The Good, the Same, and the Ugly: Reflections from the Global DPI Summit 2025

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Attending the Global DPI Summit 2025 in Cape Town felt like stepping into a microcosm of the global Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) ecosystem - vibrant, complex, and deeply contradictory. Amid the technical panels, field experiences, and political debates, one thing became clear: we are still circling around the same themes, especially the need for safeguards to make DPI safe, trusted, and inclusive, without seeing the level of concrete advancement the rhetoric implies. There is still so much work we are not confronting seriously enough. And yet, there was also a silver lining: the remarkable depth of knowledge and the commitment of people who continue to fight tirelessly for digital rights and are achieving meaningful progress despite the odds. So here is my experience, divided into **the good, the same, and the ugly**.

The Good: Cross-Sector Collaboration We Should Hold On and Foster

One thing the Summit delivered genuinely well was its ecosystem of parallel learning spaces. Beyond the main stage, there were multiple deep-dive sessions with multisectoral participation. However, special praise goes for the sessions held parallel to the official program of the event, which brought multisectoral voices into more candid, grounded conversations.

I attended a few parallel sessions that were very fruitful, for example, the *Closed-Door Breakfast on DPI Governance and Public-Interest Capacity Building*, organized by Co-Develop. The conversation highlighted a crucial, yet often overlooked, reality: public-interest actors, from media organisations to rights advocates and civil society groups, play an essential role in shaping how DPI is designed and deployed, but too often they are left without the capacity, resources, or enabling environment needed to engage meaningfully in these processes.

Another meaningful session was the *World Bank's discussion on digitalization in Fragility, Conflict, and Violence contexts*, highlighting how interoperability and safeguards become even more essential when operating in fragile states.

I also joined the World Bank & Vital Strategies workshop *Register Once, Recognize for Life*, in which government leaders and practitioners discussed how integrating civil registration and digital ID is far more than a technical fix but foundational for an inclusive DPI endeavor. The absence of a linked CRVS–ID system can delay social protection benefits, complicate service delivery, and systematically exclude people whose births or life events were never formally recorded. UNICEF representatives specifically echoed these concerns, stressing that children are disproportionately affected when CRVS and digital ID are developed in isolation, leaving many without the basic documentation needed to claim rights or even be visible in national identification systems.

Across the event, and the keynote addresses, similar concerns were raised. For instance, the UNDP's intervention emphasized the importance of **safe, inclusive, interoperable, people-centric digital infrastructure** for sustainable development, stating that *the difference between having a digital infrastructure that works, is people centric, is trustworthy, and a digital infrastructure that isn't those things, that is ineffective, inefficient, excludes people, the developmental impact difference is huge.*

And the message on safeguards was conveyed not as obstacles, but as "seatbelts" enabling safer, faster, and more legitimate DPI deployment was repeated strongly in the opening speeches and throughout the event.

The Same: The Persistent Repetition We Can No Longer Ignore

Yet for every inspiring moment, there was an unmistakable sense of *déjà-vu*. The speeches on interoperability, inclusion, cross-government cooperation, and the urgency of safeguards felt familiar, and sometimes almost identical to those delivered at the last year's Summit. Even by speakers who insist that DPI "moves too fast to keep up", their own language seems not to have moved at all.

The Summit presents itself as diverse and global, however, the underlying dynamics told a more familiar story. Nonetheless, selected government delegations, multilateral organizations, big donors, and major tech actors were unquestionably the dominant voices. The same constellation of players that typically steer DPI conversations were strongly represented on panels and in agenda-setting roles, while grassroots civil society, investigative media, local advocacy groups, and local community organisations - those closest to the lived realities and risks of DPI - remained largely at the periphery, often invited to speak but rarely positioned to influence.

Thematic breadth of the program also concealed a clear technocratic tilt. The three most well-known and widely recognized layers of DPI (digital identity, digital payments, and data-exchange), along with the growing prominence of AI, dominated the panels and workshops topics. Other forms of DPI received far less attention, and discussions about rights, safety, resilience, and community-level implementation were consistently overshadowed.

Even when safeguards were mentioned, familiar phrases resurfaced. The repeated reminder that "safeguards cannot be an afterthought" echoed almost verbatim what was said at last year's Summit. The lingering question remained: what concrete progress have we actually achieved? Rhetorically, the conversation is advancing; practically, the evidence is far harder to find.

The Ugly: The Contradictions We Can no Longer Excuse

One of the most personally unsettling aspects of the event was the **glaring gender imbalance**, especially on prominent stages.

Right at the start, at the Opening Ceremony, we watched a panel of seven men discussing equality and inclusion - a full *mannel*, in 2025, at an event championing the principle of "leave no one behind." Furthermore, both opening keynote speakers were also men, reinforcing a

pattern that has become almost routine in DPI spaces. Then came the attempted justification during the inaugural session: *"It so happens that the leadership is all male."* Hearing that as a woman working in this field was both frustrating and illuminating. If it "so happens" that leadership is entirely male, then the issue isn't circumstantial; it is systemic.

Compounding this was **the overwhelming presence of the private sector**, which further skewed the balance of voices. Private companies, big tech actors, and corporate representatives were everywhere - in panels, side events, networking spaces - often more visible than government delegations and much more present than civil society or community actors. Their influence was felt not just in numbers, but in tone: polished showcases, technical narratives, and efficiency-driven visions of DPI became the prevailing tone of the conversation. In contrast, the people and communities who live with the impacts of these systems had far fewer opportunities to shape the narrative.

Representation isn't cosmetic. It shapes which priorities dominate, whose experiences count, and how decisions are made. When the voices guiding the conversation are overwhelmingly middle-aged men in positions of power, it's not surprising that themes like community involvement, local realities, and gender equity remain secondary.

TL;DR: Between Real Progress and Remaining Challenges

The Global DPI Summit 2025 was, at once, energizing and frustrating.

The Good: meaningful multisectoral conversations, deep thematic sessions, and genuine alignment around safeguards, public value, and people-centric design.
The Same: recurring narratives, concentrated power structures, technocratic focus, and the absence of concrete evidence of change.
The Ugly: representation gaps (especially gender imbalances) that fundamentally contradict the values the sector claims to uphold.

DPI remains an area of enormous potential, capable of reshaping how people access services and exercise rights. But to realize this potential, the ecosystem must confront its own contradictions and remaining challenges. The most transformative shift is not solely technological: recognizing and addressing the patterns we continue to replicate.

Only then can we transform "the same" and "the ugly" into something genuinely new and good.