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Collaborative and digital tools to drive the ecological transition

Authors

Mathieu Saujot
Director, Lifestyles in transition

Damien Demailly
I4CE Deputy Director

Laura Brimont
Former Coordinator at IDDRI, Lifestyles in transition

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Can public authorities use collaborative economy and digital tools to support their sustainable development policies and to enhance their public services? This was the main focus of IDDRI's conference of June 23, 2016, entitled Sustainable Development 2.0: Can digital technologies fuel the ecological transition?, which brought together participants from different backgrounds to share their experience and discuss this question.

Digital technologies are a powerful tool for change in our societies and economies, as shown by collaborative economy (BlaBlaCar, LeBonCoin) and crowdsourcing (FixMyStreet) initiatives, which use these technologies to renew mobility services, access to goods and even citizen participation. Digital technologies provide not only a new context for planning the ecological transition, but also new opportunities to support this transition. But what lies beyond innovators' positive take on their impacts? What environmental and social benefits do digital technologies provide? Under what conditions and with what kind of state involvement? Based on three research projects conducted by IDDRI on collaborative peer-to-peer marketplaces, new collaborative mobility actors and urban crowdsourcing, the discussions during the conference provided some answers to these questions and produced several lessons.

Digital technologies and sustainable development

First, insights from the conference's international speakers (Germany, United Kingdom, Israel, South Korea) showed that although the models adopted and the ways digital technologies fuel public actors' practices may vary, questions about the linkages between digital technologies and sustainable development are the same, and generate real interest in experience sharing on the subject.

Challenges and conditions for the success of collaborative intiatives

Next, discussions between start-ups, researchers and the public authorities have helped to highlight a certain number of conditions to ensure peer-to-peer marketplaces, collaborative mobility solutions and new urban crowdsourcing tools support the ecological transition. With knowledge on these practices growing, the goal now is to disseminate these findings in order to go beyond guesswork and preconceived ideas, which can be an obstacle to collaboration. Moreover, this enhanced knowledge of the challenges and conditions for the success of collaborative initiatives progressively removes barriers for the public authorities to engage further in integrating and supporting new experiments.

A common framework for evaluating experiments?

As a matter of fact, the discussions revealed certain tensions: while entrepreneurs are frustrated about the way public actors work (inadequate knowledge, administrative obligations, slow procedures), the latter insist on maintaining high standards in order to guarantee the quality of public services, therefore justifying the need to proceed with caution on these solutions, which are still in the experimental stage. Establishing a common framework for evaluating experiments would help to support solutions that not only meet entrepreneurs' demands for innovation and flexibility, but also guarantee the support of the public authorities and of the people.

Local authorities and digital and collaborative stakeholders

Partnerships need to be developed between public actors and digital and collaborative stakeholders: in particular, local authorities play a pivotal role in steering these initiatives towards the ecological transition. The conference helped to identify specific avenues to ensure authorities contribute to the development of these new solutions: informing the public about them to make it easier for them to reach a critical mass of users; supporting experimentation tools to test solutions; fostering the local development of collaborative and participatory behaviour; and helping users to see their individual practices on these platforms as part of a collective ecological transition project. From this perspective, local authorities need to foster the readability and transparency of the full range of models and motivations of digital and collaborative stakeholders: the social and solidarity economy model *vs.* the mainstream economy; purely entrepreneurial motivations *vs.* environmental and social concerns, etc.

Local authorities, a key role to play

Local authorities thus have a key role to play, which implies transforming their approach by creating linkages between different fields of intervention (environment, participation, digital technologies, etc.) and supporting—including internally—a culture of innovation and collaboration with civil society. In this sense, the experiments shared by Paris and Seoul show that, albeit difficult, change and renewal of officials', agents' and technicians' practices can bring positive impacts by providing benefits to their own mission and tothe implementation of public action. In this perspective, opening data, adopting an experimentation process to enhance existing services, and opening spaces for citizen participation can all support a new public action paradigm. Public authorities at the national level also have a role to play, especially through their regulation and innovation support functions. However, innovators and local authorities are struggling to clearly define their expectations of the state, and are sometimes averse to state involvement. This is perhaps explained by the perception that conventional state tools are inflexible and unsuited to these new innovations, which trigger social and technical changes. It appears that internal changes at state level to better integrate digital technologies are a precondition for their positioning as a driving force for other stakeholders.

Dialogue between tehnophile digital community and green community

Finally, dialogue remains to be developed and strengthened between a historically technophile digital community, which is optimistic about the environmental impacts of digital solutions, and a green community that is often technophobic, or at least reluctant to admit the potential benefits of technical innovations. Although their value systems and backgrounds differ, the discussions during the conference also revealed the bridges that are beginning to be (re)built between these communities, as well as the desire to write a common story of progress, that of a twofold—digital and ecological—transition.

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