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The Pretence of Planning Digital Public Goods

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LINK TO ABSTRACT

The United Nations has built an ambitious framework for certifying, funding, and promoting open-source software in the developing world. The Secretary-General's 2020 Roadmap for Digital Cooperation declares that "digital public goods are essential in unlocking the full potential of digital technologies and data to attain the Sustainable Development Goals" (United Nations 2020, 8). The Secretary-General endorsed the Digital Public Goods Alliance (DPGA), which has since built the certification standard that decides what counts as a digital public good and now works to deploy certified software through UN agencies and development banks.

The UN's framework rests on a chain of claims. Open-source software, open data, and open AI models are "public goods" that markets have little incentive to provide. Without coordinated intervention, developed countries will fail to create these tools, and developing countries will fail to adopt them. International bodies must therefore certify quality through standardized indicators, mobilize funding through multilateral investment platforms, and coordinate deployment through UN agencies and development banks. In 2024 the UN codified these commitments in the Global Digital Compact, Annex I to the Pact for the Future. Member States commit to increase investment and funding towards the development of digital public goods, especially in developing countries (United Nations 2024, 41).

The UN framework assumes that international bodies can possess knowledge sufficient to identify which software deserves certification, which projects deserve funding, and how deployment should be coordinated across diverse contexts. These assumptions echo what Friedrich A. Hayek (1989) called "the pretence of knowledge." In his 1974 Nobel lecture, Hayek warned that "to act on the belief

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that we possess the knowledge and the power which enable us to shape the processes of society entirely to our liking, knowledge which in fact we do *not* possess, is likely to make us do much harm" (Hayek 1989, 7). The UN framework embodies this pretence. It assumes that international bodies can evaluate software quality better than user communities, and that centrally provided guidance can customize deployment to local conditions better than local actors can. Both assumptions can be tested against DHIS2, an open-source platform which sits inside the framework as a DPGA-certified digital public good (Digital Public Goods Alliance n.d.[b]).

Vetle Alvenes Utvik, Johan Ivar Sæbø, Pamod Amarakoon, and Petter Nielsen (2025) examine how DHIS2 enabled rapid COVID-19 surveillance innovation across several countries.[2] Theirs is the most detailed reconstruction of the episode on record, and I rely on it throughout. The authors read the episode through a lens of "generativity," a fit of architecture, governance, and community. I read the same findings differently. Dispersed knowledge and voluntary coordination explain the success more closely than the framework's certification, funding, and coordination, which arrived after the community had built and shared its tools, or did not figure at all. A fit describes an arrangement without accounting for its origin, and a fit that no one is credited with arranging can be read as one that a central body could supply. That reading invites an agency to provide architecture, governance, and community as inputs.

The UN Framework for Digital Public Goods

The DPGA and its institutional origins

The framework originates in the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, whose 2019 report "The Age of Digital Interdependence" recommended that "a broad, multi-stakeholder alliance, involving the UN, create a platform for sharing digital public goods, engaging talent and pooling data sets" (United Nations 2019, 29). The Panel identified a gap: "There is currently no 'go to' place for discovering, engaging with, building, and investing in digital public goods" (United Nations 2019, 11). This diagnosis assumed that such a centralized platform was necessary and that voluntary channels were insufficient.

The Digital Public Goods Alliance was formed to fill this alleged gap. The DPGA was co-founded in December 2019 by the governments of Norway and Sierra Leone, UNICEF, and the Indian Software Product Industry Roundtable (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2023, 15). The Secretary-General's 2020 Roadmap explicitly endorsed the DPGA, asking it to "continue to work closely with other

[2] In the interest of transparency, I am an associate editor of *Information Technology for Development*, the journal in which Utvik et al. (2025) appeared.

emerging digital public goods initiatives" (United Nations 2020, 23). The DPGA uses "an inclusive and transparent approach to produce and maintain an internationally recognised and widely adopted open standard and registry for DPGs" (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2023, 12).

The Alliance has grown substantially since its founding. As of 2024, the DPGA counts 45 member organizations, which span governments, UN agencies, multilateral development banks, philanthropic foundations, and private-sector firms (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2025, 11, 26). As of 2024, the DPGA has registered 187 digital public goods (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2025, 11). The DPGA Secretariat maintains the DPG Registry, governs the DPG certification standard (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2023, 14–15), and facilitates what it calls "alignment among a community of like-minded organisations" (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2025, 10). Alignment is the recurring term. The 2024 report describes the Registry and Roadmap as data for the Alliance's coordination and alignment processes, and the Secretariat as aiming to align, accelerate, and support what its members do (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2025, 5, 26).

The network behind the software, the framework, and the case

DHIS2, the software platform featured in the case study below and one of the most widely deployed digital public goods, was developed at the University of Oslo's Department of Informatics. Norwegian development assistance through Norad has continuously funded the Health Information Systems Programme (HISP)—the research group that developed and maintains the DHIS2 platform—since 1994 (DHIS2 2024).

In 2019, Norad co-founded the DPGA. Liv Marte Nordhaug, a fifteen-year Norad veteran, "spearheaded the creation and launch of the Digital Public Goods Alliance in 2019" (International Telecommunication Union 2024), and now serves as its CEO. The DPGA calls its own Secretariat "the independent and neutral entity" coordinating alignment among members. The same page records that Norad provides the Secretariat's core funding and also funds DHIS2 (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2025, 57).

The Utvik et al. (2025) paper that I examine below was written by four researchers also at the University of Oslo. DHIS2 is developed and maintained by the HISP Centre in the university's Department of Informatics. Johan Ivar Sæbø heads its research group (DHIS2 n.d.), and Petter Nielsen works on the HISP project and on DHIS2 itself (Nielsen n.d.). Pamod Amarakoon brings direct empirical knowledge of DHIS2's COVID-19 deployment in Sri Lanka, having co-authored two earlier studies on that implementation that rely on the same underlying evidence as the present paper (Amarakoon et al. 2023; 2025). Theirs is an inside account by researchers with first-hand knowledge of DHIS2's development processes that no

outside evaluator could replicate. Their account is informative, and their insider knowledge is genuinely valuable. The question is whether the theoretical framework they apply is the right one.

Certification through the DPG Standard

The DPGA certifies software as a "digital public good" against a nine-indicator standard. Six of the indicators are largely administrative, covering matters like licensing, ownership, privacy, and documentation. The remaining three bear on the knowledge problem: relevance to the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs), adherence to standards and best practices, and a "do no harm by design" requirement (Digital Public Goods Alliance n.d.[a]).

"Relevance to the SDGs" requires evaluators to predict which software will advance goals like "quality education" or "good health and well-being." The answer to that depends on context and implementation rather than the features of software. "Commitment to do no harm" requires knowing how and where software will be used, which the certifier cannot know in advance. Certifying adherence to "best practices" for evolving technologies assumes that best practices can be specified in advance. Hayek's argument was precisely that this kind of knowledge cannot be mastered or concentrated. It is dispersed, tacit, and irreducibly particular.

Funding and deployment

The UN-DPGA's framework extends beyond certification to funding and deployment. The DPGA Strategy calls for mobilizing resources "to effect transformative change across the entire DPG ecosystem" and aligning "donors around existing and effective funding structures" (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2023, 12). The 2024 DPG Ecosystem Report requests "250 million USD in financing so that DPGs that enable the implementation of safe, inclusive and interoperable digital public infrastructure can be supported until 2030" (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2025, 23).

The DPGA's 2023–2028 strategy details engagement with "centralised UN structures, like the UN Technology Envoy's Office and the UN Innovation Network, as well as sector-specific UN agencies, the World Bank and other development banks" (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2023, 12). The same document sets a concrete target that 50 countries will have used digital public goods to "design, launch and scale at least one component of their digital public infrastructure stack" by 2028 (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2023, 10).

The DPGA also sets the ends. Its strategy names four operational targets, among them climate change and so-called information pollution (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2023, 10). These targets prioritize which goods get promoted and

financed, through calls that establish priority actions and attach financing to them (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2025, 20, 23). By promoting its own ends, the UN displaces local priorities and diverts resources. All choices come with opportunity costs; they may be unseen, but they are real.

UN agencies have begun integrating the framework into procedures that constrain local choice. The Food and Agriculture Organization now follows what it calls a "DPG-first approach" so that "digital public goods… are considered and prioritised over non-standard approaches" (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2025, 46).

The Case Study and What the Evidence Shows

This case study concerns COVID-19 surveillance infrastructure. People may disagree about whether governments' expanded capacity to track individuals' health status and movements represents a net benefit, but the infrastructure built for pandemic response does not disappear when emergencies end. A centralized approach raises concerns about propaganda, censorship, persecution, election interference, etc. However, I will grant the authors' premise that rapid surveillance capacity was beneficial during COVID-19, and ask instead what institutional arrangements actually delivered it.

Utvik et al. (2025) draw on interviews and documentary evidence to reconstruct how DHIS2, an open-source health information platform used in over 100 countries, enabled rapid development of COVID-19 surveillance tools. They situate the study within the UN's digital public goods vision: "As promoted by the United Nations and the Digital Public Goods Alliance, DPGs represent a vision of making open digital technologies available to countries addressing sustainable development goals" (Utvik et al. 2025, 1791). What follows takes their evidence in the order in which they report it. Rather than being orchestrated top-down by the DPGA, the evidence shows the rapid development of COVID-19 surveillance tools coming from local professionals acting on the knowledge of particular circumstances which Hayek (1945) described, and sharing what they built through the kind of voluntary coordination which Elinor Ostrom (1990) found in self-governing commons.

The timeline: Community innovation preceded international guidance

The paper provides precise timing that undermines any story about coordinated international response. Sri Lankan professionals were already weighing how to respond in the third week of January 2020 (Utvik et al. 2025, 1800), well before

the WHO had issued comprehensive guidelines for pandemic surveillance systems. A DHIS2 implementer describes the process:

> This was kind of pro bono. We followed whatever WHO was saying at the time, some guidelines and such, but we had not contract with them. There were no one who said that we had to do this or that. There was a lot less control from that side, because it was we who chose to do it. (ibid., 1801)

The authors note that "usually, creating metadata packages for diseases are initiated by organizations like WHO who sets the initial requirements, but the tracker team realized the urgency of the situation" (Utvik et al. 2025, 1801). A DHIS2 developer made the sequence explicit: "various actors have laid the groundwork. And then we made it more publicly available… and then WHO not very long after, just a week or two after, came up with their global standards" (ibid., 1801–1802).

This timeline undermines the UN framework's assumptions. Local professionals acted on dispersed knowledge, shared their innovations voluntarily, and international bodies issued guidance a week or two later. The framework claims that international coordination is necessary for successful deployment, but this case shows that international coordination was following rather than leading.

Knowledge of particular circumstances

Why did Sri Lankan professionals act before WHO guidance arrived? Because they possessed knowledge that no international body could aggregate. Hayek's insight illuminates this:

> Today it is almost heresy to suggest that scientific knowledge is not the sum of all knowledge. But a little reflection will show that there is beyond question a body of very important but unorganized knowledge which cannot possibly be called scientific in the sense of knowledge of general rules: the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place. (Hayek 1945, 521)

The Sri Lankan team possessed exactly this type of knowledge. They understood airport workflows, Ministry of Health relationships, existing DHIS2 infrastructure, and local technical capacity. The paper notes they recognized "unclear requirements, the need to develop and implement in a short span of time without following the lengthy document processes" (Utvik et al. 2025, 1800). They knew what was needed because they were embedded in the particular circumstances, knowledge that no certification body or deployment coordinator in New York or Geneva could possess.

Hayek's conclusion follows: knowledge of this kind can be put to use only if decisions are left to those on the spot, and not concentrated in a body that cannot acquire it (Hayek 1945, 524).

Voluntary sharing through informal channels

How did the Sri Lankan innovation spread? Not through UN coordination or DPGA certification, but through voluntary sharing in informal channels. A Sri Lankan representative explains:

> We posted our metadata in the DHIS2 and the core developers… refined them, so that, some specifications we had were very country specific, so they polished it up a bit to make a generic module of COVID-19 that can be used by any other country. (Utvik et al. 2025, 1801)

No one was paid, and no one was ordered to share. The innovation flowed through what the authors describe as "various channels, including the Community of Practice forum, regional academies, Slack channels, and an annual conference" (Utvik et al. 2025, 1804). These informal channels functioned like a market for ideas, transmitting information about what had been built and what problems remained unsolved, all without central direction.

Hayek described the price system's marvel as coordination "without an order being issued, without more than perhaps a handful of people knowing the cause" (Hayek 1945, 527). The DHIS2 community achieved analogous coordination, with innovations developed in Sri Lanka reaching Norwegian municipalities without any central authority directing the transfer. A DHIS2 developer credited the open platform with allowing "level of community engagement and cooperation" that produced "a much bigger, more useful product than if DHIS2 was like a more closed or proprietary platform" (Utvik et al. 2025, 1801–1802).

The developer's comparison runs between open community coordination and proprietary alternatives. The UN framework does not figure at all in how he explains why DHIS2 worked.

Adoption through competitive selection

How did Norwegian municipalities choose DHIS2 over alternatives? Through decentralized comparison, with each municipality weighing the options against its own constraints and picking the option that fit best. A municipal physician explains:

> I figured DHIS2 was the most attractive which could be adapted. They had a own module for contact tracing based on WHO's recommendations, and at that time I had already translated the validated questionnaire of WHO according to the Norwegian context and adjusted it to our work-flow and with recommendations from Norwegian Institute of Public Health (FHI)… [Discussing reasons for choosing open-source solutions:] It principally comes down to costs. Municipalities on our level use a lot of resources… There was a limited financial opportunity to go for private solutions. (Utvik et al. 2025, 1802)

A validated questionnaire is a general instrument. It became usable in one Norwegian municipality only because a physician there translated it, fitted it to his own workflow, and then went looking for software that could carry the result. With no national recommendations available, the municipality went looking at WHO and CDC material on its own before identifying DHIS2 as suitable (Utvik et al. 2025, 1802). The translating, the adjusting to local workflow, and the choice of platform were all done by the person who had to use the result.

A municipal manager adds: "It quickly became evident that one of them [DHIS2] was better for our purpose… simply because the solution was better, more modular" (Utvik et al. 2025, 1802). These are localized judgments, weighing the costs of proprietary alternatives against an open-source platform that fits local needs. No certification body told Norwegian municipalities which software to adopt. They evaluated options and chose based on their own knowledge of their requirements.

Hayek (1945) emphasized "how little the individual participants need to know in order to be able to take the right action" (Hayek 1945, 527). Norwegian municipalities did not need to know about Sri Lankan airport workflows. They only needed to know that a useful package existed and to judge whether it fit their needs.

Polycentric governance, not central planning

DHIS2's governance fits neither the state nor the market cleanly, and much of it rests with the kind of self-organizing community Elinor Ostrom spent her career studying. Successful management often emerges from neither governmental design nor market exchange:

> Institutions are rarely either private or public—"the market" or "the state." Many successful CPR institutions are rich mixtures of "private-like" and "public-like" institutions defying classification in a sterile dichotomy. (Ostrom 1990, 14)

The DHIS2 community is an instance of such a "rich mixture." Its open-source software (public-like in its non-excludability) was developed by a university and adopted by governments and NGOs, but it was shared through voluntary community channels and selected by municipalities through competitive evaluation. The UN framework's attempt to classify this as a "digital public good" requiring state-like coordination misses what makes it work.

The authors describe 23 organizations coordinating across more than one hundred countries (Utvik et al. 2025, 1799). How? Not through UN mandate but through what Ostrom called polycentric governance. The HISP groups Utvik et al. refer to are country-based research and implementation teams within the global HISP network. They are formally independent but function as an interdependent

system through the Community of Practice, Slack channels, and shared code repositories. The authors note that

> the community is driven by what has been called enlightened self-interest which is reflected in how community members often make contributions with the overall community in mind, as opposed to only catering to their own needs. (ibid., 1804)

The cooperation runs on reputation and shared norms, not hierarchical control. Ostrom's design principles do more than describe this success. She abstracted them from long-enduring commons. She set out to learn from "both successful and unsuccessful efforts to escape tragic outcomes" (Ostrom 1990, 14). She devoted a chapter to institutions that failed or remained fragile, examining which principles were absent or weak (ibid., 143–181, summarized at 180). Clearly defined boundaries, collective-choice arrangements, monitoring, and graduated sanctions therefore carry information about where self-governance breaks, not only where it holds.

A generative-fit account, read from a single working platform, makes no comparable commitment, which is why it cannot be wrong about a success. A spontaneous order reading, on the other hand, can in principle be wrong. It predicts that when central donors take over selection and funding, implementations fail more often. That is what the network's own fieldwork found, but nothing guaranteed that it would have (Amarakoon et al. 2025). The DHIS2 case extends this finding to digital commons. Communities can develop, share, and maintain open-source software without international certification, coordinated funding, or deployment mandates.

Ostrom warned against the kind of uniform prescription that the UN framework favors: "'One size fits all' policies are not effective" (Ostrom 2010, 642). She argued that

> instead of presuming that the individuals sharing a commons are inevitably caught in a trap from which they cannot escape, I argue that the capacity of individuals to extricate themselves from various types of dilemma situations varies from situation to situation. (Ostrom 1990, 14)

The DHIS2 community demonstrated exactly this capacity, without waiting for UN guidance on how to do it.

The public goods case and the order of events

The economic case for promoting digital public goods rests on a familiar argument. A public good returns less to its providers than it is worth to society. The high cost of excluding nonpayers from benefitting—resulting in free riding—leads to underprovision. Subsidizing its provision can improve things. Utvik et al.

accept this logic, reporting that markets undersupply public goods, that provision therefore usually runs through collective action or government investment (each with its own difficulties), and that a core motivation for provision is the "potential for positive externalities" (Utvik et al. 2025, 1793). The premise is that software of this kind would otherwise go underprovided. But one problem is that the DHIS2 case does not constitute an illustration of it.

Even the general claim, that we need more digital public goods, does not follow from the externality alone. A positive externality implies that private provision falls short of the social optimum. It does not show by how much. That is a question of magnitude, settled only by comparing the marginal costs and benefits. The authors and the UN's apparatus take the outcome of that comparison for granted.

Even granting the marginal cost and benefit calculation, it still does not follow that the encouragement ought to come from a central promoter. One must consider "the total effect" of an institutional reform, which necessarily involves comparing alternative institutional arrangements (Coase 1960). What does the DHIS2 episode suggest about the total effect of empowering the UN's apparatus?

A Sri Lankan team built a port-of-entry module early in 2020 and, through the HISP network, its metadata reached the University of Oslo, which assembled a generic package (Utvik et al. 2025, 1800). When a globally usable package was needed, the Oslo developers put it together "on their own initiative" and "pro bono," and as one implementer said, "it was we who chose to do it" (ibid., 1801). They published it on 27 March 2020. The effort was sustained by the developers who generalized their work and the community that shared it. Coordination costs were low enough for voluntary effort to cover them, and no certifier or funder arranged any of it.

Finally, even granting underprovision, it does not follow that an international agency has the information about marginal costs and benefits to a global populace necessary to optimally subsidize the public good. Harold Demsetz (1969) called the appeal to such an ideal regulator with perfect information the "nirvana approach." The relevant comparison should be between real arrangements, not between a real market and an imagined flawless regulator (ibid.). After all, keeping a public institution like the UN from being a social menace is itself a public goods problem. Moreover, the UN's DPG instruments are not marginal subsidies. They consist of certification standards, deployment mandates, and funding channeled through multilateral platforms, each carrying its own costs and its own errors and biases. Whether that apparatus would improve on what the community already does is an empirical question, to be settled case by case, and the case in front of us was handled without it.

The underprovision argument assumes that a public good is in short supply unless a central body steps in to encourage it. Utvik et al. (2025) document a good

already in supply. And though its history and funding are complicated, DHIS2 had existed since 1994, and the Sri Lankans' expertise had existed since well before the pandemic. The COVID-19 response was built, generalized, shared, and adopted across two countries through voluntary coordination. DHIS2 itself did not enter the DPG Registry until 30 November 2020, eight months after the surveillance package was published (Digital Public Goods Alliance n.d.[b]).

The undesigned order the framework cannot see

The Sri Lankan team did not design their innovation to spread globally. They solved a local problem. The core developers who "polished it up a bit" (Utvik et al. 2025, 1801) did not design the Norwegian adoption. They made the package more generic for potential users they could not identify. The Norwegian municipalities did not participate in any coordinated deployment; they discovered an option and evaluated it against alternatives.

No one planned the pathway from Sri Lanka to Oslo to the Norwegian municipalities, and no international body directed it. It was, in the phrase Hayek borrowed from Adam Ferguson, the result of human action but not of human design. It ran on conditions that no one had arranged for the purpose: an open-source license chosen decades earlier, channels created for other work, and a community already used to sharing what it built. Each participant was pursuing an end of his own, and each was led, as Adam Smith put it, "by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention" (Smith 1981, 456).

A reader may object that DHIS2 is a strange example of spontaneous order, since Norwegian public funds have supported its development since 1994. Here we may distinguish between the source of funding and the directing of activity, and again apply Hayek's thinking. Hayek's knowledge problem concerns who decides how dispersed knowledge is put to use, a matter which goes beyond that of deciding who pays. Norad funded a university research group. It did not design the Sri Lankan port-of-entry system, direct the COVID-19 response, or coordinate the package's spread to Norwegian municipalities. Those things happened through the voluntary channels described above, which no funder planned. Public money kept a platform alive; it did not plan what the platform's users built on it.

Ostrom's own opening case, the Turkish inshore fishery at Alanya, turns on the same distinction. Alanya was not a centralized system, yet national legislation had given such cooperatives jurisdiction over "local arrangements," and local officials accepted the signed agreement each year. What made it self-governing was that "the actual monitoring and enforcing of the rules… [was] left to the fishers" (Ostrom 1990, 20). This is the rich mixture of the public-like and private-like elements identified earlier, not central planning, and it may thus be seen as consistent with spontaneous order rather than a counterexample to it.

Utvik et al. read the episode through generativity and offer that reading to the bodies promoting DPGs (Utvik et al. 2025, 1806). As originally defined, generativity runs the other way. Jonathan L. Zittrain makes it a property of a technology, its "capacity to produce unprompted change driven by large, varied, and uncoordinated audiences" (Zittrain 2006, 1980). Unprompted and uncoordinated describe how the change arises. They are built into what generativity is, and are not outcomes to be engineered. Llewellyn D. W. Thomas and Richard Tee (2022) recast the concept as a fit among components. Utvik et al. adopt that framing and apply it to architecture, governance, and community (Utvik et al. 2025, 1792). Recast in this way, generativity stops being a property of a tool and becomes a relation among components. But this shift obscures a key insight of Zittrain's, that generative conditions emerge from spontaneous use rather than design.

A "fit" is a snapshot. It records an alignment as if it were arranged, and so cannot register that the community built and shared the alignment before the scaffolding it credits arrived. Because a fit is an arrangement, it suggests that a central body could engineer it. But a fit must be known before it can be arranged. Zittrain's formulation is close to Hayek's, since a system producing unprompted change through uncoordinated contributions is an unplanned discovery process. Which architecture, which governance, and which community will yield innovation in a particular place is not a general truth that a standard can encode. It is knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place, held by people on the spot, often in a form they could not hand over if asked. An agency setting out to align the three would have to know the right alignment in advance, which is what the discovery process is supposed to find out.

Ostrom's Alanya fishers are the case in point. The rotation of named fishing sites was devised by the fishers themselves over more than a decade of trial and error (Ostrom 1990, 19). Ostrom concludes that "central-government officials could not have crafted such a set of rules" without putting a full-time staff in the water for an extended period (ibid., 20). Such sites are almost impossible to map without on-site experience. The mapping depended on the "extensive time-and-place information provided by the fishers" (Ostrom 1990, 20).

The UN's apparatus is an attempt to supply those conditions. Aligning members, donors, and efforts is what the Alliance says it does, and a framework in which innovation follows from an alignment gives such a body no reason to doubt that the alignments it can produce are the relevant ones. It certifies architecture, funds governance, encourages community, and coordinates deployment. The same conversion runs through the network's resilience scholarship. Amarakoon et al., whose own prescription leans toward decentralization and local sovereignty, nevertheless list "transnationally mandated networks of support" among the determinants of resilience (Amarakoon et al. 2025, 27), treating central coordination as an input to

be supplied. What Smith's invisible hand produced, the framing invites a visible hand to provide. Smith and Hayek warned against undue centralization. The UN framework proceeds as if this warning does not apply to open-source development.

Less Is Better

Since the evidence supports spontaneous order rather than planned coordination, a different set of policy suggestions follows. The UN framework's certification ambitions should be abandoned. For the reasons given earlier, the DPG Standard cannot assess whether software will fit local conditions or do no harm in them, and DHIS2 itself succeeded with no certificate at all. Certification adds a compliance cost with little assurance to show for it.

The DPGA's stated approach, to "mobilise and align donors" (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2023, 12), should be resisted. Pooling funding decisions in central bodies asks them to know which projects in which places are worth backing. The Alliance goes further and sets the ends, naming four targets and steering financing toward them. Certifying that software carries an open license is a general property a distant body can check. Judging that climate monitoring is a better use of a health ministry's programmers than whatever that ministry would have built instead is not, and no one at the center is positioned to know it. Leaving that judgment with those closest to the work keeps it where the knowledge resides.

The harm is not hypothetical, and the record comes from the network's own fieldwork. Studying DHIS2 across ten countries, Amarakoon et al. describe COVID committees "comprised of influential individuals lacking expertise in current systems," which facilitated additional digital systems alongside the ones already running (Amarakoon et al. 2025, 22). In one country, the donor organizations installed themselves as the vaccination campaign's information-technology provider and left "a state of conflict and uncertainty" (ibid., 22). In another, a government's multimillion-dollar procurement drew a contractor paid handsomely for immature technology (ibid.). Their own reading is that governance fragmented across government organizations and donor silos can jeopardize digital sovereignty by establishing rival systems outside proper local control (ibid., 27). These are the pathologies that follow when funding and selection are pooled at the center rather than left with the people who will have to live with the result.

Deployment, like the goal of reaching 50 countries by 2028, mistakes the means for the end. The point is not that countries adopt digital public goods, but that they solve their problems with whatever tool does the job.

Institutional mandates work the same way. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization now prioritizes digital public goods "over non-standard approaches" (Digital Public Goods Alliance 2025, 46). This substitutes bureaucratic preference

for local judgment. Sometimes a proprietary product works better. Sometimes a custom solution fits local needs better. Sometimes an uncertified open-source project outperforms a certified one. Mandating DPG priority prevents the local evaluation that generates knowledge about what works.

Hayek offered a metaphor for how policy should tend to conditions, not direct outcomes:

> [He] will therefore have to use what knowledge he can achieve, not to shape the results as the craftsman shapes his handiwork, but rather to cultivate a growth by providing the appropriate environment, in the manner in which the gardener does this for his plants. (Hayek 1989, 7)

For digital cooperation, this means protecting intellectual freedom, maintaining communication infrastructure, and otherwise staying out of the way.

Conclusion

Interpretation generates policy. Significant resources are being used and an institutional architecture is being built on interpretations. Certification, pooled funding, and coordinated deployment all presume that a central body can know which architecture, which governance, and which community will yield innovation in a particular place. The danger is not only that the money is wasted. It is that the apparatus displaces the flourishing of better arrangements, a dynamic which the network's own fieldwork already records (Amarakoon et al. 2025). The danger is that "the total effect" (Coase 1960) of the UN's DPGA is bad, perhaps very bad.

Utvik et al. (2025) have given us an unusually vivid account of how DHIS2 actually spread, and this account points the other way. The best evidence for the limits of planning comes from cases that planners fund but cannot explain.

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