

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2020
“Building Trust in a time of COVID-19 response and post COVID-19 recovery”

Report on the IGF 2020 Parliamentary Roundtable

The Internet Governance Forum 2020 was held virtually given the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic which made it impossible for this annual event to be held in its traditional form. Sponsored by the United Nations (UN) and the International Parliamentary Union (IPU) the forum is a global multi-stakeholder platform that facilitates discussion of public policy issues pertaining to the Internet. The forum offers a range of discussions on the operations of the Internet and brings together participants from the public and private sectors, NGO's and civil society from countries across the globe.

On Tuesday November 10, 2020 the Forum held a session dedicated to Parliamentarians which examined “Building Trust in a time of COVID-19 response and post COVID-19 recovery”. One hundred and twenty-eight Members of Parliament participated in what could be described as an information packed discussion on the issues engaging the Internet in 2020 and its effects on citizens world-wide. The challenges posed by the technology, an examination of solutions and recommendations that Parliaments and Parliamentarians could implement in their jurisdictions in a global partnership was raised as being of strategic importance.

The issue of “Trust” was a strong theme highlighted in the presentations. How Parliamentarians are viewed on the internet and their ability to utilize the internet effectively to promote their personal and national agendas were highlighted. The ethical issues and the importance of all MP's starting from a position of truth and the building of trust in the service of their constituencies was emphasized.

There was consensus on the importance of National Parliaments co-operating and exchanging best practices in the current COVID-19 world in dealing with internet related public policy issues. It was further agreed that Parliamentarians have an important task of pushing the legislative agenda which must create new laws or revisions to address the challenges. The protection of citizens in this digital age, issues of protection of personal data, cybercrime, the importance of protecting and respecting individual human rights as laid down the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are agendas that must be adopted by all Parliaments. Legislation must support and protect citizens. Parliaments must make national legislation and the rules necessary for good governance.

The need to advance trust in digital technologies, trust in public officials and trust in the Parliament as an institution was advocated. Knowledge, information and communication are key to this and the need to control misinformation and “fake news” is a major challenge in today's world. The session highlighted that citizens must be able to trust information published online and trust their Parliamentarians. This poses a unique challenge when it comes to deliberate misinformation in politics. Members of Parliament must balance the politics of their political parties with the greater national good, the need for honesty in relation to the people they serve.

The presentation examined how the relationship within and amongst Parliaments has changed since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was noted that at this time the internet was more critical than ever in maintaining basic economic processes, social interaction and a minimum of cultural life.

The issue of universal access to internet connectivity in all countries was highlighted as of major concern. It was stated that in today's world access to the internet must be considered a human right, given that in many communities the internet is the only vehicle that allows persons to continue their education, access health and other government services.

Given these considerations ensuring equality in access must be of concern to all Parliaments. The case of El Salvador which recently passed a Bill on Universal access as a human right – as a means of ensuring none of its citizens are left behind was shared as a best practice.

It was recognized that most importantly the Internet can make Parliaments more transparent, it makes the study of bills and the ability to connect with citizens on the work of Parliament much easier. It can facilitate more stakeholder engagement, build trust with politicians and assist with bringing laws to the Parliament.

In moving forward the deliberations highlighted again the importance of universal access and the role Parliaments can play in eliminating digital exclusion. The focus in the future must be on how we can connect all Parliaments, Parliamentarians and Citizens.

The negative issues associated with the Internet were also highlighted such as - cybercrime, cybersecurity and online bullying.

Parliaments were advised to place digitization high on their agenda and to increase international collaboration amongst Parliament to ensure global agreement on the Internet and access must be developed. New laws must be enacted, regulations and safeguards put in place. Governments are bound to support these initiatives so that the digital divide is eliminated.

It was highlighted by way of example that in Italy the digital education of public officials commenced recently with a special group looking at fake news - which today can be considered a threat to democracy. The training of young people to know not just the platform but the civics of its operation was highlighted as being of importance.

In conclusion it was reiterated that the Internet, considered the fourth industrial revolution, has the power to change how we see democracy and Parliamentarians can lead and hold Governments to account.

Catherine Hughes
November 16, 2020