

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Project name	Supporting the Digital Transformation of Social Protection Systems Globally towards Achieving the Goal of Universal Social Protection 2030
Assignment	Development of Guidelines on Inclusive, Human-Centric and Participatory Design of Digital Solutions in Social Protection Service Delivery ¹
Contract's duration:	16.12.2024 to 30.06.2025
Linked missions:	TBD
Days	50

Background

The Digital Convergence Initiative (DCI) is a collaborative effort to support achieving the goal of Universal Social Protection by 2030, by furthering the digital transformation of social protection and improving interoperability through advanced digital solutions and systems. Funded by the European Union, this initiative is jointly implemented by key partners, including GIZ, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Bank, FIIAPP and Expertise France.

As governments and organizations worldwide increasingly shift toward digital-empowered social protection systems, this transition presents both transformative opportunities and significant challenges. Digital technologies can enhance service delivery efficiency, expand access and streamline administrative processes. However, without a deliberate focus on inclusion, equity and participatory design, these advancements risk exacerbating existing inequalities. For instance, the digital gender gap continues widening in many developing countries where women and girls, especially in rural areas, face significant barriers to accessing digital technologies ([ITU, 2023](#)). To ensure that digital transformation leaves no one behind, it must be grounded in human rights and

¹Digital Solutions in Social Protection Service Delivery: Refers to the use of technology and digital platforms to enhance the delivery of social protection services. These solutions may encompass management information systems, online and mobile applications, automated processing systems and data analytics tools, aimed at improving access, efficiency and effectiveness in providing social support to individuals and communities.

related social security principles, including universality, non-discrimination, gender equality, responsiveness to special needs but also the protection of personal data, transparency and accountability (ILO, 2012; [OHCHR, 2024](#)).

A recent UNDP report emphasizes that digital inclusion is foundational for shared economic and social progress, driving economic transformation, addressing societal disparities and fostering accountable governance ([UNDP, 2024](#)). In contrast, digital exclusion and disengagement intensify inequalities across multiple domains—health, education, employment and financial stability ([Romanowski & Lally, 2024](#)). Low-income families, rural communities, women, children and in particular girls, older persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous people, migrants, refugees, workers in the informal economy, ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged or marginalized populations—often face systemic and often intersecting biases embedded in the design of digital systems, which create significant barriers to accessing digitally-enabled social protection services. These barriers encompass limited internet availability and connectivity, affordability issues related to purchasing digital devices and data, a lack of awareness regarding digital rights and an increased risk of discrimination in the case of automated processes. Socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals and minority or marginalized communities are often excluded from data collection processes, further widening the digital divide ([UNSSC, 2024](#)). Furthermore, many marginalized individuals struggle with gaps in digital skills, language barriers and financial illiteracy, while accessibility remains a critical challenge for those with disabilities.

The digitalization of social protection services, coupled with the automation of decision-making, often reduces the flexibility to intervene or adjust in case of unforeseen and unreasonably harmful outcomes for individuals. This limitation curtails human involvement in critical situations, diminishing human agency within social protection delivery chains and hindering timely corrective actions when needed. Such delays can have serious consequences for beneficiaries who rely on regular payments ([Ranchordás, 2022](#)). This problem is compounded by the shift from human-led grievance processes to automated complaints systems that may reduce accountability and can complicate the redress process ([Institute of Development Studies, 2024](#)). Beyond these operational risks, digitalization also raises concerns about surveillance, the violation of human rights and the protection of personal data. Marginalized and vulnerable welfare recipients may be pressured to sacrifice their right to privacy and data protection in exchange for access to social protection benefits, aggravating their already precarious

situations ([Lowe, 2022](#)).

To prevent marginalized populations from being left further behind, inclusive design must be central to digital solution design for social protection. Key research underscores the importance of legal and regulatory frameworks ([OECD, 2024](#)) along with intentional design and implementation choices ([Barca et al., 2021](#)) to ensure that technology enhances access to services rather than obstructs it. Inclusive, human-centered and participatory approaches involve understanding the lived experiences of beneficiaries, actively engaging them in the design process and tailoring solutions to their specific needs and contexts. This ensures these digital solutions are accessible, culturally relevant and effective in serving the targeted populations.

Simultaneously, maintaining non-digital in-person options is essential for disadvantaged people who may lack the means or capacities to access services digitally ([OECD, 2024](#)). While digital systems offer powerful solutions, they cannot completely replace alternative service delivery mechanisms for those who remain digitally excluded. This dual approach—combining digital and non-digital pathways—ensures that no one is left behind in the pursuit of universal social protection.

As a core principle for digital development, designing with people is indispensable to ensure that digital solutions promote ease of access rather than exacerbate exclusion ([DCI, 2022](#)). Consequently, it is imperative that digital solutions for social protection service delivery are designed to be inclusive, human-centric and participatory, ensuring that all individuals, particularly the vulnerable and disadvantaged, can access and benefit from these essential services throughout their life cycle. In doing so, digital technologies enable states to uphold the fundamental human right to social protection, enhance the standard of living and empower individuals to realize their full potential ([Alston, 2019](#)).

Assignment Scope & Objectives

The ILO wishes to engage a subject matter expert to develop comprehensive guidelines that outline the key principles and best practices for inclusive, accessible, non-discriminatory, human-centric and participatory design for digital solutions within the context of social protection service delivery. These guidelines will serve as an essential resource for policymakers, practitioners and other key stakeholders in the social protection sector, enabling them to design and implement digital systems and solutions that effectively cater to diverse populations, especially vulnerable and marginalized groups.

The specific objectives and scope of this assignment include:

- Defining key features and aspects of inclusive and human-centric design for digital solutions in social protection service delivery.
- Identifying best practices and case studies that illustrate successful inclusive, human-centric and participatory design approaches.
- Creating related guidelines that can be adopted by stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of digital solutions for social protection service delivery.

Tasks

Under the supervision of the DCI Capacity Development and Knowledge Management Coordinator, the expert will work closely with the DCI teams, ILO subject matter experts and country teams and other relevant stakeholders and will be responsible for the following tasks:

1. Literature Review:

- Conduct a thorough review of existing literature related to inclusive, human-centric and participatory design of digital solutions in social protection service delivery.
- Evaluate current practices in digital service delivery for social protection against core human rights principles and international social security standards, such as prevention of exclusion, gender equity, non-discrimination, right to information, personal data protection, transparency, accountability and effective complaint and redress mechanisms.
- Identify gaps, challenges and solutions, how these principles are being upheld across various contexts and practices.
- Assess barriers faced by different groups, especially the most marginalized populations, to ensure digital technologies and solutions promote equity and do not reinforce discriminatory barriers.

2. Stakeholder Engagement:

- Organize and facilitate consultations with key stakeholders, including government officials, scheme administrators, social workers, civil society organizations and affected population groups.
- Gather insights on user needs, challenges and expectations concerning

inclusive social protection service delivery using digital technologies, ensuring a diverse range of voices is represented.

3. Case Studies and Best Practices:

- Identify, document and analyze relevant case studies and good practices from around the world that highlight successful implementation of inclusive, human-centric and participatory design.
- Evaluate the factors contributing to the success of these examples and how they can be adapted to different contexts.

4. Guideline Development:

- Draft guidelines that incorporate the principles of inclusivity, accessibility, human-centricity, non-discrimination, accountability, transparency, dignity and participatory design for digital solutions in social protection service design.
- Integrate feedback from stakeholder consultations and peer reviews to ensure the guidelines are practical and applicable.

5. Final Report:

- Compile the findings, guidelines and case studies into a comprehensive report that synthesizes the insights gained throughout the assignment.
- Present the report to relevant stakeholders and solicit final feedback to refine the guidelines.

Expected Deliverables

Deliverables	Description	Tentative Date of Submission
Inception Report	A report outlining the methodology, work plan and timeline for the assignment.	By January 31, 2025
Draft Guidelines	A preliminary version of the guidelines for review and feedback from stakeholders. c. 50 pages, Arial 12, 1.5 line	By March 31, 2025

	spacing. See example of format.	
Final Guidelines	A polished version of the guidelines, incorporating stakeholder feedback and best practices. c. 50 pages, Arial 12, 1.5 line spacing. See example of format.	By May 31, 2025
Final Report and Presentation	A comprehensive report summarizing the process, findings and recommendations, presented to the key stakeholders.	By June 30, 2025

Qualifications and Experience

The ideal candidate should possess the following qualifications and experience to successfully complete this assignment:

Education:

- Advanced degree in Social Sciences, Public Policy, Information Technology, Digital Governance, Law or related fields.
- Additional certifications or training in Human-Centered Design, Digital Transformation or Inclusive Design will be an asset.

Professional Experience:

- At least 10 years of professional experience in the development, design and implementation of digital systems, particularly in the context of social protection, public administration or digital service delivery.
- Demonstrated experience in developing inclusive, human-centric and participatory design frameworks or guidelines for large-scale public or social protection programs.
- Experience working on projects focused on digital inclusion of marginalized and vulnerable populations such as low-income families,

women, elderly individuals, persons with disabilities, migrants and informal workers.

- Proven ability to conduct stakeholder engagement, including consultations with diverse groups such as government bodies, civil society organizations and affected communities.
- Strong understanding of relevant global frameworks, standards and principles, including familiarity with international social security standards, UN Human rights and digital technology frameworks and guidelines from, UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the DCI Principles for Digital Development and guidelines produced by the International Social Security Association (ISSA)

Technical Expertise:

- Expertise in human-centered design methodologies, including tools and techniques for gathering user insights and incorporating them into the design of digital solutions.
- In-depth knowledge of digital technologies and platforms used in social protection systems, including interoperability, accessibility standards and mobile/digital service delivery channels.
- Familiarity with data governance, data protection and cybersecurity principles in the context of social protection systems.

Skills and Competencies:

- Excellent analytical and research skills, with a demonstrated ability to translate findings into actionable guidelines and recommendations.
- Strong written and oral communication skills, with proven ability to write clear, concise and practical guidelines and reports for a range of audiences.
- Capacity to work collaboratively with diverse stakeholders and facilitate consultations, ensuring inclusivity and equitable participation.
- Strong project management skills, with the ability to work independently, meet deadlines and deliver high-quality outputs within set timelines.

Application Procedure

Interested candidates are invited to submit the following documents to

xiaol@ilo.org with the subject line: "Application for Development of Guidelines on Inclusive, Human-Centric and Participatory Design of Digital Solutions in Social Protection Service Delivery":

- **Detailed CV and Portfolio:** Highlight relevant experience, past projects and achievements that demonstrate your qualifications and expertise in digital social protection, human-centric design and inclusive approaches.
- **Assignment Proposal:** 1 page proposal with literature references.
- **Financial Proposal:** Provide proposed fee structure for completing the assignment.
- **Cover Letter:** A concise cover letter (max 2 pages) outlining your qualifications, experience relevant to the assignment and your understanding of the objectives.