1 March 2024

Dear Excellencies and dear colleagues,

Thank you to the Excellencies from Zambia and Sweden for chairing the Global Development Compact process within the Summit for the Future, providing us with an extraordinary opportunity to build on a major innovation of the digital age: multistakeholder global governance of the Internet, at scale. If we do not include all stakeholders, however, the process of developing future global standards will suffer, and we along with it.

The stability and growth of the internet and digital technologies we now enjoy is guided by a bright constellation of public, private and intergovernmental fora, from standards setting to policy making. Preserving balance and harmony, as well as functions and interoperaibility, across these fora are the stakeholders themselves: civil society, academia and the technical community. Strengthening one aspect of internet governance– such as multilaterialism– is very welcomed and overdue. However multistakeholderism is what we refer to in astronomy and physics as a "complex body problem," meaning this strengthening of one aspect cannot be done without affecting the other aspects. It is why stakeholders are being consulted in the GDC and these opportunities for engagement are most welcome. However many feel this engagement hasn't gone far enough.

The GDC must connect in both its process and its outcome with other global technology governance discussions and the broader debates around these issues, such as the WSIS+20 and processes in standard-setting bodies like the ITU, IETF, ICANN. The original WSIS agreements were predicated upon carving out a special roles for States. In the case of ICANN, this is the Governmental Advisory Committee. In the case of the IGF, it is a UN-led process that provides space for States in the Multistakeholder Advisory Group, for States as IGF host countries, and a ministerial track. These modalities are all compromises that seek to enhance cooperation from governments.

Today, with States showing greater interest in participating in internet governance, these existing mechanisms remain available and ready to enhance their cooperation. Standards bodies exchange liaisons. The IGF is already an open and welcoming forum that can only be enriched by more engagement from all stakeholder groups, including from the private sector. States should engage as stakeholders.

Furthermore, we have an opportunity to enhance cooperation in internet governance by looking to UN multilateral processes themselves: to create more carve-outs for stakeholders. Stakeholders need more seats at UN tables, to evolve global governance from multilateralism to multistakeholderism when it comes to digital technologies. However this can extend beyond the digital– we have decades of evidence that multistakeholder bodies get results. The internet itself is a paragon of humanity's ability

to cooperate and innovate. For UN-borne standards and frameworks like human rights and the sustainable development goals, we simply have no other way forward than through stakeholder cooperation.

Undoubtedly, governments have unique positions as implementers, procurers and as stewards of the public interest. States have problems and use cases of types and scales that not even the largest tech companies face. Consequently, States can help to broaden the range of topics and perspectives beyond those present in the technical community itself. It is important that "open" standards setting become more diverse and inclusive– that the technical community takes on a greater number of points of view and perspectives to improve the quality of its outputs.

For example, the digital divide is largely a market failure. States must step in to correct the gaps in connectivity, meaning that there will always be a role for governments to address connectivity in standard bodies and more broadly internet governance fora. Aside from the primary issue of connectivity, there are additional issues that the GDC should address explicitly. Network resilience in the face of aggressive censorship, blocking and filtering must be overcome with policy and States' commitments to restraint, not just with technical circumvention solutions. Strong encryption must be protected at a high level as a matter of security of systems, individuals and institutions. Finally, the use of digital tools as weapons of war and oppression, including government hacking, must be addressed within existing international governance frameworks erected at the UN level for the express purpose of ensuring peace.

The path before us is clear. For myriad reasons, we should encourage States to engage in existing internet governance fora where they are not yet active. We should encourage them to lend a hand in the development of standards that respect human rights. At the same time multistakeholderism should be extended beyond digital, eclipsing multilaterialism, so that we as active stakeholder participants can together plan our collective future. This is the only way to steward the internet that we have, and to build the future that our global community truly needs.

Sincerely,

Mallory Knodel
CTO, Center for Democracy and Technology