

Ethereum for Public Infrastructure and Commons

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Explainer

The Ethereum for Public Infrastructure and Commons team (EPIC) works with governments, multilateral and multinational institutions, NGOs, civil society and community groups to empower them to improve public infrastructure and create civil tooling that simultaneously satisfies the trilemma of resilience, personal autonomy and competitiveness.

This document introduces EPIC's mission, scope and mandate, and places it within the wider context of the Ethereum Foundation (EF) and Ethereum ecosystem, while also offering a brief explanation of the EF ethos, principles and vision for Ethereum.

01

Introduction

Ethereum is two things at once: technology and ecosystem.

The technology is a blockchain network that serves as a distributed computational substrate that anyone can interact with trustlessly, permissionlessly and persistently, with a coordination protocol that aligns the thousands of operators who power its infrastructure around the world.

That is to say, Ethereum is globally accessible compute, owned and controlled by no one, that requires no permission to use or build on.

It was invented to enable self-sovereign computation, and the ability to coordinate at scale without violating others' own sovereign use, and it does so by being a decentralized and resilient tool. Changes to and use of the protocol are not controlled by any one actor, and the protocol itself has had no downtime since inception even during major upgrades.

The ecosystem is everyone who has gathered around it: initially its inventors, researchers and developers, then application builders, infrastructure operators, governance organizations, and then beyond that to a wider commons of contributors, such as public institutions, artists and dreamers, economic stakeholders and entrepreneurs, civic technologists and public-goods funders, **all of whom share the conviction that credibly neutral infrastructure is a precondition for human freedom in a digital century.**

02

Ethereum Foundation

The Ethereum Foundation (EF), a not-for-profit organization, exists to ensure Ethereum continues to be resilient enough to serve its purpose as enduring infrastructure that underpins human endeavor far into the future.

This means ensuring that the technology remains decentralized, robust and resilient; the ecosystem remains vibrant, plural and self-renewing.

To fulfil its role, the EF acts with certain principles. For instance, in projects it supports, it makes sure that privacy, security, and censorship resistance are upheld as core properties and that the work is open source.

The EF is one of the oldest members of the Ethereum ecosystem, and its first steward, but is not its owner or parent. It is one of the many citizens in the Ethereum commons and over time it wishes to see Ethereum flourish without EF's involvement, as that would be proof of its maturity and enduring vitality.

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The Ethereum Ecosystem

The Ethereum ecosystem and the EF are unique in the way they operate.

Unlike other ecosystems, the EF is not a disproportionately dominant actor with a tight hold over development. It is not a corporate sponsor. It does not use its treasury to generate artificial demand nor does it build products internally to compete within the ecosystem.

The philosophy is one of cultivation and stewardship. EF wishes to build enduring infrastructure, and that is as much a cultural project as a technological one. EF's support and work is targeted as upstream as possible: on knowledge, of example, and on convening.

Development of the protocol itself is done by a diverse and decentralized group of the main protocol client teams who coordinate among themselves to find agreement, not by the EF itself.

The EF's ambition is to continue handing over its functions to community actors that emerge to take on these roles. Ecosystem development is not EF's sole preserve, but the work of many independent yet aligned actors who work to promote Ethereum in their own way.

EF exists alongside allied ecosystems such as open source and public goods communities, and promotes collaboration with other communities that share its values.

Ethereum for Public Infrastructure and Commons (EPIC)

The Ethereum for Public Infrastructure and Commons team within the EF (EPIC) works with governments, multilateral and multinational institutions, NGOs, civil society and community groups to:

- equip decision-makers with grounded understanding of the capabilities and affordances of Ethereum
- illustrate and incubate civic and public good use cases,
- bridge to the wider Ethereum ecosystem and identify appropriate partners,

We encourage and support the development of civic tooling that is simultaneously:

- secure, privacy-preserving and resilient (against both technical, social and political threats)
- respecting of individual autonomy
- economically competitive

Our ultimate mission is to empower those we work with to improve public infrastructure.

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EPIC's support

EPIC acts according to the EF's mandate and mission.

This means that we support initiatives that are consistent with the EF's general principles, which applied to our work provide that:

- users should have consent over the use of their identities, assets, agents, and actions
- institutions should understand that alternatives exist where they are not dependent on others for crucial functions, such as vendor lock-in, foreign providers or unauditable closed systems
- both of the above can be true simultaneously, and the infrastructure to enable this needs to be built on the values of open source software.

We know that for the types of actors we work with, change often takes time and occurs incrementally.

Our north star is that individuals are genuinely freer and more respected than they would otherwise have been, and institutions come to see resilience and user sovereignty as the mark of serious institutional practice.

This can be achieved in many forms, such as interoperability, modularity, or plurality.

Part of our work is to show decision makers that the latest technological developments allow the trilemma of security and control, autonomy, and competitiveness can be resolved.

The types of initiatives and support we provide include:

- **education and briefing notes** for decision makers on the affordances of Ethereum
- **convening workshops** to design sovereign infrastructure
- **designing community programs** related to Ethereum and public infrastructure
- **advice and sense-checking** at a high level on proposed design and architecture
- **incubating pilots** and developing proofs of concept for non-financial use cases
- **developing and promoting standards** that include decentralizing technology such as anonymous credentials
- **making introductions** to aligned development teams
- **supporting principles-aligned organizations and individuals** in expanding the understanding and reach of Ethereum

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What EPIC doesn't support

In line with the EF's mandate, we follow certain guidelines in carrying out our work to ensure that the overall aims of the EF are also met: the EF places limits on its own activities to achieve its ultimate purpose of Ethereum's resilience through cultivating a vibrant ecosystem that does not have dependence on a central institution.

This means there are certain activities we won't engage in as part of our work, including:

- **making grants solely to use or migrate to Ethereum**
- **developing turn-key product solutions**
- **open-ended technical support**
- **accreditation or certification of projects**
- **influencing protocol development**
- **advising on proposed use cases which entrench or worsen user capture**

Who we work with

Digital public infrastructure encompasses huge areas of activity that no one organization in the ecosystem can cover on their own. The EF concentrates on the highest leverage opportunities to advance the ability for self-sovereign technologies to solve urgent need which no other ecosystem actor can pursue.

EPIC prioritizes working with those who share our values and can act according to the same principles.

While Ethereum is permissionless, meaning that no one needs the EF's permission or legitimacy to build a successful application on Ethereum, the EF encourages the development of Ethereum in a certain way.

It promotes censorship-resistant operation, privacy and security as core concerns and development in the open so that innovation can accelerate freely.

We, and EF as a whole do not demand perfection or absolutism, but we do factor this into our decisions around allocating our resources.

EPIC does not work with institutions who are hostile to these principles or who are antithetical to our mission.

Closing

EPIC, the EF, and the broader aligned Ethereum ecosystem, stand ready to help public bodies, NGOs and civic groups serve the needs of their constituents better. Governments and institutions will need and demand sovereign properties from their infrastructure in the new digital and AI age, such as:

- **security and auditability of code**
- **independence and traceability of the supply chain**
- **interoperability and modularity between systems**
- **true control over deployment**

These requirements for public infrastructure lead eventually and inevitably to building on Ethereum as the only real long-term choice.

For more information, please contact us at epic@ethereum.org

If you'd like to read the full Ethereum Foundation mandate, please visit:

<https://ethereum.foundation/ef-mandate.pdf>

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