

WORLD SERIES EVENTS ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Event 11 Report

How to enable everyone to shape and benefit from digitalisation? Technology for Development

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ConfTech Lab, Geneva (CH) /
online

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This event is part of a series of dialogues titled “From Geneva: Reflections on digital future”. This panel discussion was facilitated by the Geneva Internet Platform (GIP) in partnership with the European Union Delegation to the United Nations in Geneva, the Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the UN in Geneva and the Permanent Mission of Slovenia to the UN in Geneva.

Read the full transcript of the event [here](#).

Abstract

The social and economic divides caused by digitalization have recently gained growing attention by the development cooperation sector. As such, the rollout of digital devices and infrastructure and digital capacity building programs are increasingly regarded as key solutions for contemporary development challenges. Yet, how can we ensure that everyone can shape and benefit from digitalization?

In the first part of the event (moderated by **Tereza Hořejšová** / GIP), four panelists were asked to express their opinion. The panelists noted that the development, deployment and use of digital technologies must come with a careful consultation with local communities and consideration of their social, political and economic realities. Invitees included:

- **Nanjira Sambuli:** Fellow at Technology and International Affairs Program at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
- **Nur Sulyna Abdullah:** Chief at Digital Knowledge Hub Department at International Telecommunication Union (ITU)
- **Jonas Bausch:** Youth Employment Officer at International Labor Organization (ILO)
- **Dr. Jovan Kurbalija:** Head at Geneva Internet Platform (GIP)

In the second part of the event (moderated by **Amb. Lotte Knudsen** / Delegation of EU to UN), the dialogue series “From Geneva: Reflections on digital future” has been wrapped up. Four high-level speakers formulated their concluding remarks on how we can truly harness the benefits of digital technologies and mitigate their potential risks. Speakers included:

- **Amb. Tadej Rupel:** National Coordinator for External Aspects of Digitalization, AI & Cybersecurity of the Republic of Slovenia
- **Eamon Gilmore:** European Union Special Representative for Human Rights
- **Maria-Francesca Spatolisano:** Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs at the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)
- **Amb. Benedikt Wechsler:** Head of Digital Division at Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland (FDFA)



Key points of the panel discussion

Introduction: Technology for development

In the previous three episodes, we have been hearing about various aspects of digitalization which, for many of us, have become part of our daily lives. With banking services going digital, mobile apps tracking our ecological footprint and a growing number of jobs moving online, the digital revolution is continuously seeping through. Yet, “2.9B people have never ever connected to the internet, of which 96% are in the Global South”, notes Sulyna, pointing at the widening social inequality exacerbated by our growing dependence on digital technologies.

How can we bridge this digital divide? And how can we make sure that everyone can truly shape and benefit from the technologies? The panelists have addressed a whole list of challenges, including (1) anchoring technologies into local realities, (2) implementing effective capacity development schemes, (3) adopting sustainable funding strategies and (4) taking all stakeholders onboard.

Anchoring technologies into local realities

Over the past decades, development aid programmes have repeatedly sought to come up with groundbreaking technologies to solve complex developmental challenges. However, such practices of “leapfrogging” (where areas are expected to undergo quick economic development through technological development) fail to account for the gradual character of development trajectories, as emphasized by Nanjira: “We cannot talk about universal access to the internet, for example, without having universal access to reliable energy. As much as you want to use the latest available technology to connect the unconnected, the reality is they will still need a way to be connected to charge the device”.

Therefore, while striving to bridge the digital divide between world regions, the contextual aspects to the implementation of technologies should not be neglected: “Whatever barriers we promise to address, we should not fail to take account of the local social and economic realities”.

Jovan concurs that, for digital technologies like connectivity platforms, it is particularly important to embed them into the social and cultural context: “It matters more than in the case of agricultural machines, big power plants and innovations along these lines. With digital technologies, we are impacting local social and cultural contexts”. Thereby, he accentuates that oftentimes it is difficult to gather information about African local contexts, especially knowledge that is produced by citizens of Africa themselves: “Less than 5% on Wikipedia are provided by people from Africa”, he notes. Having investigated the motives behind the low representation of African content in the digital sphere, he adds that a large part of it can merely be drawn back to a variety of “tacit and unknown complexities related to the local social and economic dynamics”. In the case of Wikipedia contributions, he notes that the average university professor in Africa will much rather publish a book to earn an income for their living instead. Therefore, Nanjira emphasizes the importance of establishing connections with and involving local communities in the design and deployment of technologies: “Whenever you say you want to roll out a tech for development project in Africa, remember that the person who’s the ultimate expert here is the African”.

Implementing effective capacity development schemes

As mentioned by multiple panelists, digitalization is reshaping millions of jobs globally. While most jobs require basic digital skills such as the ability to communicate via e-mail, search for information and create digital documents, there is also a growing demand for training in advanced digital technologies. Therefore, all panelists

emphasize the importance of capacitating the workforce in today's digital society.

Jovan finds that, while substantial efforts have been made in the Global South to work on individual capacity development, institutional capacity development has been largely untended. According to him, “we have made a devolution because we simplified capacity development as just individual training”. As such, the digital sector could not fully strengthen its vision, structure, and performance management practices. Nanjira adds, however, that the last couple of years have seen a rising share of the workforce reaching out to self-taught methods instead – to acquire their digital skills. Still, she warns that current digital skilling schemes often “reek of the same old developmentalism”, whereby the trainings clearly showcase “who is posited as the purveyor of the skills and who is the recipient”. Referring to the example of cybersecurity trainings, she adds that local communities may, in fact, “know better ways to run cybersecurity than we actually think about in how we have structure the skilling programmes”.

Jonas adds that oftentimes, the upgrading of technology might not even lead to more jobs on a net basis. Therefore, before facilitating digital skilling trainings, we should ask ourselves: “Is this programme even training young people for jobs that are out there?”. “We should be honest to ourselves in terms of what the opportunities are”, he suggests, pointing at the importance of the demand-driven character of capacity development schemes. Investments in capacity development should therefore be geared, most of all, towards specific digital skills for specific sectors.

Sulyna notes that “young people of today are often referred to as digital natives”. Yet, according to [ITU's most recent report on digital development](#), a third of the youth (aged between 15–24) in developing countries are in fact not even connected to the internet, with another substantial share having access only to a very intermittent

internet connection. Our increased dependence on digital skills therefore undermines our efforts to bridge global divides, as indicated by Sulyna: While some workers lack financial resources or training opportunities to acquire digital skills, others simply cannot access the internet at all.

Adopting sustainable funding strategies

Talking about ways to guarantee funding for a better digital cooperation, Jovan argues in favor of a simplification of the funding procedure. “Obviously, you must deal with the misuse of money”, he notes. “However, there are different ways than to have this robust reporting scheme, which can take energy off small organisations like start-up companies, which should ultimately be the carrier of the dynamics on the ground”, claims Jovan. Nanjira counters that current funding schemes are growingly disintegrated: “We end up in this situation where we’re talking about what MacKenzie Scott does to determine the digital skilling of an entire country”.

Sulyna accentuates that “only when we have data, are we able to pinpoint where the problem is. Only then, we can put those resources to something that’s really required”. She acknowledges, however, that the challenge with developing digital skill strategies or programmes is “often not knowing what exactly the skills gap is”. Therefore, Sulyna points at the importance of data to undertake an effective skill assessment: “Countries need this data to address the gaps, such that their strategies are evidence-based”. Jonas adds that such skill assessments should be conducted in close consultation with local experts: “We should not be evoking the stereotype that the implementation is what is happening together with local partners, while the analytical part is about bringing in experts from outside”. Instead, we should focus on involving local universities and research partners in the region.

Taking all stakeholders onboard

Jonas observes that a growing share of digitally skilled workers in his focus area end up working on digital labour platforms, providing them with an opportunity to make a living from the digital skills they have obtained. However, there are some major concerns to be pointed at, as he notes: “They have very little opportunity to grow and progress. They have very little agency about their work. Their social security situation is also very unclear”. Moreover, considering that a fair share of these platforms (e.g., ride hailing platforms, mobile banking platforms, etc.) are, in fact, owned by companies abroad. As a result, he warns: “Qualified workforces from the Global South end up working for online platforms owned by companies abroad under terms and conditions that are – at best – not very clearly defined”. Therefore, policy should ensure that such jobs come with a decent wage, and a right for workers to bargain and organize themselves. Jovan adds that most African nations «don’t have competition authorities like you have in the European Union, the United States, China, or bigger countries in general.

This makes smaller and traditional businesses more vulnerable to big foreign platforms». Moreover, while efforts are being made to find global solutions to regulating this vulnerability, Nanjira stresses that while “tools like these webinars are legitimate ways to build on capacity, exchange, insights, or peer learning”, “big countries like Kenya and Nigeria are not pulling their weight in global fora”.

Sulyna acknowledges that “policy and regulation definitely is key to everything”, but counters: “In a digital space, a policymaker and a regulator try to put artificial barriers in space”. With substantial risks to stifle innovation, we are trying to regulate digital applications and services in a “space where it’s difficult”. It’s like releasing the Pokémons, she adds: “The Pokémons have been released – and now you’re trying to catch them back”.

Concluding remarks

The subject of digital technologies is not a monolithic theme: “It must be broken down into all the normal policies and activities of governance today”, notes Lotte. As such, the dialogues have been broken down into various areas of focus: The episode in September focused on the human-centricity of today’s data economy. Next, the episode in October focused on the use of digital technologies for environmental protection. Another episode in November centered on how AI can power global health. Finally, this event hosted a dialogue revolving around technology for development. In the final part of this event, four high-level speakers have therefore been asked by Lotte to give a concluding remark on how we can “get the best out of this digital transition while ringfencing its potential risks”.

Maria-Francesca Spatolisano (Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination & Inter-Agency Affairs at UN DESA) notes that “the topics that have been addressed during the series are key timely issues that will impact our lives, rights, and livelihoods of people around the world in a foreseeable future”. While AI, for example, presents a tremendous opportunity for people’s health, she emphasizes that we should not forget about how such technologies are also hampered by their potential for misdiagnoses, discrimination bias and other harmful consequences. This is why the [UN’s Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#) puts a special emphasis on both harnessing the potentials of such technologies and mitigating their associated risks. Aiming to reinvigorate inclusive networks and effective multilaterals, the UN will seek to seize the 2023 edition of the Summit of the Future as an opportunity to launch a [Global Digital Compact](#). “Let us resist the growing pressures to create silos within the online space. Let us resist the temptation to retreat into exclusive like-minded clubs”, she urges.

Instead, Spatolisano proposes to gather international bodies, civil society organizations and tech companies to convene in the Global Digital Compact – an opportunity to “join forces in defining our digital future”.

Eamon Gilmore (EU Special Representative for Human Rights) highlights that the EU has a longstanding history of advocating for human rights, by means of funding and bilateral dialogues. Yet, with the emergence of digital technologies, the platforms on which human rights are exercised is now different. While the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Digital Services Act already provide online platforms with a clear set of obligations addressing issues like hate speech and due diligence, the EU is preparing [further human rights-based legislation](#) aimed at “regulating the design, development, deployment, evaluation and use of AI”. According to Eamon, “a robust human rights-based framing of digital issues is the only formula which will enable us to have a sustainable development of technology, which in turn serves all of humanity.”

Amb. Tadej Rupe (National Coordinator for External Aspects of Digitalization, AI & Cybersecurity of the Republic of Slovenia) brings forwards that digital affairs have been at the core of Slovenia’s 6-month EU presidency. During the presidency, he notes that a strong emphasis has been put on closing divides across the globe: “The pandemic has shown that uneven digital development has widened the digital divide”. As an example to counter such trends, he mentions the [Digital For Development \(D4D\) Hub](#) for Latin America and the Caribbean, a multi-stakeholder coordination platform aimed at stepping up digital cooperation with the region and promoting a human-centric digital transformation.

Amb. Benedikt Wechsler (Head of Digital Division at Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland) concludes that the promotion of human-centric technologies also generate the most trust: “People have to see and feel directly. They should know what is it that this digital age is bringing to them personally”. However, to find out what people can truly benefit from the digitalization that is seeping through their daily lives, various stakeholders have to be taken onboard and gathered in a common dialogue. Thereby, the Swiss Digital Ambassador commends the myriad of digital governance actors found in Geneva for progressively taking on a multi-stakeholder approach. In the subsequent part of his concluding remark, the Swiss Digital Ambassador goes on enumerating a list of examples which he presents as the result of effective multi-stakeholdership such as the [Giga](#) initiative (by ITU and UNICEF), the [Humanitarian Data and Trust Initiative](#) (by ICRC and OCHA) and the [Policy Network on Environment](#) (PNE) by IGF.

Click [here](#) for the full transcript of the event.

Quotes



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Nanjira Sambuli, Fellow at Technology and International Affairs Program at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

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Jonas Bausch, Youth Employment Officer at International Labor Organization (ILO)

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“Any approach should be started off by anchoring it to the really subtle, tacit understandings of the local dynamics. This can be done only by locals.”

Dr. Jovan Kurbalija, Head at Geneva Internet Platform (GIP)

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Eamon Gilmore, European Union Special Representative for Human Rights

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“Multi-stakeholder approaches are what can guarantee a more open, accessible, secure and human-centric internet.”

Amb. Lotte Knudsen, Delegation of EU to UN

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“During our presidency, we have learned that real digital transformation begins with the trust of citizens and businesses.”

Amb. Tadej Rupel, National Coordinator for External Aspects of Digitalization, AI & Cybersecurity of the Republic of Slovenia

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“If we look at the myriad of actors in Geneva and the multi-stakeholder approach they have been taking on, we are already on a very good basis. Still, we can improve day by day.”

Amb. Benedikt Wechsler, Head of Digital Division at Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland (FDFA)