The Age of Digital Independence

A Summary of the UN Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation for Libraries

The digital age is changing the way libraries work – transforming their collections, facilitating sharing of works, allowing them to offer completely new types of services, and more. That is why the way the internet and digital technology are governed concerns libraries – the current and emerging rules and practices will affect their everyday work.

In 2018, the UN Secretary-General launched a High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation – the first UN digital governance initiative of this scale. Following extensive multistakeholder consultations, the Panel issued a report in June outlining key issues and setting out recommendations on how to leverage global cooperation towards a more inclusive digital future. Several messages and recommendations the report puts forward are directly relevant for libraries:

- *Meaningful access to digital infrastructure for marginalized populations is paramount.* Many libraries offer internet access services to their users, often in areas with low internet penetration or high costs of connectivity. This function is especially important in the light of the report's recommendation. Each library can reflect if there are any further initiatives it could take to help marginalised communities in its area get online.
- *An idea of pooling together digital public goods – digital technologies and content freely available for people to use or adapt – is proposed.* In the multistakeholder discussions that will follow, libraries can lend their expertise in information organisation and access, in order to ensure that tools are usable.
- *Education systems will need to adapt to prepare people for living and working in the digital age.* These changes include teaching information literacy and soft skills, wider use of informal instruction and enabling lifelong learning. Libraries can take a proactive role and expand their educational initiatives to include these recommendations. This would help them position themselves as major partners in the changing education systems.
- *All participants of multistakeholder consultations on internet governance are invited to define their guiding values to develop a shared vision.* This offers libraries an opportunity to get involved and promote the values they stand for – public access, intellectual freedom, equality and lifelong learning.

Below is a summary of the report and its recommendations, highlighting points of particular interest for libraries.

1. Introduction: Interdependence in the Digital Age

The report opens by underlining that digital cooperation should be governed by the values of inclusiveness, respect, human-centeredness, human flourishing, transparency, collaboration, accessibility, sustainability, and harmony.

2. Leaving No One Behind

Digital technology impacts each of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and has the potential to both create opportunities and deepen inequalities. The political, social and cultural factors driving marginalization need to be addressed alongside technical solutions. *Leveraging technology towards achieving the SDGs requires a commitment from a wide range of stakeholders.*

2.1. Creating an inclusive digital economy. Digital technology can ensure broad access to information and enable people to participate in the economy. Mobile money, digital identification and e-commerce are examples of how financial inclusion, for example, can be driven by digital technology. Their full potential to foster inclusion can be achieved by digital cooperation within and across states, an enabling policy environment, *and improving the ability of traditionally marginalized populations to get online.*

Generating and pooling relevant data in such fields as health or agriculture can assist research and help achieve SGDs. However, such initiatives require both safeguards and data interoperability standards.

"Digital public goods" - freely and openly available digital technologies and content with minimal restrictions on distribution, adaptation or reuse – are particularly well-positioned to enable innovation towards inclusivity. Introducing a unified global platform for accessing and interacting with digital public goods, backed by multiple stakeholders, can be a useful initiative.

The progress on improving access to digital infrastructure is slowing, and new approaches are urgently needed. Public and private entities should cooperate to develop access and affordability solutions tailored to local needs.

In addition, more efforts to address underlying political and social drivers of marginalization are needed.

2.2. Rethinking how we work and learn. Governments and other stakeholders need to find ways to prepare people for the demands of labour markets in the digital age and protect the most vulnerable. *This includes teaching digital literacy and soft skills from an early age,* more exchange between STEM and social sciences/humanities curriculums, *and informal learning. Affordable and accessible lifelong learning needs to be enabled by a range of stakeholders.* In addition, labour codes need to adapt to protect workers in the new, less formal types of employment (freelance, agency, etc.).

2.3. Regional and global economic policy cooperation. The regulation of several areas of economic policy – trade, taxation, consumer protection and competition – should be adapted to the new realities of digital economies. An inclusive multistakeholder systems approach to cooperation and regulation is recommended. In addition, relevant stakeholders need sufficient resources and expertise to develop well-informed regulatory approaches to digital governance.

3. Individuals, Societies and Digital Technologies.

3.1. Human rights and human agency. The human rights frameworks laid out in several fundamental treaties apply fully to online settings. The Panel recommends a multistakeholder consultation process to discuss their meaningful application in the digital world and the obligations on both governments and private companies that follow.

In regard to autonomous decision-making systems, the panel recommends that their design should be explainable and allow for human accountability. The right to privacy as guaranteed by human rights law should be upheld, and a society-wide conversation about desired norms and boundaries of the use of data is recommended.

3.2. Trust and social cohesion. Digital technologies have created ways to both build and erode trust. Citizens awareness and responsible use of digital technology can build societal resilience against such threats. *Governments can consider adapting educational systems to offer training on assessing information credibility and sources.*

3.3. Security. The scope of cybersecurity threats is growing, and new vulnerabilities are likely to emerge. This heightens trade, investment and strategic tensions. Strengthening multistakeholder cooperation among governments, private companies and international organisations is needed.

4. Mechanisms for Global Digital Cooperation

Digital cooperation needs to be adaptable, based on dynamic choices about the tools which fit the local objectives the best.

4.1. Challenges and gaps. Different mechanisms of digital cooperation already exist; they vary in scope, organisation and purpose. There is some overlap between the functions of various

mechanisms, and many digital issues transcend traditional regulatory policy areas. Improvements to existing governance arrangements can be made in several areas, from inclusivity and political will to addressing the trust deficit and lack of reliable data.

Multistakeholder discussions can benefit from participants explicitly defining their guiding values and principles. This would allow them to find commonalities between these approaches, work towards a shared common vision and embed the shared values in technology development and policy practices.

4.2. Three possible architectures for global digital cooperation. The panel outlines three possible models of cooperation. The mechanisms feature different approaches, but all three are similar in emphasizing multistakeholder participation and consolidating discussions across forums. An annex further specifies the elements they share which could guide the development of digital cooperation mechanisms.

4.3. The role of the UN. The UN is in a unique position to engage with, or create space to enable dialogue between, stakeholders. It can develop the capacity of members states and set norms and frameworks to ensure an inclusive and safe digital future. With strengthened organizational and human capacity, it can help digital cooperation in a number of ways.

5. Recommendations

- **An inclusive digital economy and society:** by 2030, "every adult… should have affordable access to digital networks" and "digitally-enabled financial and health services"; and "provision of these services should guard against abuse". A "platform for sharing digital public goods" should be created by a broad multistakeholder alliance. All relevant stakeholders should adopt specific policies to "support full digital inclusion and digital equality for women and traditionally marginalised groups". A set of metrics for digital inclusiveness should be developed, agreed upon and applied to collect data and inform action worldwide.

- **Human and institutional capacity:** digital helpdesks should be established regionally and globally to inform governments, private companies and civil society actors on digital issues and enable their cooperation.

- **Human rights and human agency:** a review of how existing international human rights apply to digital technologies is needed. Social media enterprises should consult governments, human rights experts and civil society actors on the best ways to respond to concerns about human rights violations. A range of engineering and ethical standards for the design and use of autonomous intelligent design systems is suggested.

- **Trust, security and stability:** a multistakeholder Global Commitment on Digital Trust and Security could help the existing global cybersecurity cooperation efforts. It can present a shared vision, identify priorities for action and assist implementation of shared norms and agreements.

- **Global digital cooperation:** the UN should facilitate a consultation on how to update the mechanisms for global digital cooperation. Cooperation and regulation should be holistic, "adaptive, agile, inclusive and fit for purpose for the fast-changing digital age." The report suggests marking the year of UN's 75th anniversary with a "Global Commitment for Digital Cooperation" – an agreement on shared values an objectives for improving digital cooperation mechanisms, based on a consultative process inspired by the SDG "World We Want" process.