



civil society innovation and digital power shift

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Recommendations

Taken together across the diversity of the approaches in this report, the case studies reinforce important overall recommendations for other innovators, movers and shakers in civil society working to advance digital and data equity, influence inclusive future pathways for frontier technologies, and innovate technology-based solutions to help shift unequal power dynamics.

It is critical to **analyse the power dynamics around technology and data**, both in terms of the broader theory of change for the proposed intervention in the system, and any specific tool or data solution being implemented. This aligns strongly with the Principle for Digital Development to 'Understand the Existing Ecosystem'. This may take significant upfront investment of time, effort and resources, but is key to both maximising chances of impact and sustainability - ensuring the proposed approach can add value, is complementary and consider opportunities to repurpose, adapt or improve what may already exist – and reducing risk and 'doing no harm' through new connections, tools or data systems. This power analysis needs to look at how a range of stakeholders - beyond just the intended target users - might use these new tech or data assets for exploitative as well as productive potential, and anticipate future scenarios as well as address the current status quo (see below).

Use this to inform where your organisation and approach can plug in and add value, and in particular if it is for reasons of scale or specificity - such as filling in a particular data gap – and to do this without increasing risk, especially to programme participants. 'Building for Sustainability' and 'Addressing Security and Privacy' will often need prioritising above 'Designing for Scale', and this is where potential tensions between the Principles for Digital Development may need careful consideration. CSO innovation can often tend towards prioritising expectations of scale, whereas a considered range of metrics of success - which reflect the complex interplay of different aspects - will be needed. All three 'data lakes' examples have identified a clear opportunity to leverage significant organisational strengths: in data science, innovative research approaches and crowdsourcing at scale (Amnesty International), connecting community monitoring to scientific resources and assets in academia (Rainforest Foundation US / ORPIO) and innovating accessible, interactive citizen accountability tools (Corruption Watch).

Find ways to move from consultation and customisation to co-creation with (user) communities and partners. The fundamental Principle for Digital Development of 'Design with the User', and the importance of doing this iteratively throughout the programme, is well reflected throughout the case studies, with strong feedback and monitoring processes across the lifecycle. Plan International's girl-centred methodology which works with prototypes proposed by and co-designed with young people is an excellent example of this, as is Code for Pakistan's way of devising solutions with its government partners around specific civic challenges to ensure feasibility and uptake.

Investing in building the offline elements can be as or more important than the online aspects. This speaks very strongly to the critical element of 'skills, literacy and learning communities' in the model for baseline infrastructure to achieve digital equity from TechSoup (see introduction), to ensure that digital tools can be used safely and sustainably. However, it also extends to a range of aspects, such as who and how to use the data generated or managed by the approach. It may also involve growing the relationships and ability of communities to advocate or partner with government to act on the data insights – such as Rainforest Foundation US / ORPIO - or the networks or coalitions which can use that data to hold state agencies to higher standards of accountability and transparency – such as Amnesty International in the USA and Corruption Watch in South Africa.

Connect the technology or data systemically with wider governance around it, to ensure a safe, enabling environment around how it is used, while respecting and recognising local and national contexts. This speaks very strongly to the critical element of enabling policies in the model for baseline infrastructure to achieve digital equity from TechSoup (see introduction). The policy elements have, for instance, been very important for the approaches establishing community connectivity – The Internet Society and Rhizomatica – to ensure that the regulations support this to be possible. Any proposed tech or data solution will not be neutral and there is a strong argument for any planned intervention to consider any opportunities to help influence the wider policy and governance context around it.

Think strategically about the role/relationship with government – which can be a critical innovation partner, especially for scale, but also institutions to be held to account – and promote civil society (and civic tech) collaboration to enhance, exploit or challenge this. The approaches from Code for Pakistan, Rainforest Foundation US / ORPIO, The Internet Society and SOS Children’s Villages International are strong illustrations of how CSOs can connect government-citizen collaboration as a ‘win win’ to create new opportunities to build trust and constructive relationships to improve government capacities, including for service delivery, law enforcement and innovation. In contrast, the cases of Amnesty International and Corruption Watch powerfully demonstrate how CSOs can leverage technology to mobilise citizen action to hold state agencies like the police to account for their behaviour and own use of technology. Either way, these roles in convening, connecting, co-creating or challenging are not areas for civil society competition, but collaboration and coalition-building.

Emphasise ecosystem-wide collaboration, sustainability and anticipation

The case studies also emphasise the ‘Build for Sustainability’ and ‘Be Collaborative’ priorities within the Principles for Digital Development. For instance, Plan International’s experience of explicitly integrating bold joint advocacy commitments with its key private sector partner to influence its tech sector peers. SOS Children’s Villages International has also successfully built local multi-stakeholder coalitions of support and sponsorship to deliver Digital Villages in each of the many different contexts where it has been implemented. Rainforest Foundation US / ORPIO and The Internet Society are excellent examples of thinking through how new technologies and networks need to be linked in some way to a sustainable income source for the communities in which they have been introduced, building them into the local financial and information economies.

With the speed of digital developments and the ability to use and manipulate data with ever more powerful tools, sustainability planning for both approaches and partnerships needs to go well beyond the current status quo of power dynamics and applications of today’s technology, to include strong elements of anticipating potential emerging scenarios for the future.

Significant effort is still needed to get the basics right – i.e. ensuring good data science, robust, reliable infrastructure, skilled, safe and supported tech- and data-empowered users, communities and networks, and enabling policies and regulations – before making the rush to frontier technologies, which will in turn help these to be more equitably and inclusively adopted further down the line. Also, as Amnesty International's approach strongly suggests, while technology like machine learning advances quickly and opens up new avenues for research, advocacy and accountability approaches, there will still be a need for practical, people-centred methodologies to accurately analyse and address specific data problems, challenges and biases.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Collectively, these case studies demonstrate the importance of **principle-led frameworks for planning and practice** for CSOs to contribute effectively to digital equity and power shift. These aren't original insights and largely reconfirm the wisdom of existing good practice, especially the [Principles for Digital Development](#). CSOs should follow these to think through every single aspect of any new digital- or data-related approach - systematically, strategically and with sustainability in mind - to position themselves as effective agents of digital power shift which are also not reinforcing existing unequal power dynamics through their own activities. Ideally, every CSO programme should be able to produce a clear, coherent narrative about how each of the principles has been addressed or integrated at each stage of the project lifecycle.

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