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Global Digital Compact: Charting a New Era in Digital Governance?

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ABSTRACT

The Global Digital Compact, adopted during the Summit of the Future in September 2024, is the first truly multilateral instrument which addresses issues relating to global digital governance in a comprehensive and systematic manner. While this is a remarkable step forward in terms of increasing representation, enhancing coordination and addressing fragmentation in digital governance, consensus was difficult to achieve and there remains considerable confusion around its interplay with existing initiatives and mechanisms within the United Nations system. Despite implementation efforts already being underway, its true impact and potential to bridge digital divides will only be revealed in the time to come.

KEYWORDS: Global Digital Compact (GDC), The Summit of the Future, United Nations (UN), Pact for the Future, Digital Governance, Digital Divide, Digital Cooperation, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Digital Economy, Digital Transformation

Le Pacte numérique mondial, adopté lors du Sommet du futur en septembre 2024, est le premier instrument véritablement multilatéral qui aborde les questions relatives à la gouvernance numérique mondiale de manière globale et systématique. Bien qu'il représente une avancée remarquable en ce qu'il favorise une représentation accrue et un renforcement de la coordination, et permet de lutter contre la fragmentation de la gouvernance numérique, parvenir à un consensus n'a pas été chose aisée et il subsiste une grande confusion quant à son articulation avec les initiatives et les mécanismes existants au sein du système des Nations unies. Bien que des efforts de mise en œuvre soient déjà en cours, seul l'avenir nous dira s'il est susceptible d'avoir un réel impact et permettra de combler les fossés numériques.

MOTS-CLÉS: Pacte numérique mondial, Sommet du futur, Nations unies (ONU), Pacte pour l'avenir, Gouvernance numérique, Fracture numérique, Coopération numérique, Intelligence artificielle (IA), Économie numérique, Transformation numérique

KEY MESSAGES

- “The GDC lays out a comprehensive roadmap for global digital cooperation with a view to harness the immense potential of digital technology and close digital divides.”
- “One of the marquee features of the GDC is the establishment of new fora and mechanisms within the global digital governance framework.”
- “Financing remained a key point of discussion throughout the course of the GDC negotiations and the adopted text offers several proposals on this front.”

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El Pacto Digital Global, adoptado durante la Cumbre del Futuro en septiembre de 2024, es el primer instrumento verdaderamente multilateral que aborda cuestiones relativas a la gobernanza digital global de forma exhaustiva y sistemática. Si bien se trata de un notable paso adelante en términos de aumentar la representación, mejorar la coordinación y abordar la fragmentación en la gobernanza digital, el consenso fue difícil de lograr y sigue existiendo una considerable confusión en torno a su interacción con las iniciativas y mecanismos existentes dentro del sistema de las Naciones Unidas. A pesar de los esfuerzos de implementación que ya están en marcha, su verdadero impacto y potencial para reducir las brechas digitales sólo se revelará en el tiempo venidero.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Pacto Digital Global, Cumbre del Futuro, Naciones Unidas (ONU), Pacto para el Futuro, Gobernanza Digital, Brecha Digital, Cooperación Digital, Inteligencia Artificial (IA), Economía Digital, Transformación Digital

Introduction

Digital technology has undergone a sea change in the last few years, with the exigencies presented by the COVID-19 pandemic accelerating the digital transition and effectively blurring boundaries between the real and the virtual, making digital the cornerstone of everyday life. Rapid technological advancement, spurred by the rise of complex large language models and generative artificial intelligence (AI), brings with it an array of both opportunities and challenges – while the benefits of digital technology are undeniable, the very nature of such technology and the market dynamics surrounding its development and deployment raise questions around ethics, privacy, safety, consumer protection and fair competition, not to mention broader discussions around justice and equity. These are compounded by concerns relating to shifts in the labour market and the need to ensure a just transition for workers likely to be negatively impacted by increasing digitisation. The breakneck speed of technological advancement thus presents an urgent need for regulatory measures that can effectively mitigate the myriad risks that it poses – this need is particularly acute in the realm of AI which has already revolutionised the way in which we think, interact and work. In this context, the Global Digital Compact (GDC) – recently adopted at the United Nations (UN) – presents a breakthrough moment in global digital and AI governance.

This paper discusses the challenges around the governance of AI, the negotiating process leading to the adoption of the GDC, the main contentious issues that emerged therein, and the objectives and key provisions of the GDC. It also considers the establishment of new fora and mechanisms within the global digital governance framework proposed by the GDC, and the discussions around the role of various UN agencies and fora. Finally, the paper addresses some aspects of the implementation and follow up of the GDC.

Towards a multilateral digital governance framework on artificial intelligence

The emergence, evolution and dissemination of digital technology has largely been unchecked, with technological development far outpacing regulatory advances. While the need for international cooperation towards building a digital governance framework to regulate AI has long been recognised, there was little progress towards this end until fairly recently. While a number of initiatives have emerged over the years in a bid to regulate AI, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ([OECD AI Principles](#) (2019) and Group of Twenty ([G20 AI Principles](#) (2019), these efforts have remained geographically fragmented and limited in scope, and are far from being global in reach, perhaps with the sole exception of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence](#) (2021). The first truly global and multilateral efforts towards the regulation of AI at the UN came in the form of two resolutions adopted by the General Assembly during its 78th Session in 2024 – Resolution 78/265 ([A/RES/78/265](#)) of 21 March 2024 on ‘*Seizing the opportunities of safe, secure and trustworthy artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development*’¹ and Resolution 78/311 ([A/RES/78/311](#)) of 1 July 2024 on ‘*Enhancing international cooperation on capacity-building of artificial intelligence*’.

Concurrently, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres set up a High-level Advisory Body on AI (HLAB), which released its final report in September 2024. The HLAB Report recognises the challenge of rapid and cross-cutting change that AI poses and warns against the injustice of placing its governance in the hands of a few developers, while the impacts of developing and using AI are imposed on those who have no say in the decision-making process. It also identifies the UN as the vehicle for a new social contract on AI, which ensures that opportunities are fairly accessed and distributed, and risks are not loaded onto the most vulnerable groups or passed on to future generations. In order to address gaps in existing governance initiatives, the [HLAB Report](#) specifically identifies the need to enhance representation, enable coordination and strengthen implementation in global AI governance. Towards this end, it offers the following recommendations: (a) establishment of an international scientific panel on AI; (b) establishment of a policy dialogue on AI governance; (c) creation of an AI standards exchange; (d) creation of a capacity development network; (e) creation of a global fund for AI; (f) creation of a global AI data framework; and (g) establishment of an AI office in the UN Secretariat.

Notwithstanding these discussions around AI governance within the UN system, the very first comprehensive multilateral agreement on global digital cooperation and AI governance came in the form of the [Global Digital Compact](#). The GDC was

¹ For a detailed analysis of the first AI resolution, see Viviana Muñoz Tellez, “UNGA adopts first resolution on Artificial Intelligence”, *South Views* No. 269 (Geneva, South Centre, 2024). Available from https://www.southcentre.int/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/SV269_240716-1.pdf.

adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly during the [Summit of the Future](#) on 22 September 2024, as Annex I to the [Pact for the Future](#) (Pact). The Summit of the Future was the culmination of the [Our Common Agenda](#) process, which emphasised the need to strengthen commitments and forge a new international consensus on how to deliver a better present and safeguard the future, while accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Digital cooperation was a key focus area of Our Common Agenda and has been a high-priority issue under Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's term.

GDC: Key provisions and the road to consensus

The GDC lays out a comprehensive roadmap for global digital cooperation with a view to harness the immense potential of digital technology and close digital divides. It rests on 5 core objectives, with a set of concrete commitments and action items grouped into clusters under each objective. The 5 objectives are: (1) to close all digital divides and accelerate progress across the SDGs; (2) to expand inclusion in and benefits from the digital economy for all; (3) to foster an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space that respects, protects and promotes human rights; (4) to advance responsible, equitable and interoperable data governance approaches; and (5) to enhance international governance of AI for the benefit of humanity.

The actions and commitments set out in the GDC cover a broad range of issue areas.

- *Objective 1* on closing digital divides contains commitments towards providing universal meaningful and affordable connectivity, enhancing digital literacy and skills as well as ensuring open standards, interoperability and safeguards for the use of digital public goods and digital public infrastructure.
- *Objective 2* on inclusivity contains commitments towards creating an enabling environment for digital transformation, maintaining stable and resilient supply chains of digital products and services, supporting innovation, entrepreneurship and small businesses, and promoting capacity-building efforts.
- *Objective 3* on human rights contains commitments towards protecting human rights in the digital space, refraining from internet shutdowns, ensuring safety in the digital space, promoting information integrity while countering misinformation and disinformation, and calls on digital technology companies to enhance transparency and accountability of their systems as well as respect and protect human rights.
- *Objective 4* on data governance contains commitments on protecting data privacy, developing common data standards, increasing data for monitoring SDG progress, facilitating cross-border data flows, and promoting interoperability between data policy frameworks.
- *Objective 5* on AI contains commitments on capacity-building for developing countries in supporting AI governance

and mitigating the potential adverse impact of AI, developing interoperable AI standards, advancing cultural and linguistic diversity as well as improving AI education and training.

The GDC negotiations were co-facilitated by Sweden and Zambia over a two-year period, with broad multi-stakeholder consultations followed by intense rounds of intergovernmental negotiations running through May to September 2024. The negotiations proved to be highly contentious and the road to consensus was mired with challenges, with negotiations stretching well into the days leading up to the Summit of the Future and silence being broken on the final draft of the text before it was placed for adoption. Each round of discussion accompanying successive revisions of the text was fraught with tension and exposed sharp differences of opinion across priorities and issue areas – while some areas of contention reflected long-standing points of divergence between the Global North and the Global South, many others were a byproduct of the new and uncharted nature of the themes under discussion.

Amongst the historical points of disagreement were the discussions around incorporating references to the right to development, technology transfer, provision of means of implementation, intellectual property issues and preferential access to financing for developing countries. Amongst the newer issue areas, there were extensive discussions around environmental sustainability (both in relation to the adverse environmental impact of digital technology and data centres, as well as the transfer of environmentally sound technology). The issue of human rights proved to be highly contentious with widely differing positions amongst the membership on incorporating terminology such as 'technology facilitated gender-based violence' and 'multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination', which faced stiff opposition from certain quarters for being non-consensus language. There was also considerable discussion around the role of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights regarding an advisory service on human rights in the digital space, whose existence, mandate and funding were subject to extensive debate.

One of the most critical points of divergence was on the nature of the global digital governance framework, with the developed countries pushing for a multi-stakeholder approach to digital governance while the developing countries were in favour of a multilateral approach to digital governance with the UN at the centre. This spilled over into questions around the appropriate institutions for governance, with strong pushback from the developed countries against establishing new mechanisms and creating duplicative structures within the UN system (including those proposed in the recommendations set forth in the HLAB report). There was also a lot of debate surrounding the role of the Internet Governance Forum in global internet governance, with sharp differences over whether it would be the primary or appropriate forum for discussing such issues.

New mechanisms and institutions under the GDC

One of the marquee features of the GDC is the establishment of

new fora and mechanisms within the global digital governance framework. In particular, the GDC envisages: (a) the establishment of a multidisciplinary Independent International Scientific Panel on AI within the UN to promote scientific understanding on AI-related issues; (b) the initiation of a Global Dialogue on AI Governance within the UN; and (c) the establishment of an office to facilitate system-wide coordination within the UN system. It also envisages the establishment of a dedicated working group in the Commission on Science and Technology for Development to provide recommendations towards implementing equitable and interoperable data governance arrangements. While there was strong opposition to the creation of new mechanisms and institutions in general, it was particularly severe in the case of the proposed new office where concerns around necessity, scope and mandate as well as potential duplication with existing efforts and institutions within the UN system (specifically the International Telecommunication Union) took centre stage.

The process for establishment of the panel and dialogue commenced in November 2024, when Costa Rica and Spain were [appointed as co-facilitators](#) of the intergovernmental process and held consultations to identify the terms of reference and modalities for the establishment and functioning of these two mechanisms. Following informal consultations with Member States and other stakeholders, the Elements Paper is [expected to be issued](#) by the end of February 2025, with the Zero Draft following around mid-March 2025 and informal readings of the draft scheduled through April 2025. The process was also open for inputs from the public during the first half of February 2025.

With regard to the new office, the erstwhile Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology [transitioned into](#) the UN Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies (ODET) with effect from 1 January 2025, following the General Assembly's Resolution 79/258 ([A/RES/79/258](#)) dated 24 December 2024. Headed by UN Under-Secretary-General Amandeep Singh Gill, ODET is responsible for supporting the follow-up and implementation of the GDC. In addition, it is expected to serve as the UN focal point for digital cooperation, facilitate policy dialogue on digital and emerging technologies, advise senior UN leadership on key technology trends, and strengthen system-wide coordination within the UN.

Financing remained a key point of discussion throughout the course of GDC negotiations and the adopted text offers several proposals on this front. It requests the Secretary-General to develop innovative voluntary financing options for AI capacity-building that take into account the HLAB recommendations on a Global Fund on AI, and place it before the General Assembly. It identifies the Digital Window of the [Joint SDG Fund](#) and multilateral development banks as important sources of financing for implementing the GDC, and calls on governments to make support to digital transformation integral to development assistance, including through increased allocations to digital and data initiatives.

During the course of negotiations, there was considerable tension surrounding the GDC's role in and interaction with existing

digital governance mechanisms, in particular the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Hosted by the International Telecommunication Union, the [WSIS+20](#) review is scheduled for July 2025 and it remains to be seen how and to what extent the outcome of the WSIS+20 review impacts GDC implementation. Most prominently, the question of how the different [action lines](#) under WSIS tie in with the commitments made in the GDC will need to be addressed, given that the action lines in WSIS are often more ambitious and broader in scope than the objectives set out in the GDC.

Implementation and follow-up

As the first step towards implementation, the GDC invites all stakeholders (such as international and regional organisations, private sector, academia, the technical community and civil society groups) to endorse the document and take active part in its implementation. It was opened for voluntary endorsement in September 2024, and has received 315 [endorsements](#) from entities based in 93 countries (as of 31 December 2024).

The overall implementation of the Pact will be overseen by a Steering Committee established by the Secretary-General, which comprises of working groups dedicated to specific issue areas. Amongst these, the Working Group on Digital Technologies is responsible for implementation, follow-up and monitoring of the GDC. The working group aims to build on existing efforts within the UN system and encourage coordination between various UN system entities to deliver on each of the chapters (action tables) identified in the GDC. A compact implementation map is expected to be put in place during the first quarter of 2025, which identifies next steps and allocates responsibilities.

For follow-up, the GDC envisages a 'High-level review of the GDC' during the 82nd session of the General Assembly (2027-2028), to review and monitor progress on its implementation.

Looking forward

While efforts to commence implementation of the GDC are already underway, much remains to be seen in terms of its acceptance and on-ground impact. At the outset, despite its political and symbolic importance, the Pact (and by extension the GDC) is not a legally-binding document, and at best reflects the aspirations of Member States of working towards the agreed objectives. Moreover, there remains a significant amount of confusion surrounding how the GDC ties in with existing mechanisms and how best to build upon and optimally utilise the considerable amount of work already done by UN system entities in the sphere of digital governance. Further, while the Pact (and thus the GDC) was technically adopted by consensus, Member States have expressed discomfort with replicating agreed language from the GDC in subsequent UN resolutions. This was most prominent during the negotiations of Second Committee resolutions during the 79th session of the General Assembly, such as the resolution on '*Information and communications technologies for sustainable development*' (Resolution [A/RES/79/194](#)). This hesitance within mere months of the GDC being adopted

throws a question mark on the universality and ostensible global acceptance of the commitments and aspirations that it sets out.

For the global South, the GDC is a step in the right direction in so far as it is the first instance of a comprehensive digital governance framework that has been negotiated and adopted at a truly multilateral level². It addresses issues related to global digital and AI governance in a comprehensive and systematic manner. The streamlined drafting and negotiating process which first incorporated diverse stakeholder perspectives followed by intergovernmental negotiations addresses the problem of lack of representation and fragmentation which has hitherto plagued global AI governance. Despite longstanding divisions remaining unresolved, the adopted text addresses a number of developing country concerns that were raised during the negotiation stage, many of which are of particular importance to the global South. Specifically, a multilateral governance mechanism that places the UN at its centre and creates dedicated mechanisms and institutions for the governance of AI has found acceptance in the adopted text. While the establishment of such mechanisms is a noteworthy development, their ability to address concerns relating to representation and coordination will depend on the structure, composition, mandate and financial resources made available to such mechanisms, which will be decided by the Membership over the coming months. Furthermore, despite its commitment towards bridging digital divides, concerns surrounding the lack of adequate digital infrastructure in developing countries will need to be addressed first and foremost in order to ensure that no one is left behind in the digital transformation and everyone has an equal chance to benefit from the digital economy.

In any event, the GDC has immense potential to serve as the primary instrument for global digital cooperation and governance. However, the GDC's real place in the digital governance landscape is yet to be ascertained and will likely crystallise as questions surrounding its interplay with other existing mechanisms are resolved. At the very least, the GDC can serve as impetus for driving international cooperation in the digital space and provide a much-needed common normative underpinning in a domain that has historically been fragmented, is rapidly evolving, and will remain of urgent and pressing importance in the years to come.

² For a detailed analysis of the GDC's potential impact on the Global South, see Carlos Correa and others, *The Global Digital Compact: Opportunities and challenges for developing countries in a fragmented digital space*, Research Paper No. 187 (Geneva, South Centre, 2023). Available from https://www.southcentre.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/RP187_The-Global-Digital-Compact_EN.pdf.

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