The RIPE NCC's Input to the UN Global Digital Compact

Describe the process you followed to collect, consult, and prepare your input:

The RIPE NCC is grateful to the UN Secretary-General, the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology and the co-facilitators, Rwanda and Sweden, for the opportunity to provide input in this multistakeholder digital technology track as members of the Internet technical community and in preparation for a Summit of the Future on issues concerning the Global Digital Compact.

The RIPE NCC is the Regional Internet Registry for Europe, the Middle East and parts of Central Asia, allocating and administering Internet number resources (IP addresses and Autonomous System Numbers) for more than 20,000 members including Internet service providers, content providers, government agencies, banks, academic institutions, corporations and other large-scale network operators within its service region of 76 countries. It also operates one of the world's 13 root name servers (K-root) that form the backbone of the global domain name system (DNS). In addition, it is the secretariat for RIPE, an open, inclusive community that sets the policies governing Internet number resources within the RIPE NCC service region via a bottom-up, consensus-based policymaking process.

The RIPE NCC and the RIPE community have contributed to the development of the Internet in this part of the world for more than 30 years, both in terms of the technical coordination of some of the global Internet's core functions (IP addresses and the DNS), as well as by contributing technical expertise in public policymaking, providing training for technical communities, governments and law enforcement, supporting the development of local technical communities, and contributing to Internet governance discussions and processes at the national, regional and global levels.

The input submitted here is the result of an inclusive process which started with internal discussions on the values and principles that should underpin the global Internet governance environment and, therefore, be reflected in the Global Digital Compact. Subsequently, we presented the initial draft to our community via an interim session of the RIPE Cooperation Working Group and a RIPE NCC Roundtable Meeting for Governments and Regulators. This engagement with the broader community collected useful feedback that is reflected in our contribution.

1. Connect all people to the internet, including all schools

    a) Core principles

Collaboration, shared responsibility, and inclusion of all stakeholders are core principles in connecting all people to the global Internet.

As a global community, we have a shared responsibility to ensure that the benefits of access to the Internet are available to all. We still have far to go in achieving our goal, and connecting all people — including vulnerable groups such as children — requires both an Internet that can continue scaling to meet humanity's needs, and one upon which we can prioritise the safety and security of people online.

The Internet technical community plays a crucial role in meeting this challenge, developing and deploying the common standards and protocols for resilient infrastructure upon which a global Internet relies. It is these standards and protocols, and the Internet technical community's open, inclusive approach to standards-setting and technical coordination, that will ensure the Internet can continue to grow and evolve. Ensuring that the technical community's expertise and voice are incorporated into Internet governance decision-making is vital if we are to achieve universal access and the targets laid out in the ninth Sustainable Development Goal: "Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation".

Meaningful and sustainable access to and inclusion in the global Internet can only be extended to all people through cooperation among different stakeholder groups — no single actor or stakeholder group can achieve it alone. It was upon this understanding that the Tunis Agenda's endorsement of a multistakeholder approach was based, and this cooperative, inclusive multistakeholder approach must be a core principle if we are to empower all people to connect to the Internet.

An open, bottom-up approach is only as effective as it is inclusive. As we empower people to connect to the Internet, it is essential that we facilitate their engagement in open decision-making processes relating to how the Internet and digital technologies affect our lives. A core principle for all stakeholder groups must be to work across boundaries to ensure that wherever policies and decisions are being made, those with a stake in those decisions can be present and have a voice.

    b) Key commitments/pledge/actions

To address the different forms of digital divide, we need evidence-based, data-driven policies and sound regulatory frameworks. All stakeholders, including Member States, should commit to close and meaningful cooperation to overcome the digital divide, ensuring the continuing growth and evolution of an Internet built upon

standards, protocols and best practices developed via open, transparent, and inclusive processes.

All stakeholders should commit, through cooperation and collaboration, to providing training and education in the digital skills and literacy necessary for safe and empowered use of the Internet. Internet technical community organisations, including the RIPE NCC, have worked with governments, the private sector, and academia to deliver training and events for network operators and Internet users. As one example, the RIPE Academic Cooperation Initiative (RACI) supports academics to share and develop their research by collaborating with the Internet operational community. Another example is the RIPE NCC's Certified Professionals initiative, which we also referenced in our pledges to the ITU's Partner2Connect programme.

The GDC should ensure that all stakeholders, but especially governments, commit to minimising the regulatory hurdles and misalignments that can hinder equal, open and sustainable access to the global Internet. The Internet technical community is committed to providing relevant and timely technical knowledge and expertise to regulators and public policymakers.

We urge the GDC to reaffirm that building upon and fostering existing venues for information-sharing and coordination is vital, and stakeholders should look to and support the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) at the global level, its intersessional work streams, and the diverse range of national, youth and regional IGF initiatives (NRIs) as important and vibrant opportunities for this activity.

The GDC should also encourage cooperation among governments, the private sector, the technical community and civil society in all relevant UN venues to promote and foster innovative collaborative initiatives to solve access challenges.

2. Avoid internet fragmentation

a) Core principles

The value of the Internet comes from being a unified global network of networks.

This global system is the overarching fabric that connects people with their environment, their government and each other across borders. It is also the backbone for achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Jeopardising this unified network would affect the value of the Internet for all people; as such, all stakeholders need to safeguard this open and interoperable global resource.

It is important to recognise that issues raised in discussions of Internet fragmentation are multilayered, and the term can assume different meanings and interpretations. The IGF's Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation is one recent example of work that has contributed to a better understanding of the various interpretations, drivers, and implications of the concept.

At the technical level, Internet fragmentation constitutes a loss of interoperability. If networks cannot connect to one another, the Internet's value diminishes for all people.

However, it is only because this system developed in a cooperative and coordinated way, via a bottom-up, consensus-based approach that it remains as resilient and adaptable as it is today. Political or regulatory interference in the system could threaten the global interoperability of the Internet as we know it.

In its roles as both a Regional Internet Registry and operator of one of the 13 DNS root name servers, the RIPE NCC has engaged with governments and policymakers on the need to ensure that public policy and regulation respects and does not politicise core functions of the global Internet, such as the Internet number registries or the DNS.

Fragmentation could also occur at the governance level — the proliferation of Internet governance institutions, venues, and discussions can hinder the inclusive, multistakeholder coordination necessary to maintain a global Internet, especially for those stakeholders with limited resources.

The GDC should look to build on existing institutions, including the IGF, and to ensure effective coordination between the Internet governance fora and processes in order to leverage the expertise and perspectives of all stakeholder groups and ensure equal access to not only the Internet, but to Internet governance as well.

b) Key commitments/pledge/actions

The GDC should call upon all stakeholders to support the protocols, standards and core infrastructure essential for global interoperability that are developed by technical communities and standards-setting bodies such as the Regional Internet Registries, the IETF, W3C, ICANN and others, in order to safeguard universal access to the Internet's public core.

The GDC should reaffirm a global, multistakeholder commitment to a neutral, interoperable public core of the Internet free from overly burdensome or conflicting regulation, and to the multistakeholder approach that is necessary if we are to ensure that new policies and regulations do not jeopardise that global Internet.

Reducing the risks of Internet fragmentation requires a clear understanding of those risks and a deliberate, informed approach to both technical coordination and governance. All governments should consult technical communities and standards-setting bodies for input on any regulation or legislation that could affect the public core of the Internet in order to avoid unintended consequences that could lead to fragmentation.

Technical communities, standards-setting bodies, and the myriad of national and regional Internet governance initiatives that have been established around the world all have valuable input to help avoid Internet fragmentation, and this input should feed into the global IGF.

Only last year, stakeholders at the IGF agreed on this key message: "Effective multistakeholder governance mechanisms are essential for the governance of a global unfragmented Internet. There is a need to reinforce trust in these mechanisms, to ensure that they are robust and sustainable, and to foster coherence across governance structures as they evolve to meet new challenges."

The GDC should reject calls for a more multilateral approach to Internet governance, standards-setting and policymaking, and incorporate a strong commitment to the multistakeholder approach as enshrined in the Tunis Agenda and to the IGF as the primary UN venue for Internet governance processes, including follow-up on the commitments made in the GDC.

7. Digital commons as a global public good

a) Core principles

The RIPE NCC recently noted, in a comment on the European Union's proposed Cyber Resilience Act, that "the open-source community and the development of open-source software and services…play an essential role in the functioning of the open, global Internet and of a resilient and innovative Internet ecosystem within Europe." Digital commons, which include open-source software and licensing, are a fundamental element in the diverse range of systems and software that make the global Internet viable; however, these digital commons are too easily overlooked by policymakers in Internet governance discussions. In the case of the Cyber Resilience Act, the RIPE NCC joined others from the European technical community in raising concerns about the unintended consequences that the draft act could have on the open-source community and highlighted the important contributions this community makes to the global Internet.

In the same vein, other open communities produce work that serves important roles, both in the operation of the Internet and in society more broadly — examples include open data, open AI, open standards and open content. Policy and regulation can either help foster these digital commons, or can inadvertently hinder their development and maintenance.

b) Key commitments/pledge/actions

Governments and international institutions should commit, via the GDC, to foster the development and deployment of digital commons for the greater public good.

This can be done through a distributed management model that actively and meaningfully involves the technical community in policymaking. This aligns with WSIS Action Line C1 in the Geneva Plan of Action regarding the "Role of public governance and stakeholders", especially the call to "identify mechanisms, at the national, regional and international levels, for the initiation and promotion of partnerships among stakeholders of the Information Society", as well as the Tunis Agenda's endorsement of a multistakeholder approach to Internet governance.

As part of this broader commitment, all stakeholders can commit to better understand and communicate the important role that digital commons play in the global Internet ecosystem.

8. Other areas: Internet governance and participation

a) Core principles

An open, inclusive, bottom-up and multistakeholder approach is fundamental for the coordinated operation of the global Internet.

The Addis Ababa IGF 2022 Messages reiterated the importance of this approach for addressing the various challenges identified by the UN Secretary-General in his call for a Global Digital Compact. In these messages, the IGF community noted the diverse roles played by different stakeholders and the complex task of governance and coordination of these issues at the global level. An inclusive, open, multistakeholder approach is, simply put, a pragmatic response to the architectural and operational realities of the global, decentralised Internet.

This is not to say that there is one multistakeholder governance model that applies to all challenges; different models have emerged and evolved to suit different tasks, including ongoing governance work (e.g. ICANN's bottom-up policy development process) and one-off initiatives to achieve a specific goal (e.g. the IANA stewardship transition).

The GDC is an opportunity for UN Member States to reaffirm that governance of the global Internet and associated digital technologies requires an approach that effectively combines government regulation and public policymaking, technical standards, business and economic concerns, and the interests of users and society. With this affirmation as a starting point, we can develop governance models suited to the specific current challenges and those still to emerge.

We look to the GDC to acknowledge and reflect upon the successes achieved via the multistakeholder approach, as enshrined in the Tunis Agenda.

The IGF has grown and evolved since its launch in 2006 to meet the unfolding challenges of our digital society, inviting policymakers and experts from all stakeholder groups to share knowledge and consider policy solutions. It has developed dynamic coalitions, parliamentary tracks, best practice forums, policy networks, youth coalitions and national IGFs. In the past year, the IGF has also served as an important vehicle for reflecting upon the themes of the Global Digital Compact.

The GDC should look to integrate with the IGF as the UN's primary vehicle for multistakeholder Internet governance activities. The IGF can serve as a venue for follow-up and reporting on the commitments made by signatories to the compact and, in this way, the IGF itself would continue to evolve and adapt to the ever-changing Internet governance landscape.

b) Key commitments/pledge/actions

Paragraph 98 of *Our Common Agenda* calls for a multistakeholder technology track to prepare a Global Digital Compact to be agreed at the Summit of the Future. To build upon this call, we urge that the GDC recognise inclusivity as a guiding principle and that it foster open spaces for collaboration and discussion among all stakeholders at the Summit of the Future in order to build trust among stakeholders and achieve optimal outcomes.

All stakeholders should recommit to maintain and strengthen a multistakeholder approach to Internet governance in order to realise this cooperation and coordination.

While the IGF faces challenges, particularly in relation to funding sustainability and the form and communication of its outputs, it remains an open, transparent, and inclusive institution that has evolved and improved over its lifespan, and continues to be our best vehicle for collaboration, communication and coordination amongst all Internet governance stakeholders. The GDC provides an opportunity to build on the IGF's strengths while addressing the need for more concrete outcomes, its ability to attract all stakeholder groups, and a sustainable financial model going forward. We urge the GDC to encourage all stakeholders to support and strengthen this valuable resource.

We recognise the transformative functions of social demands and technological innovation as well as politicisation trends. We look forward to working with all stakeholders in evolving Internet governance and participation and we look forward to the GDC and Summit of the Future to realign any opposing interests, values, influences, agents and conflicts when it comes to protection of the Internet's global interoperability and its digital commons, for the benefit of all.