

Three day workshop on
Equity and social justice in a digital world
– An inter sectoral/movements dialogue for a digital justice agenda
25th to 27th March 2019
Bangkok, Thailand
Organised by Just Net Coalition and its Partners

Background

Digital is increasingly the substratum of much of social, economic and political activities, marking the advent of what has been called as the digital society and economy. While it does promise the advancement of human civilisation in many ways – enabling unimagined efficiencies of resource utilisation and new forms of intelligent social and economic organisation and functioning, these gains are not automatic. This is especially so regarding whether the benefits of a digital society and economy will be equitably distributed, or if data enabled pervasive digital intelligence will get employed by the powerful to further entrench their controls over the rest. It is a telling fact that the last decade and half of the rise of the Internet and digital were also the times of one of the fastest ever worsening of inequality worldwide. If the deep social, economic and political troubles currently faced by the world are any evidence, we may not be employing the newly available digitally intelligent means for better management of our societies and economies.

Governments, that are supposed to ensure appropriate economic distribution and social justice, are completely at a loss with regard to the digital society/economy phenomenon, and leave it to big – mostly global – business to advice and lead them. Even among civil society, while there exist many groups and networks advocating for the very important civil and political rights in a digital era, there is hardly any presence and work related to corresponding economic and social rights and justice. This has resulted in a singular homogeneous global digital economy discourse which is not just hegemonic – as admittedly happens in other areas as well – but also remains almost entirely uncontested, without any alternatives articulated even at its peripheries. It is underpinned by the neoliberal tenets of seamless techno-enabled economic globalisation, open unregulated markets (but actually monopoly corporate controls), and individual merit and personal responsibility. Productivity and inclusion are both sold as assured outcomes of imbibing digital technologies into everything.

The proposed workshop

Aimed at shaping progressive and Southern agendas for the digital society and economy, the three day workshop will have around 40 participants. These will be, on one hand, civil society actors in different social sectors who are facing digital challenges and opportunities but do not feel well-equipped to deal with them, and on the other hand, digital activists who are inclined to work on issues of equity and social justice but have not had structured opportunities to do so effectively.

Participants will come from leading global organisations in major sectors and social movements, from areas like labour, livelihoods, trade, gender, farming, health, education, environment, peace, media and democracy. We will try to draw both leaders from different sectors as well as those who have begun to show an initial interest in digital issues from within the respective sectors.

The workshop will provide a nurturing space for a f2f dialogue among progressive actors on digital age challenges and opportunities, the kind of space which hardly exists anywhere today. It will be specifically constructed in a manner that perspectives and agendas are equitably contributed by sectoral actors, and not dominated by digital area actors, even as they provide the needed technical assistance. The trust and mutual comfort that gets built from the f2f interactions will be carried forward as the main sustainability plank of the ensuing network.

The program will be finalised after larger consultations within the Just Net Coalition and partner groups, but tentatively the workshop will be divided in 5 half-day sections. The opening section will have two sessions that will examine key elements of the emerging digital society and economy from a progressive and Southern perspective, and the challenges faced by progressive actors and movements. The subsequent two half-day sections, post-lunch on the first day and pre-lunch on the second, will be divided into 4-5 sector specific examination of issues. A fourth half-day session, post-lunch on the second day, will tie up the sectoral discussions into convergent themes. It will *inter alia* develop the emerging pointers and elements for a ‘digital justice manifesto’, a work that may have to be taken to post workshop deliberations for completion. (Some pre workshop work will also be done on this manifesto.) The last half-day section on the third day will be devoted to ‘what now’ and developing common strategies and action plans including for how to effectively run the network on a sustainable basis. Depending on the time required, this session is likely to spill over to post-lunch as well. The workshop will be divided into plenary sessions and breakout groups.

Expected outcomes and results

A concrete outcome will be a ‘digital justice manifesto’ as a key advocacy document as well as a set of guiding principles for work in the digital arena by progressive civil society actors. Along with it will be produced sector-specific issue papers and outlines of sector-focussed principles, by sectoral and digital actors working together.

Another important outcome will be developing new directions for the Just Net Coalition – towards a JNC 2.0 avatar, enlisting new members, and putting it on a firm sustainable foundation, with clear commitments from participating organisations and networks in this regard. How this can be achieved, including through sustained interactions, and commitment of resources, will be a key agenda for discussion on the third day of the workshop.

The workshop and its follow-up are expected to result in sustained interactions among actors from different social sectors, and digital activists working on equity and social justice, in a manner that can dynamically review and address various digital challenges and opportunities from a progressive and Southern standpoint. The resulting platform will help serve the digital knowledge needs of different sectors as well as a space for devising collaborative actions. Collating inputs from all sectors will also enable developing common and cross-cutting digital principles, agendas and actions plans.

In the mid to long term, we expect this intervention to be catalytic towards developing a strong progressive narrative on digital issues globally, including on digital policies. This will appropriately impact political, governance and regulatory systems, and the behaviour of various actors, towards greater social and economic justice for all in the digital society. The ultimate aim is to positively impact the very foundations of the formative architectures of the digital society and economy. This will be achieved by countering the dominant neoliberal digital narrative and, at the same time, providing progressive alternatives. Towards this, the civil society configuration that is expected to emerge as a result of the proposed intervention will play an important role, along with other factors and developments.

The workshop is being organised with the support of, and in partnership with, Karibu Foundation, Our World Is Not For Sale network and Focus on the Global South.

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