzania Public Sector Systems Strengthening Plus \(P3+\) program](#), launched in 2020, is ensuring the interoperability of digital central planning, financial management, and reporting systems. This will improve evidence-based planning, management, and local governance to meet the needs of underserved Tanzanian communities, including women and youth.⁷



Digital payments to citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted daily life, vast segments of the economy, and the provision of public services globally. Digitizing payments has allowed governments to provide social stimulus payments in greater numbers to mitigate the effect of health crises, with overall stimulus payments during the COVID-19 outbreak reaching approximately one in six people globally.⁸ The Ministry of Digital Economy and Digital Transformation in Togo launched its all-digital system called [Novissi](#) in 2020 to support Togolese citizens in the informal sector whose income was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Novissi provided monthly financial aid to the most vulnerable individuals and families throughout the duration of Togo's official COVID-19 public health emergency.⁹ The platform utilized machine learning, geospatial analytics, and mobile phone metadata to identify the most vulnerable and facilitate mobile money payment disbursement.

Proliferation of digital identification (ID) systems. Similar in function to physical ID cards or documents, digital IDs verify an individual's identity in order to access digital government services to pay taxes, collect government payments, register a business, or vote in elections. In the long-term, multipurpose digital ID systems, as compared with IDs for a single purpose such as for school or the workplace, will allow for greater functionality, sustainability, and uptake among individuals needing to access a variety of services.¹⁰ However, such systems must be developed with enforceable data protection and privacy standards and frameworks to safeguard user data and build trust among individuals using digital IDs. To this end, the Modular Open Source Identity Platform (MOSIP), funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is producing digital public goods¹¹ to help organizations, such as governments, implement cost-effective, scalable, inclusive, secure, and interoperable foundational digital ID systems.¹²

Transparency and Accountability in Public Administration and Services (TAPAS)

[TAPAS](#) is a seven-year, \$42 million joint USAID/UKaid program that works with Ukrainian citizens, Ukraine's central government, and municipalities to improve public procurement, government e-services, and access to open data to help reduce corruption.¹³ The program's three core components focus on: (1) developing and managing the eProcurement ecosystem; (2) supporting state and local governments to regularly publish public data; and (3) launching, strengthening, and improving the transparency of e-services in Ukraine. Prior to the Russian invasion in 2022, TAPAS supported the launch of the government's revamped [Open Data Portal](#), which provided access to open data on government expenditures broken down by sector.¹⁴ TAPAS has refocused its priorities during wartime to supporting the documentation of war crimes, ensuring functionality of critical e-services, securing state information systems, and the sustainability of public procurement.¹⁵

Key Barriers in the DRG Sector

The following barriers inhibit opportunities and innovation for digital government, impacting the management of systems and processes, delivery of services, and engagement of stakeholders in the DRG sector:

Expansion of digital authoritarianism and repression. Digital authoritarianism occurs when “a repressive government controls the Internet and uses censorship, surveillance, and data, media, law and regulations to restrict or repress rights at scale.”¹⁶ Over the past two decades, digital authoritarianism has been rising due to increasing rates of connectivity and uptake in digital tools by individuals, institutions, and governments. The exploitation of digital tools by governments and leaders can take many forms of repression, from [mis- or dis-information](#), to corporate espionage, surveillance of citizens, and election interference.¹⁷ For instance, personal data accrued during implementation of initiatives such as digital ID systems may be used to target political adversaries during authoritarian regimes, as observed in Afghanistan in 2021 during the takeover by the Taliban.¹⁸ The effects of digital authoritarianism therefore decrease trust in public institutions, tilt social and political control toward the incumbent government, and undermine civil liberties.

10 Foundational ID systems are single ID systems which can serve as a public good and underline multiple purposes e.g., national ID, universal enrollment, whereas functional systems represent single ID systems with one purpose or program (e.g., voter registration, service delivery tracking) [DID Layout v9 Interactive.pdf](#).

11 Digital Public Goods refer to open-source software, open data, open AI models, open standards, and open content that adhere to privacy and other applicable laws and best practices, do no harm by design, and help attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Lack of digital governance frameworks. Currently, no single global structure exists through which governments, the technology sector, and civil society actors can discuss and agree upon the frameworks for democracy in the digital age. In the absence of these, universal human rights standards have eroded as autocrats' use of digital repression becomes more pervasive. Lacking comprehensive, overarching, and fit-for-purpose frameworks, companies have begun building out their own independent regulatory frameworks as a stopgap. This siloed approach results in duplication, inconsistency, confusion, and a definition of global digital norms that best serves the technology industry. Nevertheless, technology companies have still echoed civil society activists and democratic leaders in calling for consistent global norms, criteria, and standards to help guard against human rights violations and potential liabilities.¹⁹

Insufficient and inequitable internet connectivity and device access. While mobile internet adoption continues to grow across the world, equitable internet penetration remains an unfulfilled objective in regions like sub-Saharan Africa, with levels of coverage and usage gaps at 28 percent and 53 percent, respectively, at the end of 2020.²⁰ (Per GSM, the “coverage gap” refers to people who do not live within range of a mobile broadband network, and the “usage gap” refers to those who live within the footprint of a mobile broadband network but are not connected to the internet.) Insufficient internet connectivity, coupled with unreliable power supply and a lack of affordable internet-enabled devices in certain regions, creates challenges for governments and development partners to deploy, manage, and maximize the adoption of digital tools and services. In addition to infrastructural issues, unequal access to digital government services can accentuate the digital divide and hinder the adoption of digital tools and technologies by users, especially in groups marginalized by cultural barriers or financial challenges. Despite a growing number of citizens using digital tools and technology on a regular basis, access to technologies in some countries is more difficult for marginalized groups or individuals, such as women or persons with disabilities.



Other Digital Government in DRG Resources:

- » [USAID Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Strategy](#)
- » [USAID Learning Agenda Questions Brochure](#)
- » [CivicSpace.tech](#)
- » [USAID Digital Identity](#)
- » [Principles for Digital Development](#)
- » [Kofi Annan Foundation - About The Commission](#)

FOR MORE INFORMATION, please contact the IPI/ITR Digital Societies and Governments team (digitalsocieties@usaid.gov) and the DRG team (ddi.drg_gov@usaid.gov)

- 1 https://www.encompassworld.com/elearningfiles/GROW/CSM_Session_1_Video.mp4.
- 2 [ProZorro: How a volunteer project led to nation-wide procurement reform in Ukraine — OpenProcurement](#).
- 3 <https://prozorro.gov.ua/en/about/achievements>.
- 4 [Prozorro Launches Platform for Procurement During War | Transparency International Ukraine \(ti-ukraine.org\)](#).
- 5 [In Niger, a new online digital platform facilitates the organization of school exams | Blog | Global Partnership for Education](#).
- 6 [Civic Engagement Project | Fact Sheet | Macedonia | U.S. Agency for International Development \(usaid.gov\)](#).
- 7 [Public Sector Systems Strengthening Plus \(PS3+\) | U.S. Agency for International Development \(usaid.gov\)](#).
- 8 [How Togo Made All-Digital Government Stimulus System in Two Weeks - Bloomberg](#).
- 9 [Novissi – Programme de Revenu Universel de Solidarité \(gouv.tg\)](#).
- 12 [About Us | MOSIP](#).
- 13 [About TAPAS May 2021 \(eurasia.org\)](#).
- 14 [Ibid.](#)
- 15 [Top priorities of the USAID/UK aid TAPAS project during wartime - TAPAS](#).
- 16 [USAID_Digital_Strategy.pdf](#).
- 17 [Promote and Build: A Strategic Approach to Digital Authoritarianism | Center for Strategic and International Studies \(csis.org\)](#).
- 18 [The Taliban are showing us the dangers of personal data falling into the wrong hands | Emrys Schoemaker | The Guardian](#).
- 19 [Google's policy chief calls for 'common rules' globally for tech regulation \(cnbc.com\)](#).
- 20 [GSMA | The state of mobile internet connectivity in Sub-Saharan Africa: why addressing the barriers to mobile internet use matters now more than ever | Mobile for Development](#).