



EMERGING LEADERS

FOR THE DIGITAL WORLD

EXTRACT

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Sheba Mohammid from Trinidad and Tobago re-imagines the future



People are always saying that things aren't black and white and that there are many shades of grey. But two stories are told about the Caribbean: one is of white sand and blue seas; the other is of poor people who deserve sympathy. I am from Trinidad and Tobago. I was born in 1983, and my father named me Sheba because it was the strongest girl's name he could imagine. My coming of age is inextricably intertwined with the Internet. Things aren't always black and white; sometimes they are in colour.

Trinidad and Tobago is a twin island state that has miraculously survived its share of changed hands, revolution, independence, unimaginable cruelties, and earth-shattering

beauty. It is at once indigenous, colonised, independent, and global. Surrounding it is indeed the azure of the Caribbean sea but also the violent crashes of the Atlantic that tell of journeys made, lives lost, and civilisations found and founded. Long before globalisation became a fashionable term, this soil was stepped on by travellers from many continents who came as slaves, indentured servants, masters, and missionaries; they never left but became entangled in one dream. No island is an island.

Development = ?

I grew up in the midst of a country struggling to come to terms with development – how to achieve it and what it even



meant. Was progress a straight line forward? The buildings got taller and the streets more full of homeless people that men in suits drove past in air-conditioned cars. Poverty and misplaced opportunities were real. There was a palpable frustration with systems that did not work. Fast-food chains popped up, and some people starved. Children were taught and not heard as they were tested and standardised to regurgitate answers to other people's questions. But the mountains were still green after the rain, and there was a wildness in the waves and in masqueraders mocking history. Revelry remained.

Question everything

I once heard about a man who drove past a sign near a university that read in ominous black print: Question Everything. The next day he drove past again only to see that someone had spray painted 'Why?' My grandmother, an extraordinary woman, said that as a child I would ask endless questions. I had Audio Books Beta, if you will, as my mother read to me about everything, and my father told stories of his childhood adventures in a land that was being paved over. As soon as I could, I was reading and writing my own stories and drawing on every scrap of paper I could find, the backs of calendars and important documents. I was staining clothes with ground-up samples of hibiscus flowers, dipping litmus paper, and collecting specimens. I was

orchestrating worlds in which all the neighbourhood children would play along, and we would spend so much time playing that sometimes daylight would run out before we finished. And I was asking questions.

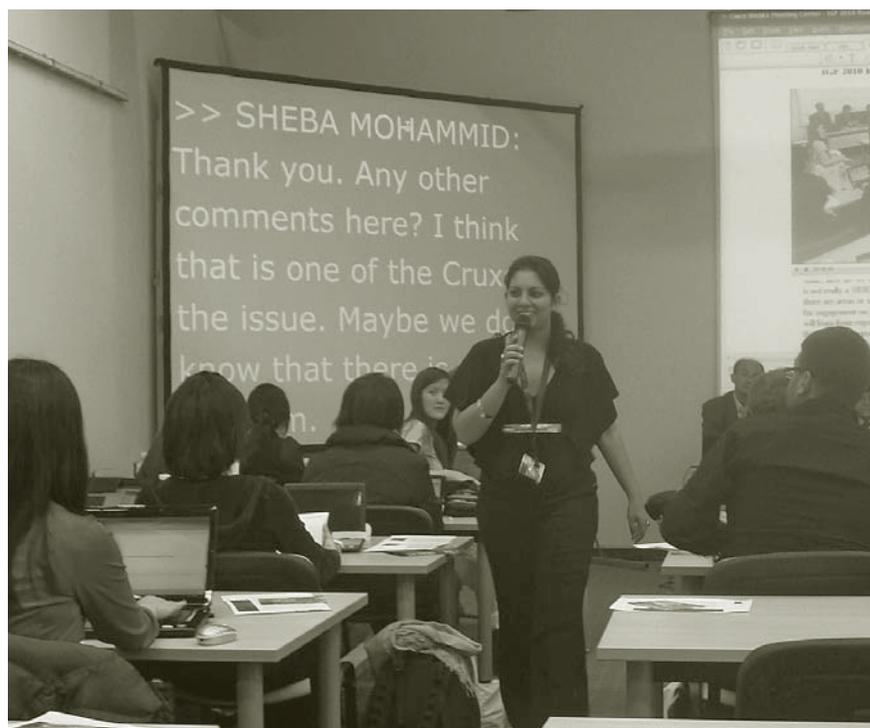
I was 16 when the world prepared for the apocalypse of Y2K and still 16 when nothing happened. Coming of age with the Internet meant that I got the sense that I could 'e-Anything' I wanted when I grew up. Coupled with this was the never-ending stream of well-meaning voices that explained in no uncertain terms that failure was inevitable.

Rethinking knowledge

When I chose to do both arts and sciences in school, people shook their heads. You did not get a scholarship with a combination like that. I went on

to win a national scholarship. When I asked the University of Manchester if I could do more than the Environmental Sciences degree I had applied for, they listened, and I went on to get first class honours in Built and Natural Environment, Literary Studies, and Drama. I studied poverty and policy, sociology and sciences, deconstructed imaginings and ideology, and media and methods. I had always been interested in multidisciplinary strategies for change and the potential of technology as a vehicle to move forward.

When I came back to Trinidad, they did not know where to put me. I didn't fit into their system. I was released from my contract with the government, and Google called and paid me what I suppose is its highest compliment: the recruiter said that I was very 'Googly.' I



started interviewing for a job in London. My files were in a folder locked away in a government building and I stopped at the local Scholarship Division to ask for directions. As serendipity would have it, the director had my CV on his desk and told me about a new section that was looking at national ICT. I blame what happened next on an unlikely combination of the following – destiny, that nagging feeling from too many 1980’s save-the-world cartoons, a family that is too remarkable for its own good, and that question, what is the point of anything if you don’t make a difference? So I stayed.

Working towards strategies for greater digital inclusion

Fast-forward half a decade, and you find me working in information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D). I did not fit what people thought IG/ICT looked like. Older men told me I had no

place here. Sexism and bigotry were condoned under the guise of culture.

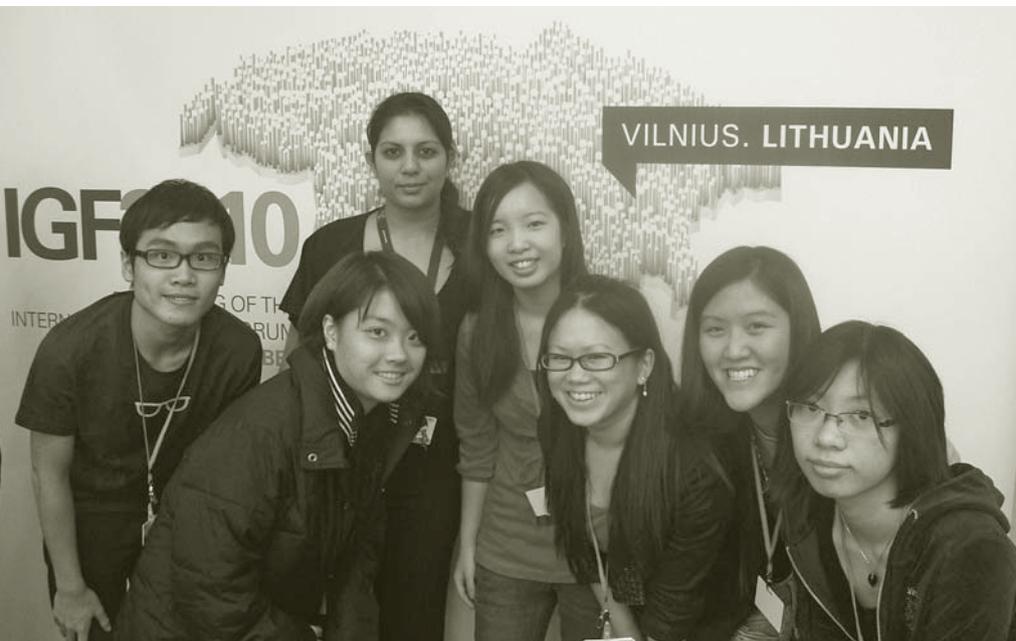
I went on to study advanced Internet governance (IG) and its technical, economic, legal, sociocultural, and development dimensions, along with ICT policy. I was appointed research expert on the ACP IG Research Programme. Locally, there was great pleasure in working in the face of stagnant systems with dedicated people to effect positive change through National Policy, Connected Government e-Legislative reform, Multichannel Service delivery and ICT4Education.

When I visited Malta on official government business, the immigration officer looked at me, a twenty-something girl in a hoodie and quizzically looked back down at the official passport. I did not look like governance. However, I have journeyed to Egypt and Lithuania to speak as a panellist

and moderator for the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and have been a Commonwealth fellow and an ACP fellow to the IGF. People were interested in the voice of a small island developing state, and they, too, asked questions.

I am humbled to be a facilitator in ICT policy and strategy e-learning for participants from all over Africa, the Pacific, and the Caribbean regions. I am also grateful to be regionally appointed as a DiploFoundation trainer for Internet Governance Capacity Building for South America and the mainland Caribbean region. I have met brilliant people from all over who believe in change. I have heard so many diverse perspectives from my visits to other countries while conducting ACP awareness raising of IG issues.

We are working towards strategies for greater digital inclusion. I have learnt the



power of collaboration through the Regional Online Group on Caribbean IG and ICT Policy Solutions. I started with participants from over 15 countries. A groundswell in the developing world is rippling, and as one of the founding members of the Internet Society (ISOC) chapter in Trinidad and Tobago, I encourage other countries to get involved.

The many faces of IG

Of course, the girl is still questioning as she now conducts research on the sociology of the Internet, focusing on youth behaviour. My work applies digital ethnography to the developing world to investigate how young people there are using the Internet for identity

and social inclusion. Perhaps IG has many faces that one did not imagine.

This is only the beginning. There is so much work still to be done. There are so many unraveling threads. There is so much still to create. There is much need to better use the Internet for development. Beyond this, there is still much need for the developing world to play a more significant role in shaping what development means to them and in shaping what the Internet will become. When I was asked to contribute to and edit this collection of stories, I was again humbled as I had the opportunity to meet amazing pioneers who are changing the face of the Internet and changing

lives. I am grateful to them. I am grateful to people who push and believe in the face of naysayers, and to groups that have believed in me, particularly DiploFoundation, EU ACP, the Commonwealth Secretariat, and the Council of Europe. I am grateful to a beautiful and inspiring family and to my friends who have also grown up with the Internet and understand it in their own ways. These are not stories in black and white or even shades of grey. They are in colour. We are emerging not from something but towards something... perhaps a future we cannot even imagine.

Sheba Mohammid is an ICT Policy Specialist in Trinidad and Tobago. ■

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