

Bridging the Gap: Addressing the vacuum in multilateral governance of digital technology to close the digital divide and support efforts to leave no one behind

2 February 2022, 11:00-11:50 EST

Session Summary

Background on the event

The Spotlight Session co-organized by the CSO FfD Group, AP-RCEM, ETC Group and UNCTAD provided a space for participants at the 2020 ECOSOC Partnership Forum to learn from insights civil society, farmers organizations and UNCTAD on the growing digital divide – the ever widening gap in access to digital technology and infrastructures between the North and the South, between men and women across the world, and between urban and rural communities within countries. Amid the promises of digital technologies as potential solutions to multiple development crises, the development divide that underpins the digital and technology divides persist and even worsened during the pandemic. Distribution of these technologies and enabling infrastructures is highly unequal and most concentrated and advanced in developed countries and in urban centers in developing economies. The Session tackled the huge vacuum in governance of digital technologies that needs to be addressed with a sense of urgency and presented proposals on global governance of digitalization to assert the mandate of inclusive multilateral institutions over corporate interests and to protect human rights, democratic processes and peoples' rights.

Key Issues discussed

1. Digital divides result from social inequalities and, in their turn, reinforce existing inequalities, in a vicious cycle. As new digital technologies are developed, and the digital and the physical worlds get more connected, digital and social inequalities persist and worsen.
2. There is not one but two waves of digital transformation. One is the digital revolution that is at its peak in developed countries, and the other is in its early stages, is based on AI, robotics, IoT and other technologies associated with Industry 4.0. It is critical to understand these technological revolutions because every wave of technological progress since the Industrial Revolution was associated with sharper inequality across countries. The technological waves reach developing countries with a delay and in bits and pieces.
3. It is difficult for institutions and governance at national and local levels to catch up with the very fast changes in consumption patterns and behaviors resulting from deployment and adoption of new technologies, build capacity, and be able to adapt to and influence the pace of change.
4. We are going past an IP-centered economy to a data and intelligence centered one (i.e., isometimes called an 'intelligence economy'), based on the primary value of 'digital intelligence'. Data and intelligence based economic systems have a necessary tendency for centralization, which is what we face today with systemic exclusion of marginalized groups and developing countries from the (real) fruits of digital economy.
5. The world's five corporate titans all deal in intangible data and have a market valuation that exceeds the GDP of entire continents, with the top five data infrastructure providers

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accounting for 80% of the market in 2020. To understand the structural underpinnings of the digital divide, we must understand that the internet is not immaterial, most of its infrastructure is corporate owned and has become one of the sectors with the greatest concentration of all. With such power concentration, the capacity for developing countries to display sovereign policies for digital access and regulatory control is strongly challenged.

6. Dependence on corporate-controlled digital technologies without societal controls and regulations could erode local knowledge systems, marginalize local communities and divert resources from addressing the development divide, further exacerbating income and social inequalities.

Key recommendations for action

1. Address social and digital inequalities simultaneously. We need to give direction to technological change, setting up the required institutions and creating the necessary incentives for the emergence of innovations that ultimately are inclusive and sustainable.
2. Re-legitimize the role of civil society to drive the required changes in behaviors and institutions that would allow us to harness the benefits of new technologies and address the potential risks.
3. As we understand the nature of exclusion in digital economy, we need to devise new counter measures specific to a digital economy. This consists of counteracting, data power, platform power and AI power, and regulation of them. Since the digital economy is global; it foremost calls for instituting and strengthening global digital governance. In this respect we welcome the call in the 2021 Digital economy Report of UNCTAD for a global data governance framework.
4. Governance of digitalisation is key in curbing the widening digital divide and contribute towards the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to Leave No One Behind.
5. In the context of such slow and corporate led regulatory framework, participatory technology assessment emerges as an important strategy for civil society for bottom-up governance. Technology assessment platforms (TAPs) bring together CSOs, movements and allies in collectively evaluating the potential impacts of digital technologies/platforms on the environment, society, economy, culture, etc. and consider alternatives.
6. Innovation and technologies developed by farmers, local communities and indigenous peoples based on local, traditional and indigenous knowledge systems must be supported, promoted and enabled to address development challenges and harness endogenous capacities.