Geneva, 20 July 2023

Comments and recommendations of the ICT4Peace Foundation on the
Strategy for International Cooperation 2025 - 2028
(IC Message 25 - 28)

Together with climate change and the demographic transition, digitalisation will profoundly change life on the planet in the coming decades. This is particularly true for living conditions in developing countries, for the poorest sections of the population and for people living in humanitarian emergencies. Digitalisation and the new technologies associated with it also have an impact on the global political framework and play an important role in the increasing rivalry between the major powers. Consequently, the Federal Council has given digitalisation a great deal of weight in the 2019-2023 legislative planning. In the Foreign Policy Strategy 2020-2023, digitisation is one of four thematic priorities.

However, digitisation and new technologies do not only change the framework conditions. They also have great potential for solving global challenges in all three pillars of sustainability (poverty, economy and ecology).

New technologies are briefly mentioned in the consultation draft of the IC Dispatch 25 - 28 (section 3.5.4). However, they play no particular role either in the analysis or in the thematic priorities. The important reference to international Geneva, to the strong ICT capacities of the Swiss private sector and to research in Switzerland is also missing, although it is a declared goal of the IC strategy to better bring Swiss expertise to bear.

Digitisation as a key factor for development

It is now undisputed that digitalisation is a key factor for development. For the countries of the Global South, access to the Internet (Digital Access), capacity building at various levels (Capacity Development), the financial sector (Inclusive Finance), cyber security and the use of modern technologies in key areas of sustainable development are urgent concerns. Digital technologies are a transversal issue (similar to gender) in many areas important for poverty reduction and development. Digitisation is very fundamentally changing education and training, health care, the functioning of the private sector, etc. While it could be argued that digitalisation is already so present and entrenched that it does not need special mention and focus, this would be a fallacy. This would be a false conclusion. Opportunities would be missed and capacities would be built up too late. For the Swiss IC, it could mean clinging to outdated paradigms and not finding viable answers to challenges of the present and future.

We therefore strongly recommend that the area of digitalisation and new technologies be set as an important focus in the IC 2025-2028 strategy, in the following areas:

Access (Digital Access)

Access to the internet, digital connectivity, is a basic prerequisite for the use of digital technologies. Access is primarily provided by private sector actors. In many developing countries today, internet coverage is insufficient and expensive, which was clearly visible during the Covid pandemic. Information from the health sector did not reach the population, the continuation of school lessons was at risk, etc. Swiss development cooperation will not be able to set up and implement bilateral programmes in this area itself. But it can advocate in the multilateral framework (World Bank, development banks, etc.) and play an advocacy role together with the countries of the global South. This role is already outlined in the Digital Foreign Policy Strategy.

Capacity building

Many developing countries have great needs in the area of capacity building. This is particularly also about human capital. The spectrum ranges from parliamentarians who pass laws, to diplomats who participate in international negotiations, to the public sector, which is central to governance. In this area, own programmes using Swiss knowledge, but also partnerships with specialised institutions and multilateral contributions would be worth considering.

Cybersecurity

Cybersecurity is becoming increasingly important for countries in the Global South. Inadequate cyber security can cause enormous damage. It is pointless to invest in development if a large part of the benefits are lost because developing and emerging countries lack cybersecurity capacities, institutions, strategies, etc.
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However, cyber security is not only about technical security and defence against cyber attacks, but also about protection against misinformation and measures against the spread of hate on the internet, which can trigger or intensify conflict dynamics. Most developing countries are poorly equipped for these tasks, but have clearly recognised the need for action. Progress in cybersecurity is also hampered by institutional barriers, for example because cybersecurity expenditures are not ODA-eligible (OECD/DAC criteria). Switzerland should take initiatives and/or support existing efforts in this area.

Digitisation as a transversal theme

Digitisation is changing the way government and private sector services are produced. Vocational training, for example, requires digital skills (digital literacy), while in the health sector the impact of services and the effective dissemination of information also depend on digital tools. In education, contemporary standards can only be achieved with the help of digital tools, even in developing countries. Switzerland can implement this aspect in its own programmes and also work towards ensuring that the digital components in multilateral programmes or programmes otherwise supported by Switzerland meet contemporary requirements.

Use the expertise and capacities of the private sector

The Swiss private sector has strong capacities in ITC, in particular Switzerland is a leading provider of ITC services and software development, and is considered an important player in the global ICT industry. The sector contributes over 20 billion Swiss francs annually to the gross domestic product and employs more than 300 000 people. Annually, the Swiss ITC sector exports goods and services worth over 10 billion Swiss francs. The Confederation and the cantons also promote cooperation between companies and universities. This creates good conditions for mobilising Swiss knowledge for the ITC sector as well.

Strengthening international Geneva

As the seat of international organisations, Geneva plays an important role in the field of internet governance and in other areas of digitalisation. These include the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), but also many foundations and think tanks such as the CyberPeace Institute, GIGA, the DiploFoundation, the GCSP or ICT4Peace. It is important to use the potential of the international Geneva for IC and thus at the same time to strengthen the role of the international Geneva, which is competed by other locations.

The role of Swiss ICT actors

As in other areas of IC, Switzerland can only achieve good results if it works together at different levels and with other actors and has its own expertise.

We therefore propose the following for the IC Strategy 2025 - 2028:

- **Establish bilateral ICT programmes in the area of cyber and digitalisation** (especially in the area of capacity building) and noticeably strengthen the digital components in traditional IC programmes.

- **Play an active role in selected international organisations.** Today, practically all international organisations are intensively involved with digitalisation (WHO, ILO, World Bank, UNHCR, etc.). It would be appropriate for Switzerland to raise its profile in a selected number of international organisations (World Bank, OECD, development banks, etc.). It would also be appropriate to advocate for sustainable development concerns in organisations without a development focus, for example for policies and measures against the digital divide within the framework of the ITU.

- **Strengthening the Confederation's own competences**. It is important that federal agencies dealing with IC have sufficient expertise themselves, both with experts in digitalisation and by building up knowledge among staff who primarily have a different technical orientation.

- **Partnerships.** Because it is not possible to build up the necessary expertise in all areas oneself, it makes sense to build up partnerships with specialised institutions in the area of digitalisation.

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