Illustrative Concept Paper - Digiso: the Hubs for Civil Society Impact + Innovation

Tagline
Digiso: Fostering organic spaces for networked civil society impact and innovation: face2face + byte2byte.

Elevator Pitch
Digiso is a network of regional civil society innovation hubs that work to connect CSOs across countries, encourage physical and digital peer-to-peer learning, provide CSOs and CSO networks with a virtual and physical platform to access tools and technologies to address their most pressing issues, and amplify civil society voices around the world.

Digiso: The Challenge
Citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) are having a larger impact on the way that societies operate than ever before. In open societies, CSOs are key drivers of policy, providing new and fresh ideas to those in government and working together to solve shared challenges. Non-governmental groups work hand-in-hand with the media to increase transparency and strengthen democratic accountability. Activists and advocates in civil society engage citizens directly in an effort to give people a real voice in how they are governed. In countries undergoing transition, CSOs are critical players, exchanging experiences and best practices on issues from constitutional design to political party development – connecting within their countries as well as with counterparts across the world.

In the 21st Century, rapid and dramatic advances in information and communications technology (ICT) are fundamentally changing how people in societies interact, citizen-to-citizen and citizen-to-government. People are using new tools more efficiently (and old tools in new ways) to hold each other and their governments accountable. In Kenya, Indonesia, South Africa and elsewhere in the Global South, citizens are collectively demanding and receiving more and better information about how government delivers (or does not deliver) services to their citizens. They use ICT tools to organize around and monitor corruption, such as the “I Paid a Bribe” campaign movement that has moved from India to Kenya to Ukraine. They use technology to track voting fraud, inconsistencies in official fees, and parliamentarians’ business connections, as seen from Russia to South America.
As citizen voices have become more unified and amplified, there has been a backlash. Civil society is under siege in many countries throughout the world. In recent years, autocratic regimes, as well as governments early in the transition trajectory, have implemented a variety of laws and regulations designed to decrease the scope of activities for civil society organizations at home, and limit their ability to receive funding from abroad. The backlash has been intense and is growing. Non-governmental organizations have been labeled “foreign agents,” accused of treason, and subjected to restrictive registration requirements. Several countries have made it illegal to accept foreign funding for “political activities.” Evidence suggests that the backlash is contagious and growing in intensity across the globe. According to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, at least 50 new laws restricting freedoms of associations, peaceful assembly, and expression have been proposed in the last two years alone, with about 20 laws having been already enacted.

To combat this trend, President Obama hosted a high-level event on the margins of UNGA to galvanize international attention and action to support and defend civil society. This event kicked off an intensive effort to: 1) Improve the policy environment for civil society by strengthening countries’ adherence to international norms and promoting best practices for government and civil society engagement; 2) Coordinate multilateral, diplomatic pressure to roll back restrictions in constrained environments and prevent new restrictions from being enacted elsewhere; and 3) Identify new and innovative ways of providing technical, financial, and logistical support to civil society.

On the third line of effort, the President has challenged the USG to develop a new system to support civil society that would: (1) be multinational; (2) be owned and operated by civil society; (3) allow the U.S. Government to support civil society in open and closed environments; and 4) embody a new, more demand-driven way of doing business. This paper is the response to that challenge and lays out the vision for Digiso.

The very act of launching Digiso would send a positive, inspirational message to civil society worldwide about the international community’s commitment to help them develop and prosper. After many years of innovation, growing strength, and learning among those states seeking to constrain civil society, a major initiative to fight back from the community of democratic societies would create positive momentum around the world.

**Digiso: Gap Analysis**

There are over one hundred civil society networks working on democracy, human rights, and governance-related issues all over the world, alone. Many of these networks in turn belong to larger ‘super-networks’. Most regionally-focused networks are located in Eastern Europe and Africa. Eastern Europe has long played host to leading sector strengthening CSOs, including Intermediary Support Organizations (ISOs), some of which have evolved into centers of excellence to serve other CSOs, a nod to evidence of the important role that regional support centers can play in connecting CSOs.

Some networks focused on democracy, human rights, and governance-related thematic areas, have either: 1) not developed as many participatory networking bodies; or 2) have centralized around a few
key transnational CSO networks. The latter case would apply to CSO networks that represent large transnational movements and issue-based coalitions, such as LGBT and Disabled Person Organization (DPO) networks. These networks have centralized their global supporters around a few groups with extensive reach. It is also important to note that some of these issue-based networks have mandates born out of global and regional organization summits (e.g. UN, EU, ASEAN, OAS); their member outreach is targeted and designed to facilitate broader engagement with the funding organization. As a result, they tend to have funding streams that are highly dependent on international donor agencies.

Although numerous types of thematic, national, and regional networks exist, there remains ample room in their efficacy of amplifying civil society capacity and/or galvanizing groups and individuals around enhancing the overall civil society enabling environment.

As both Internet and Mobile penetration rates grow exponentially, we've also taken a concerted look at the development of innovation labs that are being created around the globe, from Nairobi to Mexico City, from Lagos to Phnom Penh, fueled by the ever-growing access to Internet and Mobile technologies. While most of these technology-focused innovation labs are focused on business incubation and revenue generating-applications, a few are delving into efforts to solve society’s toughest problems in new ways. A few innovation labs are focused on various topics like media, business, social entrepreneurship, and technology, and are spaces with sets of protocols for engaging young people, technologists, and the private sector to create an ecosystem to support catalytic open source development.

In the last several decades, tens of dozens of countries have made the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, and yet the experiences of these newer democracies are not well known by their peers in other new democracies or their want-to-be peers in autocracies. International learning that occurred about non-governmental election monitoring (from the Philippines to Chile to Serbia to Ukraine to Russia) is a fantastic success story brought about by transnational networking. But there are literally tens of thousands of civil society leaders struggling with shared challenges around the world every day. Facilitating learning between civil society across regions -- and globally, both in open and close spaces, is a core vision of Digiso.

Many civil society networks exist. Some socially-driven innovation labs exist. But there is a gap between them, a gap that is impeding networks from amplifying civil society voices on a regional and global level. This gap is a result of a lack of dedicated funding and emphasis on the process of innovatively fostering robust networks of civil society organizations, the ability for civil society to have a suprastructure to provide the tools, techniques, trainings, etc., that lead to more efficient and effective work. It is this gap that Digiso intends to fill. Not by creating a new network, but by amplifying the advocacy efforts of existing networks and voices on the important roles that civil society plays worldwide.

**Digiso: Objectives**

- Establish a network of innovative regional civil society centers that focus on providing civil society organizations of all types the necessary space, tools, technology, and training to enhance their role in society.
- Support CSOs and CSO networks to operate smartly and more efficiently, be better connected to their constituents, and to connect their work to the concerns of everyday people.
- Connect CSOs face2face and byte2byte across similar and different thematic areas and geographic boundaries, and with non-traditional groups and partners.
- Enhance CSOs’ effectiveness through innovation: new and/or enhanced technology and tools, processes, and connections to plan, operate, fundraise, and communicate.
- Catalyze CSOs’ momentum to foster a strong enabling environment for civil society.

**Digiso: Setup**

**Structure**

*Note: This paper does not illustrate all of the nuts and bolts of each regional Digiso hub, how it will operate, where exactly it will operate, how the governance structure will be comprised, etc. Each of these items will need to be considered collaboratively among all partners.*

To be successful, Digiso will need to have a range of founding, core partners who will contribute value to the whole (at the regional or at the international level). Core partners could include governments, civil society networks, academia, the private sector, and other donors. Together, these partners will design, conceptualize, fundraise for, establish, and launch Digiso. Some partners may provide resources like physical building space, financial resources, convening power, or technical assistance.

Each regional Digiso hub will be different, as it will be established to address the needs of civil society in the region. Some Digiso hubs may be literally built from the ground up, or ‘implemented’ by a traditional partner, while others may be able to support existing work of coordinating CSOs, and ‘implemented’ by local organizations. Before implementation begins, each Digiso hub will create guiding principles to ensure that each Digiso hub is procedurally able to create the most robust, responsive, and adaptive program possible (see Menu options below).

In an effort to ensure that the process undertaken to develop each Digiso hub's governance structure and guiding principles result in the best outcome possible, we will seek the assistance and guidance of a design firm that specializes in human-centered design principles.

**Geographic Reach -- International and Regional**

The vision for Digiso is to have one or more Hubs in every region of the world, with virtual connective tissue (“the platform”) linking the Hubs together.

Recognizing that Hubs at the regional level are even a step removed from local organizations, each Digiso hub will place significant resources into expanding reach to and from the regional areas served, to ensure reach to CSOs outside of capital cities.
At the international level, global and cross-regional peer-to-peer learning is also central. It is likely that there will be a need for some type of international platform that can serve as a global resource for the regional hubs, and possibly a platform for global advocacy and information-sharing and coordinating global or multi-regional events. It is not the vision of Digiso to create a new network. Rather, it is the vision that the establishment of multiple regional Digiso hubs that share the same founding principles will lead organically to an international Digiso network, a platform that will allow interaction between regional Digiso hubs, civil society organizations, and individuals to expand possibilities for learning, sharing, capacity and confidence building.

Thematic Reach
Digiso will focus fundamentally on fostering enabling environments to enhance civil society impact and innovation. Civil society is defined broadly as the sector in society that gives the individual and the group a voice, and works on behalf of that voice to improve society for all. This includes traditional NGOs, associations, and other types of non-profit organizations, and unions or syndicates, as well as activists, social movements, and media support organizations.

Digiso is not intended to replace current international development programming efforts or activities surrounding civil society capacity building, or existing national, regional, or international civil society networks -- in fact, we know that we need more country-level support to CSOs. Digiso will work to amplify current activities of programs and networks by providing the necessary resources - from physical space, to strategy assistance, and beyond. Digiso can be thought of as an innovative individual, organizational, institutional, and network support center.

A significant focus will be placed on bridging the gap between capital-based, large, common aid recipient organizations and non-traditional and non-urban organizations. A major intent of Digiso is to empower a greater number of local CSOs and marginalized voices.

Face2Face + Byte2Byte
Information and communications technologies (ICTs) give civil society organizations a new panoply of options to access information, increase connections, and build/strengthen constituencies, while ushering in new forms of organizing, advocacy, and accountability. As access to these tools has grown exponentially, and are now an increasing reality of how civil society works effectively, Digiso will pay special attention to the use and integration of technology and innovative approaches in all of its work. For example, Digiso will capitalize on innovations in ICTs to enable the development and/or refinement of technology tools, virtual learning, and connections.

In parallel, Digiso is very cognizant that technology is only a tool – it is people who solve problems. A core component of success rests in the ability of individuals and groups to meet in person, bond, interact, and collaborate. This will be facilitated via various peer-to-peer trainings, meet-ups, study/experience tours, etc. Groups will be able to strengthen and extend these bonds and relationships while learning new skills virtually, via online tools, social media networking, and an e-learning platform.
Learning
A crucial component to the success of Digiso is continual learning. As Digiso is an adaptive and flexible programming mechanism, special attention will be placed on learning from the adaptive programming process, as well as the programmatic elements and activities. Setting up an M&E framework to measure results and success and to create learning feedback loops will be a critical part of the co-creation phase.

Duration, Budget, Sustainability
A medium- to long-term engagement is required for any meaningful impact. Digiso will be established for ten years. This will allow each Digiso hub to have time to launch, expand, and establish roots in the region.

As a critical part of setup, each Digiso hub (and the international platform) will consider ideas for revenue generation. Considering sustainability issues will be part of the initial co-creation design process. There are many creative options, such as buying space for long-term sustainability, renting out Digiso space to generate revenue, establishing fee-for-service trainings. etc. The long term goal for each Digiso hub, after being well-ensconced as a resource center in the region, is that it will continue to attract the requisite level of funding from entities like donors, governments, private companies to continue operations.

Long-term sustainability of CSOs is also a major goal of Digiso. Part of each Digiso menu will be focused on programs to help CSOs develop their own sustainability plans, catalyzing more community philanthropy, experimenting with crowdfunding and other innovative fundraising techniques.

Digiso: The Program Menu
Digiso will offer a menu of services to support, connect, innovate, and catalyze the space for civil society impact and innovation. Below is an illustrative chart of possible interventions, initiatives, and instances that Digiso may offer. Each regional Digiso hub will have different core programming, based on the market needs of regional CSOs, but will be able to share across geographic and thematic boundaries to other Digiso hubs and other labs/centers/etc. It is not intended that each Digiso hub would have the ability to focus on each of the illustrative menu items; the actual programming will be catered to the appropriate needs.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support: Concierge</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Custom Services</th>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Incubate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organize crowdsourced bootcamp, workshop, or training modules on topics like history of CSOs, democracy, grant writing, project management, social media, etc.</td>
<td>Construct a package of custom services to promising or endangered organizations that could include any of Digiso’s menu items.</td>
<td>Coordinate, conduct and distribute research, assessments, evaluations on topics related to Civil Society Impact and Innovation.</td>
<td>Provide various types of grants and assistance to groups to seed + incubate projects and ideas.</td>
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<td>Connect: Marketplace</td>
<td>Atelier</td>
<td>Network</td>
<td>Digital Storefronts</td>
<td>Experience Summits</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Physical and virtual space for activities, trainings, mentoring, courses, events, chats, etc.</td>
<td>Connections between and among groups, academics, IOs, governments, donors, private sector, on national, regional and international basis.</td>
<td>Creation, curation and management of online marketplaces focused on services (Yelp), crowdfunding (Indigogo), proposals, training, etc.</td>
<td>Regional and international curated ‘tradeshows’ focused on all-things civil society.</td>
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<td>Innovate: DigiPlex</td>
<td>Tech Center</td>
<td>E-Learning</td>
<td>Portal</td>
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<td>Develop, enhance, and act as a clearinghouse for old and new tech hardware and software tools that enable groups to be more efficient, robust, and safe.</td>
<td>Robust online synchronous and asynchronous learning platforms, connecting to university partners, MOOC, etc.</td>
<td>One-stop information portal of inquiry and exploration through moderated online forums, hosted blogs, etc.</td>
<td>Harness the growing movement for open, transparent data through enhancing groups’ ability to understand, mash-up, curate, broker, and infomediate data.</td>
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<td>Catalyze: Sparkplug</td>
<td>Exchanges</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Expertships</td>
<td>Creative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Facilitate and nurture exchanges, fellowships and residencies between groups and at Digiso</td>
<td>Civil society advocacy focused on traditional advocacy, organizing, and sensitization to broaden the current and future enabling environment.</td>
<td>Experts in the areas of fundraising, PR, strategy, technology, communications, campaigns, etc., from the world’s top firms, work in tandem with groups on discrete projects.</td>
<td>Catalyze action through resources in a variety of media – art, music, etc., - to catalyze groups’ creative actions.</td>
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