

First IGF 2025 Open Consultation and MAG meeting February, 2025

Proposals for PNs, BPFs and MAG Working Groups and the Secretariat from Valeria Betancourt, MAG member, and Anriette Esterhuysen, past MAG chair

- 1. Proposal concerning a “dedicated Policy Network (PN) on Global Digital Compact (GDC) implementation” which we suggest is referred to as “The IGF and Digital Cooperation and Governance”**

Overarching considerations

The MAG chair asked for a specific proposal on this. We agree this is an important issue for the MAG to produce proposals around. We do want to emphasise two overarching considerations:

- a. We believe that the subject matter of this work area should not be limited to the GDC, but include the role of the IGF in a broader context of digital cooperation, including around the WSIS review and other existing and emerging processes. That is why we propose this work area (“group” or PN or BPF) is referred as “The IGF and Digital Cooperation”
- b. We are not sure it needs a “policy network”. If a consultant can be made available to work on this for a limited period of time we would suggest that the MAG tackles this through its Working Group on Strategy but as a dedicated area of work that involves other institutions such as the ITU, UNESCO, UNGIS, UNDP etc.
- c. We also believe it is worth considering having the existing PN on Internet Fragmentation undertake this work under a heading of ‘digital cooperation’ in 2025. Digital cooperation has already been recognised by this PN as an important counteracting measure to the fragmentation of internet governance.

Why we believe this is an important work area

The [IGF 2024 messages](#) highlighted the relationship between the IGF and the Global Digital Compact and suggests that: “The Global Digital Compact (GDC) must transition from a vision document to an actionable framework, strengthening and aligning with existing structures like the WSIS process, the IGF and, the STI Forum. Enhanced coordination among these platforms is essential to avoid fragmentation, foster synergies, and ensure cohesive, inclusive policy-making.”

This process has already started with the Office of Digital and Emerging Technologies (ODET) getting an extended mandate and identifying its key focus as “supporting the follow-up and implementation of the Global Digital Compact, including its decisions on AI governance. “ODET will act across five strategic areas to: a) Serve as advocate and focal point for digital cooperation in the UN for Member States and stakeholders; b) Facilitate inclusive, multistakeholder policy dialogue on digital and emerging technologies; c) Advise senior UN leadership on key technology trends so as to guide the strategic approach taken by the Organization on such issues; d) Strengthen system-wide coordination within and across

the UN system on digital and emerging technologies; and e) Support the follow-up and [implementation of the Global Digital Compact](#). (ODET press release of 1 January 2025)

There is no doubt that much of this activity overlaps with the evolving role of the IGF. As the IGF 2024 messages put it:

“The IGF remains a pivotal agenda-setting platform, where critical issues like AI, cybersecurity, and digital inclusion are addressed, often before they gain traction in intergovernmental processes. Its agenda-setting power must deliver actionable outcomes to close gaps in connectivity, skills, and infrastructure, especially in developing countries and promote human-centric, rights-based digital governance.”

The Global Digital Compact recognises the role of the IGF “the primary multi-stakeholder platform for discussion of Internet governance issues” (Paragraph 28) and includes commitments to: (a) Promote an open, global, interoperable and reliable Internet and take concrete steps to maintain a safe, secure and enabling online environment for all and (b) Support the Internet Governance Forum, including through continued efforts to increase diverse participation from Governments and other stakeholders from developing countries and the provision of voluntary funding also to this end (SDGs 9 and 10) and (c) Promote international cooperation among all stakeholders to prevent, identify and address risks of fragmentation of the Internet in a timely manner (Paragraph 29).

The Compact also mentions the WSIS and in paragraph 68 says:

“ We will build on the processes and forums emanating from the World Summit on the Information Society, in particular the Internet Governance Forum and its national and regional initiatives, as well as the WSIS Forum, to advance implementation of this Compact. We look forward to the WSIS+20 review in 2025 and invite it to identify how these processes and forums can support the contribution of all stakeholders to implementation of the Compact.” This is followed by recognition of the work of the UN agencies involved in WSIS implementation and follow up as well as that of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. It also invites the CSTD to consider how it can contribute to GDC follow-up. It also requests the UN Secretary General to “ to provide a Compact implementation map for the consideration of Governments and other stakeholders that reflects the contributions of the United Nations system and other relevant stakeholders and to reflect this in the report of the Secretary-General on progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels ahead of the WSIS+20 review.” (Paragraph 71)

What the GDC **does not include** is also important and points to issues this proposed work area should explore:

Firstly, it does not explicitly recognise that the work of the WSIS needs to continue and that its continuation and strengthening it is a priority for the majority of countries in the global South who have been working with the WSIS framework for the last 20 years.

Secondly, even though it affirms the IGF **it does not recognise that the IGF has evolved into a forum that addresses far more than just “internet” governance issues**. It has over the years produced collaborative work on topics ranging from collaboration to build capacity in cybersecurity to inclusion of women in the digital economy to tackling the challenges posed to digitalisation by climate change.

Its format has also evolved to include intersessional work of which the outcomes are relevant to both the GDC and the WSIS, including national and regional IGFs. The latter are also recognised by the GDC. But the GDC does not recognise other IGF intersessional modalities.

How can these processes be integrated? What does it involve? What can the IGF do? How can the IGF, including its intersessional components, the WSIS implementation agencies, and ODET collaborate effectively? What actions should be undertaken, and what processes should change in order to, as pointed out by different actors in the [‘Cross-community statement from civil society, the private sector and the technical community on WSIS, the IGF and the GDC’](#):

- a) Strengthen rather than duplicate existing mechanisms and processes that strive to achieve the WSIS vision and goals (in both the Geneva Declaration/Plan of Action and the Tunis Agenda) as well as the SDGs and the objectives in the GDC;
- b) Use the GDC to update and complement the WSIS vision by integrating GDC implementation into existing processes, specifically the next phase of the WSIS, by using the WSIS review to make concrete recommendations on how this integration and non-duplication can be achieved;
- c) Affirm the need to continue to commit to the multistakeholder approach and evolve it in such a manner that it strengthens collaboration between stakeholders as well as their collective and stakeholder-specific accountability for promoting and protecting human rights and commitment to the SDGs, and the WSIS and GDC principles; and
- d) Strengthen rather than duplicate existing mechanisms and processes that strive to achieve the SDGs and the WSIS vision;
- e) Recognise that the IGF has evolved into the world’s foremost and most inclusive forum for dialogue on not only the internet, but also broader digital governance, and establish it as a permanent forum and ensure that it has the resources needed to strengthen its capacity and reach. This has to include suggestions on how the GDC can utilise and support the IGF, and how the IGF can relate to and collaborate with the multiple initiatives being undertaken by the GDC.

Some of these points are addressed in part in the [WG-strategy’s “Vision” document](#) but developing concrete SHORT (for the Norway IGF) and medium and long term proposals is necessary.

Our proposal is that the IGF MAG establishes a **group**, resourced with a consultant that can assist with research, documentation and coordination, to come up with concrete proposals that address these goals and to serve as a **liaison between the IGF, the WSIS and the GDC and the institutions involved in these (Action line facilitators, the CSTD, UNGIS and ODET).**

2. Proposal on a Best Practice Forum (possibly under the banner of the BPF on cybersecurity) on Securing Access to the Internet and Protect Core Internet Resources in Contexts of Conflict

The IGF2024 Thematic Main Session on the IGF theme “Enhancing the digital contribution to peace, development, and sustainability” took place on 17 December with the title ‘Protecting Internet infrastructure and general access during times of crisis and conflict.’

The outcome of this session pointed unambiguously to the need for work to be done to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the multistakeholder internet community - and the institutions that are part of it - with regard to securing and protecting core internet resources (also referred to as the public core of the internet) and access to the internet for civilians in context of crisis and conflict.

We include the session outcomes below as we believe this will be a useful starting point for this BPF. This could be a new BPF, or, it could be taken up by the existing BPF on Cybersecurity. Valeria Betancourt volunteers to be the MAG member responsible for leading this BPF.

Essentially this BPF will look at what the issues are, what the needs are, and what are the good practices that can be undertaken to achieve the objective of securing access and critical internet resources.

Key partners to build into this process will be NROs, RIRs, ICANN, ISOC, humanitarian relief institutions in the UN and outside of it, the ITU and irrelevant civil society and private sector institutions. The Dutch Government which first introduced the notion of the norm to protect the public core is also a key player, as is the University of Leiden who is in the process of publishing a new volume on the issue.

The session concluded that:

- Critical infrastructure includes technical infrastructure for internet access and telecommunications connectivity. There is an important role for the ITU in disaster relief and facilitating the repair and rebuild of damaged infrastructure. Technical bodies responsible for internet governance must remain neutral in order to function effectively and be free from sanctions and protected from legal and extra-legal attacks.
- Efforts must be taken at all major forums and institutions responsible for maintenance of international peace and security to ensure open and secure access to telecommunications infrastructure and protection of the public core. This includes the UN Security Council, which could incorporate attention to telecommunications in the conflicts it monitors, as well as peace and justice institutions, who can assist in efforts to seek accountability for disruptions that impact fundamental rights and security.
- All stakeholders must collaborate to ensure protection of essential telecommunications and internet infrastructure, even in times of crisis. Speakers proposed new working groups to take forward Global Digital Compact guidance that states refrain from internet shutdowns, and the creation or enhancement of IGF Best Practice Forums to look at the roles/responsibilities of the multistakeholder community in ensuring the protection of the public core/access in times of conflict and crisis.
- The primary responsibility for preserving internet and telecommunications connectivity in times of crisis and conflict lies with the parties to the conflict themselves, who shall refrain from abusing civilian infrastructure for military purposes, or targeting it outside of the strict boundaries set by the laws of armed conflict and international humanitarian law.
- They should refrain from weaponizing or withholding access to telecommunications equipment, fuel, and repair parts -- which have direct links to economic development.

- Displaced persons suffering calamities and conflicts are increasingly asked to engage with digital services to access assistance, including essential foods, medicines, and services, underlining the importance of connectivity even in dire conditions.

3. Proposal on including a government liaison function/role within the IGF Secretariat

The IGF has demonstrated how effective it can be in reaching specific constituencies by having a dedicated person who plays a primary role in liaising with these groups. The IGF NRI and IGF Parliamentary Track are excellent examples of this.

However, when it comes to dealing with governments there is, in our view, a gap. This is of course not intentional, and the Secretariat as well as UN DESA work hard to include governments in the IGF's process. This is done through, among other means:

- Inclusion of governmental representatives in on the MAG
- Close collaboration with the host country government
- High-level sessions at the annual event.
- The IGF Leadership Panel which is intended to communicate IGF outcomes to UN member states

The gap we have identified is illustrated by, for example:

- Relative ignorance among many governments of the IGF and how they can participate. This is particularly evident in ministries and departments that do not deal with digital issues.
- Difficulty and delays in inviting representatives and speakers from governments to the annual event, particularly but not only, the high level sessions.
- Relatively few inputs from governments, in the global South specifically, on IGF content and themes
- The view held by some governments that the IGF has an embedded agenda that minimises the role of governments in internet-related public policy and that the “multistakeholder approach” that characterises the IGF is dominated by civil society and / or the private sector.
- Lack of awareness of IGF messages
- Lack of awareness of and participation in IGF BPFs, PNs and Dynamic Coalitions even when these produce outputs that can be of direct use to national governments

What do we propose?

Either a new or existing (ideally new) person working in the Secretariat as a liaison person to reach out to and interact with governments with regard to:

- Access to IGF messages and other outcomes that emerged from the 2024 IGF
- Participation in the Norway IGF including development of the agenda, participation in the high-level track, and submission of session proposals
- IGF intersessional work
- The IGF's role in WSIS and GDC implementation, follow up and review