The Age of Digital Interdependence

Report of the

UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation

June 2019

Executive Summary

Digital technologies are rapidly transforming society, simultaneously allowing for unprecedented advances in the human condition and giving rise to profound new challenges. Growing opportunities created by the application of digital technologies are paralleled by stark abuses and unintended consequences. Digital dividends co-exist with digital divides. And, as technological change has accelerated, the mechanisms for cooperation and governance of this landscape have failed to keep pace. Divergent approaches and ad hoc responses threaten to fragment the interconnectedness that defines the digital age, leading to competing standards and approaches, lessening trust and discouraging cooperation.

Sensing the urgency of the moment, in July 2018 the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) appointed this Panel to consider the question of "digital cooperation" – the ways we work together to address the social, ethical, legal and economic impact of digital technologies in order to maximise their benefits and minimise their harm. In particular, the Secretary-General asked us to consider how digital cooperation can contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – the ambitious agenda to protect people and the planet endorsed by 193 UN member states in 2015. He also asked us to consider models of digital cooperation to advance the debate surrounding governance in the digital sphere.

In our consultations – both internally and with other stakeholders – it quickly became clear that our dynamic digital world urgently needs improved digital cooperation and that we live in an age of digital interdependence. Such cooperation must be grounded in common human values – such as inclusiveness, respect, human-centredness, human rights, international law, transparency and sustainability. In periods of rapid change and uncertainty such as today, these shared values must be a common light which helps guide us.

Effective digital cooperation requires that multilateralism, despite current strains, be strengthened. It also requires that multilateralism be complemented by multi-stakeholderism – cooperation that involves not only governments but a far more diverse spectrum of other stakeholders such as civil society, academics, technologists and the private sector. We need to bring far more diverse voices to the table, particularly from developing countries and traditionally marginalised groups, such as women, youth, indigenous people, rural populations and older people.

After an introduction which highlights the urgency of improved digital cooperation and invites readers to commit to a Declaration of Digital Interdependence, our report focuses on three broad sets of interlocking issues, each of which is discussed in one subsequent chapter. As a panel, we strove for consensus, but we did not always agree. We have noted areas where our views differed and tried to give a balanced summary of our debates and perspectives. While there was not unanimity of opinion among the Panel members regarding all of the recommendations, the Panel does endorse the full report in the spirit of promoting digital cooperation.

Chapter 2, **Leaving No One Behind**, argues that digital technologies will only help progress towards the full sweep of the SDGs if we think more broadly than the important issue of access to the internet and digital technologies. Access is a necessary, but insufficient, step forward. To capture the power of digital technologies we need to cooperate on the broader ecosystems that enable digital technologies to be used in an inclusive manner. This will require policy frameworks that directly support economic and social inclusion, special efforts to bring traditionally marginalised groups to the fore, important investments in both human capital and infrastructure, smart regulatory environments, and significant efforts to assist workers facing disruption from technology's impact on their livelihoods. This chapter also addresses financial inclusion – including mobile money, digital identification and e-commerce –, affordable and meaningful access to the internet, digital public goods, the future of education, and the need for regional and global economic policy cooperation.

Chapter 3, **Individuals, Societies and Digital Technologies**, underscores the fact that universal human rights apply equally online as offline, but that there is an urgent need to examine how time-honoured human rights frameworks and conventions should guide digital cooperation and digital technology. We need society-wide conversations about the boundaries, norms and shared aspirations for the uses of digital technologies, including complicated issues like privacy, human agency and security in order to achieve inclusive and equitable outcomes. This chapter also discusses the right to privacy, the need for clear human accountability for autonomous systems, and calls for strengthening efforts to develop and implement global norms on cybersecurity.

To take significant steps toward the vision identified in Chapters 2 and 3, we feel the following priority actions deserve immediate attention:

An inclusive digital economy and society

1A: We recommend that by 2030, every adult should have affordable access to digital networks, as well as digitally-enabled financial and health services, as a means to make a substantial contribution to achieving the SDGs. Provision of these services should guard against abuse by building on emerging principles and best practices, one example of which is providing the ability to opt in and opt out, and by encouraging informed public discourse.

1B: We recommend that a broad, multi-stakeholder alliance, involving the UN, create a platform for sharing digital public goods, engaging talent and pooling data sets, in a manner that respects privacy, in areas related to attaining the SDGs.

1C: We call on the private sector, civil society, national governments, multilateral banks and the UN to adopt specific policies to support full digital inclusion and digital equality for women and traditionally marginalised groups. International organisations such as the World Bank and the UN should strengthen research and promote action on barriers women and marginalised groups face to digital inclusion and digital equality.

1D: We believe that a set of metrics for digital inclusiveness should be urgently agreed, measured worldwide and detailed with sex disaggregated data in the annual reports of institutions such as the UN, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, other multilateral development banks and the OECD. From this, strategies and plans of action could be developed.

Human and institutional capacity

2:   We recommend the establishment of regional and global digital help desks to help governments, civil society and the private sector to understand digital issues and develop capacity to steer cooperation related to social and economic impacts of digital technologies.

Human rights and human agency

3A: Given that human rights apply fully in the digital world, we urge the UN Secretary-General to institute an agencies-wide review of how existing international human rights accords and standards apply to new and emerging digital technologies. Civil society, governments, the private sector and the public should be invited to submit their views on how to apply existing human rights instruments in the digital age in a proactive and transparent process.

3B: In the face of growing threats to human rights and safety, including those of children, we call on social media enterprises to work with governments, international and local civil society organisations and human rights experts around the world to fully understand and respond to concerns about existing or potential human rights violations.

3C: We believe that autonomous intelligent systems should be designed in ways that enable their decisions to be explained and humans to be accountable for their use. Audits and certification schemes should monitor compliance of artificial intelligence (AI) systems with engineering and ethical standards, which should be developed using multi-stakeholder and multilateral approaches. Life and death decisions should not be delegated to machines. We call for enhanced digital cooperation with multiple stakeholders to think through the design and application of these standards and principles such as transparency and non-bias in autonomous intelligent systems in different social settings.

Trust, security and stability

4:   We recommend the development of a Global Commitment on Digital Trust and Security to shape a shared vision, identify attributes of digital stability, elucidate and strengthen the implementation of norms for responsible uses of technology, and propose priorities for action.

If we are to deliver on the promise of digital technologies for the SDGs, including the above-mentioned priority action areas, and avoid the risks of their misuse, we need purposeful digital cooperation arrangements. To this end, in Chapter 4, **Mechanisms for Global Digital Cooperation**, we analyse gaps in the current mechanisms of global digital cooperation, identify the functions of global digital cooperation needed to address them, and outline three sets of modalities on how to improve our global digital cooperation architecture – which build on existing structures and arrangements in ways consistent with our shared values and principles.

Given the wide spectrum of issues, there will of necessity be many forms of digital cooperation; some may be led by the private sector or civil society rather than government or international organisations. Moreover, special efforts are needed to ensure inclusive participation by women and other traditionally marginalised groups in all new or updated methods of global digital cooperation.

The three proposed digital cooperation architectures presented are intended to ignite focused, agile and open multi-stakeholder consultations in order to quickly develop updated digital governance mechanisms. The 75th Anniversary of the UN in 2020 presents an opportunity for an early harvest in the form of a "Global Commitment for Digital Cooperation" enshrining goals, principles, and priority actions.

The chapter also discusses the role of the UN, both in adapting to the digital age and in contributing to improved global digital cooperation.

We feel the following steps are warranted to update digital governance:

Global digital cooperation

5A: We recommend that, as a matter of urgency, the UN Secretary-General facilitate an agile and open consultation process to develop updated mechanisms for global digital cooperation, with the options discussed in

Chapter 4 as a starting point. We suggest an initial goal of marking the UN's 75th anniversary in 2020 with a "Global Commitment for Digital Cooperation" to enshrine shared values, principles, understandings and objectives for an improved global digital cooperation architecture. As part of this process, we understand that the UN Secretary-General may appoint a Technology Envoy.

5B: We support a multi-stakeholder "systems" approach for cooperation and regulation that is adaptive, agile, inclusive and fit for purpose for the fast-changing digital age.

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We hope this report and its recommendations will form part of the building blocks of an inclusive and interdependent digital world, with a fit-for-purpose new governance architecture. We believe in a future in which improved digital cooperation can support the achievement of the SDGs, reduce inequalities, bring people together, enhance international peace and security, and promote economic opportunity and environmental sustainability.