



## Input to the Consultations on the Global Digital Compact

Prepared by the Secretariat of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD)<sup>1</sup>

### A. Context setting (why the GDC is important and what needs to be achieved)

### Why GDC is important?

Over recent years fast developments in the digital space, the pandemic, economic uncertainty, and conflict, both real-world and digital have significantly altered the context in which the global community must address the challenge of achieving digital development through digital cooperation. At the same time, discussions at the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) illustrate that considerations about the lack of truly universal inclusion in the digital economy, the need to fully integrate the digital dimension into actions to address poverty, gender equality, and climate change, and grave concerns about cybersecurity remain as valid as ever.

Take the digital divide. Although 63% of the world's population is using the Internet, least developed countries still only count 27% of their populations as internet users<sup>2</sup>. In its annual review of the progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit of the Information Society at the regional and international levels, the CSTD has noted that the persistent connectivity divide can lead to a serious development divide, stalling the progress to achieve the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

Conflicts in which digital technology plays an increasingly central role have become one of the most salient effects of digitalization on society and politics globally. Digital technology is becoming increasingly weaponized in sophisticated ways. From cyberattacks that disrupt infrastructure and services to the theft of sensitive information and the destabilizing potential of deep fakes and fake news, information technologies are increasingly often among the major causes and means of conflict. Countries lacking the cybersecurity infrastructure to protect themselves from these threats are liable to suffer disproportionately, amplifying global power imbalances.

The multidimensional impact of digital data on all aspects of societies and economies continues to necessitate global conversations around regulation and governance. Areas of concern are wide-ranging and include the geographical concentration of digital innovation and data management, problems of cross-border jurisdiction, competition policy, consumer rights, and content moderation.

The regulatory challenges created by those questions are complex, particularly where the need for international enforcement interacts with differences in national laws and norms. International forums are increasingly concerned with such issues. For example, a growing number of initiatives aim to address the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> https://datahub.itu.int/data/?c=&i=11624&e=

ethical dimensions of emerging technologies such as machine learning and artificial intelligence, raising the question of the risk of fragmentation in the treatment of these matters.

None of these challenges can be tackled successfully without digital cooperation. The ongoing process of consultations on the Global Digital Compact should outline shared principles for an open, free, and secure digital future for all, which could become key components of deliberations at the Summit of the Future in 2024.

### What needs to be achieved?

A number of elements can be identified based on the work undertaken in the CSTD as part of its review and follow up to the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS):

- Digital cooperation should be recognized as central to the GDC. The multidimensional impact of digitalization on all aspects of societies and economies continues to necessitate global conversations around regulation and governance. Areas of concern are wide-ranging and include the geographical concentration of digital innovation and data management, problems of cross-border jurisdiction, competition policy, consumer rights, and content moderation. The regulatory challenges created by those questions are complex, particularly where the need for international enforcement interacts with differences in national laws and norms. International forums are increasingly concerned with such issues. For example, a growing number of initiatives aim to address the ethical dimensions of emerging technologies such as machine learning and artificial intelligence, raising the question of the risk of fragmentation in the treatment of these matters.
- The GDC should focus beyond solutions-oriented work to address systemic issues. Recognizing that GDC and WSIS are distinctive processes, the GDC could cover areas that WSIS was not designed to address. While the WSIS vision remains strongly relevant in seeking to achieve a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, it was impossible to foresee and plan for the extent and manner in which digitalization has occurred. Given the constantly changing and increasingly complex digital economy and society, the GDC should prioritise the creation of a long-term platform and framework for accountable and inclusive global digital governance.
- Mechanisms for all stakeholders to keep abreast of the progress made in the implementation of digital cooperation should avoid complexity and duplication. Member States and other stakeholders, particularly those from developing countries, often face challenges to keep track of developments in international processes in the digital sphere. A central review mechanism that, similar to that for the WSIS, seeks to be focal point for digital development issues is crucially important to ensure that the challenges and opportunities presented by the constantly changing digital context are appropriately addressed at the international level. The CSTD, with its longstanding experience and the stock of knowledge it has accumulated in its work on the WSIS outcomes, enjoys unique advantages to contribute valuably to the success of the GDC in this regard.
- Finally, the GDC process must recognize that trust is the foundation for the digital economy and society and must be built through various measures, including more robust cybersecurity, data

privacy laws, consumer protection, and transparency measures. It should highlight the need for digital experiences that respect human rights and prevent discrimination, and which ensure that individuals can have control over their data.

# B. Sources of knowledge (what is the basis for our inputs – have we involved any consultations with our member states and other stakeholders)

These inputs of the CSTD have been based on the discussions among member States and other stakeholders engaged in the CSTD work on digital technologies and the WSIS follow up, as well as the annual reports of the Secretary-General on progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the WSIS at the regional and international level, which incorporate contributions from over 30 international organizations, regional commissions and non-governmental entities.<sup>3</sup> The annual Secretary-General's reports on this matter have been prepared in response to Economic and Social Council resolution 2006/46, which requested the Secretary-General of the United Nations to inform the CSTD about implementing the WSIS outcomes.

The Report of the Secretary-General on WSIS is presented in the annual session of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD). It forms the basis of discussion with member States and other stakeholders to identify emerging and future opportunities and challenges faced by the information society, including the socio-economic consequences arising from acceleration of the changes caused by digitalization. At the 26<sup>th</sup> annual session of the CSTD held on 27 to 31 March, member States and other stakeholders discussed the GDC process and shared thoughts about the path it should take.

### C. What we would like member States to do moving forward

### Retain a people-centric approach, building on the WSIS vision and principles:

The objective of the World Summit from its inception has been to move towards a "people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society." Its overarching mission was to ensure that the benefits of ICTs, networks, and services would be available to all and that these technologies would

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For instance, in the latest report, inputs are provided by the following entities: Association for Progressive Communications (APC); Council of Europe; Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP); Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA); Economic Commission for Africa (ECA); Economic Commission for Europe (ECE); Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC); End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism International; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO); Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA); International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA); Internet Society (ISOC); International Telecommunication Union (ITU); International Trade Centre; Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); UNCTAD; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women); United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); United Nations Industrial Development Organization; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East; Universal Postal Union; World Bank; World Food Programme; World Health Organization (WHO); World Intellectual Property Organization; World Meteorological Organization; World Trade Organization.

contribute to gains in social and economic welfare, including the achievement of first the MDGs and now the SDGs.

It is crucial to maintain the international community's commitment to this objective and orient the Global Digital Compact around it. The development, promotion, implementation, and governance of digital technologies must take a "people-first" approach. They must focus on ensuring that technologies' benefits are inclusive, notably by first closing the digital divide and making technologies accessible to all. Access does not just mean availability and affordability; it also means awareness of the existence of the technology, linguistic and disability accessibility, and ability in terms of user skills.

The WSIS vision could provide the foundations of the GDC process and vision. The WSIS's multistakeholder and global approach should also be maintained in the GDC's own working methods.

### Ensure the GDC adds coherence, not incoherence, in the multilateral digital ecosystem:

In formulating the GDC, member States must consider how it interacts with the pre-existing multilateral digital/ICT landscape to ensure it does not simply add another layer of complexity and overlap with other actors in the area, including WSIS. If the outcome of the GDC involves a larger scale overhaul of existing institutions and bodies, it is crucial that member States capitalise on the work that has been done by these and learns from their experiences. The WSIS multistakeholder approach in particular is one that the GDC should draw lessons from.

Existing institutions and infrastructure should be made use of where appropriate. The CSTD for instance, as the focal point in the UN system on STI for development which has long considered the policy issues raised by rapid technological changes and are strongly driven by the evolution of digital technologies, has extensive knowledge and expertise to share and build on. It may also serve as a forum for member States and other stakeholders to monitor progress in the GDC's implementation, similar to the role it has played for the WSIS follow up.

Concerns about digital divides reflected in WSIS outcome documents remain important. The international community should continue to pay particular attention to the risk that unequal access to digital technology will exacerbate divides in access to other developmental goods, perpetuating social and economic disparities.

Given the longstanding work of WSIS on the digital question and the many lessons that have been learned across two decades, it is strongly recommended that the experience gained in the WSIS process and outcomes, and the relevant findings and expertise are fully considered and built on as the Global Digital Compact is shaped.

### **Supporting documents**

- ECOSOC, 2021 Session, Report of the Secretary-General: Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels (A/78/62-E/2023/49), available at: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/a76d64\_en.pdf
- ECOSOC, 2022 Session, Report of the Secretary-General: Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels (A/78/62-E/2023/49), available at: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/a77d62\_en.pdf
- ECOSOC, 2023 Session, Report of the Secretary-General: Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels (A/78/62-E/2023/49), available at: <a href="https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/a78d62\_en.pdf">https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/a78d62\_en.pdf</a>
- CSTD, 21<sup>st</sup> Session, 2018: Report of the Chair of the Working Group on Enhanced Cooperation (E/CN.16/2018/CRP.3), available at: <a href="https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ecn162018crp3\_en.pdf">https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ecn162018crp3\_en.pdf</a>
- Working Group on Enhanced Cooperation on Public Policy Issues Pertaining to the Internet (2016-2018) at: <a href="https://unctad.org/topic/commission-on-science-and-technology-for-development/wgec-2016-2018">https://unctad.org/topic/commission-on-science-and-technology-for-development/wgec-2016-2018</a>