VIRTUAL EVENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN PREPARATION FOR THE 52nd OAS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL DEMOCRACY IN THE AMERICAS

ORGANIZER: Department for Effective Public Management of the Secretariat for Hemispheric Affairs, at the initiative of the Permanent Mission of Peru to the OAS

DATE: July 11, 2022

TIME: 11:00 a.m. (Washington, D.C. time - EST)

PLACE: Zoom - **https://bit.ly/3akxw27**

English and Spanish interpretation will be provided.

CONCEPT NOTE AND AGENDA

(prepared by the Department for Effective Public Management of the Secretariat for Hemispheric Affairs)

Advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) continually pose challenges that threaten stability and democratic governance while offering at the same time opportunities to promote citizen participation in democratic systems.

The lack of access to the internet or knowledge to handle ICTs, as well as low penetration or insufficient quality access to the internet or devices, are problems with adverse implications for democracy and development. Added to this is the concern generated by limits imposed by some restrictive regimes on internet access and digital freedom of expression.

Additionally, democratic institutions face risks as a result of the hyper-connectivity of some segments of citizens and unethical use of ICTs by interest groups, through which messages to citizens are manipulated towards ideologically biased digital media campaigns created on social networks aimed at influencing social sentiment towards government institutions.

Governance and disinformation

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and address the concerning disinformation issue that societies have been facing worldwide. For example, countries in the Americas have been vulnerable to online misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as during recent electoral processes. The Internet and the various digital platforms facilitate making misleading content viral towards deceiving social objectives. In addition, this content tends to exacerbate polarization and is often loaded with hate speech. All this leads to the fragmentation of societies and cracks the essence of democratic coexistence.

In this context, the Latin American region is no stranger to the great challenges posed by restrictions or advances in ICTs for the consolidation of democracy through digital means. The adverse implications for the full exercise of citizenship or the stability of democratic institutions due to these digital challenges are of concern. For this, it is necessary to reflect on the efforts being made to mitigate the effects of online disinformation, which safeguards the rights and freedoms of the people without affecting the digital ecosystem.

More access and better and more transparent digital public services

According to the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies ITU, only about half of the world's population uses the Internet[1]. Although only 23% of the population in the Americas does not have access to the internet, it is estimated that this represents at least 300 million people who do not have access.

In the first place, the lack of access to the internet, devices, and technologies, marginalizes citizens from access to government services, related information, and government open data; or to participate, express themselves, or know the partisan political proposals at the time of elections, as well as the governments' whereabouts in managing public resources and the fulfillment of campaign promises.

Likewise, in the case of public administrations, the implications of inadequate use of ICTs delegitimize them as the actors that transfer the benefits of democracy to citizens in the form of better and more transparent public services. On the contrary, the disenchantment of citizens with public institutions has proven to be the engine of a renewed movement of social protests in Latin America; certainly, exacerbated by the health and economic crisis generated by the COVID-19 virus pandemic.

On this point, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and its Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression (RELE), have expressed, in the context of the pandemic[2], "concern about the serious limitations in the lack of internet access in the region of the most vulnerable sectors"; identifying that "indigenous communities, inhabitants of rural areas, women, Afro-descendants, children

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[1] UIT, Inclusión digital para todos, Hechos y cifras de las TIC 2019.
[2] Resolución 1/2020 sobre pandemia y Derechos Humanos, y Comunicado de Prensa R/206/20, RELE, CIDH.

and adolescents are disproportionately suffering limitations in the access and affordability of digital technologies".

On the other hand, the digital divide not only hinders access to citizens' rights and affects the operations for agile and transparent delivery of services by governments, but also threatens competitiveness and reduces the opportunity for companies and businesses to generate economic development.

Finally, in terms of digital government, the Americas is a diverse and unequal region. The region has countries that are part of the group of the most digitally advanced governments in the world (DN[3]) as is the case of Canada and Uruguay, but at the same time, the region has countries that linger behind in the lower part of the digital government development rankings among 193 nations such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, Honduras, Cuba, and Haiti, according to the UN e-Government development index[4].

It is important to point out that the digital divide is not only critical at the country level in the Americas, but also at the regional level. The effects of this situation on integration and the strengthening of democracy are worrying and are reflected in transnational scenarios of corruption such as the Odebrecht case, or in the social destabilization that deepens migratory crises.

Challenges

It is important to note that, given the recent commitments adopted by the Presidents and Chiefs of Government at the IX Summit of the Americas, specifically the Digital Transformation Commitment, it is essential to reflect on measures that can address that digital transformation in the Americas is inclusive and contributes to reducing inequality gaps, including digital, and strengthening democratic governance, and not the other way around.

Based on the foregoing and in preparation for the 52nd OAS General Assembly taking place in Lima, Peru in October of this year, and whose core theme is "Together against Inequality and Discrimination", the purpose of this virtual event is to be a space for dialogue and reflection on the impact of the opportunities and challenges of digital democracy in facing the digital divide in the Americas.

This session will then seek to find answers to questions such as: Why is it relevant for the quality of democracy to reduce the digital divide? What role do governments and the private technology sector play in strengthening digital democracy? How does online disinformation threaten democracy? What are the greatest concerns of civil society in facing the digital divide? And what are the biggest obstacles that governments face in reducing the digital divide and strengthening digital democracy?

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[3] Digital Nations es el foro internacional de los gobiernos digitales lideres fundado en el 2014.
[4] Encuesta sobre e-Gobierno, 2020. ONU.

AGENDA

1. Welcoming remarks by **Ambassador Harold Forsyth**, Permanent Representative of Peru to the OAS.

2. Opening remarks by the Director of the Department for Effective Public Management of the OAS, **María Fernanda Trigo**.

3. Discussants:

    - **Daniel Innerarity**, Director of the Institute for Democratic Governance, Spain

    - **Elaine Ford**, Founder Director of Digital Democracy, Peru

    - **Anabel Cruz**, Founder Director of the Institute of Communication and Development, Uruguay

    - **Fabrizio Scrollini**, Founder Director of the Latin-American Initiative for Open Data (ILDA)

    - **Doris Põld**, CEO, Estonian ICT Cluster, Estonia

    - **Pedro Vaca Villarreal**, Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, IACHR

4. Closing remarks by the Department for Effective Public Management of the Secretariat for Hemispheric Affairs of the OAS, Director **María Fernanda Trigo.**

    The event will be moderated by **Ambassador Harold Forsyth**, Permanent Representative of Peru to the OAS.