

➔ ESTONIA: TIGER LEAP BRINGS THE BENEFITS OF ICT TO EVERYONE

In a Nutshell

The Estonian government has pursued a policy of integrating ICT into the everyday life of Estonians as well as using it to promote socioeconomic development and good governance. As a result, Estonia has achieved a high level of e-readiness over a short time, with one of the best rates of public access in Europe.

These achievements stem from partnerships developed between local and international stakeholders, the innovative use of foundations to provide a legal and institutional framework, and a strong national vision to harness the power of ICT for national development. In this context, donors have played a catalysing role, offering technical guidance and financial assistance to a locally driven process.

The Story

Estonia's connection to the wired world began with an initial focus on introducing ICT to the education sector through the now well-reputed "Tiger Leap" programme. Its success provided the impetus to extend integration to other sectors and walks of life.

Launched in 1996, Tiger Leap set out to develop IT infrastructure in schools, including Internet connections; help teachers acquire basic computer skills and learn to use ICT in subject teaching; support the updating of curricula and promote learning skills; and encourage the creation of Estonia-specific and Estonian language software. The programme eventually trained 10,900 out of the 17,000 teachers in Estonia; supplied 61 different educational software programmes to schools, including 39 in Estonian; and supported 172 development and training initiatives through project competitions.

At the beginning, the Tiger Leap Foundation was established to manage the programme, administering \$13.5 million in resources from 1997 to 2002. Led by the Ministry of Education, its co-founders included ten private companies, an association of Estonian computer firms and 26 individuals.

In the wake of the success of the education project, the government invited UNDP to prepare a discussion paper on ICT as a socioeconomic catalyst, hoping to widen awareness and inspire public discussion that would ultimately result in policy development. For UNDP, this served as a timely upstream complement to an earlier and more downstream Internet project, which included setting up a public email server and the first four Internet access points in Estonia, three of which were in rural areas of Estonia's second largest island.

Five respected public figures from a variety of backgrounds prepared the discussion paper, entitled "The Estonian Tiger Leaps into the 21st Century". It recommended:

- Access for everyone, with Estonia aiming to become the first country where logging on to the Internet is a human right
- Creation of a total overall learning environment, with ICT skills as one cornerstone, so as to increase capacity and capabilities across the board
- Full virtualization of the public sector

The Tiger Leap Foundation thereafter initiated two ICT road shows in 1998 and 1999, known as the “Tiger Tours”. In various towns and villages, huge tents were raised over 100 or so Internet-connected computers, with public access and hands-on training. Core funding was provided by the Estonian Union Bank; Microlink, a home start-up computer company that now spans the Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania markets and beyond; and the Estonian Telephone Company. Other sponsors included IT companies, several media firms, UNDP, the Soros Foundation and local governments.

All sides benefited. The bank netted new e-banking customers; Microlink probably sold more home computers; and the Estonian Telephone Company signed up people for Internet service packages. Rural and town residents crossed a knowledge gap. Gaining first-hand experience and new bits of information, they learned that everyday government, banking or self-education could be conducted via public access points.

Meanwhile, the government reaped rewards that continue to unfold. The sensitization of the wider population and imparting of skills helped create an audience eager to take advantage of the launch of the government’s e-governance efforts. Examples include a direct democracy citizen portal; the e-Tax Board project, which provides a simple way to e-manage individual tax accounts and assists government receipt of taxes; steps taken towards offering Internet voting for the 2005 elections; and paperless government Cabinet sessions.

Countless other ICT projects and activities have sprung from the momentum and interest generated by the Tiger Leap programme. The ICT private sector has flourished, a college dedicated to IT has been founded, and a legal and regulatory framework now guides further development.

Results and Critical Factors

Estonia’s relatively high level of e-readiness has emerged over a short time. Approximately 500 public access Internet points dot the country, with 36 per 100,000 persons. In 2002, some 40 percent of Estonians considered themselves Internet users, with a similar proportion conducting their daily banking via the Web. Through the e-governance initiative, the government has made itself more accessible, participatory and transparent. These developments in turn have made Estonia more competitive internationally, with its expertise attracting attention. Future challenges now include ensuring sustainability and maintaining momentum to garner additional benefits.

Estonia's achievements can be attributed to:

- Partnerships developed between local and international stakeholders; the part played by the government in proactively bringing different interest groups together; and the innovative use of foundations to manage the partnerships
- A strong national vision to harness the powers of ICT for national development, and a willingness among other local actors, including the private sector, to invest in the process
- The catalysing role of donors, who offered technical guidance and financial assistance at strategically important times

Further information

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The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Robert Juhkam, UNDP.