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Global Digital Compact – additional submission

Internet governance is a complex, highly interdependent process, which, in the past twenty years, has produced a rich normative framework: that normative framework, which rests on collaboration, inclusiveness and participation without permission is grounded on the multistakeholder model. In fact, one cannot discuss Internet governance outside of multistakeholder participation.

The Internet and multistakeholder governance are tightly interwoven. The Internet is a by-product of a pure collaborative process between engineers, individuals, government agencies and businesses. It emerged because this different set of people shared a common goal despite their often diverse and distinct viewpoints; that goal was to create a network that would be decentralized and could respond to any type of failure. As Internet pioneer David Clark has stipulated, the ultimate design goal for the Internet is to ensure that "communication must continue despite loss of networks or gateways" and that "the Internet must permit distributed management of its resources". In the Internet's design, there is no single point of failure and network operations are decentralized.

It is this very design that the first and second round of the WSIS processes, in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005, recognised when they agreed that the future of the Internet could only be guaranteed through a collaborative process.

For almost two decades, multistakeholder governance has been the model that has facilitated the participation of a broad community of stakeholders that comprise the Internet. It has been its constant companion; a model, which has managed to inspire people, allow them to be active contributors and, most importantly, open the door to voices that usually find it hard to be heard. People of different geographies, backgrounds and cultures have been coming together for years fighting for the same cause: an open, inclusive, collaborative and free Internet that allows them to discuss issues pertaining to security, human rights, connectivity, new and emerging technologies and a host of other challenges. Their views may often be at odds, yet this is the very thing that makes the multistakeholder model strong and resilient: difference of opinions is celebrated because it is seen as advancing the model; not as undermining it.

This is exactly what is at stake in the forthcoming years: the ability of people to speak up; to relate; to participate; to be part of something they feel passionate about and have vested interests in. It is, therefore, under this historical light that one must consider the entire Global Digital Compact process; and, it is under this procedural light that the Secretary General should place the Global Digital Compact if the real wish is to advance the Internet and its governance.

There is no question that the world is at an inflection point and there is really no point in denying that, in fact, there is only one option: moving forward. But, in doing so, we should not forget to look at the history and use it as an anchor that can inform how to get to the

place we want to go. Unfortunately, the way the Global Digital Compact has been set does not provide reassurances that this could happen. The process is unnecessarily complex and bureaucratic and, most fundamentally, feels less bottom up compared to what the Internet community has fought for or has been accustomed to. As important as it is for governments to find their role and feel comfortable to make their own contributions, it is equally important that this does not happen at the expense of other stakeholders.

To this end, the UN should resist any attempt at centralising Internet governance, which appears to be something the Global Digital Compact may be doing unintentionally. The Internet is by design a decentralised technology, something that has allowed it to grow organically; the mere fact that it does not have a single point of control makes it agile, flexible and highly adaptive. It even makes it more secure as it negates a single point of failure and allows participating actors to address the issues on point and in a focused way. This decentralized design has allowed the Internet to scale, to be used by billions of people around the world and to ensure its constant evolution. It is what has allowed the Internet to be resilient during the unprecedented global COVID19 pandemic; as the world was grounded to a halt, the Internet ensured that societies continued to function, markets continued to operate and people continued to communicate. This is not a small feat and should not be taken for granted. In fact, the Internet should not be taken for granted; it would be a grave mistake to do so.

The strength of the Internet lies in its ability to bring people together and make them work as a collective unit. In the Internet no group is more important than another; no technology is more useful than another; no idea is more valuable than another; and, no process is more appropriate than another. To this end, it is key that the Global Digital Compact stays committed and focused on preserving this space of collaboration and team work. A model that is based purely on state actors making all decisions at the exclusion of other stakeholders who can make valuable and informed contributions is not going to work. It will not advance the Internet; on the contrary, it will break it into small pieces. It will fragment it

The United Nations has only one choice to make in this process and that is to commit and support the multistakeholder model of Internet governance. Anything short of this would be problematic and, potentially, irreversible.

Respectfully submitted

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