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A councillor attending an online municipal council meeting in Albania.

MOVING GOVERNANCE KNOWLEDGE SERIES #4

## DIGITAL GOVERNANCE

Digitalization is a major trend influencing politics, economies and societies globally. It comes with enormous opportunities, but also bears the risk of leaving already disadvantaged people even further behind. Digital Governance has gained importance in recent years – and the trend is accelerating. Helvetas aims to use the tremendous opportunities digital governance offers, while being conscious about the risks.



## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how digital technology can be leveraged to promote good governance. Governance can be defined as the exercise of economic, political, and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It encompasses the mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, fulfil their obligations, and mediate their differences. Digital technologies enhance these functions by leveraging digital platforms and tools to increase transparency, foster public participation, strengthen accountability, and improve the provisioning of quality public services and goods. By implementing digital solutions, governance can become more inclusive, responsive, and efficient, facilitating greater citizen engagement and a more timely and accurate flow of information.

Promoting digitalization within governance presents certain challenges, however. The risk of digital exclusion, for example, may further amplify the vulnerabilities of marginalized groups. These groups may encounter barriers stemming from limited access to digital technologies, inadequate internet coverage, and insufficient levels of digital literacy. Such challenges can impede effective participation in governance processes, consequently restricting opportunities for low-income communities, women, youth, and persons with disabilities.

Mitigating these risks requires the digitalization process in governance to be democratized, ensuring accessibility for all segments of the population. This democratization can be achieved by enhancing tailored training for vulnerable groups, providing affordable devices, and establishing digital infrastructure in underserved regions. The interplay between the public sector, private sector, and civil society is fundamental to advancing digital inclusion through effective digital policy while ensuring connectivity and digital infrastructure are available to the broader population.

Helvetas engages in a collaborative approach, integrating public, private, and civil society efforts to promote digitally inclusive governance for all individuals, wherein digital solutions lead to transformative impacts. Helvetas is actively involved in numerous projects across various countries to enhance digital governance, empowering local partners and stakeholders to leverage Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D). These initiatives aspire to create sustainable impacts and systemic change by amplifying the voices of marginalized communities and enhancing opportunities for meaningful participation by civil society, the private sector, and governmental institutions in decision-making processes. The projects are designed to strengthen the capacity of public institutions to provide gender- and youth-responsive services and to develop transformative policies that promote social cohesion and inclusivity.

This paper highlights three distinct projects implemented by Helvetas in three countries, which have effectively utilized ICT4D solutions to advance good governance. In Nepal, Helvetas has facilitated simplified access to public services by establishing a smart help desk; in Albania, user-friendly municipal council websites have increased the transparency of municipal councils; and in Serbia, the e-consultation process has resulted in more participatory policymaking. The insights derived from these three cases are intended to serve as exemplary practices for other practitioners seeking to expand their digital governance initiatives. Furthermore, these cases address challenges related to digital inclusion, data security, digital literacy, and the cultivation of trust between citizens and public institutions, which are essential for the success of digital governance initiatives.

## NEPAL – SIMPLIFYING CITIZENS' ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES RELATED INFORMATION

Nepal is digitizing fast. From 2009 to 2022, the percentage of individuals using the internet grew from 2 percent to 50 percent. For every 100 people, there were 127 mobile phone subscriptions in 2021, placing Nepal above Switzerland with 123 subscriptions. The expansion of the digital infrastructure in Nepal is complemented by digital governance policies such as the Digital Nepal Framework, introduced in 2019. The policy aims at enhancing public service delivery through digital solutions.

The project, Promotion of Youth Engagement in Local Governance Process (PROYEL) is part of Helvetas' Moving Governance Program. PROYEL seeks to enhance public service delivery through digital solutions. It supports local governments with the procurement of digital tools to improve and facilitate the people's access to public services related information. Simultaneously, the project conducts digital literacy sessions to sensitize people on what digital tools are, how they function, and their potential advantages.

### THE SMART HELP DESK

An initial needs assessment identified long queues at the municipality as a major deterrence and obstacle for people to access public services. Therefore, the project devised the Smart Help Desk; an interactive touch screen display, offering detailed information about municipal services on a self-serve basis, including step-by-step information on procedures, required documents, contact information, delivery time, and fees. PROYEL implemented the tool in three municipalities in the Karnali and Madhesh provinces.

First, the project team consulted with the relevant municipalities. The municipalities committed to allocate budget and maintain the Help Desk, ensuring the sustainabil-



With just a few taps on a screen, users can find all relevant information about public services on the Smart Help Desk.

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ity and continuity of the tool. The device itself was purchased from a registered vendor and the software was developed by a local IT service provider. In an inclusive software development approach, design meetings were held with municipalities and citizens to elaborate the tool's functionality, the type of information to be included, the target audience, and the overall operational process. After the installation and orientation sessions for municipal staff, the Smart Help Desk became operational.

The system is designed to only provide publicly available information and does not require users to input any personal details to access the data. Concerns related to data privacy and security are therefore minimal. This design choice helps ensure that the tool can serve as a reliable source of information without the risks associated with handling sensitive data.

The Help Desk significantly reduced waiting times. Instead of having to wait to speak to a municipal representative, citizens are now able to quickly gain relevant information about public services. The successful implementation and improved public service even sparked interest in municipalities outside of the project, with several of them implementing the tool through their own initiatives.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND REPLICATION ADVICE

- While highly effective, the Smart Help Desk is a simple ICT4D tool. Its deployment is relatively easy, as it does not require complex or extensive digital infrastructure. At the same time, it is also a very user-friendly tool, as it is easy to understand and handle.
- Initially, when the Help Desk was introduced, citizens were hesitant to use it, as they did not understand its functioning and purpose. To address this, municipal staff provided brief orientations and demonstrations on its operation.
- Essential for the creation of the user-friendly and accessible tool was to follow user-centred design principles. From the start, the project focused on including citizens in the development process. A range of stakeholders participated in regular discussions and their feedback was documented and incorporated into the final design.
- Ensuring the sustainability of the tool is vital for its long-term success. Early and ongoing planning for maintenance and funding is necessary to support the functionality and relevance of the tool long after the end of the project. As exemplified in this project, municipalities can take over responsibility and allocate adequate budget for the maintenance of the tool.

## ALBANIA – INCREASING TRANSPARENCY OF MUNICIPAL COUNCILS

In recent years, Albania has made significant progress in its digital transformation, resulting in over 80 percent of the population using the internet in 2023 – twice as much as in 2009. Meanwhile, the government has started to implement various digitalisation initiatives. In their *Strategy for Local Government Units* (2023–2030) the government recommended digital governance to be used at the municipal level to deliver government services and programs more efficiently, transparently and cost-effectively. With the online Platform *e-Albania*, the country offers its citizens digital access to public services at the national level.

Helvetas' *Bashki te Forta* or 'Strong Municipalities' project aims at increasing the transparency of municipal councils and enabling the digital involvement of citizens to influence municipal councils' policy- and decision-making. For this digital transformation, the project focused on four key points: Changing the mindset of all stakeholders, detailing duties, tasks and responsibilities, ensuring adherence to rules and procedures, and supporting the municipal councils with their digital infrastructure.

### USER-FRIENDLY MUNICIPAL COUNCIL WEBPAGES

A key activity was the development of user-friendly interfaces of the municipal councils' websites. These interfaces allow live broadcasting of council meetings, timely publication of agendas and meeting documents, and online submission of citizen complaints, requests, and initiatives. The interface was integrated in the already existing websites of the municipalities.

First, legal compliance checks were carried out to ensure adherence to Albania's transparency laws. Councils were then provided with equipment for live broadcasting, alongside training for councilors and staff on citizen interaction and content management as well as on-the-job technical assistance. The council interfaces were developed by a collaborative group consisting of council secretaries, municipal councils' ICT staff, and the private companies that maintain the municipal websites. The municipalities committed to allocating budget for the maintenance of the council interfaces. The project team acted in a supportive role, coaching the groups and providing support when requested.

The result is a comprehensive digital repository with council meeting broadcasts, documents and registers. Digital technology significantly contributed to good governance through greater transparency in councils' processes and decisions. Furthermore, as the number of citizens watching the council meetings increased, so did



Albanian citizens now have access to live broadcasts and recordings of their municipal councils

the councilors' accountability. As a result, the councils started to better implement their rules of procedures and improve the dynamic between the political majority and the opposition.

### LESSONS LEARNED AND REPLICATION ADVICE

- Initially, the project faced some resistance from municipal council members who were hesitant to open their meetings to the public. This was addressed through awareness raising. In trainings, coachings and meetings, the project highlighted the importance of transparency and the chance to improve local governance. Most municipal councils in Albania now broadcast their meetings live and they are well-attended by local citizens and citizens living abroad.
- In the beginning, citizens were reluctant to use the digital tools to interact with the councils and their members. To overcome this, the project organised open days, where citizens could visit their municipal councils. Furthermore, the project instructed the leadership and staff of the councils to properly use and maintain the interface to build trust among citizens in the quality of the webpages. Now, citizens regularly interact with elected officials through the website, increasingly demanding accountability.
- Key to replicating the municipal council website interfaces is the sensitisation of elected officials so that they understand the importance of the digital solution for improving local governance and responding to the needs of the community. The support from mayors is essential to enforce relevant regulations. The support from councilors is necessary to implement livestreaming of council meetings and ensure a fruitful inclusion and interaction with citizens.

Within 12 years, the percentage of people with access to internet in Serbia doubled, from 42 percent in 2011 to 85 percent in 2023. The Serbian government's focus on digitalisation is most notably seen in its Office for IT and eGovernment, tasked with designing, harmonizing, developing and implementing eGovernment and related information systems. In 2019, the Office launched the Enabling Digital Governance in Serbia (EDGe) project to improve the access, quality, and efficiency of selected e-government services. As one of its main components, EDGe promotes the use of ICTs in the provision of public services to citizens and businesses, including standards, procedures, and digital infrastructure.

Helvetas' Municipal Economic Development (MED) project aims at utilizing digital tools to improve democratic practices and public services in Serbia. The project built on an existing eConsultation Portal, which had proven successful in boosting public participation at the national level.

### E-CONSULTATION PORTAL

MED developed the Portal further by integrating local governments. The Portal enables information exchange, document access, and real-time feedback, creating a dynamic environment for governance.

The implementation required extensive collaboration between national and local governments, IT experts, and

civil society organizations. The project provided technical support and trained local government officials. A local provider was contracted to expand the Portal's capabilities to allow local governments to publish their own documents and conduct consultations and public hearings on the platform. The provider also improved the Portal's user interface to ensure a more intuitive experience for both public servants and citizens, simplifying document submission and feedback collection.

The Public Policy Secretariat of the Republic of Serbia, which manages the Portal, uses data generated through the Portal to assess the quality of consultations and public hearings. This aims to strengthen the influence of citizens and the business sector on the processes of decision- and policy-making. Additionally, the data is used at national and international levels to monitor the quality of consultations in decision-making processes across all levels of government. For example, the data is used in reportings to the European Commission, SIGMA, the European Parliament, and the OECD.

The inclusion of local governments on the eConsultation Portal enhanced the management of public consultations, public hearings, and decision-making processes on the local level and introduced a systematic approach to include public input effectively. It enables citizens to transparently track regulatory and policy development and interact faster and more effectively with their local government. Furthermore, it led to a unified platform for consultations and public hearings at all levels of authority.



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By further developing the eConsultation Portal to not only facilitate national but also local governance, citizens now have all information compiled on one platform

## LESSONS LEARNED AND REPLICATION ADVICE

- Existing tools, which are already in use and supported by national or local governments should be fostered, rather than rivaled with a new tool. This increases the likelihood of long-term sustainability and local ownership.
- The local context has a significant impact on the feasibility of the Portal. It requires sufficient IT infrastructure and technical support, well-trained administrators and users, a supportive legal framework and sufficient funding sources.
- What facilitates replication of the Portal in diverse governmental and legal frameworks (within Serbia and beyond) is its modular design. It is built from multiple independent but interconnected modules and is based on adaptable technology. For example, there is a commenting module, a reporting module, a survey module, etc. Each one works independently but can be combined with others to form a whole. A key factor for successful replication is the technological adaptability of the Portal to the new hosting environment. Operational replication, that is including a wider use of the Portal within local self-governments in Serbia is also possible. This would, however, require adjustments in administrative processes and capacity building to ensure widespread and standardised use. This includes training employees, providing implementation support, and closely following the challenges that local self-governments may encounter during adoption.
- It is important to engage with local governments early on to raise awareness of the digital tool and ensure their active engagement in the digital consultation process. This ensures that the tool is aligned to the needs of local governments and ownership over its functioning and maintenance is considered from the beginning.

## CONCLUSION

The three cases from Nepal, Albania, and Serbia illustrate how ICT4D tools can foster good governance, by enhancing transparency, citizen engagement, and service delivery. They highlight both the potential and complexities of digital transformation in public administration and affairs.

In Nepal, the PROYEL project shows that even simple digital solutions can create significant impact if they are designed with user needs in mind. The Strong Municipalities project in Albania emphasizes the importance of raising awareness to promote transparency. In Serbia, the MED project showcases the advantage of leveraging existing digital tools rather than creating new ones from scratch.

Successful digital tools are intuitive, accessible, and tailored to the needs of both citizens and local governments. Projects must involve users in design and testing phases to prevent or at least mitigate resistance and ensure adoption. Furthermore, they need to be aligned with the legal framework of the country, supported by adequate IT infrastructure, rely on sufficient digital literacy in the population and be sustainably funded. For this matter, ICT4D projects must go beyond initial implementation by establishing financial, technical, capacity-building and institutional mechanisms for long-term maintenance and inclusivity.



**HELVETAS** Swiss Intercooperation

Weinbergstr. 22a, PO Box, CH - 8021 Zurich  
Maulbeerstr. 10, PO Box, CH - 3001 Bern  
info@helvetas.org, www.helvetas.org