

## **Comments by the UK Government on the Report of the UN Secretary General's High Level Panel On Digital Cooperation**

### **Summary**

The UK welcomes the report of the High Level Panel and its aim to “leave no one behind” in the digital age. We strongly support the emphasis on sustainable development, recognising that digital technology has huge potential to help meet the Sustainable Development Goals. We support further work to explore the idea of sharing “digital public goods” – in fact, the UK is supporting the Digital Impact Alliance, which is already working in this area.

We agree there is a pressing need to ensure affordable access for all to digital networks and to support digital equality for women and traditionally marginalised groups. Gender digital equality in particular is essential if we are to harness fully the potential of digital technology for sustainable development. Digital literacy is also critically important to empower individuals and communities.

We welcome the strong emphasis throughout the report on multi-stakeholder cooperation. This is essential if we are to address the challenges and opportunities of the digital age. We need to develop effective ways of working in which all stakeholders have a role. We welcome the UN Secretary General's Technology Strategy, published last year, which charts a positive way forward for UN in this regard, recognising that the UN needs to change how it works to become a more trusted platform for stakeholders to discuss digital issues.

We are cautious about some of the detailed recommendations, some of which need further consideration:

- We agree that greater capacity building is required, but this needs to be pro-active and targeted, reaching out to specific under-served stakeholders. We are not convinced that there is evidence that “help desks” would be effective.
- We agree that human rights apply fully in the digital world, but the Human Rights Council is best placed to review this, taking into account the experience of stakeholders, rather than starting an agencies-wide review. We welcome the steps the HRC is already taking to start this work.
- We are not convinced by the idea of a “Global Commitment on Digital Trust and Security” or a “Global Commitment for Digital Cooperation”. There are already many initiatives like this and there is a risk it would

cause duplication, confusion and de-value existing texts such as the World Summit on the Information Society.

Finally, we strongly support efforts to strengthen the IGF and ensure that it is able to carry out its mandate fully. IGF should remain “bottom up” and non-decision-making, but it needs a much clearer focus, more inclusive participation and clearer outcomes. We would like to see a stronger funding base for the IGF and support for the IGF from across the UN system. We welcome the proposal to move responsibility for the IGF to the office of the Secretary General.

We do not support new processes within the UN system, which would lead to duplication and additional costs. We should look to improve how existing UN Agencies are managing the impacts of digital technology. There is a great opportunity here to align a strengthened IGF with more multi-stakeholder cooperation in the UN system.

### **Comments on the report’s recommendations**

**Rec 1 A - We recommend that by 2030, every adult should have affordable access to digital networks, as well as digitally-enabled financial and health services, as a means to make a substantial contribution to achieving the SDGs. Provision of these services should guard against abuse by building on emerging principles and best practices, one example of which is providing the ability to opt in and opt out, and by encouraging informed public discourse.**

The UK strongly supports this recommendation. Digital technology has a huge role to play in delivering the Sustainable Development Goals. There has been enormous progress in getting half the world’s population online but all stakeholders need to step up their efforts to ensure that no-one is left behind.

We need to push not only for the next billion connected to the web, but the billion after that, and the billion after that. Only through strong public-private partnerships can we reach the most marginalised. Capacity building programmes and an enabling environment for investment will also be essential. Digital literacy is critically important in order to ensure that technology empowers individuals and communities in all parts of the globe.

**Rec 1 B - We recommend that a broad, multi-stakeholder alliance, involving the UN, create a platform for sharing digital public goods, engaging talent and pooling data sets, in a manner that respects privacy, in areas related to attaining the SDGs.**

The UK supports further work on this proposal. We need to be careful not to impose a top-down “one-size-fits-all” solution, but there is great potential for development agencies and other stakeholders to take this forward, working in partnership with stakeholders in developing countries to find solutions which are responsive to local and regional needs.

The Digital Impact Alliance (DIAL) is already doing work in this area, with support from the UK. DIAL is a partnership of USAID, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Swedish government and the United Nations Foundation. It is working to speed up the deployment of proven software and technology platforms, supporting responsible data sharing and technology for development and open source software platforms. We would support work to see how we can build on this model, which has the potential to reduce cost and speed up the impact of digital development initiatives, including digital public goods.

**Rec 1C - We call on the private sector, civil society, national governments, multilateral banks and the UN to adopt specific policies to support full digital inclusion and digital equality for women and traditionally marginalised groups. International organisations such as the World Bank and the UN should strengthen research and promote action on barriers women and marginalised groups face to digital inclusion and digital equality.**

The UK strongly supports this proposal. Digital equality for women is essential if we are to ensure that all parts of the community can benefit from technology and harness it for sustainable development. Digital technology is a powerful tool to empower women and so provide new opportunities for economic and social development for the whole community. Addressing this issue should be a critical priority and all stakeholders need to work across a range of social, economic, cultural and educational areas. We also need to be mindful of potential negative consequences that digital access can have on marginalised groups and women if access is not accompanied by improving literacy and capability.

**Rec 1 D - We believe that a set of metrics for digital inclusiveness should be urgently agreed, measured worldwide and detailed with sex disaggregated data in the annual reports of institutions such as the UN, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, other multilateral development banks and the OECD. From this, strategies and plans of action could be developed.**

The UK supports this recommendation. There are already many sets of metrics collected and we need to be careful not duplicate existing work. We look to international institutions to work together and collaborate to ensure that the

statistics they collect are fit for purpose, broadly recognised and used to inform evidence-based policy.

**Rec 2 - We recommend the establishment of regional and global digital help desks to help governments, civil society and the private sector to understand digital issues and develop capacity to steer cooperation related to social and economic impacts of digital technologies.**

The UK agrees that greater capacity building is required, but this needs to be pro-active and targeted, reaching out to specific under-served stakeholders. We are not convinced that there is strong evidence that establishing a general "digital help desk" would be effective or play a useful role.

Many UN Agencies and other stakeholders already run programmes of support for under-represented stakeholders to engage. This capacity building work is often rooted in strong subject-specific expertise, it is well-recognised and it is effectively networked. Care needs to be taken not to duplicate existing support and to ensure that the potential users are aware of it. It would be more effective to improve and join up existing capacity rather than using up resources on another new initiative without evidence that it would actually be a practical help.

**Rec 3 A - Given that human rights apply fully in the digital world, we urge the UN Secretary-General to institute an agencies-wide review of how existing international human rights accords and standards apply to new and emerging digital technologies. Civil society, governments, the private sector and the public should be invited to submit their views on how to apply existing human rights instruments in the digital age in a proactive and transparent process.**

The UK strongly agrees that human rights and fundamental freedoms apply fully in the digital world. We believe that interpreting how existing international human rights accords and standards apply online and to new and emerging digital technologies is an issue for the UN's human rights bodies to consider, particularly the Human Rights Council. The Human Rights Council has already agreed clear and timely resolutions on human rights in areas of digital policy and we welcome the further work it is now doing.

We believe that the Human Rights Council, and the other mechanisms of the UN's human rights system, should continue to strengthen their focus on new and emerging digital technologies across their work. We agree that listening to the experience of stakeholders is an important element in that work. It is important to maintain a consistent and joined-up approach to the application of human rights

and we would not support a role for other UN agencies in interpreting how human rights apply in particular areas of policy.

**Rec 3 B - In the face of growing threats to human rights and safety, including those of children, we call on social media enterprises to work with governments, international and local civil society organisations and human rights experts around the world to fully understand and respond to concerns about existing or potential human rights violations.**

The UK strongly supports efforts to work with social media organisations and others to protect users from the harms that exist online and to empower users to protect themselves. The UK has recently published a White Paper on Online Harms which outlines a package of online safety measures, particularly for children and vulnerable groups, and which also supports innovation, a thriving digital economy and respects human rights.

**Rec 3 C - We believe that autonomous intelligent systems should be designed in ways that enable their decisions to be explained and humans to be accountable for their use. Audits and certification schemes should monitor compliance of artificial intelligence (AI) systems with engineering and ethical standards, which should be developed using multi-stakeholder and multilateral approaches. Life and death decisions should not be delegated to machines. We call for enhanced digital cooperation with multiple stakeholders to think through the design and application of these standards and principles such as transparency and non-bias in autonomous intelligent systems in different social settings.**

The UK supports the recommendation that systems be designed in ways that enable their decisions to be explained, but this should not prejudice any technological development pathways. Our Office of Artificial Intelligence has published guidance on AI ethics and safety, which aims to build a culture of responsible innovation, and we have contributed to regional and global work to promote best practice. We consider that AI liability, and machine decision-making in situations that may impact on human life, deserves further consideration and should reflect local norms. We will continue to support this work.

**Rec 4 - We recommend the development of a Global Commitment on Digital Trust and Security to shape a shared vision, identify attributes of digital stability, elucidate and strengthen the implementation of norms for responsible uses of technology, and propose priorities for action.**

The UK is not convinced that there is currently a useful purpose for a Global Commitment on Digital Trust and Security. There already exists a wealth of

existing global, regional and national initiatives in this area. Rather than create another new one, we need greater collaboration to map ongoing work, strengthen cooperation and minimise duplication. We also note that the UN Group of Government Experts and a new Open Ended Working Group are about to begin and we should not prejudge their work.

The UK believes that the vast majority of cyber attacks can be prevented with good, basic cyber security measures. Bringing diverse communities together to build capacity is key to addressing the global challenge of enhancing trust in digital technologies. Whilst the UN has a role to play we are pleased to see the focus on industry and wider society highlighted in the report. We look to industry to help drive the change required to ensure the development of technologies that are 'Secure by Design'.

**Rec 5 A - We recommend that, as a matter of urgency, the UN Secretary-General facilitate an agile and open consultation process to develop updated mechanisms for global digital cooperation, with the options discussed in Chapter 4 as a starting point. We suggest an initial goal of marking the UN's 75th anniversary in 2020 with a "Global Commitment for Digital Cooperation" to enshrine shared values, principles, understandings and objectives for an improved global digital cooperation architecture. As part of this process, we understand that the UN Secretary-General may appoint a Technology Envoy.**

The UK notes the proposal for a "**Global Commitment for Digital Cooperation**". There are existing commitments of this kind and we should be cautious not to duplicate or de-value them. At the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), for example, world leaders called for a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society and WSIS continues to serve as a powerful and well-recognised multi-stakeholder agenda for digital cooperation.

We believe that the proposal for a "**distributed co-governance architecture**" deserves further consideration. The great strength of this proposal is the emphasis on multi-stakeholder cooperation, which will be essential if we are to make effective progress in addressing these issues. There is a risk of too much complexity, however, which could make this proposal difficult to navigate, particularly for developing countries.

We strongly support efforts to **strengthen the IGF**. The IGF has a very full mandate, set out in the Tunis Agenda. We would like to see stronger support for the IGF from across the UN system in order to ensure it is able to fulfil that mandate. We were very pleased the UN SG attended the IGF in Paris. Moving

responsibility for the IGF to his office would give the IGF much greater political weight. The IGF should remain “bottom up”, but it should have a clearer focus and the debates should be curated and shaped in a way that leads to clearer outcomes, a clear understanding of the different views and what further action needs to be taken. We strongly welcome the Secretary General's call for wider participation in the IGF. It will also be critically important to expand the financial support available to the IGF if it is to become the strengthened global forum that we want to see.

We do not support the proposal for a “**digital commons architecture**” or for the creation of new processes within the UN system. This proposal would lead to duplication and additional costs and it would be yet another forum in a policy area that is already very crowded. It would also cut across the mandates of many existing UN agencies. We do not believe that the analogy with the law of the sea is correct. Digital technology clearly gives rise to public policy issues that need to be properly addressed and there is a significant role for governments and, where necessary, for proportionate regulation. But the development, ownership and day-to-day management of digital technology is led by the private sector and the technical community and a multi-stakeholder approach is essential.

We strongly support the appointment of a **Tech Envoy**. This appointment could play a supportive role in strengthening the IGF and building stronger and more effective links between the UN and private sector and civil society stakeholders

**Rec 5 B - We support a multi-stakeholder “systems” approach for cooperation and regulation that is adaptive, agile, inclusive and fit for purpose for the fast-changing digital age.**

The UK welcomes the strong emphasis on multi-stakeholder cooperation throughout the report. Multi-stakeholder working is essential if we are to address the challenges and opportunities of the digital age. The historic approach of negotiating inter-governmental resolutions and treaties is not adaptive, agile or inclusive and it is not fit for purpose. We need to develop effective new ways of working in which all stakeholders have a role.

We strongly welcome the UN Secretary General's Technology Strategy, published last year, which charts a positive way forward for UN engagement in digital issues. The Strategy recognised that the UN needs to change how it works in order to become a more trusted platform for stakeholders to discuss digital issues. There is a great opportunity here to align a strengthened IGF with more multi-stakeholder cooperation in the UN system.

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