

Paving the Way into the Future of Cyberspace: The Global Digital Compact

24 February 2023

The aim of the lecture by UN Tech Envoy Amandeep Singh Gill was to introduce the Global Digital Compact (GDC) to the interested public and invited experts, and to engage in an exchange on what the GDC could look like and how the digital future could be shaped. The event was organized by the United Nations Association of Germany (DGVN), the Digital Society Institute (DSI) and the Internet Governance Forum Germany (IGF-D) and took place at the European School of Management and Technology Berlin (ESMT).

The event began with introductory remarks by Dr. Regine Grienberger, Ambassador, German Federal Foreign Office, and Heli Tiirmaa-Klaar, Director, Digital Society Institute. This was followed by Dr. Amandeep Singh Gill's presentation on the GDC, which was followed by a discussion with the audience moderated by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Kleinwächter, IGF-D. The event concluded with the presentation of the IGF-D Youth Statement on the GDC.

The idea for the Global Digital Compact was born against the following background Digitization is one of the priorities of the UN since Antonio Guterres took office in 2017. The GDC was presented in the UN Secretary General's 2021 report "Our Common Agenda". In July 2020, the UN Secretary-General published a "Roadmap for Digital Cooperation." The Roadmap included plans to strengthen institutional mechanisms, such as the creation of a new post of "UN Envoy for Technology", and to evolve the UN-based Internet Governance Forum (IGF), established by the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2005, into an IGF+. In 2022, a new IGF Leadership Panel was nominated and the Indian diplomat Amandeep Singh Gill was appointed as UN Tech Envoy. One of his priorities is now the preparation of the GDC. In December 2022, the various issues related to the GDC process were discussed in detail at the IGF in Addis Ababa. It remains to be seen how the GDC will be defined, maintained and promoted. This will be decided at the Summit for the Future in September 2024.

The future of the Internet is currently a highly contested and unstable asset. Different value and legal systems collide in cyberspace. Geopolitical tensions and conflicts are increasingly shifting to cyberspace, which is also being used as a space for warfare. Some emerging technologies are highly unpredictable, and digital technologies can be misused to fuel divisions within and between countries, increase insecurity, undermine human rights, and exacerbate inequality. In this context, the fragmentation of the Internet, privacy and the integrity of information on the Web are critical issues. Digital transformation therefore poses many risks and challenges.

However, digital transformation also offers hope by providing tremendous opportunities, including the potential to contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, digital transformation alone does not bring peace, as Dr. Regine Grienberger pointed out. Consequently, the question arose as to what the digital future should look like and how it can be shaped. There are

countless perspectives on this around the world, so dialogue is essential in order to have a shared vision of digital cooperation and our digital future.

In his lecture, Amandeep Singh Gill argued that the Internet and cyberspace are global commons. Global commons describe international, supranational, and global resource domains in which common pool resources are found. Such goods belong to no one, but at the same time to all. Typically, global commons are the Earth's shared natural resources, such as the high seas, the atmosphere, outer space, and Antarctica. In our digital age, however, the Internet and cyberspace can also be understood as "digital" commons.

Rules need to be established for the digital commons. The GDC is a new process that will outline "common principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all" and provide guidelines for the future of cyberspace and the management of this global commons. It will therefore play a key role in "paving the way for the future of cyberspace". Amandeep Singh Gill emphasized, however, that it is not enough to define principles; they must also be implemented. The aim of the GDC is to create a meaningful and effective instrument as a "new social contract for the digital age".

In order to achieve such an effective mechanism, it is particularly important to listen and facilitate an inclusive exchange, involving all stakeholders from all regions of the world. It is therefore particularly appropriate to establish such a process at the UN level: The UN guarantees universality, independence and neutrality. In addition, a great deal of competence and expertise is already gathered here. These aspects help to establish a "compass" for the journey into the digital future.

On the question of how to manage this digital global good, Amandeep Singh Gill highlights three aspects that need to be kept in mind:

- 1) **The missing element:** Millions of people still do not have access to the Internet. In addition, much of the information available is not meaningful to a large number of people. This is partly due to language barriers, but also to lack of equipment and misinformation. Thus, not all people are fully included in the digital world and do not have access to this global commons.
- 2) **Misuse:** Unfortunately, the Internet does not only create opportunities and progress. It can also be abused, for example to violate human rights, oppress people or commit crimes.
- 3) **Multistakeholderism:** Many different actors and their perspectives are relevant to shaping the digital future. The multistakeholder model of Internet governance is therefore essential to maintaining an open, resilient and secure Internet. This approach has emerged from the DNA of the Internet and allows it to thrive.

In the Q&A session that followed, a number of aspects were discussed in a lively exchange with the audience: These included how to further strengthen the multistakeholder model, and whether there are lessons to be learned from the climate change debate for the digital future. There are parallels in the fact that "prevention is better than cure" also applies to cyberspace, and that transdisciplinary exchange and the creation of a common basis for understanding are equally important. One idea inspired by this would be to formulate clear targets for action in the GDC report, such as the 1.5 degree target. At the same time,

it was noted that there are now many forums and initiatives on cyberspace, digital transformation and technology, and that the GDC should bring them together without duplicating them.

The responsibility of platforms with regard to disinformation was also discussed, as well as what measures would be useful tools in this context. It is clear that there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution; a combination of different instruments is needed, with a special focus on education. The role of private actors in future conflicts was also addressed, focusing on their relevance in relation to cyberspace and emerging technologies, as well as the speed at which new technologies are currently being developed.

As we discuss how to shape the future, it is crucial to listen to young people, an emerging generation of experts and users of the Internet. Young people are the most affected by these technologies; on the other hand, as "digital natives", this generation is innately equipped with expertise. The IGF supports young people to contribute to the debate on our digital future - two representatives of the IGF-D Youth presented their ideas on the GDC and handed over the statement to Amandeep Singh Gill. A special focus was put on the danger of internet shutdowns as well as the danger of assuming that data is neutral. There are many examples of AI acting in a discriminatory way. The IGF-D Youth representatives also emphasized the importance of including different perspectives in this debate, and that the dialogue should also take place in schools and universities, so that young people have the opportunity to have a say in shaping their future.

At the current stage of the process, everyone is invited by the UN Tech Envoy to provide [input on the GDC](#) by the end of March 2023.