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# Ushering in a New Era of Digital Governance: Next Steps for the GDC

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## A New (Digital) Chapter in Multilateralism

The adoption of the [Global Digital Compact (GDC)](#) in September 2024 marked an overdue—but important—turning point. For the first time, all 193 United Nations (UN) member states agreed on a shared global vision for governing the new challenges in today's digital age. However, the Compact is only the beginning.

**Now comes the difficult work: turning aspirations into action.**

The GDC reflects a renewed attempt to practice multilateralism in the digital era. In a context where technology transcends borders but governance remains fragmented, it offers a shared foundation for global cooperation—one that acknowledges the need for inclusion, digital rights, and equitable access to the benefits of technological progress.

Its 70 commitments span critical areas: from closing the digital divide, protecting online freedoms, connecting schools and hospitals to regulating data flows and disinformation. It also establishes frameworks for the ethical governance of artificial

intelligence (AI)—designed to ensure that digital progress benefits everyone, not just a powerful few. The recent establishment of the [UN Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies](#) (ODET) gives the agenda an institutional home that is no longer reliant on ad hoc initiatives with a fragmented approach.

## The Catch: the GDC Still Lacks Teeth

The GDC sets out a powerful vision, but delivering on it will hinge on more than ambition alone. Here are three important considerations for moving from commitments to impact:

### 1. Bold Targets, But No Playbook

Some of the most eye-catching commitments in the GDC set ambitious, measurable goals. But *how* these will be delivered, including by *whom*, with *what resources*, and on *what timeline*, remains vague. These targets create a vital benchmark for accountability. But without clear plans, dedicated funding, or national-level commitments, progress risks stalling. Examples to watch include:

- Connecting the [remaining 2.6 billion people who lack internet access by 2030](#).

- Mapping and connecting all schools and hospitals to the internet, building on the [Giga initiative](#).

- Developing national digital inclusion surveys to identify learning gaps.

While these are high-impact ambitions, they will require urgent action plans, investment, and clear leadership—or they risk becoming empty promises.

### 2. Scaling What Works

Not every solution requires inventing from scratch. In fact, some of the most concrete proposals in the GDC build on existing initiatives and are able to leverage established expertise, infrastructure, and networks.

There are various ready-made pathways for impact. Some examples include:

- [Giga (ITU/UNICEF)](#) → Connecting every school to the internet

- [OHCHR Digital Advisory Services](#) → Providing expert guidance on human rights and technology

- [Internet Governance Forum (IGF)](#) → Multi-stakeholder dialogue platform on internet governance

Scaling these initiatives could deliver rapid, meaningful progress. To do so will require resources, political support, and ensuring that these spaces remain inclusive—particularly by leveraging voices from the Global South, civil society, and marginalized communities.

## 3. New Ideas Still Taking Root

Beyond existing initiatives, the GDC also plants the seeds for entirely new governance mechanisms. These signal emerging priorities. However, most still lack details on design, leadership, and funding. Proposals to watch include:

- [UN Intergovernmental Process for Independent International Scientific Panel on AI & Global Dialogue on AI governance](#): A UN-led platform for AI policy discussions, paired with an independent expert body to inform global AI governance. These initiatives will be central to shaping international AI policy and ensuring that technological progress benefits all.

- **National Digital Inclusion Surveys**: Gathering data to target gaps and inequalities.

- **Digital Literacy Curricula**: Rolling out education to counter misinformation and disinformation.

- **Open Data Systems**: Supporting disaster early warning and crisis response.

- **Working Group on Interoperable Data Governance**: Developing shared frameworks for safe, equitable data flows.

While these ideas are promising, so far they are largely undeveloped. The facilitation process led by [Costa Rica and Spain](#) at the UN General Assembly is playing a critical role in advancing these initiatives. The two co-facilitators are guiding the intergovernmental consultations for the establishment of both the Global Dialogue on AI Governance and the International Scientific Panel on AI. The consultations are aimed at helping to define the terms of reference and operational modalities,

These collaborative processes are where civil society and allies in government and multilateral institutions can play a decisive role by shaping these mechanisms, ensuring inclusive design, and demanding accountability from the start. To foster buy-in from civil society and other relevant stakeholders, ODET created a platform for

[voluntary endorsements](#) of the Compact. In the three months since its launch, the platform has received endorsements from stakeholders across 93 countries, including representatives from academia, civil society, industry, and international organizations.

## 2025: The Year of Implementation

2025 will be the year that determines whether this vision gains traction or gathers dust. Several key moments lie ahead where decisions will be made, processes are launched, and accountability is tested. These are the entry points where stakeholders—from civil society and governments, to the private sector and the tech community—need to show up, stay engaged, and push for progress. The following is on our radar:

1. **The ODET Roadmap**, **coming soon**: The newly created ODET will lead the implementation of the GDC. In the coming weeks, ODET is expected to release its first Implementation Roadmap—setting out how it plans to turn the Compact's 70 commitments into real-world action. This is where the GDC's broad vision meets operational reality.

2. **[WSIS+20](#), July 7–11, 2025**: The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+20) will take stock of progress in the digital space—and provide a global stage to review the GDC's early impact. This is a key moment for advocacy—especially to spotlight efforts (or failures) to close the digital divide.

3. **[High-Level Political Forum (HLPF)](#), July 2025**: The HLPF—the UN's central platform for reviewing progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—will include a dedicated focus on closing the digital divide. This brings the GDC directly into the heart of the 2030 Agenda—reinforcing that digital governance is not a marginal issue, but a central pillar to achieving development and equity.

4. **Human Rights Council, 2025 Sessions**: The Human Rights Council will play an increasingly important role in shaping global norms for an inclusive, safe, and rights-respecting digital space.

While 2025 will be about starting the work and gaining key momentum, the next major political checkpoint for the GDC will be the 82nd Session of the UN General Assembly in 2027, where a stand-alone high-level review session is already scheduled. What happens (or doesn't happen) in 2025-2026 will determine whether that 2027 moment is a celebration of progress—or a reckoning for inaction.

# Governing in an Unequal Digital World

The difficulty is that we are not making policy on a blank slate. The digital divide is not just about who has access—**it's also about ownership, power, and who shapes the digital economy.** While 2.6 billion people remain without internet access, a small number of firms and individuals dominate the sector, controlling data, platforms, and profit flows, with little transparency or accountability.

Some warn we are entering an age of techno- or digital feudalism, where a handful of platforms extract rent and drive inequality. The numbers speak for themselves: the world's three richest individuals—all tech billionaires—hold a combined wealth of almost USD 800 billion. The top five companies according to their market cap are all tech-based and worth almost USD 14 trillion—almost double the entire gross domestic product of Latin America and the Caribbean.[1]

These inequalities exist both within and between countries. In 2024, 93 percent of people in high-income countries are online, compared to just 27 percent in low-income countries. Even where internet access exists, it is often unaffordable. In Bangladesh, a basic internet plan can consume up to 10 percent of monthly income. **The digital divide isn't marginal—it's structural**. From education to employment, healthcare to political voice, digital systems have become gatekeepers of opportunity—gatekeepers that remain largely unaccountable to the public good.

Meanwhile, as AI and data governance rapidly advance, **there is a pressing need to ensure they are guided towards public interest**, not just corporate priorities. . As Marianna Mazucatto warns, AI is not just another sector—it's a general-purpose technology reshaping the entire economy. It depends on access to cloud infrastructure dominated by just three companies: Amazon Web Services, Microsoft Azure, and Google Cloud—making development towards the common good more complicated.

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[1]According to Forbes's January 28, 2025 article, the top five of the world's largest companies by market cap are all tech-based, including: **Apple** (USD 3.456 trillion), **Microsoft** (USD 3.230 trillion), **Nvidia** (USD 2.900 trillion), **Amazon** (USD 2.475 trillion), and **Alphabet** (Google) (USD 2.361 trillion). Together, they account for approximately **USD 14.422 trillion** in market value. While these figures are rough estimates intended to make an illustrative point, it is striking to consider the scale of resources concentrated in just five companies. According to World Bank data, the total GDP of Latin America in 2023 was approximately **USD 7.3 trillion**. In other words, the combined market cap of these five corporations is nearly **double** the economic output of **an entire continent of 664 million people and 33 countries**.

**There are also rising environmental costs**. While Big Tech has made bold climate claims, the reality is stark: between 2020 and 2022, emissions from the company-owned data centers of Google, Microsoft, Meta, and Apple were likely over [662 percent higher than officially reported](#). Even worse, running AI models consumes far more energy and water than typical cloud-based applications—placing growing strain on the environment and accelerating the climate crisis. As the UN secretary-general has called out fossil fuel companies as the "[godfathers of climate chaos](#)," perhaps it's time we asked: should Big Tech be next?

Public concern about technological developments is growing across the globe—and the GDC arrives at a critical moment to respond. An Ipsos poll found that [3 in 4 people across 30 countries see disinformation](#) as a real threat. Hacking also remains a top concern. The Edelman Trust Barometer shows fewer than 40 percent across 28 countries feel confident [AI is effectively regulated](#), and just 35 percent feel they have control over how AI affects their lives. The study finds that people are more willing to embrace innovation when they trust that it is well-governed. Right now, they see change coming—but feel powerless to shape it.

The absence of effective digital governance is intimidating. What's needed isn't just frameworks—it's visible leadership, participatory governance, and real accountability.

## The Blueprint is There but the Work Starts Now

The GDC gives us a blueprint—but it's what we build with it that counts. With bold leadership, smart coordination, and collective resolve, we have a real chance to shape a digital future rooted in equity, inclusion, and human rights.