

**A. INTRODUCTION**

1. This contribution is submitted to the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology in response to the call for written input to inform the development of the Global Digital Compact proposed in Our Common Agenda.
2. My name is Ayden Férdeline. I submit this contribution in my personal capacity, however I have socialized the ideas expressed in this letter with colleagues and with a broader audience during a March 2023 session at the Mozilla Festival and April 2023 discussions at the Humanity in Action Krakow Action Academy. This contribution draws upon my experience serving on the Council of ICANN's Generic Names Supporting Organization, the body which sets policy for generic top-level domain names like .COM and .ORG, and my participation over seven years within the UN Internet Governance Forum ("IGF") and a regional IGF initiative in Europe. In addition, I draw upon research that was commissioned by the National Democratic Institute in 2021 and 2022, where for a project on Internet norms and standards, I investigated how the diversity of participation within Internet coordination and governance bodies could be improved. I am now a Landecker Democracy Fellow with Humanity in Action. These affiliations are noted to help identify the background and locus of expertise of this contribution, however these comments merely reflect my personal positions and are not necessarily the position of any other actor.

**B. GENERAL COMMENTS**

3. I welcome and appreciate the policy innovation that the UN is proposing. There is a need for us to re-think how decisions about the Internet are made. But, I would caution this does not mean we should fundamentally change what is working well, though we should consider tinkering around the edges to make some improvements. I have been impressed, for example, by how the IGF has evolved from a discussion forum into a year-round ecosystem of global stakeholder engagement, spawning hundreds of local and regional initiatives based off of, and feeding into, the annual global IGF. That being said, and while emphasizing the importance of the multistakeholder model of Internet governance endorsed by the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society, I think it is important to acknowledge that while multistakeholder institutions like the IGF are more procedurally open to participation than multilateral institutions, its institutional structure and its cultural practices do not necessarily support democratic outcomes. This needs to be improved. Internet governance processes are inaccessible to many stakeholders because of (I) cultural, (II) procedural, and (III) technical barriers to entry:
  - I. As the National Democratic Institute outlined in a 2022 report, the ways of doing business within Internet coordination fora "have developed around a Western European business style that requires one to be assertive and unintimidated by

confrontation.”<sup>1</sup> These working practices can be inaccessible for participants who are more junior in their careers, who come from cultures that frown upon aggression or speaking out of turn, for delegates of smaller countries or organizations with less resourcing, or for participants who have less fluency in the language of business of a body. Such processes also assume that all participants have the time, interest, and travel funding to support lengthy debates before consensus is reached.

- II. The institutional structures of Internet coordination fora do not necessarily support democratic outcomes. It cannot be assumed that all stakeholders operate in pursuit of a common interest, let alone the public interest. There are power imbalances and different stakeholders want institutions to evolve in different ways. Democratic outputs require democratic processes, but Internet coordination fora are not meritocratic, even if they aspire to be.
- III. Just as technical experts need human rights expertise, human rights experts need technical expertise. Internet infrastructure is complicated and rapidly evolving. More work needs to be done to bridge the gap between these two communities of subject matter experts.

## C. CORE PRINCIPLES

4. The above issues are difficult ones to solve, but I am optimistic that we can solve them incrementally. When we think about what we want Internet coordination fora to look like in the 2030s and beyond, I hope to see all stakeholders stepping forward and working collaboratively, in good faith, to preserve the ideal of multistakeholderism and to make it work even better than it already does. To this end, as core principles I propose:
  - All stakeholders must re-affirm the definition of Internet governance contained within the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society.
  - The UN must re-affirm its commitment to hosting ongoing interagency and multilateral dialogue, with the full input of non-state actors, so to help intergovernmental organizations and governments develop a deeper, shared understanding of different technology policy matters. The IGF is the most appropriate venue for this dialogue.
  - Governments must commit to participating, or continuing to participate, in the IGF by sending diverse, informed, and empowered national delegations.

---

<sup>1</sup> Férdeline, A. (2022). “Influencing the Internet: Democratizing the Politics that Shape Internet Governance Norms and Standards.” National Democratic Institute. <https://www.ndi.org/publications/influencing-internet-democratizing-politics-shape-internet-governance-norms-and>.

- Human rights must be protected online, just as they exist offline, in accordance with the rule of law and obligations under international human rights law.

#### **D. KEY COMMITMENTS**

5. In order to realize the above core principles:

- The UN should properly resource the IGF so that it can further diversify its pool of participants and consider reforming elements of its structure, including experimenting with alternative governance mechanisms like participatory democracy and citizen assemblies, so to potentially become more accessible and outcome-oriented.
- National governments have an important role to play in improving the IGF and other Internet coordination fora. When we think about traditionally excluded stakeholders, we also need to think about what disciplines and expertise are absent from government delegations. We should not only use geographic representation as a rough proxy for diversity. Governments participate, for example, but do not send delegations to Internet governance fora that represent the full breadth of national interests and concerns. We generally get people with trade backgrounds or law enforcement backgrounds, but what would the IGF look like, for example, if delegations had the informed participation of their data protection commissioners? What if we had the informed participation of anthropologists or constitutional law scholars? How can we collectively create an environment where multistakeholder participation is more intersectional?
- Governments should promote social dialogue on technology policy matters, including by consulting with civil society in their respective countries, as well as with citizens, to ensure that the economic and social benefits of technology are shared.
- Internet governance decision-making processes must respect and uphold internationally-recognized human rights. The Global Digital Compact, at its core, should reiterate the shared commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms that governments have previously expressed, recognizing that rights apply equally online as they do offline.

#### **E. CONCLUSION**

6 I thank the Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology for its consideration of this submission and remain at your disposal for any further consultation.

Ayden Férdeline  
Landecker Democracy Fellow  
Humanity in Action