# EU Digital policy 2024-2030 — civil society narratives

On June 26, 2023 a group of 30 European activists from civil society organizations and initiatives working on digital policy issues gathered for a workshop in Amsterdam to discuss policy narratives that can help us shape the European Union's digital policy agenda after the next European elections[1]. Participants who attended the meeting are working on a range of issues, from protecting fundamental rights, enabling access to knowledge and culture, promoting open-source software development and stewardship, fostering ecological transition, and promoting diversity and inclusion. This document summarizes some of the outcomes of the discussions during the workshop, with a focus on the policy narratives that emerged from the discussions. It was prepared by the Open Future with input from the Commons Network.

## 1. Context

The convening took place with the next European elections — that will be held at the end of May 2023 — in sight. With less than a year to go, now is the time to develop narratives and policy ideas for the next EU legislature. In this context, the discussions focused on narratives that can help us influence the policy priorities of EU legislators (both Parliament and European Commission) in the next five years after the upcoming elections. There is a common understanding that in order for civil society to be most effective in influencing the political agenda, a common set of narratives among a large group of civil society organizations can be helpful. This does not mean coordinating each and every policy issue, but looking for shared narratives and/or issues that can be supported by all (or most) of us.

## 2. Narratives

During the initial discussion, a wide variety of narratives were presented by the participants. There were two recurring themes that the group explored in more detail: The idea of the twin transitions and a call for a European Public Digital Infrastructure Fund.

### 1. Twin transitions

The narrative of the "twin transitions" served as a starting point for a discussion on the environmental impacts of digital technologies and their role in the green transition.

Most participants agreed that there is a need to reconceptualize the relationship between the digital and green transition in EU policies. They recognized that in the official narrative, the digital transition is presented as a mechanism to alleviate the climate crisis and "save us" from its consequences, while the detrimental environmental impacts of the development and use of digital technologies are being downplayed. The extraction of rare earth minerals required for the manufacture of digital devices, the energy consumption of data centers, and

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[1] The workshop was jointly organized by Commons Network, Open Future, Public Spaces and Waag Futurlab with support from Omidyar Network in conjunction with the Public Spaces Conference that took place in Amsterdam on 27 and 28 June.

the electronic waste generated by the rapid turnover of technological gadgets are not properly addressed.

As a result, the narrative of "twin transitions" mostly fuels tech solutionism.

In this context, the participants emphasized the importance of critically assessing and addressing the environmental impacts of digital technologies as part of the larger green transition. They agreed that green and digital transitions should not be treated as separate processes because nearly every aspect of our daily lives now involves a digital component.

The concept of commons has been identified as a thread running through the narratives surrounding the digital and green transitions. It encompasses the notion of shared resources and spaces belonging to all society members. It emphasizes the collective ownership and governance of resources for the benefit of the broader community.

The participants noted that a reference to the commons in a revised narrative about the digital and green transition could encourage people to consider the preservation of ecosystems, both natural and digital, as shared responsibilities, as well as recognize the need to engage diverse stakeholders beyond the "usual suspects" in each field.

Many participants expressed the belief that this critical rethinking of the "twin transition" should, in fact, start with acknowledging that the transitions are global in nature and that the processes occurring in Europe have an impact on other parts of the world and the people who live there. It should recognize the exploitative nature of the economy's dominant business models. These business models thrive because they make use of people and/or their data, as well as the environment and its resources.

The participants agreed that the EU should shift from being market-centric to embracing a society-centric perspective. This doesn't imply that businesses are entirely excluded from this shift; rather, the EU should extend support to EU businesses as long as they actively contribute to the establishment of an inclusive economy that benefits all individuals rather than just a select few. To achieve this, there is a need for proper incentives, such as for example favorable tax rules, that promote openness and collaboration rather than fostering competition.

Member states, the EU Commission, and MEPs from a large part of the political spectrum continue to believe that we can "innovate our way out" of the crisis, while in reality, to alleviate the current crises, they should focus less on innovation and more on maintenance and repair. In this context, there is a need to act at different levels of government: local, national, and global, as the green and digital transitions happen at each of these levels. More attention should be placed on including civic initiatives in public procurement; at all these levels, we need public-civic partnerships, as well as civic-civic partnerships.

The participants pointed out that the EU, in its policies, is unwilling to admit that the genuine transition towards a sustainable economy cannot be reconciled with the logic of infinite economic growth. On a more positive note, we are experiencing a wave of alternative approaches to the economy, which includes well-being economics, the ideas around

degrowth, donut economics, and feminist economics.  These should be more prominent in the revised narrative about the digital and green transition.

> **The way forward:** Given the points raised during the discussion, it is clear that the current "twin transition" policy narrative is inadequate. That being said, participants agreed that there is a need to link digital policy issues to the ecological transition and the need for a more sustainable economic system. A more meaningful narrative that connects the digital and green transitions should emphasize the structural impact of extraction and exploitation in both domains, point to the commons as a more sustainable alternative model for resource management, and emphasize the importance of maintenance rather than limitless innovation and growth.

## 2. European Public Digital Infrastructure Fund

A number of participants referred to the idea of a (European) Public Digital Infrastructure Fund. Such a fund has been proposed by NESTA/NGI Commons and Open Future, and elements of such a fund can be found in the Sovereign Tech Fund, which has been operating in Germany since last year, and in the proposals of the Digital Commons Working Group, which has been working under the French Presidency in the first half of 2022. The idea of such a fund is also linked to the plans to create a European Digital Infrastructure Consortium (EDIC) for the Digital Commons, which are currently being promoted by a number of Member States, including France and the Netherlands.

The establishment of a fund to invest in public digital infrastructure was identified by a number of participants as a current policy need, although there are considerable differences in the conceptualization of such a fund. Participants differed on the scope of the fund. While some participants limit the scope of the fund to specific types of infrastructure (such as open source software or more specific operating system development tools), others have a much broader idea (digital commons more broadly). For some participants, such a fund is linked to specific societal outcomes (such as advancing the green transition or supporting democratic governance of infrastructure), while others see the role of the fund as politically neutral.

Despite these different perceptions of the scope and ultimate goal of a Public Digital Infrastructure Fund, **there was a general consensus that a fund is needed to invest in digital public infrastructure that can provide alternatives to commercially operated digital services, that such a fund needs to operate at a significant scale (€100M+ on an annual basis), and that the establishment of such a fund should be a key demand for the policy agenda of the next European Commission.**

In the discussion, we identified a number of different narratives that can be used in advocating for such a fund. Each narrative appeals to different subsets of participants, but there was consensus that none of these narratives is incompatible with a collective effort to make such a fund a reality. These narratives are:

- **Digital sovereignty —** positioning the fund as an instrument that contributes to the policy objective of increasing Europe's digital sovereignty.
- **Complementary to the regulatory fight against Big Tech —** positioning the fund as a missing element in the regulatory fight against Big Tech: for regulatory efforts to be effective, it is necessary to invest in alternatives.
- **Democratic control of technology —** positioning the fund as a means to increase democratic control over technology by investing in public goods with democratic governance.
- **Media freedom —** positioning the fund as a means to strengthen Europe's media sector by reducing its dependence on commercial platforms.
- **Maintenance and stewardship —** positioning the fund as a means to ensure the maintenance and stewardship of public digital infrastructure (in a context where existing public support is focused on innovation).
- **Rely on infrastructure logic — p**ositioning the fund as a means to ensure that governments provide core infrastructure in the digital space, analogous to their role in the physical world.
- **Foundation for innovation —** positioning the fund as a means to provide the infrastructural foundations for innovation in the technology space.
- **Foundation for Capacity Building —** positioning the fund as a means to provide the infrastructural foundations for increasing the capacity of public institutions and public administrations to operate in the digital space.
- **Foundation for everything —** positioning the fund as a foundation for the digital transformation of society and the economy (possibly towards a different economic paradigm).
- **(Cyber) Security —** positioning the fund as a means to strengthen the cyber security of the infrastructural foundations of the digital transformation of society and the economy.

The above narratives in support of the fund will often overlap. More importantly, participants felt that all of these narratives are compatible with each other, so that promoting subsets of them would still be beneficial to actors invested in other narratives.

> **The way forward:** In light of the above, it seems beneficial to continue to push for the creation of a public digital infrastructure fund at the EU level, based on any combination of the above narratives, which should be seen as complementary. The call for a Public Digital Infrastructure Fund can either be articulated as such or integrated into broader platforms such as those being developed by some of the network organizations that participated in the convening.

## 3. A few other observations and action points

Aside from the aforementioned points, participants shared a number of other relevant insights and suggestions. This section highlights some of these additional observations and action points.

- Several participants pointed out that those who suffer the most because of the climate crisis or who are exploited in the course of digital transition frequently hold more radical views due to their lived experience. These communities should be given a bigger voice in policy discussions. The more radical viewpoints should serve as a catalyst for truly transformative change. Therefore, there is a need to create space and amplify in the policy debate the voices of those most affected by the negative consequences of the climate crisis and digital technologies, including stakeholders from outside of the EU
- Some participants stated that we have reached a tipping point where civil society organizations and activists must decide whether they are willing to work with corporations and conservative policymakers or whether such collaboration is unacceptable. This decision will have a significant impact on our future course of action.
- During the discussion, some participants noted that, just as societies will not "innovate" their way out of the crisis, neither will they "regulate" their way out of it. Rather than introducing new legislation that often fails to be implemented properly (as seen in the case of the GDPR), the EU should prioritize enforcing existing rules and closing legal loopholes.
- Finally, some participants suggested that adequate time and space must be allocated for imagining and cultivating alternative perspectives in order to envision a transformative path for technology and the collective future. Instead of uncritically accepting dominant narratives and conventional paradigms, civil society must embrace a mindset that encourages imaginative thinking and scrutiny. Only by allowing ourselves the freedom to explore diverse possibilities will civil society be able to transcend the constraints imposed by existing frameworks and envision truly innovative solutions.