Global Governance of the Internet must be Democratised!

A joint statement by civil society organisations for the UN CSTD meeting on 'Enhanced Cooperation on Public Policy Issues Pertaining to the Internet' to take place in Geneva on May 18ᵗʰ, 2012

proposed by
Focus on the Global South (Thailand), Instituto Nupef (Brazil), IT for Change (India), Knowledge Commons (India), Other News (Italy), Third World Network (Malaysia),

and endorsed by
organisations and individuals listed at the end of the statement

The Internet is a major force today, restructuring our economic, social, political and cultural systems. Most people implicitly assume that it is basically a beneficent force, needing, if at all, some caution only at the user-end. This may have been true in the early stages when the Internet was created and sustained by benevolent actors, including academics, technologists, and start-up enterprises that challenged big businesses. However, we are getting past that stage now. What used to be a public network of millions of digital spaces, is now largely a conglomeration of a few proprietary spaces. (A few websites like Google, Facebook, Twitter and Amazon together make much of what is considered the Internet by most people today.) We are also moving away from a browser-centric architecture of the 'open' Internet to an applications-driven mobile Internet, that is even more closed and ruled by proprietary spaces (like App Store and Android Market). **In fact, some Internet plans for mobiles come only with a few big websites and applications, without the open 'public' Internet, which is an ominous pointer to what the future Internet may look like.** What started off as a global public resource is well on its way to becoming a set of monopoly private enclosures, and a means for entrenching dominant power. **At this stage, it is crucial to actively defend and promote the Internet's immense potential as a democratic and egalitarian force, including through appropriate principles and policies at the global level.**

Who governs the Internet
It is a myth that *'the Internet is not governed by anyone'*. It is also not a coincidence nor a natural order of things that the Internet, and through it, our future societies, are headed in the way of unprecedented private gate-keeping and rentier-ing. The architecture of the Internet is being actively shaped today by the most powerful forces, both economic and political. A few US based companies increasingly have monopoly control over most of the Internet. The US government itself controls some of the most crucial nodes of the global digital network. **Together, these two forces, in increasing conjunction, are determining the techo-social structure of a new unipolar world.** It is important for progressive actors to urgently address this situation, through seeking globally democratic forms of governance of the Internet.

While the US government and US based monopoly Internet companies already have a close working relationship to support and further each other's power, this relationship is now being formalised through new power compacts; whether in the area of extra-territorial IP enforcement (read, global

economic extraction) through legislations like [SOPA](#) , or in the area of security (read, global extension of coercive power) through cyber-security legislations like [CIPSA](#).

The US government has stubbornly refused to democratise the oversight of the Internet's root server and domain name system, which it controls. While the US pooh-poohs the security concerns expressed by other countries vis-a-vis such unacceptable unilateralism, rather hypocritically, it seeks to contractually obligate the non-profit managing these key infrastructures to appoint its security officials only on US government advice. (The chief security officer of this non-profit body is already, in fact, a sworn member of the 'Homeland Security Advisory Council' of the US!)

Apart from the direct application of US law and whims (think [Wikileaks](#)) over the global Internet, and Internet-based social activity (increasingly a large part of our social existence), default global law is also being written by the clubs of powerful countries that routinely draft Internet policies and policy frameworks today. The OECD and Council of Europe are two active sites of such policy making, covering areas like cyber-security, Internet intermediary liability, search engines, social networking sites etc. Last year, OECD came out with its '[Principles for Internet Policy-Making](#)'. These Principles, heavy on IP enforcement and private policing through large North-based Internet companies, are to guide Internet policies in all OECD countries. Recently, OECD decided to 'invite' other, non-OECD, countries to accede to these Principles. **This is the new paradigm of global governance, where the powerful countries make the laws and the rest of the world must accept and implement them.**

Who is not allowed at the governance table
While Northern countries are very active at Internet related policy- and law-making, which have extra-territorial ambition and reach, they strongly resist any UN based initiative for development of global Internet principles and policies. **This is in keeping with the increasingly common Northern efforts at undermining UN/ multi-lateral frameworks in other global governance arenas** like trade, IP etc. For instance; trying to keep global financial systems out of UNCTAD's purview at the recent [Doha UNCTAD meeting](#), and bringing in [Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement](#)(ACTA) as a new instrument of extra-territorial IP enforcement by the OECD, bypassing WIPO.

The mandate of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) for building a globally democratic space for developing Internet related global policies is quite clear. The WSIS [outcome document](#) states that, "the process towards enhanced cooperation (on Internet-related international public policies), (is) to be started by the UN Secretary-General ... by the end of the first quarter of 2006". However, six years down the line, developed countries do not seem to be willing to even formally discuss how to operationalise this very important WSIS mandate of 'enhanced cooperation', much less do something concrete about it.

OUR DEMAND - Internet Governance must be democratised
We, the undersigned civil society organisations, affirm that the Internet must be governed democratically, with the equal involvement of all people, groups and countries. Its governance systems must be open, transparent and inclusive, with civil society given adequate avenues of meaningful substantive participation. While we denounce statist control over the Internet sought by many governments at national levels, we believe that the struggle at the global level also has significant dynamics of a different kind. **Our demands with respect to 'global' Internet Governance espouse a simple and obvious democratic logic.** On the technical governance side, the oversight of the Internet's critical technical and logical infrastructure, at present with the US government, should be transferred to an appropriate, democratic and participative, multi-lateral body, without disturbing the existing distributed architecture of technical governance of the Internet in any significant way.

(However, improvements in the technical governance systems are certainly needed.) On the side of larger Internet related public policy-making on global social, economic, cultural and political issues, the OECD-based model of global policy making, as well as the default application of US laws, should be replaced by a new UN-based democratic mechanism. Any such new arrangement should be based on the principle of subsidiarity, and be innovative in terms of its mandate, structure, and functions, to be adequate to the unique requirements of global Internet governance. It must be fully participative of all stakeholders, promoting the democratic and innovative potential of the Internet.

The Internet should be governed on the principles of human liberty, equality and fraternity. It should be based on the accepted principle of the indivisibility of human rights; civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and also people's collective right to development. **A rights-based agenda should be developed as an alternative to the current neo-liberal model driving the development of the Internet,** and the evolution of an information society. The UN is the appropriate place for developing and implementing such an alternative agenda. Expedient labelling by the most powerful forces in the Internet arena, of the UN, and of developing countries, as being interested *only* in 'controlling the Internet', and under this cover, continually shaping the architecture of the Internet and its social paradigm to further their narrow interests, is a bluff that must be called.

We demand that a **Working Group of the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) be instituted to explore possible ways of implementing 'enhanced cooperation' for global Internet-related policies**. (Such a CSTD Working Group is also being sought by some developing countries.) 'Enhanced cooperation' must be implemented through innovative multi-lateral mechanisms, that are participatory. Internet policy-making cannot be allowed to remain the preserve of one country or clubs of rich countries. **If the Internet is to promote democracy in the world**, which incidentally is the much touted agenda of the US and other Northern countries, **the Internet itself has, first, to be governed democratically.**

[Click here for the current list of signatories to the joint civil society statement](#)

*****