

Report of the PFD Thematic Webinar on Digitalisation

Virtual meeting held on 3 November 2020

In the framework of the Virtual PFD that kicked off in July with a series of regional meetings which was followed by a global consultation on programming chaired by DEVCO Director General Koen Doens on September 15th, a second series of thematic webinars sought to refine the PFD's recommendations to the EU by looking into its key priorities. This third global thematic webinar took place on November 3rd and brought together PFD members and technical experts to focus on the EU's policy on Digitalisation for Development.

The objective of the thematic webinar was to discuss the ways in which the EU's policy on Digitalisation for Development with partner countries could help the latter address the many challenges that the rapid adoption of new technologies represents for their societies.

After presentation by Barbara Barone (Policy Officer, Digitalisation for Development, Unit C5 Cities, Local Authorities, Digitalisation, Infrastructures, DG DEVCO) and clarifications by Paolo Cicarelli (Head of Unit C5 Cities, Local Authorities, Digitalisation, Infrastructures, DG DEVCO) and Laura Bretea (Democratic Governance Policy Officer, Unit B1 Gender Equality, Human Rights and Democratic Governance, DG DEVCO), the interactive discussion was organised around the following questions:

- How can the programming and implementation of the EU's policy on Digitalisation for Development contribute to reducing inequalities, ensure a just transition and leave no-one behind?
- How can the enabling environment (and thereby the roles and work of civil society and local and regional governments) be strengthened through the implementation of the EU's policy on Digitalisation for Development?
- How can multi-stakeholder partnerships (and thereby civil society and local and regional governments) effectively contribute to implementing the EU's policy on Digitalisation for Development at global, national and local level?

Key messages:

Digital divide: The first issue to be raised is also a call for caution: How we can collaborate to close the digital divide where almost half of the earth's inhabitants do not even have access to the internet? For developing countries, the priorities remain democracy, human rights and improving public administration. How can digitalisation contribute to fostering these is important to keep in mind. The huge differences in terms of access and skills among and within countries require the EU to take a proactive stance in addressing this new form of inequality, which has been enhanced by the COVID-19 crisis (when during lockdown all education and training moved online, we realised the true extent of the digital divide, as those without devices and connections fell behind). To this end, it is crucial to collect, analyse

and use diverse data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts to understand participation and broader trends, and adapt processes based on analysis of data.

Infrastructure: Access depends on infrastructure, which is why EU support should explore new technologies that can offer broadband service over the last mile or initiatives that target the first barrier to access, such as the issue of mobile ownership (high cost of mobile phones). Satellite systems can provide high-speed access to underserved parts of the world, yet few satellite broadband providers have been successful so far. Besides, it is important to consider who owns the infrastructure, as this gives them significant leverage over the country's economic, social and political spheres. Therefore, providing broadband access through multi-stakeholder partnerships based on transparency and collective ownership might be something to explore.

Data security and transparency: As with infrastructure, any further consideration first begs the question: Who manages the data? Whereas data should be publicly accessible without restrictions, there is also a need to provide safe digital space and ensure data security. Digital rights are also civic rights, so data protection needs to be actively sought by addressing digital threats on the one hand and by providing trainings and technical assistance to CSOs, communities and individuals.

Regulation and taxation: Innovation is outpacing legal and regulatory frameworks and regulators' ability to respond to new issues, so the EU should take a leading role and support partner countries in adopting regulations that respect human rights, while avoiding legal and regulatory frameworks that restrict the freedom of expression of civil society. Through innovative regulation, digitalisation can also become a driver of reforms towards the formalisation of the informal sector, as well as a means to promote social dialogue and social protection. This, of course, can hardly be done without proper taxation, a challenge that will require concerted action amongst diverse stakeholders. In this regard, local authorities have already started to pave the way with practices that could become models for the development of a territorial and people-centred approach towards taxation. Given its strong normative power, the EU could adopt some baseline principles for fostering digitally-enabled sustainable development that look into the environmental, social, political and economic dimensions of digitalization.

Capacities and skills: There is an urgent need for digital literacy programmes to bridge the gap that exists in access to technology. Improving digital literacy skills is not only essential for CSOs, but also for other actors such as employers' organisations, local government representatives, farmers, women groups, etc. To this end, cooperatives are already providing open digital infrastructure to SMEs, children, or women and could play a key role in delivering trainings on digital skills and related issues to their members. However, these asymmetries in terms of capacities not only affect people and groups, but also countries, so the EC could consider moving beyond the exchange of good practices towards technology transfer policies.

Gender: The digital and gender gaps feed on each other, giving way to a vicious circle of exclusion that risks leaving women and girls behind. To avoid this, the EU could support initiatives in which organisations come together to organise trainings on virtual engagement and share resources and ideas, such as what was done with the feminist response to COVID-19 (<https://www.feministcovidresponse.com/>). However, it must be acknowledged that the digital environment also brings new opportunities and risks, e.g. for female politicians, who have greater ways to engage at the local level but are also open to increased online abuse.

Active role of LAs: There is a need to encourage LAs to move forward in their adoption of digital technologies in developing countries: they need to be involved as they are crucial for promoting digitalisation, ensuring the protection of data, improving digital to facilitate life, boosting local democracy and creating start-ups/platforms which support their objectives at local level. LAs can share these

experiences on decentralised development (given that European smart cities in particular are recognised in the world as digital champions on fostering local development through digital technologies) but also an analysis of what is at stake in digitalisation, as well as concrete best practices which promote EU values. As such, LAs should also be incorporated into the D4D Hubs.

Civil society: Digitalisation has both helped CSOs participate in policy debates; and has at the same time contributed to shrinking space for civil society. The EU needs to invest in the right support for civil society, who are now dependent on access to computer networks, mobile phones, the wireless spectrum, and remote servers (the cloud) for everyday actions. This should not only be the privilege of the northern civil society, so financial and technical support is needed for civil society organisations to have access to safe and reliable internet connections and physical spaces to connect. As for digital trainings and creation of virtual tools, involve representatives of CSOs which know how to engage effectively: use local organisations to train others and support CSO actors in experimenting with sustainable digital models, enabling collective control over data.

Participatory civic spaces require **financial and technical support** for civil society organisations to have access to safe and reliable internet connections and physical spaces (such as offices, meeting rooms, etc.) to connect. What appears to be a fragmented and independent set of activities and actors—a vibrant and dynamic space of civil society—is entirely dependent on digital systems owned and managed by companies and governments, who can switch off access at any time. Support is also needed to build digital awareness and knowledge among civil society actors, by way of digital trainings and creation of virtual tools, so representatives of CSOs know how to engage effectively in these policy spaces. Local CSOs and Local Authorities which have an expertise in the topic can organise such trainings, as they are most often closer to communities.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships: Cooperative movements, together with CSOs and Trade Unions, are having critical discussions on how to enable multi-partnership collaboration with tools that allow for control of data. The role of the EC should be to set a framework ensuring that all stakeholders can collaborate in a safe environment, users keep control of their data and that smaller digital actors can emerge. The internet is based on open standards that promote a more democratic network, so the tools are there, it is just a matter of adopting them. The EC could deploy an online multi-stakeholder hub for CSOs, where partners could exchange on the needs and practices, including a library of open-source and interoperable solutions for facilitating collaboration. Include experts from the entities that are pushing that digital innovation in multi-stakeholder partnerships e.g. existing platforms by UNCTAD that are incorporating this type of partnership and could yield best practices. Other examples that were presented include the platform cooperative UP&GO, the World Bank's Digital Development Partnership (DDP) and Net Hope, consisting on a consortium of nearly 60 leading global non-profits united with more than 60 technology companies and funding partners.

EU Delegations: It is important for EU Delegations to build on existing initiatives, so a first step could be to map out who is already working where, to ensure an understanding of what already exists, build collective knowledge and share best practices. Mapping who is working where, will also add transparency to the digital transformation process and decision-making. Considering the impact of digitalisation in political phenomena such as polarisation, it is crucial for the EU Delegations to assess the implications of their actions in relation to the quality of institutions and political discourse. In this regard, the EC is already working on a handbook on "Digitalisation and Democracy" for EU Delegations, a promising step that should be complemented with regular mappings and consultations so as to keep pace of new developments and ensure that no one is left behind.