

Digital Transformation Across Borders

The need for regional cooperation for inclusive and sustainable digital economies

RCI Conference 2026: Leveraging RCI for Inclusive and Sustainable Growth

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Why the Digital Divide Persists

Rules, networks, services, trust and skills lag together, and each has a cross-border face

01

Legacy policy frameworks

Outdated, fragmented rules, often written for telecom and broadcasting, that do not fit digital services

ACROSS BORDERS

Data, licensing and e-commerce rules differ at every border

02

Costly, uneven networks

High-quality, affordable networks still missing or costly in parts of Central Asia, the Pacific and Southeast Asia

ACROSS BORDERS

Too few resilient international and transit routes

03

Too few usable solutions

Services built for costly devices, rarely in local languages; one-off tools that do not connect

ACROSS BORDERS

Digital ID, payments and data platforms that cannot work together

04

Untrusted systems

Data protection and cybersecurity often put in place only after a major breach

ACROSS BORDERS

Cyberthreats cross borders faster than cooperation

05

Digital skills gaps

Citizens, firms and governments lack the skills to use digital tools and manage their risks

ACROSS BORDERS

Uneven skills limit who can join regional digital markets



The next frontier is AI. Without reliable energy, data infrastructure, skills and cybersecurity, countries risk falling further behind as AI scales, further widening the digital divide

Source: ADB. 2026. Digital ADB: An Operational Approach for Digital Transformation 2026 to 2030.

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ADB's Digital Transformation Framework

Foundations, accelerators and use cases are built together, so digital investments add up to transformation

Digital Transformation for a Prosperous, Inclusive, Resilient, and Sustainable Asia and the Pacific

DIGITAL USE CASES

Cross-sectoral digital operations in DMCs

Digital Solutions for Livable Cities, Countries and Data-driven Innovation

- Education
- Finance
- Transport
- Water
- Urban
- Energy
- Health
- Digital Technology
- Social Protection

DIGITAL ACCELERATORS

Amplifying impact of digital technologies for DMCs

Digital Public Infrastructure

Foundational and sectoral digital ID, digital payments, data exchange for interoperability and integration

Digital Skills and Capabilities

Digital literacy and skills for workforce development

DIGITAL FOUNDATIONS

Creating a strong base for DMC digital transformation

Digital and Data Infrastructure

Deployment and implementation of affordable, accessible, and high-quality networks

Digital Policy and Regulation

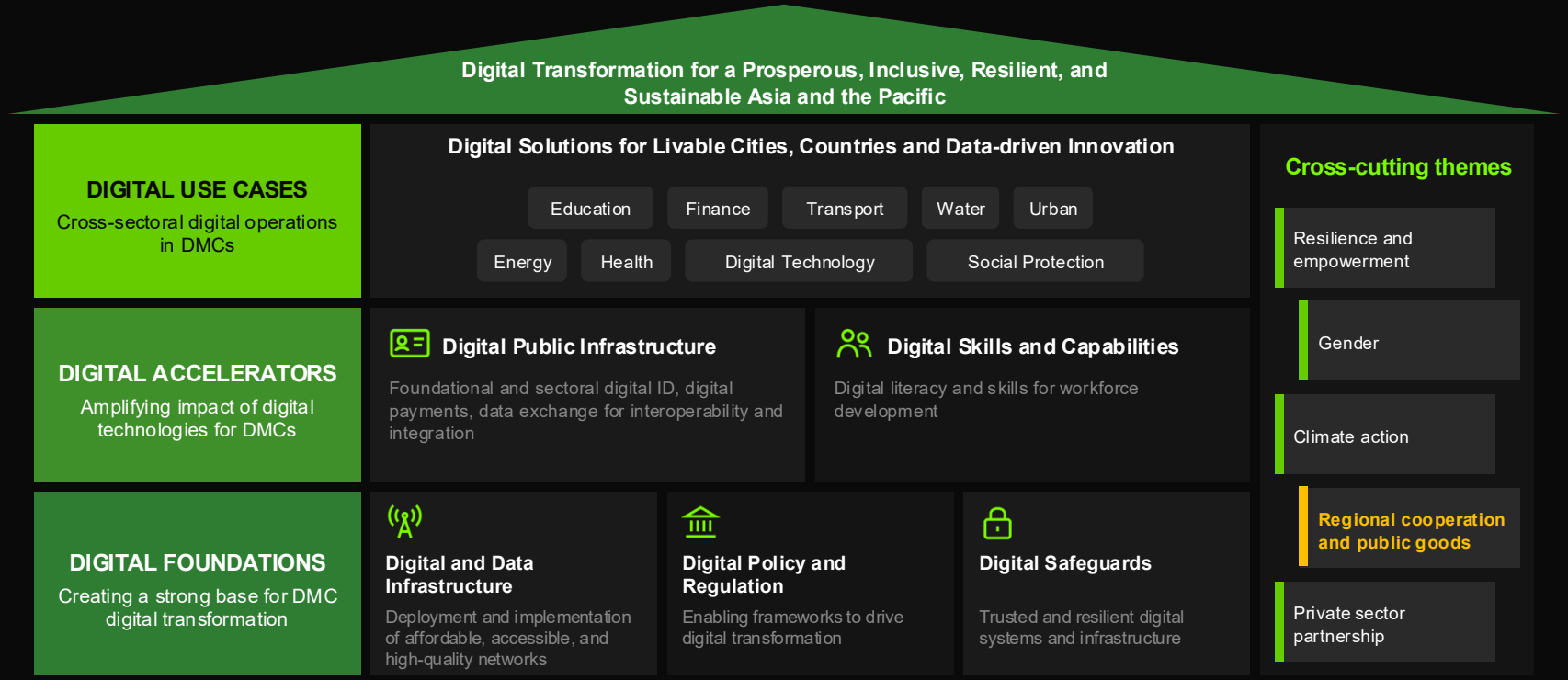
Enabling frameworks to drive digital transformation

Digital Safeguards

Trusted and resilient digital systems and infrastructure

Cross-cutting themes

- Resilience and empowerment
- Gender
- Climate action
- **Regional cooperation and public goods**
- Private sector partnership



Source: ADB. 2026. Digital Transformation for Development: Advancing Inclusion, Security, and Innovation (Board Direction); ADB. 2026. Digital ADB: An Operational Approach for Digital Transformation 2026 to 2030. Framework illustration redrawn from ADB Digital Sector Office materials.

Every Layer Needs Regional Cooperation

From cables to trade, digital systems stop at the border unless neighbors build them to connect

THE DIGITAL STACK	WHY REGIONAL COOPERATION MATTERS
Use cases and digital trade	Paperless trade and services work only if both sides connect
Cybersecurity and trust	Threats cross borders, so the response must too
Data exchange and DPI	Mutual recognition of local systems enable cross-border flows
Data infrastructure and compute	Regional hubs keep traffic and data close to users
Connectivity	Redundant cross-border routes and shared landing points
Enablers: policy, regulation, skills	**Aligned rules and skills let every layer cross the border**

Sources: ADB. 2026. Digital Transformation for Development: Advancing Inclusion, Security, and Innovation (Board Direction), para. 24; ADB. 2026. Digital ADB: An Operational Approach for Digital Transformation 2026 to 2030.

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Different Ways to Approach Regional Cooperation

CAREC is building shared digital infrastructure; ASEAN is agreeing common rules for the digital economy

CAREC Digital Corridor

Building the infrastructure together

Four pillars under CAREC Digital Strategy 2030, taken to ministers in 2026

01 CONNECT

International & national connectivity

Cross-border links to other regions

02 COMPUTE

Data centers & data hubs

National data center and AI readiness

03 EXCHANGE

IXPs & federations

More regional exchange traffic

04 ENABLE

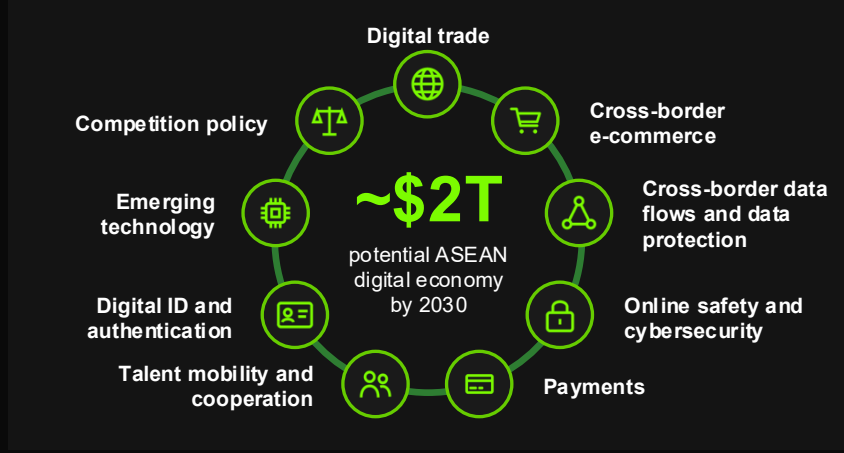
Regional guidelines

Trusted services, regional framework

ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement

Agreeing the rules together

Negotiations concluded Q3 2026; signing expected November 2026



Why ministerial dialogue matters: Ministers commit together on corridors, common rules and mutual recognition of local systems, so regional projects can build on, rather than redo local systems.

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Building It Together

No one can close a cross-border gap alone; we need to bring the ecosystem together

DMCs	Align the rules that travel across borders: data protection, cybersecurity, interoperability, open access. Bring regional projects forward together. Leverage existing regional convening platforms.
Donors and philanthropies	Provide blended finance, grants and technical assistance to support policy reform, project preparation and project de-risking.
Development partners	Work from shared diagnostics and aligned narratives, and cofinance through mutual reliance, so countries avoid incompatible platforms and duplicated assistance.
Private sector	Co-invest in networks, data centers and exchange points, and build DPI-based services and digital trade tools small firms can afford.
ADB	Convene, prepare and finance across the whole stack: Policy support, the Digital Highway, public and private infrastructure investment, and cross sectoral projects and programs.

The digital divide will not close one country at a time. Only by building, regulating and investing together can our region make sure no one is left behind.

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