

XXI INFOPOVERTY WORLD CONFERENCE

How to build a fairer and more inclusive Digital Society?

21st INFOPOVERTY WORLD CONFERENCE

GRAND CONVERSATION

21 JUNE 2021

SYNTHESIS OF THE DISCUSSION

On **June 21, 2021**, OCCAM – the Observatory on Digital Communication affiliated to the United Nations Economic and Social Council – held a “**Grand Conversation**” following the results achieved during the **XX Infopoverity World Conference**, held on December 2020 online and streamed on the [UN WebTV](#), and in preparation to the **21st Infopoverity World Conference**, taking place at the **UN Headquarters** on **December 3, 2021** with the title “*How to build a fairer and more inclusive Digital Society?*”.

The Infopoverity Grand Conversation took place on Zoom and can be rewatched on the [OCCAM Website](#). More than just a Conference, the Conversation was the key piece of a project started in 2001 at the UN Headquarters with the mission of fighting poverty through new technologies.

The event hosted speakers and contributors from all over the world and from a wide range of fields of expertise. Among others, participants attended from Japan, South Korea, USA, Nigeria, Australia, Switzerland, France, China, Morocco, Etiopia, Madagascar, Belgium, Slovenia, and Italy, and included diplomats, representatives from governments and International Organizations such as United Nations, African Union, European Parliament, and ILO, foundations – including Alliance Forum Foundation, Fondation Hironnelle, Smithers Foundation – Civil Society with the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the UN, prestigious universities (Stanford University, Universities of Sassari and Milan, Oral Roberts, AMEU ISH Ljubljana) and think tanks (IFPRI, IITM); Association such as UNAFF, Eurovisioni, Chocolate Moose Media.

Where is the Digital revolution leading us to?

Is it possible to steer it towards safer havens, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic?

What is the long-lasting emerging trend?

These and other questions were tackled under a great variety of points of view: from governance to finance, from employment to telemedicine and eLearning, from food security and e-agriculture to new forms of communications and ICTs. A specific focus was dedicated to the implementation of digital technologies for the development of rural communities in the African continent.

New approaches to cooperation, sustainability, accessibility, multilateralism, affordability and awareness emerged as the most relevant keywords for a fairer and more inclusive use of ICTs for development, where the human being – and in particular the younger generations – are at the centre.

The Grand Conversation was inaugurated by **Daniela Bas (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs)** who highlighted the need and urgency of bridging the social divide that leaves billions of people behind. She stressed the importance to invest in people’s capacities, bringing together digital and literacy skills. **Pierpaolo Saporito (President of OCCAM and ICFT-UNESCO)** followed this stream of thought and ideas focusing on the inadequacies of the *ancien régime* that Covid-19 brought to surface. The digital capacity to ensure everybody full connectivity, able to nullify distance and time, unifying languages and behaviours is building a new Society, based on virtual territories, with new paradigms, global rules, and convergent governance and guidance, also increasing the risk for freedom and privacy, working inside the unsafe land of the internet, feudalised by new barons and riddled with marauders. To clean the web is a priority in order to guarantee free circulation, transparency, affordability for platforms, algorithms, hubs, acting towards a “Regenerative convergence of awareness and skills” so to avoid private interest-driven mechanisms and affirm the principle “nobody must be left behind”.

The first session highlighted how the post-covid social and economic state-of-the-art has exacerbated inequalities on one side but can also be seized as a momentum for a radical and structural change of paradigm. Respect and dignity were some of the highlights of the speech by **Fabrizio Lobasso (Italian Ministry of**

Foreign Affairs, and International Cooperation), argued that “Rejecting the old dynamic portraying givers on one side and takers on the other is the key to have an acceleration in terms of investment, inclusivity, and sustainable development”. In such a plethora of dynamics, he underlined, the still-to-be-defined role of Africa is crucial in determining either the success or the failure of the next Digital Society. We cannot afford to confine such an enormous power to governments and International Organizations only; rather, the Civil Society must be actively involved as well. At the same time, private profits and private interests must be set aside if we want to achieve a fairer and more equal Digital Society”. **George Hara (Alliance Forum Foundation and Adviser to the Prime Minister of Japan)** stressed the notion of “public interest capitalism” according to which the value of the company increases only when it successfully contributes to the well-being of all its stakeholders such as employees, customers, suppliers, local communities, larger society, and environment: “A company should be a public institution that contributes to society through its business: profits are not to be limited to shareholders, but they shall be extended to stakeholders”. Similarly, **Uma Rani (ILO)** enriched the conversation focuses on the implications of digital platforms on the working conditions of platform workers, workers’ rights and how skills could be effectively utilised within a developing country context. Indeed, digitalization deals also with democracy and with the need to fill the digital divide and address the extreme imbalances in terms of wealth generation and concentration. On these issues was the contribution by **Daniela Rondinelli (Member of European Parliament)** who stated that “Covid-19 accelerated the ongoing process of digital and social transition and it's showing us that the digital society cannot be the consequence of an uncontrolled process”. **Liberato Bautista (Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the UN)** discussed the necessity of a Digital Society being not only inclusive but “participatory, not only efficient, but sustainable” as well. In particular, he focused on the urgency of a “strong moral compass [...] to direct the magnetic orientation of digital communication to the ethical, true North of our humanity” and how “access to knowledge and information is a human right, to be enjoyed in community with other human beings”.

How can we achieve such inclusive and participatory mission? Participants convened on the urgency to implement best practices to achieve such an important goal. **Tony Ojobo (African ICT Foundation)** identified four main pillars of ICTs: awareness of ICT capabilities, accessibility of ICTs in Africa, affordability, and adoption. He also highlighted the importance of youth in shaping the future of digitalization and how they should be adequately supported and guided. On one side, education is crucial in helping the next Digital Builders. On the matter, **Toky Ravoavy (Ligne Verte NGO)** updated the public of the progresses achieved in the [UN Millennium Village of Sambaina](#), launched by OCCAM in 2006. Equally important is telemedicine, whose progress has been showcased by a great panel of specialists, including **Francesco Sicurello (International Institute of Telemedicine)**, and **Simone Donati (University of Insubria)**, both talked about the potentialities of applying Telemedicine all over the world: “Telemedicine is the convergence between informatics, computer science, telecommunication and of course, the medical sector but to give the best Telemedical services we need the sensor the bio-device”. A particular mention goes to telemedicine practices in Middle East and North Africa carried out by the **Moroccan Society for Telemedicine and e-Health**. **Hassan Ghazal** presented these new, innovative digital tools for helping people in the MENA region against Covid-19, and how important is the application of telemedicine in the everyday life an assumption also supported by **Fabrizio Conicella (OpenZone)**. If telemedicine is crucial in helping (not only) poor and disadvantaged communities, food security helps prevent a lot of connected issues. On the topic, **Giovanna Seddaiu (University of Sassari)** presented the [EWA-BELT](#) Horizon2020 project aimed at ensuring sustainable intensification practices in six countries in East and West Africa. At the same time, the deep impact of digital technologies for the improvement of agricultural techniques was highlighted by **Jawoo Koo (IFPRI)** who presented his research on the field about how to reduce food loss and food waste in the African continent.

David Neely (ACI) submitted that the use of ICTs, specifically digital educational training platforms in partnership with local faith-based organizations, are vital in meeting the multiplying the global impact on the achievement of SDGs in the most cost effective and efficient way. The pivotal role of education was stressed

over also by **Michael Matthews (Oral Roberts University)** who pointed out that “you can expand, improve and help all countries when you simplify technology and focus on human education through the use of technology”. Another crucial element in building the Digital Society was brought forward by **Nicolas Boissez (Fondation Hironnelle)**, who pointed out that in order to build a fairer and more inclusive Digital Society we need to “support local media in places where usually media do not receive much support, such as in many African countries, and developing new media literacy programmes to help societies become more resilient against misinformation”. Information was the glue to **Andrea Cuomo (Sacertis, IW Bank)**’s speech as well, focusing on the importance and implications of knowledge transfer.

A final session highlighted the importance of cinema and communication for the post-Covid era, where participants discussed around the question: “*How to empower the collective creativity towards trends able to register and feed new aspirations of young people, in open dimensions that even democracy can benefit from?*” In this last session, **Melita Zajc (Ljubljana University)** stressed the importance of more inclusive digital platforms, where all creators and producers could present their works without the impositions from the Tech-Giants film platforms. In **Jasmina Bojic’s (Stanford University, UNAFF)** words: “The digital space presented this chance to connect with diverse groups, particularly indigenous people, Native Americans, but also disabled people and other marginalized communities, and give them an opportunity to get creatively involved in shaping the solutions and our common future”. **Firdaus Kharas (Chocolate Moose Media)** stressed the importance of the communication role in educating others in this new era of personal, instant two-way communications. **Giacomo Mazzone (Eurovisioni)** reminded that “What we can do as culture organizers or cultural promoters, faithful in conferences in traditional media, we have to do two kinds of things. One is to explain to citizens this truth that is not evident, because for the moment what is evident is the access to many contents for free, and to make efforts to explain to citizens that it is important to pursue the public interest and to fight what is against the public interest”. In the final roundtable, **Giuseppe Enne (Founder and Scientific Advisor, Desertification Research Centre, Italy)** pointed out the importance of building infrastructure in order to fill the Digital Gap in the African rural communities.

In conclusion, the urgency of identifying these new trends that will shape the Digital Society was the driving force behind the Grand Conversation held online on June 21. The different sessions highlighted crucial pillars that will be the groundwork of the **Report**:

- Positive trends (global connectivity, globalization, information) and risks that could jeopardise the process (hegemony, misinformation, marginalisation) have been recognised
- We are in a phase of creation of a new virtual world, with new languages and behaviours where anybody can explain his point of view, shaping a collective expectation. This virtual dimension, exacerbated by Covid, overlaps the real-world provoking changes giving origin to new forms of Society.
- The guiding-light of this uncertain process will be the United Nation SDGs, in term of the advancement of values like inclusiveness, justice, balance, and the respect of human rights are fundamental assumptions for a fairer Digital Society.

Having acquired the high-level remarks of all participants, a roadmap has been designed for actively investigating this process through an ad hoc **Digital Builders THINK TANK** to be installed in order to empower this Grand Conversation and to define the vision and main topics, ideas and proposals that will converge in the **Report**. This will be **presented** at the **UN Headquarters** in New York on the occasion of the **21st InfoPoverty World Conference, on December 3, 2021**, focused on how the acceleration towards the achievement of SDGs can and should coincide with the *entelekia* of the Digital Society.

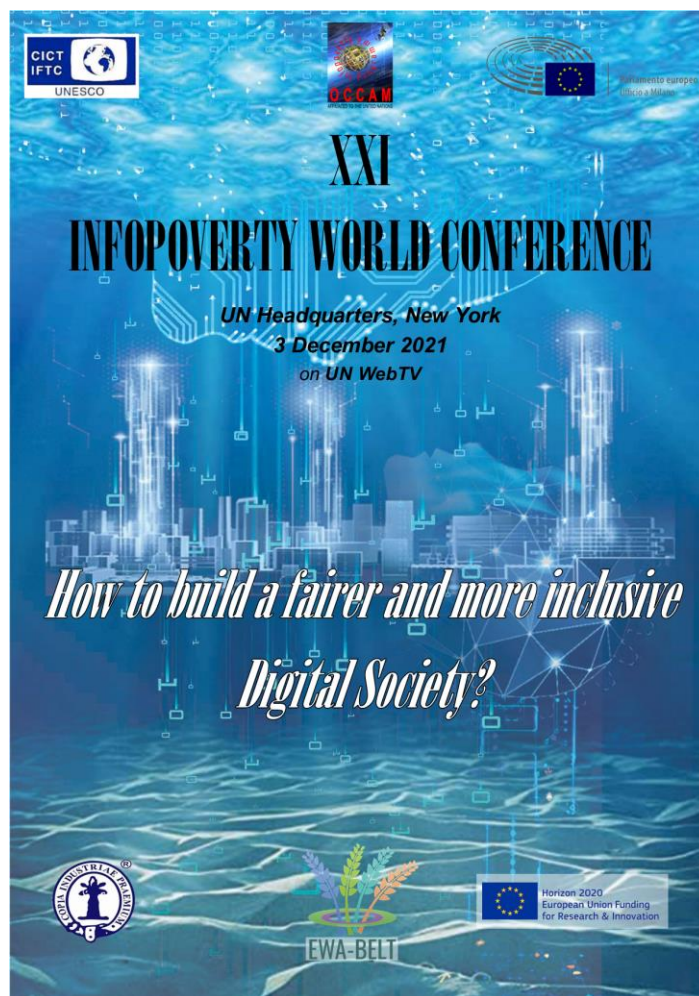
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About the Infopoverty World Conference

Since 2001, the [Infopoverty World Conference](#) took place in the premises of the UN Headquarters in New York, with the mission of fighting poverty through new technologies and presenting the results achieved year by year through the [Infopoverty Programme](#), while hosting high-level representatives of governments, international organizations, private sector, civil society and scientific world.

The Conference is an annual rendez-vous to register and validate projects ([ICT Villages Project](#), [EWA-BELT Project](#), [EMedMed](#), [3D Robotic Building System](#)) for the achievement of the **UN 2030 Agenda** at the UN Headquarters. In particular, taking stock of the results achieved during the 20th Edition – “*Towards the Digital Society inspired by SDGs*” – available as well on the [UN WebTV](#), this year the Conference will discuss the developments imposed by Covid-19 towards an acceleration of digitalisation while, on the other hand, widening the gap between the élites and disadvantaged people and communities, in continuity with the **Grand Conversation** held online on June 21 and the Final Report that will be produced by the Caucus of Digital Builders .



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