Discussion Group on Methods and Mechanisms

Co-chairs
● Doris Leuthard, Panel Member
● Fadi Chehadé, Panel Member

Moderator
● Jovan Kurbalija, Executive Director & Co-Lead of the Secretariat

Guiding Framework
The meeting was framed around proposed functional areas of digital cooperation\(^1\). These included:

- **Inclusivity function**: to facilitate active and effective participation of all stakeholders in digital cooperation
- **Deliberation function**: to ensure that analysis and discussions on digital issues are performed in an inclusive, impactful and coordinated manner
- **Coordination function**: to ensure coordinated coverage of the following aspects of digital cooperation: multidisciplinary (policy issues), multi-stakeholder (actors) and multilevel (local-national-regional-global)
- **Normative and regulatory function**: to apply existing rules and norms in the digital realm and develop new ones when necessary
- **Implementation function**: to ensure follow-up, monitoring and implementation of digital cooperation agreements and initiatives
- **Support and capacity building function**: to assist actors, in particular, from small and developing countries identify relevant resources, acquire expertise, build capacities for developing and implementing digital policies

Non-Paper on Values & Principles
Former Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard shared ahead of the meeting a non-paper containing human values and principles which could form the basis for the methods and mechanisms of digital cooperation. These values include: human-centeredness; the predominance of international law; the preponderance of human rights both offline and online; respect for diverse cultures, institutions and national conditions worldwide;

\(^1\) ‘Digital cooperation’ refers to the ways and means through which individuals, organizations, and countries work together to manage their social, economic, and legal relations in the digital realm. It emphasises functions and modalities (‘how’) and not just the form or outcome (‘what’) of processes whereby the relevant stakeholders in the digital space work to maximize the benefits of digital technologies while safeguarding against potential risks.
inclusiveness; sustainability; and building trust and confidence, with transparency, openness and access to information as key elements.

The paper proposes the following potential shared principles for structuring and optimizing global digital cooperation:

- **Consensus**-oriented decision-making for shared solutions, where all stakeholders (public, private, civic) are involved and consulted, and their views taken into account seriously and diligently.
- **Federated and subsidiarity-based** approach, acknowledging that generally there is no “one size fits all” solution, and solutions need to be crafted and implemented closer to where the problems are experienced.
- Fostering a sense of ownership that strengthens self-responsibility, the resilience and efficiency of adopted solutions, and facilitates their effective implementation.
- **Innovation** at the grass-roots level and giving space to flexible bottom-up cooperation networks closer to the grass-roots.

**Meeting Summary**

The meeting was broken into the proposed five functional areas of digital cooperation, with a few participants providing comments around each function.

**Inclusivity Function**

Participants stressed the importance of authentic inclusion and having a place at the table for everyone, especially for small island states and states in the global south (a large emphasis was placed on countries in Africa), and ensuring that shared language and terms are comprehensible by all parties. As with other functions of digital cooperation, emphasis was placed on not creating new language and terms, but rather on ensuring that current norms and international law are collectively understood. Some participants highlighted that conveying messages in simple terms is crucial. One participant stressed the importance of who is in the room and who the meeting was planned around (i.e. which time zones are not included in planning) and another iterated the importance of the coordination function for inclusivity and spoke of the importance of the 'how' piece of the inclusion process. An additional participant made note of where existing organizations are located and who currently has the right to work there.

Capacity building was identified as a critical component of inclusively. Multiple participants pointed out that the term “capacity building” itself has an impact on inclusion and has possibly become patronizing. One participant pointed out that “digital skills” may be a better term that is more inclusive.

General recommendations for the global community with regard to this function included; creating a selective bottom-up approach, ensuring that actors are followed-up with, creating flexible cooperation agreements, enabling support for actors requiring it through information sharing and capacity building, creating a one-stop shop for all stakeholders and deciding what existing organizations can serve this function.
**Deliberation Function**

One participant spoke of the importance of meaningfully engaging governments not just for one day, but continually. As states have finite resources, this will require that meetings are as impactful as possible and relevant to the stakeholders involved. Additionally, space is needed within forums for stakeholder groups which can develop into larger avenues for cooperation. For example, IGF in Geneva gave space to SIDS to have their meetings, but this needs to develop a step further in terms of broader digital cooperation.

Participants agreed that sustainability is the key here and must be a focus within this function.

**Coordination Function**

Participants agreed upon the danger of uncoordinated action - inefficiency, redundancy, and increasing complexity. Without a general framework or system for fostering cooperation, there is an increasing danger of making these issues more difficult to solve. Participants also mentioned the importance of practicality and truly understanding what can work in various contexts. It was additionally agreed upon that not all issues are the same and not all need the same level of cooperation. Participants also agreed that having clear and concrete roles, responsibilities, and goals is critical.

One participant spoke on the tendency to conflate coordination, collaboration, and cooperation and the importance of clarifying each of these. In addition, the importance of clarifying processes that allow for both horizontal and vertical participation was highlighted.

With regard to policy and norm setting, it was highlighted that a much nimbler approach is needed for policy creation and implementation. The traditional approach to norm setting has tended to focus on a top-down approach, starting with the global and hoping that it filters down to the local; however, the pace of technological change requires a faster policy development and implementation process where we see what works in a local context and what can be scaled. This is very much needed with regard to data, for example. Democratizing access to data and new models of data governance, ownership, and transfer are necessary.

It was proposed that there could be networks, or a ‘network of networks’ which can aid in coordination and implementation, especially around policy. These can be bottom-up and distributed to establish policy coherence and ensure inclusivity. One participant placed emphasis on avoiding past partnership mistakes and examining where networks have previously failed.

Additionally, one participant mentioned the opportunities for the creation of shared value. For example, instead of focusing on trying to understand how to better produce and foster the development of digital public goods, we can also try to identify and describe networks of digital public goods. Protocols are needed in this regard which are open enough that people can join these networks but also open enough that the products can be scaled.
Another participant spoke of the need to understand a country’s capacity and readiness to collaborate to ensure meaningful participation and cooperation. Additionally noted was the need for horizon cooperation to work through policy redundancies and conflicts between governments, standard-setting bodies, and stakeholders.

**Implementation Function**

Like within many of the previous functions, participants agreed that there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Rather, there is a need to build on existing mechanisms. This applies to partnerships as well. Additionally, as with other functions, we must also be realistic as to what implementation really looks like, especially on technology for development. There is a gap between rhetoric and reality, technology can be seen as a silver bullet for the implementation of SDG agenda when that may not be the case.

One participant iterated that the UN (this Panel) must do a few things well rather than attempt to do everything. One participant additionally spoke on the importance of monitoring as a crucial dimension of implementation.

Participants additionally spoke of the gap between standards, norms and the measurability and importance of measurement in digital cooperation and inclusion.

**Normative & Regulatory Function**

As with many of the other functions, emphasis was placed on not re-creating but rather dealing with existing dynamics. One participant spoke of the need for a ‘New Deal’ among all stakeholders that is based on the existing legal instruments (i.e. the UN Charter) but adds new elements as well. This deal will allow for flexibility but also the stability that will come from some form of regulation.

One participant made clear the issue of fragmentation - that there are different norms not only by geography locally and by country, but among organizations and jurisdictions as well. There is a need to think about legal norms and international law, and additionally about ethics as there is a gap in applicability of international law to the ethical use of technology. At the same time, it was mentioned that legal norms are hard to change and negotiate however having international multi-stakeholder forums that can discuss governance of technology can produce a more agile and responsive attitude change on these topics.

One participant mentioned the new conflict between regulatory unilateralism and coordinated multilateralism and the need for “innovative multilateralism” and the need for a holistic approach which connects the security, economic and human rights issues in an appropriate way. Participants also mentioned the responsibility of companies to govern emerging technologies while noting the challenge of making self-regulation that is accountable and embedded in some framework of dialogue and feedback.
Support and Capacity Building Function

Participants agreed that meaningful participation is the key in this function. This goes beyond observation in the digital space, but further having the ability to engage in a meaningful way and share in digital dividends. This is especially pivotal for island nations and those in the global south where capacity must be built from the outset (through infrastructure and skills development, pricing, security, privacy and policy engagement) to ensure access to the internet for the remaining 50% of the world’s population. Moreover, trust is key in building capacity along with privacy, safety, and rights. All of these allow for individuals to have agency in the digital realm. Participants also mentioned the need for patience in the creation of meaningful participation given that it takes time to develop opinions and positions.

Participants agreed as well that the starting point here is to reduce the mistrust that remains between state and non-state actors.

One participant delved deeper into capacity building itself, mentioning the importance of both online training and face-to-face teaching. Face-to-face learning will lead to meaningful participation and keep individuals engaged in the process. Another participant noted that we must examine which capacities are important to build and with whom they are necessary, as well as how we this will be accomplished. Emphasis here was also placed on coordination between donors, implementers, and beneficiaries.