

# **Inputs to the Consultation on 'Towards a Feminist Digital Development Cooperation'**

**IT for Change**

**June 2023**



## Inputs to betterplace lab's Consultation on 'Towards a Feminist Digital Development Cooperation'

### IT for Change

*In March 2023, the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany (BMZ) launched its [strategy for a feminist development policy](#). The consultation on 1 June 2023, organized by the betterplace lab, examined how [BMZ](#) should adapt its future digital policy for it to be truly feminist, intersectional, post-colonial, and anti-racist.*

### Some Reflections on Digital Transformation and Innovation

There is a tendency to think of technology design and development as if it is a closed system that can be tweaked, however, design choices are always dependent on the motivations for use. The larger imperatives of the economic interests of countries and corporations drive technological design in directions that leave the core of unequal social power and oppressive social structures untouched.

Feminist transformation should be based on an approach that straddles policy interventions that address the marginality of social location and economic justice. Transformative digitalization must be based on a wider ecosystem approach in which the rules of the digital economy and society are well aligned to respect rights, equity, and inclusion.

What is needed is accountable governance of the economy (through economic and social policies), worker rights, public technological alternatives and infrastructures, and appropriate corporate regulation and taxation. This needs to be coupled with encouragement to locally embedded and controlled technology models that encourage the livelihoods and aspirations of the majority that are marginalized, along with attention to the economics and politics of caregiving. This would qualify as a feminist approach.

As Southern feminists have long recognized, there is no gender justice without economic and development justice. This maxim continues to hold when thinking about feminist development policy in the digital realm.

### Policy Change Needs Multi-scalar Actions:

1. We need **more resources directed at digital transformation** in international development assistance commitments. The International Center for Research on Women's [analysis](#) of publicly available data on bilateral allocable aid commitments made by Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members with a feminist foreign policy and/or feminist development policy<sup>1</sup> and their aid commitments for women's equality, shows that population policies, reproductive health, and energy sectors are often deprioritized.

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<sup>1</sup> Namely, Canada, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden.

At USD 2.37 billion, commitments for women's equality organizations and institutions remain a fraction (9%) of the group's commitments to the government and civil society sector (USD 26.1 billion) and a sliver (2%) of their overall gender-focused aid (USD 117.6 billion). The top two donors by volume (Germany and France) also have very low shares of commitments marked as principal and aid commitments for women's equality organizations and institutions. Addressing this imbalance should be a priority and can have a sizeable impact on the aforementioned commitments.

2. For the guarantee of universal, equal, and safe access to platform, data, and artificial intelligence (AI) infrastructures for all women and girls, developed countries need to commit to concrete **Official Development Assistance (ODA) targets**.

The midterm Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) review must generate consensus towards dedicated ODA for such infrastructure development. International financial institutions must be called upon to create new mandates to enable and support developing countries to build digital capabilities for domestic development and gender equality. This can build on an assessment of how to strengthen the UN Technology Bank for Least Developed Countries, and also strengthen technical cooperation initiatives such as the GovStack.<sup>2</sup>

**3. Global digital public goods** like data pools – in health, agriculture/food, biodiversity, etc. – must not become avenues for big corporations to build digital products and services that are inimical to the local ecological systems, livelihoods, and well-being in the Global South. There must be guardrails so that AI models based on global datasets are well governed for the prevention of harm and distribution of benefits.

**4. Digital transformation** to address the gender development divide needs more than harmonization of legal frameworks in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). It also requires dedicated attention to the preservation of collective rights in data resources of all peoples. Three prongs become crucial here to further collective rights in data: collective rights as economic rights, collective rights as rights to self-determination, and collective rights as rights to development and sovereignty.

Furthermore, trade rules should not arm-twist developing countries into inequitable and unidirectional data flows in the name of providing attractive services and infrastructures. Data sovereignty is important for the collective rights of the poorest – a majority of whom are women. Respect for the rights of all peoples to govern their data resources is an integral element of their right to economic self-determination and right to development.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2020, the International Telecommunication Union, together with the governments of Germany and Estonia, and the Digital Impact Alliance launched GovStack to assist national governments in establishing interoperable, secure, and reusable IT infrastructure in support of their national development objectives. 'GovStack' is a set of digital building blocks that allow national public agencies to harness the power of emerging IT technologies, while minimizing costs and dependence on external contractors. The building blocks can be stacked together to easily build need-tailored, yet technically standardized solutions and services for citizen-oriented use cases in administration, healthcare, agriculture, education, and more.

A feminist development policy in the digital realm will be meaningful only when it is also accompanied by a trade policy that is not neo-colonialist. Free trade agreements often push for hyper-liberalization of e-commerce, overstepping trade issues and going into regulatory issues. Data rules under such agreements prevent developing countries from being able to store data locally for tax, security, privacy, financial regulation, or other reasons.

**5. Corporate regulation**, especially in fintech, agri-tech, and femtech services headquartered in the Global North, is vital for stemming the extractive data industry based on the oppression of women workers and consumers. The revision of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Guidelines on Responsible Business Conduct of Multinational Enterprises and the updation of the European Union's (EU) Due Diligence legislation should give sufficient attention to ensuring the obligations of EU companies in safeguarding data rights in their extraterritorial operations.