Photo by Fabian Alfvegren

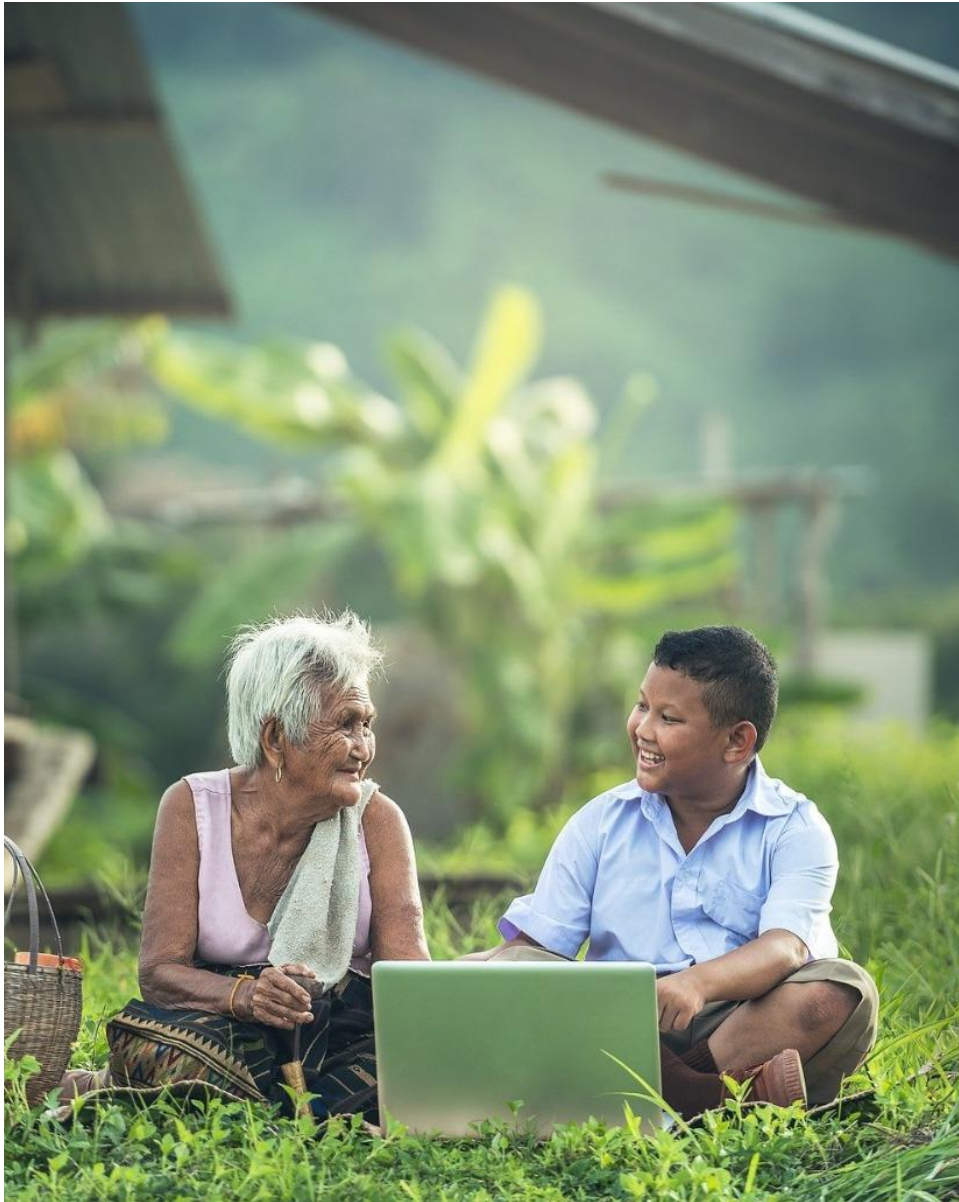Digital Public Goods Alliance

**5 Year Strategy (2021-2026)**

# Digital Public Goods Alliance
**5 Year Strategy (2021-2026)**

Promoting digital public goods to create a more
equitable world

June 2021

The Digital Public Goods Alliance is a multi-stakeholder initiative which aims to accelerate the attainment of the sustainable development goals in low- and middle-income countries by facilitating the discovery, development, use of, and investment in digital public goods. The Secretariat of the Digital Public Goods Alliance is co-hosted by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and UNICEF and governed by an Interim Strategy Group consisting of: iSPIRT; The Government of Norway; The Government of Sierra Leone; and UNICEF. Many staff, Community of Practice Members and allies of the DPGA generously contributed ideas to this paper.

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# Introduction

*"The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was launched in 2015 to end poverty and set the world on a path of peace, prosperity and opportunity for all on a healthy planet. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demand nothing short of a transformation of the financial, economic and political systems that govern our societies today to guarantee the human rights of all...*

*...They require immense political will and ambitious action by all stakeholders. But, as Member States recognized at the SDGs Summit held last September [2019], global efforts to date have been insufficient to deliver the change we need, jeopardizing the Agenda's promise to current and future generations."*

- *UN Secretary-General António Guterres,*
https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/

The Digital Public Goods Alliance (DPGA) is a multi-stakeholder initiative, launched in December 2019, in response to recommendation 1B of the UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation.

The DPGA was founded by four 1B Champions: The Government of Norway; The Government of Sierra Leone; The Indian Software Product Industry RoundTable iSPIRT; and UNICEF, to accelerate the attainment of the sustainable development goals in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) by facilitating the discovery, development, use of, and investment in digital public goods (DPGs).

A neutral, independent DPGA Secretariat is co-hosted by UNICEF and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), and governed by an Interim Strategy Group (ISG) consisting of the four co-founders.

Photo by Annie Spratt on Unsplash

The DPGA is not a legal entity, but an initiative jointly managed by the co-hosting entities who ensure that the Secretariat is adequately staffed and resourced. The DPGA is dedicated to operating in a transparent and participatory manner that mirrors our commitment to open source.

In the 2020 Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, the UN Secretary-General welcomed the formation of the DPGA and asked the DPGA to continue to work closely with other emerging digital public goods initiatives. The DPGA will continue to coordinate and explore synergies with other stakeholders engaged in implementing the UN Secretary-General's Roadmap through the 1B Roundtable and the UN Technology Envoy's Office.

# How digital public goods help create a more equitable world
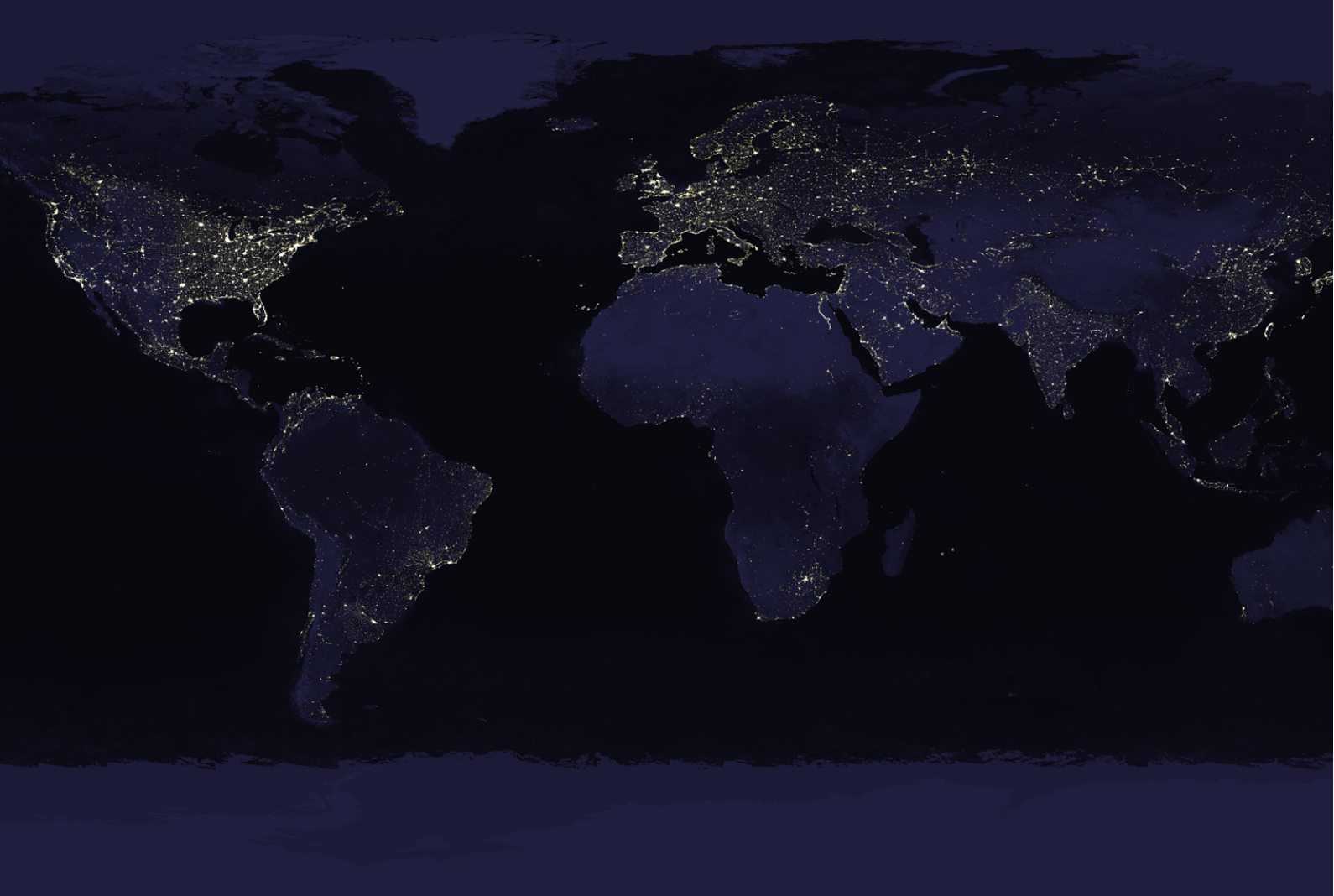


Photo by NASA web map services.

Digital public goods are 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, and help attain the Sustainable Development Goals.

DPGs promote multi-stakeholder cooperation and can help transcend geographical, institutional, sectoral and expertise boundaries that have shaped "traditional" international development discourse and initiatives to date.

As open source solutions, DPGs can be the basis for community building, knowledge sharing, and joint approaches. Local adaptations and iterations can also be shared back with the core project to help

continuously improve it and ensure its long term sustainability. DPGs can also help safeguard human rights through relevant minimum standards and by providing transparency and accountability for citizens and users around how the core technologies have been designed and developed. When those deploying a DPG (i.e. government institutions) maintain the open source license in their derivative, this transparency continues through to the implementation stage, allowing for more informed discourse and accountability.

DPGs have the [potential to promote economic development](#) and address the digital divide by reducing monopolies, powering startups and promoting innovation in the public and private sectors. While the cost of procuring the services needed to implement open source software is often comparable to the cost of leasing proprietary systems in the short term, over the medium to long term the overall total cost of ownership may be lower. In addition, open source offers more control and independence, as well as the opportunity to build capacity and trust through agency. DPGs reduce the risk of vendor lock-in, and provide greater adaptability and responsiveness to changing needs, making it easier for countries and communities to make strategic decisions and take a long term, holistic perspective when building their digital foundations.

In sum: DPGs represent an unprecedented opportunity to fundamentally alter power balances and knowledge asymmetries by enabling countries to access cutting edge features by default, drive their own digital transformation processes, and grow their local ecosystems to derive value.

# Why the Digital Public Goods Alliance is needed

Digital technologies hold immense promise to improve welfare and increase efficiency, but they also exacerbate inequalities between and within countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how technology can both cause and prevent inequities in terms of delivery of social protection, healthcare and other emergency and recovery assistance. The need for quality DPGs that are accessible, openly licensed, adaptable, and quickly deployable is greater than ever. However, the transformative potential of DPGs can not be fully or equitably realised unless we also transform the complex systems, structures and practices in which DPGs are embedded.

All countries, and in particular LMICs, need digital technologies to be able to attain the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. LMICs are therefore prioritising digitalisation to improve public service delivery and encourage private sector innovation. However, because many governments lack the financial and human resources to develop, discover or procure the solutions that best address their country's needs, they are often left dependent on suboptimal solutions with political and/or commercial strings attached, even where a preferable open source solution exists.

▼

> *"If the benefits of increased Internet connectivity are to be realized, it is important that all actors, including Member States, the United Nations system, the private sector and other stakeholders, promote open-source software, open data, open artificial intelligence models, open standards and open content that adhere to privacy and other applicable international and domestic laws, standards and best practices and do no harm."*
>
> *"Digital public goods are essential in unlocking the full potential of digital technologies and data to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular for low- and middle-income countries". Para. 78.*
>
> -       *UN Secretary-General António Guterres - Roadmap for Digital Cooperation*

# The Digital Public Goods Alliance advantage

The Digital Public Goods Alliance (DPGA) has an unprecedented opportunity to effect the transformative change needed through its:

- **Origins** - The DPGA is a direct response to *The Age of Digital Interdependence* which calls for, "the creation of a broad, multi-stakeholder alliance, involving the UN, that can support digital public goods", and has subsequently been endorsed by the UN Secretary-General as a means for improving international digital cooperation. In addition, the DPGA has, from the outset, benefited from the operational experience and reputations of its four co-founders.

- **Community** - The DPGA aligns and coordinates a diverse set of stakeholders around a common vision, strategic objectives, and the definition, standard and registry for DPGs. The community includes governments, UN-institutions and international development banks, international development donors, non-governmental organisations, academic institutions, civil society organisations, technology companies, and other private and public sector stakeholders.

- **Structure** - The DPGA supports, coordinates and facilitates alignment among this community of like-minded organisations via an independent, neutral Secretariat at the DPGA core. The Secretariat is backed by a long term funding commitment to ensure predictability for stakeholders engaging with the DPGA.

In sum: The strength of the DPGA is its strong mandate in combination with the coordination and facilitation efforts of multiple like-minded organisations and maintenance of core functions in benefit of the entire DPG ecosystem. Collectively, this reduces fragmentation and duplication of efforts, while increasing impact across different regions and sectors.

## Vision

By the year 2030, the collaborative efforts of the strong multi-stakeholder Digital Public Goods Alliance have unlocked the potential of digital public goods to contribute to a more equitable world and accelerate attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals in low- and middle-income countries.



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# Objectives

The five year objectives of the Digital Public Goods Alliance are:

1. Digital public goods with high-potential for addressing critical development needs in low- and middle-income countries are discoverable, sustainably managed, and accessible for government institutions and other relevant implementing organisations.

2. UN-institutions, multilateral development banks and other public and private institutions that are of high relevance for implementation of digital technologies in low- and middle-income countries have the knowledge, capacity and incentives to effectively promote and support adoption of DPGs that address critical development needs.

3. Government institutions in low- and middle-income countries have the information, motivation, and capacity to effectively implement DPGs that address critical development needs, including to plan, deploy, maintain and evolve their digital public infrastructures.

4. Low- and middle-income countries have vibrant commercial ecosystems in place to create, maintain, implement and incubate DPGs locally.

# Approach

The Digital Public Goods Alliance will take the following approach to achieve the above objectives:

1. **Align international leadership around Digital Public Goods** - We leverage the global endorsement from the UN Secretary-General, the High-level Panel 1B Roundtable, international forums such as the UN General Assembly, the World Bank & IMF Annual Meetings, G7/G20, regional organisations such as the African Union and the European Union, and a coalition of high-level (c-suite/heads of state) supporters to advocate for transformation in policies, practices, and resource mobilisation.

2. **Establish and maintain the Standard and Registry for Digital Public Goods** - We use high-level endorsements plus an inclusive and transparent approach to produce and maintain an internationally recognised and widely adopted open standard and registry for DPGs. The DPG Standard operationalises the definition of DPGs from the 2020 Roadmap for Digital Cooperation and advances a human rights based approach for digital development. Additionally, we work with open source, open content and open data communities to ensure that the tools and resources required to implement and build open source solutions in alignment with the DPG Standard are readily available. The DPG Registry provides information both on nominated digital solutions as well as those that have been reviewed as DPGs against the DPG Standard. It has been designed for easy integration with, and reuse by, other platforms, as well as for direct exploration by those looking for DPGs. It also pilots the use of frontier technology and other innovative approaches to strengthen the infrastructure for identifying, vetting and contributing to DPGs.

3. **Engage expert groups to advance high impact DPGs** - We convene diverse groups of experts representing relevant stakeholders in Communities of Practice (CoPs) to identify, assess and advance DPGs with high potential for addressing critical development needs in LMICs. CoPs facilitate cooperation and coordination between entities and across sectors/domains which enables the DPGA to identify, recommend, and advocate for DPGs with high impact-potential.

4. **Mobilise and direct funding and resources to effect transformative change across the entire DPG ecosystem** - We mobilise and align donors around existing and effective funding structures that cover relevant parts of the DPG ecosystem, and help create new funding, support structures, and mechanisms needed to fill relevant gaps. This includes leveraging innovative financing and new opportunities presented by digital finance, while exploring how private capital could be raised to support financially sustainable models. We will engage the private sector strategically and sustainably around open source technologies and open content and data initiatives.

5. **Enable the UN System, development banks, regional institutions, and international development donors to better support country adaptations and implementations of DPGs** - Building upon the DPGA's origins, and leveraging the endorsement of the UN Secretary-General, we engage centralised UN structures, like the UN Technology Envoy's

Office and the UN Innovation Network (UNIN), as well as sector-specific UN agencies, the World Bank and other development banks, regional institutions like the AU and EU, and bilateral and philanthropic donors to address and remove systemic barriers that limit these stakeholders' capacity to procure, produce, and support country adaptations and implementations of DPGs. This includes capturing use cases, developing toolkits, and expanding awareness of open source and open licensing options.

6. **Strengthen country and regional capacity to build, implement, and manage Digital Public Goods** - The DPGA works with government entities in LMICs and regional hubs to change the power balance around technology solutions. The DPGA supports the development of local capacity for the creation of new DPGs and for locally managed adaptation and implementation of existing DPGs. We use decentralised processes and frontier technologies to distribute opportunities for contributing to, and benefiting from, the work of the DPGA. We make tools and resources available to governments to navigate public procurement issues, and for supporting and advocating for the development of new government policies and procurement practices. We work to bolster and expand the impact of existing support structures that provide non-financial, technical, legal, and training assistance for the creation, implementation and management of DPGs.

# How the Digital Public Goods Alliance is organised


Photo by R. Farrell c.  ITU

**The Digital Public Goods Alliance (DPGA)** is a broad multi-stakeholder community of countries, multilateral organisations, philanthropic and bilateral donor organisations, private companies, non-governmental organisations and research institutions working together to advance digital public goods.

● **The DPGA stakeholder community** includes the co-founders and other stakeholders contributing to the DPGA's vision and strategic objectives in respective areas of strength, and in alignment with the DPG Standard and definition. It is expected that a formal membership model will be developed as part of the evolution of the DPGA (see below).

● **The DPGA Secretariat** works to identify, inspire, and coordinate the DPGA community to increase impact towards the DPGA's strategy. It operates in a transparent and participatory manner that mirrors its commitment to open source. The Secretariat also leads the creation and maintenance of foundational components of and for the DPG ecosystem, such as joint advocacy, the DPG Standard and Registry, and Communities of Practice. It also leads advocacy efforts that include recommending DPGs, mobilising and aligning funding for existing mechanisms, and the creation of new financing mechanisms to fill gaps in the DPG ecosystem.

● Governance of the DPGA is currently overseen by an **Interim Strategy Group (ISG)** consisting of representatives from the four co-founders of the Alliance (iSPIRT; Norway; Sierra Leone; and UNICEF). The ISG reviews and approves strategic decisions for the DPGA. The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and UNICEF are jointly responsible for co-hosting a neutral DPGA Secretariat until a long term governance structure has been established.

A long term governance structure will be decided upon by the end of 2021, involving like-minded stakeholders willing to make substantial formal commitments to ensure the long term relevance and sustainability of the DPGA.

# How the Digital Public Goods Alliance operates

There are three main types of DPGA activities:

1. The Secretariat performs **core, centralised functions** on behalf of the entire DPGA stakeholder community, such as standard management and review of DPG nominations, maintenance of the DPG Registry, DPG Standard, and DPGA communication.

2. The Secretariat performs **coordination functions across activities led by other stakeholders**, such as collecting and sharing learnings from country pathfinding pilots, and convening Communities of Practice.

3. The Secretariat works with stakeholders to **identify, track and encourage other aligned activities** that deliver on the DPGA strategic objectives, but are not coordinated by the Secretariat.
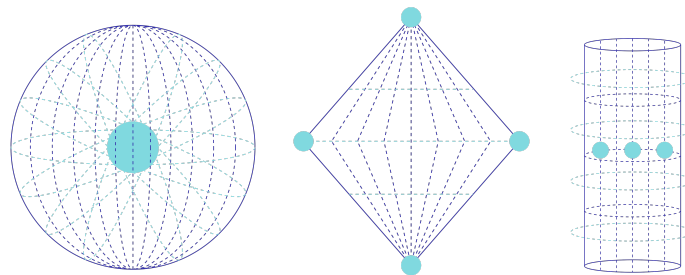
# Appendix

## Definitions

**Digital Public Goods (DPGs)**
The DPGA defines digital public goods as: "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, and help attain the SDGs."

**Digital Public Goods Registry (DPG Registry)**
The DPG Registry houses proposed DPGs that have either been nominated directly or have been pulled together from partnership databases. Once a nominated DPG has been reviewed against the DPG Standard it is considered a digital public good and labeled as such in the DPG Registry.

**Digital Public Goods Standard (DPG Standard)**
The DPG definition has been operationalised into a 9-indicator open standard by the DPGA, to enhance alignment and reduce fragmentation in the digital landscape. The DPG Standard has been designed to be relevant for all DPGs regardless of sector and to cover minimum criteria of general relevance. It incorporates and references  existing guidelines and best practices such as the Principles for Digital Development.

**Digital Public Infrastructures (DPIs)**
There is no authoritative definition of digital public infrastructures (DPIs), however  they are often referred to as *technologies that tend to be "horizontals", solving problems impacting State (taxation, government aid, etc.), Market (startups, enterprises) and Consumers, and are the rails that other solutions "run on top of"*. Their implementation typically enables many other solutions & business models to flourish.

**Frontier Technologies**
There is no universally agreed definition of frontier technology. However, there is a recurring common feature across the different technological advances in that they all "have the potential to disrupt the status quo, alter the way people live and work, rearrange value pools, and lead to entirely new products and services".

**High-level Panel (HLP or H1B)**
"High-level Panel" refers to the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation which was convened by the UN Secretary-General to provide recommendations on how the international community could work together to optimise the use of digital technologies and mitigate risks. The

report "The Age of Digital Interdependence" is the result of this panel, with recommendation 1B in that report referring to digital public goods and the DPGA. It is sometimes abbreviated as HLP or High-level Panel Recommendation 1B (H1B) referring to the specific recommendation.

**Horizontal Enablers**
Refers to technologies that tend to solve problems "horizontally" across multiple sectors and is sometimes used as part of definitions of digital public infrastructures.

**Open Source:**
Something is open source when it can be modified and shared because its design is publicly accessible. For software, data and content to be open source the source code, data, and content must be made accessible through the use of an open license. For software, the DPGA requires OSI approved licenses. For open content, a Creative Commons license is required. For data an Open Data Commons approved license is required. See the full license list for reference.

Digital
Public
Goods
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