Swiss Digital Initiative

A Commitment to Put Into Practice Ethical Standards for the Digital Age

The present document marks the starting point of the Swiss Digital Initiative (SDI). The SDI will facilitate the development, promotion and implementation of guidelines, tools and mechanisms for implementing ethical standards in the rapidly evolving field of data-driven applications and algorithmic processes. This document sets out the objectives of the SDI, highlights the fundamental principles upon which participants in the initiative will act, and presents roadmap cornerstones for subsequent steps.

The SDI builds on existing international initiatives and guidelines and aims to amplify their impact. It seeks to capitalize on Switzerland's digital expertise resulting from its strong and competitive economy, its highly reputed academic institutions and its well-established participatory processes in order to help unleash the potential of digital technologies to promote welfare and equitable access to the benefits of technology in society. In particular, the SDI intends to build upon the "key principles of global digital cooperation" highlighted by the Report of the UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation entitled "The Age of Global Interdependence". It aims to contribute to the work that was initiated as a follow-up to the publication of this report.

I. Background

In recent decades, digital transformation has fundamentally altered how humans interact, how companies conduct business, and how governments work. More recently, data-driven applications and algorithmic processes have created unprecedented opportunities for citizens, companies and governments around the world, pertaining to the fields of automated data processing and automated decision-making procedures. These applications have great potential to increase innovation and productivity, and to further the welfare of individuals and societies. This potential stems from a unique combination of (1) collecting and combining data at different scales, (2) extracting information and knowledge as well as enabling decision-making procedures, and (3) making automated decisions that influence myriad societal, political and economic processes.

However, as with many technological advances, such data-driven applications and algorithmic processes also present potential risks. Despite the best intentions, they have the capacity to cause unintentional harm and may affect human rights, individual autonomy, competitive market order, financial stability, democratic processes, and national sovereignty. In addition, they can increase inequality and shift control away from humans to algorithms. The deep transformation of our societies triggered by these applications has the potential to undermine trust between citizens, companies, and governments. Their development and use

must therefore be governed by and comply with ethical, as well as internationally agreed technical standards, such as the IEEE's "Ethically Aligned Design", and the applicable laws and regulations.

II. Objective

As companies, academic institutions, civil society organizations and other entities, we commit ourselves to engaging in an inclusive, participatory multi-stakeholder process hosted by the Switzerland-based Swiss Digital Initiative Foundation. We believe that this will serve as an important contribution towards strengthening the digital society and giving every human being the opportunity to live a better life. Our common objective is to foster the technologies' potential to advance flourishing human societies. The SDI Foundation will benefit from Switzerland's longstanding humanitarian tradition and diplomatic good offices, neutrality, and outstanding resources in education and the business sector alike.

The SDI focuses on ethical values and principles in action. Projects developed under the umbrella of the Swiss Digital Initiative will contribute to a global dialogue on the ethics of digitization, and aim to foster trust in digital technologies, as well as in the actors involved in the ongoing process of digital transformation.

III. SDI Projects

SDI projects will enable the development, improvement, and diffusion of guidelines, tools, mechanisms and codes of conduct that work towards a human rights-based, fair, sustainable, and thus flourishing digital society.

The SDI and its stakeholders will develop these projects with the objective of providing measurable and implementable outputs. Each project will require a specific developmental process that includes relevant stakeholders. Examples of projects to be developed and specified jointly by SDI stakeholders may include, but are not limited to:

-   identifying technology- or branch-specific ethical values and principles that business and non-business organizations will commit to act upon (e.g. in the form of codes of conduct) and that can be monitored and, where appropriate, enforced;

-   identifying and documenting technology- or branch-specific use cases that prove to be particularly effective with regard to securing ethical standards in data-driven applications and algorithmic processes;

-   identifying and disseminating best practices for companies and organizations to address specific ethical challenges in the digital realm, with the objective of creating a database of best practices for business and non-business organizations alike;

- creating citizen-participation projects that provide the broader public with opportunities to engage in a global conversation on societal and ethical challenges related to data-driven applications and algorithmic processes, including questions pertaining to democratic control and stakeholder accountability;

- developing, mainstreaming and promoting labeling systems that operationalize ethical values and principles for particular data-driven applications or algorithmic processes.

IV. Principles Governing the Swiss Digital Initiative Process

The process governing the definition and implementation of projects pursued within the Swiss Digital Initiative will be guided by the following principles:

1. *Inclusiveness*: SDI projects must commit to a participatory and inclusive process open to all relevant and interested stakeholders. This means including users, civil society organizations, vulnerable groups and critical voices, regulators, and corporations to ensure active participation on the part of diverse members of society from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, in order to increase overall trust in data-driven applications and algorithmic processes through their lawful, non-discriminatory and fair use.

2. *Awareness:* Insights from the many other relevant initiatives in the ongoing shaping of ethical frameworks within the digital sphere must be taken into account throughout the entire process. This will promote critical consideration of hidden assumptions or biases, which may relate to demographics, geography, or various forms of under-representation, in order to reduce unfair biases or discrimination rather than to create new or reinforce existing ones.

3. *Transparency:* SDI projects must guarantee transparent communication with stakeholders and the public.

4. *Agility and Flexibility*: The SDI process will remain flexible to allow for experimentation and innovation, while balancing the benefits with the inherent risks.

5. *Responsiveness*: SDI projects will emphasize the development of mechanisms that will enable appropriate responses to emerging harms or governance needs not foreseen during the development or implementation of data-based applications or algorithmic processes.

6. *Sustainability*: The SDI process will live up to the requirements of sustainability by striving for a minimized impact on resources, in particular by taking advantage of technologies in order to spare these resources.

7. *Benevolence:* SDI projects must strive to implement human-centric approaches that put people's rights and needs - as enshrined in principles such as autonomy, explicability, or fairness - at the heart of technical progress.

8. *Accountability:* SDI stakeholders and the implementation of SDI projects will commit to acting responsibly with regard to the initiative's commitments, and in their dealings with resources, people, and facts. If personal data is gathered or used as part of these projects, the privacy of individuals will be assured at all times in accordance with applicable data protection law.

V. Way Forward

The SDI will be further developed along the lines of the following roadmap:

- September/October 2019: inclusive and participatory multi-stakeholder work to define a first set of SDI projects (first work package) to be launched in January 2020;

- October-December 2019: consultation with SDI stakeholders on the first set of selected SDI projects and formal endorsement to be launched on the occasion of WEF Annual Meeting 2020 with SDI stakeholders;

- in parallel: set-up of SDI governance, operational structures, and funding schemes;

- December/January 2020: consultation with SDI stakeholders on SDI work procedures and organization beyond WEF Annual Meeting 2020.

We, the participants of the Swiss Global Digital Summit, will meet again on the occasion of WEF Annual Meeting 2020 in order to officially launch the SDI and present the first set of selected projects. To prepare for this strategic move, we commit ourselves, as of now, to contributing towards the definition of relevant projects and to further developing actions to be taken within the framework of the SDI.