



# Digital Public Goods

## A BRIEFING

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The idea that a key way in which governments can support development is through the provision of Digital Public Goods has become prominent in the work of the UN in recent years.

This bridges work both around the future of internet governance (notably the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, and now preparations for the Global Digital Compact), and the wider work towards the Summit of the Future (based on Our Common Agenda in 2021).

Given how high a profile this idea has, it is useful to understand what it means, and how libraries can draw on it as part of their own advocacy. This briefing aims to do just this.



## What are public goods?

The idea of public goods has been around for a long time, describing (broadly) things that benefit populations as a whole, but where there is a risk that without action, there is an under-supply.

A typical example is street-lighting – it is a good thing to have, and enables many other things, such as driving or walking safely at night. Everyone can use it (if they couldn't, it would be a major cause of inequality), but the implication is that you cannot charge people for it directly.

Instead, it needs communities to get together (for example through governments) to make sure that it is provided, for example through taxes, or pooled subscriptions.

Another example is libraries themselves. These are another form of infrastructure which support both individual and collective societal goals, such as education, research, and democratic and cultural participation.

Many countries, recognising how important it is to ensure that everyone has access to libraries, therefore do not charge for membership, but rather pay this from tax.

Arguably, a key role of governments at all levels is to guarantee (either directly or through others) that such public goods are delivered. In turn, they help make societies safer, more prosperous, and more inclusive.

This idea is central to the UN Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda, which dedicates a whole section to the topic of public and common goods, with the idea of a Knowledge Commons key amongst them.

## And digital public goods?

The concept of Digital Public Goods (DPGs) has grown in prominence in recent years, playing a prominent role in the vision of the internet set out in UN's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, released in 2020.

Given the broader focus of the Roadmap on identifying topics on which there was a need for more effective work between governments and with other stakeholders, the inclusion of DPGs makes sense – they precisely rely on cooperation in order to ensure that they are being produced.

The Roadmap also makes another key point – that DPGs can be what stands between the potential of digital technologies to effect change, and the realisation of this potential.

Key issues identified in the roadmap include, for example, proprietary systems (which leave users with little flexibility, dependent on the decisions made by the owner), copyright (which can be used to close, rather than open content and data), a lack of infrastructure for applying DPGs, non-availability in relevant languages, and a lack of investment to apply and adapt such Goods.

*Digital public goods 'can be defined as open-source software, open data, open artificial intelligence models, open standards an open content that adhere to privacy and other applicable international and domestic laws, standards and best practices, and do no harm'*

UN Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, 2020

## Two definitions

References to Digital Public Goods online fall into roughly two categories.

That promoted by the Digital Public Goods Alliance, which brings together major companies, development funders and other stakeholders focuses more on open source software and other tools.

These are seen as offering major support to efforts to help governments everywhere develop effective services without becoming dependent on proprietary systems, often owned and managed by companies passed elsewhere.

For example, it could be a case of providing the software or tools necessary to monitor the spread of an epidemic, to register drivers, or to allocate benefits.



Given that the tools are open, they can be adapted to local needs with a little effort and are also transparent to citizens who have a legitimate interest in understanding how they are governed.

Such public goods don't exclude private actors – they can build services on top of a basic open infrastructure – but crucially don't own the basic data or tools that governments and others rely on. As such, DPGs are promoted as being a way of achieving digital sovereignty.

However, there is also a broader definition, as promoted by the UN itself. This covers everything under the narrower definition, but also highlights the importance of open digital content.

This therefore includes aspects like data shared about research into COVID-19, which made it possible for a much wider range of researchers to join the search for treatments and vaccines.

It also, arguably, includes broader open government data, supporting democracy, and indeed any freely available information that contributes to achieving wider development goals.

## **Why this matters for libraries?**

Digital Public Goods, both in their narrow and broader definitions, are certainly relevant for libraries.

Starting with the narrow definition, it could certainly be possible to see open-source tools that enable libraries to operate, and in particular open access repositories, as examples of DPGs.

For example, library management systems such as Koha are open source, and so potentially offer a valuable way for libraries, as public services.

Similarly, while Digital Commons may not be open source, two other key suppliers of technology for repositories – ePrints and DSpace are. These are already being used in order to help libraries (and the institutions that host them) to run repositories, and so give better access to the work of their researchers.

Therefore, even at a narrow level, there is a case for arguing that there needs to be public support for the open source software and tools that enable the functioning of Open Access repositories, and libraries in general.

Connected to this, when we are talking about DPGs as the basis for government services, the role of libraries also comes into play as places where people can have access. The sorts of (formal or informal) government information points that exist in many countries are, by default, contributors to ensuring the effectiveness of DPGs in improving service delivery.

Of course, when we consider DPGs as including not just software, but also content, the role of libraries becomes even more obvious.

A first key where libraries make a difference is of course in the sum of openly licenced research available. This is not only the fruit of work involving libraries (the research itself), but in many cases it is libraries then helping to make it accessible, and help others to find it.

As has been noted in UNESCO's Declaration on Open Science, access to these materials, and to the other fruits of the research process, have a potentially very positive role to play in supporting development.

*Noting the transformative potential of open science for reducing the existing inequalities in STI and accelerating progress towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and beyond, particularly in Africa, least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), and small island developing States (SIDS)*

*UNESCO Declaration on Open Science, 2021*

Yet we can look beyond more conventional scientific outputs and processes to the wider public domain, and other materials that are made available more or less openly.

Such content has a key role to play in supporting the rights to education, science, culture and information in general.

And once again, it is an area where the role of libraries is clear and well established, through actions to preserve, curate, and give access, and of course by supporting people to contribute themselves to the knowledge commons.



It is worth pointing out, in particular, the emphasis on the fact that access to and use of these sorts of public goods should take place in ways that do not harm privacy. This is of course a key issue for libraries, both in terms of the services they provide directly, and the terms until which they allow users access to third-party content.

In sum, libraries provide a practical response to the fact that open content (including the possibilities meaningfully to benefit from it, and contribute to it) as a digital public good is potentially vulnerable. Of course, in order to do this, libraries themselves need to be adequately supported, both in terms of law and culture.

## Key asks for libraries

**1) As part of wider efforts to support provision of Digital Public Goods, there should be support for the development, maintenance and application of open software and tools for library management and Open Access repositories:**

this should not look to replace companies providing this where this is the case, but rather recognise their contribution, and help in implementing tools effectively.

**2) Investment in implementing Digital Public Goods as the basis for public services should take account of the vital role of libraries in enabling engagement with such services:**

ideally, libraires should be involved in planning and designing implementations, and supported to help citizens in turn interact with them.

**3) Open Access and Open Science (understood as including both access and barrier-free usage possibilities) should be recognised as key pillars of broader Digital Public Goods provision:**

they should be treated as primary goals, rather than exceptions to other policies (such as copyright), and the need to attain them should legal and funding decisions.

**4) Governments should recognise and uphold the public domain and broader knowledge commons:**

in many countries, still, the public domain is not recognised in law, and vulnerable to efforts to enclose it for private gain. More broadly, there is not enough of an emphasis on the value of public access to information and knowledge, not least in copyright, where decisions tend to reflect narrow sectoral interests rather than wider public ones.

**5) Curation must be acknowledged as key to delivering on the potential of Digital Public Goods:** especially when it comes to open content, it is recognised in UN texts that scarcity is not necessarily an issue. However, abundance brings its own problems, making it more challenging for people and governments alike to find the information they need. We need, in any comprehensive effort to provide and implement DPGs, to recognise the importance of curation and support for access.

**6) Libraries themselves must be seen as being the central pillar of any wider effort to deliver on open content or a knowledge commons as a Digital Public Good:** it is hard to imagine any effort to support sustainable without libraries. They are essential not only for curation (as above), but for preservation of, and providing access to digital public goods. Moreover, they can be key in adapting such goods to make sure they benefit everyone, spotting gaps in provision and helping to overcome these.