On November 29, 2018, the UN Foundation and Business Council for the UN hosted a private sector consultation for the High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, inviting senior executives from relevant business sectors to share experiences and raise priority areas of interest regarding the panel’s objectives. The meeting was held under Chatham House Rule, but this note provides an overview of the main themes that emerged during the discussion.

This consultation took place just prior to the high-level panel’s consultations in Silicon Valley, and served as a constructive opportunity for the panel to solicit insights from this critical group of stakeholders and to continue to build the panel’s network of potential implementation champions.

The discussion began with an overview of the rationale for the High-level Panel. The Secretary-General sees digital cooperation as important for many aspects of life, but it also faces many challenges. First, with half of the world disconnected from digital technology, its benefits are unevenly distributed. Second, these new technologies also imply various risks, including data privacy and protecting rights online. The Secretary-General believes there is the need for enhanced cooperation to address these challenges and to realize the full benefits of digital technologies, which will be critical for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The conversation was guided by three framing questions:

1. What are some of the challenges to cooperation across sectors in digital policy? What can we do to address those challenges? How do we better align the objectives of stakeholders necessary for digital cooperation?
2. What are some of the key principles that could underpin frameworks for enhancing digital collaboration across industries?
3. What are examples of successful cooperation in the digital realm? Share real-world case studies of how stakeholders are working together around critical digital issues including bridging digital divides, data privacy & governance, trust and security, and preserving human rights online.

Challenges to Cross-Sector Digital Cooperation

Participants reflected upon challenges they faced in advancing digital cooperation. One significant challenge highlighted by participants was conflicting and overlapping regulatory frameworks, for instance on data privacy or cyber threats, requiring significant time and capacity to ensure compliance.

A second challenge participants shared was around interoperability, particularly in developing logical interfaces between different types of actors. For instance, identifying frameworks for rapid partnerships between multinational corporations and start-ups has often been burdened by legacy clauses and processes that do not fit in the digital age. One participant noted that these lengthy industrial enterprise processes are ‘killing’ entrepreneurship. At present, it can take 3-6 months to finalize a contract, and during that period the start-up is deprived of needed capital. In addition, more thinking was needed on connecting the digital economy to older firms.

At the same time, concerted strategies are needed to overcome fragmentation of efforts with regards to the use of digital technologies in development (or, “tech for social good”). The tsunami of commitments that companies are asked to make, or partnerships they are encouraged to join causes fatigue and squandering of time and resources, particularly since there is often little follow up on the results from these various commitments.
Similarly on the theme of fragmentation, the proliferation of standards-setting initiatives represent different amalgamations of stakeholders and are not coordinating with one another, meaning that the outcomes of these processes are likely to be in competition.

Participants also called attention to the need to think through more flexible cooperative models that allow for modular investments in technology, to avoid getting locked in to specific technologies from the outset.

*Ingredients for Enhancing Cooperation*

Overcoming these challenges will require developing and embedding principles that are translated and shared across industries and actors. Participants stressed the importance of trust and noted a marked decline of trust between actors in today’s digital economy. This distrust harms cooperation, but new collaborations and technologies may offer opportunities to enhance digital trust.

UndergIRDING these considerations is the need to reconceptualize what is meant by partnerships, in order to draw upon expertise across regulatory bodies, private sector, and civil society. Participants also agreed that taking a long-term perspective is critical for the joint preparation, practice, and development of partnerships and discussed the importance of a shared understanding that partners can be taking incremental steps toward a solution.

One participant cautioned that relying only on high-level principles will leave a qualitative gap between the overarching framework and operational realities and suggested dedicating effort toward identifying some practical, working-level mechanisms to enable cooperation between companies and sectors.

*Successful Models of Digital Cooperation*

Although digital cooperation is beset by real challenges and does not yet benefit from clearly articulated principles, there are a number of bright spots where cooperation is working well. One participant called attention to the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, noting that it had emerged as a space for collaboration to identify recommendations for stakeholders.

Participants also discussed the UN Global Compact Breakthrough Innovation Challenge, a year-long program that seeks to support companies in developing products and technologies to help achieve the SDGs. Seven firms made it through the year-long program and four have brought products to market. This program helps companies better see the market potential of the SDGs and helps to shift thinking from a CSR lens to a mainstream market opportunity.

The discussion also reflected upon more practical ways to foster collaboration at the firm level. One suggestion was to build out space for staff to work on cooperation and partnerships, such as incorporating pro bono hours to provide the time and incentives for creative thinking to advance digital cooperation.

The group also considered two potential models for cooperation. First, participants explored the possibility of identifying specific challenges that industry competitors could cooperate on to identify solutions. Having a shared goal could encourage firms to share data through safe digital infrastructure and unlock new insights to build innovative solutions.

Second, participants suggested that a ‘Davos for engineers’ could be a useful format to bring together mid-level experts who typically do not have the opportunity to interact or the opportunity to think creatively about solutions to obstacles to collaboration. One participant noted that there might be the opportunity to craft such a space within the Web Summit.