



Digital Governance, What's at Stake?

An Explainer

June 2025

GLOBAL PARTNERS DIGITAL



Digital tech as a geopolitical battleground

Digital technologies now underpin how people express themselves, access information, and organise collectively. But they are also being used to entrench state control, expand surveillance, and reinforce inequality and discrimination. The dual nature of digital technologies presents both promise and peril for the protection and advancement of human rights globally.

Multilateral forums have become geopolitical arenas where state actors compete to enforce their vision of digital governance. This has led to attempts to centralise decision-making, often at the expense of transparency, inclusivity, human rights, and multistakeholder approaches. The **open and interoperable nature of the Internet** – which has proved essential for human rights and democratic governance – is **under threat**.

A complex ecosystem

Twenty years ago, digital governance was a nascent field. Today, the importance of digital technologies means that discussions about how to govern them have multiplied. These discussions have proliferated and are happening at a variety of levels, making for a complex digital governance ecosystem. Understanding the relevance and relationship between these proliferating discussions can be a challenge.

At the **international UN level**, discussions aim to improve cooperation between countries on digital subjects, set norms of behaviour, or create binding rules. Their rapid proliferation includes forums, working groups, processes to elaborate treaties, and committees amongst others.

International discussions can influence **regional discussions** and impact the creation of **national policies**. In turn, national and regional policymaking can set the agenda for global processes.

Discussions tend to address a particular topic but, due to the nature of digital technologies and their impact, these often **overlap or duplicate certain policy areas**.

Outside of the UN, the digital governance space is even more crowded, with **regional policy frameworks**, **multistakeholder coalitions**, and **multilateral agreements** all impacting international cooperation on digital technology governance.

2025 – A critical year for digital governance

This year and beyond, high-stakes multilateral processes will shape the future of digital governance. The outcomes of these could either reinforce open, rights-based governance, or legitimize digital authoritarianism. We are at a critical moment for the future of digital governance.

- The [Global Digital Compact](#) is shaping the UN's approach to digital governance, with new mechanisms on AI (a Scientific Panel and Global Dialogue) emerging from it.
- The [WSIS+20 review](#) could either weaken or support the multistakeholder approach to internet governance and the UN's approach to the governance of digital technologies. It also determines the future of the [Internet Governance Forum](#).
- The [Open-ended Working Group \(OEWG\) on the Security of and in the Use of ICTs](#) is concluding and a new permanent UN cybersecurity mechanism will be negotiated which will influence whether States behave responsibly in cyberspace.
- The [UN Cybercrime Convention](#) may enter into force and a supplementary protocol is likely to be negotiated, with human rights organisations sounding the alarm about this possibility.
- The [UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly](#) will continue to issue its guidance on human rights online.
- Preparations for the [ITU Plenipotentiary](#) in 2026 are underway and there is a risk that some governments will push for the role of this multilateral forum to be expanded.

The role of civil society

Civil society organisations and human rights defenders play an essential role in making digital governance processes accountable, inclusive, and informed by lived experiences. Civil society has been building expertise, engagement, and relationships in the digital governance field over the past twenty years.

Past successes show how **coordinated** civil society efforts can shape rights-respecting outcomes. **Local knowledge and advocacy** from the **Global Majority** are particularly crucial, given the work they do with communities who are under-represented but disproportionately impacted by digital governance decisions.

Despite its maturity, civil society faces significant **challenges** today:

- The proliferation of forums and negotiations makes it hard to track and engage strategically,
- Civic space is shrinking,
- There is a lack of resources to participate meaningfully which has been compounded by cuts in funding across the board.
- National and regional organisations often lack the bandwidth to engage globally, and the link between local realities and global negotiations is often lost.
- There is still no robust mechanism for global coordination across diverse civil society efforts.

Shaping our digital future together

The future of digital governance and its alignment with human rights depends on who is at the table. Civil society must not only have a seat, but the capacity, strategy, and resources to shape the table itself. Without civil society involvement, digital governance processes risk becoming undemocratic and unimplementable, with decisions being made by state and corporate actors with narrow interests.

As civil society, we need to be **ready to take highly targeted and coordinated action** to ensure that digital technologies are governed in a rights-respecting, inclusive, and multistakeholder manner. There is an urgent need:

- To better-resource civil society to meaningfully engage in digital governance processes, particularly from the Global Majority.
- For civil society to coordinate and collaborate around advocacy actions. There are too many spaces for civil society groups to single handedly engage in.
- To build a connected civil society infrastructure to enable us to rapidly respond to new threats and fast-paced developments across the plethora of processes.
- To track and analyse policy trends across forums, share this information and be ahead of the curve on threats and developments.
- To foster cross-stakeholder alliances to reinforce the multistakeholder model.



June 2025

www.gp-digital.org