Forum: SDG 9 Committee

Student Officers: Rohan Joshi, Tanuska Bora and Zain Allaboun

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Topic 2: The Question of Access to the Internet for Vulnerable and Marginalised Populations.

Introduction to the Topic:

In a world that is heavily reliant on education and exposure, the digital age is everything, meaning that internet access is crucial. We use the internet for various aspects of our lives - this can range from economic, financial or even medical-related use. The internet has recently become a large dictator to the success and development of countries on an international level. The question of a nation's ability to digitise their societies has been tied with the overall development of a nation. Internet and digitised technology has transformed into a vast educational resource. The absence of education and exposure on international and national levels has always been prevalent. As the reliance on the internet increases and the digitalization of educational resources continues, the lack of access to education to vulnerable and marginalised communities will only get worse. 2.9 billion people, globally, live without the internet - 96% of which live in developing countries. Without real-time access to information, these people live in blackout to the rest of the world.

This brings up the issue of lack of digital connectivity - should it be considered a fundamental human right? Even if digital connectivity is represented as a human right, this does not solve the lack of it thereof within vulnerable and marginalised populations. It is essential to note that lack of access to the internet, and the invisibility that comes with this, in certain communities brings up concerns regarding the surveillance gap. Meanwhile governmental surveillance, or any variation of such, is considered morally incorrect by many, the lack of surveillance can also bring conflicts stemming from the invisibility of populations. Lack of any connection to the internet can make aiding these vulnerable communities much harder due to the absence of communication and traceability.

Furthermore, this leads us to wonder: why does this invisibility occur? What drives these populations into marginalisation and vulnerability? These two questions are commonly intertwined. Sometimes, lack of internet and this invisibility is caused by the lack of educational resources stemming

from the marginalisation itself. However, in cases of vulnerable communities, the invisibility on the internet can be self-inflicted. In the case of an undocumented immigrant, traceability and surveillance is dangerous and so, the invisibility is inflicted. This is harmful as it prevents any means of communication to be shut off. Because of this, aid, support and assistance cannot be delivered which ultimately worsens the situation. How can digital connectivity be provided to all if the roots of marginalisation and vulnerability are also not taken care of?

Definition of Key Terms

Digital Connectivity: Digital connectivity is a term to describe one's connection to the internet. Essentially, to acquire digital connectivity means to acquire internet access. Lack of digital connectivity means having a restricted or nonexistent connection to the internet.

Marginalised Populations: Marginalised populations are minorities that face discrimination and exclusion in relation to overall society.

Vulnerable Populations: Vulnerable populations are communities that can be easily exploited or taken advantage of.

Censorship: Censorship is defined as the prohibition or suppression of certain speech (ex. books, news, television films) due to the fact that it is deemed politically unacceptable or is viewed as a threat to safety or security. Censorship is seen as a key issue itself within this topic.

Broadband: Broadband is considered to be high-speed internet access. It is more secure and offers more reliance.

ICT: Information and communication technology.

Key Stakeholders

UN International Telecommunication Union (UN ITU): The ITU was founded in 1865 and is responsible for bringing international connectivity to all. They ensure that technical standards are up to date in order for technologies and networks to work seamlessly. The ITU is a vital stakeholder in the fight for digital connectivity.

UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: The OHCHR plays a huge role in the maintenance of human rights. Because the internet is being potentially considered as a human right, many internet-related topics and its effects on human rights are discussed by the OHCHR. For instance, in the report titled A/HRC/50/55, the OHCHR discussed the effects and consequences on human rights caused by government ordered telecommunications shutdowns. Essentially, the lack of internet and its effect on human rights is brought into consideration. This brings up questions relating to the debate of whether or not internet access must be a human right on an international scale.

UN Human Rights Council: Similar to the OHCHR, the UNHRC is also found to discuss internet access and its relation to human rights.

Global Digital Compact: The Secretary-General proposed a GDC in his Our Common Agenda. This GDC is currently being contributed to and will be presented in the UN summit of September 2023, which will discuss our future, including our digital one.

Key Issues

Lack of Connectivity: The digital world is slowly replacing the real world, meaning connectivity is crucial. Inclusive internet access provides a multitude of benefits and presents opportunities for great economic growth and will aid vulnerable communities to rise out from the grasp of poverty. In Kerala, India, fishermen used weather tracking apps on their phones as a means of taking advantage of their digital connectivity. This allowed for an 8% increase in profit and 4% decrease in consumer prices. This is only a tiny fraction of what internet access to *everyone* could bring. It is important to note, however, that just providing connectivity is not sufficient enough. Providing broadband internet access ensures a more successful connection that also aims to protect users with privacy and reliability. This recent technology can even provide further benefits such as the provision of employment through ICT jobs. This will aid with overall poverty reduction and will help pull populations out of marginalisation and vulnerability. It is vital to note that in developing countries, increasing internet access to be available to 75% of the population, in contrast to the current 35%, would lead to the addition of $2 trillion US dollars to their GDP. With this progression, 140 million jobs will be formulated worldwide.

Too Much Privacy: Just like too little privacy can be an issue, too much privacy can also be a threat. Having no traceability and being invisible to the internet and to society can put populations at risk and can lead to economic exploitation. These people are referred to as being “in the surveillance gap.” Vulnerable

populations, those who rely on public benefits, are arguably the ones who least enjoy this aid as per the article conducted on the surveillance gap by Michelle Gilman and Rebecca Green. Green and Gilman explain that those who fall under the surveillance gap can be homeless persons, undocumented immigrants and people with a history of felony convictions. What do these populations have in common? They avoid mainstream societal institutions and any sort of digital footprint. Typically, those who submit to using public benefits are subjected to increased government surveillance. However, those who reside in the surveillance gap cannot use these benefits and are, in turn, not subjected to surveillance. This can be seen as a positive but it can put these vulnerable communities in peril. It can subject them to exploitation by employers and can endanger their health, well-being and rights.

Censorship: Censorship is viewed as a great threat not only because it breaches the right to free speech but it also explicitly and objectively restricts access to the internet in vulnerable and marginalised communities. Government censorship of the news and internet is directly stripping marginalised and vulnerable communities from internet access. Where can we draw the line between what should be censored and what shouldn't? Should governments censor certain things for the sake of national security? What defines national security - doesn't everyone view security in a different way? For instance, in August of 2020, the Belarus presidential elections were said to be falsified which caused an outbreak in protests. This further led to the Belarusian authorities to censor internet access after responding to the protests with the usage of rubber bullets, flash grenades and force. In a global perspective, this censorship can be seen as a threat to the security of the people; however, when looking through the eyes of Belarusian authorities, it can be seen as a means of protecting national security. Where can sovereignty meet morality?

Surveillance Technology: Recently, digital surveillance technology has been favoured by the commercial market, considering that it has given governments the ability to monitor private communications. This has opened a new realm for censorship, as it allows governments to precisely locate where information is stemming from. This can be dangerous, as it leads to the oppression of minorities that are trying to speak out about their maltreatment and subjugation.

Timeline of Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

1949	The ITU becomes formally recognized as a UN agency and the strive for digital connectivity increases.

2016	The UNHRC's report on *"the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet"* is adopted. This is otherwise known as report 32/13. It promotes and calls for a human rights approach to providing internet access to all.
2019	Digital Global Policy Act of 2019, also referred to as the Digital GAP Act, passed in the U.S. This act's purpose was to ensure that everyone receives internet access and ensures that developing countries are also aided with this issue. Moreover, the act also targets the closure of the digital gender gap, worldwide.
2021	Antonio Guterres presents his "*Our Common Agenda"* which contains information on the future of internet access through his request of a Global Digital Compact.
2022	The OHCHR adopts the report A/HRC/50/55 which aims to balance internet access and its relation to human rights. It discusses the effect of governmental censoring and shutdowns on telecommunications.

Possible Challenges & Solutions

Increased Affordability: In the strive for digital connectivity and broadband access, it is vital to keep in mind the challenge of affordability. A potential solution would be for governments to attract investments through the private sectors by increasing competition and reducing costs through implementing flexible environments for investment opportunities. Unleashing private investments would have the ultimate beneficial result towards dropping consumer prices.

Finding the Roots: For vulnerable populations in the surveillance gap, we must consider the fact that the surveillance gap only exists due to societal neglect, socio economic contributors and marginalisation. Because there is no current way to bridge the gap due to the strive for liberty and free will, essentially recognized as the right to remain invisible, we must get rid of what created the gap in the first place. If there are no push factors, there will be no aftereffects.

Wrongful Censorship: Solving censorship is not a simple task because there is no clear cut path to solving it when it remains to be an undetermined fixture of morality. Is it moral or is it not? Abusing the power of censorship in order to reinforce an authoritarian society can be a major threat to the wellbeing of susceptible populations. On the contrary, censoring harmful messages indicating the oppression of a minority, can reduce the susceptibility of these populations. Creating a boundary between what can be censored and what shouldn't must be agreed upon on an international level. Keeping this in mind, we also must tackle what might occur if this boundary is crossed.

Surveillance Technology: This issue is quite similar to censorship, considering that the solution is much more complex and must undergo debates relating to the morality of this action. Is it moral for governments to use digital surveillance technology under any circumstances? More importantly, should it be legal? Does this break our right to lawful privacy and unreasonable search? These factors must be considered because it is all a matter of perspective. This sub-issue, within itself, is a challenge; however, for some nations, it could actually be seen as a benefit when used morally. Finding this balance between morality, legality and the continuous preservation of human rights is of great importance.

Recommendations for Resolution Writing Including Research

The chairs of SD9 recommend delegates to focus on balancing the strive for digital connectivity with forming solutions that address marginalisation and vulnerability within populations. This is due to the fact that the lack of digital connectivity for these populations is heavily associated with the societal neglect that they endure. Solving this neglect will create an environment where digital connectivity is available to all. This might seem contradictory; nevertheless, although the provision of internet access is immensely essential, we cannot do this without also addressing the issues of marginalisation and vulnerability. How can populations benefit from internet access without being provided with sufficiency first? Governmental providers cannot always be helpful to these populations, as discussed in the surveillance gap issue. We should not pick and choose what people receive because this is what creates a larger social divide, meaning we cannot choose to solely provide internet access without also providing employment in order to keep up with internet costs. A phone and adequate internet may be able to allow people to find job opportunities; however, without education, vulnerable populations will not be able to actually receive this employment. Solely providing internet access without also addressing how the lack of internet access began will arguably worsen the situation. Rather than benefiting these populations, it can later become an additional inconvenience.

It is extremely important that delegates maintain extensive research about the factors that cause the lack of internet access because the lack of digital connectivity does not only stem from unaffordability or lack of resources. As aforementioned, when discussing the surveillance gap, the invisibility from the digital world can be self-inflicted even though this leads to greater harm. This is where balancing solving marginalisation and the provision of digital connectivity come into harmony. We must provide those in the surveillance gap with digital access meanwhile finding and solving how they ended up there in the first place. Preventative measures are equally as important as immediate action measures.

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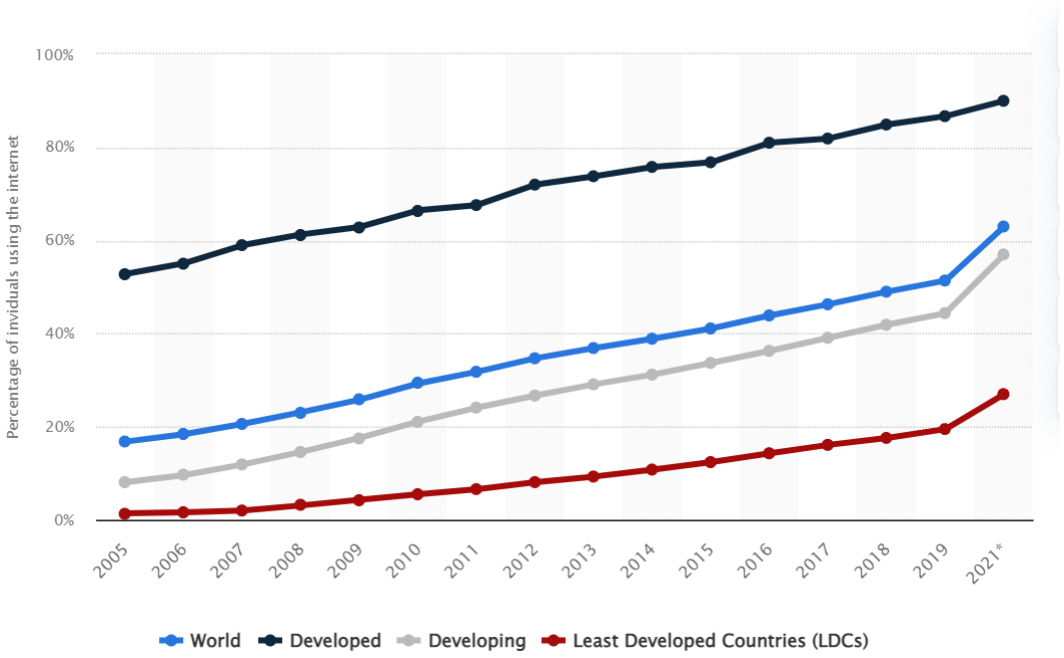
Additional Resources

Percentage of Global Population Accessing the Internet from 2005 to 2021, by Market Maturity



This is a graph provided by Statista. It shows us the development of internet access percentage over time, on a global scale. It provides data on this in contrast to the world, developed countries, developing countries and least developed countries.