

# The Belgian D4D Policy Priorities and principles

February 2022

## Digital levers for sustainable development

Digitalisation is a powerful driver and additional lever to achieve *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs). Therefore, the Belgian D4D (*Digital for Development*) policy is committed to the use and support of digital technologies in (1) all the sectors of Belgian development cooperation; (2) to address the global challenges of bilateral cooperation (climate, human mobility, urbanisation, peace and security, socio-economic inequality, global citizenship) and (3) in the context of thematic cooperation (human rights, gender equality, sustainable development, environment and good governance).

Belgian development cooperation sees digitalisation as a means of empowering specific target groups (women, children, farmers, etc.) and giving them a voice in society. This emancipation-oriented approach is the common thread for the D4D policy. Encouraging digital literacy, which is essential to addressing unequal access to modern technologies with a view to reducing the digital divide, is best performed in a cross-cutting integrated way.

Starting from the *leave no one behind* principle, the inclusion of vulnerable groups should be ensured through the integration of digital applications and digital transformation in ongoing and future development projects (*digital mainstreaming*). In this way, D4D can have a positive *spill-over* effect in the fight against socio-economic inequality. For example, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has found that countries with digital facilities are better equipped to ensure social protection and can respond more effectively to pandemics such as COVID-19.

## Starting points and principles

Having or not having access to and/or being able to make good use of digital technologies (digital literacy) increasingly determines access to basic services and the effective realisation of basic rights (health care, education, labour market, public and financial services, information, freedom of expression, etc.). Access to decent work for all employees in the future will depend upon the availability of the necessary digital and solution-oriented skills due to accelerating digitalisation in all sectors.

The aforementioned findings have prompted Belgium, other European Union (EU) member states and the European Commission to develop digital strategies which will ensure that the digital transformation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be inclusive and offer more opportunities than risks. At the same time, digitalisation is increasingly emerging as a policy priority and economic growth path in partner

countries. Digitalisation should therefore be recognised as a reality in our partner countries, with the potential to have a positive impact on socio-economic inequality. Belgium can therefore provide significant added value in closing the digital divide.

Belgium is guided by the putting people first principle (common good). In doing so, it strives for a "*human-centric digital transformation*" as stated in the Lisbon Declaration ([www.lisbondeclaration.eu](http://www.lisbondeclaration.eu)) and the *do no harm* principle, with sufficient attention paid to the risks of digitalisation.

Belgian development cooperation also subscribes to the nine (9) principles for digital development ([www.digital-principles.org](http://www.digital-principles.org)), which form a quality framework for D4D projects (cf. Wehubit):

1. Design with the user
2. Understand the existing ecosystem
3. Design for scale
4. Build for sustainability
5. Be data driven
6. Use open standards, open data, open source, and open innovation
7. Reuse and improve
8. Address privacy and security and
9. Be collaborative.

## D4D in bilateral cooperation

In the fight against inequality and extreme poverty, the possible integration of a D4D component into bilateral programmes should be considered. The identification of possible D4D interventions for bilateral and thematic portfolios should not only build upon existing national digital strategies and ecosystems in partner countries in order to promote their ownership, but also take into account their feasibility and sustainability.

In order to close the digital divide and make digital technologies available to the entire population in a sustainable and responsible manner, with a particular focus upon vulnerable groups, Belgian bilateral development cooperation concentrates its D4D activities in four action areas:

1. **Digital skills and competencies:** everyone should be able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by digital technologies and the digital economy.
2. **Inclusive digital entrepreneurship:** the inclusive and sustainable growth of the digital economy needs to be better aligned with the needs of vulnerable groups (economic independence of women and rural populations).

3. **Digital rights:** giving civil society the opportunities to use its voice in order to communicate the risks associated with digitalisation so that human rights are also guaranteed in the digital space.
4. **Digital governance:** policies aimed at digitalisation in all sectors, digital transformation and digital tools are essential as building blocks for the development of basic digital services in the public interest (*putting people first*). They create the framework conditions for sustainable and inclusive growth.

When mainstreaming digitalisation in a bilateral portfolio, it is preferable to focus on specific areas of action (*e-health, e-education, e-agriculture, data for sustainable resource management, etc.*). Lessons can be learned from the field experiences for similar initiatives in other portfolios. In addition, the experience of NGAs, public and other non-profit organisations in scaling up digital social innovations can be utilised.

## Belgium as a European pioneer

Internationally, Belgium is focusing upon the European level given its proven added value as a pioneer for greater coordination and cooperation. In early December 2020, Belgium, together with other EU member states and the European Commission, launched the D4D Hub. The D4D Hub is a strategic consortium of 11 member states, the European Commission and the European Investment Bank (EIB), which aims to facilitate a human-centric, sustainable and inclusive digital transformation by means of a *multi-stakeholder* collaboration. The letter of intent envisages a joint European digital strategy centred upon the implementation of common core values.

The Belgian development agency, Enabel, is coordinating and hosting the first joint intervention of the African branch of the D4D Hub. The AU-EU D4D Hub's mission is to bridge

the digital divide between Africa and Europe. This European collaboration creates the opportunity to pool expertise, networks and resources in order to increase the digital impact of *Team Europe* in close collaboration with local partners and digital ecosystems. Enabel will strengthen its role as coordinator at the European level, specifically with regard to the themes mentioned in this D4D note.

## Impact through partnerships

In order to have a lasting impact, partnerships and a well-defined division of labour are essential for Belgian development cooperation. In addition to its strong involvement in the D4D Hub, Enabel intends to mobilise the relevant actors within the Belgian digital ecosystem (public institutions, private sector, financial institutions, civil society, research institutions and academia). The Belgian Investment Company for Developing Countries (BIO) can take advantage of the investment opportunities which arise in the context of the D4D Hub and broader European cooperation. BIO has explicitly included D4D as one of its 4 market orientations in its investment strategy for the period 2019-2023. These include sustainable high-impact projects in the growing digital economy, including fintech (financial technologies).

## Cooperation with Non-Governmental Actors (NGAs)

Non-Governmental Actors (NGAs) are encouraged to exchange further their knowledge and share *best practices* around D4D in order to arrive at an informed formulation if they are implementing D4D in their programmes, with particular attention to the most vulnerable groups. Better knowledge exchange and more cooperation in the field between the Belgian development agency, Enabel, and the NGAs are to be encouraged, as well as the creation and dissemination of an "open" *D4D Toolbox*.



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partner in development