



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

DIGITAL GUIDANCE: ARE PARTNERS ON THE RIGHT TRACK WITH DIGITAL?



Photo Credit: ACDI/VOCA staff
Source: Feed the Future Digital Agriculture Photo Contest 2018

WHO IS THIS TOOL FOR?

This tool is meant to be used by anyone who is responsible for overseeing the work of a partner that is implementing a digital solution. Partner in this context refers to the entity that is responsible for implementing the digital solution. It could be, for example, a local NGO, a technology company, a government agency, or an implementing partner of a donor agency. It could even be a colleague of yours who is taking the lead on implementing the use of a digital solution.

INTRODUCTION

When a partner proposes a plan to use digital technology within their activity, it may not always be clear how to assess whether their plans are based on good practice. This simple checklist aims to help ask the right questions so that you can determine whether proposed plans for digital appear to be adequate or if there are areas for potential concern that might require follow up. In some cases, these questions may already be answered in whatever documentation that your partner has shared and may not need to be asked directly (such as in a proposal or request for subaward approval).

HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

The checklist has two entry points. If a partner wants to build a new digital solution from scratch, start at step 1. This should be the least common entry point, so if you find a partner submitting multiple plans or proposals that require you to start from step 1, that in itself may be an area of concern. If, however, the partner plans to use or make modifications to an existing digital solution, start from step 2.

As a general practice, you are also encouraged to make sure that any activities that are proposing to use digital technologies are aware of and adhere to [Principles for Digital Development](#). For USAID projects, they should also follow the priorities and guidance outlined in [USAID's Digital Strategy](#).

Before you get started, a couple of things to note:

- In the context of this document, the term digital solution refers broadly to any digital product, service, platform, or device.
- The table below includes some of the key questions to consider asking. It is not exhaustive, and not all questions or answers will be relevant in all instances. If there are other questions you think would be helpful to include, if you have any relevant examples from your work that we might want to cite in this document, or if you have any general feedback or questions, please contact digitalag@usaid.gov.

QUESTIONS TO ASK	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	WHEN TO BE CONCERNED
<p>1. If your partner is proposing to build a new digital solution from scratch (such as an app, computer program, or device), START HERE. If not, proceed to step 2.</p>		
<p>Why is it necessary to build something new, as opposed to using or modifying an existing digital technology?</p> <p><i>The bar for development projects to build a new digital solution should be extremely high. Not only is it inconsistent with the Reuse and Improve Principle for Digital Development, it is also fraught with potential for failure and waste.</i></p>	<p>They should provide a strong justification as to why it is necessary to build something new. They need to prove to you that this is a good investment of resources. Their justification should include an explanation of what alternatives already exist and strong justification for why any of those cannot be used or modified to meet the project needs. It should also make a clear and compelling case as to why building a new digital solution would make a more significant contribution towards their development objectives than the alternatives.</p>	<p>They do not appear to have done their research regarding what already exists on the market.</p> <p>They do not make a compelling case for why building something new has significant value and is necessary to provide a significant contribution to their development objectives.</p>
<p>Who is going to be responsible for building it, testing it and keeping it up to date?</p>	<p>Developing a new digital solution can take significant time and resources. The requirements vary based on what is being built. Generally, you want to check whether the team they are proposing has done similar work before and that they have key roles (like product manager, engineers, and user experience/user interface (UX/UI) designers) in place. Reviewing resumes of proposed staff to make sure that they have relevant experience is a good start, although even better if you can review tangible examples of their work, such as demos or design mockups.</p> <p>MIT Gov/Lab's Don't Build It. A Guide for Practitioners in Civic Tech is a great resource for better understanding some of these issues.</p>	<p>Many development sector partners do not have robust digital technology development teams in-house, so if they are proposing to have their own staff develop it, that could be an area of concern.</p>

QUESTIONS TO ASK	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	WHEN TO BE CONCERNED
2. If your partner is proposing to use or modify/customize an existing digital technology, START HERE.		
<p>How and why did you decide on using the selected digital solution?</p>	<p>Look to see that the partner was clear in their requirements in any procurement documents to identify a firm/consultant(s). They should have also requested demos from firms/consultant(s) so that they can fully evaluate their capability.</p> <p>Their rationale for selecting whatever firm/consultant(s) should be clear and highlight the qualifications of the selected party to achieve what is required, on time and at cost. They should also make clear how the selected digital solution aligns with the Principles for Digital Development, particularly in relation to usage, access, and modification rights, and user privacy and security.</p> <p>In the case of hardware purchases, they should make clear whether such hardware can be easily and affordably maintained locally, including existence of locally available parts and technical support (for repairs and maintenance), as well as its compatibility with any software that they intend to use with it. For example, some cheap mobile handsets may run on older operating systems that are incompatible with certain applications.</p>	<p>Vaguely worded or unclear solicitations can make it harder to evaluate responses. Solicitations that rely only on written proposals or quotes are generally insufficient, unless well-known commodities are being purchased (such as hardware or software licenses). In the latter case, soliciting only written bids/estimates for a purchase order may be acceptable as long as the partner has clearly explained why the selected bidder's ability to fill said order is most appropriate.</p> <p>Their rationale for selecting the winner is vague or does not clearly state why the selected party is best suited for the job.</p>
<p>Who is responsible for setting up or modifying the selected digital solution for your use?</p>	<p>The solution provider has in-house expertise to help the partner set up or modify their solution to meet the project's needs, or the partner has staff or consultants who are experienced in using and modifying that solution.</p> <p>If modifications are required, the partner is clear about their plans for doing so.</p>	<p>The responsible parties proposed by the partner will be learning how to use or modify the solution on the job.</p> <p>The partner is not clear about what modifications, if required, are necessary, how they plan to make them, and what their timeline is.</p>

QUESTIONS TO ASK	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	WHEN TO BE CONCERNED
3. Questions that are relevant to both of the above scenarios. ASK THESE REGARDLESS (AS RELEVANT).		
<p>What is the relationship of the team building/modifying/providing the digital technology and the solution itself?</p> <p>If it is unclear who is going to be responsible for this, seek clarification from the partner.</p>	<p>If the selected team has some vested interest in the digital solution, there is a greater likelihood that they will want to see it succeed beyond the life of the project. For example, if the solution is already independently operated by the proposed team. In-kind or financial co-investment in the proposed plan are other indicators of a vested interest.</p> <p>If the partner is developing the technology in-house--which as previously mentioned is generally not ideal--they provide strong and convincing commitments that they will not stop support as soon as donor funding ends.</p>	<p>If the selected team are simply vendors with no vested interest in the digital solution, they likely have limited to no interest in its ultimate sustainability. They are simply doing a job and getting paid for that work. Once payment to them stops, their interest will often wane.</p> <p>If a partner claims that the vendor plans to eventually take over the digital solution, ask to see a clear, written commitment.</p> <p>The same applies if the partner is doing the work in-house but have not made clear what investments they plan to make beyond the project funds.</p>
<p>Who owns the intellectual property behind whatever digital solution is being built/modified/provided?</p>	<p>In the case of USAID funded projects, USAID <u>generally retains shared intellectual property rights (IPR)</u> to technologies developed with USAID funding. If modifications are being made to an existing solution that was not funded by USAID, USAID would not acquire rights over the whole solution, only those components it funded. Other donors may have other requirements related to IPR.</p> <p>If USAID--or other donor, as applicable-- funding is paying to build a solution, it generally should be made open source so that others can freely use and benefit from the code base. If they are proposing to do so, then that's a good sign.</p> <p>If donor funding is paying to modify/customize an existing</p>	<p>If the project is planning to fund the development of a new solution that is completely or partially proprietary.</p> <p>If the project's ability--or that of their local partners--to make future modifications to the solution is limited or cost prohibitive, regardless of who owns the IPR.</p> <p>NOTE: There are often instances where a project may simply pay a digital solution provider to use their solution or may facilitate uptake of that solution by others without having a financial relationship with the provider. In those fee-for-service cases, the question, IPR is not an issue as</p>

QUESTIONS TO ASK	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	WHEN TO BE CONCERNED
	digital solution, look for signs that the intended users and project partners will retain an ability to benefit from the solution after the project ends.	it will be fully retained by the solution provider.
How will data be managed and who will have access to that data?	<p>They clearly state who will have access and ownership rights over the data, how it will be used, and how data subjects will be informed of their rights and recourse. They are also explicit about all of the types of data (including metadata, such as a device's IMEI number) collected by the solution.</p> <p>They clearly state what protocols and procedures are in place to ensure the security and protection of all data collected by the solution, as well as potential risks and mitigation measures.</p>	<p>There is no mention of how the solution provider handles user privacy and security, if relevant, and/or it is unclear what the terms of usage are for the project. For example, there may be cause for concern if the solution provider also claims rights over project data.</p> <p>To learn more about more farmer-centric data governance approaches, refer to this report.</p>
How did you determine the required specifications and overall design of the planned digital technology?	<p>Positive things to look for include interviews or focus groups with intended users, need assessments with users that also include metrics on digital access and digital literacy, prototype or minimum viable product testing with intended users, and robust analysis of similar solutions to inform design.</p> <p>Ultimately, you want to look for things that give you confidence that their design and implementation plan are based on realities on the ground, such as people's access to digital technology, cultural and social factors, and their ability and aspirations from digital technology, to name a few.</p>	<p>They have only spoken to a few intended users or none at all, and/or the information gathered from them was extremely high-level. They seem to be basing their decisions primarily on what worked somewhere else or based on aggregate statistics (such as overall mobile phone ownership in the country).</p> <p>A couple of years ago, one donor funded project deployed a mobile app for field agents, only to find out after the fact that only a small number of agents had smartphones that could run the app--or smartphones at all!</p>
What are your plans to promote uptake and engage with users?	They provide thorough and plausible plans related to how they will promote uptake of the solution and provide support (and training, if necessary) to users.	They appear to assume that by virtue of deploying this solution it will be used by target users, and/or they appear to assume that little to no technical support or training will be required.

QUESTIONS TO ASK	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	WHEN TO BE CONCERNED
	<p>They also document how they intend to gather feedback from users and how they will use that feedback to iterate and improve the solution, their promotion of it, and their support to users. Ensuring that you have enough flexibility in the contracting mechanism to allow for adaptive and iterative solution deployment will also help to reduce potential future roadblocks.</p>	<p>They make little to no mention about how they will gather feedback from users and how they will use that feedback to improve user experience. Or they explicitly mention that the project will only have access to a static version of the solution, and they will not engage with users to refine the solution.</p>
<p>What have you done to ensure that this digital technology is inclusive?</p>	<p>The partner recognizes differences in terms of digital technology access and ability across a range of stakeholders, including women, low-income and/or low-literacy populations, persons with disabilities, and any other priority groups for the project.</p> <p>Based on those differences, they outline a clear approach for engaging each group, including using differentiated approaches for different groups.</p>	<p>The partner makes broad claims, such as committing to targeting at least 40% women, without clearly explaining how they will do so. Or the partner uses aggregate national data to draw conclusions about the populations they are working with.</p>
<p>What steps have you taken to ensure that the digital solution is deployed responsibly?</p>	<p>They clearly mention issues such as privacy (including PII), cybersecurity, data governance and rights, and take proactive steps to ensure that they are being adequately addressed.</p> <p>Any proposed partners, particularly technology partners, have positive track records and do not have corporate values or practices that are inconsistent with your organization's values or the project's development objectives.</p>	<p>They fail to mention these issues at all or appear to pay them mostly lip service without providing tangible plans.</p>
<p>Who is going to be responsible for maintaining it during and beyond the life of the project?</p>	<p>They recognize the resources required to maintain a digital solution (both in terms of ongoing costs, like server fees, and in labor to update content, gather user feedback, and release version updates) and they have outlined a clear plan for managing those costs.</p>	<p>They don't talk about or budget for any ongoing maintenance costs at all or seem to assume that once they deploy the digital solution that no additional work is required.</p>

QUESTIONS TO ASK	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	WHEN TO BE CONCERNED
<p>Who pays for the digital solution? What is the business model?</p>	<p>They propose plausible ideas to test willingness to pay during the project period. This need not only be to charge users. Various other revenue streams exist, including B2B models (where they charge a fee to outgrower companies, for example, to offer the solution to their farmers), analytics, advertising, host country government payment, etc.</p> <p>It is okay if they do not have a single and proven revenue model, but they should show a willingness to test ideas from the offset that have plausible potential to make the solution financially viable over time.</p>	<p>They claim that it will be free for a certain period, but after that users will pay for it. This almost never works. Once users are accustomed to receiving something for free, they are unlikely to want to pay for it, unless they deploy a freemium model where certain premium content or features are available for a cost. Even then, only a small percentage of users will pay.</p> <p>Or worse yet, they do not address this at all. They simply propose to cover all costs in their budget without mention of who will eventually pay once project funding ends.</p>
<p>How will the digital solution be sustained after project support ends?</p>	<p>They include a sustainability plan within their original proposal or request and take immediate steps upon approval to implement that plan. This should include clear commitments from partners, including the entity that will own the solution.</p> <p>While there may be instances where your partner needs to be the primary owner/provider of the digital solution, unless they have made organizational investments to continue providing the solution after the project ends, they should generally be supporting an external entity (whether that be a tech company, a government agency, etc.) to own/provide the solution. They should also clearly show commitment from that entity to make continued investment in deploying and maintaining the solution moving forward.</p> <p>If substantial project funds are being used towards the expansion of a digital solution, you may even want to request that your partner submits a multi-year financial plan so that you can evaluate their financial assumptions in more detail before making a decision.</p>	<p>They fail to mention a sustainability plan at all in their proposal or request, or they state that they will develop one in a subsequent year.</p> <p>They mention partners and potential solution owners without any firm commitments or expressions of interest.</p> <p>They seem to underestimate what is required to sustainability deploy a digital solution when project funding stops, and that doing so takes significant planning. This may include failure to adequately consider ongoing maintenance of the solution, including server costs, software updates, security upgrades, or licensing fees for third-party services. Or their assumptions about potential revenue streams are overly optimistic and unrealistic.</p>