GUIDANCE FOR PRACTICING THE PRINCIPLES FOR DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT IN A GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE AND INCLUSIVE WAY

Introduction

Incorporating digital into development projects will have gender and inclusion implications. The below guidance helps you ask some key questions to make sure your use of digital in development helps to bridge, as opposed to entrench, digital divides.

The guidance is structured following the Principles for Digital Development, nine "living" guidelines designed to help digital development practitioners integrate established best practices into technology-enabled programs. They were endorsed by Plan International in July 2017.

Extensive resources to help practitioners apply to the Principles to their work can be found on digitalprinciples.org. This guidance is intended to be used alongside existing materials.

Design with the Users

User-centered design starts with getting to know the people you are designing for through conversation, observation and co-creation. Remember there is no one "user", but different users.

Recognizing digital divides is essential both in the design process and in considering the impact of the solution proposed. Are you designing with users who have different needs from the get-go? Are you including opportunities for potential users with a lower level digital know-how to learn and improve their skills? Is your choice of tech solutions based on lowest common denominator to make sure they are accessible to all? Have you considered including a variety of means – e.g. SMS, IVR, and web - for to help users with different levels of access and digital skills to engage with your solution?

Think about an upcoming design session or workshop you have planned. Have you planned it in a way that allows for a diverse group of users to attend and participate? Have you considered the suitability of the time, timing, location, and content for all participants? Are the tools and methods you use during the workshop inclusive for people with different levels of ability e.g. relating to digital skills?

Workshop participants may hold strong opinions with regards to gender roles and norms, e.g. in terms of whether it is "appropriate" for girls to have mobile phones. These can contribute to entrenching the digital gender divide. Do you have a plan for addressing these in a gender sensitive way?

Understand the Existing Ecosystem

Well-designed initiatives and digital tools consider the particular structures and needs that exist in each country, region and community.

Gender inequality is prevalent across societies, though it can manifest itself in different ways. Consider the existing ecosystem for an upcoming project through a gendered perspective: How do patriarchal structures, gender norms and stereotypes (in real life and online) affect your understanding of the ecosystem? You may e.g. want to explore who controls access to technology, such as mobile phone use in the family, or who decides what radio channel the family listens to.

You may also want to consider what the local tech sector looks like. Are women represented and engaged?
Digital divides are not only external, but exist within project implementing parties too. Look at your team – is your team diverse? Are there differences, based on gender or other attributes, in terms of digital skill levels of team members? How can you address this type of power imbalances?

Design for Scale

Achieving scale requires adoption beyond an initiative's pilot population and often necessitates securing funding or partners that take the initiative to new communities or regions.

Achieving scale thus often means reaching a larger and more diverse group of users. One size may therefore not fit all. How are you designing for scale in an inclusive way? Have you e.g. considered developing different types of content and different means to access that content to additional user groups? When working with partners to scale a project, are you ensuring they ascribe to the values of inclusivity and will they scale in a way that ensures an inclusive approach to gender?

Build for Sustainability

Building sustainable programs, platforms and digital tools is essential to maintain user and stakeholder support, as well as to maximize long-term impact. Remember that you can't achieve sustainability if you design and create with only half the population.

Cost is often a bigger hurdle for women, and marginalized groups in general, than men. How might that affect sustainability considerations for your project?

How can you make sure a diverse group of people can benefit from your project in the long run?
If your project is successful, it might contribute to changes in local power relations and therefore potentially meet some resistance. How are you addressing this to ensure your project is sustainable?

Be Data Driven

When an initiative is data driven, quality information is available to the right people when they need it, and they are using those data to take action.

Many projects desire to be data-driven, however, there are significant gaps when it comes to data about the lives of girls and women. How will you account for the realities of the gender data gap and the lack of gender- and age-disaggregated data? How are you ensuring that the data you collect is representative and not gender-biased?

Having a diverse team, including e.g. women and youth, involved in the design of data collection tools and assessments as well as acting as enumerators can help ensure you gather reliable and representative data. Have you made plans for this?

Are you also including a diverse group of users in the analysis of the data to ensure you get a diversity of insights? When designing community feedback loops, be mindful of differences in data literacy among the target group and plan to address this by sharing data and the analysis in accessible formats.

Use Open Standards, Open Data, Open Source, and Open Innovation

An open approach to digital development can help increase collaboration in the digital development community and avoid duplicating work that has already been done.

Who creates tech solutions can have an impact on their design and functionalities. Women are currently underrepresented in the open source community, meaning much open source technology is developed by men. Have you done a gender audit of the open source products you create or use? Your project can also contribute to encouraging more women, girls and marginalized communities to engage in the open movement and create open source technology. Have you taken this into consideration in forming your project team?

Collecting and sharing gender- and age-disaggregated data is key to address the gender data gap. Have you made provisions for this in a manner that respects the privacy of the data owners?

Reuse and Improve

Reusing and improving is about not reinventing the wheel and instead taking the work of the global development community further than any organization or program can do alone.

While you are encouraged to consider using and adapting existing tools and resources, these may not have been designed in a gender sensitive and inclusive way. Have you audited the tools you are considering using from a gender and inclusion perspective? Make sure you plan to address any potential gaps before deployment.

Address Privacy & Security

Addressing privacy and security in digital development involves careful consideration of which data are collected and how data are acquired, used, stored and shared. The more vulnerable and marginalized your target group is, the more sensitive any data about them is likely to be.

Girls and women are disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence online – how might you balance increasing access to the internet with education about online safety? Also consider that women and girls may do more self-censoring online so this may distort data gathered from social media platforms.

Using or accessing digital devices, such as using an internet café, accessing wifi in a public space, or collecting data on a mobile device, may also expose users to physical security risks, as well as put any data collected at risk. Do you have a plan for mitigating this in your project?

Be Collaborative

Being collaborative means sharing information, insights, strategies and resources across projects, organizations and sectors, leading to increased efficiency and impact.

Collaborating with a diverse group of actors is likely to benefit your project by bringing in a variety of views and perspectives. How will you be mindful of existing power relations between collaborators and seek to break down barriers?

Your choice of collaborators can also contribute to bridging digital divides. Are you working with local and women-led groups and do you partners have diverse teams? Also consider prioritizing collaborating with local/indigenous groups to enhance project sustainability and contribute to strengthening the local ecosystem.

Additional questions you may want to consider

Accessibility – Have you addressed this from the start? Making sure your choice of technology is accessible to a wide range of user from the get-go is likely to be cheaper than addressing the issue later.

Intentionality – Regardless of the formal goal and objectives of your project, does your use of digital technology contribute to bridging the digital divides?

Inclusivity - Has inclusion been a key determinant in your choice of technology, content, and the usability of the service?