

Civil society declaration concerning Internet.org/Free Basics in Latin America

Looking ahead to the regional meeting of the Global Internet Governance Forum, (in preparation for the FGI International, which will soon take place in Brazil), a group of civil society organizations has come forward with several concerns regarding the adoption of Free Basics in various Latin American countries. These concerns are directed towards both the governments of Latin America as well as to the Internet Service Providers.

Free Basics is a service provided by Facebook that, in association with some ISPs, cellular phone companies and in some cases, government support, hopes to facilitate access to Facebook and a handful of other services through the use of a smart phone. This service has been announced in countries such as Brazil and Peru, and has already been launched in Panama and Colombia.

If by this it is assumed that the private sector has joined the search for solutions that would provide internet access for millions of citizens in our continent, we believe it is necessary to clarify that Internet.org does not in any way provide free access to the internet; on the contrary, it gives limited access to Facebook and few other services.

The implication of this is that:

1. Free Basics does not solve the problem of access to the Internet for thousands of people in our region.

The promise made by our governments to improve access should continue to move forward, including the promise to provide a quality connection. What Free Basics offers does not replace nor complement a public policy that would provide access for those who do not have it currently.

2. Furthermore, it is with great worry that we see the lack of protection for the personal data of the users of this service. Free Basics makes it virtually impossible for a large portion of the population to choose services that guarantee the protection of their privacy. This is much more worrisome when we consider that much of our local legislation does not meet a minimal standard of protection of personal data and privacy, in light of international human rights instruments.

3. By favoring one diminished group of services rather than choosing others, Free Basics constitutes a flagrant violation of the principle of net neutrality. Although this principle is not respected in some countries in the region, those that do have laws and regulations enshrining net neutrality should respect them.

The promises and intentions of Free Basics should not be an impediment to our governments in fulfilling their promise to protect the principle of neutrality and the development of an open Internet that preserves the tenets of interoperability.

4. It is worrisome that decisions regarding the implementation of Free Basics in Latin America were made in the absence of participation on the part of civil society, the technical community and other parties interested in Internet governance.

The participation of all interested parties should not be limited only to events such as regional and global Internet governance forums; it is our hope that our governments would promise to define public policy for the digital realm in a transparent manner, with the full equitable participation of all interested parties.

Finally, we reiterate our promise to work towards public policies that allow all people to be connected to all of the Internet at all times.. Furthermore, we hope that the global controversy triggered by Free Basics will encourage our governments to renew their promise to bring such policies into place.

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