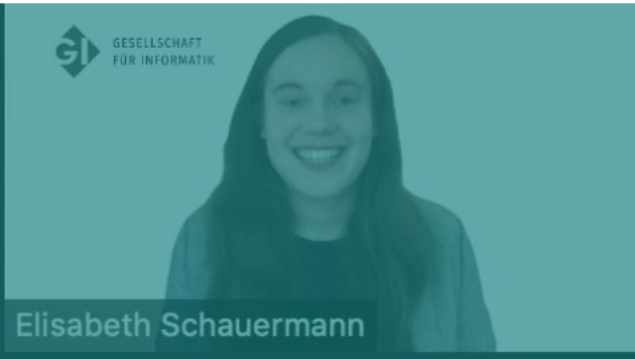


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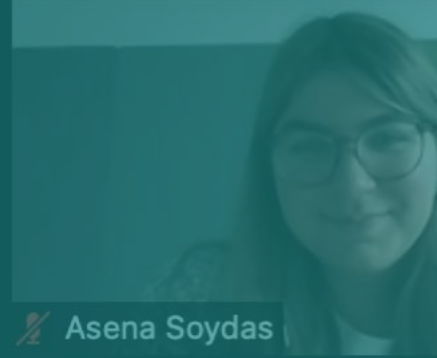


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YouthxPolicyMakers

Access & Accessibility

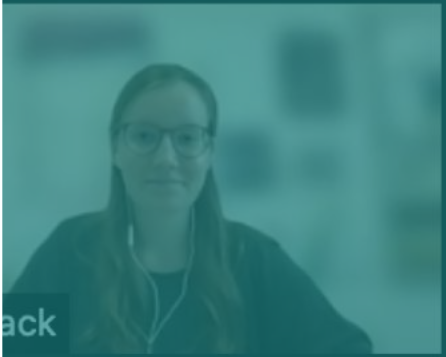
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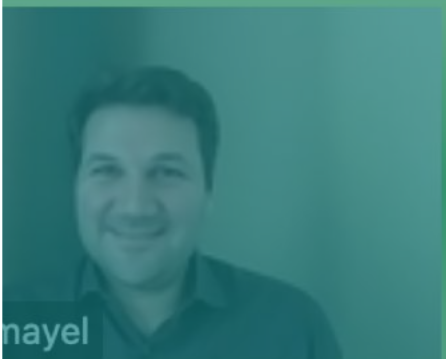
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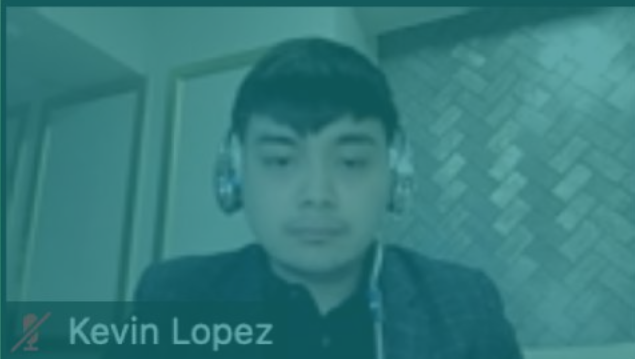
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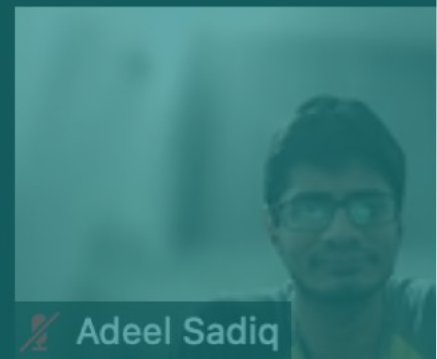
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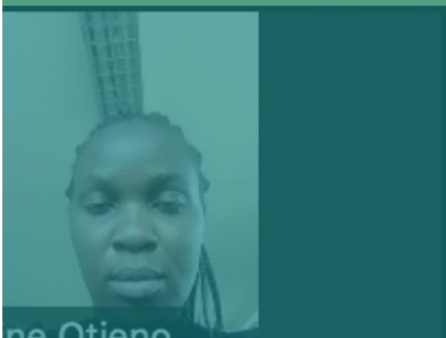
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Access and Accessibility

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Introduction

With the world steadily narrowing the gap in access to Internet connectivity, there are still very pertinent and necessary discussions about what these imply in terms of access and accessibility.¹ While the majority of the globe has been witnessing the benefits of gaining access to the Internet and being more connected to one another, what does it mean to connect the next billion? How can we also ensure that access and accessibility benefits all? The discussion regarding access and accessibility has raised awareness about the importance of focusing greater attention on addressing barriers such as infrastructure, network coverage, environmental impact and access to education and digital literacy skills.²

Current status of policy debates and processes

The Internet offers people from various backgrounds, ethnicities and geographical locations the opportunity for connection. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered the underlying issues the advancement of digitization has brought about. Aside from connectivity, it has equally exacerbated the structural inequalities and further increased the digital divide.³ Over the past several years, the global digital policy debate has largely been based on improving technology infrastructure. More recently the question of meaningful access has allowed for a more in-depth and inclusive debate on what access really means. There is a growing call for groups who were previously excluded to participate in policy discussion, formulation and implementation to create a more inclusive space for discourse in issues of Internet governance, access and accessibility.⁴

footnotes

1 Overcoming the Digital Divide: What Needs to Happen? <<https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs181/projects/digital-divide/start.html>>

2 Internet Governance Forum. 2018. IGF 2018 DIGITAL INCLUSION & ACCESSIBILITY | Internet Governance Forum (intgovforum.org) <<https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/igf-2018-digital-inclusion-accessibility>>

3 Association for Progressive Communication. 2021. Why inclusive, transparent and accessible global digital governance is more crucial than ever | Association for Progressive Communications <<https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/why-inclusive-transparent-and-accessible-global-digital-governance-more-crucial-ever>>

4 Public policy and digital technologies. 2021 . The role of National Human Rights Institutions in achieving policy coherence. <<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Business/B-Tech/b-tech-blog-policy-coherence-nhris-tech.pdf>>



Along with the existing high volumes of data, the rate at which information is generated, the speed with which it is processed and the sophistication with which algorithms are designed all contribute to the impression that we are in the midst of the fourth industrial revolution. While we celebrate these technological and innovative advancements, recent research indicates that an estimated 40% of the world's population remains unconnected to the Internet and the digital world.⁵ This research indicates that the countries in the southern hemisphere, also known as developing countries or the Global South, have the highest percentages of people without Internet access. This is due to restrictions in basic Internet infrastructure, limited access to Internet devices and data, which results in Internet connectivity shortages and high data subscription rates.⁶ These challenges are not just theoretical, as evidenced by Global South participants' poor participation rates in international engagements due to sporadic access and others inability to attend entirely due to insufficient connectivity and networks.

For instance, during the second roundtable session focusing on the topic of access and accessibility, the policy maker from Togo was prevented from fully participating in the session due to video and audio delays. The same difficulty affects many children across the Global South. Many groups in the developing world still lack access to educational materials in the

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6 Connecting for Inclusion: Broadband Access for All <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/digitaldevelopment/brief/connecting-for-inclusion-broadband-access-for-all>>

majority of, if not all, southeastern countries, as well as some neglected or disadvantaged sections of the northern hemisphere. We believe this situation creates a significant accessibility issue, as millions, if not billions, of young people over the globe continue to encounter their first device in elementary/middle school computer laboratories. Additionally, accessibility requires a unique technological design—ICT products and services should be made to be inclusive of persons with disabilities (PWDs).⁷ In line with connecting the next billion, it is integral to include underrepresented groups in the current discourse in Internet access and accessibility. Furthermore, the cycle of lack and absence of access in the Global South can be further triggered by the lack of mitigating the underrepresentation of groups on various levels of discourse formation and policy recommendation of the pertinent issues at hand.

Lessons and positions resulting from the workshop stage

As representatives of the youth, we are becoming increasingly aware of the need for progressive and institutional transformation in order to address the present complex issues of Internet governance, access and accessibility challenges at all scales. Core institutions and groups of forward-thinking enterprises, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), governments and academic institutions as well as other relevant stakeholders will need to form a collaborative structure to streamline policy and coordinate with one another in ensuring that advocacy of access and accessibility is implemented and translated into their basic operations. While there may be various interests at play, leaders coming from this diverse group of actors must find a viable structure to ensure sustainable policy making in access and accessibility in committing to connecting the next billion.

We are primarily concerned with the present temperament of numerous domains on the Internet. There is an apparent obliviousness and even disregard for the inextricable link of

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⁷ Internet Governance Forum. 2018. IGF 2018 DIGITAL INCLUSION & ACCESSIBILITY | Internet Governance Forum (intgovforum.org) <<http://www.inclusive-education.org/sites/default/files/uploads/booklets/>

access and accessibility to one another and in all our lives. As the increasingly connected global society builds infrastructure for the sole purpose of connectivity, we should always be cognizant of building a global digital society that fosters opportunities for equal and meaningful participation.⁸ It is time for all concerned stakeholders to pivot to transformational Internet policy in issues of access and accessibility through expanding to underrepresented groups. The digital access of the PWD community must be considered in the debates of these policies as well as the innovation of devices to be used by society. By using this critical thread as a focus point of our debate, we emphasise the necessity of a multi-stakeholder strategy that brings together youth, public, business, and government organisations to collaborate on Internet governance access and accessibility. Additionally, we believe that a bottom-up strategy will better foster collaboration across projects, like community network infrastructures, operating at all levels of Internet governance, whether large or small.

Discussion with policy makers

It was critical to have a good understanding of basic technological principles in order to collectively appreciate Internet governance challenges during the roundtable discussion. We all acknowledged that the Internet is a communication network comprising millions of networks, each of which is owned and maintained by a different stakeholder. It connects various networks and makes the general exchange of information easier. Hundreds of stakeholders, including governments, international organizations, businesses and technical committees, have been involved in the design and regulation of the Internet. The end-to-end principle, a key notion in Internet design, should be emphasized. Instead of placing intelligence at the network's core, the Internet places it at its periphery.⁹ In this respect, the pandemic has played a unique role in both boosting the need for access and emphasizing the relevance of access concerns to

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⁸ GIE_Webinar_Booklet_10.pdf>lobal Public Inclusive Infrastructure. 2021. <https://gpii.net/about>

⁹ Deconstructing Internet Governance.2004 .International telecommunications Union <https://www.itu.int/osg/spu/forum/intgov04/contributions/deconstructing-internet-governance-ITU-Feb26-27-2004.html#note_end2end>



Left, Manal Ismail, Chief Expert of Internet Policies at the NTRA of Egypt; middle, Nadim Gemayel, founder of Achrafieh 2020 and former member and Chairman of the ICT Committee of the Lebanese Parliament; right, Vincent Ameganvi, member of the Togolese parliament

governments. Partnerships between the public and commercial sectors were one of the discussed approaches to involve the business sector in access improvement.¹⁰

With that said, we came to an agreement and understanding of several limitations of Internet access in certain parts of the Global North, but the discussion was more focused on Global South Internet and accessibilities (also known as the developing world) challenges. Interestingly, the policy makers in the second round table discussion made a specific emphasis on the inequalities of access by gender and age, highlighting the importance of closing the gap in an effort to solve the injustices.

As representatives of the youth, we recognize that certain parts of the Global South are beginning to gravitate toward efforts aimed at addressing the complicated difficulties of Internet availability and accessibility. For example, in Egypt, service providers and the government collaborated to improve accessibility. Concurrently, considerations like data security and privacy should not be overlooked, especially as such concerns can impede access. Local efforts and bottom-up approaches were also encouraged to help the government understand innovation in a range of situations. We must, however, continue to encourage and

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¹⁰ Digital Technologies and the COVID19 pandemic: Beyond the immediate response to the outbreak of COVID-19
<https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/eng_briefing_technology_final_x.pdf>

support efforts of this nature to achieve our desired goals.¹¹

Over half of the globe is now online, this is due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a high demand to adapt to a rapidly changing world, but many people lack the quality of access required to exploit the Internet's most powerful features, such as online learning, video streaming and telemedicine. As youth, we recognise the need for raising the standard for Internet access and strive for meaningful connectivity for everybody. There is evidence that digital illiteracy restricts meaningful access; therefore, connecting the next billion people must go beyond technical execution. Finally, all stakeholders present in the discussion agreed that multistakeholder approaches that incorporate multiple groups, such as youth and business, are critical, especially in a strategy that includes the needs of the next billion people. As a result, we must continue our research into the best methods to improve these techniques and gain the trust needed to drive the results that all stakeholders envision.

Positions and demands

Following extensive roundtable discussions with high-level policy makers from around the world on October 21, 2021.

1. We, YouthxPolicyMakers Ambassadors, proclaimed our strong commitment to scaling worldwide efforts to promote an inclusive, sustainable, and accessible Internet community, and in this regard:

1.1. All heads of state shall recognize that universal Internet access and accessibility is a human right, a facilitator of socio-economic development and a necessary foundation of a just society.

footnotes

11 IGF proves the value of bottom-up, Multi-stakeholder model in cyberspace policy-making <<https://www.microsoft.com/security/blog/2018/01/29/igf-proves-the-value-of-bottom-up-multi-stakeholder-model-in-cyberspace-policy-making/>>

12 Coronavirus has exposed the digital divide like never before: Among the many inequalities exposed by COVID-19 <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-digital-divide-internet-data-broadband-mobile/>>

1.2. We affirm The UN General Assembly to look into binding resolutions that “declare Internet access a human right.” And we believe it is time for the assembly to start addressing governmental responsibility to provide access to all.

2. We, YouthxPolicyMakers, recognize the importance of striving towards high-quality universal Internet access and accessibility. COVID-19 has revealed the enormous inadequacies that exist between private and public Internet networks; differences that have signified higher exclusion rates for the most vulnerable populations. Therefore:

2.1. We recognize the imperative to reduce the existing gaps by improving Internet access and accessibility to achieve high-quality universal Internet coverage

2.2. We urge that universal Internet access and accessibility is guaranteed for everyone, including the most vulnerable groups.

2.3. All heads of state should commit to fostering a culture of a global citizenry that values the importance of Internet access and accessibility for the social and economic well-being of all peoples.

2.4. All heads of state shall undertake policies that address the diversity of social groups, including those experiencing poverty, resource allocation, engagement with grassroots social organisations, and the implementation of efficient Internet governance systems.

2.5. We shall concentrate on linear initiatives that will prioritise the most vulnerable groups in extreme poverty who lack access to essential amenities in order to assist communities in solving Internet access and accessibility.

2.6. We advocate for the building of resilient Internet infrastructure to stimulate economic growth in remote locations around the world by building systems that facilitate inclusive and sustainable industrial development through creative techniques.

2.7. All heads of state should pledge to develop a global civic culture that recognises the critical role of access and accessibility of the Internet in ensuring the social and economic well-being of all peoples.

2.8. All heads of state shall develop policies that address the diversity of social groups, taking into account poverty-stricken communities, building of Internet infrastructure, engagement with grassroots social groups, and the implementation of effective Internet governance systems.

2.9. All heads of state shall concentrate on linear systems that prioritise the most vulnerable populations living in extreme poverty and without access to essential services in order to assist communities in rising out of poverty.

2.10. We advocate for the creation of resilient Internet infrastructure to stimulate economic growth in remote locations around the world by building systems that facilitate inclusive and sustainable industrial development through creative techniques.

3. As YouthxPolicyMakers Ambassadors, we recognise the efforts made over the years to address the complexity of environmental and climate change, which touch every country on every continent. Encouraging technologies that help minimise carbon emissions and energy consumption are examples of strengthening the circular economy for digital devices. Developing and implementing adequate governance frameworks that enable the sharing and re-use of environmental data is crucial as we expand Internet access and accessibility in underserved areas worldwide. As part of the Internet governance and digital policy sphere, more emphasis needs to be put on boosting environmental education and awareness. As a result:

3.1. Immediate global action is required to address climate change and its repercussions in Internet digital policy in order to realise our aim of changing to a circular economy.

3.2. All heads of state must ensure that Internet access and accessibility go hand in hand with greening the Internet. Furthermore, greening the Internet must be acknowledged as a basic step that goes with Internet access and accessibility.

3.3. All governments must strive to provide everyone with inexpensive, dependable, and long-term Internet access.

3.4. All heads of state must reaffirm their commitment to the Paris Agreement by enacting measures to reduce air, water, and land pollution. Furthermore, civil society will be urged to consume resources responsibly, while corporations operating within member states will be forced to implement sustainable production, resource exploitation, and waste management policies. Finally, in the post-COVID-19 age, we will implement the six climate-positive steps in rebuilding member state economies.

4. All member states should commit to a step-by-step plan with clear indicators for when multilateral institutions should intervene in a member state's rule and order in order to protect and preserve human rights.

4.1. Finally, all heads of state must establish mechanisms to track the progress of this policy paper implementation and assess its impact.

