Commons Network

Idea Bank Intervention

Digital Commons

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Stimulate

Raising general awareness

The government can stimulate the use of Digital Commons (DC) through education, knowledge-building, and public campaigning. At the same time, it is important to clarify the costs and risks of closed (big tech) systems. A "white list" of programs or platforms could also serve this purpose by providing clear examples and criteria for what alternatives could be used to serve public values. Furthermore, early education on ICT, hacking, open source and AI could benefit school children and youth given the relevance of these topics. Through campaigns and storytelling, we can mobilize existing use-cases to inspire and create an ideal image or scenario for the future, making the transition to resilient autonomous systems tangible and achievable for more people. The same can be done within government agencies by organizing internal workshops and knowledge sessions.

- **Educational campaigns:** Launch initiatives to educate the public about the potential of the DC and risks of Big Tech.
- **White list programs:** Provide examples of tools that highlight the criteria of a program serving public values.
- **Education:** Include ICT, hacking and open source topics in school and college/university curricula to encourage future participation and awareness.
- **Develop vision:** Use success stories to build a compelling vision for the future of DC.
- **Bring insight and transparency** into the financial and societal costs of the current centralized, proprietary system.
- **Clarify risks and pain** of current (big tech) infrastructures such as opaque AI and algorithm training data.

Incubation and innovation

Innovation in the production and use of DC requires knowledge sharing and support, requiring incubation pathways. Specific GovTech incubation can play a role in providing the necessary knowledge and tools (i.e.: GovTech Validation Lab). The aim here is not to copy existing large technology platforms, but to develop functionality based on public values. Innovation should also focus on ease of transition, usability and interoperability with existing systems. Furthermore, it is important to see the DC approach as creating solutions for public issues in order to be mobilized and on-boarded into political agendas.

- **Incubation:** Set up labs to provide tools and knowledge for DC innovation.
- **Functional innovation:** Develop new functionalities depending on public values and policies.
- **Easy transition:** Inform on the importance of integration, use cases and interoperability.
- **Policy integration:** Advocate for DC inclusion in policy agendas. See it as a tool to create solutions.

Protect digital commons

There should also be legislative action to establish standards and structures that can serve to protect the DC from potential big corporate takeovers. Innovating new legal entities for the DC could be a good solution. Trust frameworks and proper licensing are also important. More importantly, enforcement of the regulations is necessary for the longevity and proper function of the DC. Finally, building a community around the DC will be important as it would protect values and create a safe space for innovation and collaboration. Implement maintenance strategies to ensure long-term functionality and reduce burn-out.

- **Legislative measures:** Implement laws and standards to protect and promote DC.
- **Legal Frameworks:** Develop new legal entities and Trust Frameworks to protectDC initiatives.
- **Community Building:** Encourage a strong community to keep DC values high and support innovation.
- **Maintenance strategies** are pivotal to keep DC programs functional and reduce the workload and burn-out on DC contributors.

Regulation and enforcement

Strong regulation and effective enforcement of existing regulations are needed to ensure a secure digital environment, privacy and fair competition (i.e.: "unfair competition" rules prohibiting the free provision of private services). This will help eliminate problematic Big Tech practices and create space for alternatives that do operate in line with public values. This will decrease dependence on Big Tech and ultimately reduce costs. Special enforcement agencies could be created to oversee the implementation of the regulations. At the same time, it would be crucial to develop conditions for procurement that are in line with digital independence and diverse offerings.

- **Strengthen autonomy:** Less room for Big Tech's problematic practices, create space for the development of infrastructures that serve public values.
- **Enforce regulations:** Thoroughly develop enforcement bodies that can monitor, evaluate and oversee the implementation and development of regulations.

- **Fine-tuning regulation** such as limiting or removing cheap or free services from Big Tech can shield public institutions such as education and healthcare from dependency on private services.
- **Procurement policies:** Develop new terms for procurement that commit to digital independence, open systems, and best practices.

Unburdening

Public and semi-public institutions such as schools and public broadcasters need attention and care to transition to and integrate digital commons systems. Big Tech is easy to use, well integrated and often inexpensive or "free" for educational institutions. Using other tools is much less convenient and (it seems) often more expensive. Therefore, it needs to be easier to access and adopt (DC) alternatives. Facilitation is needed in making it easier to integrate DC into existing systems and develop high-quality services to replace Big Tech. It would be sensible to organize hands-on training and support in transitions and implementation of digital tools. Developing a best practices guide for the DC could prove valuable in securing public values and eventually decoupling from Big Tech.

Make use of

Overcoming the network effect

It is necessary to overcome the network effect of Big Tech. It should be easier to invest in open source through subsidies and cost reduction. Need to make the reasons for switching to open source and DC obvious to the public. This not only makes things more transparent, but also serves to inform about the pros and cons of both closed and open. Offer financial support to government agencies that are willing to move to open source and DC. Develop legal tactics to overcome existing limitations for switching over. For example, there is a threshold in standard procurement that, once exceeded, provides an incentive to keep buying as much as possible—naturally, this needs revisiting. Need to make software modular and create the ability to buy software in smaller or simpler pieces. Finally, make use of interoperability, user-friendliness and ease of integration when designing DC to encourage implementation.

- **Investment incentives:** Offer grants and cost savings to encourage open source and DC adoption/investment.
- **Transparency:** Inform stakeholders about the pros and cons of switching, especially if it coincides with political needs and public values.

- **Modular procurement:** Develop legal tactics to enable modular software procurement such as buying software in smaller chunks.
- **Emphasize** interoperability, user-friendliness, and easy integration when it implementing DC.

Provide long-term support and funding

There needs to be adaptability of legal structures, enforcement power, knowledge and alignment of interests. Ensure that there is some form of enforcement that contracts and standards are followed. There also needs to be more coordination such as jointly organizing the procurement of software. For example, a governmental department could organize and fund a team to help maintain a set of open source components used by multiple critical organizations. This team could also help keep these open source software components compliant and usable within regulations. Forge strong partnerships between open source community and government to encourage positive exchange, innovation and longevity.

- **Adaptive legal structures:** Ensure that legal frameworks can adapt to support DC projects. Enforcement is necessary for implementation and long-term use.
- **Joint acquisitions:** Coordinate software purchases to maximize efficiency and resources. Maintain an open source inventory that complies with new regulations.
- **Procurement expertise:** Build expertise in open source procurement processes by forging partnerships between government and open source/DC parties.
- **Engaging culture:** Promote active participation through an engaging practice culture that goes beyond the use of DC. Develop genuine interest and commitment in the project of the DC.

Mobilize against closed software

There is a need for concrete anti-vendor lock rules that encourage the use of DC. Not only should these regulations be developed, but existing regulations should be enforced. Some degree of transparency about open standards is necessary to monitor whether or not they are followed.

In addition, including open standards in procurement contracts could further consolidate proper DC adoption. Conducting studies on the total cost of ownership (including end-of-life migration) of closed software as opposed to open software could also lead to some interesting results. It might also make sense to introduce fees for the use of closed software. Fundamentally, creating incentives for the use of DC and enforcing them would help more DC-based programs and platforms to be adopted.

- **Open standards:** Enforce transparency and compliance with open standards in procurement contracts.
- **Incentives and penalties:** Introduce fees or penalties for closed software use and incentives for DC adoption. Encourage adoption through the structure of contracts.

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Participate

Government involvement

Make use of government expertise to participate in the DC community. This can be done through avenues such as "buy-enough-to-influence" or, for example, by using the government as a steward for a DC initiative under a steward-ownership model. This would amount to providing advice and solutions supported by government experts and in line with the current policy agenda. In effect, this would safeguard government interests and ensure that development takes place in accordance with agreed-upon values that place the public interest at the forefront. A clear monitoring and evaluation program will also be crucial to maintain and enforce public values.

- **Board participation:** Take a permanent seat on the DC project board to set and influence direction. Ensure that public values and policies are part of the project direction.
- **Expertise utilization:** Leverage government expertise to actively participate and guide DC initiatives. Provide government-backed advice to ensure that the public interest is prioritized.
- **Monitoring programs:** Establish robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track project progress and results.

Develop DC-specific solutions, standards, protocols and norms

Leverage knowledge from different industries to develop expert solutions to DC-related issues. Code refactoring (code cleanup to make it more readable and scalable without sacrificing functionality) is an example of a proven solution that could work for scaling DC under a lean model. Other solutions could be legal, administrative or business-oriented. Process standards such as the NL Design System serve to inform, facilitate and formalize standards for DC development. Alternatively, the government could do well to facilitate donations and funds for DC initiatives. Something like a centralized database or easily accessible channels for funding different DC projects could make it easier to both donate and receive.

- **Cross-sector knowledge:** Leverage expertise from different sectors to create ad-hoc solutions to DC challenges.
- **Scalability strategies:** Strategies like code refactoring could hold improvements for better scalability, efficiency and reduce workload on employees and contributors.

- **Adopt and enforce standards:** Follow protocols such as those provided by the NL Design System to ensure quality and consistency. Generic Digital Infrastructure (GDI) is another good example of how we can deploy digital infrastructure standards for the development of public service-based DC. Again, pathways for standards enforcement should be created.
- **Facilitate funding:** Create centralized databases or accessible channels for project funding. Make it easier to secure or provide funding.

- **Multi-perspective approach:** Encourage collaboration between IT engineers, managers and other departments.
- **Commoning culture:** Promote a culture of shared goals and teamwork where different contributors are heard.
- **Continuous training:** Offer ongoing training and workshops to improve skills and knowledge.

Embrace multiple perspectives and areas of expertise

A cross-governmental collaboration is particularly important. This would mean bringing IT engineers and executives together to discuss possible solutions. In fact, this would not only produce better solutions but also foster a culture of commoning in which different perspectives and expertise work together to collaborate and contribute to the implementation of DC for the public good. This could be reinforced through further training and workshops that bring together members from different departments.

Develop internal culture and technical capacity in government

By bringing people from multiple departments together, we can develop a different culture of collaboration. Individuals who would otherwise rarely communicate with each other can work together to improve DC, cultivating an internal commons-thinking approach. In addition, this will ensure that the government has its own technical capacity reducing dependency on external services. This environment will be in close collaboration with talent incubators such as Digicampus to attract talent. Offer opportunities to STEM students through internships, e-learning, summer courses, and so on. Make it an attractive prospect to bring in new innovators and ensure they stay.

- **Internal collaboration:** Foster a collaborative environment by bringing together a diverse departmental team.
- **Talent incubators:** Work with talent incubators and organizations such as Digicampus to attract talent.
- **STEM opportunities:** Provide internships, e-learning and summer school opportunities for STEM students to participate in the culture and projects being worked on.
- **Retention strategies:** Create career prospects to retain new talent in DC initiatives. Provide an attractive internal work culture where collaboration is central.