



First Meeting of the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation

New York, 24-25 September 2018

Summary Note

The first in-person meeting of the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation took place on 24 and 25 September 2018 in New York. The Secretary-General welcomed participants, noting that digital technology is key to accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. He called on the Panel to make practical proposals on how stakeholders can work together to leverage its potential and address its unintended consequences. He emphasized the crucial importance he places on the Panel by specifically referring to it in [his address to the General Assembly](#).

Co-chairs Melinda Gates and Jack Ma underlined the importance and urgency of the Panel's work. Ms. Gates encouraged Panel members to devise practical solutions and ensure that all voices are heard. Mr. Ma emphasized the need for the Panel to have a global vision and to focus on the future, in order to deal not only with today's challenges, but also tomorrow's.

In their introductory remarks, many Panel members stressed the importance of inclusiveness to tackle digital divides and ensure that all stakeholders, especially marginalized ones, are included in policy discussions and decision-making. Some Panel members underscored that human rights are foundational also in the digital space, and that technology should be aligned to values. Others urged the Panel to focus on the risks of digital technologies, so that its benefits can be realized. Some Panel members noted the need to eschew tech determinism and carefully consider the societal implications of the digital transformation, as technology risks creating new divides. Stability of the digital environment also emerged as a shared concern. It was noted that up to now many discussions on digital issues have been taking place in different policy silos; by focusing on cross-cutting issues the Panel could help bring different knowledge streams and stakeholders closer together. Lastly, the ambition was expressed that the Panel propose new ways of thinking about digital issues.

Mr Ma closed the discussion by noting that access, inclusiveness and stability in the digital space had emerged as early areas of consensus, while Ms Gates remarked that ultimately the key question was, what kind of society we want to live in going forward.

Panel members subsequently discussed the six focus areas that were identified following the initial virtual meeting held in August 2018.

Inclusive technology, trade, and development

Panel members discussed how to ensure that the digital economy is inclusive and beneficial for all. It was noted that a question the Panel would need to answer is whether inclusion means giving disenfranchised groups access to existing systems, or changing these systems to enhance inclusion.

While some Panel members called for regulation to level the playing field, others believed that the new business models that have emerged in the digital space (e.g. platforms) enable small and medium enterprises, as they open new markets and standardize the way business is conducted.

Panel members noted the importance of public policy and the need for 'smart' regulation to enable rather than stifle innovation and economic development; concrete examples could be usefully included in the Panel's report. Challenges to developing regulation include the speed of technological progress, which outpaces the capacity of governments to regulate, and the global nature of the new oligopolies. Some Panel members suggested that a taxonomy be developed of cases where public policy intervention is required. Further thought should also be given to how to set up an incentive structure for industry to broaden access to inclusive technology infrastructure.

In closing, Mr. Ma emphasized the inclusive nature of internet technology, how rapidly digital technology has spread throughout the world, and the ability of technology to create jobs and support small business. He also noted the need for new frameworks to support inclusive global trade and the importance of capacity building.

Principles, mechanisms and approaches to digital cooperation

Panel members concurred that developing principles and modalities for digital cooperation is one of the main goals of the Panel. The Panel could also contribute to better communication across professional and national borders by forging a common vocabulary and facilitating shared understanding of key concepts such as inclusiveness and the multi-stakeholder approach. It should also showcase success stories of digital cooperation across regions and sectors.

It was noted that trust between various stakeholders is an essential prerequisite for greater cooperation. The erosion of trust between individuals and technology, consumers and businesses, governments and industries, and with regard to institutions and experts were mentioned as challenges across all focus areas. The Panel should consider *inter alia* how to rebuild trust between states and other stakeholders, how to hold stakeholders accountable, and how to measure the effectiveness of the proposed mechanisms.

While some suggested that the Panel first develop principles and modalities and subsequently socialize them with stakeholders, others called for developing principles and modalities organically, by examining existing practices across regions and sectors, and culling out those principles and modalities that could be applied to other areas as well. This approach would help build stakeholders' sense of ownership, which would greatly enhance the likelihood that these principles and modalities would be implemented.

Capacity building and closing the digital gap

Panel members felt that a massive capacity building effort is required in order to improve digital literacy and technology capacity at the individual, institutional and government levels, especially in the least developed countries.

At the individual level, two priority tracks were identified: education for children and youth (with a particular emphasis on reaching girls and other marginalized groups), not only to code but to become lifelong learners so as to be able to adapt to the continuous changes that rapid technological advances will bring; and reskilling of workers at a mass scale.

With respect to the institutional level, it was noted that most institutions and governments lack resources to adapt and respond to the digital transformation. Panel members suggested that digital technologies be incorporated in development strategies and that South-South cooperation and knowledge sharing be encouraged.

Data as a transformative resource

Panel members discussed some of the key issues around data, including data governance, data ownership, data biases, data localization, and cross-border data flows, as well as their application to specific industries and sectors such as healthcare. Some Panel members noted that there were many types of data, and that data relationships can be complex, with multiple participants including citizens, enterprises, research institutions and government agencies. Data itself can redefine the relationship between participants and can be looked at as a resource or a right depending on the context.

Panel members suggested that while a number of initiatives are under way to address data-related issues, the Panel could make a meaningful contribution by proposing ways and means to improve cooperation around data and highlighting best practices. The Panel will need to consider *inter alia* what cooperation modalities can help ensure that the benefits from the use of data by diverse stakeholders and data flows are shared, while concerns relating to data concentration and privacy are addressed. Some Panel members noted the experience of different countries relating to common data pools for academic research or other purposes, and proposed treating data as a public good in some contexts.

Human rights and human agency in the digital age

Panel members concurred that placing human beings at the centre of digital technologies was a foundational principle. Many Panel members emphasized the need to apply human values and ethics to shape the development and design of technology. They also agreed that human rights should be a cross-cutting issue in the report and that the Panel should reaffirm that international law including international human rights law are applicable in the digital domain. Some Panel members suggested examining how the Universal Declaration of Human Rights applies in the digital sphere, to address issues such as the right not to be measured or analyzed and the right to meaningful human contact.

Questions that the Panel will need to consider include how to align digital technologies with human values, how to balance private rights and public goods, and what metrics can be used to measure the impact of technologies on human well-being.

Digital security

The Panel discussed various initiatives underway to promote cyber security as it has been traditionally termed, and noted the need to take a broader approach in view both of developments in technology and of the broader consequences of security breaches. It was noted that promoting digital security and stability requires adopting a multi-stakeholder approach, as all actors have a role to play in this respect. Digital security challenges are present in all spheres of modern digital life, from individual users to companies and organizations, national states and international organizations. The Panel would need to examine the shared responsibility of both states and industry actors, and call for greater multi-stakeholder cooperation to build robust digital systems that improve trust.

Trust was identified as the key issue underpinning digital security and stability. Some Panel members called for a bottom-up approach to rebuilding trust among stakeholders. Many underscored that with regard to normative approaches the UN has a unique role to play in creating trust in the digital space.

Research and engagement

The Secretariat presented its research and engagement strategies for the months ahead. The two strategies are intertwined; their objectives are to co-construct with stakeholders ideas and recommendations for the Panel's report, catalyze multi-stakeholder and inter-disciplinary cooperation on digital issues, and build support among key stakeholders for implementation of the report's recommendations.

The Secretariat encouraged Panel members to contribute to its research and engagement activities by leading or participating in upcoming virtual discussions, sharing digital cooperation stories, hosting or participating in events with stakeholders, and speaking or writing on matters within the purview of the Panel. Panel members welcomed the proposed approach and requested the Secretariat to equally focus inward on facilitating consultation by Panel members, including by bringing them together in small groups.

Next steps

Panel members held a lively discussion on the desired focus of the Panel's work in the months ahead and requested the Secretariat to draft a short document summarizing the agreement reached (see Annex).

Annex: A framework for pursuing the Panel's work in the inter-sessional period

At its meeting in New York on 24-25 September 2018, the UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation discussed opportunities offered by digital technologies for accelerating the implementation of Agenda 2030 and for empowering individuals and communities. Equally, it examined the risks associated with these technologies and current obstacles to digital trust and cooperation.

Panel members took turns to explore select areas of interest, such as: capacity building and closing the digital gap; inclusive technology, trade and development; data as a transformative resource; human rights and human agency in the digital age; digital security; and principles, mechanisms and approaches to digital cooperation. They agreed to focus the Panel's research and outreach in the period up to its next meeting on the following aspects of digital cooperation:

1. Values and Principles: What values are relevant today in pursuing digital cooperation while addressing corresponding challenges? How do we adapt these values to the digital age? What should be the principles underpinning digital cooperation? Where do they find reflection in existing norms and frameworks? How can these values and principles be embedded in business and policy?
2. Methods and Mechanisms: What are the new and emerging forms of cooperation appropriate for the digital era? How well are they working, and what are their limitations? How do we include the voices of women, youth, small enterprises and forgotten or marginalized stakeholders? Which existing mechanisms of digital cooperation should we embrace, and where should we fill in the gaps with new and innovative models? And how can we better incorporate our values and principles into these frameworks?
3. Illustrative Action Areas: The Panel will explore key areas of digital cooperation such as human rights and human agency; trust and security; data; closing the digital gap; inclusive finance, trade, technology and participation in the digital economy; enabling development; and building the capacity of individuals, institutions and governments for the digital transformation. For each of these areas, the Panel will seek to ascertain what are the challenges that are currently being addressed by different stakeholders (including individuals, organizations and States), what are good examples of existing cooperation among stakeholders and where is further digital cooperation needed? What are the big transformative ideas in these areas? How can we apply the values, principles and mechanisms above to these areas?

In conducting its research and outreach, the Panel should endeavour to look at digital issues across silos, identify best practices, engage marginalized and/or emerging stakeholders, and seek to devise a shared vocabulary reflective of contemporary realities. It should broadly engage with civil society and forums, institutions and entities currently active on digital policy issues, avoiding duplication and seeking opportunities for value-add. The Panel should make the case for an urgent increase in international cooperation in the digital space.