Photo: Nathalia Angarita for USAID

THE ASSESSMENT SPURRING INNOVATIVE DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT AROUND THE WORLD:

The Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment (DECA)

In 2016, the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) brokered a peace accord that ended nearly five decades of internal armed conflict. After years of reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts, the Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment (DECA) report published by USAID and DAI's Digital Frontiers project revealed that new emerging threats to civil society, while digital, had a potential link to physical violence. The team recommended that USAID/Colombia invest in cyber hygiene programming to assess and improve online and offline safety for its implementing partners. Today, USAID/Colombia partners with Digital APEX to build just this type of cybersecurity capacity.

As more Missions like Colombia grapple with the emerging opportunities and challenges of our digital world, USAID's Digital Strategy is shaping the Agency's response. In order to design policies and programs that take advantage of technology, stakeholders need to first understand the building blocks of a country's digital landscape. The DECA, a cornerstone of the Digital Strategy, is helping USAID Missions to do just that.

DECA JOURNEY

The DECA emerged from a close working partnership between USAID's Technology Division within the Innovation, Technology, and Research (ITR) Hub and DAI's Digital Frontiers project, who, together, set out to define the digital ecosystem. As part of the initial implementation of USAID's Digital Strategy, the Technology Division worked with the Digital Frontiers team to design and pilot the DECA. After two years of piloting and iterating the methodology in the field with four Missions, the DECA became not just a standalone assessment, but a versatile and broadly applicable tool. Building on these pilots, the team developed the Digital Ecosystem Framework to better explain the digital ecosystem to the Agency and their implementing partners. The DE Framework now guides the whole of USAID's digital development approach.

The joint USAID and Digital Frontiers team has or will conduct 19 additional DECAs for a total of 23 as of mid-2024. This diversity of DECAs has encompassed conflict and crisis zones, countries with a large humanitarian aid presence or heightened security environment, and regional Missions covering multiple countries. After each assessment, the team documented technical processes and created internal templates and research tools to standardize the process. USAID saw the immense value in this collection of internal documentation and the idea for the DECA Toolkit was born. Today, the Toolkit empowers Missions to

conduct a robust DECA through their existing partnerships that, while unfamiliar, is neither confusing nor overly complex and allows Missions to tackle their priorities.

DECA IMPACT

The DECA has spurred innovative thinking across Missions. In Serbia, the DECA helped staff think about how to incorporate digital development in new and existing activities. For example, DECA research revealed a nascent startup environment in need of institutional nurturing. As a result, USAID/Serbia recently advocated for the legal recognition of angel investors and tech startup companies. Additionally, Serbia utilized DECA findings to incorporate digital into the Mission's new Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS).
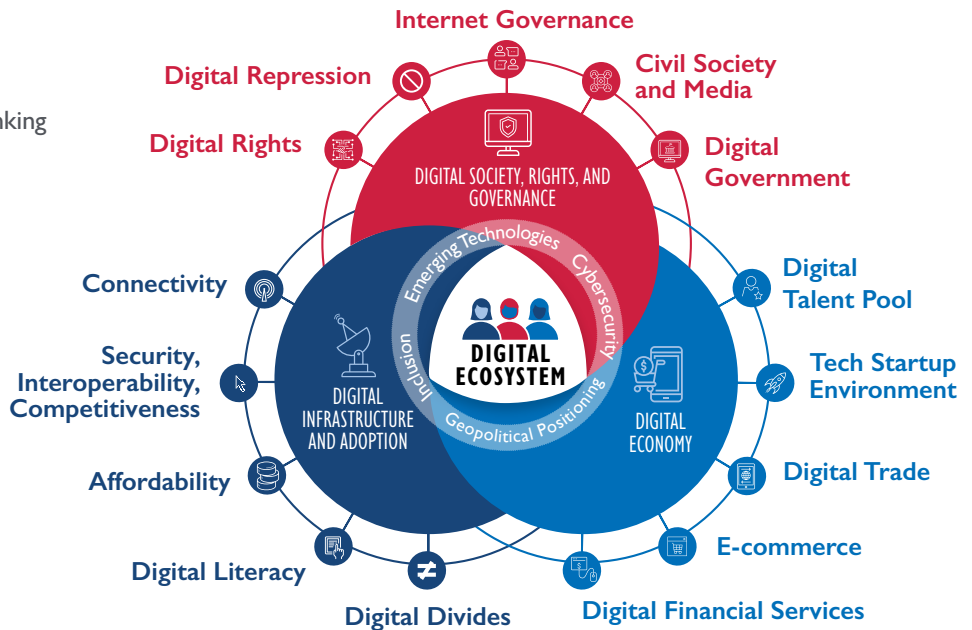
[The DECA] was planned as a comprehensive effort to elevate our knowledge and capacity for the digitalization context in which we operate. [It had] good timing - we were developing our CDCS, so we could incorporate the aspects that were covered by DECA. [An] excellent opportunity to complement our knowledge, which we might not have been able to do otherwise.

Sasa Djureinovic, USAID/Serbia

The DECAs also continue to inspire new ideas. In Colombia, the DECA report dug into gender disparities across the digital ecosystem, including access to finance. This got the Mission thinking about ways to incorporate more gender inclusive programming in financial inclusion. Six months later, USAID and Mastercard partnered to launch the StartPath Empodera program, which catalyzes investments in female-led fintech companies that focus on products and services designed for greater financial inclusion. USAID/Colombia also continues to include the DECA as background information in their RFPs, encouraging offerors to address digital solutions in their proposals.

[The DECA] did meet my expectations, and that's because the DECA team let us co-create the product…We were brainstorming and ended up with a product that is really useful to the Mission and I've been able to share [it] with project managers and they've been able to take it and run with it. People know where they fit within the DECA"

David Jackson, USAID/Colombia

Today, more than a quarter of USAID's 80 Missions have completed or are in the process of conducting a DECA either through Digital Frontiers or independently via the Toolkit. And many more are on the horizon. Recently, three Missions, Uzbekistan, Zambia, and Bosnia completed DECAs on their own using the Toolkit as a guide—with this model continuing to grow. From the start, the goal was to design a tool Missions find collaborative, informative, and ultimately actionable. The evidence seems to speak for itself.

Learn more about the DECAs at usaid.gov/digital-strategy.