People Centered Approach to Digital Transformation: What are the respective roles for citizens and the private and public sector?

Moderator: Kate Wilson, Senior Fellow, People Centered Internet

Countries around the globe are on a digital transformation journey. From investments in foundational digital public infrastructure (e.g., identity, financial services, health) to investments in cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and advanced data analytics, there is a recognition that if we are to achieve the SDGs and deliver services to citizens, digital is essential. However, these efforts are driven predominantly by the public and private sector with few examples of citizen consent being considered and consistently incorporated into the debate. This panel will feature countries who have built this precept into their digital thinking and introduce you to how their input is incorporated into government prioritization and regulation. Panelists will also share their recommendations for new mechanisms (e.g., digital sandbox, community networks), which can address these challenges.

The initial event on this topic took place as part of the event of the UN Science Summit Sessions on "Key Challenges and Objectives for Digital Cooperation, Governance and Regulation" (Link to recording). The 9th edition of the Science Summit around the 78th United Nations General Assembly (SSUNGA78) took place from 12-29 September 2023. The People Centered Internet (PCI) organized nine sessions in conjunction with the International Science Council from Sept 20-22 to discuss the future of digital in achieving the SDGs. The sessions took a people centered approach; this means to discuss how scientific and digital collaboration can only be advanced through human feedback loops. The People Centered Internet sessions explored the parameters of this approach focusing on specific use cases where this is needed to achieve the SDGs and discussing the recommended enabling policy, regulatory, and financial environments, that are required to support genuinely global scientific collaborations across continents, nations, and themes. Speakers from each panel summarized the most important results in a stocktaking (Link).

Speakers

- Teki Akuetteh, Director of Public Policy, Vulcan Inc.

- Nicolas Comini, Head Policy Strategy and Operations, Latam, META

- Nele Leosk, Ambassador-at-Large for Digital Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia

- Robert Opp, Chief Digital Officer, UNDP

- Pramod Varma, Chief Technology Officer, EkStep Foundation

Summary of People Centered Approach to Digital Transformation

Prepared by Christine Asjoma, Convenor of the Panel Series "Key Challenges and Objectives for Digital Cooperation, Governance and Regulation"

Countries around the world are on a wide-ranging journey of digital transformation. We should not get too lost in technology, but rather focus on the social change that comes with it, stated Nele Leosk. This social transformation is a global transformation that enables all countries to take control and shape their digital future, with a focus on inclusion and local engagement. This panel session looked at five themes: Building Trust, Governance and Data, Inclusion, forming the necessary partnerships and encouraging people to contribute to the digital ecosystem.

During the discussion, it was emphasized how important it is for countries to take their digital future into their own hands. Teki Akuetteh from Ghana showed how new technologies can help Africa to transform itself from a commodity producer to an innovation leader. Africa's digital ID systems, for example, give people access to financial resources and markets. It is important to align technology with the development agenda.

For India, too, digitalization means inclusion, access to goods and services and access to opportunities. Pramod Varma explained that in a country with 109 languages, digitalization is a necessity. However, the government itself has little capacity, which is why much must be outsourced to the private sector. Pramod Varma and Nicolas Comini spoke in favor of public-private partnerships, where the government focuses on the essentials and allows the private sector and civil society to drive integration through innovation. Robert Opp also noted that countries that invested in inclusive solutions from the outset during the coronavirus crisis had great advantages.

Because at the end of the day, it is the private sector network framed by state regulation that will help to develop, maintain, and build on new applications. This is the only way to create a long-term local ecosystem that will keep the digital ecosystem alive.