Summary Report: At the Crossroads of Digital Futures—Defining the EU’s Priorities for the Global Digital Compact

Summary report of the online consultation between the EU and non-governmental stakeholders. This public report serves as a non-exhaustive summary of the online event, and does not represent the views of the European Union.

On 09 April, the EEAS, the European Commission’s DG CONNECT, and the Global Initiative on the Future of the Internet invited EU-based stakeholders to share insights on the Zero Draft as well as on the EU priorities for the Global Digital Compact (GDC) negotiations. Stakeholders welcomed the Zero Draft of the GDC as a foundation for future negotiations, citing some positive impressions, while highlighting key omissions and opportunities for improvement.

Key Takeaways

- Human rights, including rights to privacy, data protection, and gender equality, need to be strengthened and mainstreamed across the Global Digital Compact, and should clearly reference the broader human rights frameworks of International Human Rights Law, international humanitarian law, and international refugee law. Statements should also be backed up by clear commitments, investment, and monitoring mechanisms to increase accountability and transparency.

- The Global Digital Compact must be more explicit in its commitments and definitions to promote an open, global, interoperable internet that avoids broad interpretation. The text should also make specific and procedural references to a multistakeholder governance process that goes beyond mere cooperation.

- Stakeholders welcomed the emphasis on meaningful connectivity, but the concept should also recognise community-driven initiatives, blended financing models, and the distinct role of distinct stakeholder groups beyond the private sector.

- With the potential exception of the UN Digital Human Rights Advisory Service, the GDC should be cautious to avoid duplication and parallel processes through the establishment of new UN structures. Instead, the GDC is an opportunity to strengthen and streamline existing structures and expertise, particularly the Internet Governance Forum (IGF).

- Ultimately, the facilitators of the Global Digital Compact, the European Union, and member states engaged in the drafting of the Compact should proceed with a spirit and principle of inclusivity and collaboration, and work to ensure that multistakeholder input is meaningfully integrated into the next stages of the process.
Specific Recommendations

Objectives 1 & 2. Closing the digital divides and accelerating progress across the Sustainable Development Goals; Expanding inclusion in the digital economy

- Stakeholders noted the need to acknowledge the distinction between the ‘coverage gap’ and the ‘usage gap’, particularly in reference to innovative financing mechanisms.
- While the inclusion of digital public goods and infrastructure was welcome, the language should ensure they are sufficiently protected and promoted.
- The GDC could also consider making references to the importance of radio spectrum and effective competition policy.
- The language around environmental impact and sustainability could be strengthened, including through a reference to the ‘right to repair’.
- The need for greater cultural and linguistic diversity online and an emphasis on life-long learning beyond the classroom were also highlighted as priorities.
- It was noted that technology transfer should be emphasized as voluntary and that the GDC is best served by focusing on promoting open standards and open-source technology solutions.

Objective 3. Fostering an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space

- When referencing Human Rights, the text should refer to the whole life cycle of digital technologies, including the conceptualization, use, design, transfer and trade of technologies.
- The GDC should also explicitly acknowledge the link between human rights and access to independent and reliable information, and stress that human rights and development are mutually reinforcing.
- The GDC should be committed to empowering and protecting decentralized decision-making by online communities. References to multistakeholder participation should emphasize the governance process, and be more inclusive regarding youth, civil society, the technical community, and marginalized communities.
- In conjunction with strengthening the IGF, the GDC should also avoid centralising internet governance processes in New York.
- Stakeholders noted that the GDC should strengthen the language around surveillance in accordance with existing standards and principles, including human rights by design principles.
- The GDC should also address disinformation and misinformation through holistic and positive measures including literacy and digital infrastructure, and promote public-interest media while recalling the existing national and international standards on information integrity and hate speech.

Objective 4 & 5. Advancing equitable international data governance; Governing emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence, for humanity

- While references to cross-border data flows and open-source software and standards are welcome, the language must be strengthened to avoid fragmentation and encourage global cooperation and interoperability across policy and regulatory systems.
• The Global Digital Compact should ensure that Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning models are built in accordance with international human rights standards, the rule of law, and democratic values. This should include a commitment to transparency, responsible disclosure, and clear guidelines for ethical AI use and mechanisms for public oversight.

• Stakeholders noted that the Compact should facilitate innovation but also include stronger language on risks and harms, ensuring AI systems meet agreed standards of robustness, security and safety.

All written contributions and text-based recommendations submitted by stakeholders are available to download here.