



Ministry for Foreign
Affairs of Finland

Wired for Change - Reviewing Finland's role in advancing inclusive digitalisation

Digitalisation is central to Finland's development policy

Development cooperation on digitalisation - digital development - has played a central role in Finland's development policy and cooperation for more than 25 years. Although digital development has been an integral part of Finland's development cooperation, there is no explicit digital strategy guiding its activities in this area. Moreover, these activities have not been previously assessed. However, various policies and strategies have addressed elements of digital development. Finland's current development policy, as laid out in the [Government Report on International Economic Relations and Development Cooperation](#) (2024), emphasizes digital transformation of developing countries.

United Nations (UN) defines digital inclusion as "equitable, meaningful, and safe access to use, lead, and design of digital technologies, services, and associated opportunities for everyone, everywhere". Digital technologies are driving unprecedented innovation, providing essential tools for achieving development policy objectives. They have the potential to play a catalytic role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the same time, it is imperative to proactively address risks associated with digitalization, which can exacerbate existing inequalities and undermine development objectives.

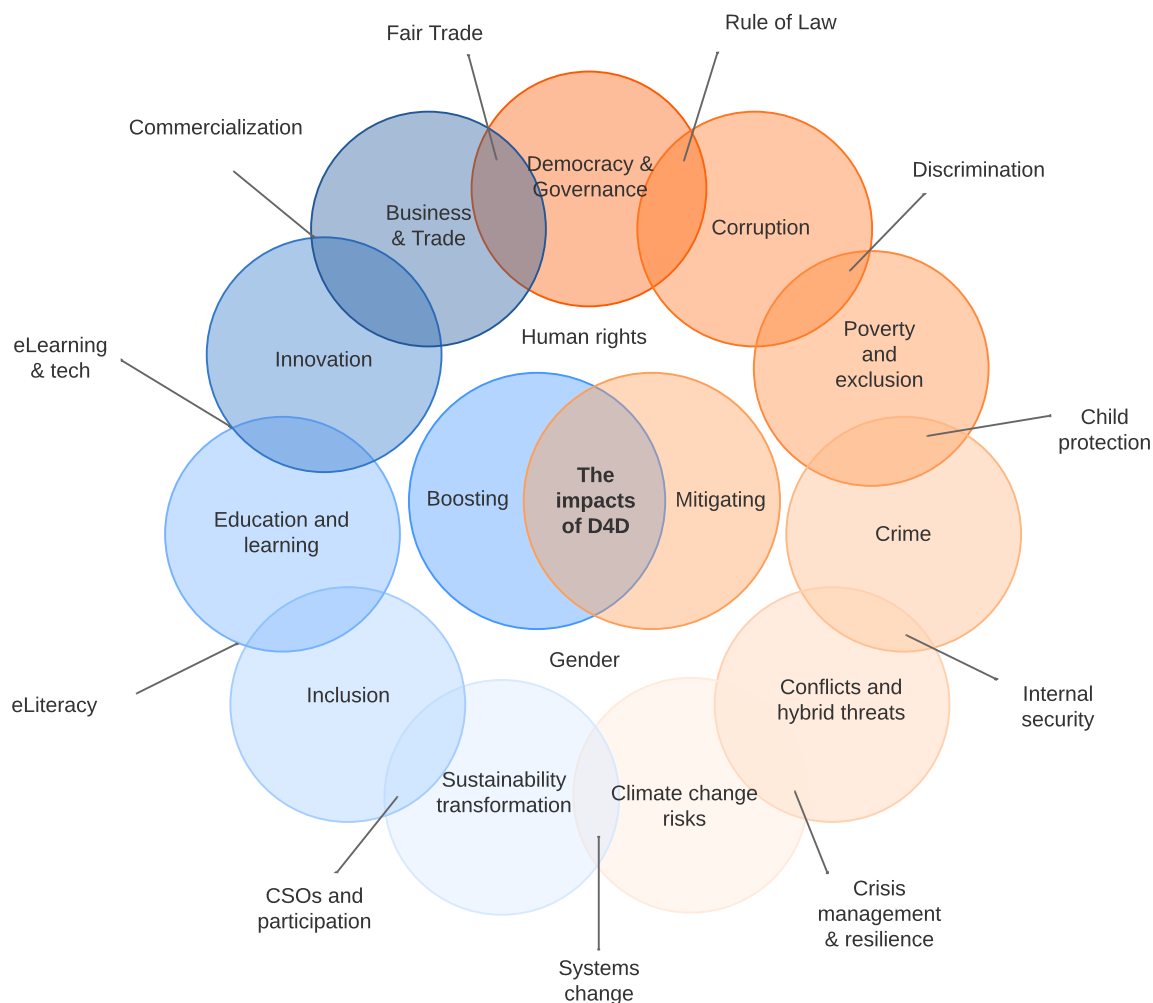
Forward-looking review of development cooperation in digitalisation

The purpose of the Digital and Development review was to assess Finland's recent and current development cooperation in digitalisation to inform future policy options. The review assessed the policy achievements as well as the strengths and challenges of Finland's support. The focus was on Finland's policy and cooperation from 2018 to the present.

Finland's recent and current digital development portfolio consists of: 1) interventions, initiatives, and instruments, in which digital development is pursued as the primary objective, and 2) those where it is a secondary objective or means to an end. The review mainly focused on the former, while selected mainstreamed (secondary or means to an end) interventions were also reviewed.

In addition to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (the Ministry), the users of the review include the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, Development Policy Committee, various partners, actors and stakeholders.

In this brief, the Development Evaluation Unit of the Ministry highlights some of the findings and conclusions reached by the Review Team.



The main impact areas of digitalisation for development.

Support for digitalisation has shifted towards multilateral cooperation

While Finland can be considered as one of the pioneers in the efforts of digital development, analysis shows that a significant part of Finland's current inclusive digitalisation portfolio consists of initiatives and interventions that Finland has engaged in over the past couple of years. At the same time, support has shifted towards more multilateral cooperation and partnerships with the private sector.

A shift towards multilateral cooperation means that decision-making processes become lengthier and more complex as more stakeholders are involved. Multilateral cooperation has, nonetheless, many benefits, such as scale, coherence, and sustainability. Influencing globally and cooperation through multilateral and EU channels

benefit Finland's innovation and private sector engagements. However, mobilising Finnish expertise and private companies can be challenging. Commitment, time, resources, and local presence are needed to fully benefit from multilateral channels.

Finland has contributed to accelerating the attainment of the SDGs...

Finland's leadership in digital development has made relevant contributions to accelerating the attainment of the SDGs, including influencing UN global policies and responses. Finland's increased attention to connectivity, financing, the role of the private sector, as well as human rights and gender equality is relevant for the achievement of especially SDG 5 Gender Equality, SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth, and SDG 9 Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure.

The relevance is best illustrated by the support for UN processes leading up to the adoption of the Global Digital Compact. This included gender equality references introduced through the Generation Equality Campaign. Another example is Finland's influencing on development cooperation at the World Bank and the EU Global Gateway. Bilateral cooperation, although scaled down, also supported relevant enablers of inclusion and gender equality in land use rights.

There are several initiatives demonstrating the relevance of Finland's bilateral and regional funding for digitalization and accelerating the SDGs. Finland has supported digitalization projects for two decades aiming at local innovation initiatives, creation of new digital solutions, and support for entrepreneurship.

...and actively seeks to enhance coherence in its support

Finland has introduced several initiatives to improve the coherence of its support. One of these is the Government Report on International Economic Relations and Development Cooperation in 2024, which includes an overarching strategy and introduces crosscutting coordination measures within the Ministry. Coherence has, furthermore, been promoted through more targeted sourcing of expertise and private sector support through HAUS (Finnish Institute of Public Management) and Finnfund. However, not all stakeholders are regularly engaged, and Finland lacks a mechanism for dialogue on digital development that could ensure strategic engagement with all stakeholders.

Achievements are based on long-term engagement and proactive influencing

The review found that Finland's most notable achievements are based on its long-term engagement in digital development. Influencing and support for the Global Digital Compact and the World Bank's Digital Development Partnership programme are examples at the multilateral level. In the EU cooperation, due to Finland's advocacy, digitalisation became a Global Gateway priority, even though this meant that the EU started from scratch in this area.

Notable Global Gateway achievements included Finnfund's piloting of the EFSD+ (European Fund for Sus-

tainable Development Plus) loan guarantee, a blended financing model for connectivity and digital infrastructure support. Moreover, Finland's support for the launch of the EU's D4D Hub – a strategic tool in implementing Global Gateway – was crucial.

At the country level, Finland's support for a digital rural cadastre in Ethiopia achieved best practice in land tenure security. It enabled access to finance for rural low-income groups, and women-headed households, and scalability and replication through partnerships. Influencing and cooperation had the greatest impact when it was proactive and when it could leverage Finnish value-added strengths.

Achievements from using Finnish expertise can go unreported

The primary sourcing modalities of Finnish expertise in digital development are HAUS' expert procurements and Finnfund's private sector investments. Both actors play a key role in the development and implementation of Global Gateway offers. Institutional cooperation between public authorities, research and education institutions also forms a critical backbone of innovation and digitalisation.

However, successful digitalisation funding in these types of modalities, for example support for the Finnish Meteorological Institute and the Finnish Revenue Authority, is typically embedded in sector-specific purposes and headings. As a result, achievements significant for digital transformation often go unreported and remain overlooked.

Mainstreaming inclusion and joint partnerships are Finland's strengths

Inclusion was effectively mainstreamed across influencing and development cooperation. This was evident in Finland's influence on Global Digital Compact commitments for artificial intelligence governance and data privacy, and efforts to mitigate the digital divide and online harassment.

Support for the Freedom Online Coalition, Access Now, and UNICEF Innovation Hubs in Helsinki are further examples of multilateral cooperation where inclusion and digital rights are prime objectives. At the country level, connectivity investments and digitalization of land use

rights are significant examples of support for inclusion benefiting groups in disadvantaged positions. In addition, Finnfund investments are subject to mandatory impact assessments regarding equality.

Multilateral and EU cooperation programmes present opportunities for complementarity. Joint partnerships allow Finland to focus on its strengths and priorities without compromising sustainability and coherence. This includes programmes addressing the challenges of the green and digital twin transitions, where multilateral and EU programming guidelines, as well as environmental, social and governance criteria safeguard sustainability goals. Joint partnerships can target energy, waste, health, and work-related issues while Finland can focus on connectivity and data security.

Challenges include mobilisation of private companies and maintaining visibility within multilateral programmes

Finland's support also entails challenges and trade-offs. Inclusion outcomes were mixed in bilateral support for innovation and entrepreneurship, and mobilising Finnish SMEs in emerging markets remains difficult. Multilateral and EU cooperation continue to face challenges with suitable implementation models, insufficient funding, and investment instruments that are not yet fit for purpose. This is hindering mobilisation of Finnish expertise and private companies.

Another trade-off is reduced visibility. Finland aims to strengthen bilateral relations with developing countries. However, when support is embedded within multilateral programmes, opportunities to showcase Finnish solutions, maintain presence, and build relationships are more limited.

What should Finland do next?

The review provided policy recommendations for continuing and enhancing Finland's support for digital development. First, Finland should develop a more focused strategy based on its strengths and best opportunities for scale and impact. Strategic dialogue and cooperation should also be strengthened, and Finland should assess policy coherence and effectiveness of mainstreaming digitalisation across the foreign policy.

The incentives to participate in digital development should be improved to increase involvement of Finnish actors, enhance collaboration with local partners, and strengthen synergies between private sector, public authorities, and civil society actors. Moreover, the review recommended branding Finnish expertise in digital transformation to mobilise international partnerships and co-funding for Finnish development interventions.

Methodology and acknowledged limitations

Finland's current policy guided the analysis resulting in a particular focus on the private sector cooperation instruments, the EU Global Gateway, and other multilateral cooperation, especially with the UN and World Bank. The review was conducted from December 2024 to May 2025. It applied a qualitative, mixed-method approach, based on document reviews, mapping, key informant interviews and focus group discussions, peer country case studies, and policy foresight. More than 70 interviewees participated in 80 interviews or discussions.

The scope of the review and a portfolio of interventions in progress limited opportunities to engage with partners and beneficiaries in developing countries. To avoid bias in perceptions of gaps, needs, and the effectiveness of Finland's support, the review drew on external evaluations, reports, benchmarks, and citizen and leadership report cards. It also reached out to stakeholders in developing countries whenever opportunities arose.



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For the full evaluation report and additional materials, please visit:

<https://um.fi/development-cooperation-evaluation-reports-comprehensive-evaluations>