

Call to endorse a joint statement by civil society organisations for the UN CSTD meeting on 'Enhanced Cooperation on Public Policy Issues Pertaining to the Internet'

Background Information

As per the UN General Assembly resolution in December 2011, the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development is holding a one day meeting on 'Enhanced Cooperation on Public Policy Issues Pertaining to the Internet' on 18th May in Geneva. This can have critical implications **for democratising the global governance of the Internet**, currently being driven by dominant political and economic interests. It is vital that progressive civil society actors speak up for preserving the egalitarian potential of the Internet, and seek appropriate institutional arrangements for this purpose. (See our campaign for ['Defending the publicness and egalitarian nature of the Internet'](#), in 2008, which was supported by over 110 NGOs and individuals, globally.)

As we all realise, while the real action and impact may be at the micro-level, in the everyday lives of people, increasingly, much of the structural causes of our social challenges and opportunities lie at the global level. One deep structural phenomenon strongly impacting our societies is the Internet and the related larger digital ecology. However, progressive actors have mostly looked only at the opportunities and goodies that the Internet provides, and not so much at it as a larger techno-social construct and at the **key question of 'who and what shapes the Internet today'**. The issue of governance of the global Internet is most significant in this regard.

Developed countries, chiefly the US, using the power of its monopoly Internet companies and other kinds of strategic advantages, are eagerly shaping the Internet as per their narrow interests – economic, political, security and cultural. At the same time, the North has managed to keep developing countries away from the seats of governance of the Internet. For this purpose, they use many different strategies. To many developing countries, they sell the proposition that poorer countries should focus on the immense developmental potential of the Internet, rather than the 'esoteric' question of its global governance. To global civil society, the North has somewhat successfully been able to sell an image of themselves as the protector of freedoms and liberties on the Internet, chiefly the freedom of expression, and that of developing countries as anti-democratic and retrograde, thus arguing that the latter should not be allowed anywhere near the levers of Internet governance. To the technical experts, a powerful constituency in the early days of the Internet, the global North touts the illusion of a bottom-up, user-driven and built Internet, while the fact is that it is the policies and practices of the North, as for example through their active complacency concerning 'net neutrality' (a key egalitarian architectural principle of the Internet), and non-enforcement of competition law vis-a-vis the unprecedented monopolization in the Internet business, that are rapidly eroding the bottom-up nature of the Internet.

Overall, a well orchestrated game is on to keep the control of the Internet in the hands of the Northern political and economic powers (very lopsidedly, US based). Progressive civil society actors, who have otherwise been very active in demanding democratization of global governance, be it in areas of trade, IP, climate change or health, must develop appropriate strategies and responses for the area of global Internet governance as well, which of course is intimately and ever-increasingly linked with all these other global governance arenas. **It is important that progressive actors intervene at this early stage of institutional development in this crucial area.**

We recognise the manner in which most governments, at the national level, have sought **statist controls over the Internet**, and the need for active civil society resistance to such moves. However,

the **dynamics at the global stage of Internet governance also have other significant dimensions**, which are important to understand, and which this joint civil society statement primarily addresses.

The **World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)** in 2005 expressly sought democratisation of global Internet governance and mandated the Secretary General to commence a process in 2006 itself towards 'enhanced cooperation' (a place-holder term for new institutional arrangements) on international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet. Over the last six years, the Northern powers however have not been ready even to formally *discuss* the issue of how to move ahead on this important mandate, much less do something concrete about it. They bluntly refused the demand by many developing countries for a Working Group of the Commission of Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) to discuss the 'enhanced cooperation' issue during negotiations for drafting the ICT and Development resolution by the Second Committee of the UN in November 2012. CSTD is the institution mandated with WSIS follow-up.

However, as a compromise, the 2012 UN General Assembly resolution mandated a one day meeting to be called by the CSTD on 'Enhanced Cooperation on Public Policy Issues Pertaining to The Internet' which will be held in Geneva on the 18th of May. **An impression is actively being created by the dominant interests** (as self-professed champions of freedoms on the Internet) **that civil society is fully supportive of the positions of Northern powers, for more or less maintaining the status quo.** The unfortunate fact is that only a very narrow segment of civil society is engaged with global Internet Governance issues at present. It is important that progressive civil society actors committed to global justice and engaged with the discourse of democratization of global governance stand up and assert that;

- (1) not only civil and political rights, but also economic, social, cultural rights and the right to development, have to be claimed vis-a-vis the governance of the Internet, and**
- (2) the North-centric global governance of the Internet is not acceptable and it should involve all people, groups and countries, and the UN, in an appropriate manner, and with open and inclusive participation of civil society.**
