



## Digitalisation and its discontents

### **The need for a digital transformation of civil society and our digital civil society programme**

Four months down in the blink of an eye and what can I say? What a strange time indeed. My world suddenly became a lot smaller; only seeing my housemates and occasionally my brother in person, I, along with everyone else, found my life propelled to an entirely digital setting, like something from a science fiction film.

The Civil Society Engagement Unit also found itself transferred entirely to a digital setting. On top of the usual annual schedule of country and sectoral policy and strategy consultations which will now take place in a virtual setting, we, like everyone else, prioritised the Covid-19 response and have so far organised and hosted 18 online consultations with civil society representatives to understand the needs of civil society during the crisis in our regions of operations.

In summary, the main feedback points we have received so far:

- *How can we guarantee digital security for our civil society stakeholders in countries where surveillance is an issue?*
- *How will new digitalisation measures work with areas of civil society targeting vulnerable groups who do not necessarily have access to technology, nor the ability to operate technology?*
- *How can we improve digital platforms to provide access in rural areas with unreliable and often non-existent WIFI and equipment?*

### ***Assuring digital security in the digitalisation transition***

I've listened in on many a virtual meeting recently to understand the need for enhanced digital security in Covid-19 times and what we at the EBRD can do directly to help. Concerns about the increased risks of reprisals deriving from restrictive measures and surveillance put in place by governments across the EBRD regions of operations (and beyond) have been raised. Digital contact tracing as one example, is great for containing the virus but could also be exploited as an aggressive form of surveillance. We have also noted worrying recent trends in the area of rule of law and human rights compliance and

warned that the transition process could be undermined without functioning democracy and limits to state power.

Ongoing discussion is needed for adopting and creating more secure digital forums for dialogue and exchange throughout our regions of operations in order for us to protect privacy, protect data and therefore protect a person's right to speak out.

Under the EBRD's Civil Society Capacity Building Framework, we will keep supporting the role of civil society as a public accountability mechanism, including when it comes to monitoring of public spending on the Covid-19 response in terms of both crisis management and reconstruction. We are exploring framework projects targeting the Covid-19 response, reinforcing the supporting of civil society in monitoring the efficiency and effectiveness of public spending under the immediate pandemic response and government's economic stimulus packages across our regions of operations. And potentially in close collaboration with the Open Contracting Partnership with whom we have recently signed a memorandum of understanding.

My colleague and specialist in this area, Luisa Balbi, will be posting an article soon to furthermore comment on undemocratic restrictions imposed and the shrinking civil space as a result of Covid-19.

We have an interesting period of problem solving ahead.

### ***Access to technology***

At the EBRD, we have had the advantage of being able to directly access equipment and software to streamline the transition to a virtual setting and even we have experienced teething problems in the first few weeks. Many of our countries do not have the capacity to put together digital and remote working strategies. So how can we use technology to enable the narrowing of gaps in these countries? I've listened to many webinars and podcasts and kept an eye out for individual civil society initiatives in our regions of operations, and there are a lot of positive ideas out there.

We will be looking to big tech companies in the coming years pushing to break new ground as the trend for social and commercial interactions continue permanently online. Already certain companies like Twitter have announced major changes to the future of working practices by allowing employees who prefer to work remotely, to do so indefinitely. I'm sure we will start to see many other companies follow suit. We need to ensure that civil society isn't left behind and understand what innovative solutions for technological transformation can come out of this crisis.

FinTech has been leading the way for digital transformation over the past few years, with the EBRD supporting a number of SME projects develop platforms for eProcurement, eLearning and eCommerce. We will look to see what lessons have been learned from these projects and how best practices can be applied to target the digitalisation of civil society under the Capacity Enhancement Framework. We already have two projects in the pipeline to support the digital transformation of civil society organisations in Turkey and for enhanced stakeholder engagement in an online setting.

One of the most significant opportunities of this crisis, will be for states and individuals to realize the potential of a truly global digital society. The George Floyd killing and subsequent Black Lives Matter movement has demonstrated how change can be effected through digital collaboration. Imagine a world of online collaborators, sharing skills, experiences and information across all of the world, not just in the West. If we can encourage the investment in technology infrastructure and digital skills

training for the youth in countries where this is still desperately needed to support the digital transition, we can empower communities so they are not left behind.

As we gradually resurface from the lockdown, unsure about what the future will bring, we must not forget the lessons learned from the past few months. We are at a developmental junction where we should look at this time as an opportunity to reconnect, to use technology to our advantage and become more efficient in the way we engage and communicate. If we succeed, the world could be a better place for it.

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