

Governments must 'own' the Global Digital Compact

The adoption of the Global Digital Compact (GDC) marks a significant step towards the first-ever international framework dedicated to digitalisation and digital cooperation. This initiative, led by the international community, demonstrates a commitment to leveraging the transformative power of digital technologies to further the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. In this latest revision, United Nations (UN) Member States have clearly articulated the crucial responsibilities that digital companies bear in the realms of human rights, digital trust and safety, and information integrity. This emphasises the necessity for these companies to uphold transparency in their operations and processes.

The revised GDC (third revision) recognises the profound impact of digital technologies on the modern world and highlights their role in accelerating progress towards global goals. As custodians of global governance, UN Member States have the role to ensure that international norms and standards remain relevant amidst rapid technological changes worldwide. These standards are not only vital to ensure that digital transitions provide equal access and opportunities for all but also guide developers and the private sector in defining their responsibilities according to clearly established public rules and norms.

Specific articles 31(a)(b)(c) and 35(a)(b)(c) of the GDC emphasise the accountability of developers, the platform economy, and digital technology companies. These articles call on these entities to be responsible for the innovations they introduce into the digital space, ensuring that comprehensive risk assessments, transparency, and mitigation efforts are implemented to minimise any unintended consequences that their innovations may have on users and society at large. Despite these provisions, the draft lacks adequate emphasis on the public sector's essential role in setting the necessary standards, or "minimum thresholds," through regulatory approaches at various levels of public governance.

For example, before social media platforms should implement their privacy measures, individual data protection standards are clearly embodied in public law. Similarly, before Artificial Intelligence (AI) innovators can claim their products or services are "ethical," governments need to explicitly define what constitutes "responsible AI" to ensure compliance. Governments around the world must enhance their efforts and investment in digital policy-making. Although the private sector has traditionally led the charge in digital transformation, this dynamic needs to change.

Public administration of emerging technologies must pre-empt and set foundational rules ahead industry's self-regulation. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in his [policy brief](#) (2023), stresses that "industry self-regulation is not enough. We need to bring stakeholders together in a meaningful effort to consider the implications of emerging technologies." If digitalisation is to be viewed as a common public good, it is imperative that governments, as "duty-bearers," establish robust digital

regulations to ensure that everyone has the right to access, safety, and proportional protection in the digital environment.

To ensure that "multi-level" and "multistakeholder" digital governance adequately serves the public's needs, it is essential to acknowledge the critical function of governments. This can begin by explicitly recognising and articulating the importance of their role in laying the necessary regulatory foundations for the digital space within the GDC. By doing so, we can ensure that the co-governance framework is comprehensive, inclusive, and capable of addressing the complexities and challenges posed by the rapid advancement of digital technologies.