Proposal for an Open Forum on Technical Standard-Setting and Human Rights

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Background:

Ensuring human rights protections in the digital age requires looking beyond the digital interface and into where standards that govern our digital ecosystem are developed. Technical standards cover a wide range of digital technologies and related infrastructures, services, protocols, applications, and devices that have enormous impacts on human rights. Yet technical standard-setting processes within standards development organizations often do not fully take into consideration human rights concerns in part because the processes are often opaque, complex, and resource-heavy for civil society and other stakeholders to access and regularly follow. According to the former Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, David Kaye, the “failure to mandate Transport Layer Security (TLS) as a feature of the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) left web traffic vulnerable to censorship and surveillance,” illustrating one example of how standards development without adequate human rights considerations may adversely impact human rights, notably the freedom of expression.

Pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution A/HRC/RES/47/23, UN Human Rights is mandated to convene an expert consultation and draft a report on the relationship between technical standard-setting and human rights. As part of an open consultation process, this Open Forum will provide an opportunity to convene various stakeholders, particularly from academia, technical community, private sector and civil society, and discuss the following questions.

- How can standard setting processes be made more transparent and accessible to organizations working at the intersection of human rights and digital technology?
- How to facilitate concerns related to human rights in the digital age in standard setting processes?