Asia Pacific Regional Internet Governance Forum 2021 Synthesis Document

Preamble

1. The Asia Pacific Regional Internet Governance Forum (APrIGF) 2021 was held in a hybrid format, virtually, and physically hosted in Kathmandu, Nepal[1] with two local hubs in India[2]. The overarching theme for APrIGF 2021 was *"Towards an Inclusive, Sustainable and Trusted Internet*". The main theme incorporated three high-level thematic tracks, namely "Inclusion", "Sustainability", and "Trust".

2. The APrIGF 2021 thematic tracks were designed to encompass various sub-topics under each track. The 2021 thematic tracks were a departure from the past APrIGF themes which had been more specific and descriptive[3].

3. The use of high-level thematic tracks was to enable discussions on cross-cutting issues related to Internet Governance in the Asia Pacific region. This allowed the APrIGF community to recognise and appreciate the complexity and interrelated nature of diverse Internet Governance issues and understand their significance at a policy level in all economies across the region. Thus, the APrIGF Multistakeholder Steering Group (MSG) adopted a more flexible and all-encompassing approach to the design of the APrIGF 2021 program. In doing so, APrIGF 2021 session organisers and participants were encouraged to approach policy discussions creatively in an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary manner.

[1] https://aprigf.org.np
[2] Two local hubs: One in Punjab, India, and the other in Hyderabad, India https://ap.rigf.asia/news/2021/aprigf-2021-local-hubs-2/
[3] APrIGF 2021 Themes and subthemes: https://ap.rigf.asia/news/2021/overarching-theme-towards-an-inclusive-sustainable-and-trusted-Internet/

Inclusion

4. Inclusion means to leave no one behind. The issue of digital inclusion is multidimensional in nature, it includes social, economic, legal, technological, and human rights issues, amongst others.

5. In the context of Internet governance, inclusion is taking actions to facilitate accessibility, affordability, and equity in Internet connectivity, as well as improving the awareness, skills, and opportunities for people using the Internet in ways that best suit their needs. Inclusion is also the meaningful participation of diverse stakeholders, especially marginalized, minority, and

underserved communities, ensuring that all voices are treated equally in the multistakeholder agenda-setting and decision-making processes. The inherent diversity and vast geographic scale of the Asia Pacific region presents a daunting challenge to ensure digital connectivity and inclusion for everyone[4].

- Diversity across the personal identity and needs of every individual, in different groups, within various communities, linguistic groups, in rural and urban parts of Asia must be considered, as well as the needs of the isolated island states of the region's oceans. In addition, the wide range of technological solutions available to overcome the digital divide, and their varying impact in different economies, must be considered in national and regional planning.

- To enable effective digital inclusion, an overarching and collaborative policy framework for planning is needed[5]. Stakeholders can work together to facilitate the development of integrated national, regional and sectoral plans for infrastructure and services, ensuring that no-one is left behind, supporting access to reliable, uninterrupted and affordable Internet.

- Governments can work together with ISPs and the private sector to achieve affordable Internet access for all, enabling effective public and private partnerships and coordination.

- Community-based network systems, although controversial among stakeholders, can provide more Internet coverage areas.

- Rural and urban areas present different challenges in all countries. Strategic national planning should encourage and facilitate collaboration among all sectors nationally. Strategic regional planning can help equalise progress of developing and developed countries, building on collaboration at national level.

- Partnership, collaboration and knowledge sharing in digital media and information literacy between libraries and other organisations from public, private and people sectors are essential to widen the reach and deepen the understanding of the ever changing information landscape.

- To encourage multi-stakeholder policy-shaping conversation on Internet Governance issues, events like APrIGF and yIGF can serve as a solid platform at local and regional level.

[4] Advancing Internet Freedom in Asia Pacific via applying UNESCO's Internet Universality ROAM Principles and Indicators
[5] https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Six-Stories-of-Resilience_Digital-Technologies-as-Drivers-of-Development-in-the-Covid-19-Era_9-30-21.pdf

Digital information literacy and E-education

6. The Internet is an indispensable platform for delivery of library and information services. Urban and rural libraries are publicly funded, inclusive of all age groups, genders, ethnicities, permanent residents and migrants as well as all sectors of the community, they are safe for all, including vulnerable users. Libraries support users in developing competencies such as media literacy to identify and discard online mis/disinformation, disseminate e-learning, encourage use of e-services and assist in bridging the gender digital divide by empowering people with digital literacy skills.[6] Services provided are responsive to the communities' needs[7]. In all cases, services are provided using facilities and technologies physically accessible to the communities, where people live and in the languages that they speak, including minority and indigenous languages. Services place an emphasis on net-safety, particularly for children and youth. Information services offered in collaboration with the education system place emphasis on developing skills for critical assessment of online information.

7. The global pandemic of COVID-19 highlights the essential need of e-education for both educators and students. Virtual classrooms, online distribution of teaching materials, provision of necessary software and tools and other adaptive or innovative measures require an enabling and supporting legal environment. Copyright rules that impair e-education and other public information services should be reformed and balanced both to protect intellectual property in the rush for the development of online courses and be responsive to needs. Cost is another significant roadblock, e-education must be extended at an affordable price to especially to children and youth in underserved, under-resourced, remote and rural communities.

8. Significant state resources are devoted to government programmes taking an integrated approach to rolling out digital services in all domains, including gathering and assessing data on the progressive extension of connectivity. In the case of Nepal, participants noted the positive outcomes of a number of programmes and initiatives: the excellent support which was provided by the Ministry of Education through its ICT in Education Masterplan up to 2017, the work of the READ Nepal program in collecting data about public and community libraries and in promoting digital literacy[8]. Conference participants noted with approval the number of cyber safety training programmes offered by ISOC Nepal and other civil society organisations aimed at children and youth - and at their parents.

9. Digital information literacy programmes in Australia, Singapore and Nepal - despite the great differences among these countries - all reveal acute awareness of community needs and the effective action being taken to meet these needs at the conjunction of education services,

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[6] WS: Building digital information literacy skills for trust and well-being.

[7] Examples shown were the services provided to remote rural communities, including indigenous communities in Australia; services to communities in the high-density city state of Singapore and the services to communities in Nepal, a land-locked developing country.

[8] It was noted however that mobile Internet penetration and the quality of service providers was still inadequate. The conference was informed that the public libraries in Nepal need further training, and coordination between ICT personnel and library staff. However positive progress has been made: READ has conducted free training in community libraries for digital information literacy (the use of hardware and software, and understanding how to critically evaluate the quality of information found through use of media apps).

information services and Internet access. Progress can be made by these three sectors working in collaboration with national authorities, and where national resources are insufficient then collaboration with external partners is the solution.

10. E-education case studies from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan[9] look at strategies in Central Asia to deal with challenges in education posed by the COVID-19 pandemic especially with children and youth in remote and rural communities. Some of the solutions look at delivering educational materials in local languages through offline digital libraries[10]. Capacity building and training for educators (as well as parents in the case of younger children) is needed to provide students with adequate support during online and hybrid forms of education. Lack of devices is cited as a common challenge in the region; in Vietnam it is estimated that there are about 1.5 million children who do not have enough digital devices and telecommunication services to access online education. Strategic public-private partnerships can provide potential solutions to bridge the digital divide in terms of Internet connectivity, provision of devices[11], and skills training.

Capacity building and Internet Governance processes

11. The COVID-19 pandemic has also significantly disrupted most capacity building initiatives. There are formidable challenges that newcomers face in joining global, regional, and national Internet Governance processes. Schools on Internet Governance (SIGs)[12] provide one of the most effective means of onboarding new talent and making them participate effectively in Internet Governance.

12. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit most SIGs adversely. Some schools have adapted to a hybrid format, leading to compressed schedules and reduced interactions among participants (an important consideration in creating a community of alumni). Some schools have adopted innovations to overcome some of these challenges, including “Meet-and-greet” sessions for Fellows, extensive mentor sessions, and inter-sessional lectures for covering specific topics in depth. The pandemic has also seen the creation of a fully virtual SIG targeted at global audiences.

13. Some SIGs that used extensively interactive methodologies (such as simulating multistakeholder processes) have creatively adapted different methodologies including closer integration with actual IG events.

14. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the Internet indispensable for the day-to-day lives of people. The breadth and depth of the use of the Internet call for greater participation by all

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[9] WS: Helping kids learn in times of pandemic
[10] Such as Ilimbox in Kyrgyzstan https://isoc.kg/ilimbox/
[11] The Prime Minister of Vietnam launched ‘Internet Connection and Computers for Students’ to provide disadvantaged children with computers. The program aims to support over 1 million students by the end of 2021 https://english.mic.gov.vn/Pages/TinTuc/148893/Poor-students-to-access-the-internet-thanks-to-special-programme.html
[12] WS: The Impact of the Global Pandemic on Schools on Internet Governance

stakeholders in the governance of the Internet. The role of SIGs is therefore even more important in the post-COVID-19 world.

Online hate speech and content moderation

15. Online hate speech and disinformation are on the rise in South and Southeast Asia. While the two issues have often been discussed separately as distinct problems, in recent years, hate speech has increasingly manifested through disinformation where its content is based on non-factual information or includes false allegations. Further, the context-dependent nature of hate speech content has made identifying it challenging. Amid gaps in legislation and shortfalls in online platforms' content moderation in addressing the complexity of online hate speech and disinformation in the region[13], a bottom-up, citizen-centered approach, such as using human experts to conduct fact-checking and diversifying online news flows are crucial to foster healthier debate and improve quality of content online. While necessary, these actions alone will not be sufficient in countering online hate speech and disinformation considering the speed and volume with which they are produced and distributed. It is important that fact-checking organizations form partnerships with online platforms, local media organizations, and other relevant intermediaries to scale the fact-checking effort. Alongside promoting media and information literacy, more research needs to be done to better bring together manual and automated approaches to content moderation toward human-in-the-loop systems.

16. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is now widely used by all governments for surveillance and by Internet platforms to detect, categorize and remove harmful online content at scale. In practice, AI systems are beset with serious methodological, technical and ethical challenges.[14] Considerations on how these systems and algorithms can be better trained in order to facilitate a better online environment include looking at indicators and measurements to gauge the maturity of the technology and improve algorithmic accountability. A sustainable multistakeholder collaboration that can keep pace with the constantly evolving nature of online hate speech needs to be rooted in a rights-respecting approach that can meaningfully support offline efforts to prevent violence, protect the freedom of expression and build societal cohesion.

17. Regarding harmful content on the Internet, participants noted that governments are increasingly using criminal law to regulate online behaviour and this has implications for freedom of expression and access to the Internet, especially for communities who are marginalized on the basis of their gender, ethnicity, class, migrant status. Equally, criminal law is increasingly being considered to protect marginalised communities against hate speech.[15] Case studies from Nepal, Malaysia, Taiwan and Sri Lanka looked at protectionist laws around online gender-based violence and freedom of expression, and opaque methods of online censorship performed in tandem by governments and platform companies.

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[13] WS: Citizen-Centered Approach on Tackling Hate Speech, Hindering State Authoritarianism and Algorithmic Censorship of Tech Platforms
[14] WS: More than wor(l)ds : Can AI effectively monitor online harms?
[15] WS: Transnational conversations on reclaiming freedom of expression online

18. A question was raised on how macroeconomic ideologies and the platform economy shape access, expression, and experience of violence on the Internet of women, and queer and trans people in Asia Pacific as well as the strategies beyond laws, policies and content moderation that could be used to reclaim the Internet.

Human rights and COVID-19

19. Participants agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic has posed a fundamental challenge for governments[16], in that they need to reconcile the imperative to deploy huge resources efficiently to roll out large-scale public health programs, with the need to respect democracy and the right to privacy.

20. It was also noted that governments can place temporary restrictions on some human rights, with respect to tracing and tracking technologies to control the Covid-19 pandemic and ensure the fundamental right to health and life. Rights such as rights to privacy, freedom of movement to name a few, were affected by lockdowns, travel restrictions, restrictions on movement, quarantine requirements, the closure of workplaces, schools and sites of economic activity, among other things. Many decisions have been outsourced to the private sector in the development of these tracing applications. This raises the question of the role the private sector has in developing safeguards to ensure privacy rights.

Sustainability

21. The evolution of the Internet and its applications has facilitated the development of the digital economy and substantial advancement in science, agriculture, health and education. It is critical that these technological advancements are used to facilitate the present requirements as well as consider future environmental, human and social requirements for a sustainable world. Strong, ethical, democratic and sustainable governance of the Internet will in turn render the Internet better able to support the Sustainable Development Goals and rights of all people. Sustainability is crucial in national, regional and sectoral planning of the global effects and outcomes of technology and its innovations. Awareness about the environmental impact of the increasing demand for electricity and electronic devices using the Internet could support the necessary sustainable transformation of our societies.

22. Participants discussed the Internet's impact on the environment, what has been done so far to reduce that impact, its resilience, the role that Internet-related technologies play to help to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the role that different stakeholders play in creating a sustainable world, as well as the policies put in place that remedy the damage caused to the environment preventing further deterioration.

23. The potential of the Internet and ICT to monitor climate change and reduce our carbon footprint makes the target of net-zero emissions achievable.[17] Energy saving by cloud computing could

[16] WS: Human rights impact of Covid-19 technologies and the role of businesses
[17] WS: Critical Times: Impact of Digitalization on Climate Change

potentially offset the carbon footprint of electricity generation. Technologies enabled by the Internet for remote monitoring for conservation purposes also bring a net benefit to the environment. Solar energy farms on isolated small islands[18] have not only enhanced the quality of the air on these island environments, without the use of hazardous fossil fuels to power old generators, but the new power source has enabled 24×7 use of green technologies for health and education, with cleaner and less expensive power generation which supports a further reduction in any climate change impacts.

24. In the discussion of the impact of digitalization on climate change, the following recommendations were made for possible implementation through policy and regulations that can ensure a green economy for the Asia Pacific region:

- Raising public awareness regarding carbon footprints and climate change
- Collaboration on policy dialogue[19] among the nations for creating the green economy together
- Developing Green ICT policies for ICT sustainability

Sustainability of the Internet's core infrastructure

25. As a final comment on sustainability, it was considered that the principles behind the Internet's core infrastructure: the importance of security, reliability and resilience, and the open and interoperable nature of the infrastructure are the key[20] technical features that underpin the Internet's success. Therefore, these technical factors in the current Internet's success will no doubt help us determine if the Internet is fit for purpose for the future.

Trust

26. Trust calls for striking a good balance between security and people's fundamental rights and freedoms. The security, stability, and resilience of the Internet is critical to ensure that users benefit from a healthy digital environment. Trust in the Internet and its infrastructure is built by ensuring that the interest and security of people is assured. A human-centric approach and a human rights-based approach is needed to guarantee development for all. Collectively, stakeholders must work towards a safe, reliable, and trustworthy cyberspace that enables the fair use of the Internet without compromising on user safety, security of personal data, rights and mutual respect.

27. Alongside traditional cybersecurity concerns, the role of data is an increasingly pressing topic when discussing trust online. Data has become an important resource for the digital economy and data-driven technology and applications. Incidents of data and privacy leakage in recent years have decreased users' confidence[21] in ICT platforms, while use and selling of personal

[18] Ibid
[19] Ibid
[20] Showcase: The Internet's Technical Success Factors
[21] WS: Weaponization of surveillance amid a pandemic in South East Asia

data for economic purposes have fostered feelings of being monitored and have risked user trust. User awareness of rights to personal information, data, and privacy, is increasing and allowing for more informed discussions. Enhanced cybersecurity, cyber resilience and good digital literacy tools help people better understand and address the key risks that both new and experienced users face online, such as online scams, phishing attacks, and identity theft. However, challenges remain and all stakeholders must work together to find solutions to achieve balance and trust.

28. Policy decisions around the region can impact the Internet positively and contribute to its growth as an enabler and a force for good for APAC societies and economies. At the same time, legal measures[22] can have a technical impact to undermine a core technology, encryption, that underpin the Internet's security, and the security of everyone on the Internet or create opportunities for wider surveillance and data collection, more potent cyberattacks, and greater online abuse.

29. These come at a time of APAC's ever growing reliance on the Internet to deliver government services and respond to citizens' needs; for businesses to reach customers and markets; and as an overall lifeline in a world increasingly shaped by the ongoing pandemic. It is important to ask what the roles and responsibilities of governments, industry, civil society, and other stakeholders are to maintain trust in Internet governance.

30. The challenges that spur these policies are important, but these are broad and long-standing societal problems predating the Internet. Across the region, there are a number of examples where policy is evolving including intermediary liability, end-to-end encryption, and online hate speech.

Intermediary Liability

31. The need to balance the fundamental freedom of speech and expression in view of the violence and harms caused due to the actions of people through intermediaries has sparked a range of action across the region. With India, Malaysia, Indonesia and others exploring regulations or ordinances in this space, what are the challenges and concrete recommendations for implementing Intermediary Liability principles[23] in the Asia Pacific? Some countries have pushed for stringent enforcement of laws relating to classification and elimination of fake news to ensure that the safety of citizens is protected while also maintaining the intermediary liability of the major online spaces. This approach has also raised concerns around freedom of expression, with some prompting the need for comprehensive frameworks to recognize the cross-border nature of platforms and address the issue in a balanced and comprehensive way.

[22] Showcase: Is the Internet trusted forever? — The issue about the pirate site on "Manga" and freedom of expression in Japan.
[23] WS: Don't shoot the messenger, intermediary liability principles under threat

Encryption

32. Recent developments related to the End to End Encryption (E2E) debate in the Asia Pacific[24] include the Amendments in TOLA in Australia; the Indian Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021; and encryption issues related to CSAM. This complexity of the encryption debate calls for further deliberation and a look at the adequacy of initiatives taken so far. More needs to be done to increase encryption literacy among lawmakers and citizenry to ensure a rich discussion and informed decision making. Simplifying the encryption debate to make it non-technical and easier for the ordinary person to understand will go a long way in protecting the E2E in the APAC region while engaging with those sectors and individuals most impacted, such as finance, banking, and journalism, will ensure more meaningful progress can be made. Encryption has a wide range of applications, so any debate to increase, maintain, or restrict the use of encryption needs to be set against the wider regional context, including efforts to increase Internet accessibility, security, and trust.

Routing Security

33. The Internet plays an essential role in the majority of societies around the world. From banking to education, health to logistics, just about every sector relies on Internet-based applications and services to function. The interconnected nature of networks means that many solutions only work when other networks make the same improvements, and nowhere is this truer than with routing security. By its nature, routing security requires collective action to make a real change. For policy makers to understand and engage with technical standard best practices[25] to address technical challenges and security threats, policymakers need to work with network and infrastructure operators, critical infrastructure protection agencies and standards bodies, among others, to improve global routing security while also preserving vital aspects of the system that have allowed the Internet to be open and universal.[26]

Data

34. ICT and the Internet have played an important role in pandemic prevention and response, as well as a positive role in keeping people socially connected during social distancing. At the same time, in response to COVID-19, many governments implemented new surveillance measures including privacy-intrusive contact tracing applications, databases, and surveillance-expanding policies.[27] While these are supposedly temporary measures taken during a state of pandemic emergency, there are legitimate concerns that they may become permanent and, in turn, facilitate function creep with their original purpose being progressively extended to perform long-term surveillance and policing. Further, as registration in centralized databases becomes mandatory for individuals to obtain public services and for businesses requiring a copy of digital vaccination record from service users, risks of data-based discrimination and privacy invasion

[24] WS: Decrypting the encryption debate in Asia Pacific
[25] WS: MANRS for Policy Makers to improve global routing security
[26] Ibid
[27] WS: Weaponization of surveillance amid a pandemic in South East Asia

are growing. Several cases of COVID-19-related data breaches in the region pointed to the security risks of having massive sensitive data centralized in government databases. To avoid post-pandemic normalization and weaponization of surveillance, it's essential that the introduction of emergency surveillance measures, from policies to technologies, includes sunset provisions which articulate when and how they will be withdrawn, and how the data collected will be deleted or stored. In the absence of a robust data protection regime, governments should ensure that data technologies are designed in conformity with privacy-preserving protocols and that data protection impact assessment be regularly conducted.

Regulatory developments and inclusive economic growth

35. In Asia, jurisprudence developed around laws and regulatory developments[28] has significantly shaped the experience of digital rights and impacted the infrastructure, architecture and experience of the Internet.[29] Developing laws rooted in principles and predictability, an informed judiciary, vigilant in upholding the rights of individuals contributes significantly to the building of an inclusive, rights-respecting, trusted, and sustainable Internet.

36. Online platforms are delivering cost savings, efficiency, and value creation that can be leveraged to achieve an array of positive development goals from inclusive economic growth, to improved health and welfare of marginalized populations, to women's empowerment.[30] Internet usage could come with adverse effects if abused or overused. Having the capability to address the risks aspect of individual digital wellbeing should be part of user literacy for maintaining the trust of the Internet. The Internet has proven to be a force for good: it has empowered society and individuals during the global pandemic and has increased communities' resilience in terms of the ability to plan, prepare, communicate and support each other.

[28] https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/jurisprudence-shaping-digital-rights-south-asia
[29] WS: Internet Rules: Judicial and Regulatory developments impacts digital rights in Asia
[30] WS: Digitally-led, Inclusive Growth in the Age of COVID-19

Appendix I

Public Comment platform - https://comment.aprigf.asia/

Public Comment matrix - https://igf.asia/syndocmatrix2021

Appendix II

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