

Her Excellency, Anna Karin Eneström
Ambassador Permanent Representative of Sweden to the United Nations
Permanent Mission of Sweden to the United Nations

His Excellency, Claver Gatete
Ambassador Permanent Representative of Rwanda to the United Nations
Permanent Mission of Rwanda to the United Nations

CC: His Excellency, Amandeep Singh Gill
Under Secretary-General
United Nations Technology Envoy
The United Nations

Re: Civil Society Participation in the United Nations Global Digital Compact Process

Your Excellencies,

We the undersigned civil society organizations actively engage and follow the process of developing the United Nations (UN) Global Digital Compact (GDC). We thank the Government of Sweden and the Government of Rwanda for your efforts as Co-Facilitators of the UN GDC process (Co-Facilitators). We are particularly encouraged by your efforts to enable a multistakeholder process.

However, we write to express our concerns regarding the overall GDC process and specifically, stemming from the most recent GDC Thematic Deep Dive on Human Rights Online, which took place in a hybrid format (online and in-person at the UN Headquarters in New York) on May 8, 2023. We are specifically concerned with the following:

- 1. Reducing the GDC Thematic Deep Dives from a full day (6 hours) to a half day (3 hours) and the impact on civil society participation:** As Co-Facilitators, we appreciate that you have been forthright from [the onset](#) that the deep dives *may* conclude during the morning (EST/EDT) session. However, we were disappointed to discover on May 2, 2023 that each proceeding deep dive – initiating with the Human Rights Online Thematic Deep Dive on May 8, 2023 – would *automatically* be reduced from a full day to a half day. We acknowledge that in prior sessions where 6 hours were allocated, the sessions ended earlier than the allotted time; however, the steep reduction has come at a disproportionate cost to civil society, who were largely only able to take the floor in the last portion of the sessions and often at the 4-hour mark.

While the Human Rights Online Thematic Deep Dive gathered attention from Member States, intergovernmental agencies, and the private sector, many civil society organizations were not afforded the opportunity to speak at this session where they had been able to previously. While we appreciate the opportunity to submit our oral submissions in writing to the UN Tech Envoy

Office, we view this option as inadequate, particularly if our statements do not form part of the informal record, are considered in the key takeaways, or – at the bare minimum – uploaded on the official website for public access. UN processes – including informal processes, such as the GDC Thematic Deep Dives – should involve the meaningful participation of diverse, pluralistic, and independent civil society organizations, working on all levels.

- 2. Relatedly, the impact of the decision to reduce the thematic deep dives from a full day to a half day initiating with the Human Rights Online Thematic Deep Dive and the potential consequences of this decision as it relates to the priority theme of Human Rights Online within the GDC itself:** We acknowledge that as Co-Facilitators you decided to reduce the subsequent GDC Thematic Deep Dives [on the basis that](#) the previous 3 deep dives (Digital Inclusion and Connectivity, Internet Governance, and Data Protection) did not require a full day. While we understand the practical reasoning behind this, in our view, it is arbitrary to presume that the remaining thematic deep dives will not warrant the full day (6 hours).

To the contrary, as active followers of the UN digital cooperation processes, we have witnessed the centralization of human rights within such processes including the [UN Secretary General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#), as well as the [UN Declaration on the Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations](#). This was further witnessed in practice during the Human Rights Online Thematic Deep Dive, where Member States, UN agencies, and the private sector took, in our view, a particularly keen interest and high-level of engagement – particularly collaborative engagement (as multiple Member States referenced their collaboration as part of the Freedom Online Coalition and several companies mentioned collaboration through the Global Network Initiative) – in comparison to the previous thematic deep dive topics. Indeed, many interventions – particularly those of civil society members and human rights defenders – were cut off after 3 minutes due to the reduced session and subsequent time constraints. We cannot underestimate the impact of this when it comes to the proceeding outputs of the GDC process. Human rights must remain central in any outcomes stemming from the GDC Thematic Deep Dives, and in order to do so, we must be afforded the opportunity for meaningful discussion.

- 3. Notable preference given to Member States, UN agencies, and the private sector, at the expense of human rights civil society organizations during the Human Rights Online Thematic Deep Dive:** As previously indicated, while the Human Rights Online Thematic Deep Dive gathered attention from Member States, intergovernmental agencies, and the private sector, many civil society organizations were not afforded the opportunity to speak. This was particularly detrimental to human rights civil society organizations who spent considerable time, resources, and efforts to prioritize this particular thematic deep dive. Concerningly, many civil society organizations received confirmation for speaking that ultimately were unable to speak. While we recognize there is an opportunity to submit written input following each session, this neither equates to nor has the same impact as presenting our views orally and directly to those leading the GDC process. Additionally, the organizations taking the floor are predominantly those who have already submitted written input via the online portal and have thus missed the opportunity to present our views on specific areas of the Compact in an alternative format.

- 4. Lack of transparency regarding the speaker selection process for making an intervention from the floor in the thematic deep dives:** We appreciate that as Co-Facilitators you provided some indication of your priorities for selection of the GDC Thematic Deep Dive briefers via formal letters. However, it remains unclear how *stakeholders* are chosen, and under what criteria, whether to achieve diversity in terms of regional, thematic, gender, geographic, or other representation. With more clarity on who will be allowed to speak, and the time allotted to specific stakeholder to make interventions, we as civil society might be more efficient as we could group our statements, sign onto joint statements, and be more selective in which deep dives we participate in, for example.

As referenced in your Co-Facilitator letters dated February 22, 2023 and [March 20, 2023](#), the “deep dives aim to share knowledge and views, as well as allowing for contributions on a wide range of digital issues.” A multistakeholder approach is essential throughout the development of the GDC process, including drafting and commenting – both written and oral. We therefore take this opportunity to reiterate our [Principles and Recommendations on ensuring civil society inclusion in UN discussions](#), for your consideration. This statement calls on UN agencies, mechanisms, and bodies to ensure that virtual modalities, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, do not limit the meaningful inclusion of civil society voices in UN discussions. Such principles apply to the now hybrid modalities we are witnessing at the UN as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of our organizations have been collaborating on the digital cooperation agenda for four years, and we remain dedicated to bringing our thematic and technical expertise to the process.

Based on the above, we therefore call on you as Co-Facilitators of the GDC process to undertake the following actions moving forward:

1. When determining the order of speakers, ensure there are clear criteria for deciding the order and that this be balanced across stakeholder groups.
2. Request that there be a dedicated portion of the session for civil society interventions.
3. Recommendation that key takeaways and a summary of the discussion from each deep dive be circulated after each deep dive.
4. Request that *all* interventions submitted in written form to the co-facilitators be posted in a central place on the GDC webpage for future reference and for others to access.
5. Request that the link to register for each session as well as the form to request to be a speaker be circulated again prior to each session to ensure maximum participation.
6. Call on the UN Technology Envoy to continue to actively and meaningfully consult with civil society on the GDC process. We particularly view the upcoming RightsCon Summit in Costa Rica (June 5-8) as a fruitful opportunity for the mandate to conduct such meaningful civil society engagement.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Signatories

1. Access Now
2. Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

3. Global Partners Digital (GPD)
4. ARTICLE 19
5. International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL)
6. European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL)
7. Women@TheTable
8. <A+> Alliance for Inclusive Algorithms
9. Derechos Digitales
10. Red en Defensa de los Derechos Digitales
11. Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC)
12. Bangladesh Internet Governance Forum
13. Cyber Diia Platform (cyberdiia.org), Ukraine
14. Taraaz
15. Bangladesh Youth Internet Governance Forum
16. Bangladesh Women Internet Governance Forum
17. Consortium d'Appui aux Actions pour la Promotion et le Développement de l'Afrique (CAPDA)
18. Africa Open Data and Internet Research Foundation (AODIRF)
19. Organization of the Justice Campaign (OJC)
20. Afghanistan Democracy and Development Organization (ADDO)
21. Youth Latin American and Caribbean Internet Governance Forum (YouthLACIGF)
22. Internet Society Gender Standing Group
23. Free Expression Myanmar
24. Cooperativa Sulá Batsú (Costa Rica)
25. CCAOI
26. Paradigm Initiative (PIN)
27. Alliance for Universal Digital Rights (AUDRi)
28. Centre for Multilateral Affairs (CfMA), Uganda
29. CyberPeace Institute
30. CIPESA
31. Opennet Africa
32. TechSocietal (Nigeria)
33. DigitalSENSE Africa
34. TEDIC (Paraguay)
35. Internet Governance Caucus IGC