



Principles *for* Digital Development

A RETROSPECTIVE ON THE
FIRST 10 YEARS OF THE
PRINCIPLES



Authors:

Mark Mulobi (Digital Impact Alliance)

Lee Sutton (Digital Impact Alliance)

This case study examines how the Principles evolved from initial guidelines into a transformative force in development practice. Through analysis of survey data, stakeholder interviews, and implementation case studies, we reveal their impact on organizational practices, national policies, and development outcomes.

The findings demonstrate how the Principles drive more effective, inclusive digital transformation and identify strategic opportunities to strengthen their impact in the next decade.

Their primary aim was to ensure technology would be implemented in a responsible, ethical, effective, and sustainable manner in development work, preventing misuse and inappropriate applications that could harm rather than benefit communities. Fifty-four organizations endorsed these Principles from the start, marking the beginning of what would become a global movement in digital development practice.

The growth and impact of the Principles over the past decade has been substantial. From those initial 54 endorsing organizations in 2014, the community has expanded to include 315 endorsers as of 2024. This growth reflects not just increasing numbers, but deepening commitment from the UN Innovation Network. The Principles have also served as a foundation for numerous other frameworks and standards, including the [USAID Digital Investment Tool](#) and [UNDP Digital Standards](#).

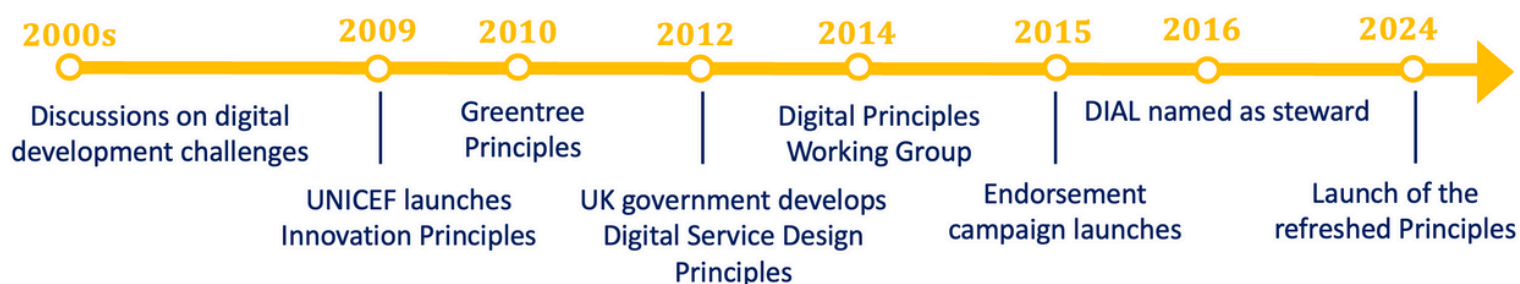


Figure 1: History of the Digital Principles

As illustrated in Figure 2, the Principles have evolved through distinct developmental phases over more than a decade. The timeline captures key milestones from early discussions on digital development challenges in the 2000s through formative initiatives like UNICEF's Innovation Principles (2009) and the Greentree Principles (2010). The formal establishment of the Digital Principles Working Group in 2014 marked a key turning point in digital development, uniting stakeholders like USAID, and UNICEF to refine a shared framework.

This was followed by a 2015 endorsement campaign that drove adoption of the Principles for Digital Development across sectors, promoting sustainable, scalable solutions for challenges in healthcare, education, and economic empowerment. In 2016, the Digital Impact Alliance assumed the stewardship role and committed to building a community of practitioners who could share knowledge, resources, and support in implementation of the Principles.

Recognizing the rapid evolution of digital technology and drawing lessons from a decade of implementation, the Principles underwent a comprehensive refresh process in 2024. This process engaged the community through extensive consultations, beginning with detailed discussions with 60 organizational representatives to assess update needs. This was followed by a series of 15 in-person and virtual consultations that engaged 168 participants across different regions. A working group of 18 senior practitioners then developed draft updates, which underwent a public comment period garnering responses from 61 organizations. The 2024 comprehensive refresh draws on the practical experience of these organizations to adapt the Principles to address emerging technological challenges while maintaining their core values. The result is a refreshed set of Principles equipped for 2024 and beyond.

This case study examines how the Principles evolved from initial guidelines into a transformative force in development practice. Through analysis of survey data, stakeholder interviews, and implementation case studies, we reveal their impact on organizational practices, national policies, and development outcomes. The findings demonstrate how the Principles drive more effective, inclusive digital transformation and identifies strategic opportunities to strengthen their impact in the next decade.



DIAL's role in supporting the Principles

"The principles would not have been what they are currently if it wasn't for very clear and visionary leadership and stewardship from DIAL."
- Key informant interview respondent


The Digital Impact Alliance (DIAL) took on the role of steward of the Principles in 2016, and since then have fundamentally shaped their development and implementation through three critical functions.

Advocacy, awareness and training: Through strategic communications, targeted outreach, and structured training programs (e.g. the foundational Principles 101 coursework and advanced Training of Trainers (ToT) modules), DIAL's stewardship drove an increase in the community of endorsers to nearly 6 times its original size, from 54 initial endorsers to 315. The effectiveness of these efforts between 2021-2024 is evidenced by significant training resource uptake, with 114 downloads recorded and 15 organizations reporting implementation during this period.

Community support: DIAL cultivated a dynamic community that now includes over 900 active practitioners across NGOs, international organizations, academic institutions, and the private sector. Central to this effort has been the Digital Principles Advisory Council which brings together technical experts and senior representatives from implementing organizations and donor agencies to provide strategic guidance.

Knowledge production: DIAL developed a suite of practical resources and evaluation tools that helped organizations operationalize the Principles in their work. Between 2021-2024, these knowledge products demonstrated significant uptake, as evidenced by:

- 929 total downloads of implementation toolkits and guides
- 335 documented organizational engagements with the Digital Principles Maturity Matrix
- 42% of surveyed organizations reporting use of Digital Principles Measurement Framework
- 15 detailed implementation case studies published



The Maturity Matrix proved particularly valuable, with organizations reporting it helped them:

- Identify specific areas for improvement (82% of users)
- Assess their current implementation level of the Principles (76% of users)
- Track progress over time (64% of users)
- Set concrete implementation goals (58% of users)

This robust engagement with measurement tools indicates organizations moving beyond endorsement to meaningful implementation of the Principles in their operations. The Maturity Matrix data also provides valuable insights into common implementation challenges and success factors across different organizational contexts, enabling DIAL to adapt and contextualize Principles implementation to increase uptake.

Objectives and methodology

This case study examines how the Principles evolved from initial guidelines into a transformative force in digital development. Through analysis of survey data, stakeholder interviews, and implementation case studies, this research addresses four key objectives:

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of advocacy and support mechanisms for the Principles, particularly focusing on organizational adoption and implementation
2. Document and analyze diverse implementation approaches across different organizational and regional contexts
3. Assess concrete outcomes of the Principles on organizational practices and development work
4. Identify strategic opportunities and recommendations for strengthening the Principles' future impact

The study analyzed data collected between 2021-2024, incorporating both quantitative metrics from organizational surveys and qualitative data from implementation case studies. This diversity of data sets provides a comprehensive view of how the Principles were adapted to address emerging challenges in the digital development landscape.

Methodology

To evaluate the Principles' impact and evolution, this study employed a mixed-methods approach capturing both quantitative outcomes and qualitative organizational changes. The research, conducted between 2024-2025, combined:

Quantitative Analysis:

- Training completion data (114 recorded downloads)
- Digital Principles resource engagement (929 downloads)
- Organizational assessments from 34 organizations across 18 countries
- Maturity Matrix implementation tracking (335 engagements)

Qualitative Components:

- In-depth interviews with key implementers
- Detailed analysis of implementation reports
- Case studies of specific country implementations
- Documentation from the 2024 refresh process

The study used purposeful sampling, targeting organizations with demonstrated engagement through endorsements, training participation, or implementation experience. Survey respondents represented diverse sectors including NGOs (35%), private sector entities (32%), international organizations (9%), academic institutions (9%), and government agencies (3%).

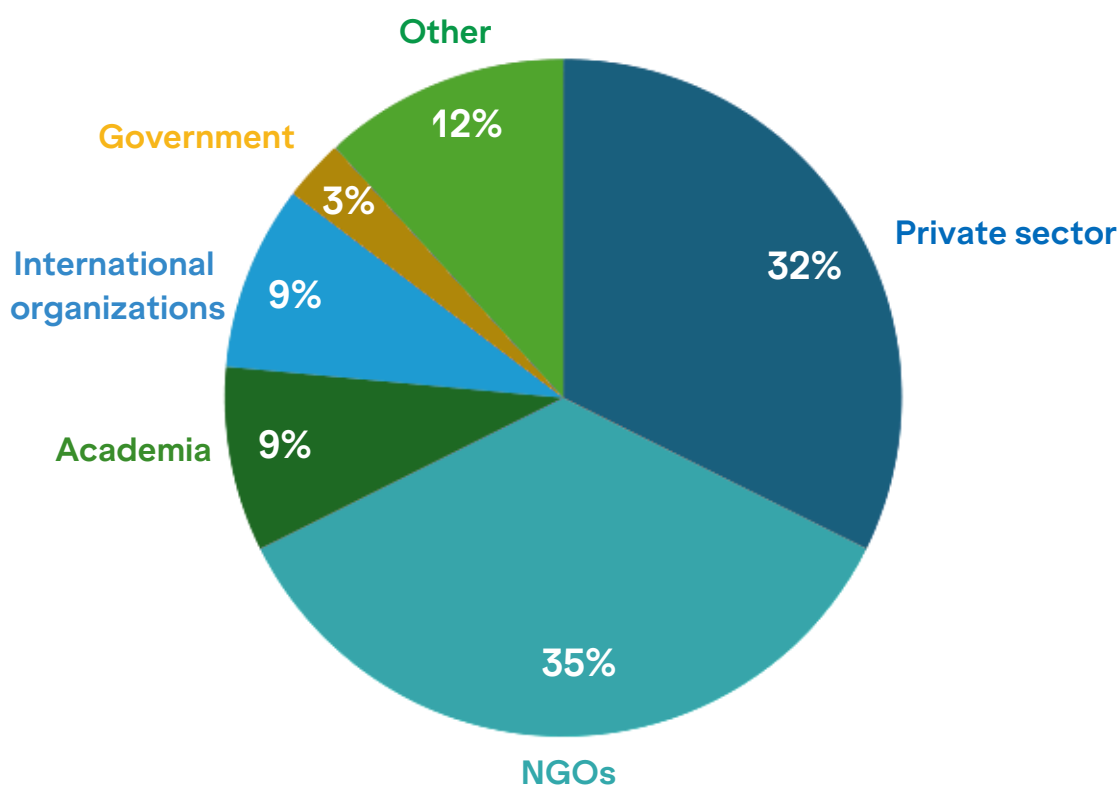


Figure 2: Distribution of implementing organizations

Study Limitations:

- Findings primarily reflect experiences of organizations already engaged with the Principles.
- Survey respondents are self-selected and represent more active implementers.
- Geographic representation is concentrated in regions with active digital transformation initiatives.

Key Findings

The research reveals significant patterns in how organizations have successfully adopted and implemented the Digital Principles.

Survey data from 34 organizations shows that 59% have formally endorsed the Principles, with approximately half demonstrating tangible operational changes. Survey respondents strongly affirmed the relevance and value of the Principles, with 96% indicating they would recommend them to other organizations, demonstrating their perceived utility across different organizational contexts.

Demographic and geographic representation in the survey reflected the diverse implementation ecosystem. Survey respondents spanned 18 countries, with notable representation from Germany (7 respondents), Kenya (6 respondents), and the United States (4 respondents). This international scope provides a multi-regional perspective on digital development challenges.

Organizations consistently emphasized the value of specific Principles, namely those focused on sustainability, human-centered design, and ecosystem understanding, while also reporting challenges with resource constraints and implementation complexities to fully adopt the Principles.



Below we outline our 5 key findings from the evaluation.

Key Finding One: The Principles reached a broad global audience, mainly comprised of NGOs and private sector companies.

The research into the current state of the Principles reveals a broad implementation ecosystem. Survey data collected in 2024 from 34 organizations reveals a diverse sectoral composition, though this may differ from overall distribution of endorsers. NGOs (35%) and private sector entities (32%) show the highest representation among active implementers, followed by international organizations and academic institutions (9% each), and government agencies (3%). The remaining respondents (21%) identified as development finance institutions or independent consultants. This multi-sectoral spread underscores the value of flexible, adaptable principles that can transcend traditional organizational boundaries and move beyond the international development sector, to influence government, private companies, and others who exert influence over digital technology. Additionally, our research identified over 900 individual practitioners actively engaged in implementation and knowledge sharing across these different types of organizations.

Geographic Implementation Patterns

Survey data reveals more concentrated regional implementation clusters in Germany, Kenya, and the United States.

Key Finding Two: The Principles are as relevant to policy as they are to project implementation.

The Kenya Digital Health Act 2023 provides compelling evidence of how the Principles can influence national policy frameworks when champions integrate them into governance discussions.

IntelliSoft, working as a technical assistance partner to Kenya's Ministry of Health, intentionally infused the Principles' language and concepts into the legislative development process.

"The Principles have diversely influenced even the language that is in the Digital Health Act 2023, which is one of the most transformative pieces of legislation regarding digital health on the African continent," explained IntelliSoft's CEO.

This policy influence represents a significant evolution in the Principles' impact trajectory - moving from voluntary guidelines to legally mandated approaches. The Act, which governs digital health implementations across Kenya, incorporates key Principles concepts like user-centered design, data protection, and system interoperability.

This success in Kenya demonstrates how strong organizational adoption and regional engagement leads to significant policy impact.

Key Finding Three: Organizations adapted three proven implementation models with distinct approaches and impacts.

The research reveals significant patterns in how organizations successfully apply the Principles. Through detailed analysis of stakeholder interviews and implementation data, three distinct and complementary implementation approaches emerged, each leveraging specific organizational strengths in different ways:

1. Comprehensive Integration Model (GIZ): This model embeds the Principles deeply into organizational architecture through formal toolkits and systematic processes. In the case of GIZ, the German development bank, the Principles have become an anchor point on which they build their programs. As a GIZ representative explained, "The Principles have guided the approach of how GIZ shapes internal and external technology transformation projects. There is even guidance for each principle and how it translates into GIZ perspectives and processes." This approach creates organization-wide alignment where the Principles inform not just individual projects, but entire digital strategies and governance frameworks. Through their funding for external digital transformation projects, GIZ also amplifies the Principles beyond their own work. Given its role as a top global funder, it is reasonable to assume that GIZ has helped to extend the reach of the Principles beyond its own organizational walls via funded projects.

2. Technical Implementation Model (IntelliSoft): This approach focuses on embedding the Principles directly into technical workflows and product development methodologies. This model ensures all technical decisions are filtered through the Principles, affecting everything from code architecture to client engagement. This is demonstrated in the work of IntelliSoft – a Principles endorser based in Nairobi Kenya that works on digital health solutions, particularly for Low- to Medium- Income Countries. IntelliSoft's CEO emphasized, "It's not just a Principle, it's actually our practice and it's in our policies, and it's also built into our procedures." The effectiveness of this approach is demonstrated by IntelliSoft's contribution to Kenya's Digital Health Act 2023, showing how technical implementation can influence national policy. Through this model, the impact of the Principles is felt beyond IntelliSoft – by people and organizations engaging with or impacted by the Health Act.

3. Funding Alignment Model (Fingo): This model leverages the Principles as a framework for resource allocation decisions. Fingo, an umbrella organization of approximately 260 Finnish NGOs working in sustainable development, demonstrates this approach through their funding strategy. As the ICT for development specialist explained, "We require those organizations applying for funding to clearly show how they will use and adhere to the Principles for Digital Development" By anchoring funding to Principles alignment, this model creates powerful incentives for adoption throughout partner ecosystems. Through this model, the impacts of DIAL's efforts to build out the community of endorsers becomes clear, with Fingo requiring organizations to demonstrate how they will operationalize the Principles.

These models demonstrate that successful adoption shares common elements despite different entry points: clear leadership commitment, dedicated resources, regular capacity building, strong monitoring systems, and context-specific adaptation. They also all demonstrate how DIAL's efforts as the steward can be leveraged and amplified by endorsers. With every new endorsing organization, the Principles can reach a new region, sector, or community.



Key Finding Four: Despite these successful models, implementation challenges remain.

While these models prove successful, organizations reported facing specific challenges in implementation:

- Resource constraints (64%)
- Technical capacity limitations (58%)
- Contextual adaptation difficulties (52%)

Interviews with stakeholders revealed additional nuances to these challenges. As one GIZ representative noted, "Tying the Principles with practice is not something [the stewardship body] can do," highlighting the need for implementation support that respects organizational contexts rather than prescriptive approaches.

For technical implementers like IntelliSoft, a key challenge is turning the Principles from theoretical concepts into practical solutions within regulated environments, such as healthcare or government frameworks. This requires ongoing collaboration with policy stakeholders like regulators or government officials to ensure the Principles align with strict legal and operational standards, a process that demands considerable time, expertise, and resources.

Organizations using the Funding Alignment model, like Fingo, face challenges ensuring authentic implementation rather than superficial compliance. This requires developing robust assessment frameworks to evaluate genuine Principles adoption.

These challenges highlight the need for contextual support mechanisms, capacity building programs, and measurement frameworks that accommodate diverse implementation approaches while maintaining the Principles' integrity.



Key Finding Five: The Principles' influence extends beyond formal endorsements through undocumented implementation.

A critical discovery from the research is the extent of implementation occurring without the stewardship body's awareness. While formal endorsement metrics show impressive growth to 315 organizations, our interviews revealed substantial "unrecognized integration" - where organizations apply the Principles extensively without visible connection to the formal community.

The GLZ experience exemplifies this phenomenon—their comprehensive internal application of the Principles, including regular meetings, dedicated toolkits, and integration into major initiatives like the Digital Transformation Centers, had remained largely invisible to the broader community. "If I go now on Microsoft Teams and search for Principles for Digital Development, I'm sure I'll see two or three meetings that have happened within GLZ this year alone." a GLZ representative noted.

This pattern suggests the Principles' influence extends considerably beyond documented endorsements, with organizations independently operationalizing them through internal communities of practice. This unrecognized integration represents both a challenge and an opportunity: while it indicates successful organic adoption, it also highlights the need for better mechanisms to capture these success stories and facilitate cross-organizational learning.



Recommendations

Based on the evidence from implementations, surveys, and interviews conducted between 2021-2024, four key priority areas emerge for strengthening the impact and sustainability of the Principles. These recommendations directly address the implementation barriers identified across different organizational types while building on proven successful approaches.

Strengthen contextual support

Challenge: Implementation challenges reported by 64% of participants, despite successful adaptations by organizations like GIZ and IntelliSoft

Recommendations: To address resource limitations and varying organizational contexts, the Principles need:

- Flexible, modular training materials based on successful implementation models
- Region-specific implementation guides drawing from documented successes
- Support for local champions and implementation networks where effectiveness demonstrated
- Documented successful adaptation cases that acknowledge resource constraints

Enhance capacity building

Challenge: High neutral rating (64%) of the practical application of the Principles, despite successful training programs in Kenya and Sierra Leone

Recommendations: To address knowledge and capacity gaps, the Principles need:

- Sector-specific training modules based on proven approaches
- Mentorship programs pairing experienced implementers with new organizations
- Communities of practice for ongoing learning
- Practical implementation toolkits reflecting real-world applications

Build community learning networks

Challenge: Interview insights revealed untapped potential in cross-organizational learning and success stories from organizations like Fingo.

Recommendations: To address community challenges, the Principles need:

- More platforms for sharing implementation experiences across regions
- Regional practitioner networks building on existing hubs
- More translation and localization efforts
- Champion communities that can guide context-appropriate adoption

Strengthen measurement frameworks

Challenge: Despite measuring high demand and engagement, to-date there is a lack of information on adoption beyond the stories documented for this case study.

Recommendations: To support implementation monitoring, the Principles need:

- An enhanced Maturity Matrix based on user feedback
- Sector-specific assessment tools reflecting organizational needs
- Impact measurement guidelines grounded in practical experience
- Organizational monitoring systems that work within resource constraints

Develop a champion-centered sustainability model

Challenge: The survey revealed consistent challenges related to resourcing, which vary significantly by organizational type. While 64% of organizations cite resource constraints as implementation barriers, our interviews also revealed several organizations have developed sophisticated, self-funded implementation approaches without direct support.

Recommendation: To build a sustainable, champion-centered model we recommend:

- Identify and empower organizational champions - rather than attempting comprehensive direct support for all endorsers
- Create lightweight coordination mechanisms
- Facilitate resource pooling across champion networks
- Develop self-sustaining learning mechanisms



Conclusion

The evolution of the Digital Principles demonstrates both their adaptability and enduring relevance. Through this analysis, we can see a path forward for the next decade of the Principles that builds on the fact that 96% of respondents would recommend the Principles to other organizations. The stories collected here show that the Principles can influence national policy frameworks, transform organizational practices, guide technical implementation, and shape development approaches.

Moving forward, successful, widespread adoption will require intentional integration at multiple levels - from initial capacity building through to ongoing implementation monitoring. This next phase will require an evolution from a centrally-driven stewardship approach to a more democratic one. With the growing community of global champions, the Principles can be advanced by organizations, practitioners, and regional leaders on the frontlines of efforts to harness digital technologies for social and economic progress. By following any of the recommendations we have outlined, endorsers can be the driving force to create a self-sustaining ecosystem where the Principles thrive through widespread, grassroots leadership rather than top-down stewardship alone.

Looking ahead, the Digital Principles stand at an important juncture. The 2024 refresh process reinforced their relevance while expanding their applicability. The success of implementations like Kenya's Digital Health Act 2023 demonstrate the potential for policy-level impact when organizations deeply engage with the Principles. With government agencies currently representing only 3% of adopters, there is significant opportunity for growth in public sector engagement.

Through continued adaptation, learning, and community engagement, the Digital Principles are well-positioned to guide the next decade of digital development. The challenge lies in building on existing successful models of implementation while ensuring the Principles remain relevant and actionable in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. This evolution will be crucial in ensuring technology serves as an enabler of inclusive progress rather than a driver of digital divides.

