

Networking for freedom online and offline: Protecting freedom of information, expression and association on the internet in India, Malaysia and Pakistan

The experience of APC and our partners showcases new and emerging issues that are affecting internet freedom in Pakistan, India and Malaysia and that these need a strategic response. The long-term effects of failure to support civil society organisations (CSOs) will now be disproportionately felt in the future as government's repressive measures outpace both internet access by the public, and civil society's ability to concurrently raise awareness and monitor internet freedoms. A strategic response is needed which enables human rights defenders in the region to respond to local issues and work together through a mix of research, monitoring, advocacy, training, capacity building, awareness raising and institutional strengthening.

GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of the action is to protect and promote respect for human rights on the internet, particularly the right to information, the right to freedom of expression, the right to freedom of association and the right to freedom of assembly, in India, Malaysia and Pakistan.

Ultimately it will contribute to strengthening human rights online and offline.

Specific objectives:

Objective 1: Build awareness among target groups¹ of the critical importance of protecting and promoting human rights on the internet as a pre-condition for democracy and the exercise of civil and political rights.

Objective 2: Strengthen understanding among target groups of how restrictions of human rights on the internet are implemented (including the rights to freedom of expression, privacy, and freedom of assembly), how these rights are being threatened at technical and regulatory levels by both States and corporations, and what techniques they can use to communicate more securely and safely online.

Objective 3: Provide human rights defenders (our primary target groups) with knowledge, tools and support to respond to rights violations and advocate for the long term protection of human rights on the internet.

Objective 4: Facilitate and support multi-stakeholder networks that can respond to threats to human rights on the internet and build stronger human rights cultures on the internet in each of the three countries.

Objective 5: Facilitate strategic linkages between national, regional and global advocacy for human rights on the internet through making use of opportunities presented by the Internet Governance Forum and the UN's Human Rights Council, among others.

Target groups: General public and users of the internet, lawyers, bloggers, youth groups, civil society who face human rights violations and/or human rights defenders' groups.

- Public awareness based on research findings and recommendations will be used to support interventions in national public policy spaces where the opportunity arises.
- Convene national dialogues on proposed legislation impacting human rights on the internet, collaborating with media freedom advocates and CSOs, developing a joint campaign to highlight issues.
- Public campaigns, for example, on International Women's Day and through the Take Back the Tech Campaign⁶ will be implemented to raise awareness on the importance of protecting freedom of information, expression and association. It will help to further contribute to expanding the democratic spaces to include all.
- Actively participate at the national events on human rights and on internet policy (such as national IGFs, India Internet Governance Conference and the International Congress of E-government)
- In India, create national network of RTI trainers and practitioners
- Convene an activity with media practitioners around how the media report online threats and rights violations

Role of DEF and partners: APC will coordinate development of resources, including IRHR Curriculum and digital first aid kit, with input from national partners. APC will also conduct the need assessment and regional training of trainers. Empower, DEF and Bytes for all will conduct national roll-out of IRHR curriculum and will provide support for Secure Online Communications organisational strategies.

DEF frequently implements ICT for development projects in partnership with government (national and state). This means that their work with government around human rights on the internet can take the form of 'constructive engagement'. It might involve challenging government, but they are not likely to assume an 'oppositional' approach. In Malaysia and Pakistan working collaboratively with government will be far more difficult as in both countries government has taken a strong stance against internet freedom and people who speak out.

Therefore our country partners will focus on working with institutions that are not directly part of government, but who actively engages with policy and legislative development and advocacy, such as the national human rights commission and the bar council.

Expected impact

- Internet companies and internet service providers are an important sector of all three national economies, and, the free flow of information on the internet is vital to this sector's ongoing development and the contribution it makes to job creation and GDP.
- More over, the free flow of information is a driver for other economic activity, including for small and medium enterprises. While this project will not have direct economic impact, it will indirectly support thriving online information and knowledge economies.

- More people are aware of the how vital internet freedoms are to expression of other rights and democratisation thereby reducing tolerance for arbitrary infringements of internet freedoms by States and corporations.
- Increased recognition by policy-makers of the impact of the internet on human rights. Strengthened national legislation to protect and promote human rights online, supported by global institutions and networks.