

SPEECH by
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D4D in Europe

Kickoff Digital for Development: Igniting partnerships
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Honourable Minister, dear representatives from the private sector, non-governmental and governmental actors, academia, civil society, members of informal groups or networks, distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am particularly honoured by the Belgian Development Cooperation invitation to be joining this distinguished group of participants and speakers to talk about what the European Commission is doing and is planning to do with regard to digitalisation for development.

I want to seize the opportunity of this event to address my acknowledgements to the Belgian vice-Prime Minister Alexander De Croo for pointing us in 2015 to the lacuna in our development aid, to the Slovak Presidencies for issuing the Council Conclusions in 2016 and also to the Estonian Presidency for preparing new Council Conclusions that are expected to be adopted today. Thanks to this work, Digitalisation for Development is put prominently on the agenda of EU Development Aid.

Previous speakers have already hinted that digital technologies and digital economy be a game changer in development policies. I would fully agree and add that digital should not either be seen as an end in itself. It is rather crucial to exploit the full potential of digital technologies and services as enablers for an inclusive sustainable development, by mainstreaming digitalisation across focal sectors, and controlling for the misapplying of digital technologies, which could otherwise result in further widening of inequalities and undermining of development progress. Health and education are for example two sectors, where digital technologies could play a big role, bringing a wide spectrum of benefits for a larger part of the population.

Commission services published in May 2017 a Staff Working Document "Digital-for-Development: Mainstreaming digital technologies and services into EU development policy" with the aim to support partner countries to address the key challenges that digitalisation and technological revolution bring, as well as to allow digitalisation to play a central role in improving lives— **in particular by empowering women and girls, enhancing democratic governance and transparency, and boosting productivity and job creation**. Our long-term objective is to ensure digitalisation plays its role as a strong driver for economic growth and reducing the digital divide in all partner countries, providing access for all.

Technology has made giant leaps forward leading to a tangible demand from our development partners. It is urgent to match this demand with a real offer from our side. It is our ambition to make much more use of ICTs for development and assist our development partners on the path to the Knowledge Economy.

But, in this time of austerity no new resources can be earmarked specifically for this D4D approach, but one of the financial tools that can and will be used to that aim is the European External Investment Plan with a specific "digital" window offering different schemes such as guarantees. This window will encourage investments in Africa and the Neighbourhood to lower risk and create the conditions for the deployment of digital technologies as well as for the scaling –up of digital services.

The EU policy objective under the EEIP is to boost the digital economy by supporting i) **innovative digital solutions promoted by local entrepreneurs**, particularly those addressing social needs (health, education and social assistance related services) and promoting decent job creation ii) **the introduction and development of e-government related services**, promoting the use of digital technologies in a range of priority areas (agriculture, education, water management, health and energy) and iii) **enabling environments for the digital economy by enhancing connectivity**, removing obstacles to unleash its full potential for sustainable development, while promoting free, open and secure Internet.

The EFSD should be complemented both by **enabling policies to foster stable investment environments and also by technical assistance**. In the case of digital infrastructure and services, **policy dialogue could be relevant**, for example, to support partner countries' governments on public policies in the digital economy sector, as well as for the development of Digital National Plans and changes in the regulatory frameworks.

While digitalisation is considered of global interest and the added value of mainstreaming digital aspects applies to the entire range of development policy and action, it is clear that **we cannot do everything at once** – we should remain realistic and focused. In this regard, putting the **focus mainly on Africa** makes complete sense, since there is where the digital divide is the greatest, and in particular in those African countries that are more ready building on the interests and consensus of the local partners.

We need to support Africa to harness the potential of digitalisation and the "4th industrial revolution". The European Digital Single Market opens significant pathways and offers a wide scope of productive engagement between Africa and Europe. It is important to **use the opportunity of the EU-Africa Summit** at the end of this month in order to present and to discuss with the political leaders our Digital for Development approach. Many initiatives, in the run up to

the Africa-EU Summit, have been agreed or are in the immediate pipeline, [*such as:*

- *study contracted to the Estonian eGov Academy, analysing the situation and preparedness of African countries regarding e-government systems and accordingly proposing recommendations;*
- *Multinational Trans-Saharan Backbone (TSB) - Optical Fiber Project (TSB)*
- *Central Africa Backbone-Central African Republic (CAR) Terrestrial fibre ICT backbone project*
- *Cyber Resilience for Development: protecting critical digital infrastructure and networks envelope*
- *Accessing the Digital Dividend in Africa*
- *Private sector programmes]*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by reminding that for digital to be an accelerator and enabler of sustainable development other conditions need to be met, namely a) national ownership and political will; b) multiple stakeholders engagement; c) public-private partnership and resource blending, d) non-duplication of efforts and coordination with other donors; e) full consideration to the unequal distribution of digital dividends among countries and within countries (monitoring gender, rural-urban, group marginalisation dimensions). This list is not

exhaustive. What matters is that the integration of digital technologies is fully grounded on the analysis of the local context and deep understating of who is going to be affected and how, tailoring the approach to the local needs and readiness of the country.

We find important to seize the opportunity and make sure that our cooperation frameworks and investments are oriented in areas that **offer jobs and inclusive growth**. Systematic involvement of EU Member States, partner countries, civil society, academia **and first and foremost the digital private sector is essential**.

In this respect, close **cooperation and coordination with Belgium**, sharing with EU the same priorities in digitalisation for development, as cited in the Strategic Policy Note on Digital for Development (D4D-Be), is essential in order to address the existing challenges.

Implementation of Belgian D4D partnerships could be fostered by EU instruments and frameworks, such as the SME Instrument, part of the European Innovation Council (EIC) pilot that supports top-class innovators, entrepreneurs, small companies and scientists with funding opportunities and acceleration services, as well as the EIC Horizon Prizes, awarding the most innovative solutions to societal challenges, open to anyone willing to think outside the box across sectors and disciplines.

Thank you for your attention.