Sustaining and Scaling Civic and Government Technology: A White Paper on Challenges, Best Practices and Recommendations

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About the International Republican Institute (IRI)

The **International Republican Institute (IRI)** is one of the world's leading international democracy development organizations. The nonpartisan, nongovernmental institute has supported civil society organizations, journalists, democratic governments and other democratic actors in more than 100 countries since 1983—in Africa, Asia, Eurasia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa—with a current presence in over 70 and working in over 100. Through its global support network to advance digital democracy initiatives, IRI provides capacity building trainings to strengthen grassroots actors' ability to launch, sustain and scale digital democracy projects; and supports civictech and govtech projects around the world.

Executive Summary

Technology continues to transform our lives, revolutionizing how and at what speed we expect to consume information, buy goods and services, and engage with each other. As every facet of our lives continues to evolve alongside the global digital revolution, there is increasing pressure for governments to invest in public-sector modernization to meet evolving expectations and civic needs in the digital age. The question of how best to harness technology to advance more efficient, responsive and effective government — in essence, to bring government into the modern, digital age — has become core to discussions about the future of democracy.

Over the past 30 years, the fields of civictech and govtech have become important parts of the answer to that question.[1] The civic and govtech space has emerged as a critical launching ground for citizen-driven innovations that capitalize on the potential digitalization promises, helping to launch societies and governments into a modern age of democracy where expectations for accessible, efficient and transparent citizen-centric public services are met. Extensive research and real-world evidence have shown how civic and govtech initiatives can help governments use digital tools to find a sustainable balance between legitimacy and efficiency. Yet, despite nearly 30 years of learnings, the success of civic and govtech initiatives in advancing the digitalization of democratic governance remains limited. Too many promising initiatives fail in the long term, struggling with sustainability and a limited ability to scale impact.

Capitalizing on IRI's unique position as a leading global partner for civic and govtech initiatives around the world, this white paper synthesizes core challenges and lessons learned from practitioners, funders and government to help answer the questions of why civic and govtech initiatives struggle long term and what can be done about it. This paper is intended to serve as a resource for key stakeholders in the field — namely civic and govtech practitioners, funders and governments — to better understand how to sustain and scale initiatives in the longer term, and how to create enabling ecosystems to help civic and govtech projects achieve greater and more sustained impact. IRI's experience informs this white paper, as do the experiences of more than 50 civic and govtech organizations.

While not intended to be a comprehensive guide to the myriad challenges of sustaining and growing successful initiatives in this space, this white paper synthesizes the core challenges hindering the sustainment and scale of civic and govtech efforts as seen globally, as well as the best practices and recommendations proven to help navigate those challenges. In this paper, IRI distills lessons learned from more than 50 interviews with a diversity of stakeholder groups, across all regions of the globe, into three sets of key findings. These findings are grouped by: **(1) core challenges, (2) best practices of civic and govtech implementers and (3) recommendations moving forward.** Topline key takeaways are listed below, with the remainder of the paper discussing each finding in greater detail.

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1 For an introduction to civic and govtech, see: Van Ransbeeck, Wietse. "What's the Difference Between Civic Tech and GovTech?" CitizenLab, 29 Aug. 2019, citizenlab.co/blog/civic-tech/whats-difference-civic-tech-govtech/.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Core challenges limiting civic and govtech scale, sustainment and impact

- Inadequate or counterproductive funding models, including **funding models** with too-short time horizons; models that only invest in project-based support; the sometimes unhelpful imposition of funder ideas with limited room for partner feedback; and funder distraction with new trends.

- Challenges **generating government buy-in**, including government culture that is averse to digitalization; bureaucratic barriers; weak institutional values around democracy; and frequent government turnover.

- Challenges with **skill acquisition and retention**, including challenges competing with the private sector; loss of talent due to the "brain drain;" and limitations in filling the skills gap, including challenges with volunteer support.

- Challenges with **user uptake and growth**, including barriers from the digital divide and a lack of funding for promotional campaigns.

Best practices to facilitate civic and govtech scale and sustainment

- **Diversify funding and income sources** when possible, in addition to diversifying staffing structures to help navigate limitations from insufficient funding.

- **Build government buy-in** by finding champions across seniority levels and roles in a local or national government's agencies and departments, including among leadership; supplementing analog processes rather than replacing them; understanding and supporting existing government priorities; and investing in activities to shift a government's organizational culture to one open to the benefits of digital tools.

- Overcome limitations to **skill acquisition and retention** by engaging with and relying on support communities and building partnerships with diverse stakeholder groups.

- Improve **user uptake and scaling** by focusing on technology as a means and not an end; scaling intentionally and only when relevant; advocating for sufficient time to iterate and adapt a tool; meeting target users where they already are; and building partnerships to grow the user base more effectively.

Key recommendations for funders, practitioners and governments to scale and sustain civic and govtech initiatives and impact

- **Funders** can better support civic and govtech initiatives by funding organizations rather than projects; providing longer funding time horizons; diversifying the organizations receiving support; avoiding distraction by trends; funding ecosystems to promote collaboration among civic and govtech teams; and investing in providing support beyond funding.

- **Civic and govtech practitioners** can better navigate core challenges by investing in establishing interpersonal relationships with funders to secure more consistent and stable support; building organizational investment into project budgets; investing in promotional campaigns to increase project awareness and engagement; taking advantage of local innovation networks; and designing all projects with a user-centered focus.

- **Governments** can better support civic and govtech initiatives and digitalization efforts overall by committing support to digital initiatives across levels of government, including at the leadership level; structuring clear lines of accountability when integrating a new tool; and making data accessible, reliable and open for civic and govtech practitioners to use.

Introduction:
Why We Wrote This

Democracy and democratic governance are spaces of constant change. The challenges governments face constantly evolve and increase in complexity in our ever more interconnected world. Governments, civil society and citizens themselves must collaborate and innovate in response. And yet, the past few decades have seen governments unevenly invest in efforts to modernize, with many democracies slow to respond to evolving challenges, including struggling to adapt to and capitalize on the digital transformation of their societies. Governments have struggled to adopt innovative solutions to adapt to an increasingly digital environment and, in many citizens' views, have failed to modernize to meet citizens' needs. As digital tools continue to transform our lives, there is increasing pressure for governments to overcome these flaws and successfully advance public-sector modernization to meet citizens' needs and expectations — and there is an increasing opportunity for citizens to help government get there.

The fields of civic and govtech have become critical launching grounds for innovations that capitalize on the potential that digitalization promises, helping to launch societies and governments into a modern age of democracy where citizen-centric public services are accessible, efficient and transparent. The past 30 years have seen the fields of civic and govtech play an increasingly fruitful role in support of modernizing governance and strengthening democracy. However, as the CivicTech Graveyard and many failed govtech initiatives can attest, many more struggle to successfully sustain in the longer term, even when they are initially successful.[2]

Conversations and analysis driven by many invested in the power of technology to strengthen democracy — including Code for All, MySociety, RightsCon and the Knight Foundation — have increasingly focused on why and where civic and govtech initiatives struggle to succeed. Time and again, conversations have centered on the question of what needs to happen to enable civic and govtech tools to achieve long-lasting and larger-scale impact. To this end, IRI has capitalized on its unique position as a leading global

partner for civic and govtech initiatives to respond to the questions of why civic and govtech initiatives struggle to scale and sustain long term, and what can be done about it.

Throughout this paper, the question of scale refers to the growth of a project's user base and/or expansion across geographic locations, while sustainment refers to continued use, utility and relevance in the longer term. Unique among papers on this topic, this white paper integrates IRI's experience as a global partner to civic and govtech initiatives as well as the experiences of more than 50 civic and govtech practitioners around the world. This white paper is intended to inform the efforts of civic and govtech practitioners, funders, and governments working to make civic and govtech initiatives succeed beyond the launch. The paper is divided into three sections: core challenges, best practices and recommendations for funders, governments and civic and govtech practitioners to foster an ecosystem better informed, and better structured, to help civic and govtech initiatives succeed in the longer term.

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2 A resource collecting civic and govtech projects that failed, which funders and practitioners can reference and learn from. See: "The Civic Tech Graveyard." Civic Tech Field Guide, civictech.guide/graveyard/.

METHODOLOGY

In developing this white paper, IRI relied on desk research, interviews with practitioners, direct implementation support to civic and govtech practitioners, and validation sessions. See Appendix B for more detailed information on the methodology behind the white paper.

1 Extensive Desk Research

Over the course of three months, IRI reviewed existing literature to understand and build upon established findings on challenges and recommendations related to the scale and sustainment of civic and govtech initiatives. Our results have reinforced and built upon those established findings.

2 Interviews

IRI conducted more than 50 interviews with practitioners, academics and government officials around the world, with a focus on gathering perspectives outside of North America.

- Twenty-four in Europe
- Eleven in Asia
- Ten in the Middle East and Africa
- Seven in Latin America
- Two in North America
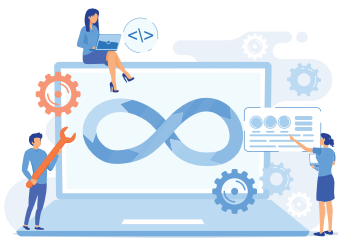
3 Direct Implementation Support

Over the past year, IRI worked with seven civic and govtech initiatives around the world to scale or sustain ongoing efforts. IRI distilled key challenges, best practices and needed support from those seven projects and teams. These lessons and related case studies have been integrated throughout the white paper.

4 Validation Sessions

IRI organized two validation sessions to invite feedback on draft findings within the white paper. Across the two sessions, more than 20 additional civic and govtech practitioners weighed in on results to date, serving as key points of validation.

What Isn't Working? Key Challenges for Civic and GovTech Initiatives to Scale and Sustain Impact

Across geographies, issue areas and project types, four key challenges consistently and repeatedly emerged that limit civic and govtech initiatives from scaling and/or sustaining long term. Surprisingly, these four challenges remained consistent across country and regional contexts, as well as across diverse projects with distinct and diverging goals.

Four core challenges are identified below, with each broken into more nuanced explanations of how each challenge can limit civic and govtech projects in different ways. The following sections — best practices and key recommendations — respond directly to the core challenges listed here.

CORE CHALLENGES

1. Inadequate and/or counterproductive funding models.

2. Challenges generating government buy-in.

3. Challenges with skill acquisition and retention.

4. Challenges with user uptake and growth.

Core Challenge #1:
Inadequate and/or Counterproductive Funding Models.

In 100 percent of interviews, interviewees referenced funding limitations — either in the amount or the structure of funding models — as the biggest barrier to sustaining and scaling their work. Due to the nuanced ways in which funding models can limit civic and govtech initiatives, we have analyzed four key ways in which this challenge often emerges.

Lack of funder investment in organizational capacity and infrastructure. In 47 of our 53 interviews, interviewees reported frustrations and challenges with the limitations imposed both by what types of projects funders are willing to support and how funders are willing to financially support civic and govtech initiatives. Funders often exclusively focus on funding specific projects, rather than providing more flexible, core funding for civic and govtech organizations to invest in growing their organizational capacity. Investing in organizational capacity is important to ensure civic and govtech teams have the ability to deliver high-quality projects by making certain staff are well-trained, operational costs are covered, and the organization can financially sustain in-between projects, leading to higher chances for long-term sustainability. Further exacerbating this challenge is the fact that most funders are interested in supporting new projects, rather than investing in the continuation or scale of existing civic or govtech initiatives. Project-centered funding was linked to numerous challenges, including: limiting investment in upskilling team members; curtailing the ability to develop strategic plans; preventing a civic or govtech team from hiring for non-project-specific positions such as communications, advocacy and partnerships roles; and reducing a team's ability to provide longer-term project maintenance. Combined, these factors ultimately limit the sustainability of projects.

Funding timelines are too short. While interviewees understood funders cannot sustain and invest in a project indefinitely, short timelines of one year or less often require civic and govtech teams to cut corners on key steps, such as forgoing in-depth research to adequately define a narrow problem, skipping robust user testing and/or omitting the measurement of impact. While digital tools can certainly evolve and iterate rapidly, the overall timeline for the launch and sustainment of a new initiative — as well as for the scale or adaptation of an existing tool — must be sufficient to get things right.

> *Civictech [teams] must first fully understand and define the problem, then develop a working model, iterate for sustained use and consider possible scaling, and then you need to measure the results. In the cases I've seen, [the expectation from funders is] for the team to complete all four stages, but the funding is [really] only available for the equivalent work required for understanding the problem. So ultimately, we wing our way through these four steps or never do them completely." — Civictech practitioner, speaking to experience gained across global contexts.*

Funders can superimpose their own ideas with limited room for partner feedback. Despite occasionally having a comparatively weaker understanding of on-the-ground needs than civic and govtech teams, funders – including venture capital firms, foundations, and government funders – can feel emboldened to impose their own ideas on a project. This is especially acute when funders do not create space to listen to and receive input from civic and govtech partners regarding their areas of concern and focus to inform funding opportunities. IRI found this challenge, when it occurs, is most common in two stages of project-proposal processes:

- First and most commonly, very narrow calls for proposals by funders can prescribe a presumed problem that may not accurately reflect challenges or needs on the ground. For example, a call for proposals may seek artificial-intelligence (AI) solutions to resolve corruption when, in reality, data access or data literacy is the core issue. As a result, civic and govtech teams can de-emphasize

the development of their own solutions and instead reflect funder interests without a chance to share concerns or their own perception of priorities.

- Secondly, funders can give overly prescriptive feedback and revisions throughout the proposal and project-finalization processes. Multiple teams reported instances when funder feedback resulted in such intensive changes to the accepted project that the project shifted from the original solution to one aligned with funder interests, but not the capacities or needs of the local context. Although funders are realistically constrained by internal goals and priorities, funders would be better served if civic and govtech teams are given a chance to share key considerations for the realities of the implementation context early in the proposal process.

> *As explained by a civictech practitioner in Nigeria: "We've worked with donors who actually impose their own idea. Even when you come up with a proposal, we've worked with donors who still rework your proposal…and come up with a review that entirely changes the whole idea. Most times [that] comes with a cost. The implementation or design of such an idea [that has been redesigned by the funder] sometimes does not respect the context in which it will be implemented. Sometimes funders review proposals with only one set or interpretation of data, and that is not the true representation of the context the project will be implemented in." It's best when a funder organization has an area of focus and then lets the local partner come up with the idea because [the local partner] will think from the angle of the context they want to work in and will come up with an appropriate solution. And that is why most times we discover we have a lot of tech solutions that are not viable, the traffic is not there, because it is the result of an elitist [design process]."*

— Funders can get distracted by new trends and needs. While many interviewees noted they understood funders must respond to shifting trends and needs, more than a quarter of interviewees reported facing challenges when funders shifted their funding focus or prioritization due to a distraction or fascination with the newest emerging piece of technology. This can be especially challenging if communication regarding a prioritization shift is limited or last minute. These shifts towards emerging trends can fail to consider continued realities and needs on the ground, and frequently exacerbate frustrations with project specific funding and the imposition of funder ideas. When funder shifts occur, organizations that do not shift with them have reported losing a large portion of their funding, or are forced to adapt despite known implementation limitations.

> *Funders constantly get distracted by what the hot new thing is. In a way that's good because it means they're being responsive to changes in the world but not when it's happening to the exclusion of all else, and we've seen a lot of that both in terms of types of technology and in terms of different situations around the world… We've seen funders become laser focused on [new areas or crises] overnight. When it comes to technologies, funders are constantly jumping around. They jump from drones, to blockchain, to some other thing, and it's just constantly changing. It's good to be open to new ideas and tools but not to the exclusion of all else. A lot of our work is based on good old SMS because that works in the contexts where we work. So, when a funder comes along and asks, "Why don't you have a smartphone app, or why aren't you doing something with blockchain?" I ask, "why would we be doing that?" Our [end users] don't care about that — many of them can't even read." — The Sentinel Project, a nongovernmental organization working around the world.*

> **Case Study: Donor Distraction by Emerging Tech Diverges from Needs on the Ground**
>
> **SocialTIC** – an organization dedicated to research, training and promotion of digital technology and information for social purposes – was funded for a project called Escuela de Datos, a network of School of Data in Latin America to train change agents, share lessons in the use of data, and strengthen projects based on data. The project ran from 2015 to 2018 and was critical to sustaining the growth of data communities of practice and teaching in the use of data for social purposes throughout Latin America. Unfortunately, after a three-year run time, the three primary donors for the project decided the goal of the program was achieved and shifted their attention to funding newer, emerging tech including projects focused on advancing artificial intelligence (AI). However, projects focused on advancing AI in the contexts where **SocialTIC** works have proven largely ineffective as the projects are not answering to a specific need on the ground.
>
> **SocialTIC** shared they have found few individuals within the countries and amongst the partners with whom they work to be qualified to manage and manifest the benefits from AI-focused projects, while residents reportedly do not find the projects helpful, relevant or understandable. In the meantime, **SocialTIC** has seen the need for data literacy education remains extremely strong as data literacy amongst civil society and government partners remains low despite the progress achived through Escuela de Datos. Governments and civil society partners continue to struggle to integrate data into their decision-making processes. Due to these funding changes, **SocialTIC** is only able to maintain Escuela de Datos through consulting and data training on the side.

Core Challenge #2:
Challenges Generating Government Buy-In.

Following closely behind frustrations with funding models, establishing government buy-in at any level (municipal, state, national, etc.) was identified as a core challenge. In this white paper, government buy-in refers to the support relevant government actors are willing to provide to civic and govtech projects — at minimum, passively supporting and promoting the tool, and at best institutionalizing the tool with funding and maintenance support. If civic and govtech teams cannot achieve government support, they are left to sustain the digital tool on their own, repeatedly search for external funding opportunities, pivot toward a commercial model or, in many cases, give up on the project overall. Below, IRI has distilled four key barriers identified as distinct to generating government support.

— most commonly, from a lack of understanding among staff and officials about the benefits digital tools offer. A lack of digital literacy on the part of government officials and staff can create resistance to digitalization, because they perceive it as creating more work due to difficulty of use. Generating political will to support civic and govtech efforts requires navigating these cultural fears and concerns, which takes time, patience and convincing.

> "There are often two strands of people in government — the people terrified by the new interest, and then there are reformist actors who are the catalysts to start the institutionalization. It can be a natural reaction to resist change. You have to bring value to existing stakeholders in the system." - Govtech practitioner based in Nigeria

Government culture can be averse to digitalization.
Across interviews and country contexts, it emerged that shifting government culture from one that is analog to one receptive to, and trusting in, digitalization and digital initiatives can be very difficult.[3] A government will not adopt even the most innovative, well-researched and well-defined digital tool if that government's underlying organizational culture is closed to digitalization and innovation. This resistance to digitalization can come from many sources

Bureaucratic barriers. Distinct from organizational cultural barriers, interviewees also identified bureaucratic barriers as a core challenge even when political will was successfully established. Interviewees pointed to challenges such as determining how to feed a tool into existing bureaucratic decision-making processes, challenges building needed approval processes into a tool when the analog process is ill-defined, and difficulty navigating procurement processes that are lengthy and poorly equipped for the procurement of digital resources and partnership with civic and govtech teams.

3 Digitalization refers to moving existing processes into digital technologies, transforming processes from analog to digital.

— **Weak institutional values around democracy.** When a civic or govtech project is aimed at strengthening transparency, citizen participation or other democratic principles, it is challenging to establish government buy-in if the government does not invest in those values to begin with. In many of the local contexts in which IRI partners and white paper interviewees operate, the challenge of establishing a baseline investment in democratic norms can be a core limitation. It is important to recognize this is not a challenge civic and govtech teams can overcome on their own. While digital tools can certainly work to push and pressure governments toward democratic principles, they cannot on their own convince governments to care for or invest in those values. Broader national-level organizations or even international good-governance organizations need to step in to create pressure for governments to adopt digital good-governance tools.

— **Government turnover (and ego)**. When new decision-makers are elected to office or are internally transferred from place to place, civic and govtech teams struggle to retain the right connections and influence to continue moving their project forward. Further, the election of new officials can threaten a tool's sustainability simply because officials can be resistant to supporting an initiative their predecessor created or supported. When these changes occur, civic and govtech teams must restart their efforts to persuade the new administration to maintain the tool, resulting in lost time and effort and, in some cases, citizens' loss of faith that digital services can result in positive governmental change.

Core Challenge #3:
Challenges with Skill Acquisition and Retention.
A third core challenge is the struggle civic and govtech organizations, as well as government officials driving digitalization, face in finding and retaining skilled individuals to drive civic and govtech initiatives. This is especially pertinent given the many disparate skills civic and govtech teams must juggle, including communication, proposal writing, user experience and interface (UX/UI) design, government liaising, relationship-development skills and more. Further, it can be hard for those already in the field to find opportunities for upskilling themselves. This overarching challenge with skill acquisition and retention is broken into three key components below.

— **Civictech organizations (and governments) struggle to compete with the private sector.** The challenge of competing with private-sector pay exists across developing and developed country contexts, and is exacerbated when funders are only interested in supporting projects rather than organizations. This limits the training, capacity building and human-resources support civic and govtech teams can offer to potential hires, and additionally limits the opportunities in which existing staff can invest to advance their own skills.

— **The Brain drain.** "Brain drain" — a phenomenon in which qualified individuals with in-demand skills leave their home country for countries with stronger job and pay markets — limits the available talent pool for civic and govtech teams in smaller or less developed countries. Determining how to create the right incentive structure for talent, especially youth, to stay and work in its home country remains an unsolved question for many of the civic, govtech and government interviewees with whom IRI spoke.

— **Reliance on volunteers can sometimes hurt organizational credibility.** To address the challenges of talent acquisition and retention, interviewees have tried turning to volunteer support to bridge the gap between their organizations' talent needs and their lack of funds to acquire said talent. Unfortunately, interviewees ran into issues when funders and governments perceived volunteer talent and support to be less qualified than hired individuals, and funders have expressed that volunteer support is a threat to the sustainability of the organization. This puts civic and govtech teams in a difficult spot, struggling between limited financial capacity, challenges with skill acquisition and arising doubts when those gaps are bridged with volunteer support.

> *[When working with volunteers] there was this perception of lack of trust because it is an initiative group based on volunteering and young women. It was an issue of lack of credibility not only from the councilors [we were engaging] but also from colleagues in similar groups."*
> *– Civictech practitioner based in Europe*

Core Challenge #4:

Challenges with End-User Uptake and Growth. A final challenge reported across interviews was the difficulty faced in generating, sustaining and growing the number of end users who engage with civic and govtech initiatives once they are made available. While more challenges were reported related to establishing government support and navigating funding challenges, generating the support and buy-in of citizens to use — and continue using — new tools was cited as a core challenge. A few key reasons as to why are provided below.

- When a digital tool ultimately fails or is not maintained, citizens are often frustrated and disincentivized from engaging with digital tools, generating distrust in technology's capacity to improve governance. Without government buy-in, flexible funding support, skills to sustain the tool and the longer-term investment in maintaining and updating a tool, end-user uptake and growth are a losing battle.

- Further, end-user uptake and growth are challenging when civic and govtech organizations are unable to secure funding to invest in communication campaigns. Unfortunately, the majority of interviewees reported they did not have sufficient funds to conduct a promotional campaign of any sort, let alone hire an individual with previous communications skills, linking back to challenges with existing funding models and timelines.

- Finally, interviewees cited the digital divide — the gap between those who have ready access to the internet and digital tools, such as computers or phones, and those who do not — as a confounding variable limiting user uptake. While this challenge can vary in severity across contexts, accounting for different levels of access and accessibility within the tool and across end user groups remains critical.

What's Working? Best Practices that Lead to Success in Scaling and Sustaining Efforts

While the challenges are diverse, civic and govtech teams have found compelling and varied best practices to navigate some of the most common barriers that have plagued the field for years. Below is a list of best practices interviewees personally reported as effective, disaggregated to respond directly to the four key challenges identified earlier in this paper: funding limitations; government buy-in; skill acquisition and retention; and user uptake.

Best practices to navigate funding models and challenges:

- Diversify funding and income when possible.
- Be creative in staffing structures.

Best practices to generate government buy-in:

- Start with a champion within government, but don't stop there.
- Supplement and build within existing analog processes, rather than replacing them.
- Undertake efforts to shift governments' organizational culture.
- Be intentional about understanding government priorities.

Best practices to navigate challenges with skill acquisition and retention:

- Engage with and rely on support communities.
- Build partnerships with diverse stakeholder groups to identify needed talent.

Best practices for user uptake and scaling:

- Remember that technology is not an end; it's a means.
- Advocate for enough time for iteration in tool design, and build the expectation for iteration and adaptation over the course of tool maintenance.
- Don't scale just to scale.
- Build diverse partnerships to grow the user base more effectively.
- Go where your target end users already are.

Best Practices to Navigate Funding Models and Challenges

Best practices to manage funding limitations were the most difficult to distill, as many interviewees have been unable to identify reliable methods to circumvent funding challenges. The limited number of best practices IRI was able to identify underscores the importance of the funder recommendations listed further in this paper that could help advance a more enabling ecosystem. The two identified best practices related to navigating funding challenges are listed below.

Civic and govtech teams should diversify funding and income when possible. While interviewees admitted this is a challenging best practice to execute, many said diversifying funding and income sources was their most effective best practice for the sustainment and scale of a project. Recommended approaches included the following.

- Where possible, commercialize products or services to provide stopgaps when donor funding or government support dwindle. Examples include establishing a pay-for-service model, in which local authorities pay a small fee to simply imbed an already developed digital tool in their website, enabling citizens to engage with the government through the tool but leaving the maintenance primarily to the civic or govtech organization. This fee structure can provide the income needed for a team to maintain an initiative longer term, without requiring full government support.

- Integrate ads into products or services, when doing so does not have an impact on the usability of the tool. This can be an effective way to generate a regular, passive source of income.

- Generate government support from a project's start to increase the likelihood that a government entity allocates budgetary support toward the sustainment of a project. Early government buy-in can be helped along by conducting and sharing a cost-benefit analysis to demonstrate anticipated cost savings for the government if it were to integrate the tool into its work.

- Apply to a diversity of donors where possible, with the caveat of first carefully evaluating the relevance of each call for proposals.

Be creative in your staffing structure. When funding resources are slim, interviewees suggested implementing cost-saving measures through creative staffing structures. Implementing a combination of the below best practices can help establish a lean, effective and more affordable staffing structure.

- Hire short-term contractors for specific portions of a project, rather than hiring additional full-time individuals when a project begins. Mapping out short-term contracts needed at the start of a project — or even the start of a fiscal year — can help organizations reduce financial commitments, save costs and identify areas where specialized skills are needed.

- Intentionally hire staff locally where a project is being implemented, reducing overall travel and salary costs. For example, if your organization is expanding to a municipality in a new country, it can be helpful to hire a local individual to support the scale of the initiative.

- Establish fellowship opportunities to create shorter, six-to-12-month opportunities at a civic or govtech organization. This can entice individuals who are interested in the mission of the work but may not be willing to commit long term to salaries lower than those in the private sector.

Best Practices to Generate Government Buy-In

Of all the core challenges identified through this research, IRI was able to distill the largest number of best practices to help navigate the challenge of generating government buy-in. The four most common approaches are listed below.

Start with a champion within government, but don't stop there. The most common best practice was to identify champions within government who could advance and advocate for a civic or govtech project. Finding even one champion can make the difference

between the long-term success or failure of a project, as government adoption will ultimately depend on support and advocacy driven internally as well as externally. Identifying more than one government champion has resulted in higher rates of long-term success, especially when champions span seniority levels and roles. Look for allies in individuals who are already responsible for existing analog processes, and advocate for how the new digital tool or service will help make their work easier. If your team can find a diversity of champions among staff and leading officials, there is a much greater likelihood the tool will be sustained and advanced even if there is a change in personnel or power.

Supplement and build within existing analog processes, rather than replacing them. Given government cultures are often suspicious of integrating digital tools, a recommended best practice is to advocate for the uptake of a digital tool or service to supplement in-person engagement, not necessarily to replace it. Interviewees reported an increased willingness among governments to integrate digital tools or services when they are promoted as a supplementary resource rather than as a replacement to an existing process. Using this approach is especially key to bringing along staff or officials who are resistant to changing established ways of operating or engaging with citizens. Even for platforms that receive early support from citizens or government, it is important to carefully consider how tools imbed into processes that are already working, including those that are in person.

Undertake efforts to shift governments' organizational cultures. This best practice emerged in direct response to the challenge of analog government cultures. Recommended efforts to shift organizational culture included a few key approaches.

- Facilitate trainings and capacity building with government staff or officials. Building the staff's digital literacy skills can be the best pathway to building support.

- If possible, develop a cost-benefit analysis at the start of a project to demonstrate the direct financial benefits of integrating or engaging with technology as a government entity.

- If possible, involve the project funder to advocate for the benefits and importance of technology, innovation and modernization in government and help nudge the organizational culture to be increasingly open. Civic and govtech teams also found success in characterizing the integration of technology as useful for achieving broader good-governance goals, such as meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals or agreements set with the Open Government Partnership.

- Use data to demonstrate the utility of technology. When you can use data to demonstrate a digital tool is increasing the efficiency of public-service delivery or measurably increasing citizen engagement, staff and leadership are more easily convinced of the importance of innovation.

- Create competition among local municipalities or state agencies. If localities or departments see counterpart municipalities or departments modernizing more rapidly than they are, a sense of competition can drive openness to considering digitizing their own processes.

> "*The biggest challenge is the culture and internal policies. Even though the local government is working towards digital governance, it's very small steps…it's very hard to change the culture of the organization. [The staff] don't want to use it… it's not part of their background to understand innovation. There needs to be capacity building of municipal staff and officials not just in digital literacy, but in the importance of innovation.*" – *Ursula Andrea Harman Canalle, District Municipality of San Bartolo, Peru*

Case Study on Modernizing Municipalities in North Macedonia: The Center for Social Innovations BLINK42-21
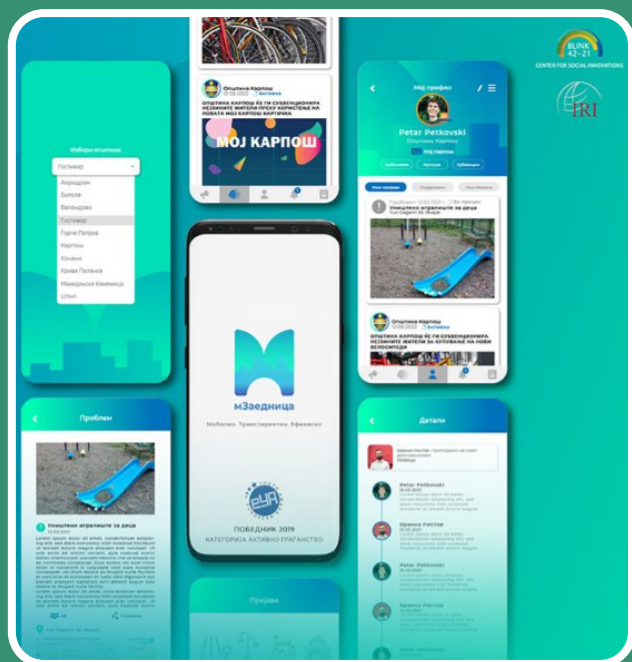
Over the past 11 years, **Blink42-21** has been a leading voice in North Macedonia's efforts to modernize, specifically on the local level. **Blink42-21** is a nonprofit civictech team dedicated to the idea that social innovation can lead to economic, educational and social transformation through the smarter use of people, data and technology. Beginning in 2018, the **Blink42-21** team launched and developed an app, called mZaednica (in English, translating to "mCommunity"), to help municipalities establish two-way communication with citizens, resolve public concerns and identify priority issue areas through information and communications technology (ICT). Designed to be user friendly for both government officials and citizens, mZaednica serves as a critical digital connection point between officials and their citizens.

At the beginning of mZaednica's lifetime, **Blink42-21** intentionally partnered with just one municipality to pilot the tool, spending more than a year to refine, test and improve its app. Following the full launch of the pilot, **Blink42-21** leveraged its success to encourage other municipalities, as well as citizens, to consider mZaednica as a valuable tool. By demonstrating how mZaednica improved operations and citizen-to-government connection, and emphasizing the opportunity for other municipalities to similarly adopt the resource, **Blink42-21** was able to scale its app to two additional municipalities. In-person meetings to share their success with government officials alongside sustained promotion of the tool through social media platforms were key in gaining interest and awareness of the resource. This approach not only provided a strong proof point **Blink42-21** could use to convince other municipalities of the value of its initiative, but also created a sense of competition among neighboring municipalities that didn't want to be seen as falling behind their peers that had modernized through the app. With IRI's support, **Blink42-21** has been able to scale its app to four additional municipalities in the past year alone. In total, 10 municipalities use mZaednica with a reach of almost 500,000 citizens in the country. Its success has been driven by building upon the pilot as a strong proof point, encouraging friendly municipal competition and investing in raising awareness of the value and importance of digitization to improve government operations and shift government culture.

Be intentional about understanding government priorities. Engaging with government in digitization initiatives is a long and slow road requiring alignment with government priorities. Interviewees recommended first mapping the current stance of the government on digitization and governance priorities more broadly, before trying to achieve buy-in on a civic or govtech project. This can help teams understand the values, policies and initiatives governments are most actively seeking to promote, thereby informing teams of the tools that will help strengthen ongoing efforts in a way that incentivizes government to work with them and that automatically aligns with their existing priorities.

Layertech Software Labs, Inc., is focused on one clear goal: providing relevant, inclusive and effective ICT solutions to help solve society's biggest challenges. This goal has naturally led **Layertech Labs** to focus on finding ways to partner and align with governments and their priorities across the Philippines. Although the Philippines has been a commitment holder in the Open Government Partnership National Action Plan, which includes requirements related to advancing access to procurement data, a lack of existing datasets and technical skills of local government units (LGUs) has prevented the achievement of these commitments. Understanding the opportunity to support the government in achieving these existing priorities, **Layertech Labs** developed the Open Contracting Codex (OCDex) portal in 2018. OCDex is an open portal hosting machine-readable procurement and other government data in select areas in the Philippines, and is intended to help address the lack of accessible datasets across the country.

Much of Layertech's success with this platform, however, came from the work it has done beyond simply creating it. With IRI's support, Layertech developed a collaboration model between LGUs and local academia, training them on how to use procurement data accessible on OCDex to analyze public problems and identify potential solutions based on their analysis. In doing this, Layertech was not only able to help capacitate government on the power of ICT and data analysis in line with existing priorities, but helped generate insights and recommendations relevant to the government's business processes and decision-making. OCDex's utility to the local government's ongoing operations and areas of focus resulted in much great government buy-in, support and engagement, which have continued into the platform's fourth year.

Best Practices to Navigate Challenges with Skill Acquisition and Retention

As mentioned in the core challenges section, finding and retaining individuals with needed talent and finding opportunities to upskill in core civic and govtech skills remains a barrier. Interviewees cited two key approaches that have helped them successfully navigate this challenge.

Engage with and rely on support communities. Multiple civic and govtech leaders with whom we spoke cited the support of broader civic, govtech and technology-for-good communities as key to their ability to overcome skill limitations. Existing networks and communities of global and regional actors were referenced as one of the few reliable sources of knowledge and mentorship that can enable civic and govtech teams to grow individually and organizationally, as well as key sources of problem-solving support. Support communities can also connect practitioners to accelerator programs which many successful civic and govtech leaders referenced as critical to acquiring the skills needed to advance an early project idea, shifting it toward a sustainable and scalable model.

Build partnerships with diverse stakeholder groups. While this best practice can be challenging to execute, partnerships with diverse stakeholders can be the difference between the failure or success of a civic or govtech initiative. Take the time to map existing organizations with aligning interests and goals, both within and outside of the tech space, to build a network that provides knowledge support, mentorship connections, human-resources recommendations and general advice. Partnering with a diversity of organizations can also help to source needed talent, including partnering with the private sector for mentorship and technical support; community groups for communication and outreach assistance; and civil society and citizen groups to help define narrow problems to inform project development. Partnerships can help provide and connect civictech teams with needed expertise in a more efficient, and often low-cost or free, way.

Best Practices for User Uptake and Scaling

As explained above, sustaining citizens' engagement with a tool, let alone growing the number of citizens using it, can be a core challenge. The below are frequently cited best practices to help teams overcome those limitations.

— **Remember that technology is not an end; it's a means.** Although most of our interviewees were strong tech enthusiasts, many cautioned against viewing the spin-up and integration of technology as the main end goal, and to instead view it as a means to a broader good-governance goal. It is important for civic and govtech organizations to keep their organizational identities clear, focusing on solving public problems using tech where it makes sense, rather than creating new tech "solutions" and trying to find a problem to which to apply them. Even the most innovative tech tools will flounder and fail without a truly useful application. Maintaining a humble and adaptable perspective that recognizes tech is not always the best solution will enable your team to more effectively solve public challenges.

— **Advocate for enough time for iteration in tool design, and build the expectation for iteration and adaptation over the course of tool maintenance.** In spaces unfamiliar with or new to digitization, there can be an expectation that digital initiatives result in an "end product" in which a civic or govtech resource is created and then remains final for the foreseeable future. This perception fails to build in adequate time or resources for the iteration needed to create tools that remain useful to their target end users. Omitting user testing, iteration and opportunities for user input and adaptation will result in tools that are not user friendly and that rapidly fall out of use as they fail to adapt to changing needs, user expectations and even digital realities. A strong design methodology is based on a cyclical process of prototyping, testing, analyzing and refining a product or process; the most successful civic and govtech initiatives were the result of this approach. Further, it is important to note that a digital tool is never truly final. It will require regular updates and maintenance to remain relevant and even usable, and to ensure use does not drop off over time. To increase the user friendliness of a tool, one of the interviewees

said they are constantly iterating and trying to improve, including rethinking how their digital initiative presents information: "We had a tool that has a lot of text — articles, summaries and so on. So we consulted with our community on what we should do, and then we hired someone who could help us on social media to try to have the information more visual, although we are not giving up text since it is the basis of what we do." Advocating to funders for time to enable an iterative process in both the design and maintenance of the digital initiative is key for longer-term success.

— **Don't scale just to scale.** Although many of the best practices listed in this paper focus on enabling the scale of a tool, it is important to note that growing for the sake of growth is never the best option. A digital tool is only going to be successful if it has been appropriately modified to fit the specific citizen needs. Keep in mind that the scale of any initiative requires the proper partnerships, translations, investments and, most importantly, a narrow and definable problem and target end-user group(s) in mind. Across the groups we interviewed with successfully scaled initiatives – and amongst the teams IRI directly funded specifically to scale existing initiatives – critical to their success was first investing in ensuring their product was useful, proven and successful in its original context. Only once a pilot project is successfully proven should your team begin considering how the reach of the tool could expand to either a broader user base or to new contexts.

A prime case of this approach is the work of the civictech group **BudgIT**, a civic organization working to improve participatory governance and access to public data in Nigeria. Although the team had early success in its work to improve governance with digital tools, the team remained extremely cautious about scaling its work beyond Nigeria to ensure it had a refined tool and service to provide. In fact, **BudgIT** spent its first eight years operating only within Nigeria, and only after those eight years of refining its processes and products did the team begin approaching other West African countries to scale its work.

As a **BudgIT** leader described it, "Scaling for us is very cautious because we realized we are not selling a direct product — governance is our product — so we have to understand contexts differ across countries and it's important for us to listen and to approach this from a humble perspective. This act of listening gave us the opportunity to approach the problem specifically across countries. So we don't have a one-size-fits all, but our products are consistent around governance, accountability, etc." The team recognized how important it was to build verified tools and name recognition over time, enabling it to build government attention and scale in a deliberate and successful way.

Build diverse partnerships to grow the user base more effectively. As mentioned in relation to skill acquisition and uptake, partnering with a diverse array of organizations is useful to support the scale of initiatives, especially when scaling tools to new contexts (not just scaling their user base). In some cases, teams were able to scale their tools to new municipalities within their home country on their own, relying on their networks with government and citizens, but none reported successfully scaling to new country contexts without the help of a broader coalition.

Many teams reported building relationships with organizations that focused on community mobilization, government accountability, or even political groups or parties simply focused on governance in general. When partnerships are built as groundwork first, digital tools can get traction much more quickly when expanded to new spaces.
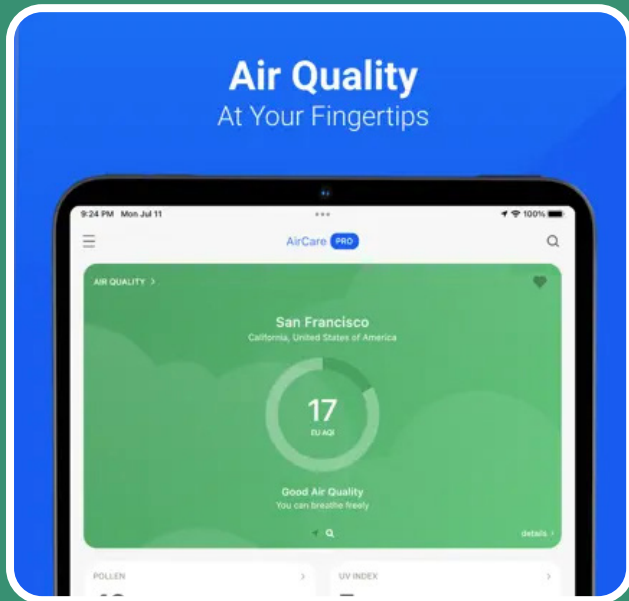
A strong example of this approach is the work of the team behind **AirCare**, a mobile app designed to track air quality, pollen and ultraviolet (UV) data across the globe. Originally founded in Skopje, North Macedonia, in 2014, it was developed to track poor air quality specifically within the Skopje context by displaying air-quality data in an easy-to-understand way. The tool empowered targeted advocacy and direct citizen engagement to fight for green policies to reduce air pollution. After launching in North Macedonia, **AirCare** has successfully scaled across different countries, including scaling to Serbia, the Balkans, Australia, the United States, and elsewhere. One of the keys to its scaling success? Building mutually beneficial partnerships with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civic groups also working on the topic of climate change in each of those countries and regions. As **AirCare** prepares to expand to a new country, the team identifies local partners and requests they promote the app in exchange for **AirCare** featuring the work of the local organization on its platform. In this way, **AirCare** has been able to exponentially scale the number of potential users it reaches, foster greater engagement with its work and ultimately generate uptake in new countries in a way it could not have achieved if it had entered the market on its own.

Go where your target end users already are. This final best practice related to user uptake encompasses several approaches to effectively reach targeted end users, as summarized below. Combining a series of these approaches can help generate the traction needed for users to notice and use your tool or service in a way that feels seamless and low effort for them.

- First, invest in understanding where your targeted end users are already interacting online and imbed or market your tool or service in that space. For example, if users are already engaging on Facebook or another social media site, take specific efforts to integrate your tool — or at least promote your tool — on those platforms to make it easy for your end users to seamlessly find and interact with your initiative. If end users need to intentionally seek out and directly navigate to a different platform or app just to engage with your tool, it can be hard to sustain engagement.

- Second, do your best to imbed your work and digital initiative into existing public narratives. For example, if the public conversation in your locality or country is concerned with climate

action and your platform is a citizen engagement tool, market your tool in a way that connects to climate concerns. If public conversation centers on concerns around corruption, develop a communications campaign that links your initiative to anti-corruption efforts. The more you can relate to trending public conversations that are relevant to your organization's goals, the more likely that citizens will take note of your initiative.

- Finally, it can be helpful to partner with viral individuals or influencers who care about topics related to your work and can promote your platform to reach a wider audience.

How Can We Create A More Supportive Ecosystem? Recommendations for Civic and Govtech Practitioners, Funders and Governments to Better Scale and Sustain Initiatives and Impact

Building upon challenges and best practices listed above, IRI specifically sought to identify recommendations for key stakeholders who often determine the success of a digital initiative, namely civic and govtech practitioners, funders and governments. Recommendations are structured to speak specifically to each of those three key categories of actors, reflective of the challenges and best practices covered earlier in this paper. Again, this is not intended to be a fulsome set of recommendations addressing every challenge or struggle digital initiatives face, but it serves as a starting point for top recommendations actors should consider to adjust existing approaches to support the long-term success of civic and govtech initiatives.

Key recommendations for funders:

- Fund organizations, not just projects.
- Fund on longer time horizons.
- Fund beyond the regular, well-capacitated organizations.
- Ensure funding priorities align with on-the-ground needs.
- Emphasize funding local, as well as national-level, organizations.
- Provide support beyond funding, such as mentorship and capacity building.
- Invest in ecosystems and promote multisectoral approaches and collaboration to encourage a diversity of actors to work together.
- Discuss sustainability of tools before awarding funds to a proposal.

Key recommendations for civic and govtech practitioners:

- Establish interpersonal relationships with funders.
- Build organizational investment into project budgets if funders won't step outside of a project mindset.
- Invest in external promotion campaigns to build awareness and engagement with your initiatives.
- Take advantage of local innovation networks, accelerator programs and fellowships.
- Be driven by a user-centered focus.
- Set aside your own biases about what is helpful and invest in understanding what is valued by relevant government stakeholders.

Key recommendations for governments:

- Commit to supporting digital initiatives across levels of government, and ensure support comes from the highest level to effectively change government culture.
- Structure clear lines of accountability to ensure consistent and thorough responsiveness through digital tools.
- Make data accessible.

Recommendations for Funders to be Responsive to Civic and Govtech Needs

Given the top challenges were linked to funders and funding models, IRI primarily focused on distilling recommendations for funders to improve how they support civic and govtech initiatives and organizations. Below are the top eight recommendations, suggested by practitioners, academics and researchers. These recommendations apply to a diverse set of funders, including venture capital firms, foundations and USG and other governmental funders.

Fund organizations, not just projects. Interviewees across contexts were united in this message. Funders should at least consider redirecting a portion of their resources to support the core operations of civic and govtech organizations rather than specific projects. As mentioned above, when funding is limited to a specific project, civic and govtech teams are unable to invest in capacity building and critical human resources to retain talent; organizational flexibility to pivot and adapt is limited; and strategic plans cannot be developed, as work is constantly directed toward one-off products rather than holistic initiatives. Funders should diversify their funding models to at least include funding opportunities focused on supporting a strategic vision and plan rather than limiting funding to project-based support.

This would enable civic and govtech teams to more strategically approach digitization in their country or locality, provide space to invest in coalition building and team development, and ultimately give teams the opportunity to create a stronger and more holistic movement for digitalization where the supported organization is based. Funding organizational capacity and infrastructure, rather than projects, also reflects truisims in the venture capital world — investing in building the infrastructure of a promising organization will ultimately yield greater impact than project-centered funding. This truth applies to the civic and govtech spaces as well.

Fund on longer time horizons. This was the second most frequent suggestion across interviews. This recommendation was also reiterated through IRI's experience directly funding teams over the past year, as six of its seven partners requested time extensions to complete their projects. Interviewees expressed frustration with the fact that funders often do not seem to understand the time horizons needed to effectively research, define, develop, test, iterate, launch and promote a civic or govtech initiative, resulting in funding timelines that severely limit a team's capacity to move thoroughly through each of those steps. If funders are serious about investing in the longer-term success of tools, rather than the constant creation of new initiatives that then struggle to sustain, they should consider conducting a thorough review to understand realistic time horizons needed for tools to be launched and should consult realistically with potential grantees to understand their optimal time horizons. If funders are limited to specific, short time horizons for each grant, funders should consider providing a series of repeat grants to the same organization as a way to provide longer-term funding to support the more sustainable development and growth of a tool.

Fund beyond the regular, well-capacitated organizations. Many interviewees pointed to the fact that funders tend to repeatedly support the same few organizations, rarely diversifying. Even when funders diversify, they rarely expand to support organizations with limited past experience. While there is a need for funders to determine organizational capacity before providing support, a strongly promoted alternative model is for funders to support organizations with more limited experience and reducing the risk in doing so by pairing financial support with robust mentoring and capacity-building programs. Many interviewees — including those who are well capacitated and funded — expressed concern that the broader civic, govtech and digital-democracy ecosystem has remained relatively small, with limited opportunities for inexperienced teams to develop their skills. In the perspective of many interviewees, this hinders the capacity of technology to advance democracy and governance overall by discouraging new individuals, organizations and teams from entering the space, because it is almost impossible to secure early funding.

Ensure funding priorities align with on-the-ground needs. While it can be tempting to pivot your funding focus to mirror emerging trends, interviewees universally expressed frustration with frequently — and sometimes constantly — shifting funding priorities

that do not align with on-the-ground needs. While interviewees recognized funder priorities cannot remain static, interviewees consistently reported funders' interest in new trends — such as suddenly pivoting to fund artificial intelligence, drone use, app development or other emerging technologies — is usually a reflection of funder interest rather than of actual needs on the ground. If a funder chooses to pivot funding priorities to mirror or more strongly focus on emerging trends, interviewees recommended funders conduct extensive consultations to confirm those emerging technologies will be useful in the intended country context, preferably in partnership with partners in those operating contexts.

Finally, interviewees strongly recommended that if funders wish to shift their priorities, they should do so without completely abandoning previous priorities. While it can be exciting to fund something new, interviewees across contexts repeatedly emphasized funder investment in simple digitalization approaches and the advancement of associated skills — such as investing in simple, short-message-service (SMS) technologies —remain the bread and butter of the digitalization needs in most developing-country contexts. One partner, based at a civil society organization dedicated to the promotion of digital technology and information for social purposes in Paraguay, summarized funder recommendations below.

> *New technologies, innovations should continue but should not [be assessed] to be the future of civictech. Civictech needs are mostly the same as we've been seeing the past ten years. Even though right now we can envision [a future] where you have the right quality of data and the right people to do more sophisticated technology solutions. But when you substitute the support for basic approaches on technology and data with advanced innovations you are basically limiting the ability to make those useful. I would tell funders to be careful of the trends, and to avoid funding the flashy, supposedly state-of-the-art technology that might be relevant in Silicon Valley, but in the rest of the world is still immature to reach those goals.*

Emphasize funding local, as well as national-level, organizations. Across contexts and countries, interviewees emphasized that the most successful initiatives they have created have been those that at least started on a smaller, more local level. As one interviewee put it: *"All problems are local problems."* It can be enticing for funders to invest in larger organizations working to address national-level problems, but a strong recommendation was for funders to consider supporting local-level efforts in addition to, if not instead of, national-level initiatives. When funders support local-level organizations and initiatives, tools and their teams are often closer to the problem on the ground, resulting in better designed and more useful tools with higher citizen uptake and local-government support. This also enables initiatives to iterate more rapidly and responsively at the start, only growing once a proven resource is ready to scale. Funding local organizations and initiatives also helps to build momentum toward a more sustainable grassroots movement that advances technology for democracy — generating local buy-in that grows organically across municipalities, rather than what can often feel like an inorganic, top-down imposition when digitalization efforts are driven by national-level government or organizations.

Provide support beyond funding. Many interviewees said they often struggled to receive needed non-monetary support that could make a big difference in their ability to scale and sustain their work. Many interviewees emphasized their desire for a mentorship component to be imbedded within funding opportunities. Those who had received mentorship support emphasized how helpful it was to have the dedicated support of someone more experienced in at least a component of launching or sustaining civic or govtech initiatives. Interviewees most frequently reported a deficiency in skills related to the broader tasks of messaging, outreach and organizational management. If funders could provide capacity building, mentorships and connections to private organizations that could support on these skills in particular, civic and govtech initiatives would have a much higher chance of long-term success.

Fund ecosystems and promote multisectoral approaches and collaboration to encourage a diversity of actors to work together. Funding only civic technologists isn't going to effectively address the challenge of advancing technology for democracy. Funders need to provide support for citizen groups, governments and tech experts to connect and work together to address public problems. This is critical if funders wish to address a problem in a more holistic way, and is one of the few ways to encourage broader cultural changes to embrace the positive application of technology to improve governance. Funding ecosystems can also help reduce competition between civictech organizations and foster collaboration instead. A civictech practitioner and researcher based in West Africa summarized this recommendation:

> *Change has to happen at the systematic level. Five organizations is not the system. You don't have the capacity to spread and create the kind of influence or traction that would result in meaningful change. They will always be successful at creating success stories, but there wouldn't be enough critical mass for there to be a shift in the system towards [changes] that are more desirable."*
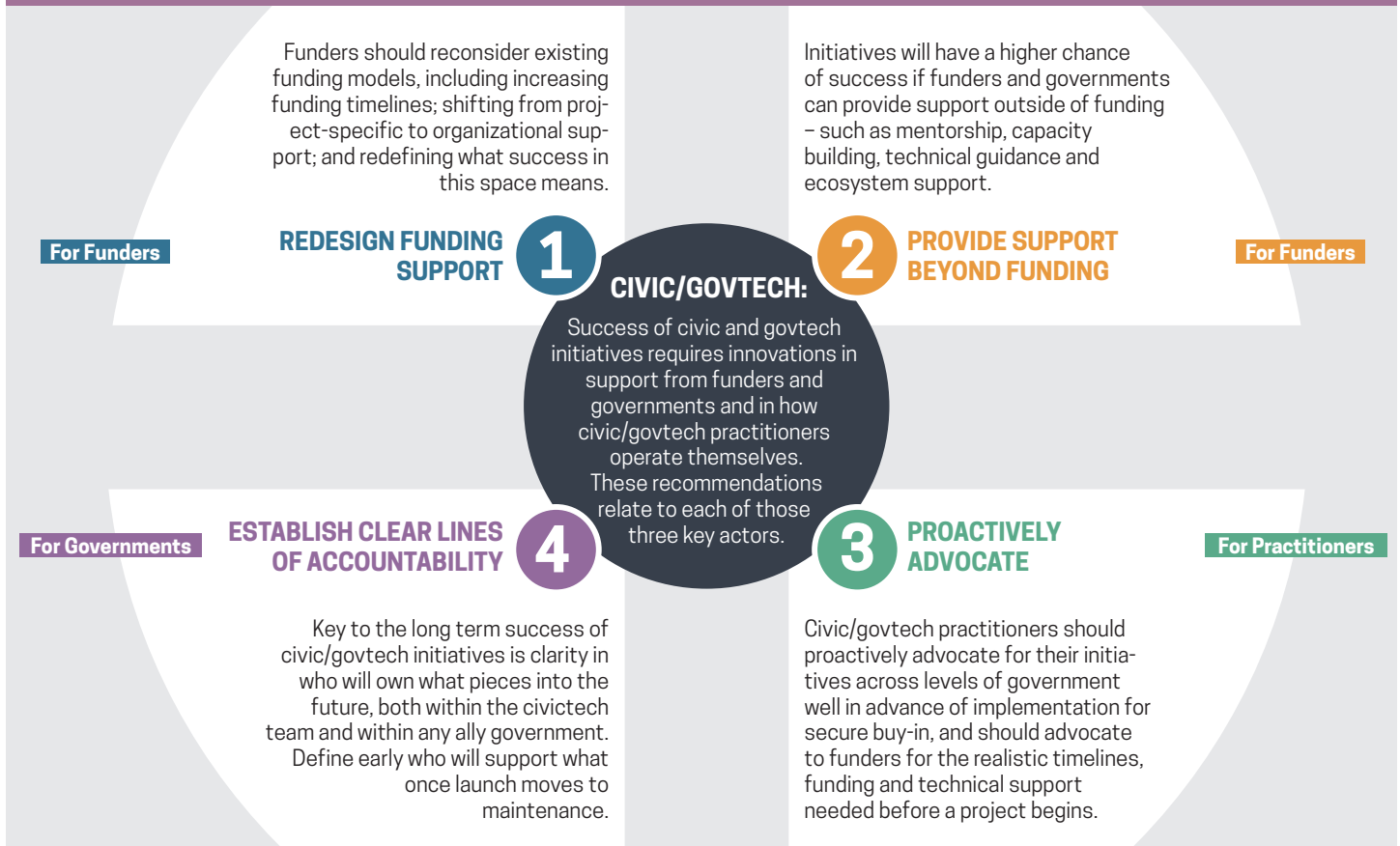
When funders help to drive collaboration between government and civil society, digital tools are often better informed and receive much stronger governmental support in the longer term, leading to much more successful scale and sustainment. Consider the below case study for an example of how this can be done.

Case Study: Success in Multisectoral Collaboration

In Nigeria, the World Bank funded the creation of a free SMS text-messaging tool that facilitated communication between farmers and the federal government, enabling a mobile feedback program. The tool, called MyVoice, was a multistakeholder effort from the beginning, as the entire state-level system responsible for communicating with and supporting farmers was brought in on design and intent conversations from the start. The support of the World Bank as funder made it possible to bring together the community of use at the start, enabling greater collaboration, government interest in integrating the tool, and a chance for greater scale and sustainment. The team behind the app's creation may not have otherwise had the capacity to convene the entire community of use early in the project lifetime. Because of the funder's efforts and support, the app had a much stronger chance of success.

Discuss sustainability of tools before awarding funds to a proposal. Based on the interviews and desk research IRI conducted, there appears to be a slowly growing trend of funders initiating conversations about sustainability plans for a tool at the start of investment. In cases where these conversations occurred before a proposal was awarded, interviewees reported receiving greater support from their funders to prepare for sustainment beyond the grant end by way of mentorship, capacity support and better assistance in building private-public partnerships. In addition, interviewees said early sustainability conversations helped their teams develop a strategy for how they hoped to address longer-term sustainment questions, including considering alternative funding sources, flexible staffing structures and key relationships. Finally, discussing sustainability of a project in advance can help establish realistic expectations about what is needed for the tool to succeed, fostering clearer communications with the funder regarding challenges and ensuring the project begins with all parties on the same page.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS, PRACTITIONERS AND GOVERNMENTS TO ADVANCE CIVIC/GOVTECH INITIATIVES IN THE LONG-TERM

Funders should reconsider existing funding models, including increasing funding timelines; shifting from project-specific to organizational support; and redefining what success in this space means.

For Funders

REDESIGN FUNDING SUPPORT **1**

Initiatives will have a higher chance of success if funders and governments can provide support outside of funding – such as mentorship, capacity building, technical guidance and ecosystem support.

2 **PROVIDE SUPPORT BEYOND FUNDING**

For Funders

CIVIC/GOVTECH:
Success of civic and govtech initiatives requires innovations in support from funders and governments and in how civic/govtech practitioners operate themselves. These recommendations relate to each of those three key actors.

For Governments

ESTABLISH CLEAR LINES OF ACCOUNTABILITY **4**

3 **PROACTIVELY ADVOCATE**

For Practitioners

Key to the long term success of civic/govtech initiatives is clarity in who will own what pieces into the future, both within the civictech team and within any ally government. Define early who will support what once launch moves to maintenance.

Civic/govtech practitioners should proactively advocate for their initiatives across levels of government well in advance of implementation for secure buy-in, and should advocate to funders for the realistic timelines, funding and technical support needed before a project begins.

Recommendations for Civic and Govtech Practitioners

The recommendations below provide guidance specifically for civic and govtech practitioners navigating current and anticipated challenges. While not all recommendations will be relevant to every practitioner reading this paper, each reflects learnings from experienced practitioners who have successfully applied these in their own work.

— Establish interpersonal relationships with funders.
While it may be easy to recommend diversifying funding streams, figuring out how to do so can be a challenge for even the most well-connected civictech organizations, let alone those new to the space. Successful civic and govtech practitioners and teams emphasized the importance of investing in personal relationships with individuals at a funding organization, rather than investing time and energy trying to find new sources of funding. This can have multiple benefits. For example, developing more direct relationships with funding organizations and the individuals within enables teams to stay in touch with funder priorities,

proactively communicate program and project ideas, and encourage extensions to funding streams without having to reestablish organizational credibility. Investing in developing relationships within funding organizations has also proven to save civic and govtech teams valuable time by avoiding reintroductions and avoiding the endless process of crafting, revising and submitting proposals.

— Build organizational investment into project budgets if funders won't step outside of a project mindset. If funders are unwilling or unable to consider providing grants for core organizational support, civic and govtech teams should, at minimum, advocate to integrate line items or allocate a percentage of indirect costs within the proposed budget to account for project maintenance, communication campaigns and even capacity building for team members. Even if calls for proposals do not ask for or suggest such an investment, practitioners within successful civic and govtech teams recommended submitting a proposal that at least initially includes a funding component for small levels of organizational investment. While a funder

may push back or question the inclusion of such funds, it can at least give a civic or govtech organization a starting point for a conversation about why the funds are needed, how organizational investment is important and how it will ultimately help advance the success of the specific project in which a funder is interested. Even if funders ultimately may not agree, consistency in pushing for organizational support as a component of project-based grants can result in shifting a funder's perspective over time.

Invest in external promotion campaigns to build awareness and engagement with your initiatives. Successful projects were only able to scale if an effective and robust outreach campaign was planned and executed over a long period of time — preferably months rather than days or weeks — using a variety of communication mediums. Key to the success of a strong external communications campaign is first mapping target stakeholders and understanding how to reach them where they are, meaning teams should make use of the communication tools their target audience already uses. For example, one IRI partner made use of radio and in-person townhalls to launch a state-assembly website in Nigeria, while another primarily used Facebook ads and posts to communicate about the launch of a procurement platform in the Philippines. Each strategy met citizens where they already engaged online and offline, increasing user acquisition. Lastly, remember to keep the capacities of your end users in mind. Using infographics and easily digestible content helps increase the accessibility of your communication campaign.

Take advantage of local innovation networks, accelerator programs and fellowships. Reiterating a best practice listed above, more than half of all interviewees attributed a portion of their success to their participation in local and international accelerator programs and fellowships. Especially useful was seeking out fellowships that exposed participants to innovative projects and best practices in contexts outside of their own, offering inspiration for what could be implemented in their home country or locality. Accelerator programs share innovative ways to solve public problems using proven best practices, including trainings on problem definition, user-centered and iterative design, and examples of successful and failed

initiatives to inspire and caution future work. Civic and govtech practitioners and teams should seek out these programs to the best of their ability, and should also request funders, mentors and government partners to connect them to those opportunities whenever possible.

Be driven by a user-centered focus. Once a novel idea, user-centered design is now a well-established principle for successful tech products, and not just for civic and govtech initiatives. Effectively designing a tool with a user-centered approach requires mapping and understanding the needs, limitations and goals of your intended end user from the very start of the project. This can be aided by developing strong user personas to guide your team as you move through project iterations, challenges and changes. Doing so will keep your team focused on the needs of the people who will use your tool — whether they are government officials, staff or citizens — and will serve as a guidepost for your team even as product designs inevitably change. Along with keeping your team focused on a user-centered design, ensure that the UI/UX designers and private companies with which civic and govtech teams contract or collaborate have an understanding of user needs for civic processes. An civictech practitioner in Eastern Europe cautioned against hiring a private-sector contractor who doesn't understand user design for products working to address or overcome public or democratic challenges, stating,

> *…We hired a company with a good name and reputation, but the challenge was that these companies are used to working with big corporations and for them we were irrelevant [to them]…they didn't have a civic-minded workflow. We've had to launch a new call for proposals."*

Set aside your own biases about what is helpful and invest in understanding what is valued by relevant government stakeholders. As mentioned earlier in this paper, one of the core challenges to sustaining and scaling a civic or govtech initiative is achieving government buy-in and support, enabling tools to, at minimum, be advanced by government and, at best, adopted by it. One of the best practices implemented across successful initiatives was to

begin the project with an alignment with government officials' interests. Multiple interviewees told stories of failed initiatives that were designed without any consultations with local government officials, or who were only consulted partway through the project. One civictech practitioner summarized their learned lesson as follows:

> "If you focus on addressing challenges as [government] or at least identified champions within government perceive them, there is a greater likelihood they will then use the tool you create. This means beginning with an alignment of interest with government officials. Consulting with government about their hardships and needs at the start can also be helpful to determine if there are individuals internal to government who can own this service, so that the external civictech team is not always appearing as the face of the initiative. This can majorly help with government and citizen adoption of the tool in the longer run."

While it can be difficult to build relationships with government at the start of the project, this underscores a hard lesson learned across many civic and govtech projects — investing in socializing your plans, consistently engaging with government staff and officials, and understanding internal and external challenges the government faces can change the fate of your tool.

Recommendations for Governments

Although most of the interviews and research conducted were primarily intended to gather findings relevant to civic and govtech practitioners and their funders, it is important to note that governments are a key stakeholder in this process, whether local, provincial or national. Governments play a critical role in the sustainability and scale of civic and govtech initiatives and digitalization efforts more broadly, can be important funders and promotors of digital initiatives, and can even institutionalize a resource in the longer term. As such, IRI distilled three key recommendations for governments to consider as they embark on their own digitalization efforts and collaborations with civic and govtech teams.

Commit to supporting digital initiatives across levels of government, and ensure support comes from the highest level to effectively change government culture. Reiterating a best practice listed above, governments need to holistically commit to building leadership buy-in to build sustainable culture change and openness to digitalization in the longer term. Initiatives are more likely to be fully institutionalized if a government entity commits to engaging a diversity of staff to advance a digital initiative — expanding beyond the information-technology (IT) team to include decision-makers who will be responsible for the underlying goals of the tool. Governments investing in digitalization should note that while diversifying support across a department or municipality is key, these efforts will not succeed if senior leaders do not support or understand the value of the digital initiative. As explained by a staffer currently working to drive the adoption of a digital initiative within her municipality in Peru:

> "Municipal buy-in is always a challenge in top-down organizations. One of the best things you can do is to have a strategy to put forward to the municipal manager to convince [them] that tech makes [their] job easier rather than as a burden."

Structure clear lines of accountability to ensure consistent and thorough responsiveness through digital tools. In situations where the government itself is working to integrate a civic or govtech tool — especially a tool enabling citizen engagement with the government — governments should invest in responsiveness through the tool from the very start. Government staff and officials IRI interviewed emphasized that many governments fail to understand the importance of establishing an early precedent of responsiveness. What can often exacerbate this challenge is the failure to create clear lines of accountability in terms of who within the government will manage and respond to citizens through the digital tool or service. Establishing clear internal roles, as well as intentionally building the digital tool or service into existing government processes and responsibilities, will enable the sustainable maintenance of a tool, as well as sustained citizen engagement with the tool in the longer term.

— **Make data accessible.** Nearly all civic and govtech tools rely on access to data for their development, scale and sustainment. Data are critical to identifying and understanding the scope, scale and depth of public-service challenges that digital tools might help solve. Reliable access to data is also critical to keep a tool updated, relevant to citizens and useful for governments and civil society. It is therefore critical for governments to invest in making reliable data available. Doing so can often require a culture change within a municipality or relevant government entity to advance a stronger understanding of the importance of data, as well as investing in trainings to capacitate government staff to collect and analyze data and make those data available. There are many resources governments can access to help in this shift, which will ultimately enable the longer-term success of digital initiatives, including through the support of organizations such as the Open Contracting Partnership and the Open Government Partnership.

A final recommendation

A final recommendation for all stakeholder groups — whether government, funders or civic and govtech practitioners — is to **be open to reconsidering the definition of success for digital tools.** Civic and govtech initiatives more closely follow the principles of the tech world than those of traditional good-government or democracy work. Remember that successful digital products and services are built on clear research, development, iteration, testing and iteration again; it is not always a linear process and requires flexibility to have failures and pivots along the way. This is important for funders, government and civic and govtech practitioners to keep in mind. Even if something is not working as planned at the start, there are often adaptations that will enable its future success. Remember to keep patience, dedication and the implementation of the best practices and recommendations outlined above top of mind.

Conclusion

This white paper is in no way meant to serve as a fully comprehensive guide mapping all challenges that civic and govtech initiatives and stakeholders face. This paper is meant to be a snapshot of best practices, lessons learned, challenges and recommendations for stakeholders invested in making this sector more successful, impactful, and sustainable. Modern governnace cannot remain in the analog world. Civic and govtech initiative will continue to become increasingly important if democracy is to adapt to the digital age, and establishing support and collaboration among the stakeholders invested in making that future a reality is key.

We recognize no one organization can drive change across an entire sector; collaboration will be key. Please reach out to IRI at **info@iri.org** if you'd like to share your inputs or collaborate with us.

Acknowledgements

Appendix

Appendix A. List of Interviewed Individuals

The below list provides a sample of the individuals with whom IRI spoke, but is not a comprehensive list of everyone who contributed or spoke with IRI during the course of white-paper development.

Name of Individual and/or Organization	Geographic Location	Stakeholder Type
Alex Parsons, MySociety	Europe	Academia
Bojan Kordalov, Institute for Good Governance and Euro Atlantic Perspectives (IDUEP)	Europe	Civil Society
Bukola Idowu, Kimpact Development Initiative (KDI)	Africa	Civil Society
Christopher Tuckwood, The Sentinel Project	North America	Civil Society
Code for Pakistan	Asia	Civil Society
Cricket Soong, CirroLytix Research Services and Data Ethics PH	Asia	Civil Society
Daniel Carranza, Data Uruguay	Europe	Civil Society
Debora Peci, Democracy Plus	Europe	Civil Society
Dominic Ligot, CirroLytix Research Services and Data Ethics PH	Asia	Civil Society
Emile Gozali, Affiliated Network for Social Accountability-EAP	Asia	Civil Society
Emmanuel Guardiola, Cologne Game Lab TH Koeln	Europe	Civil Society
Gherbal Initiative	Asia	Academia
Gorjan Jovanovski, Green Humane City/ Zelen Human Grad	Europe	Civil Society
Hannah Wheatley, CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation	Africa	Civil Society
Hugo Calvano, Municipality of Corrientes	Latin America and the Caribbean	Government
Inés Reineke, Local Innovation Network (RIL)	Latin America and the Caribbean	Civil Society
Javier Perez, Political Watch	Europe	Civil Society
Jesus Cepeda, OS City	Latin America and the Caribbean	Civil Society
John Paul P. Miranda, Don Honorio Ventura State University	Asia	Academia
Joie Cruz, Limitless Labs	Asia	Civil Society
Layertech Software Labs Inc.	Asia	Civil Society
Lucas Giorgetti, Local Innovation Network (RIL)	Latin America and the Caribbean	Civil Society
Maria Vianca Jasmin Anglo	Asia	Academia
Mariela Belén Aguero, Political Watch	Europe	Civil Society
Marr Nayng, Gambia Participates	Africa	Civil Society
Michal Szwarc, TechSoup	Europe	Civil Society
Miguel Angel Alor Flores	Latin America and the Caribbean	Civil Society
Milan Tancheski, Center for Social Innovations Blink 42-21	Europe	Civil Society
Misha Popovikj, Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' Skopje	Europe	Civil Society

Nonso Jideofor, Present Lab	Africa	Academia
Olivia Vereha, Commit Global	Europe	Civil Society
Oluseun Onigbinde, BudgIT	Africa	Civil Society
Rafidiharinirina Fabieene Mananarivoarisoa, Madagascar Initiatives for Digital Innovation (MAIDI)	Africa	Academia
Rebecca Rumbul, Rust Foundation	Europe	Academia
Sename Koffi Agbodjinou, WoeLab	Africa	Civil Society
SocialTIC	Latin America and the Caribbean	Civil Society
Ursula Andrea Harman Canalle, District Municipality of San Bartolo	Latin America and the Caribbean	Government
Vlada Ciobanu, Primaria Mea (My City Hall)	Europe	Civil Society
Zorica Velkovska, Center for Social Innovations Blink 42-21	Europe	Civil Society

Appendix B. Methodology: Desk Research, Interviews and Implementation Support

To inform this white paper, IRI conducted multiple stages of research on previous and ongoing civic and govtech initiatives. Before IRI began conducting its own research, the team conducted an in-depth review of existing literature, including an analysis of past research interrogating the impact of the civic and govtech fields to date, as well as existing researching analyzing enabling factors and challenges to civictech initiatives in general. In doing so, the team was able to build upon previously identified best practices and limitations to civic and govtech projects, and was able to target identified research gaps — namely, specifically analyzing and synthesizing the limitations and best practices for sustaining and scaling initiatives on a global scale. This was reinforced by inputs from the civic and govtech teams with which IRI actively partners, which frequently cited the longer-term scale and sustainment of their work as the biggest challenges to success.

Following the identification of a specific research gap, the team conducted 53 interviews with practitioners, thought leaders, government representatives and academics experienced in the fields of civic and govtech who could speak to concrete lessons learned and the realities facing civic and govtech projects across the world. Interviews were spread across geographies, with 11 interviewees based in Asia, 10 in the Middle East and Africa, 24 in Europe, seven in Latin America and one in North America (see Appendix A for a detailed list of many of the interviewees). Much of this paper is a summarization of findings identified through those interviews, distilling the key successes, challenges and needs from the very individuals and teams actively working to use technology to advance democratic principles.

Finally, integrated throughout this paper are key lessons learned through IRI's active support of seven civic and govtech initiatives over the past year. Through monthly check-ins, in-person visits and focused interviews with each of the seven teams, IRI was able to glean key challenges, needs and successful approaches from each team. Those learnings have heavily influenced the writing of this white paper and have been used to practically inform each section. Finally, draft findings were shared with the broader civic and govtech community through two events open to civic and govtech practitioners, inviting feedback from more than 25 additional implementers on early draft findings. In total, more than 70 practitioners and experts have informed and contributed to these findings. While many of the lessons and best practices within the white paper can be applied to teams interested in digital initiatives writ large, the white paper primarily focuses on challenges, successes and needs for projects focused specifically on strengthening democracy and addressing good-governance challenges.

* A note for future research: Most of these interviews were conducted with partners operating in democratic or mostly democratic contexts. Many of the initiatives discussed were created, scaled or sustained in contexts that were open to democratic principles, an active civil society and/or good-governance efforts. Only a few individuals spoke of experiences in which government was threatened by civic or govtech initiatives and actively took steps to prevent the success of the digital initiative seeking to improve democratic governance. Most of IRI's interviewees and supported practitioners simply faced resistance to change rather than outright hostility. An opportunity for future research is to interrogate factors and approaches that are key to scaling and sustaining digital-democracy initiatives specifically in closed-country contexts.