Task Force 7
Towards Reformed Multilateralism: Transforming Global Institutions and Frameworks

TOWARDS A MULTILATERAL FRAMEWORK FOR DIGITAL PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

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Abstract

As the current G20 chair, India confronts the challenge of affirming the forum's value for consensus-building and collective action in times of heightened geopolitical tensions. A key opportunity for this is a structured and prudent agenda on Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI). The broad availability of performant and secure DPI is a critical enabler to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, India's experience of rolling-out digital services at scale puts this year's presidency in a strong position to design a forward-looking agenda on the issue.

This policy brief identifies DPI as a component of sustainable development, discusses the G20's potential as a focal point for international cooperation, and develops possible steps for advancing the group's DPI agenda. This includes setting up a designated task force on human-centred DPI principles, a multistakeholder process to support the mapping of local requirements, and early cooperation prototyping in 'implementation triangles' consisting of two G20 members and a third partner country. More broadly, intensified engagement on DPI also provides an opportunity to anchor sustainable development and the global public good at the centre of the G20's rapidly-evolving digital technology agenda.

The Challenge

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Digital technology has demonstrated its potential for improving people's lives in a series of recent crises. It has helped the world recover from the COVID-19 pandemic,[1] restored access to key public services in conflict zones like Ukraine,[2] and assisted in the provision of earthquake relief efforts in Syria and Turkey.[3]

Beyond crisis management, however, digital technology drives longer-term developmental transformations across countries and societies. This is effectively seen through the provision of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), an umbrella term that frequently refers to systems and solutions that support essential society-wide functions and services.[4] Just like roads, bridges, and transportation served to shrink and flatten the world, DPI furthers peoples' access to public services and economic opportunities. It accelerates and scales functions that lie at the heart of social and economic activity, such as identification and authentication or making and receiving payments.[5] For many countries, such uses of digital technology hold great potential to expand access to basic resources and services, strengthen healthcare and education systems and raise overall living standards.

Accordingly, digital technology has become central to the global community's efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As the shared 'blueprint' for establishing "a better and more sustainable future for all," the SDGs address significant global challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice.[6] DPI is becoming increasingly crucial to the international community's efforts to accelerate sustainable development and remain on track for its 2030 targets.[7] A main goal for the international community is thus to improve the global availability of performant and secure DPI, including for countries from resource-poor areas. This remains a challenge given that the technical capacities and financial resources required can be significant, making it difficult for some countries to develop and administer DPIs independently.

G20 countries currently develop and deploy a range of DPI initiatives. For example, the Indian model, dubbed *IndiaStack*, includes "a set of open APIs (application programming interface) and digital public goods that aim to unlock the economic primitives of identity, data, and payments at population scale."[8] In just a decade, it enabled

approximately 90 percent of India's population to sign up for a digital ID and gain access to services like interoperable online payments.[9] The US has a set of DPI frameworks initiated by state and non-state actors that aim to deliver better public services and accelerate improvements in health and economic welfare.[10] In addition to such country-specific efforts, international organisations such as the United Nations and the World Bank also engage in DPI initiatives (see below).

Yet, despite their shared developmental focus, global coordination of domestic and international DPI efforts remains relatively limited. *GovStack*, a joint initiative by the German and Estonian governments, the International Telecommunication Union, and Digital Impact Alliance, has begun to address this issue. With a strong international focus, it aims at "breaking down the barriers to building sustainable digital infrastructure and help governments create human-centred digital services that empower individuals and improve well-being."[11] At the same time, DPI stacks globally remain largely siloed, lack a foundation in common principles such as interoperability, transparency, and data protection, and risk the inefficient use of knowledge and funds due to duplication.

Given the G20's unique membership constellation that brings together a heterogeneous set of countries, this brief highlights avenues for closer international DPI cooperation at a moment when many countries are ramping up support for digital services as an integral element of their developmental agenda.

The G20's Role

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Several countries are currently driving major DPI initiatives. Some of these are targeted towards meeting their own developmental goals, while others are being designed as building blocks for use in various country-specific contexts. As different countries come with varied experiences of DPI development and rollouts, a multilateral framework for regular engagement on this issue would facilitate mutual learning, identifying synergies, and an inclusive approach to best practices.

Like other international institutions, the G20 confronts the challenge of deriving consensus in an increasingly geopolitically charged environment. Digital technology is emerging as a frontier for strategic competition as it is becoming an important foundation for economic competitiveness and increasingly determines military advantage.[12] China has already associated its great power ambitions to leadership in selected technology areas, especially AI, quantum computing, and the newest generation 5G/6G networking technology.[13] The US, in turn, has demonstrated it willingness to leverage its strengths in digital technology value chains to slow China's ability to achieve parity or dominance in critical technologies.[14] Relatedly, the growing centrality of notions such as 'digital', 'cyber' or 'internet sovereignty' in policy discourses reflects states' attempts at reasserting authority over how digital technology is governed within their borders. Importantly, therefore, international cooperation on digital technology unfolds in a setting where countries differ substantially in their motivations, goals, and instruments related to this push for greater sovereignty.

Yet, the G20 stands out as a comparatively robust venue for multilateral cooperation that includes a broad range of heterogeneous but critical state members. Digital technology and its role in sustainable development have been part of the G20 agenda for several years. Under the German presidency in 2017, a 'Digital Economy Task Force' (DETF) was created alongside a series of conferences focused on digital issues and development.[15] Under the 2021 Italian presidency, the G20 recognised digital identity as a key enabler for access to public services as part of its broader commitment to advancing digital government through

the work of the DETF.[16] Finally, in the November 2022 G20 Bali leaders' declaration, member states recognised the importance of inclusive international cooperation on digital trade, affordable and high-quality digital connectivity, promoting cross-border data flows, and further developing digital skills and literacy.[17] Having underscored DPI as "the most remarkable change of our era", the Indian presidency appears to have the potential and will to make digital technology governance a centrepiece of the 2023 G20 process.[18]

The G20 could thus serve as a focal point for designing a multilateral framework on DPI. Such a framework should strive to establish greater consensus on the kinds of technologies and services that fall under the term DPI. It should also aim to facilitate consensus on a shared set of foundational principles that can inform DPI development and deployment and serve as a basis for international technical cooperation. This may include interoperability, openness, and scalability principles to offset risks such as vendor lock-in. Such a framework could also create a platform for sharing and mapping digital requirements that individual countries and communities may have.

Recommendations to the G20

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The Indian G20 presidency represents an important opportunity to accelerate the international community's efforts of achieving the SDGs. A multilateral framework to facilitate DPI cooperation should be a key component of this. Possible steps include:

Defining shared DPI principles in a mission-oriented task force

G20 members should establish a task force to define shared principles to guide the development and use of DPI for sustainable development. This could include principles— such as interoperability, openness, and scalability—that ensure a country's ownership and choice when meeting specific requirements. As a basis for developing such principles, the task force should aim to establish a common consensus on the kinds of technologies and services that fall under the term DPI. These principles can help inform a developmentally-centred agenda for global DPI provision. Structurally, the task force could be set up under the G20's Digital Economy Working Group (DEWG) and operate in a mission-oriented manner under a one-year sunset clause.

Mapping DPI requirements based on multistakeholder input

The task force's work should be flanked by an inclusive process for mapping DPI requirements. This could take the form of a 'DPI for sustainable development' multistakeholder forum in the context of a G20 task force meeting involving members of the technical community and civil society to provide input on DPI-related priorities and challenges. It should also provide a platform for discussion with the private sector on how technology companies, including smaller and innovative market players, can accelerate DPI provision in line with principles such as transparency, interoperability, and accountability. A collaborative approach along these lines could ensure both broad participation and ownership towards a multilateral framework to advance DPI.

Operationalising DPI cooperation through 'implementation triangles'

G20 members should strive for rapid operationalisation of DPI cooperation. While the task force would provide a platform for all G20 members to elaborate common guiding principles for DPI, on-the-ground cooperation could be fast-tracked in the form of 'implementation triangles'. Here, two G20 members would collaborate with a third country to jointly prototype an interoperable package of DPI solutions adapted to local priorities. Learnings from these implementation experiences could then feed back into discussions among G20 members in the task force and DEWG.

Coordinating with other international organisations on public digital services

A prospective G20 DPI task force should coordinate with other bodies and initiatives to mitigate duplication and fragmentation of international DPI efforts. One key reference point for coordination could be the recommendations of the SDG Digital Investment Framework of the International Telecommunications Union and the Digital Impact Alliance.[19] The potential task force should also involve representatives from the World Bank, which administers two programmes—Identification for Development (ID4D) and Government-to-Person Payments (G2Px)—to harness digital technologies for key services like identification and payments.[20] Finally, it should consider inviting a representative of the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Tech Envoy to explore how the G20's work on DPI can feed into the ongoing process for a Global Digital Compact for "shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future".[21]

Attribution: Christoph Meinel, Sharinee L. Jagtiani, and David Hagebölling, "Towards a Multilateral Framework for Digital Public Infrastructure," *T20 Policy Brief*, May 2023.

Endnotes

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