

Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue on “The Age of Digital Interdependence”

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The contemporary world is drastically changing and is being forced to evolve its approach to certain sectors, such as the economic, social and political sphere. Despite the fact that these elements shape and usher the world to change, it is certain that the most fundamental aspect behind this new age of change is the global advance regarding digital technologies. These technologies offer a new world of possibilities, but with them, challenges and risks emerge that must be addressed by the international community as a whole.

While the advantages of the internet are mostly obvious, initially societies were not as aware about the side effects. However, over time, the challenges have become clear. Questions regarding the regulation and limits of this digital (r)evolution, the identification of the key stakeholders, the predominant threats and even the pivotal areas to shape the digital future, or more accurately, the digital present, are emerging.

These aspects constitute the background of the Report of the United Nation Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation, “The Age of Digital Interdependence”. Many important tendencies have been highlighted and certain actions have been recommended, some of them being: the current accelerating digitalization process and the danger of the further division within individual countries and the international community, the growing dangers and opportunities regarding an unprecedented wave of automation (including automatic weapon systems) as a consequence of the digital technologies and their evolution, as well the increase in exclusion biases regarding the use of AI, the intromission and restriction of privacy (generated on a global scale by global companies and (sub)national governments and executive bodies alike), fading of trust among societies as a result of fake news and deep fakes and the rising danger of surveilled societies thanks to new surveillance technologies and new consumer behaviours and negligence.

Although this report is very alarming, it also focuses on the new opportunities and positive changes that digital transformation encompasses and the duty of all States to cooperate on this subject. It is a fact that the deep complexity and the rapid dynamic nature of the digital world demands many different sets of competences, skills and even knowledge of several agents/ acting bodies, causing both directly and indirectly the need for cooperation in a multi-stakeholder approach. This multi-stakeholder digital cooperation should be taken into consideration as the new outline for the normative, social and even ethical approach to the matter in question.

During the multi-stakeholder dialogue based on the Report mentioned above, four main points were made in order to address, discuss and solve the issue thoroughly. These aspects are: (1) Reducing the digital divide and the inclusion of marginalized groups, (2) Re-shaping the socio-economic dimension, (3) Human Rights and Digitalization and finally (4) Building trust in the digital age, digital governance and the role of the United Nations.

Referring to the cornerstone of the dialogue, The Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) proposed a set of different questions regarding the report in order to achieve a discussion that be highly productive and rich in content. The key questions presented by the KAS alongside with the four aspects previously explained will be addressed and explained individually.

1. Reducing the Digital Divide and the Inclusion of Marginalized Groups

“Fairness and non-discrimination should be central elements in the development of automatic decision-making (and action) systems based on artificial intelligence. Decisions based on algorithms can discriminate (Barocas and Selbst 2016) because the data used to train the algorithms might have biases that can give rise to discriminatory decisions, because of the properties of the algorithm itself, or through the misuse of certain models in different contexts.”¹

A very ambitious, yet unlikely, recommendation was embodied in the main report. This is the goal of achieving affordable access to digital networks (for adults) and digitally-qualified financial and health services by 2030. In here the report aspires for a substantial contribution in order to achieve the SDGs.

During the dialogue the experts argued that in some aspects they perceived the report as being too ambitious, while in others it lacks ambitiousness. In this specific point, the representatives explained that 10 years is not enough time to guarantee universal internet access and highlighting that currently 50% of the world’s population continues to lack access.

They added that despite the fact that this is the current status of the world, countries must begin cooperating with each other so as to generate comprehensive solutions that will allow for global internet access. The case of Peru was brought into the debate, as an example of what is trying to be achieved. Currently Peru has a project that intends to grant all their citizens complete access to the internet in less than five years and some participants stated that the goal might be achieved due to public-private cooperation, thus serving as an example for other regions.

A call to action was also made geared towards the international community as well as to each national government, to the private sector, multilateral banks and most importantly to the UN urging them to adopt policies supporting and empowering digital inclusion and equality for marginalized groups and women around the world. The spokesmen also agreed that even though the new upcoming young generations have the responsibility to be the catalysts of this technological change in the world, the elder generation in charge of different organizations and companies must also collaborate with the youth on these topics. All nations must come together to promote inclusion, education and access so as to ensure that women and certain marginalized groups are able to fully immerse themselves into the digital age on equal footing and therefore, be part of the change. The spokesmen also stated that this digital equality and inclusiveness should be ruled by a set of norms, and those laws should be urgently agreed. To effectively face those challenges a legal outline, strategies, action plans and new solutions must be developed.

Reaching this point, the representatives expressed their deep belief that countries should rely more on education as a solution due to the fact that with the instruction in digital space and

¹ Oliver, Nuria. *Women Shaping Global Economic Governance*, “Governance in the era of data-driven decision-making algorithms”. CEPR Press: July 2019.

technologies more social groups would be included in this changing world. The point of education will be formally addressed in the following questions.

2. *Reshaping the Socio-Economic Dimension*

There is a very clear necessity for governments to regulate Digital Development, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that governments are not empowered to be able to take on such a task. Therefore, the suggestion on the table is an empowerment through various dimensions: a technological, regulatory, ethical, social and an economic dimension.

Each of these aspects are necessary in order to to effectively regulate this new digital era. Education regarding the consequences of technology, the meaning and power of computing languages, and the understanding of the principal technical functionality is essential for a later regulation of technology. However, we must also look at the ethical implications of technology and its uses. Finally, the social and economic aspect, which will be explained in this section, the responsible agents in social and political organizations and institutions must learn to be aware of and to adapt to this fast-changing world in order to not leave sectors of society or the economy behind.

- **Education**

People cannot feel empowered until they dispose of a deeper knowledge on the technologies in question. On the topic of education, the general consensus was that there has been a lack of ambiguity found in the report.

Three levels of approaches in education were brought to the table:

- a. **Profound transformation of obligatory education:** Digital competences in five key areas must be integrated and intertwined with traditional teaching materials in schools: networks, data, programming, algorithms and hardware. This is necessary because on a global scale, current generations are mostly characterized by digital illiteracy. But digital literacy, within only a few years to come, will be as decisive for professional success and the chance for a pro-active civic and political involvement as the traditional literacy has been today. Additionally, creativity and critical thinking will be even more important than today. We must also invest in what makes us homo sapiens so as to not lose ourselves in the process.
- b. **Investing in education for professionals and the ‘elites’:** this point was highlighted as one of vital importance, as the spokesmen stated that many professional positions are being replaced by computers and the workforce must be able to keep up.

This is a pivotal matter because as discussed in the panel, the changes are occurring at an accelerating pace and countries are not focusing on investment in re-education of their professionals for them to be digitally competent and not be left behind the digital transformation process. In order to play a constructive role during this digital revolution and to stay proactive in terms of protecting human rights and dignity, decision-makers in business, politics and the public administration must be able to encompass the challenges and to take positive

action. But currently, most of the traditional 'elites' are not up to the task, unfortunately not even in highly industrialized nations nor the UN.

- c. Citizenship education: this point aims at empowering citizens and allow them to feel like they can enact real change within their governments and rules and regulations of the digital world. If the citizens do not know or understand the procedures that can be taken against the companies who violate their rights, they will not feel the empowerment and the responsibility that they have in this digital revolution.

- **Big Corporations**

Big Corporations seem to agglomerate most of the power when it comes to digital development. Therefore, any report coming from the United Nations must address the big questions: Do large international corporations have too much power? Will they be the ones to determine and decide the direction of digital development, including the legal boundaries and regulations? They are unelected yet very powerful. How far can we let them continue with the power? In the digital world there are no physical barriers. These corporations could, and should be divided up so as to not have so much control over the sector.

The current report as is does approach the topic of digital economics, however, it lacks initiative regarding digital commerce. There is no real regulation regarding the topic of digital commerce and it is something that is becoming continuously more important. There has to be a regulation put in place regulate this ever growing sector in the economy regarding to basic international rules.

- **Sustainability**

During the dialogue many spokesmen stated that approximately 20% of the current global energy consumption is spent on technology. Additionally, the development of artificial intelligence is also a considerable consumer of energy and it is a fact (stated with worry multiple times during the discussion) that the competent organizations, companies and even governments are not focusing enough on climate change matters in the main report, which is something that needs to be remedied. "Today's pervasive deep-learning techniques require high computing capabilities with prohibitive energy costs, especially if we consider the deployment of such systems on a large scale."²

As members of the United Nations, States must urge to find a way to make the digital development a sustainable reality, this means to comply with the SDGs and the digital goals at a global scale.

3. Human rights and digitalization

The spokesmen were highly concerned with the preservation of Human Rights in the context of the digital revolution. The experts discussed the need to recognize that Human Rights in the digital world are not only an option, but are key to the future of the digital evolution. They stated that the fundamental rights must always be protected, however, in the digital world where

² Oliver, Nuria. *Women Shaping Global Economic Governance*, "Governance in the era of data-driven decision-making algorithms". CEPR Press: July 2019.

no physical borders or people exist, it becomes extremely difficult to guarantee and/or protect these rights.

With this topic, controversy surged in reference to Article 12 of the Declaration of Human Rights. This article states that “no one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence [...]. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.” With the wide range of connections between actors (not only states but multinational and digital companies) this personal privacy that we are entitled to is often violated or ignored. The representatives referred to the existence of cameras around cities on a global scale, the buying and selling of our personal data on the internet and even the fake flow of videos and images as a threat to our privacy. Because of this, they insisted that the creation and regulations of some red lines would be mandatory so as to ensure the respect and correct appreciation of Human Rights.

A fear that was brought up in several occasions as a theoretical but feasible example of the technological possibilities and its impact on societies today, was that the next conflict or even genocide, could be the result of the streaming of a (deep) fake video shared through social media because there is little to no control over what people can share, view and even upload onto the internet. According to several participants, internet companies and providers do have to be subjected to stronger regulations on a global scale and should be thus be treated equally to news broadcasting and telecommunication companies, organizations that have been subjected to state regulation for many decades. The UN and all its member States must worktogether towards a holistic spectrum of rights that completely encompass the spirit and intention of human rights protection without getting lost in technical details: The digital rights canon must be, independently of single technological evolutions, as valid in 50 years from now as today. Even when today we cannot foresee the next technical invention in every sphere of society, we have to formulate the digital rights agenda in a way that it will outlast every single invention and to reflect the universal spirit of human rights. Another solution was the emission of a UN review on how Human Rights and existing standards apply to the new emerging digital panorama and how this review can include the views of different governments, civil societies and even private and public sectors around the world on how to proactively apply the existing rights in the digital age. Regarding the issue of social media that was previously discussed, a call to action addressing this was issued, so as to ensure that social media enterprises, local governments and organizations work hand in hand so that a comprehensive response can be created to eliminate existing or potential human rights violations.

- **Digital Bill of Rights**

“Internet is a public-private ecosystem: it is a world ruled by interests and private rules that fall into the hands of private organization... but it is indisputable the existence of a public interest in the outcome of the matter of Internet in significantly knowing the exercise of the rights of citizens and public policies.”³

One necessity that was brought up by several members was the creation of a so called ‘Digital Bill of Rights’. These rights would be based on Human Rights and the limits to those rights already developed by the Human Rights Commission so as to create new rights that would fill in

³ Barrio, Andrés. *Revista de Privacidad y Derecho Digital*. “Internet Governance”. Issue 10, 2018.

the gaps this new Digital Age has created. They should be brought about through multi stakeholder collaboration.

Even though consensus was hard to reach, it was agreed on that law protecting Human Rights had to be very strict allowing them to require as opposed to recommending and that all States in the United Nations had to comply to these rules and be a part of the creation of them so that everyone may comment, contribute and share the knowledge of each area needed for the creation of this digital human rights.

4. Building Trust in the Digital Age - Digital Governance - Role of the United Nations

“Sharan Burrow refers to a generalised fracturing of trust in globalisation, and considers it a determinant of several political phenomena currently observed in the industrialised world. She warns that if trust in institutions is not restored, people may lose faith in democracy itself.”⁴

- Building Trust in the Digital Age

The topic of autonomous intelligent system was of great concern. The spokesmen fully supported the idea that these systems must be designed and wired in ways to enable that the decisions they made were ethically correct. In addition, one must take care with the algorithm used as they may result in unintended and catastrophic results. They agreed that the systems and algorithms must be monitored and configured according to both engineering and ethical standards (for those systems to allow a multi-stakeholder and even human approaches towards autonomous systems). There was consensus regarding the fact that the delicate life and death decisions should never be in the hands of or be delegated to machines/technology and that a multilateral cooperation was necessary in this area so as to design autonomous systems transparently and unbiased in different social settings.

The discussion then circled around to what the spokesmen referred to as “Machine Ethics”; we need an ethical system for the algorithms that will give us some sort of global regulation that can later be translated into law. The creation of this ethical system is necessary so as to develop ethical Artificial Intelligence. This development of algorithms in Artificial Intelligence must be regulated, supervised and revised. “However, data-driven decision making is not without limitations. Plato’s words of some 2,400 years ago are surprisingly relevant today: “A good decision is based on knowledge, not on numbers”⁵.

In this context, another big question to be addressed is whether or not to base the future lawmaking regarding this cataclysmic issue as well as its ethical considerations onto premises of positive law or natural law. Whereas we have seen some self-regulation that has been effective, (i.e. some companies that might refuse to organize a cyber-attack on States) the opinion of this committee is that the International Community requires compellingly a binding stipulation of law that does not depend solely on the good-will of the actors involved but is compulsory for all private and public agents.

⁴ González, Arancha; Jansen, Marion. *Women Shaping Global Economic Governance*, “Introduction: The economy according to her”. CEPR Press: July 2019.

⁵ Oliver, Nuria. *Women Shaping Global Economic Governance*, “Governance in the era of data-driven decision-making algorithms”. CEPR Press: July 2019.

- Digital Governance

One aspect that reflects humaneness is the democratic rule of law, which offers people to participate in the decision-making processes in order to determine how technological development will be carried out in a society. This ability must be taken into account when regulating the digital world. The panel has refused clearly and unanimously the determinism that has been articulated by many tech-companies and techno-optimists according to those human development leads inevitably to the technological singularity. On the contrary, the experts emphasized very strongly that technology cannot and does not dictate human action!

Hence, the panel underlined that the final report must claim compellingly and not just to recommend - that an ethical code and stricter laws regarding digital development must be included. However, the law will be able to regulate this phenomenon when the principles are such that they are applicable today and in 30 years. They must also take into account the multi stakeholder aspect of this digital world as well as be applicable globally, not just in the west.

Here the spokesmen debated the complex issue of “who regulates who”. Until now, since the early 2000s, technology has dictated the rules of the game, so far. However, the national governments must step up and play a role in the regulation of these technologies. This becomes difficult when national governments do not comprehend what they are regulating and the people who elected them democratically do not understand how they can influence the policy in order to better benefit society as a whole. Yet, at the same time, governments have an advantage that big corporations lack, and that is the fact that they have been, for the most part, democratically elected to represent the people they are legislating for. Therefore, this report calls on national governments and big corporations to collaborate in the creation of comprehensive laws that will best serve the community.

- Role of the United Nations

A very critical point regarding the digital era and this debate is the role of the UN itself. The participants agreed that given the fact that digitalization is a global issue, any national (and even local) solutions are insufficient and also counterproductive when addressing the challenges and risks of technological development and their impact on human society.

National governments and organizations are unable to regulate this global phenomenon in an isolated manner, because of its very global definition and character. The internet is borderless, and in many occasions, just as early as today, many acting agents in the digital sphere are not human, any more. This is why the UN should focus on channelling digital development taking into account the consequences, the risks and of course the wide range of opportunities that are stemming from the digital revolution and should hence be calling for international cooperation in this specific matter.

As a global initiative, this project must strive to include all cultural and social differences in order to make the proposals outlined effective around the globe and consequently can not only be based on “Western values”. However, the report as it is, outlines a very western reality. In addition, computer programming language and educational materials on the subject have a tendency to be predominantly in English. So as to remedy both of these issues, two proposals were made: consultations should be made in at least two countries per continent, and if possible in more, to be able to better gauge the wide range of necessities; computer programming languages and

educational materials on the subject should be translated into various other languages. This would give more people access to the digital world.

The spokesmen firmly agreed that it would be advisable to enhance the development of a Global Commitment on Digital Trust and Security. This Commitment would help shape a shared vision, strengthen the implementation of norms for responsible uses of technology, identify the main attributes and weaknesses of the process of achieving digital stability and propose priorities for action in the sphere of digital advances and uses of technology.

With this Commitment the representatives argued that the creation of a platform for sharing digital public goods (in ways that privacy is completely respected) and engaging pooling data sets in areas related to the achievement of the SDGs. The spokesmen recommended that this Commitment had its backbone in a multi-stakeholder alliance with the involvement of the United Nations.

The United Nations must play a role in the regulation of digital development as they are the only organization with a global reach that can sufficiently address the issues presented. They must be the ones to call for conferences and reports to address these issues and then ultimately impulse a change in regulation around the world.

Conclusion

In this discussion many ideas were brought to the table touching on each of the different aspects of the report. However, there were a few points that were repetitively brought up. These topics were education, ethics, law and the role of the United Nations.

Some general remarks on the report recommended to put more emphasis in the idea of sustainability; to consider more broadly the link to the international debate on climate change; to include more references to Africa and Latin America and to consider that these two regions are facing the threat to be disconnected to the progress and achievements of digital innovation; to avoid that the final report may be seen as a document which is mainly directed to the more digitally advanced countries; to stress more explicitly the role of the State and state agency when it comes to the regulation of digital companies; to give even more emphasis to digital governance; and finally to focus even more the principle of solidarity when it comes to international cooperation and exchange in the digital age.

Regarding education, this topic was considered to be of utmost importance. This was one point where the members of the debate considered that the report was lacking ambiguity. As mentioned on many occasions, without education we do not know what we are talking about. While this statement includes all people, especially re-education of members of the workforce and a new approach to educating children, it is also directed towards those legislating digital technologies. In many cases the legislators don't fully comprehend the extent to which their actions affect society. Multiple proposals on this topic were given and have been outlined in the previous report.

The debate between ethics and law was very much present as well throughout the entire debate. While everyone agreed that an ethical code had to exist, they believed that this ethical code must also be enshrined in law. This law had to be universal and required so as to protect citizens from the abuse of these digital technologies.

Finally, the consensus was the only forum to debate this topic effectively and to truly create international law regarding digital technologies. To adequately confront this digital challenge, we must make sure that all voices are heard and that the policies produced are applicable all over the world.

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