

Terms of Reference: 2026-2027 Working Groups

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About the DPI Safeguards Initiative

The Member States of the United Nations, in the Pact for the Future and its annex, the Global Digital Compact, recognized both the transformative potential of DPI and the necessity of safeguards to ensure DPI's responsible development and implementation.

The DPI Safeguards initiative is a global, multi-stakeholder undertaking convened and supported by the Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies (ODET) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

In 2024, the initiative launched the Universal DPI Safeguards Framework. This milestone was achieved through collaboration with 44 DPI experts across various sectors: public and private organizations, civil society, development agencies, and academia. It also involved contributions from 13 organizations forming the International Organizations Consulting Group (IOCG), representatives from 12 countries, and input from the public through 13 convenings. In addition, more than 100 public contributions offered critical insights that shaped the development of the Framework.

In 2025, the initiative focussed on global mainstreaming of the Universal DPI Safeguards Framework, supporting catalytic safeguards implementation at the country level and continuing the development of assets such as the evolution of the Framework from 1.0 to 2.0 and implementation supportive resources.

In 2026-2027: The initiative is transitioning from a global, multi-stakeholder undertaking to a decentralized, ecosystem-led delivery model designed to scale country-level adoption.

Purpose of the Working Groups

The DPI Safeguards initiative is a multi-stakeholder effort by design. The guidance presented in assets (such as the Framework) seeks to reflect the needs of various stakeholders across the DPI ecosystem. The working groups are instrumental in incorporating diverse perspectives into the Framework, and any subsequent assets which support the adoption and implementation of the Framework ensuring it is inclusive and globally relevant. The working groups also serve to foster broad stakeholder support and drive the Framework's adoption.

After the publication of the second edition (2.0) of the Universal DPI Safeguards Framework in September 2025, the initiative received a range of feedback from the community, including Member States actively adopting the Framework—such as Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Malawi, and South Africa—along with countries seeking to initiate adoption, including Egypt, Kazakhstan, Mexico, and Trinidad and Tobago.

This feedback highlights that while global norm-setting has been broadly successful — with more implementers acknowledging the need for safeguards and recognizing the principles that need to be adopted — translating these principles to concrete national deployment requires resolving three distinct operational vectors: **Commitment, Capacity, and Capital that need to actively work together to ensure** robust safeguards accelerate digital adoption, public administration efficiency, and social inclusion.

Commitment: High-level political support is critical to creating the domestic operational space required to advance inclusion and safety objectives.

Capacity: Even when clear political support exists, national-level stakeholders and programme managers routinely lack the specialized know-how, policy toolkits, or technical mechanisms required to identify and mitigate institutional safeguarding risks. Early country implementations reveal that safeguards demand context-intensive, localized technical support as teams navigate complex architectural and data sovereignty tradeoffs. These require capital and therefore they translate to budgetary and financing decisions along the life cycle of DPI implementation.

Capital: Capital dictates the long-term arc of state capacity and architectural sustainability. How a country finances safeguards, what specific cost items it prioritizes, and the structural decisions made during public investment planning determine whether a DPI achieves population-scale trust or suffers from systemic infrastructure decay. Capacity cannot scale over multi-year horizons on ad-hoc funding; it requires dedicated capital to sustain human personnel, run complex redressal mechanisms, and execute continuous public safety and inclusion audits and interventions. From our lighthouse country implementations in 2025, the DPI Safeguards Secretariat has been requested to provide technical guidance on the critical decisions driven by this capital arc:

1. **Quantifying Upfront Institutional Mechanisms:** Moving beyond high-level principles to understand the explicit cost structures required to establish upfront participatory service design, robust public grievance redressal systems, and comprehensive legal, regulatory, and enforcement frameworks.
2. **Public Financial Management (PFM) Integration:** Securing technical clarity on how to inject safeguards funding requirements directly into sovereign budgeting templates, national procurement frameworks, and multilateral development bank (MDB) investment cycles, rather than relying on isolated, temporary pilots.
3. **Capitalizing Horizontal Structures:** Accounting for the horizontal nature of safeguards, which demands explicit budget lines for cross-institutional change management, adoption analytics, inter-ministerial coordination, and continuous public capacity building—line items that are frequently omitted from initial capital expenditure project budgets.

Based on these country-level insights, the 2026–2027 working groups are convened to deliver structured technical guidance and address these persistent operational and financing questions.

Scope of Work

Focus areas

The working groups will contribute their practical technical knowledge and expertise, focus their research, discussions, input, and process multi-stakeholder feedback across six(6) core themes, explicitly framed to address implementation challenges:

Theme 1: Technical & Operational Decisions, Cost Items & Trade-Offs

If embedding safeguards requires dedicated time, programmatic funding, and strategic resource allocation to unlock long-term public trust and maximize the economic dividends of digital inclusion, then:

- *Is there an optimal entry point within the national DPI life cycle to establish safeguards-related technical capacity, inter-agency coordination mechanisms, and core administrative processes?*

- *What constitutes the baseline minimum financial and institutional investments (such as dedicated administrative coordinating personnel, specialized technical capacity for standard setting and auditing, cross-agency coordination units, and legal/regulatory enforcement mechanisms) required to operationalize these guardrails effectively in a proactive manner, preventing them from becoming retroactive bottlenecks?*

Theme 2: Sources of Funds & Capital Architecture

If transitioning to a sustainable DPI scaling requires shifting the fiscal narrative from upfront capital expenditure to long-term architectural viability—where DPI alters capital expenditure (Capex)/Operating expenditure (Opex) ratios across ministries—while ensuring that safeguards are treated as standard infrastructure cost items rather than isolated pilots, then:

- *How should DPI be funded across its life cycle using blended capital sources (such as, catalytic grants, MDB project preparation loans, sovereign allocations, bilateral grants, user-fee mechanisms, or intra-governmental cost-sharing)?*
- *How do public financial management (PFM) systems transition from evaluating standalone, single-agency technology projects to measuring comprehensive multi-ministry Total Cost of Ownership (TCO)—specifically accounting for PFM budget lines, cost-apportionment formulas for shared horizontal layers, recurring operational maintenance, safety compliance, and continuous security infrastructure?*
- *How should multi-year sustainability models be constructed within sovereign investment planning to ensure continuous revenue or budget availability across participating ministries, avoiding systemic infrastructure decay and vendor lock-in?*
- *What empirical learnings, budgeting models, processes can be leveraged from active, country-level implementations worldwide to guide future national infrastructure investments?*

Theme 3: Institutional Coordination Frameworks

If DPI with safeguards functions as a foundational horizontal layer —digital identity, payment rails, and data exchange layers—that flows upward into sectoral applications like digital health and climate-resilient agriculture, then:

- *What does an actionable Institutional Matrix of Responsibility look like to enable central cross-cutting authorities (such as Ministries of Finance, Planning, ICT and more) to establish decision-making rights, operating mandates, and governance oversight for shared horizontal infrastructure layers?*
- *How can inter-ministerial mandates and governance holding environments be structured to effectively balance agile technical execution with rigorous public fiscal oversight?*
- *What structural governance arrangements and measurement strategies are required to evaluate public efficiency gains and institutional savings achieved by de-duplicating fragmented, siloed agency systems into a single horizontal, safeguard-aligned DPI?*

Theme 4: Public-Private Partnerships & Governance

If scaling a trusted national digital ecosystem relies on enabling private sector innovation and market-led efficiencies without compromising public integrity, individual rights, or sovereign control of core data

layers—distinguishing clearly between **‘Build Operating Infrastructure Partnerships’** (such as vendors, system integrators, platform PPPs) and **‘Ecosystem Application Partnerships’** (such as, third-party service providers, fintechs, social/local innovation via APIs)—then

- At what specific stages in the technical life cycle should public entities structure private sector engagement at the core infrastructure layer (e.g., platform development, maintenance PPPs) versus the downstream application layer (e.g., market onboarding via open APIs)?
- (For Build Operating Infrastructure Partnerships) What specific procurement rules, standard contract clauses, and open-source/open-standard mandates must govern core platform vendors and system integrators to prevent vendor lock-in, safeguard data sovereignty, and enforce long-term interoperability?
- (For Ecosystem-Application Partnerships) How can public authorities design an enabling environment that encourages local/social innovation while enforcing strong consumer protections, privacy, and data sovereignty?

Theme 5: Government-CSO Partnerships & Governance

If sustainable digital infrastructure adoption depends on early risk identification, public trust, and accessible recourse channels across the population, then:

- What institutional models, funding architectures, and PFM mechanisms can governments evaluate to resource participatory design, public consultations, public grievance channels, and independent monitoring—balancing fiscal sustainability with effective oversight?
- What comparative funding strategies (such as direct sovereign budget allocations, independent multilateral/donor facilities, or co-financing) prevent public grievance and monitoring systems from creating unsustainable financial strain on national budgets or civic partners?
- What structural governance arrangements, data-sharing protocols, and legal safeguards best balance independent civic oversight and grievance processing with state security, data privacy, and administrative efficiency?
- How can public authorities determine the cost structures, budgeting methods, and partnership models required to execute pre-deployment Information-Education-Communication (IEC) drives and local language translations for digitally excluded populations?

Theme 6: Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning (MEL)

If sustaining population-scale trust requires continuous oversight, empirical impact measurement, and adaptive policy adjustments across the infrastructure lifecycle, then:

- What standardized indicators and compliance frameworks should implementers use to measure the ongoing efficacy, inclusivity, and safety of deployed DPI guardrails? Reference work undertaken by the 2025 working groups.
- How can disaggregated impact data (gender, geography, socio-economic status) and independent third-party audits be operationalized to verify equitable inclusion and safeguard enforcement?
- How can feedback loops and learning mechanisms be embedded into sovereign administrative workflows to dynamically update safeguard standards as technical risks evolve?
- How can empirical MEL findings and audit data be embedded into annual PFM review cycles to dynamically adjust active budget lines and trigger procurement updates (eg:contract re-negotiations)?

Deliverables

To address these emerging requirements, the 2026–2027 working groups will operate over a 10-month period to develop, refine, and deliver the ***‘Guidance on Building DPI with Safeguards: A Guide for Implementers in Ministries of ICT, Finance, Planning and Beyond.’***

This operational guidance asset will:

1. Translate universal DPI safeguards principles and process recommendations into standardized cost line-items that can be integrated directly into national infrastructure DPI implementation planning, ensuring that critical safeguards costs are not hidden or left unbudgeted.
2. Present operational case studies from 4–5 diverse national contexts, highlighting how safeguards were structurally integrated, the associated fiscal implications, and the long-term socioeconomic return on investment measured through public savings and digital economy growth metrics.

Unifying Approach: Institutional Integration & Complementarity

The ***‘Guidance on Building DPI with Safeguards: A Guide for Implementers in Ministries of ICT, Finance, Planning and Beyond’*** does not seek to replace, replicate, or override existing international digital transformation guidelines. Rather, this asset is explicitly designed as a unifying and complementary approach to bridge the technical, policy, and financial silos observed within contemporary global governance frameworks.

The 2026–2027 Working Groups will purposefully reference current known guidance from leading international institutions, ensuring structural alignment with:

1. The World Bank Group: Specifically aligning costing methodologies with the ID4D Identification System Cost Framework and the Digital Public Infrastructure white paper series, mapping safeguard costs directly into Multilateral Development Bank (MDB) project preparation loan cycles.
2. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): Building directly on the Universal DPI Safeguards Framework, the UNDP-Dalberg Human and Economic Impact assessments, and the UN's human rights-based digital transformation metrics.
3. Ecosystem Standards Bodies & Consortia: Factoring in the programmatic non-technology costing strategies formulated by the Digital Impact Alliance (DIAL), the GovStack Initiative, and the Centre for Digital Public Infrastructure (CDPI), where relevant.

Operational Principle of Coexistence:

Rather than creating competing operational standards, this handbook serves as a cross-cutting translational layer. It takes the abstract, Universal DPI Safeguards principles and the documents, standards and guidelines published by these multilateral organizations and converts them into a practical, budgetable safeguards operating model that implementers can begin executing from day one.

Working Groups Structure, Approach

Structure

The 2026–2027 Cohort utilizes a parallel, deeply integrated, and outcome-focused structure. Both working groups operate in tandem to co-develop a single consolidated manual: *‘Guidance on Building DPI with Safeguards: A Guide for Implementers in Ministries of ICT, Finance, Planning and More’* and can be taken up for public consultations.

The groups are organized as follows:

- **Working Group 1 (WG 1): Government Implementers & Policymakers**

Composed of senior officials and representatives from the ministries of finance, planning, ICT, and executive offices (such as the Prime Minister’s Office or President’s Office), or any other government department playing a key, critical role in national DPI Implementation. They bring **real-world, day-to-day operational realities, country-level deployment constraints, and public financial management (PFM) insights**. Their participation ensures that the resulting guidance is grounded in practical governance workflows, aligns with national development agendas, and addresses the actual administrative bottlenecks faced by national/regional implementers on the ground.

- **Working Group 2 (WG 2): Technical Experts & Strategic Advisors**

Composed of international and domestic advisors, strategic consultants, subject matter specialists, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), development donors, and funders who directly work with and advise government implementers on population-scale digital infrastructure implementations. They bring **global technical benchmarks, evidence-based best practices, diverse multi-stakeholder perspectives, innovative financing frameworks, and deep expertise in MEL, audit mechanisms, and social impact metrics**. Their expertise ensures that the guidance balances cutting-edge architectural standards, robust consumer and data privacy protections, and practical strategies for sustainable project design, long-term funding, and continuous accountability.

- **Working Groups - International Organizations: Strategic Alignment**

Both these workstreams will get consolidated inputs from the existing International Organizations Consulting Group (IOCG), which comprises key UN/multilateral institutions and development banks. The IOCG will provide high-level policy alignment and technical review to ensure that the guidance brings in current known guidance from their organizations, maps smoothly into international financing instruments and global open-source frameworks.

Approach

Phased Approach: Ensuring Balance between discussions and multistakeholder feedback

The workplan spans a 10-month horizon divided into three distinct operational phases designed to move systematically from ecosystem led unpacking to global publication:

	Phase	Focus	Inputs, Activities and Outputs
1	Phase 1: October 2026 - February 2027	Divergence & Alignment (Forming Early Guidance)	Secretariat-led Inputs: - During onboarding, secretariat will share a framing document that synthesises existing publications, insights from country level adoption and emerging questions. - High-level multi-stakeholder inputs channeled directly into the working groups from the International Organizations Consulting Group (IOCG), open public convenings, and dedicated regional discussions held during high-level side events (e.g., UNGA-United Nations General Assembly], Red GEALC discussions, and Africa regional forums). - Active documentation from ongoing, on-the-ground country implementations introduced as available to inform the structural recommendations of the working group. Activities: - Both working groups will systematically unpack the core technical questions across the six core themes, hear from subject matter experts - Draft initial guidance in parallel and resolve for each other comments along with IOCG input Key Outputs: - Synthesis of divergent technical discussions and global institutional inputs to publish Early Guidance draft - Early draft of case studies from 1-2 countries to be attached as appendix
2	Phase 2 March - June 2027	Multistakeholder Feedback & Iteration <i>(Validating Early Guidance & Deep diving into core friction points, where needed)</i>	Secretariat-led Inputs: - Strategic alignment inputs from the IOCG and key global forums such as Global DPI Summit, the World Bank Spring Meetings, and the Annual Meetings of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), African Development Bank

			(AfDB), and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and CSO-led global/regional forums where possible. - Active documentation from ongoing, on-the-ground country implementations introduced as available to inform the structural recommendations of the working group. Activities: - WG's move past high-level guidance, to break down recommendations to actions, interventions, checklists, tools & templates, where feasible - Updating early guidance draft as required basis feedback from ecosystem. Key Outputs: - Updated Guidance Document V1 - Reviewed draft of Case studies from 4-5 countries to be attached as appendix - The document is handed over to the UN Secretariat for visual formatting, graphic design, and copy-editing to prepare the asset for global public distribution.
3	Phase 3 July - August 2027	Framework V 3.0 Update	Secretariat-led Inputs: - Final document, compiled and signed off by the working group steering committees. - Inputs for Framework evolution is collected from multistakeholder convenings and feedback submitted to Working Groups. Activities: - WG review fresh insights, feedback into additions to framework evolving it to Universal Safeguards V3.0

			Outputs: Publication versions of • <i>'Guidance on Building DPI with Safeguards: A Guide for Implementers in Ministries of ICT, Finance, Planning and More'</i> • Universal DPI Safeguards Framework 3.0
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Working Group Organization

Roles and Responsibilities

Responsibilities of Chairs/Co-Chairs:

Selected from the working group members, the chairs will ensure the following:

For WG Meetings:

- **Setting the Agendas:** The chair of each working group is responsible for setting and finalizing the agendas for all weekly meetings in consultation with the secretariat.
- **Task Assignment & Discussion Leadership:** Chairs lead strategic discussions across the six core themes and assign specific action items, ensuring tasks align with members' expertise and institutional interests.
- **Oversight of Minutes:** Chairs, in coordination with the Secretariat, oversee the structural review and final distribution of weekly meeting summaries

For the Outputs:

- **Drafting Management:** Chairs guide the substantive direction of their working group's chapters and coordinate official text submissions to the corresponding working group and the DPI Safeguards Secretariat.
- **Cross-Review Facilitation:** Chairs lead the mid-phase cross-consultation and review cycles with the DPI Safeguards Secretariat, ensuring feedback from peer workstreams is thoroughly addressed.
- **Consensus Building:** Chairs are responsible for managing technical consensus among their group members regarding the final text of the guidance asset

Responsibilities of the DPI Safeguards Secretariat:

To optimize output efficiency and reduce the administrative burden on working group members, the DPI Safeguards Secretariat will fulfill both Facilitation and Rapporteur functions for both workstreams.

For WG Meetings:

- **Documentation & Minute-Taking:** The Secretariat will document all technical discussions, key decisions, and action items during weekly sessions, finalizing and distributing formal meeting minutes.
- **Session Logistics:** The Secretariat will manage meeting schedules, host virtual calls, maintain attendance records, and provide seamless access to archived session recordings.

For the Outputs:

- **Core Drafting & Writing:** The Secretariat will act as the primary drafting engine, translating the verbal deliberations, expert inputs, and written submissions from WG 1 and WG 2 into structured, narrative chapters.
- **Document & Feedback Management:** The Secretariat will manage the shared workspace repository, maintain the joint feedback and alignment documents, ensure clean access to live drafts, and handle the professional copy-editing, visual formatting, and final graphic design of the asset.

Responsibilities of the Steering Committee:

Composed of the Chairs/CO-chairs and the DPI Safeguards Secretariat, the Steering Committee serves as the central governing and coordination body of the cohort. The committee will ensure the following:

For Progress Coordination:

- **Strategic Oversight:** Convene virtual meetings once every 2 months to review overall timeline, assess drafting momentum across all six core themes, and monitor inter-working group cooperation.
- **Cross-Workstream Alignment:** Ensure that the operational insights and constraints from Government Implementers (WG 1) directly instruct and shape the frameworks and tools compiled by Technical Advisors (WG 2), and vice versa, preventing siloed workflows.
- **Timeline and Delay Mitigation:** Actively track progress against the 10-month working window; in the event of unforeseen drafting or feedback delays, the committee will reallocate resources or adjust internal phase sprints to protect the final publication deadline.

For Output Consolidation and Framework Evolution:

- Manage the integration of intermediate drafts during the Phase 2 deep-dive iteration window, ensuring that all sub-checklists, procurement clauses, if any and budgeting models, if relevant are structurally synchronized.
- Serve as the first-instance forum to resolve lingering technical, process or policy disagreements between the two working groups. In cases where a cross-workstream consensus cannot be reached organically on a specific financing or safeguarding recommendation, the DPI Safeguards Secretariat's decision within the Steering Committee is final.

Modality of Work

Sessions

- **Working Sessions:** These are sessions organized by the WGs where members meet, discuss and work on the deliverables.
- **Feedback and exchange sessions:** WG present their findings to the other WG(s) for feedback. They also play a role in providing feedback to the each other

- **Revising sessions:** Based on the feedback received, WGs revise draft deliverables.
- **Final output Production:** The deliverable is handed to the Secretariat to prepare for its public release. This process may include copy editing and design towards finalisation.

WG Meetings

- Attendance: All WG members
- Frequency: Working group meetings will be held on a weekly basis to ensure continuous progress.
 - UN official holidays will be observed. The Working Group will recess for the end-of-year period from **18 December 2026 through 10 January 2027**. If a scheduled working group meeting falls on a recognized holiday, it will be rescheduled to another working day.
- Format: Meetings will be in virtual formats, accommodating the preferences and geographical locations of members.
- Expected Duration: Each meeting is expected to last for approximately one hour, on average.
 - Offline asynchronous work will be required between Working Sessions
- Recording of Meetings: All working group meetings are recorded to ensure that detailed documentation of the discussions and decisions is available for future reference.
 - Access to Recordings: Access to the meeting recordings is available to all Working Group members.
- Quorum: A quorum of two-thirds of the working group members is required for any decision making process.

Steering Group Meetings

- Attendance: Chairs/Co-chairs and DPI Safeguards Secretariat
- Frequency: Steering committee meetings will be held once every 2 months
- Format: Meetings will be in virtual formats

Final Asset Review & Sign off

- Submission: The WG Chairs will submit their deliverables, saved as a google doc in the google drive folder of each WG and copy your UN Facilitator. If you have any unforeseen delay, please let the UN Facilitator know.
- Review: WG reviews the compiled asset and provides final feedback within 5 business days. Steering Committee [Chairs] amend the deliverable as required.
- Dispute Resolution: In case of persistent non-resolution or a lack of consensus between chairs or groups on a specific policy or financial clause, the DPI Safeguards Secretariat's administrative decision during the Steering Committee review is final.
- Final sign-off: The DPI Safeguards Secretariat retains final institutional responsibility for the official sign-off, authorizing the text for copy-editing, design, and global release.