EMERGING LEADERS

FOR THE DIGITAL WORLD

EXTRACT

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Valmikki Singh from Guyana emphasises the need for Internet governance regimes and representation

Born in Guyana to working class parents, I was brought up in an environment that nurtured values such as integrity, honesty, and respect for others. It was also instilled in me at an early age that education was of great importance and that it affords a better standard of living and understanding of life in general. These basic, but important teachings have been and continue to be a major guide for me, both personally and professionally.

I am currently the Managing Director of the National Frequency Management Unit, and have the core responsibilities of managing the Radio Spectrum and Number Resources in Guyana. I am a trained Engineer, with postgraduate training in the areas of Telecoms Regulation, Policy and Management. I have also served for approximately ten years on the Council of the Guyana National Bureau of Standards. Even though my main responsibility is in the area of Spectrum Management, I have a strong interest in Internet governance (IG) matters, particularly cybersecurity.

I have represented my country in the joint European Union/International Telecommunication Union funded HIPCAR (Enhancing Competitiveness in the Caribbean through the Harmonization of ICT Policies, Legislation and Regulatory Procedures) project. Here, I participated in workshops, where several draft bills were developed. These included Freedom of Information, Data Privacy and Protection and Cybersecurity/e-Crime.

When not working, I enjoy spending time with my family and friends. I have also been

involved in volunteering to assist others in need, such as mentoring young people and working with others to donate blood on a periodic basis.

Guyana moves into ICT

Guyana is located on the north-eastern shoulder of South America. It has an area of approximately 215 000 km² and is populated by approximately 780 000 people. Traditionally, Guyana's main exports include gold, sugar, rice, and bauxite. However, in order to enhance its development and diversify its export base, Guyana has been pushing to expand information and communication technology (ICT) services, non-traditional agriculture, and adding value to its primary products.

To facilitate the expansion of the ICT services, Guyana has committed to liberalising its telecommunications sector. To this extent, new and modern bills have been developed; they are expected to be laid before the National Assembly in the near future. Recently, the Access to Information Bill was tabled in the National Assembly. Other laws pertaining to IG are still to be tabled and legislated.

In order to reduce poverty and facilitate the development of a knowledge economy, Guyana recently launched the One Laptop per Family Project (OLPF), where one laptop would be given to each of 90 000 of the poorest families (approximately half of all households) in Guyana. In addition to this, Guyana's

Computer for Schools initiative envisages computer labs for all primary and secondary schools. In order to augment Internet connectivity, the government has invested in landing a second fibre optic cable in Guyana.

Looking and clicking...with consequences

My first real experience with the Internet occurred after I graduated from University with my first degree. I was working on a project and was required to conduct some research on the Internet (which had only

been introduced into Guyana approximately one year before) on a particular product. Not being au fait with the Internet, I asked one of my colleagues for some guidance. She said 'it is very simple; all you have to do is look and click'.

That was about 14 years ago. Since then, the Internet, its applications, the services it facilitates, its ubiquity, etc., have all grown exponentially. The threats and dangers of using the Internet have also grown at alarming rates. The Internet is no longer a space

where you can simply 'look and click' without the possibility of serious negative consequences. Because of its rapid growth, the Internet has become a huge magnet for attacks by criminals and hackers. The consequences of cyber-attacks are increasing daily, even affecting those who are not online.

Despite this reality, Internet usage is growing, simply because it is seen as a vital enabler for poverty reduction and development. Indeed, the Internet can be a double-edged sword. Consequently, given man's innate quest to have stability, reliability, and certainty in his life, governance of the Internet is only a natural evolution. In an environment where the Internet is or is quickly becoming mainstream, it is imperative that every country establish an IG regime.

Extending the debate

The OLPF project and computers in schools would expose a huge number of Guyanese, particularly the young, to the Internet, many for the first time. In such a scenario, a suitable IG regime needs to be in place to provide protection for these users. Guyana has a responsibility to protect vulnerable users (especially young children) who are expected to go online in the near future.

Given the growing ubiquity, importance, and uniqueness of the Internet and the fact that it has been revolutionising the way we work, socialise, organise, communicate, etc., everyone needs to be involved and given a space to participate in the IG process.

Having said this, I have a particular concern that the ordinary people in the street are not very involved in the debate/discussions on IG. There are many reasons for this, including a lack of understanding/appreciation of the issues involved, ignorance about the discussions, uncertainty of how it would impact them. One way of engaging them in a meaningful way is by facilitating capacity building programmes for them and extending the debate to social networks, of which many are regular users.

Building confidence

Like many developing countries, Guyana is facing a host of

problems; its focus is usually on issues, such as sea defence, healthcare, education, flood, and drought mitigation, etc. So when it comes to allocating scarce resources and determining priorities, it becomes a challenge when matters such as IG have to be dealt with.

Notwithstanding this reality, the Internet is unlike anything else. It is an extremely powerful and potent tool for development; it can also cause significant disparities and actually retard development, if people lack confidence in it.

As such, I strongly believe that IG and everything else that is needed to build confidence in the Internet should be placed as a top priority of the agenda of every developing country. Developing countries also need to raise their voices and get meaningfully involved in IG at regional and global level. To do otherwise will commit the citizens of the developing world to perpetual poverty and life on the wrong side of the digital divide.

It is therefore my intention to not only raise the awareness of the importance of IG in my country, but also to demonstrate the linkages and synergies between current development and poverty reduction initiatives and an effective IG regime and representation.

Valmikki Singh is Managing Director of the National Frequency Management Unit in Guyana. ■

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