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UNDP



POLICY BRIEF 03

Development Intelligence as an Engine for Recovery and Systems Change

Bridging the gap from data to decisions, and from information to intelligence

KNOWLEDGE PROJECT.

NOVEMBER 2026

The purpose of this Policy Brief

This Policy Brief gives policymakers and development practitioners a compact overview of development intelligence as a foundational asset for more anticipatory, adaptive and transformative approaches to governance and development. Development intelligence is particularly important in contexts of high uncertainty and high complexity, when it becomes harder for decision makers to access the right data and information at the speed decisions demand.

This Brief has four purposes:

1. To define and explain the concept of development intelligence.
2. To explain the process of generating and using development intelligence.
3. To present a few real-world examples of how development intelligence is used.
4. To offer recommendations for practical first steps to strengthen this capability.

What is development intelligence?

Development intelligence is data, information and insights that are packaged to surface options and inform strategic decisions.

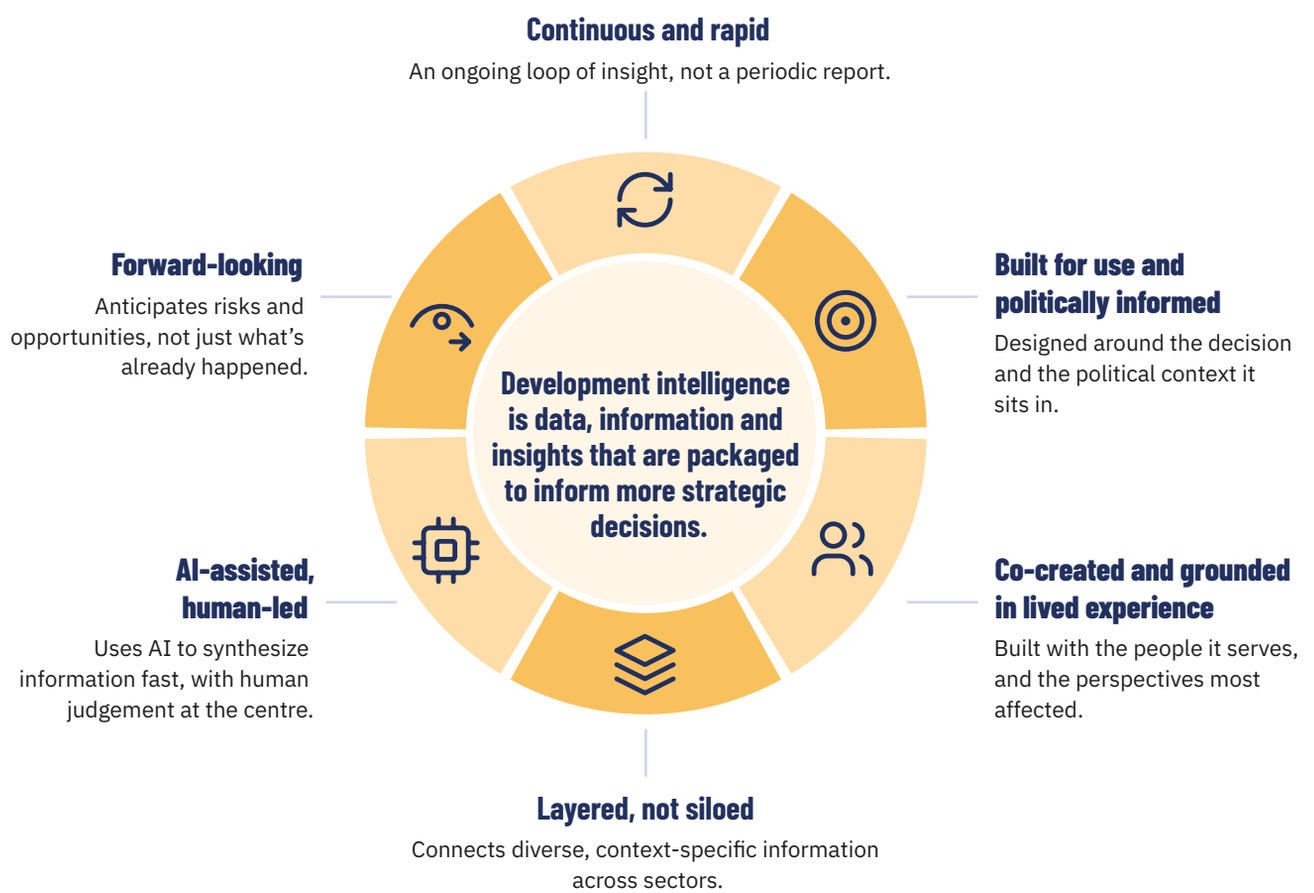
Development intelligence is a synthesis of input from multiple, often siloed sources (big data, foresight, lived experience, grassroots innovation, signals and artificial intelligence (AI)) that generates actionable insights into how systems work. It draws on new learnings to generate policy and programmatic options for decision makers, particularly in fast-changing, uncertain environments, often marked by crisis.

Development intelligence has the following features:

- **Continuous and rapid:** It operates as an ongoing learning loop, rather than retrospective reporting or one-off monitoring. It updates continuously as data and priorities shift, producing a steady stream of insight rather than periodic assessments.
- **Built for use and politically informed:** It is packaged to be used, designed around the decision it needs to support and a sharp assessment of the surrounding political context. It is not produced first and matched to a use later.
- **Co-created and grounded in lived experience:** It is co-created with the people and institutions it serves, rather than delivered as an outsourced analytical product built elsewhere and handed over. It elevates the experience of those closest to the impacts of a decision, reflecting a commitment to insight grounded in the perspectives of the people most affected.
- **Layered, not siloed:** It draws on diverse, layered and context-specific data, information and knowledge, rather than raw data or siloed analytics. It connects across sectors to reveal system dynamics that might otherwise remain hidden.

- **AI-assisted, human-led:** It draws on AI to surface and synthesize large volumes of information quickly, while keeping human judgement central. This means it elevates community voice rather than replacing it.
- **Forward-looking:** It complements retrospective data with anticipatory analysis. This helps decision makers see risks and opportunities before they arrive, rather than only looking backward.

THE SIX FEATURES OF A DEVELOPMENT INTELLIGENCE SYSTEM



How is development intelligence surfaced and used?

Development intelligence does not need a single, dedicated function. It can run through any process that produces timely insight, sitting alongside functions such as monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), which often move through valuable but slower, more structured processes.

A development intelligence system connects six parts, from raw data through to the decisions it is designed to support:

1

Data sources

Both formal and informal insight, spanning qualitative and quantitative, primary and secondary evidence. This works best when it mixes data types and perspectives to build a more holistic picture and when it surfaces and elevates the experience of those affected by the decision being made.

2

Analysis and interpretation

Turning that material into meaning, detecting weak signals and emerging trends through methods such as political economy analysis, scenario and foresight work, sensemaking and rapid assessment tools.

3

Insights storage and sharing

Keeping analysis where people can find and reuse it, across internal repositories, partner and government libraries and search tools. Beyond the systems themselves, this depends on a culture of sharing information that breaks down silos between teams and units.

4

Insight products and outputs

Packaging analysis into a form decision makers will actually use: short, sharp and practical, from periodic briefs and dashboards to thematic notes, policy briefs and public-facing formats.

5

Engagement and dissemination

Getting these products to the people who need them, through internal meetings, government dialogues, partner round tables and rapid, informal channels.

6

Decisions

The point of the system, where insight informs choices ranging from crisis response and programmatic adjustment to strategic positioning and organizational learning.

This system works best when it is designed backwards and run forwards. Design starts at the decision point: identifying what decision makers need to decide and working back through what products, engagement and analysis would support that decision, down to what data would need to be collected. Once designed, the system runs in the other direction: from data collection through to analysis, storage, products and engagement, arriving at the decision it was designed to support.

AI can play a role at every step along this chain, from surfacing signals in the data to drafting products and testing scenarios, but works best when paired with human judgement at each step.

Judgement amid uncertainty: the promise and practice of development intelligence

How is development intelligence being leveraged for large-scale transformations?

Governments and development actors around the world are experiencing a paradox: while information has never been more accessible or affordable, the ability to translate it into reliable insights and a continuous stream of options for decision-making is lagging. Fragmented and sector-driven policies, short-term decision horizons and the speed of change outpacing institutional capacity to act are just some of the reasons for this.

Below are several examples of how development actors are leveraging development intelligence to reshape responses to political, social and economic shocks and improve development outcomes.

CASE STUDY

UNDP Nepal

undp.org/nepal

UNDP Nepal is using development intelligence for real-time portfolio adaptation, helping leaders reposition investments and design interventions that respond to shifting political and economic realities. Development intelligence is identifying new strategic options and enabling more agile management across a range of development challenges. This shift allows leadership to move more quickly from insight to decision and from decision to action, reducing the lag between emerging signals and programmatic responses.

The 'Gen Z moment' in Nepal exposed the structural limitations of periodic, resource-intensive assessments: when analysis is updated annually, institutions inevitably react to events rather than anticipate them. During this period of transition, the UNDP Nepal Country Office pivoted to real-time sentiment monitoring, weekly briefs, and forward-looking scenario planning. In fragile environments, timeliness is an essential component of accuracy.

> **Translating knowledge, insights and evidence into more agile decision-making requires shifts in both process and mindset.**

The UNDP Nepal Country Office is also driving a mindset shift that values credible and timely insights over perfect but delayed outputs, as well as an operational shift that embeds intelligence into everyday programming discussions rather than treating it as a separate process or specialized product. One result of this shift is that Country Office staff now routinely share their own observations of day-to-day dynamics in the country, surfacing insight that is directly relevant to UNDP programmes and partnerships, rather than leaving this knowledge informal or unshared.

The UNDP Nepal Country Office intends to further strengthen its development intelligence capability to enhance its strategic positioning and inform programming decisions.

CASE STUDY

UNDP Libya

undp.org/libya

In the context of protracted political crisis and fragmentation, the UNDP Libya development intelligence initiative, which is currently in its nascent phase, incorporates insights from community members, feedback from local leadership and economic assessments to shape policy recommendations aimed at fostering the nation's economic evolution. Operating within an environment characterized by a notable deficit of trust, this initiative seeks to enhance credibility among diverse and fragmented stakeholders. Through carefully designed perception surveys and processes of community engagement, it facilitates collaboration among local actors, including representatives from various sectors of the economy and community leaders and civil society organizations (CSOs), to jointly establish priorities. This method effectively aligns local aspirations with broader national strategies.

Development intelligence is proving to be valuable for mitigating risk and for identifying political openings and opportunities for alignment across divided and fragmented systems.

In Libya, many policies and strategies exist, but implementation remains a persistent challenge. Development intelligence is helping to close that gap. The experience of Libya shows that structural misalignments, emerging investor interest and governance gaps can be treated as opportunities for strategic repositioning, rather than simply as risks to manage. This approach is inclusive, participatory and rights-based, bringing together community perspectives and data to shape interventions that are broadly supported and grounded in local realities.

Rather than retreating in the face of volatility, the UNDP Libya Country Office is leveraging intelligence to frame economic transformation, digital governance and anti-corruption reform as credible entry points for systemic engagement. In this sense, development intelligence is becoming a tool for strategic agency, enabling UNDP to move from reactive adaptation to proactive thought leadership in fragile contexts.

CASE STUDY

Agirre Lehendakaria Center

agirrecenter.eus

While the examples of Nepal and Libya show how development intelligence can accelerate real-time decision-making, the experience of the Agirre Lehendakaria Center (ALC) in the Basque Country sheds light on the importance of slowing down action to enable collective sensemaking and experimentation before intervention, both to manage risk and maximize impact. The ALC applies a development intelligence approach that, rather than focusing solely on what to do and how to do it, integrates the 'why' throughout the policy cycle.

Drawing on an example of the transition of individuals from mental health and care institutions back into their communities, the ALC described how it combined traditional data with ethnographic narratives to capture cultural dimensions and nuances – the 'why' underlying complex challenges. Rather than moving directly to implementation through disconnected interventions, stakeholders took part in quarterly 'sensemaking' sessions, connecting insights across diverse and sometimes contradictory initiatives to build a collective intelligence.

To manage this complexity at scale, the project leveraged open-source digital infrastructure and AI. This approach enabled automated systems-mapping and the creation of AI simulations of diverse community perspectives, allowing policymakers to test policy scenarios in a safe environment. Ultimately, this continuous loop of listening, collaborative sensemaking and digital simulation helps ensure that the resulting policies reflect both system-level dynamics and community realities.

CASE STUDY

CulturePulse

culturepulse.ai

Complementing this systems-oriented approach, development intelligence can also be used to anticipate how communities are likely to respond to policies and interventions before they are implemented. By combining behavioural science, AI and diverse data sources, including social media, interviews and community-level research, digital twins can be developed to capture cultural, psychological and social dynamics. These enable policymakers to simulate policy and communication scenarios, helping identify potential trade-offs and reduce uncertainty before decisions are taken.

CulturePulse has applied this approach to support i) peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, where digital twins were used to assess community responses to proposed policies, and ii) public health communication in Norway during the COVID-19 pandemic, where behavioural modelling helped strengthen government messaging, improve public engagement and counter misinformation. Digital twins complement human judgement by combining computational modelling with behavioural insights, local knowledge and stakeholder engagement to support more anticipatory, context-sensitive and trusted decision-making. Together, these capabilities demonstrate how development intelligence can help policymakers anticipate societal responses, navigate uncertainty and make more informed decisions in complex and rapidly evolving contexts.

CASE STUDY

Development Intelligence Lab

devintelligencelab.com

Starting from the premise that better evidence does not necessarily lead to better decisions, the Development Intelligence Lab (DIL) examines how policymakers can make better decisions, as well as the processes and enabling factors that shape these better decisions. Drawing on surveys of policymakers across Australia, the DIL shared several key insights into decision-making in practice: policymakers often lack the time to read or engage with large volumes of material; reports are not always structured or designed to support concrete decisions; evidence frequently arrives too late in the decision-making process or decision makers lack access to the data they need; and research alone does not lead to good decisions.

Based on this research into how policymakers and leaders make decisions, the DIL identified several emerging tensions:

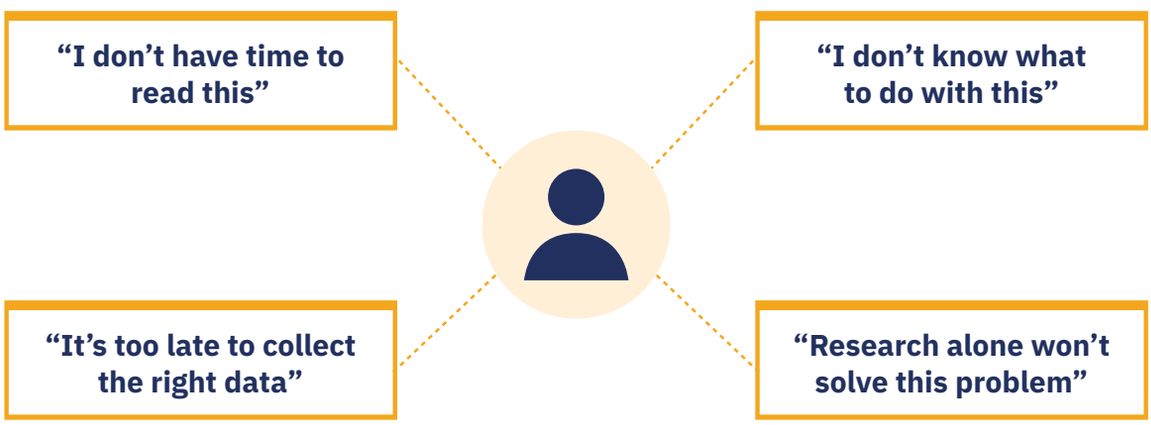
1. There is more information than ever before, yet leaders and policymakers are more time-constrained than ever.
2. While information is available, additional information alone is unlikely to shift political dynamics.

3 Everyone seeks new insights and ideas, yet open discussion and engagement are often politically difficult.

4 Long reports take time to produce and quickly become outdated in rapidly changing contexts, but what are the alternatives and can they be delivered at scale?

One of the most important aspects of development intelligence is building a culture that values quick analysis and synthesis of information into more options for rigorous, contestable decisions.

The DIL is supporting governments and development partners around the world to strengthen their development intelligence capabilities. It described three dimensions of this work: tools for collecting, processing and packaging development intelligence; processes, including complex decision planning; and organizational culture, supported by strong leadership and a willingness to encourage experimentation.



Where to from here: three practical first steps

Despite the abundance of data and increasingly sophisticated analytical tools, development actors too often continue to make decisions with incomplete situational awareness. This reflects limits in the quality of data and analysis, weak incentives to take a systems perspective and weak mechanisms for turning insight into action.

Institutions do not need to build a complete development intelligence system to get started. There are three conditions that matter most, each paired with a practical first step. Investing in establishing these conditions across levels–at country level as well as corporately–can create economies of scale and accelerate a development organization's transition 'from information to intelligence.'

1 Build a culture that shares and acts on insight.

Development intelligence depends on the culture around it as much as on any tool or process. Three things matter most:

- **Clear leadership signals:** Leaders openly set out the decisions ahead of them and what they need to make them and visibly value and use the development intelligence their teams produce.

- **Safety to speak up:** Staff feel safe to share information, including information that is politically sensitive.
- **Comfort with implications:** Staff move beyond noting that something has happened to routinely working through what it means for the institution's objectives, the 'so what.'

POSSIBLE FIRST STEP

Set up simple, regular spaces, such as team meetings or message threads, where staff can share what they are noticing against a small number of issues leadership has clearly flagged as live.

2 Start with the decision, not the data.

Development intelligence works best when it is scoped backwards from the decision, rather than built up from whatever data happens to be available. In practice, this means getting into the habit of understanding what a decision maker actually needs, either by asking them directly what information they want to have in front of them and in what form or by anticipating their needs and checking that anticipation with them.

POSSIBLE FIRST STEP

Pick one decision an institution is likely to face in the next three to six months, and either ask the relevant decision maker what they will need to see or draft your best guess at the answer and check it with them.

3 Develop the underlying capability.

Development intelligence systems work better when staff have specific skills to draw on. Three areas matter most: using AI tools at every step of the process; understanding the range of analytical tools available and when each is the right fit; and deliberately building one or two capabilities that are not yet native to the institution.

POSSIBLE FIRST STEP

Take one thing staff are already doing informally, such as catch-ups with stakeholders, and reframe it deliberately as a listening exercise with no fixed agenda, just space to pick up on what people are noticing, rather than an opportunity to push a particular issue.

Moving from data-rich environments to intelligence-enabled decision-making does not require new systems to be built from scratch. It requires deliberate choices about the culture that surrounds insight-sharing, how decisions are scoped from the start and what capabilities staff build over time. When applied well, development intelligence helps decision makers exercise judgement under uncertainty.

About this Policy Brief

This Policy Brief builds on discussions held during a policy roundtable convened as part of the Knowledge Summit 2025, organized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation (MBRF) in November 2025. The Brief draws on the perspectives and insights shared during the roundtable, complemented by relevant evidence and ongoing work in the field.

It also draws on experiences and emerging practices in development intelligence across different contexts, including those shared during the UNDP Portfolios in Practice webinar held in February 2026 and examples shared by UNDP Country Offices and other organizations working on systems transformation, innovation and evidence-informed decision-making.

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