REPORT ON THE SOUTH ASIA WEBINAR DISCUSSION ON TOWARDS AN ANTI EXTRACTIVE & CIRCULAR TECH SOCIETY & ECONOMY

Date: 18 MARCH 2024

(Monday)

Mode- Virtual (Zoom webinar)

Time- 12 noon to 2 pm IST (6.30 am – 8.30 am UTC)

Organizers

DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT *foundation*

APC ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Council for Social & Digital Development

INTRODUCTION

The Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and The Council for Social and Digital Development (CSDD) jointly hosted a Virtual South Asia Webinar Discussion on 'Towards an Anti-Extractive & Circular Tech Society & Economy.' This webinar explored sustainable and responsible approaches to technology, challenging prevailing extractive and linear models. It raised dialogue among diverse stakeholders on promoting anti-extractive practices, circular design principles, ethical data practices, and inclusive technological innovations. The event aimed to envision a future where technology catalyzes positive social and environmental transformation, rather than continuing unsustainable practices. The Webinar Discussion was held from 12 noon to 2 pm IST (6.30 am – 8.30 am UTC) Online via Zoom Webinar.

WEBINAR GOALS

The primary goals of this Webinar Discussion are:

The webinar aims to facilitate a regional dialogue and experience-sharing platform for three pilot projects undertaken by South - ASIA members of the Association for Progressive Communication (APC). These projects focus on promoting anti-extractive and circular approaches to digital technologies, addressing the environmental and climate impacts resulting from their design, production, use, and disposal.

Specifically, the webinar will highlight the learnings, findings, and initial results from these pilot projects:

1) Building Community Knowledge Archives with Practices for Environmental Sustainability by SERVELOTS Infotech, India;

2) Strengthening Circular Approaches of Digital Technology for Environmental Sustainability by VOICE, Bangladesh; and

3) Tackling Harms of Digital Tech on Environment and Climate by Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), India.

Through this experience-sharing, the webinar seeks to meaningfully address the harms caused by digital technologies on the environment and climate. It will explore transformative approaches that prioritize people and the planet over extractive and unsustainable practices in the digital land.

Furthermore, the webinar aims to engage critical stakeholders, including community organizations, NGOs, and environmental agencies, to understand, realize, adopt, and

advocate for anti-extractive and circular approaches in the digital technology sector. This regional dialogue will contribute to the larger global event discussion on the APC's pilot projects, scheduled for the second week of April 2024, involving all project partners across regions.

RESOURCE PERSONS

The South Asia Webinar Discussion was conducted by a Specialized Professionals comprised of the following speakers: -

1) **Dr. Syed S. Kazi,** Adviser and Consultant, Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), New Delhi, India & Director, Council for Social & Digital Development (CSDD), Guwahati, Assam, India
2) **Mr. Osama Manzar,** Founder & Director**,** Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), New Delhi, India
3) **Mr. T.B. Dinesh,** Founder & Technical Director, Janastu & Co-Founder – Servelots Infotech, Bangalore, Karnataka, India
4) **Mr. Ahmed Swapan Mahmud,** Executive Director, VOICE, Bangladesh

WEBINAR PARTICIPANTS

- Shalini A - Servelots Infotech
- Patience LUYEYE - APC's Associate
- Mohammad Kawsar Uddin - Daily Sangbad, Bangladesh
- Fayaz Ahmad - Advocate
- T.B. Dinesh - Servelots Infotech and Janastu
- Avis MOMENI - PROTEGE QV
- Shanti Pada Saha - VOICE, Bangladesh
- Khadizakhatun - আগামী স্বপ্ন, Bangladesh
- Hameedullah Shaik - Servelots Infotech
- Bhargav - Anant University
- S. NAGABRAHMA CHARY- SEED NGO
- Rahul Choudhary - Digital Empowerment Foundation
- Mursaleem - Digital Empowerment Foundation
- Appala Reddy Yendreddi – India Youth for Society
- Utkarsh Rajawat- Digital Empowerment Foundation
- Samar - Digital Empowerment Foundation
- Shahrukh Khan - Digital Empowerment Foundation
- Vamsi Krishna Pothuru - University of Hyderabad
- Mili Dangwal - Digital Empowerment Foundation
- Ahmed Swapan - VOICE,

Bangladesh
- WASIM AKRAM - Digital Empowerment Foundation
- R. PRIYANKA - Digital Empowerment Foundation
- Musharrat Mahera - VOICE, Bangladesh
- Khaja Nazimuddin - Digital Empowerment Foundation
- Sudipta Chakma - Maleya Foundation, Bangladesh
- Shalini Kala - Rural Development and Agriculture Specialist, Goa

INAUGRAL SESSION: OPENING REMARKS

Dr. Syed S. Kazi, Director, Council for Social & Digital Development began with a brief introduction of the speakers of the workshop.

Session 1: Building Community knowledge archives with practices for environmental sustainability - SERVELOTS, India

Speaker: Mr. T.B. Dinesh, Founder & Technical Director, Janastu and Co-Founder- Servelots Infotech, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

Moderator- Dr. Syed S. Kazi

In the Webinar, Mr. T.B. Dinesh covers various aspects related to community empowerment, environmental sustainability, and the adoption of transformative technologies. He raises the question of how comfortable communities are with reading and writing, highlighting the importance of community knowledge as an enabler for environmental sustainability. He suggests exploring decentralized web technologies and community radio as potential solutions for localizing knowledge and bridging the gap in mainstream understanding.

Mr. T.B. Dinesh emphasizes the need for local communities, led by young people and women, to retain ownership and control over the use and management of transformative technologies. He questions the cost of adopting and using technology, and explores the concept of "production of knowledge," where communities become producers of knowledge while initially being consumers of technology and resources.

Mr. T.B. Dinesh discusses the importance of sustaining traditional knowledge systems as community-owned systems. He explores how efforts to build local community capacities for utilizing transformative technologies to harness traditional knowledge can be sustained over the long term. Potential solutions mentioned include mesh networks, decentralized web platforms, and robust backup systems.

Mr. T.B. Dinesh explores how the transformative capacity of AI could revise approaches to transformative technologies for people and the planet. He raises concerns about the potential influx of data into community spaces, the availability of internet connectivity, and the ability of AI to communicate in local languages. Mr. T.B. Dinesh questions how communities can ensure their power to override AI with their knowledge of their histories and identities.

Mr. T.B. Dinesh includes a narrative about rain-fed farming practices shared through community radio. He describes the experiences of two farmers using different soil types and sustainable farming methods, such as green covering, natural fertilizers, crop rotation, and pest control techniques. However, Mr. T.B. Dinesh mentions an issue with the online forum where this information was initially shared, leading to data loss.

Mr. T.B. Dinesh provides links to various multimedia resources, including audio recordings, videos, and film screenings, showcasing community initiatives and interactions related to sustainable farming practices, waste management, and the impacts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. These resources aim to educate and engage communities in discussions about environmental sustainability and alternative solutions.

Mr. T.B. Dinesh mentions the concept of "Crafter space" as a model for demonstrating alternative products and local economy generation concepts. He discusses interactions with different groups, such as "Khojis," where sustainable practices and eco-friendly products are showcased, encouraging the adoption of these practices in other settings.

Overall, Mr. T.B. Dinesh covers a wide range of topics related to community empowerment, environmental sustainability, and the adoption of transformative technologies, with a specific focus on sustainable farming practices, traditional knowledge systems, and community-driven solutions.

Session 2: Strengthening circular approaches of digital technology for Environmental Sustainability - VOICE, Bangladesh

Speaker: Mr. Ahmed Swapan Mahmud, Executive Director, VOICE, Bangladesh
Moderator- Dr. Syed S. Kazi

Mr. Ahmed Swapan Mahmud discusses a pilot project called "Strengthening Circular Approaches of Digital Technology for Environmental Sustainability" (VOICE), implemented to address the e-waste management challenges in Bangladesh and promote circular approaches to the lifecycle of digital technologies. The objectives of the project include advocating for anti-extractive and circular frameworks governing the design, production, use, and disposal of digital technologies, strengthening the capacities of multi-stakeholder communities to develop,

adopt, and promote anti-extractive and circular approaches, and strengthening public-private partnerships to practice circular approaches through e-waste management in Bangladesh.

The challenges for e-waste management in Bangladesh include lack of knowledge on circular approaches to technology, mismanagement in waste collection processes, unscientific and informal dismantling processes, lack of policy enforcement related to e-waste management, lack of formal e-waste management facilities, lack of public awareness about e-waste issues, and absence of public-private partnerships in the e-waste sector.

The project's achievements include successfully generating discussions on the importance of e-waste management in the public domain, contributing to the government's efforts in attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to environmental sustainability, raising awareness about circular approaches to technology, initiating efforts for public-private partnership opportunities in e-waste management, strengthening policy advocacy efforts related to e-waste management, accumulating available data on e-waste management in Bangladesh comprehensively, engaging various stakeholder communities, and developing informative and educational materials to establish VOICE as a knowledge hub.

Key activities of the project include a consultation meeting titled "E-waste Management Industry, User Community and Circular Economies of Digital Technologies" and a daylong advocacy meeting titled "Strengthening Circular Approach of Digital Technology for Environmental Sustainability." The project engaged various stakeholder communities, including policymakers, private sector companies/tech companies, e-waste management industries, civil society organizations, academicians, experts, users (including women and youth), and media, with a multi-stakeholder approach to develop, adopt, and promote anti-extractive and circular approaches to the lifecycle of digital technologies holistically.

The findings of the project include data on illegal e-waste exports from developed countries to low-income or middle-income countries, the amount of e-waste produced annually in Bangladesh (3 million metric tons), the low recycling rate of e-waste (3%), the per capita e-waste generation in Bangladesh (1.2 kilograms), the number of internet users in Bangladesh (130 million), the surging annual rate of e-waste production (30%), and the exposure of workers, children, and women to heavy metals, PCBs, dioxins, and furans from e-waste.

The way forward and VOICE's future plans include resource mobilization efforts for the continuation of current activities, strengthening government liaison and collaboration, convincing development partners to invest in e-waste management initiatives, encouraging

private sector participation in e-waste management, conducting robust public awareness campaigns, and ultimately implementing a comprehensive and replicable e-waste management project.

Session 3: Tackling harms of digital tech on environment and climate – Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), India:

Speaker: Dr. Syed S. Kazi, Adviser & Consultant**,** Digital Empowerment Foundation & Director**,** Council for Social & Digital Development, INDIA
Moderator- Mr. Osama Manzar

Dr. Syed S. Kazi discusses a pilot project by the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) in collaboration with the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) on "Tackling the Harms of Digital Tech on Environment & Climate." The project aims to engage and build a network of environmental stakeholders in India and South Asia to address emerging issues and challenges related to the impact of digital technologies on the environment and climate. The background highlights that India and South Asia are highly populous regions undergoing massive digital transformation, resulting in enormous digital waste generation. India is the third-largest e-waste generator globally, and the South Asian region is among the top three. There is a scarcity of natural and rare material resources for manufacturing digital technologies, which comes at a high environmental and biodiversity cost.

Dr. Kazi shares his overall experience, noting that while environmental stakeholders have awareness of e-waste issues, there is a significant gap in education and knowledge regarding the criticality of co-relating digital and environmental issues. Environmental stakeholders, including civil society organizations (CSOs) and government agencies, have yet to comprehensively address the harms of digital technologies on the environment. The concept of the circular economy and its relevance in addressing social, economic, and environmental concerns as an end-to-end process is new and requires wider promotion and engagement.

Key learnings from the pilot project include the importance of engaging environmental stakeholders with lower levels of knowledge on the harms of digital technologies, understanding the intersection between digital technology and environmental sustainability, and recognizing the potential for advocacy in promoting circular economy principles within the digital technology space. Challenges faced include bridging the knowledge gap among environmental stakeholders, overcoming resistance to adopting circular economy principles in the digital technology sector, and addressing systemic barriers and industry interests that may delay progress.

DEF's upcoming plans and programs involve creating a Digital Environmental Sustainability Network, developing educational modules and resources, establishing partnerships with environmental NGOs and CSOs, integrating support for digital and environmental sustainability within policy efforts, facilitating collaboration between environmental stakeholders and industry players, monitoring and evaluating the impact of interventions, and working towards organizing a Digital Tech and Environment Summit in 2024.

Dr. Kazi provides recommendations for APC, including tapping into the need to engage wider environmental stakeholders, encouraging members to ideate and plan action-oriented measures to promote sustainable digital technology policies and practices, supporting members to lead digital environmental sustainability movements in their countries and regions through local network building, and supporting research and development of resources on digital environmental sustainability.

SUMMARY

The South Asia Webinar on "Towards an Anti-Extractive & Circular Tech Society & Economy" brought together diverse stakeholders from India, Bangladesh, and other countries to discuss the pressing issues surrounding the environmental impact of digital technologies. The presentations highlighted the critical need for addressing e-waste management challenges, promoting circular economy practices, and engaging environmental stakeholders in the discourse on digital environmental sustainability.

The pilot projects shared by Servelots Infotech/ Janastu, VOICE, and the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) offered valuable insights into community-driven initiatives, advocacy efforts, and multi-stakeholder collaborations aimed at mitigating the harmful effects of digital technologies on the environment and climate. Key learnings emphasized the importance of education, capacity building, policy advocacy, and forging partnerships across sectors to drive transformative change.

Moving forward, the organizations expressed their commitment to strengthening networks, developing educational resources, promoting public-private partnerships, and growing advocacy efforts to promote anti-extractive and circular approaches to the lifecycle of digital technologies. The webinar highlighted the urgency of addressing the digital-environmental link and the need for collective action to build a more sustainable and equitable digital future for South Asia and beyond.