

The Global Digital Compact: Lessons Learned from the Submissions of the Multistakeholder Internet Community

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Forward by auDA

In 2024, the United Nations (UN) is planning to host the Summit of the Future, an event inspired by the UN Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda report, which is intended to reshape and modernise the world's multilateral system to address the challenges of 2030 and beyond.

As part of the Summit, governments are also negotiating a Global Digital Compact (GDC), an initiative that is expected to "outline shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all."¹

Through his Envoy on Technology, the UN Secretary-General launched a consultation in 2022 seeking written inputs on what a GDC could include. The Envoy on Technology received 178 written inputs by April 2023 (one was duplicative). Around the same time, in May 2023, the UN Secretary-General released a policy brief setting out his thoughts on the shape the GDC should take.

Alongside this process, member states, led by co-facilitators Sweden and Rwanda, undertook a process of stakeholder and member state dialogues. These 'deep dives' were held to explore the proposed themes for the GDC. The co-facilitators' findings were summarised in a three-page letter released in September 2023.

As a principled supporter of multi-stakeholder internet governance, auDA thought that it would be to the benefit of the Internet's multistakeholder community to conduct a high level analysis and extract any data points that would facilitate all stakeholders in considering how to move forward the discussions on Internet governance. Diverse organisations and individuals from all over the world took the time to share their views. They should be part of the considerations shaping the GDC.

To address this, the .au Domain Administration (auDA) commissioned noted internet governance expert Dr Konstantinos Komaitis to review and summarise the key arguments of the 178 submissions, and to make the information available in an accessible form. A report summarising his key findings, and a matrix setting out the views of all 178 submissions, are the output of this work.

auDA is pleased to have supported this work. We hope those interested in the development of the GDC find both the summary report and the accessible matrix of all the views shared to be of value.

auDA is committed to ongoing contribution to the global discussion around multi-stakeholder internet governance. You can find this report and more information about our work at <https://www.auda.org.au/internet-governance>.

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by Konstantinos Komaitis¹

Introduction

In September 2020, following the political declaration adopted as part of the United Nations' 75th anniversary, UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, released a report entitled "Our Common Agenda", where he recommended a Global Digital Compact (GDC) to be agreed at the Summit for the Future, scheduled to take place in September 2024.

The GDC is meant to "outline shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all".² Additionally, the report recommended some issues the GDC could cover, specifically around digital connectivity, how to avoid Internet fragmentation, how best to empower people over the use of their data, the application of human rights online, the regulation of Artificial Intelligence (AI), what a digital commons space should look like and, finally, how best to promote a trustworthy Internet through the introduction of accountability criteria for misleading content.

Unlike other processes within the UN system, the conception of the idea and the instruction for a GDC did not come from Member States. Although the UN's member states will participate, it is the Office of the Secretary General that is behind the construction of this process. To this end, an Envoy on Technology has been set up and is tasked with coordinating the implementation of the Secretary General's vision as well as advancing "work towards the Global Digital Compact [...] in close consultation with Member States, the technology industry, private companies, civil society and other stakeholders".³

¹ Konstantinos Komaitis has more than 20 years of experience in Internet governance and policy, having held positions in academic institutions and non-for-profit organizations. He is currently a non-resident fellow at the Digital Forensics Research Lab (FRLab) at the Democracy and Technology Initiative at the Atlantic Council; he is also a senior researcher and non-resident fellow at the Lisbon Council.

² "Our Common Agenda", Report of the Secretary General, https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf

³ <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/>

The permanent representatives of Rwanda and Sweden to the UN were originally appointed to co-facilitate the intergovernmental process of the GDC. In October 2023, it was confirmed that for 2024 and leading up to the Summit for the Future, the permanent representative of Sweden would continue as one of the facilitators and would be joined by the permanent representative of Zambia.

Between March to June 2023, the co-facilitators organized a series of deep dive sessions⁴ based on the thematic areas identified by the Secretary General in his “Our Common Agenda” report. Additionally, between June 2022 to April 2023, stakeholders from around the world were asked to submit comments on the GDC. On September 1st, 2023, the co-facilitators produced a two-page document seeking to provide an account of the stakeholders’ views.

This report provides a high level analysis of stakeholder submissions in response to the Office of the Secretary General’s call for input in the context of the GDC. It starts by briefly outlining the Secretary General’s Policy Paper and the co-facilitators’ Issues Paper, followed by some key data and reflection points. This report includes a [GDC submission summary matrix](#), and should also be read in conjunction with the Secretary’s General Policy Paper and the co-facilitators Issues’ Paper.

The Two Papers

As part of the GDC process, both the Office of the Secretary General and the co-facilitators released two papers – a Policy Brief and an Issues Paper, respectively.

a. Secretary General’s Policy Brief⁵

The Secretary General’s policy brief on the GDC, published in May 2023 and submitted as an input to the Summit for the Future, starts from the premise that there are rising levels of inequality among state actors, which create “a massive governance gap” on connectivity, data and innovation. The GDC process is meant to help address this governance gap.

According to the brief, the aim of the GDC is to “articulate a shared vision of an open, secure and human-centered digital future that rests on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda”. To this end, the GDC should seek to do the following:

- “Advance multistakeholder cooperation”;
- Articulate “shared principles and objectives and identify concrete actions for their implementation”;

⁴ <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact/intergovernmental-process>

⁵ “Our Common Agenda – Policy Brief 5: A Global Digital Compact”, <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-gobal-digi-compact-en.pdf>

- Work towards establishing “a global framework for bringing together and leveraging existing digital cooperation processes to support dialogue and collaboration among regional, national, industry and expert organizations and platforms”; and
- “Facilitate new governance arrangements where needed”.

Regarding the process for the GDC, the policy brief underscores that “the Compact would be initiated and led by Member States with full participation of other stakeholders, responsible for its implementation. “I share the view of the Advisory Board that while a global framework should be driven by Member States, the involvement of the private sector and civil society is essential”, the UN Secretary General states in the policy brief.

According to the UN Secretary General’s vision, the monitoring and review of the GDC’s implementation will be vested in the Digital Cooperation Forum (DCF), a new forum “to support tripartite engagement and follow up on the implementation of the Compact”. The DCF would provide coordination across the multiple Internet governance multistakeholder processes and “would accommodate existing forums and initiatives in a hub-and-spoke arrangement”, while helping to “identify gaps where multistakeholder action is required”. The idea is that “existing forums and initiatives [...] would support the translation of the Compact objectives into practical action within their respective areas of expertise”.

The policy brief concludes by stressing the pressing need for digital cooperation and with a call for action by the United Nations.

b. Co-Facilitators Issues Paper⁶

As the first co-facilitators to the GDC, Sweden and Rwanda were tasked with producing an issues paper based on the deep dives and the consultation submissions. Sweden and Rwanda issued a two-page paper that sought to capture the spirit of the “genuinely global conversation [that] is underway”.

Specifically, the issues’ paper highlighted the following:

- How “an inclusive Global Digital Compact could help mobilize efforts to connect the remaining 2.7 billion people without Internet access” and the additional need to foster digital skills and literacy.
- How important it is to preserve “an open, free and globally accessible Internet”, through “interoperable Internet standards and protocols”.
- How best the GDC could “articulate principles to guide regional and national approaches to data protection and governance”, including “the principle that people should have control over how their data is collected, processed and stored”.

⁶ <https://www.un.org/pga/77/2023/09/01/letter-from-the-president-of-the-general-assembly-global-digital-compact-co-facilitators-letter-issues-paper/>

- How the GDC could be used “to promote digital trust and security and to address disinformation, hate speech and other harmful online content”, by advancing “transparent and responsible design and application, including a human rights-based approach, of digital technologies by technology developers and digital platforms”.
- How Artificial Intelligence (AI) is “emerging as another key issue for a GDC” and the need to understand and address its potential risks through a “human-centric approach as well as [through] transparent and equitable risk-based approaches to the development, use and governance of AI”.
- How the GDC provides an opportunity to also address issues of digital gender divides and sustainability, including green technologies.

Although these high-level points reflect the views of the different stakeholders, they don't seem to do justice to some specific issues stakeholders identified in their submissions. They also do not reveal the diversity, both geographical and cultural, of the stakeholders and fail to map the levels of their participation. The aim of this report is to help address some of these gaps.

GDC Submission Data Points and Key Takeaways

The Global Digital Compact is a newly formed space that will foster a global conversation about the way the Internet should be governed and how core Internet-related issues should be addressed. The GDC is not unique in the sense that such conversations have been taking place for years, and continue to do so, in international, regional and national fora. It is important, therefore, that the GDC is not seen as a process more important than any of the other existing process; but it can be used as an additional way to learn some lessons and do some more listening regarding the concerns of the multistakeholder community.

Key questions include: What is the breakdown of the stakeholders' submissions? Which geographical areas do they represent? What are the core issues that each stakeholder was concerned? How did each region perform? What are the key takeaways that emerge from the submissions? This report attempts to consider these and shed some further light on how stakeholders view this process. The key points that emerged under each thematic area are listed at Annex 1. As the GDC enters its next phase of negotiations in early 2024, such data points can prove useful for all interested parties.

a) Data Points

The Office of the UN Secretary General received a total of 178 submissions, out of which one was duplicative. A range of stakeholders participated in the process, from individual governments and government groups (G77+China, the European Union), to private sector entities, technical expert communities and organizations, international multilateral and non-governmental organizations, think-tanks and academics and civil society organizations, including groups representing minorities and marginalized communities (e.g., indigenous communities).

An interesting point regarding stakeholder engagement was the number of multistakeholder initiatives from across the world that decided to come together for this process and made collective submissions, including from Africa, South America and the Asia-Pacific region. In fact, these multistakeholder submissions were the majority, with submissions from academic institutions and think-tanks following close and civil society groups coming third. Collectively, these three groups represent more than half of the submissions received. (Chart I)

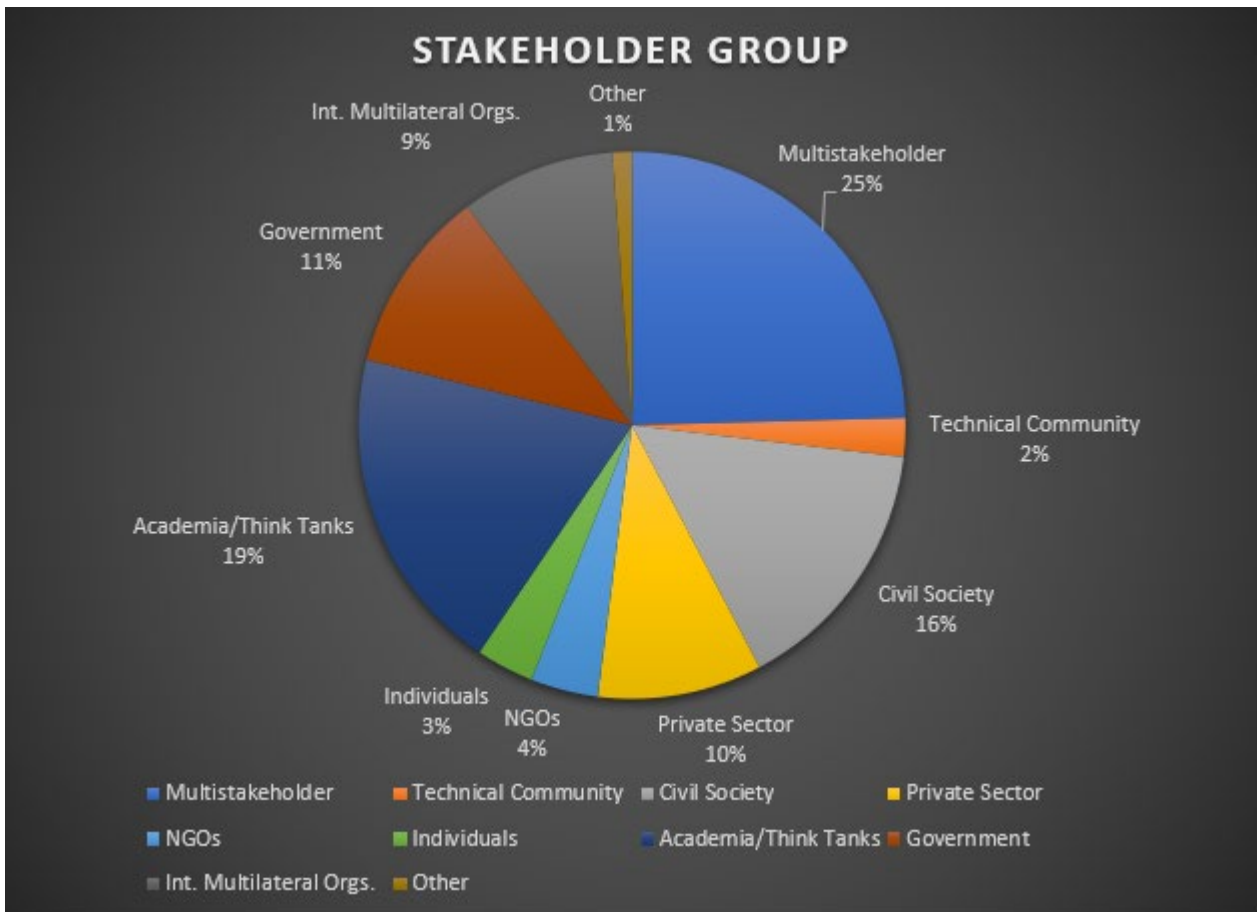


Chart I

When it comes to the multistakeholder submissions, in particular, it is important to note that they reflect global, regional and local initiatives. These initiatives demonstrate the willingness of stakeholders to come together and collaborate in the GDC process; it also points to how accustomed stakeholders have become in setting up multistakeholder processes and their confidence in using them to produce recommendations based on collective thinking. The inclination to do this should be attributed, at least to a degree, to the past twenty years of multistakeholder Internet governance. Such initiatives would not necessarily happen ten years ago and, they would certainly not happen twenty years ago. (Chart II)

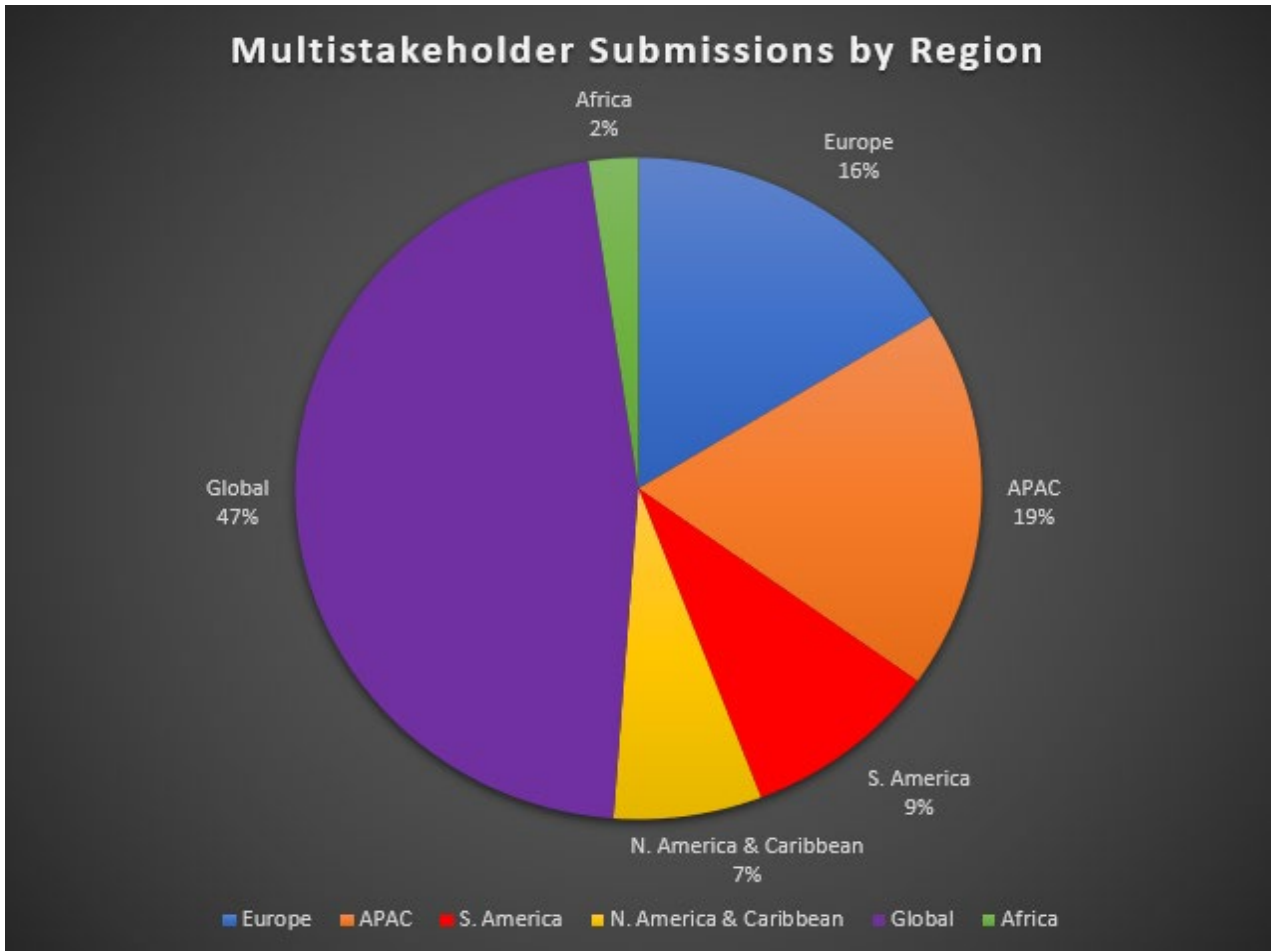


Chart II

When it comes to the geographical representation of stakeholders, submissions came from all regions, including from entities that are not tied to any specific region but they have a global membership and/or a global footprint. Of note, is the low number of submissions from countries in the so-called global south, which are significantly disproportionate compared to the ones that came from the northern hemisphere. (Chart III)

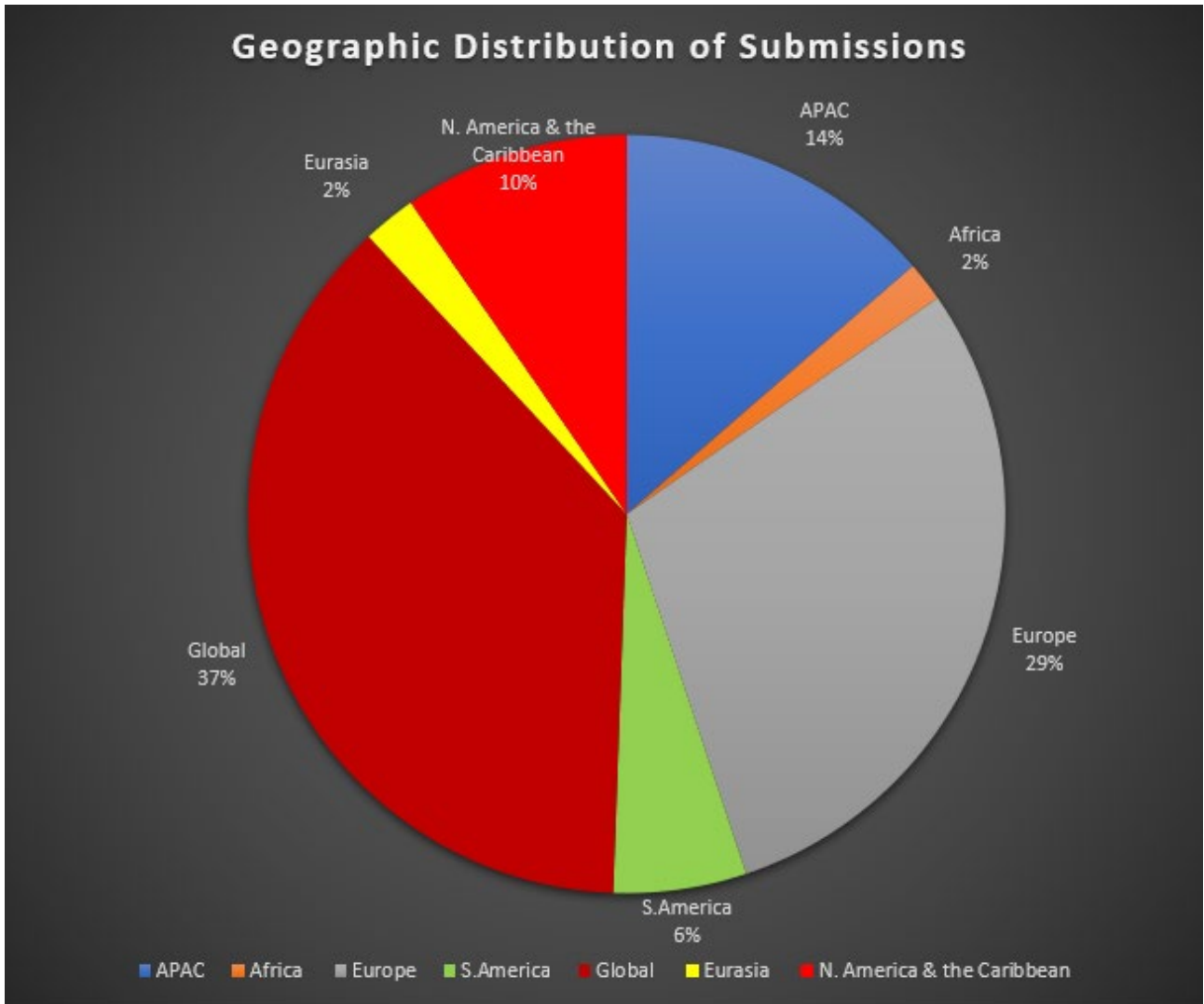


Chart III

Academic institutions and think tanks also showed great interest in the GDC process with submissions from entities from around the world. European institutions have been leading this group by a rather significant majority. (Chart IV)

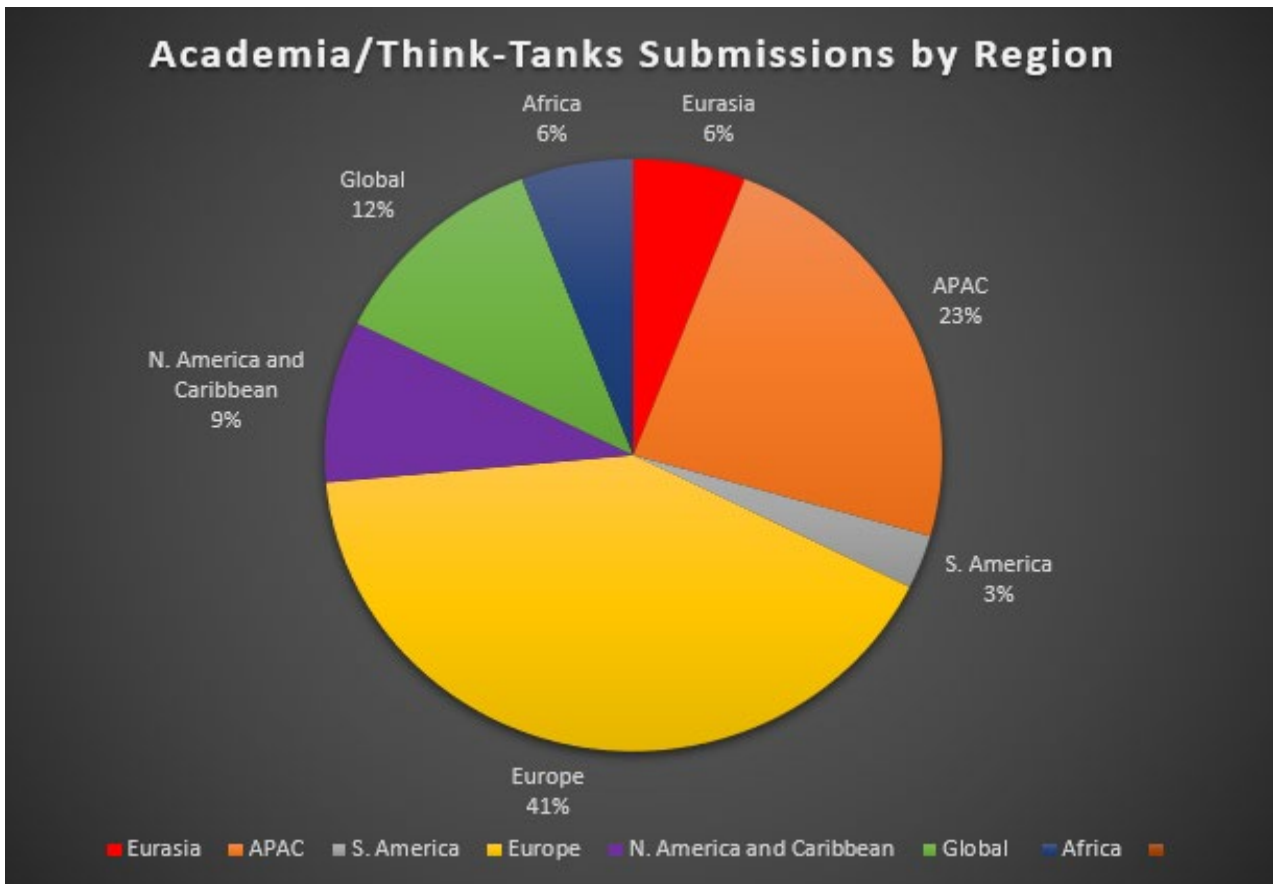


Chart IV

Civil society also participated in the GDC, with the majority of comments coming from organizations that have a global footprint. At a local level, civil society organizations from all regions bar Africa made submissions. Not surprisingly, the majority (16 out of the 27 submissions) focused their submissions on human rights. (Chart V)

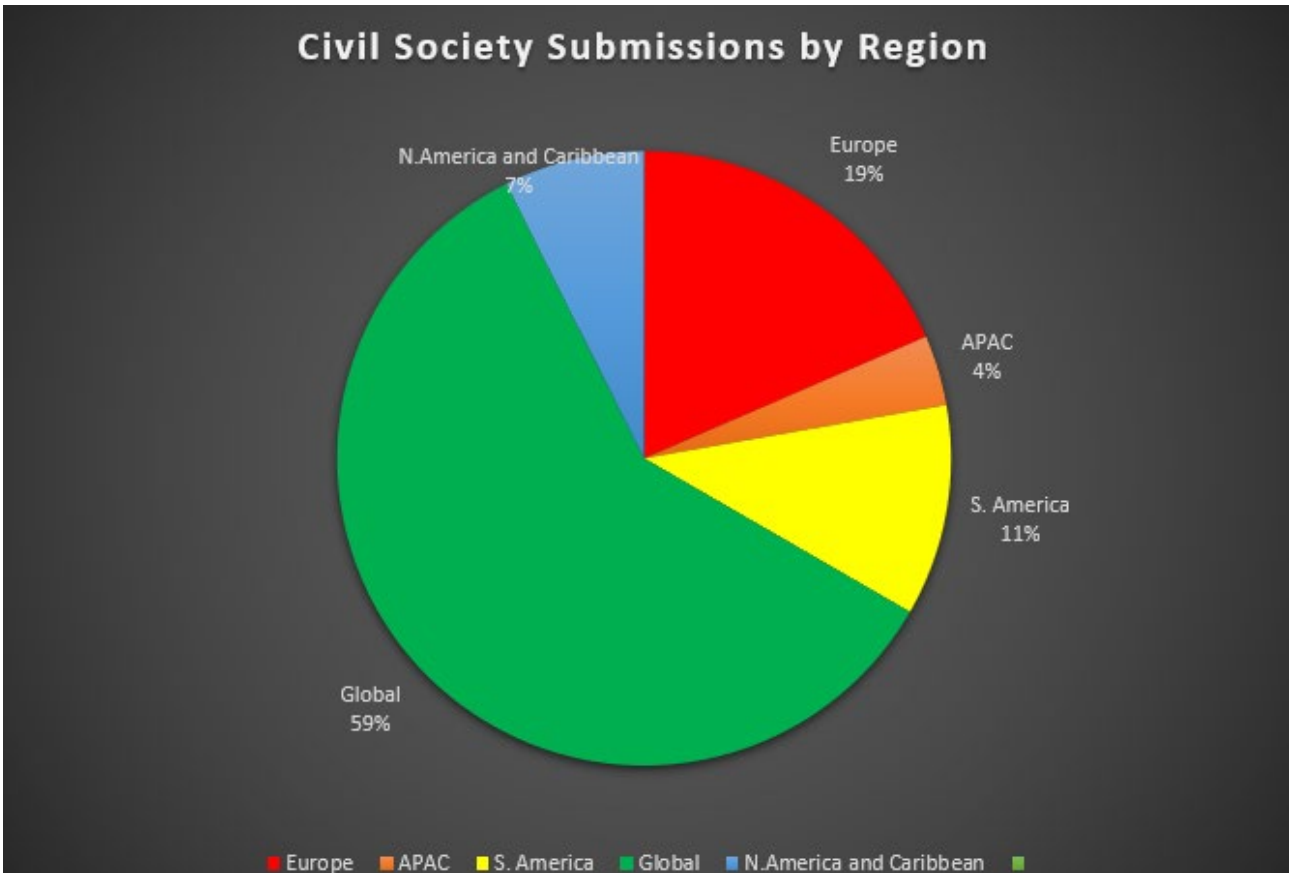


Chart V

Governments also showed interest in the GDC process. Individual submissions came from governments from all continents, bar Africa. However, there were submissions by government groups, like the G77+China group, where some African governments participate. Where the value is "global", it represents such groups. (Chart VI)

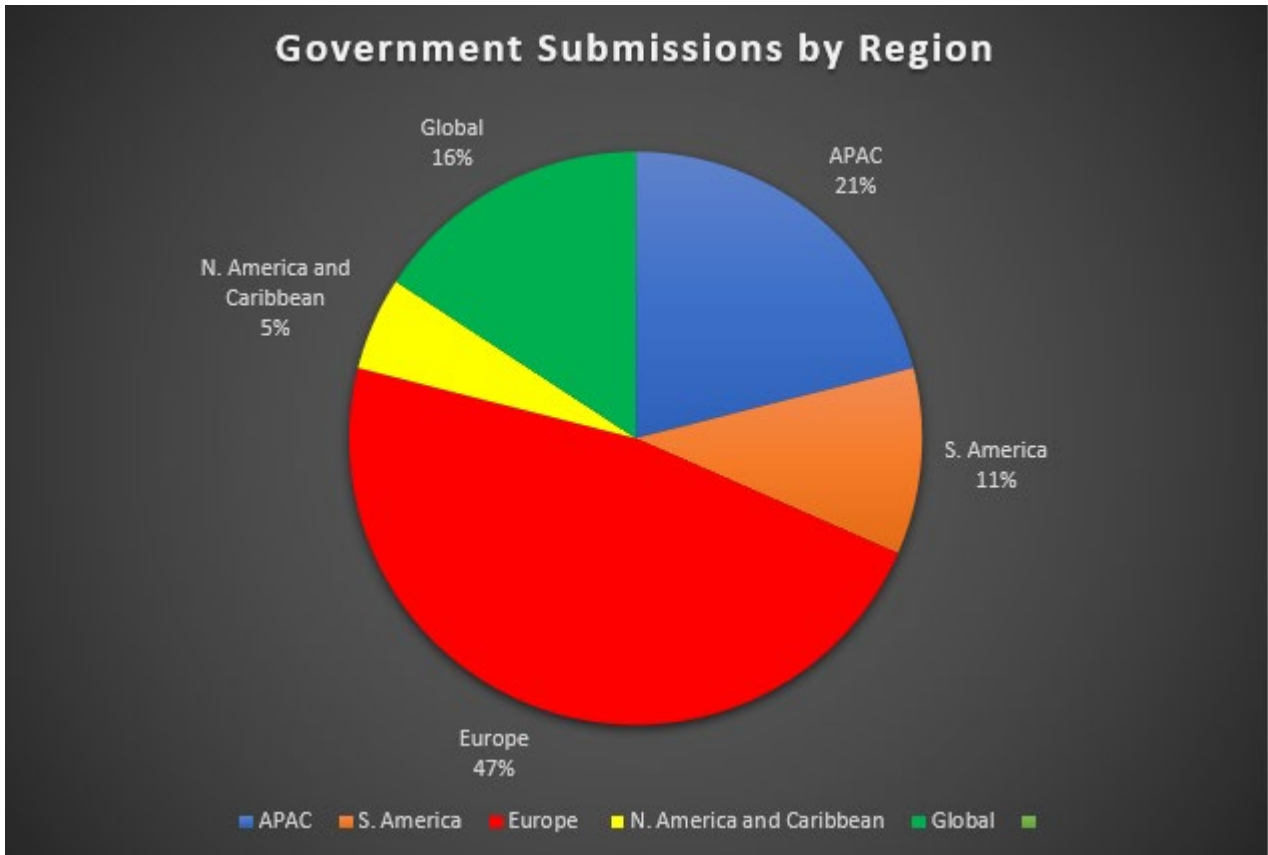


Chart VI

Finally, when it comes to the private sector, the majority of the submissions came from the North American region with zero submissions from Africa and South America. (Chart VII)

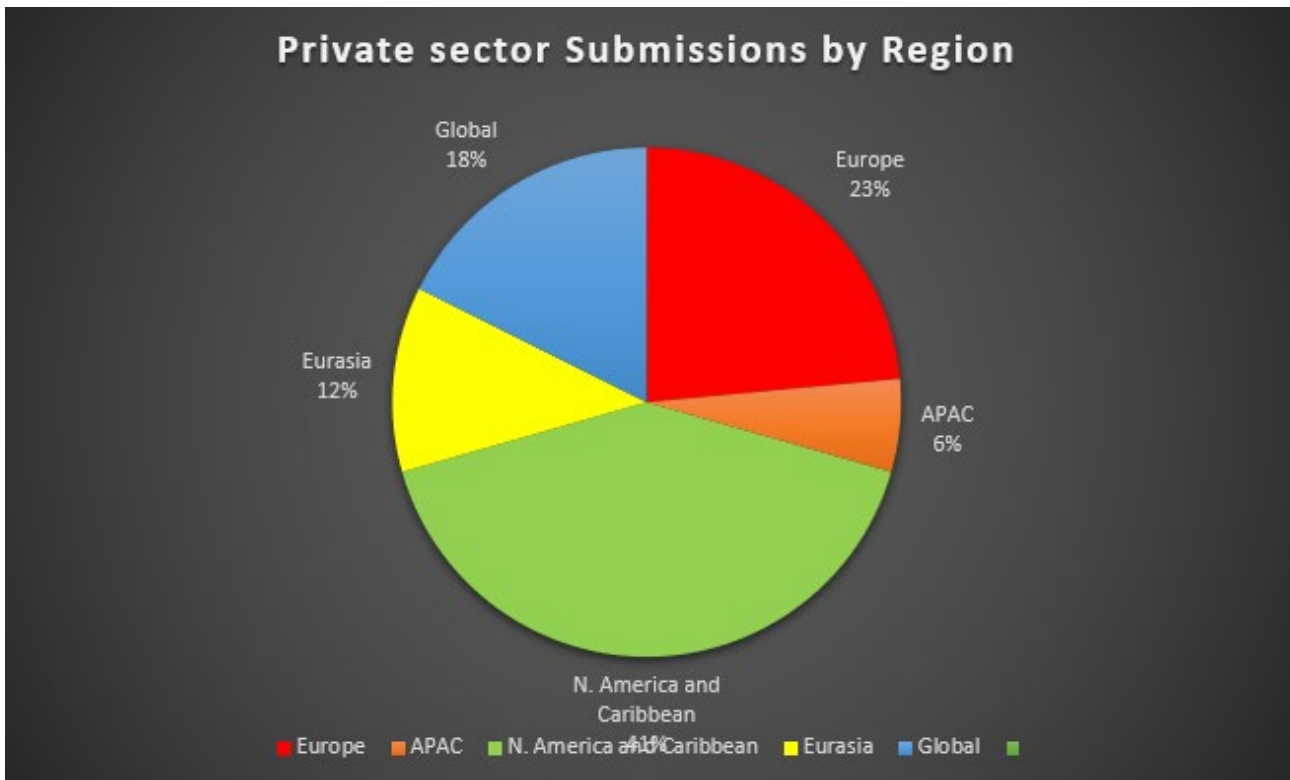


Chart VII

These charts provide some useful information as we start to think about the future of multistakeholder Internet governance and demonstrate the existing interest amongst stakeholders from across the world to discuss issues pertaining to the Internet. For instance, there is a great interest among research institutions and the academic community in Internet governance issues and a lot of work is taking place with regards to the issues identified in the GDC. The research community, though recognized as a stakeholder in the context of Internet governance from the WSIS Tunis Agenda, is not often as visible in other UN fora as it has been in this process.

Another thing that comes across from the submissions is the different interests that exist amongst stakeholders and the priority issues they have identified. For instance, of the 178 submissions only 25 addressed all the issues. The rest of the submissions focused on individual issues depending on where stakeholders felt they had something to say. This data point can help the GDC process put issues into perspective and help prioritize its focus areas. It can help the GDC become more effective. (Chart VIII)

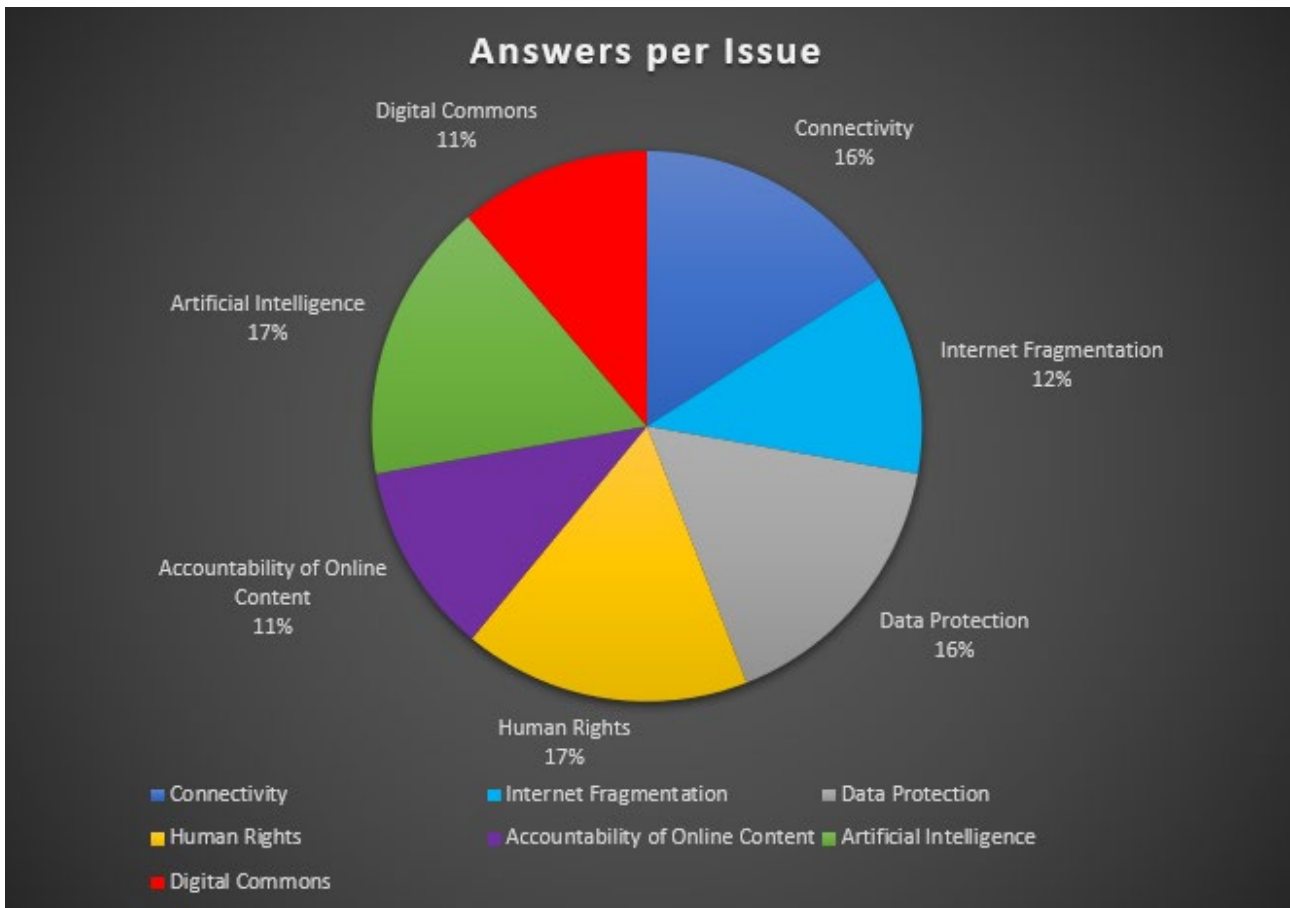


Chart VIII

b) Key Takeaways

❖ No need for new processes

The first takeaway is that there is no support for a new process. Twenty-six (26) submissions made explicit reference to the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the need for the GDC to not duplicate it or end up creating new mechanisms that they could displace it. This is also something that the co-facilitators flagged in their report: “There is broad consensus that the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) plays – and should continue to play – a key role in promoting the global and interoperable nature and governance of the Internet”.⁷ In this context, the idea for a Digital Cooperation Forum (DCF), as originally promoted in the Policy brief the Office of the Secretary General circulated, does not have any support from the broader multistakeholder community. The submissions send a clear message that the existing processes – particularly

⁷ <https://www.un.org/pga/77/wp-content/uploads/sites/105/2023/09/Global-Digital-Compact-Issues-paper-September-1-2023.pdf>

the Internet Governance Forum – should continue being the foundation for addressing issues of Internet governance. As the co-facilitators Issues Paper states: “[...] a GDC should not duplicate existing forums and processes”.⁸

❖ Commitment to multistakeholder governance

Another important takeaway is the Internet community’s strong commitment to the multistakeholder governance model for the Internet. In general, the overwhelming majority of the submissions do not want to see a top down, United Nations’ state driven Internet governance and identify inclusivity as key to the way the GDC should seek to address its thematic areas. Specifically, 51 submissions make clear reference to the word “multistakeholder” by stressing the need for the GDC to uphold it and preserve it. Although submissions from around the world included their commitment to the multistakeholder model, it was mainly the submissions from Europe and the North America and the Caribbean region that used it as an umbrella in addressing the issues identified in the GDC.

Another interesting point is how the need for multistakeholder governance is seen horizontally. According to the submissions, the common theme across all the thematic areas is stressing how important inclusive participation is to help address the complexity of the issues (see Annex I). This is a significant detail that points to how the multistakeholder model is now ingrained in the DNA of Internet governance.

❖ Participation from the Global South continues to be low

One of the things the data confirms, is that more work needs to be done to bring in countries from Africa, South America and, in general, the global south into the Internet governance discussions. As the Internet evolves, new technologies are added to its architecture and new processes are being created; as such, ensuring the participation of such countries should become a priority. Countries in the global south play a pivotal role in shaping the Internet, especially if one considers that this is where the next wave of users and innovation is coming from. Real participation from stakeholders from countries that historically have not been able to participate as much as other countries is going to be crucial especially when it comes to reinforcing the multistakeholder model of Internet governance. Besides the overarching concerns over AI governance, data protection and connectivity, stakeholders from Africa and South America highlighted the need for inclusion, the development of digital skills and the retreat from old patterns of paternalism.

❖ Thinking of the technical infrastructure

Experts from the Internet’s technical community commented on the need for the coordination of the Internet’s technical infrastructure to continue to work under the current bottom-up arrangement, including the tasks performed by entities like the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) and the

⁸ Id.

Regional Internet Registries (RIRs). Emphasis was placed on the need to sustain the independence of the operations of the administration of unique identifiers and the development of open standards from any governmental and non-governmental top-down policies.

❖ Chinese stakeholders' high interest

The APAC region provides a new, interesting data point. Of the 24 in total submissions that came from the region, 6 were from entities located or operating in China. That's ¼ of the submissions and it is a high number, especially for a region as big as the Asia-Pacific. Some of these submissions were from think-tanks, some were from industry associations and there was also a submission from China's government. In terms of messaging, the submissions are pretty consistent: emphasis on how the Internet and emerging technologies can facilitate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a message that China has also been promoting through its own Belt and Road Initiative; an underlying narrative about how processes, like the GDC, should become vehicles for mechanisms that aim at standardization, which is consistent with China's overall position about the role the UN should play in the governance of the Internet; and, placing the role of governments at the heart of how the Internet is managed, which is aligned with its own vision of cyber-sovereignty.

❖ WSIS Action Lines⁹

One of the questions stakeholders will be required to answer relates to the relevance between the GDC thematic areas and the WSIS Actions Lines. The WSIS Action Lines talk about the need for communication infrastructure, for inclusiveness, diversity, human rights, capacity building, multistakeholder governance, security, cultural diversity and ethics, amongst others. Similarly, the GDC submissions reflect the same issues; there is consensus amongst stakeholders about the need for connectivity, the application of human rights and a commitment to multistakeholder governance. AI and content moderation issues may not have been present twenty years ago; however, one could argue that the language in the WSIS Action Lines provides the scope and framework to cover such new and emerging issues.

Conclusion

When looking at the information above and thinking about the GDC process, it is important to bear in mind that the submissions affirm the need for the multistakeholder model of governance to continue and they give a directive to the United Nations to identify ways to ensure that different voices are included in this process. They state that the broader Internet community is content with processes, like the IGF, but they also want it strengthened. This can become a clear 'ask' for the GDC process to instigate and which the NetMundial+10 process in April 2024, the WSIS Forum in May 2024 and the IGF later that year could continue.

⁹ <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/poa.html>

It is important that the Office of the Secretary General, the Envoy on Technology and Member States pay attention to what the stakeholders are asking and preserve the long standing multistakeholder model and, subsequently, the IGF, as the process that has been supporting it over the past 20 years.

Annex I

Key points emerging from the thematic areas

⇒ Connectivity

- ❖ Need to address digital inequality
- ❖ Need for meaningful connectivity which is universal
- ❖ Need for infrastructure to be resilient, secure, accessible and affordable
- ❖ Need for alternative models for connectivity, whether community-based or through public-private partnerships
- ❖ Need for multilingualism and education
- ❖ Need to stop Internet shutdowns
- ❖ Need for multistakeholder participation

⇒ Avoiding Internet Fragmentation

- ❖ Need to avoid excessive government intervention
- ❖ Need for the multistakeholder model to be preserved
- ❖ Need to preserve the interoperability of open standards
- ❖ Need to facilitate cross border data flows
- ❖ Need to stop Internet shutdowns
- ❖ Need for collaboration
- ❖ Notions of sovereignty contribute to a fragmented internet

⇒ Data Protection

- ❖ Importance of right to privacy
- ❖ Need for data protection and privacy regulations
- ❖ Need for the data to be able and travel across borders
- ❖ Need for a trust in the handling of personal data. This includes security, especially through upholding encryption
- ❖ Need for a data governance mechanism that is based on multistakeholder collaboration and focuses on accountability and transparency

⇒ Applying Human Rights Online

- ❖ Need to apply human rights online the same way as offline

- ❖ Need to stop surveillance and, in particular, the use of spyware
- ❖ Human rights are important for development and for meeting the SDGs
- ❖ Need for multistakeholder collaboration
- ❖ Need to put in place robust accountability and transparency mechanisms to ensure the application of human rights
- ❖ Need for human rights assessment with regards to company and government practices

⇒ Accountability for Online Content

- ❖ Need for transparency in content moderation
- ❖ Need for a human rights-based approach
- ❖ Need for the content moderation processes to be transparent
- ❖ Need for multistakeholder dialogue
- ❖ Need for education regarding mis- and dis-information
- ❖ Need for evidence-based content moderation

⇒ Regulating Artificial Intelligence (AI)

- ❖ Need for multistakeholder approach in AI governance
- ❖ Need for ethical and human rights-based approach to AI
- ❖ Need for transparency in the creation, deployment and use of AI.
- ❖ Need for trustworthy AI technologies
- ❖ Need for a risk-based approach to AI

⇒ Digital Commons

- ❖ Need for open-source software and open access to knowledge
- ❖ Need for open digital infrastructure
- ❖ Need for multistakeholder frameworks for digital commons governance
- ❖ Need for education as part of digital commons
- ❖ Need for open data policies

