

The UN Secretary General's High-Level Panel report on Digital Cooperation

Our preliminary response

About Global Partners Digital

The advent of the internet – and the wider digital environment – has enabled new forms of free expression, organisation and association, provided unprecedented access to information and ideas, and catalysed rapid economic and social development. It has also facilitated new forms of repression and violation of human rights, and intensified existing inequalities.

Global Partners Digital (GPD) is a social purpose company dedicated to fostering a digital environment underpinned by human rights and democratic values. We do this by making policy spaces and processes more open, inclusive and transparent, and by facilitating strategic, informed and coordinated engagement in these processes by public interest actors.

Our submission/output

GPD welcomes the UN Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation report, the "the Age of Digital Interdependence", and the opportunity to provide some preliminary feedback. As GPD's work focuses on promoting and protecting human rights in the digital environment, and on promoting inclusive approaches to policy-making, the section "Human Rights and Human Agency" in chapter 3 on "Individuals, Societies and Digital technologies" is most directly relevant to our work. However, as we see human rights and the multistakeholder approach to policy-making as cross-cutting issues we also provide some remarks on the two other substantive chapters which form part of the report, chapter 2 "Leaving no-one behind" and chapter 4, "Mechanisms for Global Digital Cooperation". In this initial response, we first provide overall feedback on chapters 2-4 of the report, before summarising our responses to the report's recommendations. We look forward to being part of the ongoing consultation process going forward.

1. Summary of feedback on the report

Leaving no-one behind

We welcome the emphasis on the importance of the multistakeholder approach, inclusiveness and cooperation among stakeholders in chapter 2, but we would emphasise two general points: first, that two key terms, "digital public goods", and "digital inclusion" used in this chapter remain loosely defined and understood in different ways,

depending on the actor and context in question. Therefore, should responses be developed to address the issues outlined, the definitions should be clearly defined through a collaborative and inclusive process. For example, different institutions, from libraries, to educational and training facilities, to banks have different definitions of the term “digital inclusion”. Second, policy responses should be developed to promote a holistic approach to addressing issues of inequality in access to digital technology. For example, although there is recognition in the report of the complex nature of inequality in access to the internet and to digital services, there is a focus on the role of financial institutions like the World Bank in addressing these issues. Instead, it should be acknowledged that policies relevant to addressing unequal access and use of digital goods and services will need to be responsive to the underlying causes of inequality in any given context and therefore consult a wide range of stakeholders in relevant policy spaces to ensure holistic and long-term responses.

Human rights and human agency

GPD welcomes the affirmation in the report that human rights apply online as they do offline, and the reference to some recent efforts to interpret the human rights framework for the digital age.

However, the report doesn’t acknowledge that the interpretation of how existing international human rights standards apply to the digital age has been ongoing for more than two decades, both through binding regulation and non-binding policy responses at the national, regional and global levels. Within the UN, the Human Rights Council (HRC) in particular continues to issue interpretations via its resolutions, with further elaboration provided through the outputs of the Special Procedures, where they are endorsed by the HRC. In addition, the outputs of the Treaty Bodies, both the General Comments and the responses to individual communications, are an important source of interpretation of international human rights standards in the digital age.

Therefore, instead of starting anew with an “agencies-wide review of how existing international human rights accords and standards apply to the digital age” - as suggested in recommendation 3A - we would urge closer collaboration among all stakeholders to ensure that the existing standards developed by the HRC and the other bodies and processes mentioned above are heeded by actors in relevant UN agencies and bodies, and implemented and monitored at the national, regional and global levels. The recommendation proposes that stakeholders are invited to submit their views on how to apply human rights to the digital age which risks duplicating or even disregarding, the wide-ranging existing and continuing work in this area. A collaborative database which collates the standards developed within the HRC and the other bodies and processes mentioned above relevant to the application of the existing human rights framework to the digital age, and which is consistently updated, could be a useful tool to this end.

Second, in this section, discussion on the right to privacy makes reference to “how to give people greater meaningful control over their personal data” as an important question. Efforts should be focused on the institution of strong data protection frameworks and the harmonisation of data protection frameworks globally. This could be a focus for capacity building efforts aimed at policymakers carried out or supported by the relevant UN agencies, in addition to a reformed Internet Governance Forum (IGF) as proposed in chapter 4 of the report.

With regards to the section on trust and cohesion, including the role of social media companies in this regard, we would agree with the general points made that trust can be promoted through greater transparency, accountability, and greater cooperation among stakeholders. We also agree that both a mix of policy and technical measures are required to promote transparency and accountability. However, we would emphasise that both policy and technical measures should be underpinned and guided by international human rights standards in their development and application.

In the section on “security” we agree that global security and stability are increasingly dependent on digital security and stability, and that the current landscape is characterised by tensions. We also agree that important progress has been made within the UN, including by meetings of Groups of Governmental Experts. However, there is a lack of acknowledgement of the securitisation of these discussions within narrow and closed sections of policymaking, including national security, military and law enforcement agencies. This lack of inclusivity must be addressed, and a recognition of the centrality of human security, and of the links between human rights, the sustainable development agenda and cybersecurity, should be at the forefront of cybersecurity discussions.

Mechanisms for digital cooperation

GPD agrees that an inclusive approach should be at the basis of mechanisms to promote digital cooperation, and that there currently exists a disconnect between multistakeholder dialogue platforms like the IGF and decision-making entities on national and international levels. However, the need to create lower entry points and promote greater synchronisation between forums should happen within existing frameworks instead of via the creation of new agencies or initiatives, as this risks splintering discussions and introducing greater complexity to the existing system. We would therefore support the proposal to reform the IGF included in chapter 4, although we would urge a thorough consultation with the multistakeholder community, including via national and regional IGFs, to that end.

2. Responses to the recommendations

In line with these broad comments, our responses to the relevant recommendations follow.

An inclusive digital economy and society

- **Recommendation 1a:** we would recommend reference to the importance of “secure” as well as “affordable” access.
- **Recommendation 1b:** we would recommend that a broad and inclusive discussion on the proposed definition of “digital public goods” be held.
- **Recommendation 1c:** we would emphasise a broad conversation is required to develop a shared understanding of the term “digital inclusion” to support consistency in its application in different contexts, before any policies are proposed and developed.

Human and institutional capacity

- **Recommendation 2:** Any efforts to address capacity-building gaps should consider lessons learned from similar efforts. Further, instead of creating new institutions which could risk being politicised, the international community should leverage existing institutions like the IGF. In order to promote lower-entry points, UN agencies could facilitate networks of existing capacity building actors at the national level.

Human rights and human agency

- **Recommendation 3a:** we would urge closer collaboration and work among all

stakeholders to ensure that the existing standards developed by the HRC and the other bodies and processes mentioned above are heeded by actors in relevant UN agencies and bodies, and implemented and monitored at the national, regional and global levels. The development of a database of relevant standards could be helpful in this regard.

- **Recommendation 3b:** We support this recommendation
- **Recommendation 3b:** We recommend emphasis is placed on the application of the human rights framework in order to operationalise ethical standards related to the development and use of AI.

Trust, security and stability

- **Recommendation 4:** We recommend that the discussion regarding the need for a “global commitment on digital trust and security” be carried out with all relevant stakeholders in an open, inclusive and transparent manner. Provided there is agreement among stakeholders that such a mechanism is needed, any ensuing efforts to develop it should be guided by the recognition of the links between cybersecurity, human rights and the sustainable development agenda, and ensure the meaningful inclusion of stakeholders.

Global Digital Cooperation

- **Recommendation 5a:** We recommend that the discussion regarding a “global commitment for digital cooperation” be carried out within the IGF structure in an open, inclusive and transparent manner.
- **Recommendation 5b:** We fully support the multistakeholder approach to digital cooperation.