



UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

DIGITAL STRATEGY 2022 — 2025

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Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how digital connectivity is fast becoming the global metric of inclusion and exclusion with 2.9 billion people still offline. The *digital divide*, notably the lack of affordable broadband internet and appropriate digital skills, have prevented many people, especially the most vulnerable, from working or studying from home during the crisis. Remarkably, one in three children missed out on remote learning when COVID-19 shuttered schools with students in countries with low human development disproportionately affected. Notably, the digital divide is also harmful to civil society and activists. Trapped offline, their ability to advocate for change in key areas like climate action is stifled.

Yet the pandemic also demonstrated the incredible power of digital technology. From Honduras to Nigeria, the United Nations (UN) assisted countries to leverage the potential of digital finance to support critical electronic cash transfer programmes, benefitting millions of people. In the Maldives and Brazil, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supported parliaments to hold virtual sessions. Or look to the contribution of the UNDP Accelerator Labs network. It utilized the potential of 3D-printing to rapidly produce vital personal protective equipment and helped to deploy robots in COVID-19 treatment centres in Rwanda and Kenya reducing healthcare worker exposure to the virus. UNDP was ideally placed to offer this type of support given that it already had a Digital Strategy in place since 2019. That strategy prompted the organization to embark on a profound digital transformation in both its programmes and internal systems. Over 2,000 UNDP personnel have upgraded their digital skills through new, specialized courses -- and continue to do so. The related cultural change also spurred the development of the open-access Data Futures platform, for instance. Integrating data, analysis, and visualizations, it is helping to inform key development policies and programmes including in the vaccine equity sphere.

With this new 2022-25 Digital Strategy, UNDP aims to *get ahead* to the ever-evolving digital reality, equipped with the knowledge and tools to support our partners at this time of rapid change. For instance, digital technology can advance democracy and human rights by boosting civic engagement, political participation,



Achim Steiner
Administrator, United Nations
Development Programme (UNDP)

and social accountability. And new e-platforms will make it easier to access state services while reducing opportunities for corruption. UNDP’s continued role as a trusted development partner hinges on our ability to provide this now vital support. The Strategy also highlights the challenges that digital technology poses. That includes the fact that the pandemic has accelerated growth in cybercrime and misinformation. Crucially, the Strategy also elaborates on how digitalization is serving as one of three enablers in UNDP’s 2022-2025 Strategic Plan as we set bold objectives – from helping 100 million people to escape multidimensional poverty to supporting 800 million people to participate in elections.

This new Digital Strategy will guide UNDP in its efforts to support countries to build inclusive, ethical, and sustainable digital societies. It also recognizes that digitalization will continue to re-shape how the organization responds to the monumental challenges our world now faces. That includes using its power to drive climate action and restore our natural world. And it will also complement the UN’s wide-ranging global efforts to boost the digital capacity of vulnerable and marginalized groups including women and people with disabilities, for instance. In many ways, the Strategy will *future proof* the organization for the technological changes now and those yet to come, including advancing ways to boost the digital expertise of our personnel. This Digital Strategy demonstrates that UNDP refuses to stand still. With the Sustainable Development Goals serving as our guiding stars, we are looking beyond the immediate horizon to continue offering cutting-edge development support at the seminal moment for people and planet.



Executive summary

UNDP¹ launched its first Digital Strategy² in mid-2019 to harness digital transformation within the organization. Building on a long history of project-level digital support for partners³, the strategy represented a systematic and corporate-driven transformation process to reimagine the way UNDP serves its partners and operates its systems and processes. The first Digital Strategy proved to be prescient given the incredible acceleration in digital transformation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

UNDP has changed significantly since the adoption of the 2019 strategy, developing new capabilities in digital programming and strengthening its digital capabilities. UNDP will continue to accelerate these efforts in response to growing demand from partner governments. UNDP will also continue to support our development partners to ensure that the arc of future digital transformation protects human rights and leaves no one behind.

Digital Strategy 2022-2025 is intended to maintain and accelerate the momentum that has already been generated across UNDP and among its partners. Indeed, many of the components are already in place such as the Accelerator Labs⁴, the Digital Advocates Network⁵, a comprehensive IT transformation, and the Chief Digital Office⁶. Continuing to build the capabilities of UNDP's workforce to imagine, plan, and implement integrated digital approaches has the potential to truly generate a multiplier effect on its support to partners.

This Digital Strategy is structured in three main parts:

Part 1 – Guiding principles and value proposition:

Overview of UNDP's approach to digital transformation.

Part 2 – Setting the course: Vision, objectives, and outcomes towards which UNDP will continue evolving over the next four years.

Part 3 – Strategy implementation approach and measuring results: High-level approach to implementing the strategy.

The new UNDP Strategic Plan 2022-2025 highlighted the importance of digital as one of the key enablers. This renewed Digital Strategy builds upon the Strategic Plan, and puts forth a vision whereby **digital is an empowering force for people and planet**.

To achieve this vision, three objectives are outlined: two programmatic and one operational, in a continuation of the bimodal approach of the first Digital Strategy. The first objective is to use digital to amplify UNDP's programming work. Secondly, UNDP will look to strengthen inclusive digital ecosystems. Finally, the third objective is focused on transforming UNDP into a digitally native organization, fully equipped with the digital skills, processes, and data necessary for UNDP to continue as the development partner of choice for the digital age.

This strategy is anchored in the Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation⁷ as well as the framework presented by Our Common Agenda⁸, articulating the unique role of UNDP within the UN System in countries and globally. It is directly aligned with, and intended to support, the UNDP Strategic Plan 2022-2025⁹. The strategy also provides a complementary framework for the UNDP IT Strategy 2020-2023 and the UNDP Data Strategy 2020-2021, as well as several other corporate and regional efforts such as the Accelerator Lab Network and the work of the Strategic Innovation Unit¹⁰.

Digital: We define digital as

- An ever-evolving range of technologies (like mobile technologies, artificial intelligence, machine learning, blockchain, Internet of Things, and robotics to name a few) that impact all aspects of our world.
- A mindset, which translates into a new way of working that enables people and institutions to innovate with technology.



Introduction

Digital technology is a fundamental force for change in this century, reshaping economies, government, and civil society – thereby impacting almost every aspect of development. The profound consequences and exponential pace of digital transformation demands both local action and global leadership to



reimagine development in a digital age.



In many ways, increasingly powerful digital technologies represent an opportunity to accelerate progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Most governments globally are rapidly increasing their use of digital technology, creating opportunities to deliver more responsive and effective services to citizens, including women.¹¹ Countries with developed digital infrastructures such as digital payments and identification systems have responded more effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic than countries whose digital infrastructures are less developed.¹² Businesses and jobs are also changing: the latest World Economic Forum (WEF) report on the *Future of Jobs* suggests companies in 26 advanced and emerging economies are rapidly digitalizing their working processes.¹³ Greater digitalization is also linked to economic resilience; more advanced digital economies were on track to experience smaller downward GDP adjustments in 2021.¹⁴ In the most highly connected economies, digital infrastructure may mitigate more than half of the long-term negative economic impact of COVID-19.¹⁵

Despite the promise of digital technologies, they also bring real and growing challenges. COVID-19 has drawn attention to the urgency of closing the digital divide, especially for women and marginalized population segments. In low-income countries, 70 percent of households are not yet covered by fixed broadband networks, 33 percent are out of reach of mobile internet (4G), and 234 million fewer women than men use mobile internet, with women 15 percent less likely to own a

smartphone.^{16,17} New challenges continue to arise such as data privacy, cybercrime, and mis- and disinformation proliferating through digital platforms.¹⁸ In addition, national policy and regulatory frameworks for new technologies are often implemented in a reactive, uncertain, and piecemeal manner. Finally, rapid and pervasive change can be disruptive, straining the limited capacity of governments that frequently lack the skilled human resources and infrastructure to respond. It is not a given that digital transformation drives greater inclusion; in fact, it may further exacerbate inequalities, discrimination, marginalization of vulnerable populations, and abuse of human rights.¹⁹ Digital can also have unintended negative impact on climate change and environment through increased energy use, supply chain (material extraction, waste management), and increased or unsustainable consumption and production patterns.

Seized by the need to ensure relevance at this time of rapid digital change, UNDP launched its first Digital Strategy in 2019, sparking a corporate effort to drive significant changes across both its programmatic offerings and its operational systems. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, that effort became even more urgent as requests for UNDP support in digital surged. UNDP supported over 60 partner governments to deploy critical digital technologies to maintain business continuity during the brunt of the pandemic. Over 250 digitally enabled programme responses to COVID-19 were developed, ranging from developing digital case management systems for social workers

to provide emergency assistance to connecting informal market vendors, many of whom are women, to e-commerce platforms to maintain their livelihoods.

The past two-and-a-half years have seen a remarkable expansion in the use of digital in UNDP. The organization has explored new digital delivery models, digital partnerships, and advocacy on pressing digital issues. In terms of its internal operations, UNDP has adopted new strategies for information technology and data, launching several new corporate-wide technology platforms.

However, UNDP's digital transformation is far from over, and several key challenges remain. A more strategic and integrated approach to digital programming must be adopted. Efforts thus far have largely been opportunistic, in response to partner demand, leading to uneven adoption across thematic areas and countries. Data infrastructure and capabilities must be further strengthened to enable shared data exchanges for decision making and corporate-wide knowledge management. A digital culture must be embedded in the organization, and digital literacy among UNDP personnel needs to be urgently improved in order to utilize digital infrastructure and tools to their fullest potential.

Building on the progress from the first strategy, this Digital Strategy will chart the continuation of UNDP's journey in digital transformation over the next four years (2022-2025). With this renewed strategy, UNDP puts forth a long-term vision to help create a world in which ***digital is an empowering force for people and planet.*** This vision is closely aligned with the recently approved UNDP Strategic Plan 2022-2025, which outlines how UNDP will seek to support countries in three directions of change – structural transformation, leaving no one behind, and building resilience – and underlines the importance of digital as one of three enablers along with strategic innovation and development financing to achieve this change.

As with the first strategy, UNDP's digital transformation will continue to address both external and internal challenges. Three objectives are outlined: two programmatic and one operational. First, UNDP will harness digital technology to amplify the effects of its programming. Second, as the societies UNDP serves increasingly adopt digital technology themselves, we will ensure that inclusive digital ecosystems²⁰ are built that are empowering and that leave no one behind. Finally, the third objective speaks to the ongoing operational transformation that UNDP needs to continue implementing to enable this change. UNDP will become a digitally native organization. That means fostering a digital mindset, enhancing digital literacy and skills, ensuring our internal systems and processes are fit for purpose and future-proofed, as well as using data strategically. These capabilities are essential if UNDP is to continue as the partner of choice for development in the digital age.

The next four years will be critical in determining how digital technology can play a positive role in development, reversing the economic and social damage from COVID-19, and accelerating progress towards the SDGs while mitigating emergent digital challenges and risks. UNDP will continue to be bold and ambitious in our digital transformation efforts to make sure that we are the organization that the world needs us to be.

Digital Strategy 2019-2021

In 2019, UNDP introduced its first Digital Strategy (2019-2021) to harness the power of digital technology and innovation to respond more effectively to development challenges. This first Digital Strategy was built on two interrelated transformation pathways:

Pathway 1 focused on programmatic outcomes to improve UNDP's partner experience and solve development challenges through innovations in delivery, collaboration models, and joint advocacy.

Pathway 2 focused on operational outcomes to improve systems, internal processes, and data usage and to enhance knowledge sharing.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly accelerated UNDP's digital transformation. New organizational and governance structures such as the Chief Digital Office, Data Governance Group, and Digital Governance Group were established, and in March 2020, UNDP approved an IT Strategy to double down on this internal transformation. Moreover, due to social distancing restrictions, the pandemic also catalysed the process of incorporating digital into UNDP programming. For example, the Rapid Financing Facility (RFF) was established in support of the UNDP Beyond Recovery COVID-19 offer. It received 129 proposals, more than a third of which had a digital component. The demand from our development partners continues to grow rapidly, reinforcing the urgent need for UNDP to continue to adapt.

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