

Anita Gurumurthy's Statement at IGF session

Digital Cooperation- Quo Vadis?

(Main Session on Inclusive Internet Governance Ecosystems and Digital Cooperation)

Wednesday, Dec 8, 2021.

Q1. Perspectives on the UN Secretary General Roadmap (4 minutes)

One cannot disagree with the semantic categories of the SG's report – from digital inclusion to human rights, it's all there. But the core problem diagnostic about what exactly ails our interconnected world unfortunately falls short. That means, the solution simply misses the point.

In 2018 the Sec-General appointed a High Level Panel co-chaired by Jack Ma and Melinda French Gates to advise him. Their report on which the Sec=Gen's Roadmap is based, identifies the lack of trust and humility as the key problem preventing effective multi-stakeholder cooperation.

Multistakeholderism does not fail because of lack of humility or trust. It fails because in a fundamentally unequal world, "the materially strongest nodes of the network will dominate the overall network. In any such network with no clear lines of responsibility, it is impossible to hold any actor accountable for any particular governance failure".

So we turn to the unfortunate blind-spot in the SG's report – the ordinary story of extraordinary power of transnational digital corporations whose primary stake in digital cooperation is about ensuring the status quo.

Meaningful global dialogue for the realization of digital inclusion or human rights is about fixing responsibility. Sanitized of the means to moderate power, multistakeholderism retains no connections to the claims and entitlements of people. It also distracts attention from the responsibility and legitimacy of states in digital governance.

The specific proposals in the UN SG Roadmap do not clarify any binding mechanisms. Instead they propose a high level body to address urgent issues – supported by private finance and offering membership based on financial contributions. As the Just Net Coalition's Open Letter to the UN Secretary General, signed by over 170 civil society groups notes, we face the incredulous prospect of 'a Big Tech-led body for the Global Governance of Big Tech'. That too at the precise moment when the EU and the Biden administration, and many governments in the South, are stepping up the public policy process for stringent regulation of Big Tech!

The inspiring vision of UN SG's recent report – Our Common Agenda – falters similarly. The document calls for a Global Digital Compact, and strengthening the governance of the global digital commons and public goods. However, it contains no recommendations for new legally binding intergovernmental treaties or directions to enhance the implementation of the international rule of law vis-à-vis emerging digital public goods. On the contrary, it argues that this does not require new institutions. Coming on the heels of the UNCTAD Digital

Economy Report (2021) which has observed the need for a new institutional setup to meet the global data governance challenge, this is indeed surprising.

We confront a postmodern dystopia – a collective future based on a non-approach to global governance without political leadership or accountability, based on voluntary actions by various actors, where vocabularies coalesce around the high ideals of rights and inclusion, and yet, the road to cooperation does little to address injustice and exploitation. It is nothing short of a tragic paradox that the mandate of the UN – for decolonizing of territories is being reconfigured to enable a new digital colonialism!

2. How can the IGF "adapt, innovate and reform" itself to advance global digital cooperation? And what role should the IGF play (and how) in advancing global digital cooperation?

The IGF is not like other UN bodies that develop norms and soft law. The WSIS gave it the mandate to provide a public agora for digital policy discussions – and not to forge consensus.

As a recent letter to the SG from JNC highlights, the IGF must provide the best conditions for open, diverse and inclusive policy discussions. Today the IGF does not pass this inclusivity test. It lacks representational diversity – in terms of who contributes to the pool of public opinion, and by logical extension, what digital issues become public or get politicized.

The folks who come here may wear different hats – tech community, private sector or CS – and many also do wear different hats across years – which in common parlance is referred to as the revolving door. But broadly, their interests and political ideologies represent a shared consensus. This consensus is not good for the political agora. It suggests an elitism that discounts particular intersectional locations.

Social movements – the public for whom public digital goods are sought to be created – are missing. Many developing countries, and even businesses other than big tech, are not there. One study has found that it takes 95 countries to reach the amount of civil society representation from the United States alone (294 CSOs)

What is vital going forward is to see how a rebooted networked multilateralism – for digital public policy – can benefit from the complementarities that IGF can offer to galvanize new publics for a rhetorical pluralism that prisms open the dominant consensus.

The power of the IGF is in the ideal type global community it can grow to represent – as the public of publics in the post-national agora. This is crucial because states may not prioritize certain publics. The IGF can support the many overlapping communities of interest to challenge corporate and statist interests, in pursuit of the highest ideals of human life.

The monocultures of MSHism need to be broken by injecting democratic representation into the ways of the IGF. For instance, health activists from the global south have a lot to say about data rights, as do biodiversity

activists who care about DSI. How can they be involved? Openness means looking outward and downward, making the effort to understand how the disenfranchised communities see their role in relation to public policy making.

We need a post-MSHist IGF that can deepen the democratic quotient of public policy debates on the digital – making way for less powerful voices, and providing new frames that a new institutional framework for global digital cooperation can benefit from.