



Issues in digital government*

Summary

Digitalization continues to offer immense opportunities to leapfrog development, improve public service delivery, combat corruption, reduce inequalities and improve State-citizen relations, provided it is managed in a fair, ethical, inclusive, and people-centred manner. Going forward it will be crucial to ensure a just and inclusive digital transformation, with the goal of leaving no one behind and strengthening trust, integrity, and inclusion in government. Efforts to address digital divides are urgently needed, alongside improved data governance and greater attention to the mitigation of risks arising from ICTs, such as artificial intelligence and social media, through new policy and regulatory regimes and standards.

Recommendations

The Committee recommends that the Council encourage governments to manage digitalization of public services in an inclusive, fair, ethical, and people-centred manner, while accelerating efforts to bridge digital divides, inter alia through hybrid models of public service delivery. (Paragraph 14)

The Committee recommends that the Council encourage oversight agencies to strengthen the use of open data and artificial intelligence to detect and deter corruption and bribery in all their forms. (Paragraph 15)

► See [ECOSOC resolution 2022/9](#)

* Excerpt from Committee of Experts on Public Administration, Report on the twenty-first session. See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2022, Supplement No. 24 ([E/2022/44-E/C.16/2022/9](#))

Discussion

Reinforcing trust in government

The Committee underscores that digitalization can strengthen trust, integrity and inclusion in government and support governments on the path to build forward better from the pandemic and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The great acceleration of government digitalization that the pandemic engendered is irreversible, with profound effects on the sharing of data and information and public service delivery, as well as opportunities for collaboration within government and with citizens and other actors.

Ensuring that digital transformation strengthens trust in governments in their capacity to deliver equitable public services, manage people's data and, in the case of social media, address the risks of disinformation and polarization, is critical. Technologies can build trust, such as through digital

identification, if deployed effectively and with sufficient engagement of stakeholders, or they can deepen mistrust, for example when services are digitized without the possibility of independent oversight or adequate privacy safeguards. Implicit data bias in artificial intelligence is one concern for which adequate oversight mechanisms might be needed.

The uneven playing field in science and technology and the market dominance of some technology companies contributes to limiting options for governments in the application of artificial intelligence, neural networks, access to big data and other technologies. Those factors also introduce security vulnerabilities, which some governments are tackling by restricting access rather than cooperating.

Bridging digital divides and leaving no one behind

The Committee notes that central to the global debate on government in the digital era is the broader challenge of ensuring a just, inclusive, people-centred and rights-based digital transformation, with the goal of leaving no one behind while mitigating the risks of widening digital divides.

The digital divide affecting many States and population groups, based on lack of access and connectivity infrastructure, including Internet quality, unaffordability due to the high cost of Internet use and digital devices, insufficient capacity-building and digital illiteracy, must be addressed urgently. Access is also about making technologies available to address targeted needs, for instance through mobile devices to address divides between urban and rural areas and

developed and less-developed regions. Bridging the gender and income divides and addressing difficulties faced by persons with disabilities are other critical concerns.

Digital services rely on digital data, which should be disaggregated for inclusion but are often lacking. Data governance could be improved through integrated data centres or big data centres, with data that are more inclusive of vulnerable groups, and more effective collection and integration approaches.

The rapid development of science and technology has created preconditions for potentially reducing socioeconomic inequalities, including by reducing the time and cost for citizens to gain access to services. For instance, there is immense opportunity

in online learning and digital education in schools, as evident in the hardware and software solutions on offer, and especially in offering hybrid solutions. Hybrid models of public service delivery should be considered as a default to leave no one behind. In

some communities, especially in developing countries, there are still basic challenges of energy availability and electricity access, as well as limited bandwidth availability.

Investing in public sector capabilities and expertise

To guide the digital transformation and effectively invest in and deploy government technology solutions, governments need to strengthen their digital capabilities and expertise. The availability of skilled technology workers is a particular challenge for governments, especially in developing countries. There is a need to mitigate the loss of digital skills through measures such as adequate remuneration and motivation of public sector workers. Investment in human capital in the technology fields should be given greater weight in national human resource strategies and in budgets.

The need to strengthen digital capabilities and expertise also applies to regulators in upgrading digital capabilities for smarter regulation and enforcing compliance with privacy regulations and other requirements. The sharp rise in technology budgets in some countries and the increasing complexity of digital solutions creates its own set of vulnerabilities. Often, government technology procurement is complex and exposed to implementation failures, cost overruns and vendor capture. Such risks are often the result of the excessive outsourcing of technological expertise in the development of digital government projects.

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