

Will Multilateral Governance of Digital Technology Close the Digital Divide?

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Organised by: Civil Society Financing for Development (FfD) Group, Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration (ETC Group), Society for International Development (SID), Major Group on Children and Youth (MGCY)

Full transcript

[00:00:13] Pooja Rangaprasad: Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening, everyone. My name is Pooja Rangaprasad, and I will be moderating the panel today. Will multilateral governance of digital technology close the digital divide? I'm based in India, and I work with Society for International Development. We coordinate the Civil Society Financing for Development Group, which is an open platform of organizations and network that are engaged in the FfD process and its interrelated domains. This side event is being co-organized along with our colleagues from Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration (ETC group) and Major Group on Children and Youth (MGCY).

For those who may not know the history, the Science Technology Innovation Forum is actually a component of the Technology Facilitation Mechanism, which was established in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the third FfD conference in 2015. This was in fact pushed by developing countries, by G77 at the time, and really was one of the only concrete decisions that came out of the Addis conference in favor of G77. They lost many battles, unfortunately, in 2015, but the technology facilitation mechanism was something they pushed really strongly.

Now a few years down the line, it's a bit unfortunate that the STI forum is actually quite disconnected from both the FfD forum as well as the ECOSOC Commission on science, technology, and development. The technology conversation within the UN is happening in fairly disconnected and disparate spaces. The lack of progress over the years on technology governance, technology assessments, and technology transfer is now, of course, being exposed by this global pandemic.

The pandemic has exposed the extent as well as exacerbated the digital divide, which was already very wide, between the North and the South, between men and women, and between urban and rural communities within countries. There's of course a lot of talk of the benefits and promises of digital technologies and the solutions that they provide to the development challenges. They, of course, are very highly concentrated in the North and in certain urban centers of the South while the rest of the world struggles.

Of course, with the pandemic now, the digital gap only widens and worsens. On the other side of things, we also have to confront the many unpleasant and worrying consequences around digitalization from violation of basic rights, especially women, girls, and young people, racial and gender discrimination, breach of privacy, political repression, and the disproportionate power and influence of technology platforms and companies.

While a few countries in the North have attempted to address some of these issues, putting in place regulations, sanctions, and so on, countries in the South are continuing to grapple with how to deal with issues that are essentially trans-boundary by nature, but within the national jurisdiction. Amid all of these very disparate efforts at the global and national levels, there remains a huge vacuum in governance of digital technologies that needs to be addressed with a sense of urgency to protect human rights, and of course, to contribute to the vision of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development and leaving no one behind.

To help us unpack all of these issues, we have a wonderful panel with us today. Our first speaker will be Ambassador Perks Ligoya who is the permanent representative of Malawi to the UN, and Malawi is also the chair of the LDC group and members of the LDC group have, of course, for many years talked about the importance of bridging the digital divide and the importance of technology transfers. We're very grateful that the ambassador has joined us today. The floor is yours, Ambassador. Thank you.

[00:04:20] Ambassador Perks Ligoya: Thank you very much, Pooja. Good morning, good afternoon, good evening from wherever you are. I'd like to thank the Civil Society Financing for Development Group for inviting me to speak today on the important topics of science, technology, and innovation and closing the digital divide in less developed countries. We have a question. Will multilateral governance of digital technology close the digital divide? Let me answer, yes, but with a big but. That's what I will go into.

Today's very timely meeting takes place where we are at a critical juncture where hard-won progress may be lost if we do not act now and decisively. Maybe before I start, I should express my solidarity with the people of India and all other countries that have been devastated by this pandemic. Our thoughts are with you, and we hope quick recovery will come. The COVID-19 pandemic continues its global spread and I remain deeply concerned by the ongoing threat to the health of our peoples as well as the prolonged economic downturn the pandemic has already caused.

After more than one year of the ongoing pandemic, it is clear that interlinked health, economic, and social shocks have affected the LDC severely and disproportionately. While the pandemic continues to have adverse effects on all different aspects of our social and economic life, it has underscored the pressing need for countries to elevate science, technology, and innovation in both policy and practical terms. There is need for more research, collaboration, data, and knowledge sharing to cope with the immediate impacts of the coronavirus crisis and go beyond it.

The pandemic has made one thing very clear. The digital divide between the digital haves and the have nots is growing and it increases inequality. We have heard that the biggest companies have amassed more than 6 trillion during this pandemic whilst the rest of us are languishing. Only 19% of people in LDCs have access to internet. The number is even lower when we look at access for women or access in rural areas. This means that 800 million people in LDCs alone are not able to participate in the digital world. To remind everybody that the population of unlinked people worldwide, if we take ages 10 and above, is 3 trillion.

Whereas most people in developing countries were able to continue their work or education from home, access government service online and benefit from online businesses and e-commerce opportunities, this was not possible for the vast majority of people in LDCs. This has impacted the youth more than anybody else. In my own country, Malawi, for girls who were not able to go to school, discontinued because of the pandemic, we have had very bad consequences of early pregnancies, early marriages, and the consequences for the youth are indeed very devastating.

We need better and affordable broadband connectivity, but we also need the right digital skills for our populations. Digital connectivity extends beyond the technology itself, and it includes the ecosystem, the infrastructure, the skill set of people, and relevant policies. Learning systems adopted to local environment are required to provide relevant knowledge and adaptation possibilities for citizens and entrepreneurs as well as digital platforms that support employment creation for communities, youth, and women.

If we cannot bridge the digital divide and ensure that access to the internet and knowledge on how to navigate the digital economy becomes a standard, the LDCs will not be able to achieve the SDGs and

will be left behind. I know we only have one hour for this meeting. I will not read my whole speech. I will make it available to you, Pooja, and I just want to mention a few things.

I said it is possible to close the digital divide, but for that to happen, we need to work together in the Internet Governance Forum, which is already there, initiated by Germany and UAE. Let us be thankful for the roadmap, the Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation. It has all the important elements that if it is implemented successfully, it will really help us close the digital gap. We should also be thankful that now we have an Envoy on Technology, somebody we can talk to and map the way forward together.

I'm very glad that there is already a record of the implementation of the Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation. It has good elements, for example, there is Giga by UNICEF and ITU to connect all schools around the world to the internet. This is a very good initiative, and almost 3,000 schools have already been connected through this. My but, the big but, is whether the international community will support the cost of connecting everybody. According to the ITU, we need \$428 billion to connect the remaining 3 billion people aged 10 years and above to broadband internet by 2050. That's a lot of money, but it can be raised. This is why we need innovative ways of raising financing and connecting people.

I will not go further than that. I want to give opportunity, but I'm extremely excited. This week we have a lot of meetings, as you know, and the voice-- I want to encourage the civil society. I know that in September, over 70 civil society organizations, eminent individuals wrote to the PGA calling for member states to prioritize digital trust and security. If you are in the news today, Germany has closed down a network of child pornography and all that. Network that was connecting 400,000 people. The danger is still there. We need to work together, and I want to encourage you, civil society organizations, your voice is very important in all this. I thank you.

[00:13:14] Pooja: Thank you, Ambassador, for kicking us off with those very important and powerful remarks. Like you said, we can, of course, do one round and come back to the rest of your remarks if there's time. I will now move on to our next speaker, Neth Daño, who is the Asia Director of the ETC Group. Neth, you have to the floor.

[00:13:41] Neth Daño: Thank you very much, Pooja, and thank you to the ambassador for kicking off the discussion. I think I will actually focus my short intervention around answering the question that is posed to all of us by these side events. **[inaudible 00:13:58]** multilateral looking at **[inaudible 00:14:03]** digital divide, which I find very, very provocative. I think it's something that should really be thrown not just to government, but also to civil society and those who are actually engaged around development issues, because as we heard from the ambassador, the fundamentals of the digital divide actually goes beyond technical, infrastructure, capacity. The development divide characterizes this world.

The global pandemic, as Pooja pointed out earlier, has actually exposed the extent and further exacerbated, as pointed out by the ambassador, exacerbated the digital divide. You actually come out with a very strange situation, like almost surreal. After a devastating pandemic, you all come out, and in the midst of the devastation, you have a few big techs who have actually made money, tons of money, billions of dollars in all this devastation around us. You've seen in the pandemic how digitization has gone overdrive. We sometimes refer to it as digitalization on steroids. It was something that really, wow, unexpected by many of us, but probably expected by those who have enriched themselves in this situation.

It's really widened the development gap, that's just access to digital technology and infrastructure between North and South, between men and women across the world, and between urban and rural

communities within countries. It's not even so much as like rich and poor countries, I had to struggle getting into this call because I cannot get through for some reason. The Philippines is a middle-income country even, and I don't live in the hinterland. I live in a big city where infrastructure remains an issue, and you actually have much more people who don't even have access to digital technology.

The ambassador was mentioning about that magic number by ITU, the \$428 billion needed to connect everyone to the digital world and also including capacities and skills. Often glossed over in this discussion, which is often reduced to infrastructure and technical capacity. We often gloss over the structural issues around governance of digital technologies are equally crucial. They need to be tackled head-on. It's at the UN where they should be tackled.

The ambassador has mentioned some effort of governments in the North not to deal with the issues around digitalization, in particular, those that are related to privacy, also ethics, and also we've seen how the European Union, and even the US, that's actually started clamping down or beginning to clamp down the power of big tech. On the sideline, the rest of the world, the rest of the world other than these two big powers, superpowers, are just passive observers of what's happening. There's really no capacity to deal with this. I think when we talk of multilateral governance, there has to-- as well empowerment of those who will govern. This task, this challenge actually rests on the UN.

Also **[inaudible 00:18:04]** and way beyond the infrastructure of infrastructure and technical. As the digital gap widens and worsens during the pandemic, we're actually seeing both sides dealing with all these violations of basic rights and also the disproportionate power and intervention of technology platforms and companies. There's also a large imbalance in terms of the way to deal with them and even understanding what's going on. There's a huge vacuum in governance of digital technologies right now which needs to be addressed with a sense of urgency to protect human rights and assert the mandate of democratic institutions over corporate interests.

We would really want to see this at the UN beyond just the roadmap on digital cooperation. Before we even go into the discussion of cooperation, in particular cooperation with the private sector, we're the very ones who are behind this very surreal situation of enriching themselves in the process of the pandemic. We should really address the fundamentals, the structural issues around governance and, of course, the structural issues around the development divide that is near in the digital divide that we've been talking about.

It would be good to see the UN tackling this head-on. I'd really like to thank Malawi as well for tirelessly raising the issue of the digital divide in all forums the UN. The next step really is to address this problem which actually gets worse as we move forward beyond the pandemic. Thanks, Pooja.

[00:19:59] Pooja: Thank you, Neth.

for your very interesting remarks. I think what we've heard so far, we've heard from the ambassador, of course, that multilateral governance is really important but not just that, we also actually need investments. As we heard from Neth, it's not even just about investments, we also actually need to tackle structural issues around governance and that UN is the place and governments really need to take the lead on addressing some of these challenging issues.

I will now hand this over to Parminder Singh, who is the executive director of IT for Change. We've also heard a little bit about the Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, and maybe Parminder, you can also share your views on that. Thank you, and the floor is yours.

[00:20:48] Parminder Singh: Thank you, Pooja, and my esteemed colleague panelists, and all the attendees. I would build over what Neth said. Ambassador led what I think is the first layer of what is

digital, on which Neth said there are structural issues, and I'm going to go on with that. The problem is that digital is simultaneously many things, and every passing year shows us that fact. We do not have the luxury to deal with one thing first and wait for the other thing to be done later, and I will explain what I mean.

For example, infrastructure laying. We need to lay the infrastructure and get every person connected. Same way like in the industrial era, we could not wait for everybody to get education and everybody to get electricity before some centers in other countries needed to set up their own industries, and own factories, and own transportation. All these things go on at the same time. We do not have the luxury that, let's finish the technical layer first and then we'll come to the industrialization layer, then we will have our own platform. We have to do this battle at multiple levels.

Increasingly over the last 20 decades or so, and I will quickly go into the history because I have been a part of the World Summit on the Information Society and all those developments which have taken place where developing countries have had different stands at different times on digital governance. Digital divide today is not a divide of access. First it was access. That was the early 2000s. That's the time ITU and World Summit on the Information Society was talking about connectivity and access. Then it became a divide of opportunity and then it's a divide of control and ownership.

Digital divided at the same time whether we have connectivity, but also whether we have digital businesses. Whether our own countries control the manner in which restaurants are able to deliver food at people's home using a website. It's a very simple application but who's in control of that? Whether the taxi drivers in our cities are organized over a local platform or a platform which is controlled from US or China. These are elements of digital divide. Do we have our own data infrastructures? Do our local datas get collected locally and made available, or all of them are sucked at the time of production itself and goes out and are increasing the intelligence capacities of other people? All these are layers of what is today a digital divide, and all of them have to be dealt at the same time.

It's very strange, and I'm coming to multilateralism, that things which are much less global-- Education is much less global. We have our schools, and we could-- independently, we're working on them. Development is much less global. All of them are global, I'm not denying it, but much less global than digital. Even health is much less global but pandemic taught us something. Else but cut out the pandemic, otherwise, our health systems are something which we do locally. Many things are so local, but we have a global agency which deals with governance of education, of health, of development, of children welfare, of women welfare. We have all these UN agencies. It's very funny something which is fundamentally global, which is digital does not have a global agency dealing with the digital.

People will talk about ITU, and that's where I want to make the distinction. That increasingly countries are feeling that this is not a technology matter. It is as much a matter of digital industrialization. It is as much a matter of taking decisions about your homegrown businesses to be supported or outside businesses are to be supported. Whether we should force joint ownerships, which we added with industrialization in the industrial era itself. All these elements, some of them are political, others are technical, and increasingly globally, the digital governance is shifting from technical to becoming political. It is becoming South-South.

The World Summit on the Information Society also had a very strong political element, especially in the last phases, about governance of the internet, but subsequently, it has become more political. What has happened? There, I'm just going to talk about the failures which a developing countries have had in being able to get a political forum for digital governance at a global level.

As globally, whether it's in EU or in US or in developing countries, digital governments have shifted to becoming more political and economic from being just technical and social and health sector and all sectors. What has happened in the World Summit on Information Society, it was decided that there would be a multilateral platform for public policy meeting for government, where they will stick together and make public policies.

This demand has survived from 2005 up to now, but what has happened is there were those groups on enhanced cooperation. I was a member of this UN group, which was tasked with coming out with the possibilities, what platform could be available to governments to make digital policies, but they did not succeed.

The problem today is that there was WSIS+10 in 2010, which could not deal with this issue. At that time, G77 made a formal demand that we should have a government platform to make political decisions, political discussions around digital governance. Technical decisions are different, but there are some things which are political like it's at UNESCO, it's WHO, it's at UNDP. There is always a political element, and we need a political platform, but that has been denied to developing countries consistently.

Now we have WSIS+20 coming in or 2025. Developed countries already started working towards it to see or stop any possibilities of developing countries getting together and again making some demands. It is in this context I would place the UN roadmap on digital corporation, which Ambassador talked about. It has very good elements, including the Ambassador talked about the Giga framework where connectivity would be laid out, but there is one element of which is very problematic, which is that they want to turn internet governance forum, which is a discussion-based platform, into something which would be providing policy advice to everyone.

It was very clear that IGF should remain a decision-making forum. There was a UN commission on science and technology for development working group on improvements to the IGF. I was a member of that, which looked at various possibilities of IGF improvement. It was a member-based commission, and that commission decided that IGF should do these things and not do these things. It was decided at that. Respectfully, I would make the submission to the ambassador, the problem is that one element of the digital corporation actually says that IGF would do those things, which were rejected by the member based commission, which said that IGF should remain a body, which does not evolve into advice-giving body.

Here, the problem is that we have a setup in which large companies will dominate that platform, which will be giving advice on global policymaking. It's very funny that whether it's Jack ma Alibaba or Microsoft's Bill Gates, which are the big companies, which even US is trying to break up now. China just now fined Alibaba a huge amount of money. When big problem, there is a big tech lash happening. You don't want these corporations to be giving the political advice to the global system about what should be done and what should not be done because the only advice they can give, and this was a matter raised both by Neth and Ambassador that these tech companies have earned billions of dollars in the COVID times.

Where did that money come from? This is the same wealth transfer which takes place from developing countries to the US, which was other problem during the industrial colonization, where we first liked all those shiny objects which came to our countries but then soon we realized that there is a net wealth transfer taking place. The same net wealth transfer is taking place much faster from developing countries to developed countries.

As we look for getting our infrastructure well and good, we also have to see that this net wealth transfer does not take place, and this not to take place, we have to internally do our own digital

industrialization. To do that digital industrialization, we have to have the kind of policies which UNCTAD has for some time been talking. There has been South Centre, which has come up with those advises in which there are possibilities of digital industrialization.

It's not an either-or, you just don't want to get up and say that the companies wouldn't enter our countries, which is what happened with the industrial era also. We allowed them, but they were the joint ventures, they were technology transfers, they were all kind of sunset clauses about 10 years, and then you had to have a local partner. We have to get into a very sophisticated kind of a system if we have to survive in the digital age, as we did in the industrial age.

What the digital divide has become today is a complex of all those things, and it is required that the multilateral system helps us bridge that digital divide. For that, I think G77 should renew its demand, which is already on the table right now, that there should be a platform where digital discussions can take place among member countries in consultation with other stakeholders. It should not be given up to technical people or to corporates to give advice on what are political matters. They should give advice on technical matters. They should give advice on how we can improve our gadgets or our software, but that's one side, but there's a big side, which is political, and I'm ready to come back to this discussion in the second round. Thank you, Pooja

[00:31:39] Pooja: Thank you, Parminder, for adding now the additional layer to this discussion, which is very helpful. That, of course, there are many things we're talking about here, and that a lot of things need to happen simultaneously. Really at the core of this is the need for what has been a G77 demand but perhaps a bit quiet at the moment on that front, but the need to renew those calls for an intergovernmental platform. That this isn't just technical issues, but we need a space for political decision-making. For southern countries to work together, also because of the power asymmetries with these companies, which is massive. The importance of South-South cooperation and working together and renewing this demand.

I think before I open the floor, I just want to come back to Ambassador and Neth, if there's anything you want to respond to or we will open the floor for questions.

[00:32:33] Ambassador Perks: Thank you, Pooja. I very much like the contribution made by the previous speaker. I take note of the concerns with the IGF and their role of giving political advice. Actually, within there, they formed the multi-stakeholder advisory group, which is the group that is doing that, but it stemmed out from the IGF process. I will take it up and see to it that representation of not only LDCs but all the South is taken into consideration. If we have to form a subgroup that can be working on that, I would really back that up.

As we open the floor, I want to discuss the issue of affordability. Affordability, you'd be surprised that the poorest countries are the ones paying the highest cost per gigabyte of data. On top of the list is my own country, Malawi, and some African countries. This is not acceptable. We need to work together, especially with the big tech companies, to make sure that this does not continue because we are robbing off the few dollars that these poor people already have for connectivity.

Now, we have the technology bank for LDCs. This should be supported with resources to enhance the capacity of the LDCs to build science, technology, and innovation capacities,

ecosystems and regulatory framework that can harness the benefits of newly available technologies by attracting and adapting outside technology, facilitating technology transfer, and bringing important and indigenous technologies to market.

As you all know, we are on the road to Doha for the fifth UN Conference on LDCs, which will take place in January next year. On this road, let us ensure that all actors that can support the LDCs are around the table and all options and opportunities are well known and being discussed, as this is where I invite you, civil societies, your input to the LDC5 conference is vital.

We are now preparing the first preparatory committee meeting which will take place at the end of May, and we have identified science, technology, and innovation as one of the core topics of the meeting and also of the new program of action. This is promising and shows the importance of the topic. Let me thank you, the Civil Society Financing for Development Group, together with the Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration, the Society for International Development, and Major Group on Children and Youth for co-organizing this meeting today. I thank you.

[00:36:43] Pooja: Thank you, Ambassador, and also for the warm invitation to the very important LDC conference and the discussions that are very soon coming up. Certainly, something that's on our radar, and we look forward to providing these inputs to that discussion as well. I think Neth, I don't know if you have any quick reactions, and then I will open the floor.

[00:37:02] Neth: No, I think we should open the floor.

[00:37:06] Pooja: Okay, great. All right. The floor is open. If you would like to raise your hand, if you would like to ask any question, just have to click on reactions and raise your hand or just type in the chatbox if you would like to take the floor. Any question or comment?

[00:37:35] Martha: Pooja, can you hear me? This is Martha.

[00:37:39] Pooja: Yes, hi Martha, go ahead.

[00:37:43] Martha: Thank you for doing this because we have to really be active monitoring everything that's going on. Things are changing rapidly, one day to the other, and sometimes in the same day, but they are demanding of citizens this or the other or the other to fulfill the requirements to be healthy, but nothing is being done about really keeping the people healthy because everything has gone very high in terms of even accessing to any other vaccines and a lot of the people don't even have benefits for that.

I think that we really have to apply what we are calling, for many in the South, we call them global planetary citizenship, which means that from the personal to the family to a local to the international, we have to keep track of it and helping each other by monitoring because, at this point, if we don't do that, all of a sudden, we find ourselves getting up in the morning with some kind of work in some issues, and then at the end of the day, something else. People's movements are very active, but they don't have access to this kind of participation.

This program is very, very urgent, and I see that only 20 people have participated. I'm calling from El Salvador. We just had a coup d'etat in the last two days. Because we don't monitor, even though some of us have been really putting our lives at risk to make sure that we demand democracy, everything, all that the international community has been able to do is express concerns.

We don't need to express concerns. They are giving more money to the government to continue-- They don't even want to give any report of what they're getting, how they're using it, and the present generations, the children of now, the great-grandchildren won't be able to pay this because we have gone backwards up to the '70s with all the changes that have been made during this can this situation. We're indebted for at least five more decades, so how are we going to end the century? How are we going to start the new century?

All that you're talking about really for us, it means doing the work of these have to be that we do the kind of monitoring because while they were doing these changes on 1st of May, which is the international day of workers, everything has changed in my country, meaning the administration of government has taken over the city organs of state and changing every possible thing. People haven't said very much.

The president of the US and vice-president are doing what they can, even the UN, but civil society is paying attention to some things and not to others. If in Latin America more countries go the way that my country is going, we're going to have big problems in multilateral processes at the UN. They're not going to be for the economy session like they've always been, the Latins, because they have been effectively pushed out of the way. This is very important. I just wanted to say that.

[00:40:49] Pooja: Thank you. Thank you, Martha. I appreciate that, of course we're all functioning under very, very big challenges and sometimes these conversations aren't always as connected as I think as we would all like to see.

Any other comments or questions? [silence] Maybe a question I have for the panel because-- When we talk about governance, there is I think one reference to multi-stakeholder governance, which is something that the secretary-general has also floated as an idea. From what I hear from Parminder it's he's critical of the idea of multi-stakeholder governance, what we need is really multilateralism and intergovernmental process. I was wondering if you could maybe unpack that a little bit more about what your concerns are around this direction of multistakeholderism and why it would suggest intergovernmental instead. Maybe Parminder, Neth and anyone else thinks.

[00:41:58] Parminder: I would start, and I would like to hear other people views on it. As I said, digital today is many layers. It is technology, how we do things better. That's a very technical thing. I have two pieces of wood, how do I make a bridge out of it is a technical advice. There are other aspects of it. My digital industrialization. It's a very economic policy and political economy advice.

Whether I should, for very simple things-- I keep giving example. You have restaurants in your capital city, and you just won't have the restaurants deliver food to people's houses over a website, coordinated. It's not rocket science, but still, we would get an outside company who will put in investment, price out everybody else, and then start squeezing the local restaurants and local consumers. 30% of all the local food industry or business money starts going outside.

It's already happening in the taxis business. The taxi drivers are local, but 30% of the money is going outside just because somebody is squeezing that, and that very well could have been a local operation. Very well could have been a local operation. It could have been a South-South initiative, get somebody who will have a little better technology in South Africa, or Nigeria, or India and have a joint venture, and say in 20 years, you have to transfer it to a local person, and then you can go out. The guy is happy because he's still making a few million dollars when he comes out. You don't have to have 10 billion or 500 billion dollar companies to do this.

The point was that while some layers are technical and their technical advisers are good, multi-stakeholder bodies are good because there's a diversity of advice. Even a technology company will come and tell you, "Sorry, sorry. You're setting up a data infrastructure. This is not going to work. This is my advice, listen to it, and if you don't like it, don't take it." We need those advises. Those multi-stakeholder forums are good. That's why IGF was made by the World Summit on Information Society, that yes, you do discussions and get the best out. Then the political guys, which was a Forum for Enhanced Cooperation, which was supposed to be multi-stakeholder will take that advice. This happens in UNICEF, it happens in UNESCO, WHO, UNDP, you name it. There are technical systems and there are political systems.

Now, what is happening is that we don't have the political system, and the technical system is now growing a new head in the form of this new multi-stakeholder high-level body. A new head to fill in the vacuum which has been left by the political system. Now, this becomes the head. Then it will simply give political advice, which would be highly extractive in the way industrial colonization takes place. It will keep on giving advices, let bigger companies come, take over the restaurant business. Even your barber appointment has to be fixed by a company which wants to take a 30% cut in the US.

This is not a joke. This is what is happening. The companies are coming and mediating the relationship between you and your hairdresser. Just mediating that relationship and somebody takes the money. It's not like making Mercedes cars, it's not like making industrial machines, this is relatively simpler things which South-South can do it. South African company can do in Malawi, Indian company can do in Philippines. We're talking about those kinds of things.

Coming back, but these things need to be taught together. Somebody has to sit together and say, okay, this is a political group which has asked the bureaucracy to make a paper on what kind of local digital industry is possible. Unless a political direction is given to the bureaucracy and the bureaucracy then brings results back to the political guy, if it is politically driven, it's very different and nobody has to teach this, all people here are from a UN background who know things that what is political and what is technical.

That difference needs to be gotten and then we should start pushing both a South-South cooperation layer and keeping on a demand for a political system. That is, I think, one of the biggest needs today because the future is digital.

Then the last point I want to say is, in the same way industrial society was different from agriculture society, digital society is different from industrial society. In that sense, industrial society is not a technology, it's the way the whole society is organized, the way its government is organized, the way schools are organized. Industrial society is a paradigm of society. In the same way, digital is a paradigm and therefore needs political governance, and we should be starting to take small steps in that direction.

[00:46:49] Pooja: Thank you, Parminder, that was very clear that a multi-stakeholder platform to discuss some of the technical issues, get inputs from different stakeholders is very useful, but we're missing a political process, especially considering we're dealing with giant monopolies, which really needs to be regulated. It's not simply a question of collaborating with them, we have to regulate these monopolies, and so thank you, Parminder. I see Ambassador? Yes. The floor is yours.

[00:47:22] Ambassador Perks: Thank you very much. I agree with the comments. When we say multi-stakeholder, it should be really multi-stakeholder and not domination by the big tech companies who will want to impose on the rest of us what we should be doing. In that exercise, I think the most important thing, and I'm happy to say that the envoy on technologies is already working on it, is to define the framework to measure digital inclusion.

What is digital inclusion? Because this can start from the farmer, how he accesses the market. People are now using the mobile to know where prices are better for their produce, to everyone. He has mentioned the barber connected. How do you know which barber is free now? All that is digital. Now, what do we call Digital Inclusion? It's only when we define that to establish a measurable and evidence-based foundation that we can start now the further work on how we affect the lives of everybody who is in one way or the other concerned with digital technology.

[00:49:20] Pooja: Thank you, Ambassador, for setting this element to the discussion on really measuring digital inclusion. I don't know, Neth, if you would like to respond to any [crosstalk].

[00:49:28] Neth: Yes. Just to add a bit towards affirming this and now as we discuss multilateral governance of the digital, it's very important to call for coherence as well. At the moment, each part of the UN actually is still dealing with the digital, like every single institution has a study, a report on the digital and have their own recommendations, but it's not clear which part of the UN is dealing with the political aspects of the discussion of governance of digitalization.

As pointed out by Parminder, there have been a lot of inroads, and also milestones that were achieved in the IGF, also in the CSTD, and there are also a lot of elements that are being introduced, particularly coming from the UN Secretary General's office which actually provides more vagueness than clarity on where it's going, on how the UN is going to deal with the core of the issue, which is really political in nature.

You can also see it in much of the report that a lot of technical discussions are being founded by UN institutions, but very few are actually tackling head-on the political structural implications of digital issues. I think the call for the UN is to address this issue head-on, and it should be now than later, and as Parminder pointed out, there's actually even very little realization on how net wealth transfer is happening, and this is one focus of interest that the South, in particular LDCs, should actually be raising across the UN.

[00:51:35] Pooja: Thank you, Neth. Indeed, it's a very important point on thinking about net wealth transfers, these massive profits of these companies, really it's not even in our countries. We're not even able to tax them. There're also discussions that cut across taxation of the digital economy, where we're seeing the same North-South divided on those political conversations. We're really staring at a moment of how important multilateralism is to address these issues. Parminder, go ahead.

[00:52:07] Parminder: Yes, just to add. I completely agree with those useful elements in the digital corporation mandate about-- Ambassador was talking the index of inclusion, and those are the areas in which we can push. What are the factors of inclusion? I think we should on a South-South level, also do-- We work with South Center, also try to develop those things, but then there is an index of inclusion, but we need to go beyond inclusion to opportunity, to control and to ownership. These are sliding scales.

These conceptual developments, when we input into these kinds of works, which is happening at UNSG level or at CSTD level, which is official follow up for the World Summit on Information Society, we should introduce these conceptual elements because some victories are gotten by these conceptual elements and not directly by developing different kinds of scales of improvement of situation. I think we should also, as civil society and researchers, contribute those scales of inclusion opportunities, control and ownership, and so on. Thank you,

[00:53:24] Pooja: Parminder, I see there's one question in the chatbox, and I think it's maybe addressed a little bit in the conversations we've had so far about what is the main challenge that is preventing establishing such an intergovernmental mechanism for digital governance at the UN? I supposed Parminder you talked a little bit about the practical political steps that we need with G77 perhaps, LDC group with LDC5 starting to raise these issues. I don't know if you have other reflections on what the challenge are towards getting there, what it has been so far?

[00:53:56] Parminder: Yes, let's be frank, the challenges are always who has power and who doesn't want to share power, if we are one to one frankly talking. Many changes have taken place, I have been in this process, intergovernmental committees, for many years. I actually saw, for example, China, who was very interested in global governance of the digital phenomenon till around-- I precisely remember the two, three meetings in which things started to change because, at that time, China

thought that US controlled the basic root of the internet technology and all those things, and they wanted global governance because that would have gravitated some power away from them.

By and by around 2011, 2012, China got a good hold and understanding of the technology so well that it did not need a global system, and it started becoming a digital power, and it slowly started withdrawing from very strong engagements. Right now, it supports G77 positions, but those kinds of geopolitics. Funnily now, Europe is at a position, which is close to being the Naspers, which is the biggest South African company, which has the biggest stake in Tencent. The chief of Naspers said that Europe is a digital colony of US already. Europe is actually getting left out.

I actually often see Pope in Europe that they would come back and say, no, we need some kind of digital governance because globally, and this is what the IMF new chief said that we are facing a digital Berlin wall. IMF chief is a very conservative person normally. They don't go and make those big statements like that. They said that she said, and a lot of people now say that the technology system, the world digital system is dividing into two spheres. Either you change to US system or you choose China's system. Developing countries don't want to be caught in that kind of thing. The only way to keep something separate is to think politically about how to keep the digital sphere open as a model, as a technology, and so on.

I think the issue is basically sharing power. Multilateralism has always been that, but there are always good people, good values, and good norms we can always touch whether it's in US or whether it's in China or in Europe. As there is a backlash building against the big tech companies in the last three, four years, all of you would have noticed, this is also a time to get people to agree that let's have a very light global system where it is you start talking about these things rather than just reading *Washington Post* about what to what should be done about Uber or Guardian, about UK's position and developing countries are all consumers of these political positions around how big tech has to be governed.

We also have something to say because we also contribute wealth to those companies. The challenges has been, of course, like old times, but I think small ways the direction, we cannot ask for actual big new building in Geneva or New York, which will set up a digital governance system, but we can ask for a small forum on the side of a CSTD or something like that or even the way ambassador was saying, outside IGF, intergovernmental system. You look for a small forum where this kind of thing start and then it grows into a big thing.

Challenge for making a new UN system are obviously always huge. It is much worse than now. Thankfully, we are out of the Trumpian era, but things have not gone. I think the hope is in Europe in a very negative manner so as to say and the hope is in the fact that there is a universal tech lash and people completely recognize that globally, tech companies have gone beyond all possibilities of power ever historically happening and something needs to be done.

[00:58:10] Pooja: Thank you, Parminder. Last word to-- Yes Ambassador, yes.

[00:58:13] Ambassador Perks: Pooja, the system, the good thing at the UN is that we all have a chair on the table. Each that some as civil society organizations, there are some meetings that you do not attend. You cannot attend, but use our offices like the OHRLS that takes care of LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDS. We are there for all the vulnerable countries, the problems that we are meeting.

This dialogue between you, the civil society organizations, and us representatives, your representatives at the UN, is very vital. We should claim our rightful place on the table. The voices that we have been making, be it to the IMF, you know now they're issuing the SDRs. Maybe not

enough, but at least, it's a step forward. The voices that we make are very important, and let's use all these to influence change in policies that are made internationally.

I want to thank you, Pooja, and all the participants. Parminder, I hope we will remain in touch because I see you have vast experience in the field. We hope really that all of you can join us in the LDC5 conference. We need your ideas. We should have a robust paragraph or chapter on digital cooperation, something realistic that will bring us towards the realization of the 2030 agenda. I want to thank you.

[01:00:42] Pooja: Thank you, Ambassador. I see we're now completely out of time. This has been an incredibly interesting discussion. Very warm thank you to our panelists. I think that was a great note to end on with Ambassador's invitation that we follow up on this conversation, particularly with the LDC5 meetings coming up with the Office of OHRLLS of LDC group LLDCs and SIDS and really starting to have these conversations much more with member states on moving this issue. A very warm thanks, Ambassador Perks Ligoya, Neth, and Parminder for this very interesting discussion. We will, of course, share the link to the video if you're interested to revisit. Thank you so much, everyone.

[01:01:26] Parminder: Thanks, everybody. Thank everybody. [crosstalk]-

[01:01:29] Neth: Thank you, Pooja. Thank you. you,

[01:01:31] Parminder: -Ambassador's invitation. We'll like to help in any way the LDC meeting. Thank you, everybody.

[01:01:39] Ambassador Perks: Thank you very much. Thank you, everybody.

[01:01:41] Pooja: Thank you, everyone. Bye.

[01:01:44] Parminder: Bye-bye.

[01:01:57] [END OF AUDIO]