# CONCORD

European Confederation of NGOs working on
sustainable development and international cooperation

# DEMYSTIFYING THE PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACH FOR THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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The EU has started using the term 'human centric approach' increasingly regularly in its discourse and policy documents in the field of digital policy and digital for development. As a result, various definitions are available.[1] CONCORD chooses to refer to a "people-centred approach" that reflects the value of each individual person, as opposed to the term human, which is neutral and disconnected from individuals. In 2022, the Digital for Development (D4D) Hub linked to DG INTPA took concrete steps to seek inputs from various stakeholders and to formulate the following definition:

The human-centric approach aims to "Foster inclusive digital economies and societies in which all citizens – notably women and young people – have equal opportunities to participate in the digital world. The human-centric approach puts people at the heart of the digital transformation – driven by people's needs, fundamental rights and intersectional challenges to closing digital divides".[2]

**CONCORD would like to encourage the stakeholders involved in EU external digital policy and actions to prioritise this approach, by developing concrete frameworks, guidance and tools to support its implementation, and to evaluate and report on its impact. We believe it is a key concept to translate commitments into action and ensure digital equality for all.**

In 2022, we engaged on the question of the people-centred approach to digitalisation with a few partner organisations, some based in Africa and some globally. As a result of the exchanges, we identified central elements that set a framework for the people-centred approach, and we developed recommendations for the EU. This brief presents these findings and gathers several resources to take this discussion further.

## Technology is not a magic wand

Before diving into the elements identified, we believe it is essential to start with a reflection. Given the opportunities it offers, digitalisation is often seen as the solution to many issues. However, it is important to be aware that it can also create risks and divides. Being aware of the risks as well as the advantages is the only way the EU can make the digital transformation work for all people.

Technology is not a magic wand. It is not a given that it will help promote, protect, respect and fulfil human rights; it all depends on how it is designed, and that is not neutral. There is always a person responsible for designing technologies and any person has biases, prejudices, ideas, cultural variability, etc., while the people using technology might have different needs and experiences. For instance, it is well known that the underrepresentation of women or people of colour in the tech sector and in the data that shapes artificial intelligence leads to technology that does not respond to their needs and that reproduces gender and racial bias. Similarly, technology is often not designed with children in mind, while they are a growing user base constituting an estimated one-third of internet users globally. They often use technology that is not adapted to their needs, with a high risk of exposure to harmful content. For some persons with disabilities, the technological solution may not always be accessible, and alternatives are required.

All stakeholders must remain critical and consider:

- Is the problem we are trying to solve in need of a digital solution?
- Can digital technology meaningfully address the problem?
- Is there infrastructure in place to support a tech solution and make it sustainable in the existing ecosystem?
- Is the solution proposed inclusive, accessible and affordable to all?
- And importantly, **who decides whether digital is needed or not?**

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1   See for example DG INTPA's website; a 2020 speech from Commissioner Vestager, the 2022 Declaration on European digital rights and principles.
2   See the D4D Hub principles here: https://d4dhub.eu/

# The five elements needed for a people-centred approach



## 1. An inclusive digital transformation

The first element of the people-centred approach is people. In order to put people's needs and rights at the centre of the digital transformation, and to create policies that do no harm, it is important to identify who are the people under discussion, what is their particular context, concerns and needs, who might be excluded from policies and actions and how to prevent it. The element of an inclusive digital transformation goes hand-in-hand with participation.

- In its actions, the EU should prioritise those who are furthest behind and put availability, accessibility, affordability and inclusivity at the heart of the digital transformation.
- The EU must ensure that its policies and actions fully recognise the online and offline systems that exist and how a given digital policy or solution may improve people's lives or, on the contrary, create barriers and exclusion.
- Inclusion cannot be achieved without an **intersectional approach**[3] that considers how multiple identities and the social and economic context, in addition to the existing state of digital development in a given country, influence outcomes for different groups of people.

- It is important to **involve different groups of people at all stages** of digital interventions and in the design of digital technology to ensure local ownership and long-term sustainability, e.g. people with disabilities, people living in rural and remote areas, women, children and youth.[4]
- We encourage the EU to apply feminist, a **gender-transformative lens** to the digital transformation to make it inclusive of people of all genders.
- The **design of technology** should pay particular attention to safety, the needs of diverse users, as well as transparency and accountability.[5] In particular, child safety should be ensured by design.[6]
- The EU should support **open, secure and affordable access to the internet,** where content on the internet and on various platforms is guaranteed to all irrespective of a person's language, geographical location, income, education, gender and social status and other factors, and safeguarded against surveillance by governments or companies.

### Feminist Principles of the Internet
The Feminist Principles of the Internet were developed by feminist organisations from 2014 to 2016 and provide a framework to address gender equality in a digital world. There are 17 principles grouped under five clusters: Access, Movements, Economy, Expression, Embodiment.

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3   CONCORD provides a definition of intersectionality in its 2019 report "Inequalities Unwrapped", box 3 page 7.

4   A full list of grounds for discrimination can be found in the UDHR (Art. 2).

5   The Principles for Digital Development developed by a group of international donors and multilateral organisations provide a strong basis for the design of accessible, inclusive, participatory and efficient digital solutions.

6   Child safety by design that works against online sexual exploitation of children, Down to Zero Alliance.
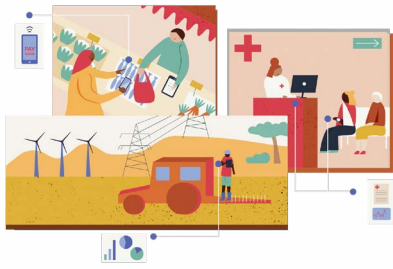
# 2. Participation and online civic space

The meaningful, safe and inclusive participation[7] of civil society and representative groups in decision-making from the get-go, supported by an enabling environment, is an essential condition for identifying concerns, needs and priorities of those affected by policies and programmes. As such, it is one of the central elements of the people-centred approach.

- The EU should actively **involve civil society organisations in the development, implementation and monitoring of digital policies and initiatives.** Civil society at different levels (local, national, regional) each have a role to play and expertise to bring to the table, in policy-making but also in programmes, in the design of ICTs and in their deployment. They can support the EU to identify and address barriers to access and use of ICTs, and to respond to people's needs effectively.
- **Meaningful partnerships and engagement** with a wide range of civil society organisations as well as transparent and structured channels for exchange are key. In particular, the EU must consult with civil society in its partner countries, through the EU Delegations, to get a full picture of the existing ecosystem, challenges, needs and initiatives on digitalisation.
- The EU must **take action for an enabling environment for civic space online and offline,** as a condition for the participation of civil society and the protection of rights in a digital age.
- The EU should support civil society and activists to develop safe digital tools and make the most of the freedoms of the digital space, while mitigating the risks they face online

(surveillance, cyberbullying, sexual abuse and harassment, mis and disinformation etc.).

- The EU should **strengthen civil society's capacity** to research, advocate and litigate on digital rights and issues related to digitalisation, including by supporting collaboration and partnership between civil society organisations both within and between countries, to strengthen civil society's ability to influence digital policy at different levels and in different contexts.

# 3. Policy coherence and environmental sustainability

The environmental impact of digitalisation is a key issue to be considered in a people-centred approach. It is an opportunity for the EU to link its priorities on the digital and green transformation (the Twin Transition) and to ensure Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development[8] across policy sectors, including in particular climate and trade.

- The EU should put in place a framework to **clarify how a minimal environmental impact of digital solutions and services will be achieved and measured,** including through transparency obligations and alignment with climate and environmental commitments.
- The EU should **assess ex- and post-ante the negative consequences** of digital policies and programmes across different sectors and on people's lives and take measures to address them, involving all relevant stakeholders.
- The EU should **ensure that no harm is caused** to people and the enjoyment of their rights by the EU's actions. Lessons can be drawn from other sectors on the negative impact of certain policies and approaches.

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7   CONCORD's paper "7 practices for civil society participation in EU decision-making" defines what we mean by meaningful, safe and inclusive participation.

8   PCSD & PCD - what's the difference? Read CONCORD's guide here.

## 4. Human rights

Protecting and promoting human rights in the digital world must be at the core of the people-centred approach. In fact, most of the EU's references to the people-centred approach focus on human rights in the digital transformation.

- The EU should **raise the issue of digital rights** through its dialogue with partner countries and by consistently including rights in digital policies and regulatory frameworks (access to information, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, etc.).
- The EU should support programmes that **equip people and civil society organisations to understand their digital rights and legal frameworks,** to support their role in holding governments and private tech companies accountable for data breaches, and politically motivated internet and social media blockages.
- The EU should unequivocally **condemn internet shutdowns** as an infringement on the right to information and freedom of press and expression.

### Using the people-centred approach as a compass in multilateral spaces

There is a proliferation of spaces at regional and global level where digital governance is being shaped. The people-centred approach is a useful framework and guidance for the EU to ensure a consistent and coherent position across these spaces, to cover digital issues that may require technical knowledge, without losing sight of the people at the centre of and impacted by the digital transformation.

## 5. Private sector accountability

We recognise the importance of engaging with the private sector on digital issues, and the potentially positive role it can play in the digital transformation, such as building infrastructure, digital literacy, promoting diversity in the tech sector, and expanding civic tech. However, involving and regulating internet service providers, telecommunication companies, and other private sector stakeholders is also key to lessening the risk of their impacting negatively on human rights and making their actions more transparent and accountable.

- The EU should **use the key elements of the people-centred approach to assess private sector engagement.**
- The EU should support laws and policies regulating digital technology and online spaces and holding the private sector accountable, including through **enforcement mechanisms.**
- The EU should share knowledge and support the development and implementation of regulatory frameworks on **data protection and against data colonialism**[9] in partner countries. This includes regulating how governments, companies and online platforms store and use people's personal digital data.
- Through its trade rules and regulations on **surveillance technology,** the EU should ensure that technologies being produced and sold by European companies can not be used by autocratic governments for monitoring purposes.
- Ensure **Net neutrality**[10] by mandating Internet service providers supported by EU funds to treat all data on the Internet in the same way and not to discriminate or charge different prices according to user, content, website, platform, application, type of attached equipment, or method of communication.

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9    Or data extraction. See Automated Imperialism, Expansionist Dreams: Exploring Digital Extractivism in Africa, Pollicy, 2021

10   Net neutrality is a core principle of the internet; equal treatment of data traffic by internet service providers.

# Learn more

We would like to thank the organisations that participated in our exchanges and that, by sharing their expertise, helped to shape the content of this paper:

- The Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
- Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)
- Pollicy
- Research ICT Africa
- And ECDPM's Digital economy and governance team

**Additional resources from CONCORD:**
**Digitalisation and NDICI Programming**, 2020
**Digital Gender Divide**, 2022
**Seven practices** for civil society participation in EU decision-making, 2022
**Guide** to Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, 2020

**Want to get in touch with our Digital Community?**
**Contact our Policy and Advocacy Adviser, Salomé Guibreteau**

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bond

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actalliance eu — Formerly APRODEV

actionaid

ADRA

Alliance 2015 — towards the eradication of poverty

care

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eu-cord — European Christian Organisations for Relief and Development

GNDR

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