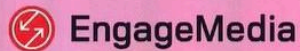




ctrl + alt + shift

DRAPAC NATIONAL CONVENING BANGLADESH 2025

BICC, Dhaka February 3, 2024



| OUTCOME REPORT

DRAPAC BANGLADESH NATIONAL CONVENING 2025

| DATE: FEBRUARY 3, 2025

| VENUE: BANGABANDHU INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTER (BICC), DHAKA

| ORGANIZED BY: ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS, ENGAGEMEDIA, AND
DIGITALLY RIGHT

INTRODUCTION

The DRAPAC Bangladesh National Convening 2025 brought together about 100 participants from government, civil society, media, private sector, donor and grassroots organizations to discuss the future of digital rights in Bangladesh. Held at a critical moment when Bangladesh is navigating a period of political transition, the convening provided a rare and timely space for frank, inclusive dialogue between stakeholders who often operate in silos.

Digitally Right, in collaboration with the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and EngageMedia, hosted the DRAPAC Bangladesh National Convening 2025 on February 3rd at the Bangabandhu International Conference Center (BICC) in Dhaka. It brought together around 100 participants, including 14 panelists, from local and international civil society, media, government, private sector and tech industry. The day featured an opening plenary and three panel discussions, alongside a cartoon exhibition by Transparency International Bangladesh highlighting threats to online privacy and freedom of expression. Presentations by Digitally Right's Tech Policy Fellows spotlighted pressing digital rights challenges facing marginalized communities across the country.



Speakers in the plenary session discussing the digital rights challenges and opportunities in Bangladesh. Photo: Digitally Right

The day-long convening reflected the tensions, hopes, and challenges surrounding digital rights reforms in Bangladesh, while also identifying common ground for collaboration. Against a backdrop of legal reform processes, growing concerns over internet governance, and shifting political realities, this convening highlighted both the urgency of action and the opportunity to reimagine Bangladesh's digital future.



Digital rights cartoon exhibition sponsored by Transparency International Bangladesh highlights censorship and online surveillance. Photo: Digitally Right

KEY OUTCOMES

| A space for multi-stakeholder dialogue that fostered trust and inclusion

The convening successfully created a rare space for open and candid discussions, enabling dialogue between diverse actors — from government officials and legal experts to civil society, private sector representatives, and grassroots voices. Participants appreciated the opportunity to build trust across sectors and openly debate conflicting views in a respectful and constructive environment. Voices from outside Dhaka, including rural and marginalized communities, were meaningfully included, enriching the discussions with lived experiences and diverse perspectives.

Reflecting on the significance of the convening, a prominent civil society figure stressed how vital it is — especially at this pivotal moment for Bangladesh — to have spaces where people can speak openly, disagree respectfully, and still work towards common ground. A political leader echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that digital governance must reflect the hopes and concerns of all citizens, not just those in positions of power. True progress, they argued, depends on an ongoing dialogue between government, civil society, and the people.

| Broad agreement on the need for legal and institutional reform

Across the plenaries and panels, broad consensus emerged that legal and institutional reforms must prioritize the protection of fundamental rights, particularly freedom of expression, privacy, and data protection. Participants repeatedly called for transparent, inclusive, and participatory processes to revise laws like the Cyber Safety Ordinance (CSO), ensuring these reforms are firmly

grounded in international human rights standards. At the same time, the lack of meaningful consultation and the rushed nature of drafting new digital laws, including the CSO, triggered heated debate, with lawyers and civil society representatives raising concerns that vague provisions, unclear procedures, and overly broad powers leave significant room for misuse and arbitrary enforcement.

The policy advisor from the interim government acknowledged this tension, candidly stating that, “being interim, this is a government in rush,” while also assuring that stakeholders would have an additional eight weeks to submit feedback on the draft. The convening emphasized the need to move away from colonial-era, control-oriented governance approaches, advocating instead for people-centered, accountable policymaking that prioritizes rights protection over state control.

| **Shared recognition of internet shutdowns as a critical threat**

Media professionals, business leaders, civil society, and international observers unanimously condemned arbitrary internet shutdowns, citing their far-reaching impacts on freedom of expression, democratic participation, economic stability, and public trust. Private sector representatives highlighted how shutdowns disrupt essential business operations and erode investor confidence in Bangladesh’s digital economy, while media editors and civil society actors stressed that internet shutdowns must be explicitly made illegal, with independent oversight mechanisms and clear procedural safeguards to ensure transparency and accountability in any future decisions affecting connectivity.

Several participants called for mandatory public notifications to users before any disruption, clear justification criteria, and regular review processes to assess the necessity and proportionality of shutdowns. Both government regulators and service providers acknowledged the need for reform but pointed to structural limitations within the current legal framework, with BTRC emphasizing that without fundamental legal amendments, its ability to act independently or introduce internal checks and balances remains severely constrained.

| **A call to bridge the digital divide and ensure inclusive governance**

A recurring theme throughout the convening was the urgent need to bridge the digital divide and ensure that digital governance reflects the voices and needs of all communities, not just those in urban centers or positions of power. Panelists and participants highlighted how digital rights are deeply intertwined with broader socioeconomic inequalities — from the urban-rural digital divide to gender disparities and the exclusion of ethnic and religious minorities. Addressing these gaps requires localizing policymaking processes, ensuring that perspectives from outside Dhaka meaningfully shape future policies.

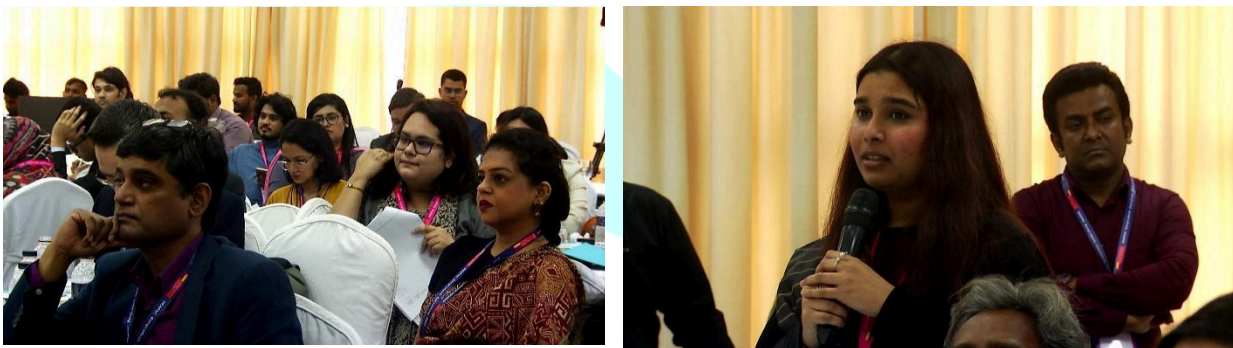
The call for inclusive governance was reinforced by insights from Digitally Right’s Tech Policy Fellows 2023. Their presentations highlighted the power of

community-driven research and youth leadership in shaping digital rights conversations. Fellows shared findings from their work on issues like internet shutdowns, gaps in personal data protection, cyberbullying, digital financial inclusion, and technology-facilitated human trafficking — illustrating how digital rights challenges are experienced differently across communities. Their work served as a reminder that policies crafted in isolation from the lived experiences of communities — particularly marginalized groups — risk being disconnected from the realities on the ground. Bringing community voices, especially from youth and underserved groups, into national conversations is essential to building digital policies that are both rights-respecting and responsive to Bangladesh’s diverse population.

| Linking national reforms to regional solidarity and political realities

Speakers and participants repeatedly acknowledged that safeguarding digital rights in Bangladesh will require far more than legal and policy reforms — it demands a broader shift in the country’s political culture. Without genuine political will, institutional accountability, and a commitment to democratic governance, legal protections risk remaining little more than symbolic gestures. This recognition of the deep connection between political realities and digital rights reform set the stage for conversations about cross-border solidarity and learning.

The announcement of the upcoming DRAPAC regional convening in August 2025 was welcomed as an opportunity to strengthen these connections, linking Bangladesh’s digital rights movement with broader efforts across South and Southeast Asia. Participants expressed hope that Bangladesh’s recent experiences — including lessons from the July uprising and the intense legal debates that followed — could contribute to a shared regional understanding of how political, legal, and civic spaces intersect in the fight for digital rights.



A snapshot of a highly engaged audience in the convening. Photo: Digitally Right

CONCLUSION

The DRAPAC Bangladesh National Convening 2025 took place at a time of profound transition for Bangladesh—a period when political change opened a space for open discussion on issues that had long been off-limits. This convening was not just another conference; it was a testament to the possibility of dialogue, even between actors with deeply opposing views.

For many participants, the convening rekindled hope that Bangladesh can break free from the cycle of opaque policymaking and rights violations, replacing it with a more transparent, accountable, and rights-respecting digital governance framework. It ended with a collective question hanging in the air: what's next?

This question—what's next—is both a challenge and an invitation. It is a call to build on the trust and momentum generated at this convening; to transform dialogue into concrete action; and to ensure that Bangladesh's digital future is built not only through laws and policies, but through genuine inclusion and collaboration.

The path ahead is uncertain, but the convening demonstrated that space exists for hope, dialogue, and collective action. Whether Bangladesh can seize this moment will depend on the political will, civic engagement, and cross-sector solidarity that emerges in the months to come.