HLAB
HIGH-LEVEL ADVISORY BOARD ON
EFFECTIVE MULTILATERALISM

Framing Paper

Technology and Digital Cooperation

Note on 16 March Preparatory Roundtable on Technology and Digital Cooperation

On 16 March, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR) co-hosted an expert preparatory roundtable on technology and digital cooperation, together with the UN Foundation, Global Challenges Foundation, and the UN Technology Envoy's Office. The purpose of the event was to discuss gaps in the global governance architecture around digital space and the internet, and to offer proposals that could be considered by the High-Level Advisory Board (HLAB). This note summarizes key recommendations and proposals raised in the roundtable. It is accompanied by several papers commissioned by UNU-CPR for that event.

Definitions

Participants noted the difficulties in defining digital issues as global public goods and/or global commons. The high levels of exclusion and competition in the digital space mean that it does not fit neatly into traditional definitions of global public goods. At the same time, treating the internet as a global common, or as "the operating system for our society" could be a useful frame for discussions of equitable access. "The internet is the way we will secure other global public goods," one participant noted.

Global governance of social, economic and political issues all now have a strong technological/digital component, complicating any effort to compartmentalize digital issues in one domain. It is also complicated by the fact that there is one internet with 195 national jurisdictions, meaning that referring to global digital issues may obscure the strong nationalism and sovereignty considerations underpinning it.

Participants agreed that a key aspect of defining and regulating the internet was the disconnect between the codemaking and lawmaking communities (between the internet's infrastructure and its regulation). A broad goal for any global governance regime should be to bring the codemaking and policymaking/lawmaking communities together into a unified approach. A related issue concerns the need to improve dialogue across digital communities and the social sciences, taking a "digital humanism" approach to global governance (see associated papers).

Inclusion and access

Participants noted that there had been advocacy in favour of inclusive approaches to the internet for decades, but the trends were largely pointed towards greater inequality and exclusion at a geopolitical level as meaningful digital access has become more central to participating in economic and social life. "What does digital inclusion look like in an increasingly fragmented world?" Several participants pointed to a risk that the internet has actually exacerbated inequalities and created greater barriers to inclusive development and access.

Participants also stressed the importance of continuing to make progress on the recommendations of the Secretary-General's *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation* and of his High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, to ensure concrete outcomes in key areas such as universal connectivity and digital human rights. The UN Global Digital Compact, which aims to build a more effective architecture for digital cooperation, could be a helpful entry route in testing some of the proposals shared during this roundtable.

Several proposals were advanced to improve inclusion and access to the internet, including: (1) greater use of open-source hardware for increased internet connectivity; (2) a global arrangement to protect internet satellite connections in emergency or humanitarian situations; (3) treatment of meaningful access to the internet as a basic human right, possibly with codification in an international legal instrument; and (4) a globally-recognized definition of "meaningful internet access" with a matrix to track progress.

Legal framework

The legal framework for digital goods is difficult to define. Participants noted that a range of domains and products could be regulated, including access to the internet, the hardware used to generate digital goods, or the data transmitted in cyberspace. Depending on the field of inquiry, different forms of regulation might be needed (e.g. cyberwarfare versus health data). Several participants noted that a governance regime should speak to both the infrastructure and the application of digital space, bringing codemakers and lawmakers together in a process that would ensure access, protect infrastructure, and address global interdependence.

Several proposals were advanced, including: (1) a global declaration on digital rights; (2) a body akin to the Financial Stability Board for digital space (a "Digital Stability Board"), composed of regulators and private sector leaders, with powers to regulate and impose financial penalties; (3) provision of legal status to cities as entities that can assert claims for digital rights; (4) development of a set of principles and/or code of conduct for digital space aimed at data sharing, access, non-aggressive use of cyberspace, and equitable development of new technologies; and (5) drawing on the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace and the Christchurch Call to Action, a "Call to Action for Internet Access."

Trust, legitimacy

The global deficit of trust – between States and within States with their populations – was noted as a major impediment to improved digital cooperation. In this context, mechanisms to build trust and improved inter-State cooperation were highlighted as crucial to any governance regime.

Several proposals were offered to help build trust (and see associated Crisis Group paper for additional proposals) including: (1) A Charter of Trust akin to the "Net Mondiale Declaration" that would expand on existing models of cooperation at a global level; (2) support to a global network of fact-checkers and more systematic/ recognized ways to counter disinformation; (3) creation of a global monitoring body building on the Internet Governance Forum and the World Summit on the Information Society; and (4) recognition of high-quality, fact-checked information as a global public good.

Cyber security

While cybersecurity was not a principal topic of the roundtable, several participants noted the strong risks that unregulated cyberspace posed to a range of security-related domains, including: biothreats, Artificial intelligence-driven weapons systems, cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, and global disinformation campaigns. Proposals and recommendations in this area included: (1) an expansion of the Paris Call, possibly with mechanisms for reporting, monitoring, and verification of cyberthreats; (2) an expansion of the International Gene Synthesis Group[1] to address bio-data security issues; (3) development of a normative framework/compact to articulate cybernorms and cyberrights.

Notes

[1] International Gene Synthesis Consortium, "About IGSC," last accessed 24 March 2022, https://genesynthesisconsortium.org

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