

THE GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT AND A RESPONSIBLE, INCLUSIVE TRANSITION

The United Nations Global Digital Compact seeks to establish a worldwide consensus on the principles to underpin an open, free and secure digital future. The negotiations have exposed a divide between the nations that wish to continue with Internet governance in its present form and those that push for a more statist approach. That, along with the importance human rights should have in such an agreement, diminishes the prospect of progress towards global digital governance frameworks capable of rising to today's challenges.



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Shortly after taking up the post in 2017, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres announced that global digital governance and cooperation would be a core component of his ambitious agenda to reform and strengthen the multilateral system. Following several rounds of consultations, the [Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#) was released in 2020. It gathers the secretary-general's vision for how the international community can best exploit the opportunities that digital technologies offer and, at the same time, tackle the challenges they present. The secretary-general's idea to include a technological track in his [Our Common Agenda](#) report, leading to the approval of a Global Digital Compact (GDC), should be interpreted as part of this long haul commitment to placing the United Nations at the heart of global digital cooperation.

The Global Digital Compact, presented as an annex to the Pact for the Future to be approved in September 2024, seeks to establish a global consensus on the principles to underpin an open, free and secure digital future for all. It revolves around eight specific goals: 1) closing digital divides by guaranteeing connectivity and digital skills; 2) expanding and guaranteeing the

benefits of the digital economy; 3) avoiding Internet fragmentation and ensuring it remains inclusive, open, secure and shared; 4) improving data management and protection; 5) applying human rights in the digital sphere; 6) establishing digital commons as a public good; 7) moving towards enhanced levels of digital security and confidence to reinforce accountability mechanisms for discrimination and misleading content; 8) regulating artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies.

WHILE IT IS AN INTER-GOVERNMENTAL PROCESS WHICH, IT IS HOPED, WILL INVOLVE ALL MEMBER STATES, IT IS THE OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL THAT IS BEHIND THE GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT INITIATIVE.

It is worth noting that, unlike other digital cooperation processes in the UN system, the idea of establishing a GDC and the conceptualisation of its key pillars did not come from the member states. While it is an intergovernmental process which, it is hoped, will involve all UN member states, it is the Office of the Secretary-General that is behind it. The role of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology was created for that purpose in 2022. They perform the function of coordinating the Roadmap for Digital

Cooperation and, within this framework, moving towards approval of the Global Digital Compact in close consultation with the member states, the tech industry, civil society and other stakeholders.

Do we need more *multilateralism* for Internet governance?

It has always been said that the Internet is a system which, by design, is capable of withstanding the abuse of power. As a decentralised technology, it was supposed to be an open governance model based on the voluntary participation of multiple stakeholders (governments, the private sector, the tech community and civil society). A model that would guarantee that Internet grew and evolved out of open standards. And that has been the case over the last few decades. A single, highly decentralised governance model has taken root in which several organisations, such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) or the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) oversee the Internet's technical architecture. This model limits direct state or multilateral intervention in the processes of developing Internet standards and protocols.

This is not to say that the United Nations has remained on the sidelines of Internet and digital governance, but it does mean that its participation has been more or less fragmentary. At the end of the 1990s, when the importance of digital technologies and the need for some sort of

international cooperation were beginning to become clear, the United Nations organised the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). After two rounds of negotiations, in Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005), the foundations and principles on which the future of the Internet should rest were established. The main WSIS outcome was the creation of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), which was to be the preferred (though non-binding) space for political dialogue, where governments, businesses, the tech community and civil society would meet periodically to discuss matters on an equal footing.

While this model has worked reasonably well, it has not been without controversy and disagreement. And, as with all models, there is room for improvement. Generally speaking, there is an enduring divide between a group of states that wish to continue with Internet governance in its current form, with strong participation of non-state actors, and those that push for a more statist approach, where government and intergovernmental bodies are the main players. This latter group maintains there is Western bias in most of the multistakeholder governance spaces, since the decision makers are largely actors from the Western private sector and tech communities. Consequently, while on paper forums such as the IGF seek to promote Internet interoperability, resilience and growth in a neutral manner, the standards and protocols presented often inherently reflect certain preferences for privacy, security and openness, in line with a liberal and democratic world view (Ringhof, 2023).

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Tensions between the two models have become more evident in the last few years. The group of countries that would like a broader role for the state in digital management, including China, Russia and the Gulf states, have tried to weaken the multistakeholder model, promoting a multilateral intergovernmental governance instead. The strategy they have chosen is to try to transfer some of the functions these spaces perform to certain intergovernmental bodies, like the International Telecommunication Union (UTI), where the chances of garnering support are greater (Gjesvik and Schia, 2023). The Western states' response to date has been to reject such expansions, which are seen as a kind of "authoritarian multilateralism" (Raymond and Sherman, 2023), arguing that the multistakeholder model is the only one that can guarantee an open Internet governed according

to democratic principles. The UTI has traditionally been responsible for the development of telecommunication standards and infrastructures, but not Internet governance.

Given this, some have seen the Global Digital Compact as a dangerous movement towards recentralising Internet governance around the United Nations and a top-down bid to minimise the role of the tech community. While it may seem positive that the secretary-general should care about moving towards a more inclusive digital multilateralism, some states fear the GDC may spell the beginning of the end for the collaborative and multistakeholder model and, therefore, a concession to those more authoritarian states. This view holds that instead the United Nations should step up efforts to improve the current governance model to make it more efficient, inclusive and representative (Komaitis, 2023). Since the start of the process, what's more, questions have been raised about the choice of New York as the centre of negotiations rather than Geneva, which is where the most important UN digital governance bodies (like the ITU) are based.

This concern helps us to understand how some negotiations have developed. For example, the “**zero draft**” of the GDC proposed as many as five new structures or processes. Arguably the most controversial of these was the proposal for a new forum of intergovernmental digital cooperation with a broad mandate and which would to a large extent duplicate existing spaces, such as the IGF. Most of these initiatives were reframed or ended up disappearing from the **first revision** on account of the opposition of certain major states. The chief criticism is that rather than duplicating structures that are already working perhaps it is better to reinforce the existing ones. In addition, these new structures may require too many resources, particularly for civil society groups, and call for funding that few countries can provide (and which would lead to reinforcing certain countries' dominance over Internet decision-making).

Human rights versus development: a false dilemma

The second major topic in the final stretch of the GDC discussions is the weight given to safeguarding human rights in the digital sphere. **G77 and, particularly, Chinese inputs** appear to be geared towards trying to curtail US, EU and other Western nations' efforts to enshrine and reinforce the observance of political and civil rights in the final document. They are trying to switch the narrative to bolster the importance of safeguarding state security and propose that economic development be recognised as “the primary and basic human right”. They are also calling for the GDC

to “reaffirm the sovereign right of states to determine their national rules for Internet usage and their prerogative to govern the digital sphere within their jurisdiction, in conformity with international law”.

Following this logic, that group of nations is trying to approve provisions that would commit states to refrain from “politicising human rights issues or interfering in others’ domestic affairs and challenging others’ judicial sovereignty under the excuse of protecting online human rights” (Lynch, 2024). A specific example of this movement is the proposal (backed by states including Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Syria and Saudi Arabia, as well as China) to remove a provision from the draft that calls on the UN secretary-general to outline a plan for a United Nations digital human rights advisory service.

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Instead, the G77 countries emphasise being more ambitious on goals like guaranteeing global connectivity and reinforcing action aimed at developing technological skills, particularly in Global South countries, where fears about being left behind are deepest.

They call for considering an international technology framework aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which would offer developing countries preferential access to relevant advanced technologies with a view to developing their productive capacities. China’s inputs often frame this debate as a competition among monopolist Western tech corporations that seek profits and domination at the expense of the poorest countries, which suffer growing inequality.

Looking beyond the GDC

The GDC has potential implications in several key areas. These include access to affordable and reliable digital services and Internet connectivity; digital inclusion and the possibility of bridging digital divides; human rights protection and ethical considerations in the digital world; the digital economy and its connection to economic growth; governance frameworks for regulating new technologies; or the need for global cooperation to jointly address issues such as cyberthreats or disinformation.

There should be no cause for controversy in the response to these fundamental issues. Yet discussions at UN headquarters have revealed

a deepening geopolitical divide that advises caution when predicting the outcome of the GDC negotiations. A good illustration of this is the diluting of the references to human rights in the **second revision**, the deletion of the goal to fight Internet fragmentation, or the first appearance of a problematic mention of the GDC applying exclusively to the “non-military” domain.

In addition, this latest revision emphasises the “critical” role the United Nations must play in digital cooperation, illustrated by the recovery of the controversial high-level review mechanism proposed for the GDC, which is suspiciously like the previously criticised forum for intergovernmental digital cooperation. These changes, along with the softening of the language regarding the primacy of the multistakeholder governance model, have triggered some significant reactions, such as the publication of an **open letter** where some of the world’s most authoritative voices on Internet development warn the secretary-general of the dangerous turn the GDC appears to be taking.

As one might expect in such circumstances, the divisions are already impacting (and will likely continue to impact) other negotiations taking place in parallel, such as the UN’s efforts to regulate artificial intelligence (AI). We will need to pay close attention to these other processes in the coming months, as they may be instrumental in complementing what will (surely) remain open or incomplete in the GDC. The first important stop is the 20-year review of the WSIS in 2025, where the renewal of the IGF’s mandate will be under discussion. It will be the moment to debate how to implement the GDC to move towards such urgent goals as connecting the 2.6 billion people in the world who remain unconnected to the Internet.

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