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# DRAPAC BANGLADESH NATIONAL CONVENING

# 2026

EVENT REPORT

28 April 2026 | Dhaka, Bangladesh

## Introduction

The DRAPAC Bangladesh National Convening 2026 was organized on 28 April 2026 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, by Digitally Right Limited, in collaboration with EngageMedia, and with the support of session partners Transparency International Bangladesh and Dnet. The Convening brought together over a 100 participants, representing a diverse cross-section of stakeholders, including policy makers and government institutions; civil society organizations and human rights defenders; private sector and industry representatives from the telecom, technology, and digital services sectors; media professionals; legal experts, academics, and researchers; youth leaders; and representatives of communities most affected by digital governance decisions and engaging on issues of civic space and freedom of expression. The Convening also saw the active participation of 20 students from multiple public and private universities in Dhaka, which is a first for this annual assembly, reinforcing the need to reflect upon young people's experiences, perspectives, and inquiries when designing legislation.

*Meaningfully inclusive policy-making* has been the guiding theme for this year's National Convening, and participants across panels and plenary sessions organized throughout the day have engaged with this proposition by bringing in multiple perspectives. Discussions at the Convening were widely framed around several key, interconnected considerations, including the need to adopt a grassroots-to-global approach in policy-making and to prioritize the voices and concerns of communities and actors most affected by regulatory frameworks that create and regulate rights and obligations in the digital space. Speakers at the Convening have additionally deliberated on ways for policy-makers to design stakeholder engagement processes that are meaningfully participatory for a wide and diverse range of actors and communities; they have debated the impact of restrictive regulations on big tech companies and smaller, local platforms; and they have talked about how policy-making, and access to information and resources in the digital space, hinge largely on exclusion by design.

## Key Insights and Takeaways

- **Laws seeking to regulate the digital space remain flawed**

There has been collective, and recurring, acknowledgement that the newly enacted Cyber Security Act, 2026, the Personal Data Protection Act, 2026, and the National Data Governance Act, 2026, and the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation (Amendment) Ordinance, 2026 (currently under review), which together provide the foundations of a centralized digital governance framework in Bangladesh, are strategic instruments enabling a surveillance regime, political weaponization against critique and dissent, repression of marginalized voices, and state control over press freedom. As noted by Dr. Iftekharuzzaman, Executive Director, Transparency International Bangladesh, these new laws, which were hastily approved with little to no meaningful consultation amongst key stakeholders and relevant communities, continue to empower the state with broad, discretionary authority

without sufficient checks and balances, transparency and accountability mechanisms, or judicial oversight to limit executive overreach.



*Panelists sharing insights and perspectives during an engaging discussion on key issues shaping the digital landscape.*

Participants have also observed how the very laws intended to protect crucial rights in the digital space, such as freedom of expression and privacy, are ending up violating these rights. Aasha Mehreen Amin, joint editor of The Daily Star, spoke of high-profile arrests under the Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025 in April 2026, over online content, such as cartoons, memes, and posts on social media, about the Prime Minister or other ruling party representatives, and highlighted heightened concerns for investigative journalism in the current landscape, with devices being hacked or photographs being deleted, and informants being dismissed from employment, circumstances all too reminiscent of the previous regime's misuse of cyber laws to suppress critique.

Namrata Maheshwari, Senior Policy Counsel and Encryption Policy Lead, Access Now, additionally highlighted that there has been an appropriation of 'safety' and 'security' by legal frameworks at the cost of citizens' right to privacy in online spaces. She emphasized that there is no privacy vs. safety dichotomy, as privacy and safety are very much mutually reinforcing. She also spoke of the need to recognize that laws focused on technology and the

digital space require a grassroots-to-global approach, as legislative efforts in this space must balance the impact of regulation on human rights.

In response to these concerns, Muhammad Anwar Uddin, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Post, Telecommunications and Information Technology, noted that the government is committed to making amendments to newly enacted laws if there are gaps in protection and governance, and challenges in implementation. He explained that while it was important for these laws to be enacted promptly to ensure protection of rights in the digital space, there remains the opportunity to test whether these laws can be implemented to accord full protection to fundamental rights.

- **Current stakeholder engagement processes reinforce silos and power structures and fail to ensure meaningful, wide-ranging participation**

Speakers observed that legal and regulatory frameworks that center rights and obligations in the digital space in the South Asian region largely frame state and corporate interests at the expense of human rights, with legislative processes failing to be participatory and inclusive. Panelists added that participatory processes and context-specific and inclusive policies need adequate time for consultation, channels through which to hear from and meaningfully engage communities that are most affected and most vulnerable, and consultative processes where any member of the public can participate in a meaningful manner.

Dr. Susan Vize, Head of Office and UNESCO Representative to Bangladesh, UNESCO Dhaka Office, additionally spoke of the need to determine the values and principles that will guide policy-making processes in Bangladesh and will inform how people critically engage with the intended use of a particular policy. She underscored the importance of looking inwards when approaching policy-making, as social, political, legal, and religious contexts in Bangladesh are not the same as those in other countries and regions, stating that replicating the Brussels Effect will simply not work for Bangladesh.

Speakers at the Convening also highlighted the importance of opening up the space for multi-stakeholder dialogue in inclusive policy-making processes. Mahmud Hossain, Commissioner, Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation Commission (BTRC), explained that government agencies and many other organizations operating in this space have a history of working in silos. He reflected upon the power structures that are intrinsic to public decision-making spaces in Bangladesh's current socio-political landscape, where certain stakeholders hold greater power than others and, as a result, are able to have greater access to decision-making spaces and a higher likelihood of their interests being represented or reflected in policy decisions. He added that these structures need to be dismantled, and people need to be heard in ways that are visible, through action, to ensure that laws and policies have mechanisms in place that address their concerns.

This was echoed by Ruhi Naz, Deputy Director (RTI), Research Initiatives Bangladesh, who emphasized the importance of evaluating the kinds of stakeholders with whom state-led

consultations were held and asked whether mere participation was enough if a stakeholder's concerns were not actually addressed through visible processes. She observed that, to develop and build on people-centric recommendations, engagement must occur from the local to the national level, thereby evincing a clear partnership between citizens and the state.

- **Demand for communities and stakeholders to be heard in visible ways—building trust and accountability as a step towards meaningful engagement**

Sadia Haque, Founder and CEO, ShareTrip, explained that initiatives enabling public-private engagement are still observably new in Bangladesh, and trust-building is essential in order to make these spaces of engagement between the two sectors functional and meaningful. She added that the government has a lack of proactive intent in reaching out and engaging with smaller platforms and startups, and listening to their specific concerns, which is why startups seldom speak up.



*A participant engaging with the panelists during the discussion.*

Participants also identified the need to build accountability as another crucial factor towards meaningful engagement, sharing that the government needs to be held accountable for any dialogue sessions held with the private sector, and their concerns and recommendations need to be visibly translated into action. Pratyush Rao, Head of Public and Regulatory Affairs, Telenor Asia, added that proactive transparency about decision-making processes can help in mitigating the trust deficit between the public and private sectors, particularly amongst smaller, locally-based companies.

- **A need to recognize that regulatory frameworks impact Big Tech and smaller companies, local platforms, and startups differently**

Ruzan Sarwar, Public Policy Manager, Meta, cited Bangladesh’s historically restrictive business-associated policies with excessively punitive measures as one of the key reasons behind the absence of visible or structured engagement between the platform and government and non-government bodies in Bangladesh. She explained that such policies discourage platforms, more generally, from being deeply involved in the Bangladesh market, prioritizing setting up initiatives for users here, or intervening in the regulatory landscape, unwilling to risk overcompliance at the expense of user rights.

Sadia Haque highlighted that in designing a regulatory framework for the digital space, there is a need to recognize that industry is not linear. When assessing the impact of data protection laws, it is important to consider new perspectives brought on by start-ups, smaller platforms, and mid-sized companies that are using technology, and the new challenges they encounter as the digital space evolves. Participants also acknowledged this, stating that this assessment is necessary when formulating regulations that are proportionate in outlining obligations and penalties.

- **Students and youth want greater inclusion in digital governance discussions**

Students and youth representatives constituted a significant portion of participants at this year’s convening, marking a deliberate expansion of engagement beyond traditional stakeholder groups. Their inclusion reflected a growing recognition that discussions on digital governance cannot be meaningfully held without the involvement of those who will be shaping these frameworks in the coming years.



*Students in dialogue with the panelists during the Q&A session.*

Their participation showed that youth are not peripheral stakeholders in digital policy debates; they are central to them. Students expressed a strong interest in being meaningfully included in such spaces and in better understanding how digital rights and governance discussions intersect with their futures.

- **Sustained multi-stakeholder dialogue remains essential for inclusive digital governance**

The Convening was significant not only for the substance of the discussions but also for bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders in a shared space for open and constructive dialogue. By convening government representatives, civil society actors, industry stakeholders, media professionals, researchers, and young people, it demonstrated the value of inclusive engagement in digital governance discussions.

Held for the second consecutive year, the Convening reinforced the importance of sustained multi-stakeholder engagement in shaping digital governance in Bangladesh. For Digitally Right and its partners, it reaffirmed the value of maintaining this platform as an ongoing space for dialogue, collaboration, and policy engagement. Participants emphasized that meaningful reform requires continued exchange across sectors, and Digitally Right remains committed to continuing these conversations and fostering opportunities for stakeholders to engage with one another on the evolving challenges and opportunities in Bangladesh's digital landscape.

## Conclusion

The DRAPAC Bangladesh National Convening 2026 has offered a very timely platform for collective consideration of the newly elected government's first foray into law-making, following the interim government's hasty implementation of ordinances amidst a transitioning political landscape unfolding in the wake of the 2024 uprising. Through ensuring the participation of such a diverse assembly of cross-sectoral actors and stakeholders, the Convening has strived to uphold its goal to curate spaces of conversation that truly foster multistakeholder engagement and exchange of experiences. Impassioned discussions held during the Convening, where young people have spoken alongside veteran actors in tech and civil society, and the expectations and recommendations emerging out of these sessions, have offered a blueprint for designing meaningfully inclusive and consultative policy-making processes in Bangladesh. In line with its previous editions, the Convening hopes to continue to provide a space for cross-stakeholder engagement on issues that affect fundamental rights in the digital space.