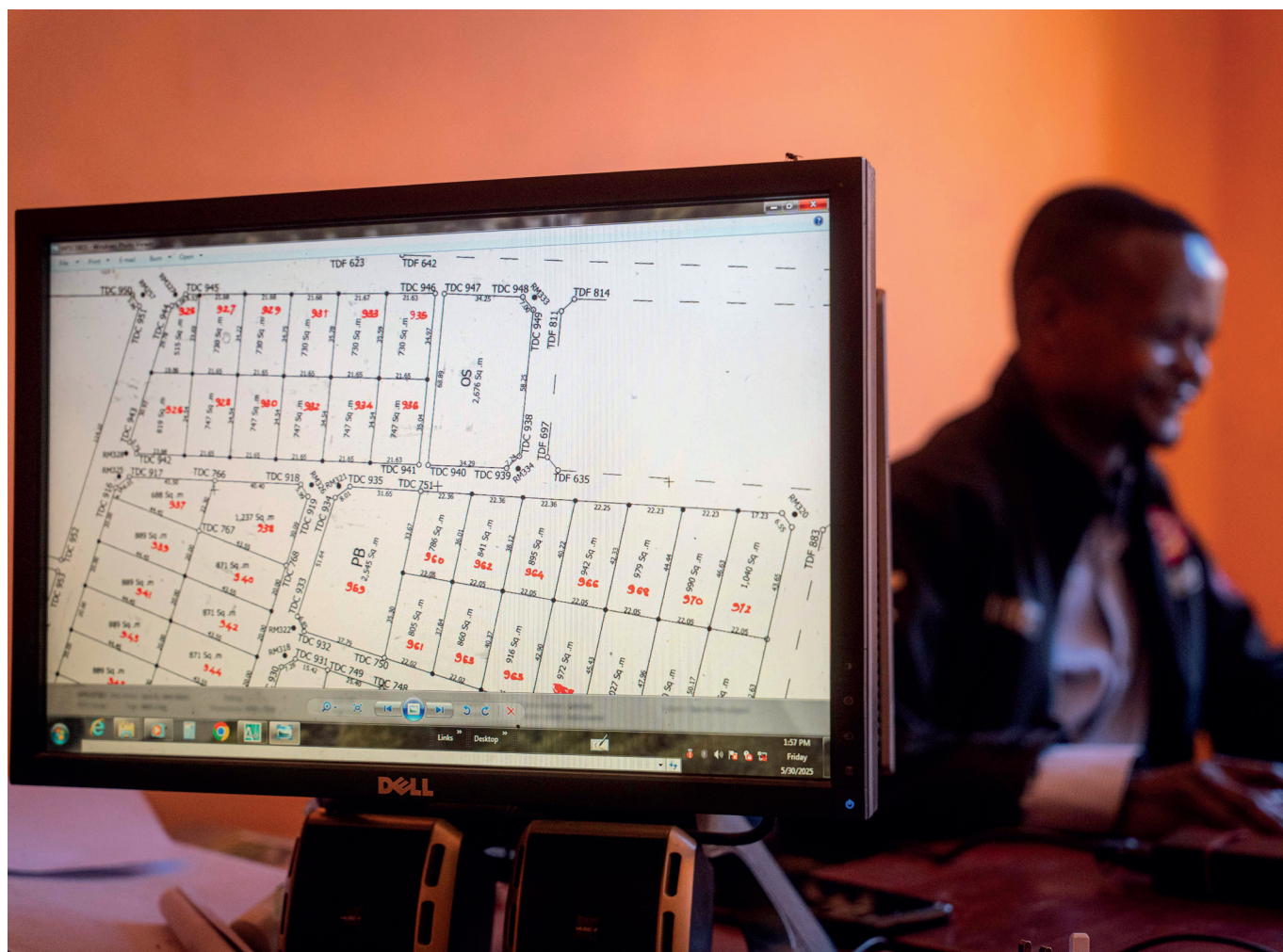




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MOVING GOVERNANCE – REGIONAL FOCUS (AFRICA):

FROM DIGITAL TOOLS TO INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE: PRACTICAL LESSONS FROM TANZANIA AND ETHIOPIA

This publication showcases selected experiences and practical lessons on the use of digital tools to strengthen inclusive governance and public service delivery. Drawing on examples from Tanzania and Ethiopia, it highlights how digital approaches are being integrated into local governance processes to support more responsive,

participatory, transparent and accountable institutions. The publication is intended as a practice-oriented resource for policymakers, development practitioners, civil society actors, researchers, and local government stakeholders working on digital governance and local development.



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INTRODUCTION

Digital innovation is increasingly influencing how governments and communities interact, transforming service delivery, accountability, and public engagement. In Africa, digital governance gained policy and institutional traction in the 1990s, accelerated in the 2010s with the spread of mobile technologies and e-government platforms, and has expanded significantly in the 2020s as governments increasingly adopt digital tools to improve service delivery, accountability, and civic engagement.¹

At the local level, the drivers of digital transformation in governance include the need to improve service delivery, efficiency, transparency, and accountability.² In African cities, rapid urbanization intensifies this need, as growing populations place pressure on housing, transport, water, sanitation, and health services, particularly in informal settlements. Digital tools can support more data-informed urban planning, infrastructure management, and service delivery. At the same time, rising public expectations, expanding internet and mobile access, and the need for rapid response during crises such as COVID-19 have accelerated the adoption of digital governance approaches across the region.³

ROLE OF THE DEVELOPMENT SECTOR

Governments, local institutions, civil society organisations, regional bodies, and the private sector are increasingly leading efforts to strengthen digital governance across Africa. Development partners have supported these processes through technical assistance, capacity strengthening, financing, and facilitating knowledge exchange and collaboration. Regional and continental initiatives, including the African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy and the African Information Society Initiative (AISII), have also helped shape enabling policy frameworks and dialogue around digital transformation and governance.

As part of this broader landscape, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation supports programmes and partnerships that explore how digital tools can strengthen local governance, participation, and service delivery. In 2025, Helvetas convened a regional exchange workshop in Arusha, Tanzania, bringing together stakeholders from Tanzania, Ethiopia, and regional institutions working on digital governance and urban development. Participants included representatives from government institutions, civil society organisations, academia, the private sector, and development partners. The workshop provided a space for exchange



Digital Governance Workshop: Group photo of participants during a field visit at the Nelson Mandela African Institute of Science and Technology, Arusha

ing experiences, discussing emerging challenges, and reflecting on practical approaches for strengthening service delivery, accountability, and citizen participation through digital tools.

This publication builds on discussions from the workshop and documents selected insights, experiences, and practical approaches highlighted by the participants. Key participants included the East African Community (EAC), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit – East African Community (GIZ-EAC), the Nelson Mandela African Institution of Science and Technology (NM-AIST), the President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) Tanzania, Serensic Africa, and the East African Civil Society Organization Forum (EAC-SOF).

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES FROM

TANZANIA AND ETHIOPIA

A range of initiatives from Tanzania and Ethiopia provide practical examples of how digital tools can support local governance processes while strengthening institutional capacity. Helvetas programmes such as the Amhara Local Governance Project Plus (ALGP+) in Ethiopia and Sauti na Nafasi (Voice and Space) and Inclusive Cities for Nutrition (IC4N) in Tanzania demonstrate how digital approaches can be integrated into planning, communication, monitoring, and citizen engagement processes at the local level.

1. TANZANIA: Sauti na Nafasi (“Voice and Space”) project, Singida Municipality

What was done

The project deployed the Kobo toolbox to track the quality of social service delivery using a Community-Led Monitoring (CLM) approach. CLM is a participatory approach in which community members generate and use data-derived evidence to advocate for improved service delivery. In the city of Singida, the project supported the youth forum as a structured space for young people to engage in urban governance, alongside green groups designed to foster the green aspects of the city. These groups were trained



Digital inclusion in action: a Youth Forum member capturing dialogue feedback through KoboToolbox to strengthen participatory urban governance



Land mapping: A Land officer using GIS technology to survey land plots in Singida Tanzania.

to utilise the KoBo Toolbox to systematically collect and share data with the municipality. The data primarily focuses on key urban service issues, including solid waste management, water rationing, and reporting challenges related to local road infrastructure.

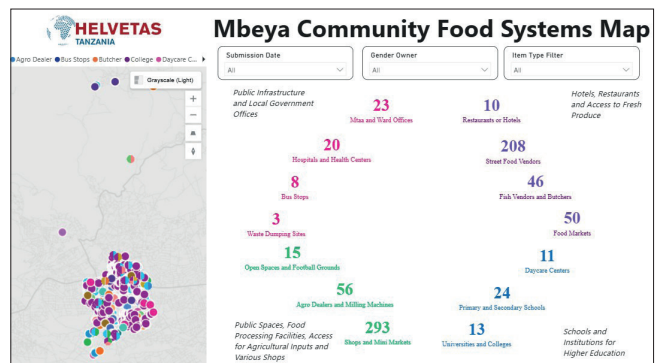
What worked

The youth forums and green group members use structured questionnaires covering different issues, including waste management, water supply and local road conditions. Data is collected in real time through direct observations and, where necessary, by uploading photographic evidence on the KoBo Toolbox. The collected data is then shared with the local authorities on a monthly basis, providing an accurate reflection of the on-the-ground service delivery situation. This approach has strengthened data-driven and timely decision-making within the municipality.

2 TANZANIA: Inclusive Cities for Nutrition (IC4N) project, Mbeya city council

What was done

The project used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to create a city food systems map, supporting more informed urban planning. The food systems map was an important tool for strengthening Mbeya City's food systems' planning because it showed how food



Food mapping: Mbeya Community Food Systems Map showing key food access points, institutions, and market distribution across the city

flows from production areas to markets and consumers, while identifying key actors, infrastructure, and gaps in access. It also made both formal and informal food networks more visible. The map helps the city target investments in markets, transport routes, storage, and underserved neighbourhoods, while also improving resilience to shocks and supply disruptions. Additionally, the project used Kobo Toolbox for data collection to monitor service quality and gather community feedback, with Power BI utilized for data visualization and presentation.



Soweto market in Mbeya

What worked

The project strengthened food systems governance by enabling evidence-based planning through GIS mapping. GIS mapping was used as evidence to directly inform urban planning through guiding land-use decisions, market infrastructure development, transport planning, and public health strategies, ensuring that Mbeya's urban growth supports food security, livelihoods, and nutrition.

A nutrition awareness campaign through WhatsApp provided reliable, evidence-based guidance, addressing a gap where communities typically rely on social media sources that can be biased or commercially driven and often lack accurate nutritional information. Efficient data collection using Kobo Toolbox improved monitoring and accountability, while enhanced information flow and coordination among stakeholders supported more effective decision-making.

3 ETHIOPIA: Amhara Local Governance Project (ALGP) Project in Amhara region

What was done:

In response to the destruction caused by the conflict in the northern part of Ethiopia, Helvetas' ALGP+ project supported 13 conflict-affected district council offices and plan offices by providing essential office materials and digital equipment, including computers, printers, photocopiers, cameras, sound recorders, and hard disks. The project also facilitated system strengthening through digital training for district council and planning office experts. The training focused on digitizing hardcopy documents, securely storing files on cloud platforms such as Google Drive, using email for organizational communication, sharing documents through digital communication platforms, and conducting virtual learning. Additionally, knowledge corners or hubs were established in each district to

collect and make documents accessible, promoting knowledge sharing within offices.

What worked:

The combination of digital equipment, training, and the creation of knowledge hubs helped district councils recover from the loss of critical records and improve their operational resilience. Digitalization and cloud storage ensured that important documents were preserved and easily retrievable, while email and social media skills improved internal and external communication. The knowledge hubs fostered information sharing and capacity building, enabling district staff to access and transfer knowledge more effectively, reducing the risk of future data loss and enhancing overall administrative efficiency.



The project also included photography and videography training to strengthen documentation and communication capacities



KEY CHALLENGES AND LESSONS

Efforts to integrate digital tools into governance systems encounter a set of recurring challenges, but they also offer valuable lessons for designing effective, inclusive, and sustainable interventions. Key observations include:

- **Limited digital literacy:** Many government staff and community members still face challenges in using digital tools effectively. Without sufficient training and guidance, even well-designed platforms may be underutilized or mismanaged. Building digital skills through structured training and ongoing support is essential for ensuring that both officials and citizens can meaningfully engage with digital governance systems.
- **Uneven internet connectivity:** Reliable internet access is often concentrated in urban centers, leaving rural areas with limited or inconsistent connectivity. This digital divide can exclude large segments of the population from participating in digital governance initiatives. Addressing infrastructure gaps, while leveraging low-bandwidth and offline capable solutions, can help expand reach and ensure inclusivity.
- **Resource constraints for equipment and maintenance:** Procuring, maintaining, and upgrading hardware and software remains a significant barrier. Limited budgets often result in outdated or non-functional devices, hindering the implementation of digital solutions. Sustainable financing strategies, partnerships with development organizations, and locally appropriate technology solutions are critical to overcoming these resource challenges.
- **Data quality, security, and protection:** Ensuring that information collected through digital systems is accurate, complete, and secure is a major concern. Weak data governance can undermine trust in digital platforms and reduce their effectiveness. Establishing clear protocols for data management, privacy, and cybersecurity is therefore crucial for building confidence among both government staff and citizens.
- **Strategic adoption and pilot-testing:** Lessons from past interventions highlight the importance of phased implementation. Using familiar digital platforms, piloting solutions before scaling, and securing ongoing government support improves adoption and sustainability. Pilot projects allow stakeholders to identify and resolve technical or operational challenges, ensuring that solutions are well aligned with local needs and governance contexts.

CONCLUSION

This publication has highlighted a range of practical experiences showing how digital tools can support more inclusive and responsive governance processes in Tanzania, Ethiopia, and selected countries in the region. The examples demonstrate that technology alone is not transformative; its effectiveness depends on how it is integrated into governance systems, institutional processes, and citizen engagement mechanisms.

Across the examples, the most effective approaches combined digital tools with institutional strengthening and community engagement. This highlights that inclusive digital governance is not only about technology, but also about strengthening interaction, communication, and accountability between citizens and public institutions. At the same time, challenges such as limited digital literacy, connectivity gaps, resource constraints, and data protection concerns underline the need for thoughtful, context-sensitive implementation.

As a way forward, stakeholders emphasized the importance of continued collaboration and shared learning. The decision to establish a Community of Practice on Digital Governance in Tanzania and Ethiopia marks an important step toward sustaining regional dialogue, exchanging best practices, and collectively addressing emerging challenges, ultimately supporting continued learning, collaboration, and the gradual strengthening of inclusive digital governance approaches across the region.

¹ Hafkin, N. J. (2009, February 17–19). E-government in Africa: An overview of progress made and challenges ahead. Paper prepared for the UNDESA/UNPAN Workshop on Electronic/Mobile Government in Africa: Building Capacity in Knowledge Management through Partnership, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

² Sharmin, S. and Hasan Chowdhury, R. (2025) Digital Transformation in Governance: The Impact of e-governance on Public Administration and Transparency, *Journal of Computer Science and Technology Studies*, 7(1), 362-279

³ Bauer, G. K. (2020). Digital solutions to improve basic service provision to the urban poor. *Water, Waste & Energy: Prospects for Essential Services in Africa*, (22), 116–124.



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