



Open Knowledge

THE TECH WE WANT

Who Decides? A Quick Guide to Governance

A field guide from the Open Knowledge Foundation on how to govern public interest tech *with* communities.

DECEMBER 2025

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By: Open Knowledge Foundation

Illustrations and design: Constanza Figueroa Bustos

Editor: Solana Larsen

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Open Knowledge Foundation (OKFN) is a not-for-profit organisation incorporated in England & Wales with company number 05133759. okfn.org

We are building a world open by design where all knowledge is accessible to everyone.



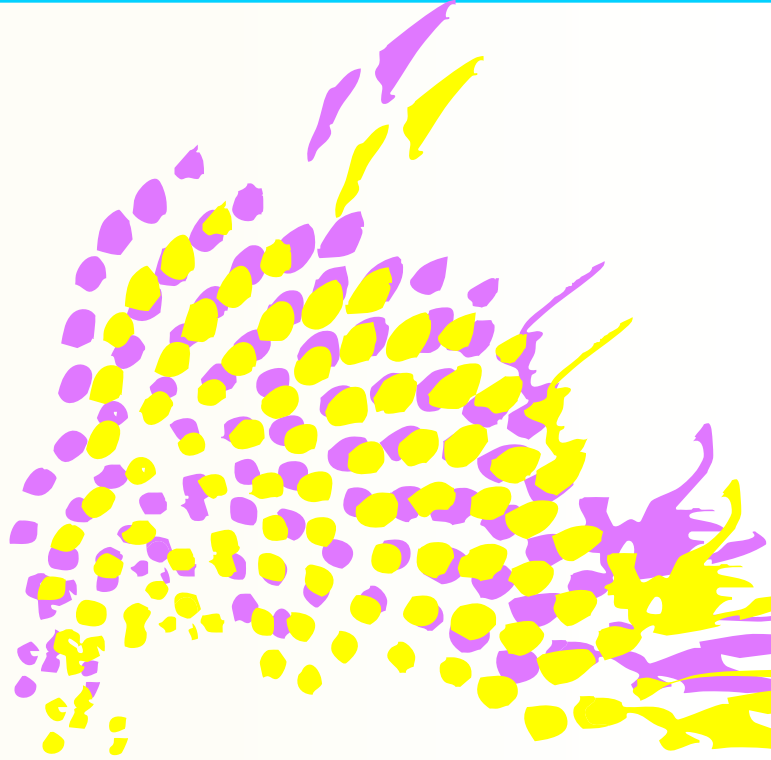
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ReadMe

Why governance matters

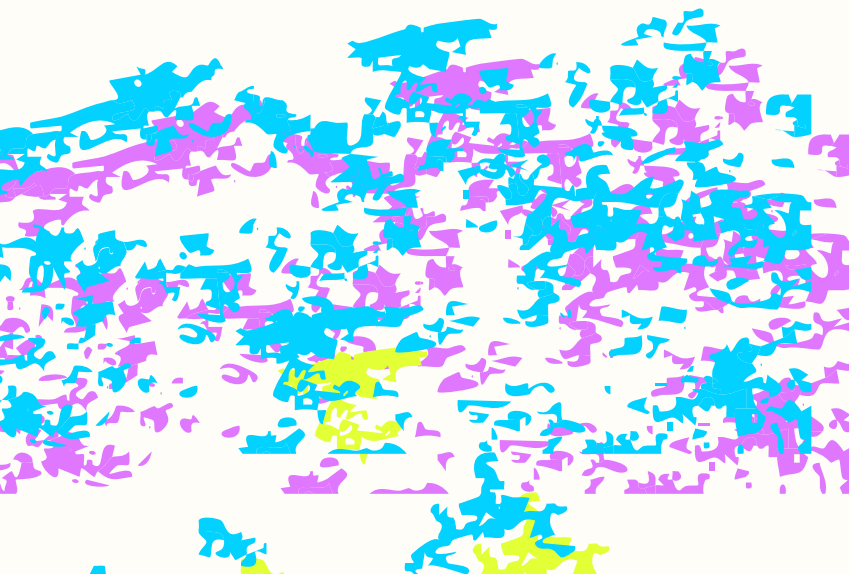


This guide is about who decides what should happen with your public interest tech project. We call this governance. Specifically, it's about *community* governance in order for a project to evolve through the visions and needs of more than just the people who write the code. It's about sharing power, but also about caring for, maintaining, and sustaining *The Tech We Want*.

At the Open Knowledge Foundation (OKFN) we have championed the development of public interest open technologies and standards for over two decades. Some of our technologies are now celebrated as *digital public goods*; others have found new homes with alternative organisations; while yet others have

been deprecated or abandoned. Some are at crossroads because we don't have capacity to work on them as much as we have in the past.

The open licensing terms that we have uniformly applied across all of our projects have enabled maximum opportunities for innovation, sharing and localisation. But we never developed a similar open model (or set of options) for governance structures that would help guarantee their evolution, sustainability, and loyalty to a public interest purpose.





When small and nonprofit tech builders develop tech, we fill market gaps but usually without generating profits. Sustainability is a real challenge. Community governance could help overcome that challenge, but more of us need to experiment, learn, and share how.

Among the questions we want to explore further:

- How does community governance matter for public interest tech?
- Why is governance usually an afterthought rather than core to development?
- What are different models and structures that could help?
- What support do communities need to govern more effectively?

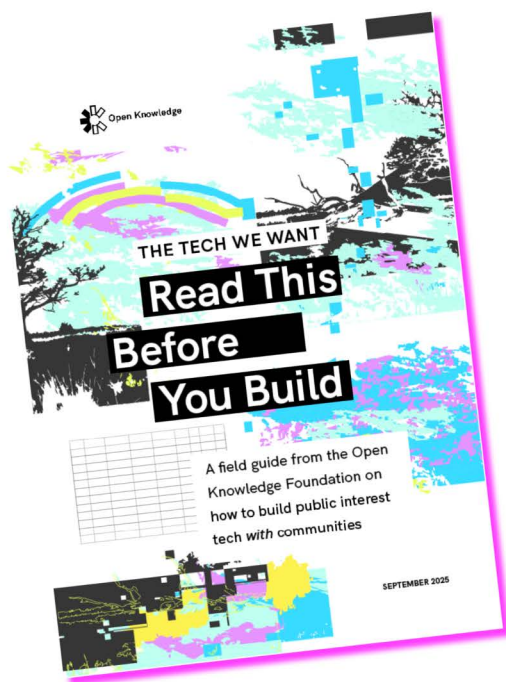
But first... Let's say you're part of a public interest tech project. How do you dive into exploring whether community governance is right for you?

We know from experience that it can be overwhelming to imagine a new structure from scratch, so we developed this simple guide to take the mystery out of getting started.

In 2025, as we sought to understand governance models better, we consulted with **Ramya Chandrasekhar** and **Valérien Guillier** of the [French National Centre for Scientific Research](#) (CIS-CNRS) on possible next steps for OKFN's open source app for data validation, Open Data Editor (ODE). Their field research on community governance forms the basis of this guide.

See the previous guide
in this series...

Read This Before You Build — A field guide on how to build public interest tech with communities



'We need to rethink how we build and govern digital tools that truly work for *us* to ensure that we have options, now and in the future.'

ReadMe | On learning and unlearning

Frequently asked questions

Hint:

It has nothing to do with governments

WHAT is governance?

It's the people and processes that define how your project is used, improved and maintained. It's about determining roles and distributing tasks. A governance framework describes how power is shared to make decisions. It can also define rules for healthy collaboration and enforcement processes.

WHO should be involved?

People who take part in governance should have a say in what they wish to contribute to the project. Participants should reflect the diversity of existing and potential contributors. Depending on your purpose, you could have global participation or tie it to a specific location.

WHY does it matter?

Clear governance helps enable meaningful community participation. It is an antidote to harmful behaviours and unilateral decision-making. That's why you should develop a framework early. When fair rules are enforced, it helps to create a welcoming environment, maintain the project focus, and prevent abandonment of projects.

There's a saying:

"If you want to go fast, go alone.

If you want to go far, go together."



Community governance?

8 questions you should ask

It's important to ask these questions from the start of a project, even if you don't know all the answers. You keep evolving ideas and processes as the project continues.

What is the purpose of your project?

Be clear about expectations for the project and participation.

What values and principles will you uphold?

Be clear about your mission statement.

Who is your community?

Identify who is involved and what role they play.

Who should have a voice in decisions?

Figure out who is needed and how to balance representation.

Do you need formal or informal rules?

It's OK to start basic and add more rules later.

Is your language clear enough?

Describe roles and rules as concisely as you can.

Who will lead over time to prevent abandonment?

Plan for long-term governance.

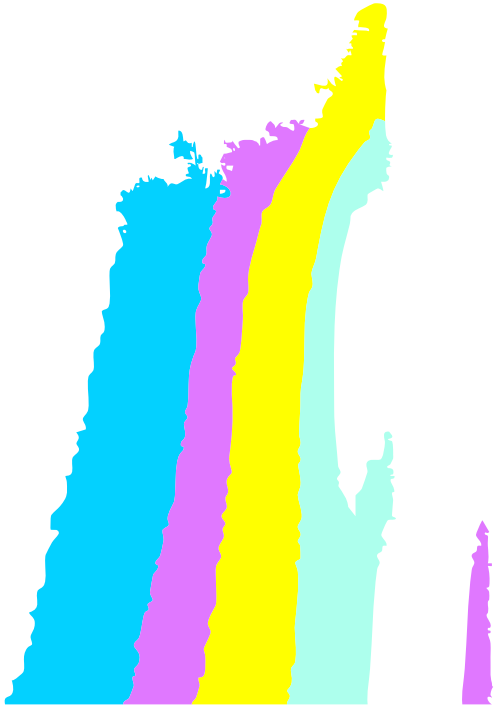
What should governance not do?

Avoid micro-management, only make rules you really need.



Healthy ecosystems

Multi-layered sustainability



The longevity and success of a public interest technology depends not only on its financial stability, but also its commitment to equity and fair distribution of power inside its governance bodies. It's about the health of its community, including its ecological sustainability.

We call this multi-layered sustainability.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach. The governing body of *your* public interest technology should iterate on approaches as needed.

Some advice to keep in mind:

1. Remember the core values of the project.

Do your models for financial sustainability, such as monetisation of add-on services, align with these core values or not?

2. Pay attention to power.

Do your codes of conduct, rules and governance processes create safe spaces for the community to participate?

3. Share a sense of purpose.

Do you center a clear purpose and goals that extend beyond the tool itself, for instance data literacy or open knowledge?

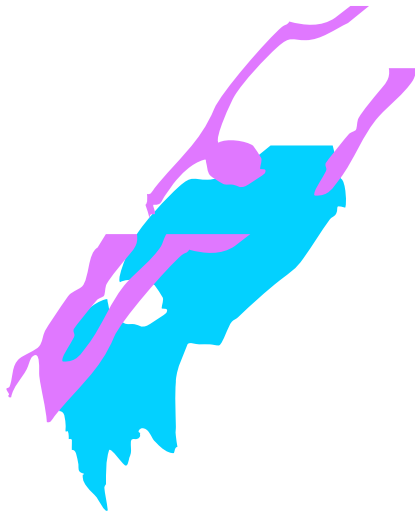


5 steps to a community governance framework

Step 1:

Take stock of your community.

Is there already an online forum or a regular community call? Or... do you need to work on establishing a community from scratch?



Step 2:

Openly state your commitment.

Develop your principles and goals and iterate on them with your community. To prevent sudden drop offs, be clear in advance: For how long (and how much) can everyone commit?

Tip:

Tech won't solve everything

Voting tools and techno-legal systems, like licences and smart contracts can help, but you will need a more human touch to actually govern the community.

Step 3:

Keep involving the community.

Use any online or offline methods to discuss the future of your project—involving builders, users, trainers, and other intermediaries—in governance questions and activities.



Step 4:

Get ready to make it official.

Informal decision-making at the start allows for more agility, but also leads to gatekeeping. Create rules for conduct and decision processes to support inclusivity. In time, a more formal framework will be feasible.

Step 5:

Ask, discuss, revise, repeat.

Once you have processes in place, keep iterating on things like funding, intellectual property, hosting, and upkeep. And on governance itself. What can be improved?

Who decides?

Possible approaches for getting started

An online discussion space for the community

A welcoming and thoughtfully moderated communication channel, forum, app, or email list can help facilitate online collaboration.

A governing board to steer the project

Whether they are elected or chosen, someone should take leadership of managing things like meetings, money, people, and code.

A project management group

Are you still transitioning to community governance? Perhaps a team of original staff will still maintain certain resources or relationships.

A person who 'translates' between contributors

People who build tech often describe their ideas differently from contributors who mainly use tech. Who can help bridge communication?



Conclusion

Open, as in open governance

Welcoming a community to participate in a tech project requires more than just an open invitation. It requires a governance structure to embed an ethic of care and inclusivity into the project, and to ensure people's time and input are genuinely valued.

It can be daunting to design such processes, but the questions and recommendations in this guide can help you begin with the basics. We all need to start somewhere.

Over the years, we have seen countless examples of open source communities forming around software projects or online discussion spaces. As much as it can feel organic in moments when the right combinations of people and ideas come together, a lot of work goes into maintaining the ecosystems that allow such communities to thrive and carry projects forward.

Furthermore, just because a community forms organically, it doesn't automatically mean it's inclusive or caring. For this, you need constant engagement and iteration.

As developers of public interest tech, we believe centering communities in the development process is important to ensuring we are delivering on our mission. However, as we've

experienced ourselves, truly sharing ownership of a project requires opening up decisions and processes to an extent that can be difficult to do before a community is even fully formed.

Whether your project is big or small, it's hard to get this right. There isn't a plug-and-play solution for governance. Thankfully, there is a large body of research and past experiences to build on. We share some additional reading resources on the final pages of this guide.

With curiosity and humility, we have learned ourselves that there is real value in co-creating and iterating on development and decisions. However, there is also a cost. It takes a lot of labor and determination. For open source projects that have limited time and resources, we believe it is still worth trying. Beyond the (hopefully) improved chances of long term sustainability, it creates opportunities for more communities to be involved in building and using people-powered tech now and in the future. This is, also, *The Tech We Want*.



Community governance template

A template you can use to host conversations on governance.

Project name: _____

This is what we do, and who we do it for:	
This is our public interest purpose:	
The purpose of this governance model is to:	Create more transparency Share decision-making power Enable more community participation Support our long-term sustainability Enable more community participation
Other purposes:	

These are some key values that guide decisions in this project:

Value	What this means in practice:
1.	
2.	
3.	



Who is part of the community? (Check all that apply)

People who work on the code

People who work on documentation

People who use our tech

Researchers / domain experts

Funders and investors

Community representatives

Paid contributors

Volunteers

Other: _____

These people are impacted by the project but not directly involved:

This is how people can join the community:

By invitation

By election

It's open to everyone

Other: _____

These are some of the roles we will have:

Role	Main responsibilities	Term limit

Can roles rotate?

Yes No

Details: _____



These are decisions guided by our governance framework:

Strategic direction
Values and principles
Funding and partnerships
Technical development
Code of conduct enforcement
Other: _____

This is how we make decisions:

By consensus
Voting
Delegated authority
Mixed approach
Other: _____

These are the people who make decisions:

All contributors
Role-based groups
Steering group
Other: _____

Our communication happens via:

Repository
Forum
Chat
Mailing list
Calls / meetings
Other: _____

This is how we document governance decisions:

This is how our community members raise proposals or concerns:

When conflicts arise, we will:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



Conflicts will be mediated by these roles:

This is how we manage and make decisions about resources:

This governance model will be reviewed:

Every ___ months

When major changes occur

On community request

Other: _____

Changes can be suggested by:

Anyone

Active contributors

Specific roles

Other: _____

This is how changes will be approved:

This is how we agree to adopt this governance framework:

Consensus

Vote

Other: _____

Optional closing reflection (for workshops)

What do we appreciate the most in this governance framework?



Further reading



Understanding Open Source Governance Models

Red Hat

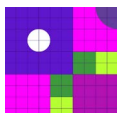
redhat.com/en/blog/understanding-open-source-governance-models



AI Commons: Nourishing Alternatives to Big Tech Monoculture

Coding Rights

codingrights.org/en/library-item/ai-commons-nourishing-alternatives-to-big-tech-monoculture



Towards a feminist framework for AI development: from principles to practice

Derechos Digitales, Chile and the A+ Alliance

derechosdigitales.org/wp-content/uploads/Fair_Doc_Eng.pdf



Free and Open Source Governance

Foss Governance Collection

fossgovernance.org



CommunityRule Templates

CommunityRules

communityrule.info/templates



Digital Commons Tutorial: a practical guide to engaging in a Digital Commons process

Inno3 and Labo Société Numérique

labo.societenumerique.gouv.fr/en/articles/tutorial-digital-commons-practical-guide-for-engaging-in-a-digital-commons



The Third Wave of Open Data Toolkit: Operational Guidance on Capturing the Institutional and Societal Value of Data Re-Use

The Open Data Policy Lab

files.thegovlab.org/The-Third-Wave-of-Open-Data-Toolkit.pdf



OSS Governance

OW2

ow2.org/view/OSS_Governance

Academic reading:

Frischmann, B. M., Madison, M. J., & Strandburg, K. J. (Eds.). (2014). *Governing knowledge commons*. Oxford University Press.

Hess, C., & Ostrom, E. (2011). *Understanding knowledge as a commons : From theory to practice* (1st ed.). MIT Press.


Schweik and English, Schweik, C. M., & English, R. C. (2012). *Internet success : A study of open-source software commons*. MIT Press.






#TheTechWeWant

A collective conversation about practical ways to build software that is useful, simple, long-lasting and focused on solving people's real problems.



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If you would like to be in touch with us about this publication or anything else, please email:

info@okfn.org.

