



Can digital innovation drive transformative development cooperation?

Leveraging emerging technologies to tackle complex challenges

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The MOST Programme is an intergovernmental initiative dedicated to understanding and responding to societal transformations. It draws on the social sciences to support governments in navigating the interconnected changes that are shaping today's world, ranging from climate and technological changes to evolving socio-economic challenges.

Through its collaboration with the "la Caixa" Foundation, MOST develops in-depth flagship reports, as well as policy papers and shorter think pieces derived from jointly organised events.

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This paper analyzes the potential of locally led approaches (also referred to as localization) and emerging digital technologies in development cooperation programs, based on the experience of the Work4Progress program, led by Fundación “la Caixa.”

The article is based on the event organised by the “la Caixa” Foundation, in collaboration with UNESCO, in October 2025, to explore what the role of local communities should be and how the use of new technologies should be understood to strengthen cooperation and promote more inclusive, ethical, democratic and sustainable initiatives.

In these pages, we will also echo the opinions and perspectives of actors and experts in the field (from both the public and private sectors) on the need to design cooperation strategies based on a responsible and ethical use of technology, maintaining a constant dialogue with local communities.

In conclusion, the article will argue that the emphasis on localization and a firm commitment to ethical technological development that empowers local communities are essential elements to reverse the current negative figures on the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



Key messages:

- The inadequacy of traditional philanthropic models to achieve the SDGs requires the adoption of new development cooperation strategies.
- The emphasis on local action and the use of new digital technologies are key elements for the achievement of these objectives.
- While digital technologies are called upon to play a fundamental role in development cooperation, their use needs to be subject to constant dialogue with local communities to ensure an ethical and more humane perspective.
- The combination of localization and new digital technologies is essential for the construction of more resilient, cohesive, democratic and efficient local socio-economic ecosystems.

Background

On 8 October 2025, the event *Can digital innovation drive transformative development cooperation? Leveraging emerging technologies to tackle complex challenges*, organised by "la Caixa" Foundation in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The event was part of the annual event of the Work4Progress job creation programme, promoted by the "la Caixa" Foundation since 2018 and currently implemented in India, Mozambique, Peru and Colombia.

Based on the opinions and conclusions presented by the participants in the event, this article aims to delve into the new perspectives that an **ethical use of new digital technologies** aimed at responding to the needs of communities, together with the growing trend to **give greater prominence to local actors**, offers to co-create, design and implement more inclusive, democratic and effective *development cooperation programmes*.



1. Introduction

In 2015, through resolution A/70/L.1, the United Nations General Assembly approved the **2030 Agenda**, which included a total of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030 ([UNGA, 2015](#)). On the tenth anniversary of its establishment, the United Nations Statistics Division, in its latest annual report on SDGs, estimated the percentage of goals in the process of being met at 18%, compared to 35% that are stagnant or in regression ([UNDS, 2025](#), p. 4).

The UN's International Communications Union (ITU) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated that the application of **new digital technologies** (such as generative AI, 5G and blockchain) could be key in achieving up to 70% of the SDGs in key areas such as climate action, education and the fight against hunger and poverty ([ITU, 2023](#)). On the other hand, and according to recent estimates by different United Nations agencies, 65% of the SDGs can only be achieved through strategic actions that focus on the local level (localization) ([UNDESA, UNHABITAT, UNDP, 2024](#)).

These data show that development cooperation committed to meeting the SDGs cannot ignore the indispensable role of new digital technologies in being put at the service of local communities, as well as the participation of these communities in the strategic design of

cooperation programmes. Moreover, the emphasis on these two elements seems essential to reverse the negative figures recorded in the last annual report on the SDGs.

2. Digital technologies and development cooperation: new perspectives

The role of new digital technologies in development cooperation is still in a defining phase. On the other hand, in recent years, traditional models of development cooperation, largely based on direct investments and donations by institutions and foundations, have given way to a commitment to a strategic orientation based on dialogue and listening to local communities to create more inclusive economic ecosystems, sustainable and self-sufficient.

The combination of both factors leads us to a fundamental question: What should be the interrelationship between digital technologies and new conceptions of development cooperation? Bearing in mind that recent estimates have put the SDGs in which digital technologies are called upon to play a crucial role at 70% and at 65% those that must necessarily be articulated through localization, development cooperation programmes committed to the fulfilment of the SDGs are inevitably destined to focus their means and energies on establishing synergies

with communities and in using digital technologies selected, led and adopted by the communities from an ethical, dialogued and constructive perspective.

Localization has become an essential element of today's development cooperation. Through **direct dialogue and listening to communities**, it is possible to identify more accurately and efficiently the real socio-economic challenges they face and on which the philanthropic actor must have an impact. The objective is not the implementation of one-off aid programs developed exclusively by foundations and institutions outside the community, but the creation of more inclusive and sustainable local productive ecosystems. In this way, it contributes to the construction of self-sufficient and resilient productive fabrics. In turn, the decentralization of decision-making, in which it is no longer the philanthropic actor who monopolizes the project, favors local cohesion and underpins the legitimacy of the cooperative process ([OECD, 2024](#); [Barron et al., 2024](#)).

While **digital technologies** are a key tool for driving localization, they cannot be decoupled from the specific realities of local communities. In this regard, the United Nations, in the context of its Development Agenda, has emphasized the combined potential of localization and the ethical use of new digital technologies to foster collective intelligence that serves as a fundamental principle for mobilizing data, ideas and perspectives. The benefits derived from this approach would favor (i) the implementation of new forms of accountability and governance, (ii) the anticipation and surveillance of systemic risks, (iii) real-time environmental monitoring, (iv) work with more complex systems, (v) inclusive development, and (vi) distributed problem solving ([UNPD, 2021](#), pp. 5-6). Otherwise, there is an exponential risk that new technologies will widen the gap between developed and developing countries ([UNCTAD, 2024](#), pp. 7-8) and favour racial inequalities and paternalistic attitudes tending towards neocolonialism ([UNHRC, 2020](#); on the general risks of inadequate technological development, see. [UNPD, 2024](#))

For this reason, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development has once again recommended that technological cooperation for sustainable development should be structured around the construction of inclusive global agendas, multilateral technological development, encouraging investments and public-private partnerships, strengthening collaboration networks between actors and promoting the transfer of technology and knowledge ([UNCTAD, 2024](#), pp. 47-49).

An example of the convergence of these new approaches to development cooperation and new technologies can be found in the

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Work4Progress programme, launched by the "la Caixa" Foundation in 2018. [Work4progress](#) seeks to **replace previous models of cooperation based on direct funding of isolated projects with dialogue, effective identification of real problems and empowerment of local communities (localization) for the creation of self-sustaining indigenous socio-economic ecosystems**. Specifically, the project's strategy is based on five phases: (i) listening to the needs of the community, (ii) co-creating innovative solutions, (iii) prototyping new employment models, (iv) accelerating successful initiatives and (v) evaluating the impact for continuous improvement. With a presence in four countries (India, Mozambique, Colombia and Peru), Work4Progress has contributed, to date, to the co-creation of more than 30,000 companies and almost 60,000 jobs for young people (41%) and women (66%) in vulnerable locals, adding up to a total of 110,000 direct beneficiaries.

3. Towards a more inclusive and technological cooperation

Given the inability of traditional development cooperation models to deliver on the SDGs by 2030, it is imperative to adopt new, more human-centred and localised approaches. The construction of local socio-economic ecosystems, driven by listening and co-creating solutions with communities, is shown to be the only way to ensure a more democratic, inclusive and, of course, effective cooperation in terms of results. New digital technologies, as long as they are selected and led by communities, ensuring that their adoption responds to participatory and ethically grounded processes, are called upon to play a primary role in this process.

The new cooperation programmes committed to this path should seek to establish synergies between, on the one hand, the construction of more empowered and self-sufficient local communities and, on the other, the incorporation of digital technologies at the service of communities and their capacities to promote a more solid and inclusive economic development.

It was precisely these issues that were the protagonists of the event held in Barcelona under the auspices of the "la Caixa" Foundation and UNESCO, in which representatives of various key actors in the field of development cooperation met to put their personal and professional experience at the service of the audience.

José Moisés Martín Carretero, director of the Centre for Technological Development and Innovation (CDTI), opened the session with a keynote lecture on new perspectives in development cooperation and technological innovation. The speaker began by pointing out the importance of both areas to solve some of the most pressing global problems included in the 2030 Agenda. He argued that **technology is not neutral in itself, but is part of broader socio-technical ecosystems**. For this reason, its potential to contribute to the solution of global problems depends, to a large extent, on its **critical and human use**. The so-called Silicon Valley model has proven incapable not only of generating wealth in a continuous and stable way, but also of ensuring that digital development is ethical. It is therefore imperative to explore alternative pathways towards more sustainable and inclusive progress, in the spirit of AI for Good.

This goal can only be achieved through a firm commitment to technology with a strong **relational component**, which strengthens human ties and empowers local communities to seek solutions to the problems they themselves consider real and urgent, while respecting their cultural values. He also insisted on the capital importance of **recovering digital optimism** that the growing emphasis on technological risks has eclipsed. Future projects in the field of philanthropy should therefore be aimed at promoting the resilience of communities, taking advantage of existing ties between their inhabitants, working with local resources and incorporating a strong component of adaptability and technological inclusion. Their impact and results should be measured, together with economic and technological indicators, at the social level. Consequently, the concept of donor, as it has been understood until today, has to disappear or, at least, be redefined as an actor that contributes to activating social ecosystems.

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As **future ways of working**, Martín Carretero argued, firstly, that the actors involved in development cooperation must learn to map local technological ecosystems, maintain alliances with knowledge centres in the area and understand that technological solutions cannot aim to replace the internal dynamics of local communities, but rather to promote them. Secondly, technological solutions must be durable, resilient and respond to real problems. Thirdly, cooperation projects would have to be evaluated from the perspective of relational capacity, since no technological solution will work if it does not have people at its centre and they are the ones who operate them. He concluded his communication by emphasizing that communities must be sovereign over their technological capabilities and their data. Only in this way will we be in a position to build a cooperation that listens, learns and co-believes for the sake of a more sustainable, humane, inclusive, participatory and democratic development.

In the round table that followed the keynote lecture, moderated by **Gorka Espiau**, director of the **Agirre Lehendakaria Center**, the participants maintained similar positions. **Kasia Odrozek**, coordinator of the Business Council for Ethics of AI, Bioethics and Ethics of Science, SHS Sector of UNESCO, argued that the efforts of many actors to import the Silicon Valley model are creating scenarios in which the use of digital technologies is far from ethical and is instead proving to be very harmful to the most vulnerable communities. He said that this model favors the emergence of behaviors tending towards digital colonialism. A clear case can be found in the treatment of non-hegemonic languages, of which about 99% have been excluded from generative AI engines. He recalled, in turn, that most of these engines, which are radically changing the way we consume knowledge, are usually biased and obey exclusively Western cultural and idiosyncratic patterns. He warned of the danger of confusing the idea of a business opportunity with the development of an AI at the service of humanity. He agreed with **García Carretero** on the **importance of protecting what is human, including social ties, cultures and creativity**.

Shrashtant Patara, Executive Director of Development Alternatives and Executive Vice President of DA Group (Delhi, India), lamented that attention to development cooperation has declined since the beginning of the century. He argued that, in the face of the dichotomy over who should decide the strategic direction of technological development, **local communities should prevail over political actors**. He considered that Work4Progress has the virtue of wanting to build horizontal networks, involving both national and subnational actors in the countries where the program has been developed. The result is that the project is succeeding in creating living technological and economic ecosystems. This approach is diametrically opposed to the Silicon Valley model, which tends to see people as mere consumers. To accelerate innovation, you need to ask yourself who will be involved in the process and what kind of innovation we want to achieve. In the face of laboratory innovation, **Patar advocated a more humane and social innovation**, shaped through dialogue with local communities and observation on the ground.

In the conversation that followed between the three speakers and the audience, some of these ideas were once again highlighted. The need to seek new avenues of cooperation for development and technological progress was insisted on, in order to address the inability of traditional models to meet the expectations and objectives set out in the 2030 Agenda. Philanthropy and technology, especially if both are considered outside the real interests of local communities, cannot be expected to become the solutions to the great challenges that we face. However, they can become catalysts for more sustainable development, as long as they are based on dialogue, the empowerment of local communities and the use of new technologies aimed at generating social capital. As inevitably happens when traveling on a path that is still unexplored, philanthropic actors must take risks and be experimental, have hope in the potential of technology, opt for catalytic financing formulas and, above all, be willing to learn from their mistakes.

Conclusions and recommendations

After the round table, the speakers insisted on the key points of their interventions. All of them agreed that it is essential to build development cooperation and technological progress that is more humane and sustainable. Philanthropy and technology must join forces to contribute to the formation of self-sufficient, resilient and inclusive local socio-economic ecosystems. It is not enough for the philanthropic actor to disburse funds through specific direct financing programs, nor for technological development to only seek the maximum and fastest possible economic return, disregarding the true interests of local communities. Technology must be a tool at the service of cooperation and, above all, of people. And cooperation, on the other hand, has to be directed mainly at the local level, in order to activate these ecosystems and spur their growth. This goal can only be achieved if there is a constant dialogue between the parties, a direct and on-the-ground assessment of communal needs and, most especially, a use of

technology that aims directly at the solution of the problems identified and over which the communities have sovereignty.

Along these lines, **José Moisés García Carretero** highlighted the **relevance of dialogue and the ability to listen in this process**. The philanthropic actor and the technological actor must be able to dialogue to develop joint strategies and pursue common objectives. They must assume that, on their own, they will not be able to find and implement comprehensive solutions. Only mutual understanding and the establishment of synergies between the two fields will allow for more effective and inclusive development cooperation.

For his part, Shrashtant Patara stressed the human aspect. Technology must be at the service of people and not the other way around. In the same way, it cannot be the experts who try to change the ecosystems, but they have to be the ones who adapt to the ecosystems. The indiscriminate implementation of technological solutions without taking into account the needs and cultural ties of local communities will not work. People should not be digitized. It is technologies that must be humanized.

Finally, Kasia Odrozek stressed the importance of designing cooperation models based on location. It is important that foundations and other actors with a genuine interest in the fulfillment of the SDGs assume that local communities work with them, not for them. Only in this way can the asymmetry of power between actors from developed countries and those belonging to developing countries be rebalanced. Again, dialogue with local communities was claimed as the central axis of cooperation.

To conclude, we can only reiterate the importance of combining development cooperation focused on localization and an ethical use of new digital technologies to promote, as HRH the Infanta Doña Cristiana, director of the international area of the "la Caixa" Foundation, expressed in the presentation of the event, cooperation programs of "greater impact and build a fairer and more sustainable future".

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