

Siim Sikkut – Panel 4 statements outline

Estonia is an example of how innovation and, in particular, the innovation built on smart use of digital technology and public-private partnerships can deliver development. Only 17 years ago, we ourselves were a country in transition when Millennium Development Goals were adopted. That was the time when we started using information and communications technology actively in government, economy and society in Estonia.

Today we are considered one of the most digitally advanced countries in the world. Some even call us e-Estonia for that. Today we are also among the high-income countries and as a donor, committed to help others make the transition leap.

Digital development has brought Estonia more economic growth, more resource efficiency, more human development. Building an advanced digital government and being the birthplace of Skype have given us a strong tech industry and a very active start-up scene, where new, high-paying jobs are created daily. The digitization of operations both in the back office as well as frontline services have made both the public sector and private companies very efficient with the few resources we have as a small country. We have found out in practice that e-governance solutions can make people's lives better by saving them time and money, ensuring access and transparency and lowering the barrier to participating in and taking advantage of government services.

Estonia does not have too many people or dollars, therefore we have had to be smart, innovative and find unconventional solutions to be effective as a nation and as a state. That is why we use laptops or smart phones to get just about anything done online – from children's grades to health records to internet based voting to declaring taxes.

When you start a company, first thing you do is go online. It takes only 20 minutes to set up a legally functional company that can start with business the same day. All the later required reporting, tax declarations, and other deeds involved in running a business can be fully and only handled digitally. Less bureaucracy saves time, which can instead be invested into growing the businesses. So, digital solutions can bring great boost to business growth which is a pillar for development.

Our experience shows that to make great leaps in digital society level, there needs to be proper enabling technical and legal infrastructure in place. As the last World Bank's Global Development Report clearly showed, the difference of digital development gains between

countries comes from policies and legal systems that their governments put in place to support digital adoption – or not.

We developed a nation-wide electronic identity platform, an ID-card or a special SIM-card in a mobile phone. In Estonia, we have used it for more than a decade. With digital ID, you authenticate yourself and sign everything digitally, in a fully legally valid manner: from government acts to business contracts to any applications to state by the citizens. Digital ID has provided the possibility to move all government transactions online.

Another example of proper infrastructure is government-wide data exchange. We have developed a data exchange platform called X-Road, through which the government institutions and agencies are connected as well as parts of the private sector. X-Road allows transmitting and exchanging any data in a highly secure manner between any organization and information system.

That provides the basis for companies and people to get things done in a single encounter with government. We have a once-only rule. According to the Estonian law, Government agencies should not ask people for data that any other agency already holds. That's why it only takes 3 minutes to fill the tax declaration (it comes prefilled, people only review).

Innovation does not mean that the new solution or practice has to be an invention, something completely new-to-the-world. That is why more knowledge sharing and transfer between countries on effective policy designs and proven digital tools can help speed up the building digital society. It could greatly boost digital innovation around the world towards SDGs, reducing innovation cycles and ensuring success. Multilateral institutions should focus their supporting efforts to facilitating such innovation practice exchange and supporting such capacity building or technology transfer more, especially for countries lack these the most.

Estonia has increased national financial contribution in this regard through development cooperation, too. We remain ready to send our governmental and also private ICT experts to such initiatives; they already have similar experience from more than 60 countries in the world. Especially under the e-Governance Academy (www.ega.ee), an NGO of experts operating from Estonia.

Finally, giving all people of the world a secure digital identity could be one of the steps to achieving the SDGs. Then everyone would have a chance to benefit from digital services and tools, to use them in secure ways and have more means to enhance their livelihood.

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