

# Internet Society's Contribution to the Global Digital Compact

April 2023



The Internet Society supports and promotes the development of the Internet as a global technical infrastructure, a resource to enrich people's lives, and a force for good in society. Our work aligns with our goals for the Internet to be open, globally connected, secure, and trustworthy and we seek collaboration with all who share these goals. Together, we focus on: building and supporting the communities that make the Internet work; advancing the development and application of Internet infrastructure, technologies, and open standards; and advocating for policy that is consistent with our view of the Internet.

## The Process We Followed to Collect, Consult, and Prepare our Input

The Internet Society welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the United Nations Global Digital Compact (GDC). This initiative is important to outline shared principles for "an open, free, and secure digital future for all." The Internet is central to this.

The development of this submission involved extensive internal discussions and participation in different consultation processes, including the Global Digital Compact Thematic Deep Dive discussions in New York, including the sessions on: Digital Inclusion and Connectivity (27 March 2023), Internet Governance (13 April 2023), and Data Protection (24 April 2023).

We urge the GDC to reaffirm the consensus from the Tunis Agenda on Internet governance. The approach involves all stakeholders in their respective roles—popularly known as the multi-stakeholder approach—and is the most certain way to secure the sustainable development of the Internet and, therefore of all humanity that connects through it, including the fulfillment of the UN 2030 Agenda.

The Internet allows people to learn, inform, collaborate, and interact globally. It is the people's medium. The Sustainable Development Goals cannot be realized without an open, globally-connected, secure, and trustworthy Internet. The Internet is intrinsic to SDG prerequisites—information and knowledge sharing, collaboration and innovation, and civil engagement and empowerment.

This submission focuses on the Internet as the global enabler of social, economic, and developmental opportunities. Based on the Internet Society's strategic goals of building, promoting, and protecting the



Internet, we focus our submission on two key themes: connecting the unconnected and avoiding Internet fragmentation.

We emphasize the importance of creating enabling environments that improve Internet access, particularly resisting the proliferation of initiatives and proposals that could fragment the Internet. Such fragmentation can substantially diminish the opportunities that the Internet offers to people and society.

Additionally, our submission underscores the necessity of collaborative efforts among multiple stakeholders to guarantee the Internet's future as a force for good for everyone. As an organization committed to playing our part in this process, we believe that by having all stakeholders work together in their respective roles, we can create an Internet that is truly open, globally-connected, secure, and trustworthy for everyone.

## Addressing Key Challenges

### 1. Connect all people to the Internet, including all schools

Despite the tremendous progress in connecting people to the Internet, at least 2.7 billion people still don't have access to it. That is, one-third of the world's population lacks access to a critical resource that can help people access learning opportunities and promote economic development within their communities.

Significant challenges remain in connecting the unconnected, particularly in rural, remote, and low-income communities. Bridging the digital gap requires new approaches to connectivity, only possible with an enabling policy or regulatory environment. It demands taking proactive steps and a commitment to a shared goal of connecting the unconnected.

To this end, the Internet Society recommends the following strategic approaches:

1. **Explore, support, and implement complementary solutions to connectivity:** Governments and all stakeholders should explore and support complementary access solutions, such as Community Networks (CN). CNs help connect the unconnected in under-served areas in an affordable and locally relevant manner.
2. **Support local content and traffic exchange initiatives:** The Internet should provide local content and services that are culturally relevant and supports the needs of the local communities and economies. It requires infrastructure to host and deliver content locally, an Internet Exchange Point (IXP) to keep local content local, and to support and encourage entrepreneurs and developers generate content and services that meet local needs.



3. **Ensure stakeholders have access to trusted data about the state of the Internet:** All stakeholders should have access to trusted data about the health and evolution of the Internet. The [Internet Society Pulse](#) initiative consolidates trusted third-party Internet measurement data from various sources into a single platform. This is critical for making informed decisions and policies.
4. **Identify innovative financing mechanisms to support community-led initiatives:** Innovative financing mechanisms are needed to support local, community-led initiatives. Universal Service and Access Funds and innovative private sector investments, can help communities build sustainable solutions for Internet access.
5. **Foster collaborative governance to promote infrastructure development, innovative solutions, and human capacity:** Collaborative governance mechanisms are needed for an enabling environment that grows the Internet. It promotes infrastructure development, innovative solutions, and human capacity building.

#### Key Commitment/ Pledges/ Actions:

- **Governments** should create an enabling environment for complementary connectivity and access solutions to thrive. To do this, the Internet Society encourages policymakers to:
  - Integrate complementary connectivity and access solutions, such as community networks, municipal networks, and social enterprises focused on connectivity infrastructure, into national broadband plans, connectivity and telecommunications strategies, and digitalization policies.
  - Streamline licensing regulations and procedures to make them affordable and to provide legal status to complementary connectivity and access solutions.
  - Create options for complementary connectivity and access solutions to:
    - Access affordable spectrum usage and infrastructure such as masts, poles and ducts.
    - Promote infrastructure sharing policies, wholesale open access to backhaul through open data platforms, or investments in physical infrastructure (dark fiber, conduits, and others).
  - **Governments** need to invest in/foster two types of skills: skills for the technical community so that access can expand and skills for the application layer (developers, entrepreneurs, etc.) so that the Internet can be used effectively to improve societies.
- The **private sector** plays a crucial role in investment. Investment is needed for the infrastructure to provide Internet access and create and host content and services. Partnerships among private and community operators have proven successful in providing access to backhaul and supporting community management of local access solutions. For example, in 2020,

Murambinda Works partnered with TelOne, a leading telecom operator in Zimbabwe, to gain access to their fiber backbone, ensuring sufficient bandwidth. In early 2021, they developed software applications (apps) to add value to the network. One app was a school management system that linked schools to the district education offices, giving educational inspectors access to vital information without traveling. This type of partnership between private and community operators can effectively expand access to the Internet and create new opportunities for local communities.

- **The technical community** needs the opportunity to deploy and operate resilient access and content infrastructure. It is also necessary to develop human capacity so entrepreneurs, developers, and others can create content and services and innovative new business and delivery models built on them.

## 2. Avoid Fragmentation

The Internet Society is committed to upholding and defending the open, globally-connected, secure, and trustworthy Internet, which creates immense opportunity for everyone. We stand to lose the interoperable, seamless Internet to threats of fragmentation. The Internet Society has identified a set of critical properties the Internet needs to exist:

1. The Internet's **accessible infrastructure with a common protocol** has enabled its accessibility and phenomenal growth, allowing global connectivity and organic growth. The network is open to anyone willing to participate and continues to grow because participants find value in connecting.
2. The Internet's **open architecture of interoperable and reusable building blocks** provides choices allowing easy deployment and innovation without re-engineering the entire network. The open and interoperable building blocks encourage developers to build on top of existing technology. Each building block delivers a specific function. This is essential for fast and permissionless innovation.
3. The Internet's **decentralized management and a single distributed routing system** allow for global reach, resilience, and optimized connectivity. Each organization that joins the Internet can select how they connect and route their data based on their needs, allowing the Internet to be more agile, scalable, and adaptable to users' needs.
4. **Common global identifiers**, specifically IP addresses and the DNS, are essential for the Internet to function as a seamlessly interconnected network of networks. This ensures consistent addressability, allowing predictable and reliable service to every Internet user.
5. The Internet is a technology-neutral, **general-purpose network**. It is not optimized for any particular usage but can support a wide range of applications and services. The Internet is

agnostic about the type of content that flows through it, guaranteeing neither quality nor connectivity yet delivering enough of both to be a base layer for information services.

In addition, there are enabling properties the Internet needs to **thrive**:

- An **open** Internet that allows participation with minimum barriers.
- A **globally connected** Internet that is inclusive, allowing everyone to interconnect without geographical restrictions.
- A **secure** Internet that survives threats/attacks is one that maintains the integrity and confidentiality of data.
- A **trustworthy** Internet that is dependable, lives up to expectations and promises, and ensures accountability and privacy.

Key Commitment/ Pledges/ Actions:

The Internet Society has developed an **Internet Impact Assessment Toolkit** that enables stakeholders to conduct impact assessments for Internet-related policies and decisions. Analyzing proposals through the toolkit shows the positive and negative impacts the proposal might have on the open, globally connected, secure, and trustworthy Internet.

The Internet Impact Assessment Toolkit aims to help stakeholders take the following actions:

- **Governments** can use the toolkit to assess whether the policy will further the open, global Internet or impede it. It provides an additional step of accountability and a roadmap for conscious and informed decisions to keep the Internet healthy.
- The **private sector** should conduct Internet impact assessments for business decisions or technological developments that could impact the Internet. Companies own and operate parts of the Internet's infrastructure, which can significantly impact the Internet's ecosystem.
- **Civil society** can identify and flag fragmentation threats and organize to advocate against such actions. Civil society is invited to join the **Open Internet Advocacy Network**, which the Internet Society is coordinating to resist fragmentation. They should also conduct Internet Impact Assessments of proposals from governments and companies to identify possible issues and hold them accountable.
- The **technical community's** insights into potential effects on the systems that make the Internet function, their interactions, and possible side effects on technology. An impact assessment will help translate their knowledge into valuable input for other stakeholders.

All stakeholders are encouraged to collaborate to identify threats to the open, global Internet and good practices to support properties that the Internet needs to exist and thrive. By working together, we can resist fragmentation and ensure that the Internet remains a force for good for everyone.

### 3. Data Protection

The Internet Society believes that encryption is a vital tool for protecting ourselves online, building trust, and accessing the full benefits of a digital society. Regarding data protection and an overall safer internet for everyone, encryption is a security technology that plays a vital role in our daily lives. Encryption is used in our private messages, online banking, air traffic control, medical data, e-voting, and any context where our online information must be protected against eavesdropping and tampering. End-to-end encryption offers the highest security standard by ensuring that decrypted messages are only readable by the sender and receiver.

Encryption is a crucial feature of a safe and trustworthy Internet. Encryption keeps personal data safe and is critical to national security by protecting society from terrorists, criminals, and hostile governments. Encryption is also synonymous with open societies. Journalists, LGBTQ+ communities, and human rights defenders rely on the protection encryption offers to ensure they have safe spaces to work and interact online.

At the Internet Society, we launched the Global Encryption Coalition (GEC) in 2021, with over 300 members distributed across every region of the world, the GEC promotes and defends encryption in key countries and multilateral fora where it is under threat. It also supports efforts by companies to offer encrypted services to their users.

#### Key Commitment/ Pledges/ Actions:

- **Governments** should formally recognize the importance of encryption as a security tool and encourage its availability and use in contexts where data, including personal data, requires protection.
- **Governments** should not enact legislation that undermines strong encryption by requiring that service providers integrate encryption backdoors. Such actions would create new vulnerabilities that criminals and hostile actors could exploit. This would weaken the security of law-abiding citizens and reduce trust in the Internet at large.
- Likewise, **governments** should not enact legislation that undermines the purpose of encryption by requiring the use of scanning technologies to conduct general monitoring. These technologies violate user expectations of encryption, create new vulnerabilities, and could be exploited for repressive purposes such as censorship or the suppression of political dissent.

- Legislation that undermines encryption in one country has global consequences, as service providers often operate in multiple markets. Therefore, actions in one country can also impact individuals in other jurisdictions.
- The **private sector** has made great progress in recent years by increasingly offering strong encryption to its users. This improves personal and national security by keeping sensitive and classified information confidential and out of the hands of criminals and hostile actors.
- **Private sector** companies should continue to roll out encryption on more of their services to more users; clearly labeled and activated by default.  
**Civil Society** plays a key role in identifying threats to encryption, raising awareness, and conducting advocacy to ensure that public support for strong encryption is clear to policymakers and businesses.
- **Civil Society** organizations are invited to join the [Global Encryption Coalition](#) in promoting and defending encryption in key countries and multilateral fora where it is under threat.
- The **technical community** holds immense knowledge of the use of encryption. It has the skills to analyze legislative proposals and business decisions to understand their impact on encryption and the larger Internet. The technical community should work with policymakers and businesses to identify policy solutions that are technically feasible and would preserve the security promised by end-to-end encryption.

#### 4. Internet Governance

The Internet Society firmly believes that multistakeholder mechanisms support a stronger Internet governance ecosystem and are critical for the evolution of the Internet. We reaffirm the Tunis Agenda call for enhanced cooperation with the involvement of all stakeholders in their respective roles.

We recognize four significant attributes to a successful multi-stakeholder process: inclusiveness and transparency; collective responsibility; effective decision-making and implementation; and collaboration through distributed and interoperable governance.

In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge the role of the IGF in exemplifying the multistakeholder approach to Internet governance. Although efforts have been made to link the outcomes of the IGF to inform the GDC, there is still a need for more clarity on how the [messages reflecting the primary outcomes](#) of the IGF, both in the 2022 and 2023 editions, will be articulated to ensure that the GDC benefits from the expertise and insights generated through the IGF process.

##### Key Commitment/ Pledges/ Actions:

We call upon the GDC to reaffirm the role of the various stakeholders, including the technical community, as defined in the Tunis Agenda. At the same time, the GDC should seek to evolve how

stakeholders can cooperate and collaborate to enhance digital cooperation as set out in the Secretary General's Roadmap to Digital Cooperation and the Our Common Agenda report.

To conclude, the Internet Society reiterates its commitment to working with the United Nations and other partners to advance the multistakeholder model and promote an Internet for everyone. The Internet Society recognizes that the challenges facing the Internet require collaborative, coordinated efforts and is committed to supporting the Global Digital Compact process until the Summit of the Future to achieve these goals. By working together, we can ensure that the Internet remains a powerful tool to enrich people's lives.

## Any Other Comments on the Global Digital Compact?

The Internet Society is pleased to see the multistakeholder approach to the Global Digital Compact consultative process and calls for the continued and further involvement of various stakeholders.

