

## **Diplomacy in the digital age – Introduction**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by pushing an open door: the digital revolution is disrupting every facet of our society.

It is disrupting how we relate to each other. Just ask teenagers what their most important mode of communication is.

It is disrupting how businesses operate. Ask your taximan!

And yes, even diplomacy and international development is being disrupted.

This is not a new trend.

Ten-fifteen years ago, newspapers and book sellers were probably among the first to see their businesses being disrupted. Some have been able to absorb the change. Others are still recovering. And some did fail because they denied the disruptiveness of online media.

We see the same resistance or hesitation in other sectors. I just referred to the taxi sector, but also diplomacy and international development is looking for ways to adapt.

I hope I do not insult anyone in this room by stating that diplomacy is late in adapting. One could argue that this hesitance in some way is understandable, since diplomats and development people are working relatively 'out of view' and 'out of touch' of the mainstream – in contrast with taxi drivers.

Diplomats also have an established way of doing business, without many if any contenders or challengers.

Yet, it is crucial that diplomacy does embrace digital change. Not – as the report of Clingendael Institute correctly highlights – to be part of the hype. But as a clear and

decisive strategy to strengthen our relevance and re-think our own processes.

Digital change is more than just copy-pasting our existing tools and instruments to the virtual universe. Just using new trendy tools to do old stuff is not really the most efficient or effective strategy. Digital is more than just another instrument.

Online presence can never just be about being there because it's a must, because others do the same, because the head office has instructed to.

The power of digital, its disruptive power, is hidden in its ability to change trusted familiar concepts from within, but also in its potential to fundamentally strengthen and re-calibrate our goals and objectives.

Let me give some examples how the digital revolution is changing the rules of the game – I will mainly put from the field that is closest to me, international development.

- 1) **Digital blurs traditional role divisions.** Relationships and role sets that used to be hierarchical become horizontal. It is one of the main traits of the so-called collaborative economy.

Take Airbnb. When everyone becomes tenant and landlord at the same time it blurs traditional roles.

With regard to diplomacy, the Clingendael Report clearly identifies the pressure digitalization puts on the classic relations between a head office and embassies, for example.

But also in international development, collaborative practices question old models. Top-down planning of actions for beneficiaries is outdated when those beneficiaries can also be the planners and the implementers of these actions.

Avaaz, a movement for social justice using online petitioning, is just 8 years old and boasts over 42 million members worldwide. It has done more to raise awareness of world problems than others in the past. Its success lies in the fact that Avaaz empowers its members to build and promote their own campaigns, rather than a top-down decision of which causes should be supported or not.

Another example from the development world: Kenya, one of the leading

countries with regard to mobile payments in Africa. In Kenya, mobile operators are now the biggest providers of financial services and mobile payments have become the norm.

- 2) **A second trend that is radically changing our classic conceptions is the phenomenon of crowd-sourcing.** Because of digital, knowledge and expertise are no longer the exclusive domain of specialists or academics. Knowledge and expertise are distributed among people who freely share, build, update, question, access and broadcast it.

Of course, talking of crowd-sourcing **Wikipedia** immediately comes to mind, but crowd-sourcing has a much broader array of applications that – again – can be quite disruptive.

For instance, you all know that Belgium is very attentive to the fight against corruption. Well, in Uganda, because of crowd-sourcing we are advancing the fight against corruption. A smartphone app enables citizens to anonymously report cases of corruption or public fund misuse. This gives visibility to the problem and enables the citizens to act upon it. This collective knowledge can then also be used to support our diplomatic efforts.

- 3) **A third example is disintermediation and cutting out the middleman.**

Digital platforms replace broker functions that bring little added value but only exploit their rent situation. Financial markets have already experienced this and brokers have had to refocus their roles on added value. For the simple reason that digital platforms came in and broker at a fraction of the cost. Because of their efficiency, they made it possible to develop new trades and put pressure on old ones.

In Belgium, community supported agriculture and direct commercialization circuits (from producers to consumers) heavily rely on this.

In developing countries, for instance crowdfunding platforms such as Kiva are empowering small entrepreneurs through direct micro-credit. Coming from nowhere, in less than 10 years, Kiva has lent over 750 million USD from 1.35 million lenders with a 98.46% repayment rate. An achievement that few classic actors may claim today.

- 4) **Empowerment and engagement.** Social media is also leveraging political and

civil rights. On social media people have an equal voice and a real capacity to question governments and businesses.

In **Burkina Faso**, for example, the social mobilization against the constitutional coup of 2014 and this year's military coup has been greatly made possible through the use of social media which empowered the population by making everyone understand that they were not alone and by mutually reinforcing their beliefs.

The government of the **DRC** has well understood this power of social media when they shut down mobile communications and internet during the January demonstrations against the modification of the constitution.

For diplomacy, this new reality is important. Diplomats should be attentive to the narrative of the street as it unfolds on social media and use it to exert their influence.

It also means that engagement with the civil society is imperative. Silence is no longer an acceptable option. Questions need credible answers. Strategies who do not take this new reality into account are bound to fail.

- 5) **Transparency:** A business model where trust or reputation is only built on secrecy and confidentiality is particularly weak in the digital age. You first need to be transparent about your goals and your methods and seek to win broad support for them.

Allowing feedback can deepen your understanding, adapt to criticism and adopt new ways of engagement.

Trust and reputation depends on the credibility of your public statements, the alignment between what you do and what you say.

The international aid transparency initiative (IATI), to which Belgium is adhering, is a powerful instrument to map all development initiatives and empower governments and citizens over their own development.

Through IATI, donors have a higher accountability vis-à-vis their partners and their own constituencies.

Citizens are now able question the choices and priorities of development interventions. Should Belgium invest so many funds in DRC or in agriculture?

What are the results? Transparency calls for clearly justified choices and a pertinent communication strategy over these choices.

Development is no longer a domain reserved to experts, but lies in the democratic field. The same goes for diplomacy.

- 6) **Lastly, data overload and making sense out of it.** Too much information kills information. Those who have a competitive advantage in the digital age are those who can make sense out of the overabundance of information.

Big data analytics will become a major asset in the coming 5 years. Knowledge management will be revolutionized by big data analytics.

Developing countries often lack good statistics to pilot their policies. When resources are scarce, sufficient data is increasingly important.

Big data analytics bring new opportunities at a fraction of the cost of collecting data through household surveys.

For example, telecom consumption patterns can be used to map poverty issues, to identify mobility patterns or population densities at a very granular level. Big data analytics can illustrate trends over time that were unthinkable just 5 years ago. The availability of such data will revolutionize the way policies are drafted, actions are monitored and impact is measured.

Diplomats are at the crossroad of various information sources and one of their added values is to synthesize them and to make sense out of them to support policy agendas. Big data analytics is an additional source of information that needs to be taken into account.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I said earlier, the challenge is way broader than just using the new technologies to keep on doing the same. Embracing digital change means embracing the opportunity to strategically re-think our processes. The central question is not how to digitize our processes. The fundamental question is how to enhance our processes and re-new our objectives by using this new set of tools.

Development cooperation is facing the same challenges as diplomacy on how to

integrate the trends I just mentioned.

The classic actors of development cooperation are still operating with an outdated mindset and are mainly involved in digitalization just as a new software to make old hardware run more efficiently.

Very few have re-thought their objectives and remodeled their approach in adaptation to the new reality. Established NGO's, who are usually considered to be sources of social innovations have not grasped the opportunities of social networking in bringing about social change.

We have to use the digital revolution to re-invent the business model of international development actors. Investing in digital infrastructure to bridge the digital divide, or lobbying for internet access as a human right could certainly be new themes just like the cyber agenda (internet governance, online freedoms, cybersecurity,...) is for diplomacy.

When I share my vision on the role of digital in international development, I'm often met with **resistance and skepticism**. Why would we invest in this field when people in developing countries don't have access to their most basic rights? Why are we talking about smartphones and connected apps when 4 billion people have yet to gain access to these technologies?

The reality is that developing countries are on the move, in particular Africa is catching up at a high pace.

A casual observer of the development of Africa would certainly notice that one of the most visible development outcomes of the last 15 years is the incredible penetration of communication technology. Mobile technology has enabled developing countries to leapfrog certain technologies from the 20th century.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The question is not if we should first invest in access to drinking water and wait to invest in digital rights. The question is how we can use the rapid penetration of digital technologies to advance the right to health, to education, to food,...

In the next 5 years, digitalization will be the most powerful driver of growth and human rights in developing countries. And the best is that it's already happening, without waiting for classical aid relations. Over 100 technological hubs already exist

all over Africa where young entrepreneurs develop solutions in line with their local context and needs. This private entrepreneurship should be supported by at least an enabling local environment. We should be assisting our partners in developing countries to grasp the local potential of digitalization and put in place such an enabling environment.

Finally, I would like to conclude this introduction by inviting you to embrace these new possibilities with confidence and a clear sense of urgency. This change of hardware needs to happen fast, otherwise we face the risk of becoming irrelevant or obsolete.

I know this is hard to grasp because these are trends that are happening as we speak. But instead of opposing the changing of the game we have to adapt ourselves to proactively be part of it.

We are a growing number of believers; we should be enthusiastically communicating this confidence to our colleagues and within our structures.

Thank you