Reflections on the Global Digital Compact

I have frequently been asked in recent weeks about my thoughts on the UN Secretary General's Global Digital Compact (GDC). It is far from easy to summarise these, not least because the actual compact is not due to be agreed until the "Summit of the Future" in September 2024. Any such comments can therefore only be about its overall objectives and the process so far. However, I am deeply sceptical of both, and consider the compact to be fundamentally flawed in concept, design and practice. In essence, it largely reflects an elitist view, dominated heavily by the corporate tech sector, focused on a technologically deterministic ideology, that will do little or nothing to serve the interests of the poorest and most marginalised.[i]

For those who don't have time to read this entire post, it argues in essence that:
- The Global Digital Compact is a result of the ways in which the ideologies and practices of digital tech companies have come to dominate UN rhetoric around digital tech;
- The issues it addresses, the questions it asks, and the ways in which the consultation is constructed, largely serve the interests of those companies, rather than those of the world's poorest and most marginalised individuals and communities; and
- It fails to address the most significant issues pertaining to the role of digital tech and the science underlying it, notably the future relationships between machines and humans, the environmental harms caused by the design and use of digital tech, and the increasing enslavement (loss of freedoms) of the majority of the world's people through and by the activities of digital tech companies of all sizes.

For the long read, read on… (also available as a .pdf here).

Context of the Global Digital Compact.
As the Digital Watch Observatory has so accurately commented, "The GDC is the latest step in a lengthy policy journey to have, at least, a shared understanding of key digital principles globally and, at most, common rules that will guide the development of our digital future". Like all such initiatives, however, it reflects a very specific set of interests, and it is helpful to begin by briefly trying to unravel these.

There has been concern for a long time about the increasingly large number of overlapping international multi-stakeholder gatherings that have been created by different interest groups to discuss the interlinkages between digital tech and human life (for a detailed discussion of the origins of these, see my *Reclaiming ICT4D*, OU, 2017). Three are particularly interesting: ICANN, WSIS, and the IGF. The Internet Corporation for assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) created in 1998 was initially designed as a mechanism to transfer the policy and technical management of the DNS to a non-profit organisation based in the USA, and largely reflects private sector interests in the Internet. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process began with Summits in Geneva and Tunis in 2003 and 2005, that brought together UN agencies, governments and the private sector, and has since evolved to discuss and report on 14 action lines relating to the "information society". In large part it serves the interests of UN agencies responsible for delivering on these in the

context of the SDGs. The claim that WSIS initially placed insufficient emphasis on the needs and interests of civil society led to the foundation of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) first convened in 2006 essentially as a discussion forum without any direct decision-making authority.

WSIS, Geneva, 2003

All of these processes and institutions make claims to multi-stakeholderism (but define these in rather different ways), and all frequently discuss very similar themes and topics, again largely reflecting the varied interests of those participating. Many of the same people (or those who can afford it) are to be found at all three gatherings, discussing similar issues in similar cavernous conference centres. In addition to these three main international gatherings, countless other more focused series of gatherings and events are held, such as those convened by ISOC and IEEE, alongside the regular series of digital events convened by different UN agencies such as the ITU, UNCTAD and UNESCO, as well as specific conferences such as the ICT4D series or the GCCS London Process (Global Conference on Cyber Space) meetings between 2011 and 2017 that initially focused on cybersecurity. Again each of these represents and serves the interests and agendas of different interest groups.

A fundamental problem with the sheer quantity and frequency of these gatherings is that only large, powerful and rich entities are really able to participate in them all. Despite the efforts of many convenors to make some of these events more open and accessible, online and hybrid events have not yet really made a significant positive impact into opening up international discourse on digital tech and the Internet, so that small states and economically poorer entities can participate fully and effectively. Frustration with the proliferation of such meetings, and the urgency of the issues relating to digital tech for the planet and its human inhabitants has therefore precipitated calls for there to be a single, overarching framework for coordination. At first sight, this may seem to be a reasonable proposition, but it is essential to dig beneath the surface to understand the interests underlying the formulation of the Global Digital Compact, and its likely impact and conclusions. It is these interests that have shaped the new discourse, and especially the questions being asked in the ongoing global consultation due to close at the end of April 2023

These reflect a particular agenda, that will not serve the interests of the mass of the world's population, and especially the poorest and most marginalised.

ICANN meeting in Singapore, 2014

Origins
I remember about a decade ago talking with a young and enthusiastic member of the UN's Office of Information and Communication (OICT) who surprised me by saying that they intended to take over all co-ordination of digital tech within the UN system. He came from a technical background, and appeared to know little about the vast amount of work that had been done in recent years by those of us working at the interface between technology and "international development". In origin, the OICT was essentially the entity providing UN personnel with appropriate digital tools and processes to collaborate effectively, and in my understanding at that time it was nothing to do with the UN's support for global policy making or programme/project implementation relating to digital tech on the ground.[ii] Other UN bodies such as the ITU, UNESCO, UNDP, and UNDESA had years of experience in supporting global digital policy and practice. This conversation nevertheless reflected four crucial features: competition within the UN system; the power and ambition of people within the UN Secretariat based in New York (USA); the dominance of a technical and scientist perspective; and the energy and arrogance of youth. I thought little more of this conversation, unwisely dismissing it as mere aspiration, that could not possibly succeed, especially given the good work being done on digital tech for development (or ICT4D) by my many good friends in other UN agencies. Little did I know then about some of the ways in which the UN system operates, and the interests that it serves.[iii]

At about the same time, there was widespread ongoing discussion within the UN system and beyond about the post-2015 development goals. I had personally argued vehemently that the world needed some very clear statements, and perhaps targets, relating to digital tech in the proposed new goals, but there seemed little appetite for this among most of those involved in shaping them.[iv] In my role as Secretary General of the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation (CTO), I nevertheless co-ordinated a statement on the role of ICTs in the post-2015 Development Goals by all of our members (mainly governments but also

companies), which was published on 7 October 2014 laying out 8 principles, and proposing one goal and three targets. The document concluded that "For ICTs to be used effectively for development interventions, there must be affordable and universal access". Ironically, it took the UN system (The Office of the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology and the International Telecommunication Union) until April 2022 to create a set of 15 aspirational targets for 2030 that were intended to achieve "universal and meaningful digital connectivity in the decade of action" (see further below). I cannot help but think that I should have pushed even harder for the proposal that we crafted eight years earlier within the CTO. If we had been able to achieve what we then proposed, much of the subsequent turmoil and wasteful infighting represented by the recent actions of the UN Secretariat could have been avoided.

In July 2018, the UN Secretary General's office then announced the convening of a High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation (HLPDC) "to advance proposals to strengthen cooperation in the digital space among Governments, the private sector, civil society, international organisations, academia, the technical community and other relevant stakeholders".[v] It is not easy to identify exactly how and why this process was initiated, especially when reasonably good co-ordinating mechanisms already exist within the UN system, notably the Chief Executive's Board (CEB) and the High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP).[vi] However, the composition of the Panel would seem to support the persistent rumours that a former President and CEO of ICANN might have persuaded the government of an Arab Gulf state, both with strong private sector connections, to lobby the UN Secretary General's Office to create such a panel. The panel itself had 20 members, who according to its terms of reference were meant to be "eminent leaders from Governments, private sector, academia, the technical community, and civil society led by two co-chairs".[vii] The two co-chairs (Melinda Gates and Jack Ma) were both heavily involved in successful private sector entities and had little prior engagement in implementing programmes that might beneficially impact the world's poorest and most marginalised through digital tech. Although half of the panel were women, and there was indeed also some "youth" representation, the overall panel was almost exclusively made up of individuals from the private sector, rich countries, and academics with interests in innovation and the latest advanced technologies. Only three people had any substantial involvement with civil society, and the voices of the poor and marginalised, especially from small island developing states (SIDS) were largely absent. I would even venture to suggest that almost none of the panel had any real practical engagement on the ground with, or substantial understanding of, the use of digital technologies in international development, other than from a top-down, corporate or scientistic perspective (see more below). However, the small secretariat was led by two people, one of whom did indeed have substantial expertise and understanding of many of the crucial issues around the use of digital tech in development.

Once created the panel did then consult quite widely. As the Geneva Internet Platform (digwatch) summarised, "Between June 2018 and June 2019 the Panel organised several in person meetings, discussions, workshops, international visits to the Silicon Valley, China, India, Kenya, Belgium and Israel as well as online meetings". This led to the publication in June 2019 of the panel's short report *The Age of Digital Interdependence*.[viii] Many of the people participating in these

meetings did indeed have good experience of the interface between digital tech and international development, and a considerable number of civil society organisations also participated in the discussions. However, I was struck by three things: first, the questions being asked mainly reflected the interests of the UN Secretariat and those on the panel; second there was very little new being said; and third the choice of countries visited excluded many of the poorest and most marginalised.[ix] Many, if not most, of the participants in the consultations were regular attendees at global gatherings such as the IGF, WSIS annual forums and ICANN meetings, and their collective knowledge already existed in the global community. It was fun to meet up with them again in a new virtual space, although many of us reflected during the process that we were just repeating what we had long been saying many times previously. There was absolutely no need to go to the expense and complexity of creating a panel of "experts" who actually had little real knowledge themselves of the key issues.

The outcome of these deliberations was nevertheless presented in June 2020 as the Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation. In large part this reflects some fine work by the HLPDC secretariat in trying to mesh these discussions with existing and well-established principles of good practice in the field. The roadmap highlighted eight key areas for action:

- Achieving universal connectivity by 2030—everyone should have safe and affordable access to the internet.
- Promoting digital public goods to unlock a more equitable world—the internet's open source, public origins should be embraced and supported.
- Ensuring digital inclusion for all, including the most vulnerable—under-served groups need equal access to digital tools to accelerate development.
- Strengthening digital capacity building—skills development and training are needed around the world.
- Ensuring the protection of human rights in the digital era—human rights apply both online and offline.
- Supporting global cooperation on artificial intelligence that is trustworthy, human-rights based, safe and sustainable and promotes peace.
- Promoting digital trust and security— calling for a global dialogue to advance the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Building a more effective architecture for digital cooperation—make digital governance a priority and focus the United Nation's approach.

It is scarcely surprising that all of these had featured prominently in the WSIS Action Lines that were developed during and following the summits in 2003 and 2005. There was very little at all new in them, although of course they were presented as being novel and important.[x] Moreover, the roadmap also included the rather bizarre statement that "the United Nations is ready to serve as a platform for multi-stakeholder policy dialogue on…emerging technologies".[xi] Somehow, the entire effort of UN agencies over the last decade, when the UN was already providing platforms for such dialogue seemed to have been quietly ignored. I have long puzzled over this, but on reflection it is only really intelligible in the context of my earlier discussion with staff at OICT. What it really seems to have meant was that the UN Secretariat under the Office of the Secretary General was now going to take central stage in providing that platform. This was reiterated in the UN General

Assembly's assertion in 2020 (GA resolution 75/1) that "the United Nations can provide a platform for all stakeholders to participate in such deliberations." This only makes sense if it refers to the central Secretariat of the UN providing the platform.

The UN Secretary General then proceeded with establishing the office of his Envoy on Technology, and in January 2021 appointed the former Chilean diplomat and long-term UN official Fabrizio Hochschild[xii] to the role, despite being aware that complaints had previously been raised about his behaviour. If that was not worrying enough, immediately on his appointment Hochschild acknowledged on Twitter that he did not know much about the interface between digital tech and international development:

Fabrizio Hochschild ✔ @HochschildF · Jan 23, 2021 ···
Deeply honoured that @UN Secretary-General @antonioguterres has appointed me as his first Envoy on Technology (@UNTechEnvoy). I look forward to consulting closely with all Member States and other partners in my new role.

Thread below on my first thoughts: (1/8)

◯ 117   ⬭ 296   ♡ 1,189   �ɪⅼⅼ   ⬆

Fabrizio Hochschild ✔   ···
@HochschildF

Though a relative newcomer to the tech field, I spent many years working alongside survivors of war & poverty, victims of human rights abuses & those w/ limited access to development opportunities. Amidst current tech debates, I draw my bearings from their hopes & needs. (2/8)

1:27 AM · Jan 23, 2021   [xiii]

Five days after his appointment, Hochschild was placed on leave, pending an investigation into his behaviour, and a year later it was reported that he was no longer employed by the UN. It is very hard to understand how the UN Secretary General could have appointed someone with so little knowledge of the field, and with such a dubious track record of behaviour in the UN to such an important role.[xiv] Either it reflects incompetence, ignorance, or once again the effect of specific interests working behind the scenes within the UN system to achieve both individual and organisational goals.

The Office of the Tech Envoy nevertheless continued its work under the interim leadership of the Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs. In September 2021 the UN Secretary General then produced his next report, _Our Common Agenda_, which followed on from GA resolution 75/1 a year earlier. This rambling (wide-ranging) and aspirational document was in part an attempt to salvage something from the impending wreckage of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. As its summary states, "Our Common Agenda is, above all, an agenda of action designed to accelerate the implementation of existing agreements, including the Sustainable Development Goals".[xv] The seventh of its twelve commitments was on improving digital cooperation, and slimmed down the earlier list of issues in the _Roadmap…_ to seven key proposals forming an agenda for the new Global Digital Compact:
- Connect all people to the internet, including all schools
- Avoid internet fragmentation
- Protect data
- Apply human rights online

- Introduce accountability criteria for discrimination and misleading content
- Promote regulation of artificial intelligence
- Digital commons as a global public good

However, *Our Common Agenda* says little as to how these are to be achieved. It has been fascinating to watch the activity of senior UN officials and their staff in different agencies scurrying to position themselves in response to these proposals, seeking to protect their existing portfolios of activities and gain advantage over others in delivering these agendas. The initiative has, though, in some instances also led to increased dialogue and positive collaboration between like-minded individuals and agencies.

Our Common Agenda thus provided the foundations for the *Global Digital Compact* which will be agreed at the ambitiously titled *Summit of the Future* in September 2024. The important thing to remember about this is the *interests* that underlie its creation as outlined above. These are primarily global capital, the advocates of neo-liberalism, and the rich and powerful states and para-statal entities, as well as the UN and its agencies. This is all too evident in the language used in *Our Common Agenda*. Some examples of this include statement such as:
- "The Fourth Industrial Revolution has changed the world" (p.62). This is a damaging myth. The so-called 4IR is just a construct developed by those promoting a heroic vision of technological scientism, and it ignores the argument that the current rapid expansion of digital tech is merely a product of the existing logic of capitalism.[xvi]
- "The Internet has provided access to information for billions, thereby fostering collaboration, connection and sustainable development" (p.62), largely ignoring the fact that it is also a means through which people are increasingly exploited and harmed (although see below).
- The Internet "is a global public good that should benefit everyone, everywhere" (p.62), without recognising that the notion of global public goods is frequently used by those companies that can afford it to extract surplus profit and exploit users for their own corporate gain.
- "Reaffirming the fundamental commitment to connecting the unconnected", without acknowledging the rights of people to remain unconnected.

There are, though, importantly also some positive signs of a more nuanced and balanced approach to these issues in *Our Common Future*, including recognition that
- "Currently the potential harms of the digital domain risk overshadowing its benefits" (p.62), although these harms are all too often ignored by those advocating a belief that digital tech is a solution to all the world's problems, especially those relating to the SDGs.
- "Serious and urgent ethical, social and regulatory questions confront us, including… the emergence of large technology companies as geopolitical actors and arbiters of difficult social questions without the responsibilities commensurate with their outsized profits" (pp.62-63). I would agree with this observation, although it is 20 years too late, and the horse has already bolted.

As well as driving the GDC forward, the Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Technology has over the last year also developed its nine areas of ongoing work, based largely on the *Roadmap*, and working with the ITU produced in April 2022 the

new set of targets for universal and meaningful connectivity by 2030 referred to above. In June 2022, The UN Secretary General eventually appointed a new Tech Envoy who was none other than the Executive Director and Co-Lead of his High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, an Indian diplomat with a recent tech background in AI and lethal autonomous weapons systems.[xvii] Several months later in October 2022 Sweden and Rwanda were appointed as co-facilitators to lead the intergovernmental process on the Global Digital Compact,[xviii] and in January 2023 the process of consultation on the Compact began in earnest.[xix] Informal discussions were held with member states, observes and stakeholders in January and February 2023, and Stakeholders have been invited to contribute to the online consultation to be concluded at the end of April 2023.[xx] In parallel, a series of eight thematic "deep dives" are being held between March and June 2023 based on the seven GDC proposal areas and a concluding "dive" on accelerating progress on the SDGs. Great emphasis is being placed on an open and inclusive process.

Still image from recording of UN informal consultation with Member States and observers, 30 January 2023 (video at https://media.un.org/en/asset/k15/k15tc09dqf). Interestingly, the opening statement by Ambassador Claver Gatete from Rwanda emphasised the need "To consider all that science can offer". How many representative of SIDS and the least deveoped countries are participating?

However, the fundamental problem with the Global Digital Compact is in the way that its consultation process is structured. Although respondents can submit supplementary information, the main survey invites comment specifically on the seven proposal areas or themes, focusing on two aspects: core principles that should be adhered to, and commitment to bring about these principles. The focus on these seven themes is deeply problematic because they do not necessarily represent the most important issues that need to be discussed around the future of digital tech and humanity, and largely reflect the interests of those who shaped the lengthy process giving rise to the compact as described in the section above. The entire structure of the GDC thus mainly serves the interests of ambitious (and/or rich) individuals, organisations and countries, that often have little real understanding of, or care for, the lives of the world's poorest and most marginalised people. Responses within this framing will thus serve to reinforce the power of those interests rather than changing them fundamentally. Every one of the seven areas listed for comment is presented as a positive assertion, and all could be contested. For example,

- Why should internet fragmentation be avoided? Whose interests does this mainly serve?
- Why should the focus be on the application of human rights online? Surely this should also be matched by a focus on responsibilities.[xxi]
- Whose interests does the notion of digital commons as a global common good really serve? Is it not a mechanism through which the rich can access and exploit something that is claimed as a common good, as with the exploitation of space by satellite companies.
- Why is there no thematic question about the environmental impact of digital tech? Digital tech causes immense harm to the environment, alongside the positive benefits that its advocates claim it provides.
- Why does the theme around connecting people to the Internet only emphasise education? Surely the seven "basic needs" of air, water, food, shelter, sanitation, touch, sleep and personal space are at least as important, as too more simply are health and security.
- Why is there no question focusing on the implications of increasing integration between humans and machines that threatens the very nature of human life?

The example of the way in which the interface between digital tech and education is presented in the GDC agenda mirrors the account thereof in *Our Common Agenda* which provides a classic example of the ways in which very specific interests coalesce:

> "Summit preparations will involve governments, students, teachers and leading United Nations entities, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). They will also draw on the private sector and major technology companies, which can contribute to the digital transformation of education systems".[xxii]

This quotation for example clearly indicates the interest of three UN agencies. It is also aspirational in thinking that it is actually feasible to bring together not only the views of governments but also of students and teachers in any comprehensive, representative and rigorous way. Above all, though, it makes very explicit the positive role of the private sector and especially technology companies. No mention is made of civil society organisations, or other important stakeholders. It represents a vision where the involvement of the private sector is seen as being overwhelmingly positive. It fails to acknowledge that connecting every school will enable private sector companies to expand their markets, to extract huge amounts of data from schoolchildren and teachers to improve their systems, and to increase their profits dramatically.

The growth agenda, innovation and science
Underlying these issues with the GDC is a fundamental problem with UN agendas around international development and the SDGs more widely. This is the belief that economic growth will eliminate poverty. In recent years, this is turn has been supplemented by what I call the "innovation fetish", whereby governments and UN

agencies alike have become beguiled by the idea of innovation, and particularly innovation in the digital tech sector, to deliver on their economic growth ideology.

In essence, most mainstream development agendas over at least the last 25 years have been driven by the obsession that economic growth is the solution to poverty reduction. This is based largely on a conceptualisation of poverty as being absolute, and that economic growth will necessarily reduce or, as is often claimed, eliminate it. However, economic growth raises the potential for relative poverty actually to increase; the rich get richer and the poorest stay where they are, or are even further immiserated.[xxiii] Aligned with the dominant agenda of neo-liberalism, this has encouraged governments across the world to find ways of fostering economic growth driven primarily by the private sector. In the telecommunication sector, for example, this is expressed clearly in the way in which most regulators focus more on the interests of the telecom companies as drivers of growth than they do on equity issues in terms of delivering services to the most marginalised. The innovation fetish that emerged during the 2010s was conceptualised and implemented largely as an accelerator of this trend, bringing renewed vitality to the idea that science and innovation are crucial for increasing economic growth and thus improving human well-being. This applies as much at the national or local scale as it does at the international. The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) thus produced a new strategy in 2012 for innovation and evidence-based approaches to humanitarian crises,[xxiv] and later in the decade considerably expanded its emphasis on innovation, particularly with respect to digital tech. As DFID's senior innovation advisor commented in 2019, "We need to acknowledge the increasingly digital world that we live in. It's not that innovation is synonymous with digital, but it's making the most of new technologies and the digital economy".[xxv] Within the UN system, the latter part of the 2010s also saw a dramatic increase in emphasis on innovation, for example through the creation of the UN Innovation Network in 2015. I distinctly remember sitting in a meeting if the HLCP when innovation was being discussed, and almost everyone in the room appeared hugely impressed by it! Perhaps this was in part because the UN leadership was strongly advocating in it; perhaps too it was in part because few of them actually understood what was being said. Innovation is inherently associated with good things, even though most innovations fail. Above all, though, I it almost inevitably serve the interests of those involved in innovation, especially scientists and the wider system of private sector companies and corporations, particularly in the tech sector.

These interests, full of the optimism of entrepreneurship, have convincingly beguiled governments, civil society organisations and UN agencies more widely that they have the means to solve all of the world's problems, particularly with respect to economic growth and international development. Yet, all too often they turn out to be solutions in search of a problem, as has classically been the case with blockchain. They are grounded in the widespread belief that "Science" and the dominant current scientific method are not only the best, but also the only way that truth about the world can be conceptualised and expressed. However, while such scientism has proved to be very good at explaining in great detail how things work and how they can be developed, it has led to the creation of a "Science" that does not have the ability to reflect on its own construction.[xxvi] It lacks a moral compass. It is completely unable to address the thought that just because something can be done does not mean that it should be done. With its emphasis on what is (the

"positive") it does not have the ability to address what should be (the "normative). Scientists are fully responsible for the science that they do, both for its potential benefits, but also for its unintended negative consequences. They have a choice. They can serve the interests of global capital, or they can instead address issues of equity and equality, and work to create a fairer and more equal society.

A fundamental problem with the Global Digital Compact is thus that it is based on this flawed belief that trying technically to resolve challenges with detailed aspects of how the digital economy operates effectively will actually improve the life experiences of the majority of the world's people. The seven issues it raises are all concerned with making the digital tech sector more efficient within a neo-liberal framework, so that the owners and shareholders of private sector companies can extract yet further profit and surplus value as more and more people are enslaved within their virtual worlds. It does not address the fundamental questions about the role of science, about the innovation fetish, about the kind of world that most people want to live in, or the false consciousness that has been woven about the good of science and technology,

The co-option of the UN by digital global capital.
The last 25 years have seen the gradual permeation (or subversion) of international discourse within the UN system by global capital. This is nowhere clearer than in discussions and practices around the role of digital tech within international development. Having had the privilege of leading one of the early development partnerships between governments, private sector companies, civil society organisations and international organisations specifically using digital tech to achieve development outcomes, I have long been conscious that some of what we did may have contributed to this process. However, I still consider that we had checks and balances in place to ensure that the ultimate beneficiaries were indeed some of Africa's poorest and most marginalised children.[xxvii] I also like to believe that most of our partners were indeed well-intentioned and altruistic.   Nevertheless, it has been remarkable to think back to the end of last century and compare the relatively low extent to which private sector companies were engaged in and with the UN system then, and the very considerable extent to which they are now involved. Indeed, as I argue above, the entire process leading to the creation of the Global Digital Compact, and especially the Secretary General's HLPDC, has been very heavily influenced by the private sector. Indeed, it is possible to suggest that it represents one of the very best examples of the co-option of the UN by global capital.[xxviii]

There are at least six main reasons why private sector digital tech companies have become so influential within the UN system:
- The UN has insufficient funds to fulfil its ambitions, and is therefore eager to attract external sources of funding for its work, either through donations or partnerships.
- Telecommunication companies have been involved in international agencies such as the ITU and the CTO since their foundations in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Close relationships between companies and governments were central to the emergence and growth of the sector, and international agreements were necessary to enable efficient communication between different parts of the world.[xxix]

- Most UN agencies do not have the relevant technical and scientific expertise possessed by the private sector to be able sufficiently to understand the creation and use of digital tech to develop appropriate policy guidance and programme implementation.
- Digital tech companies feature very prominently in driving forward the economic growth agenda that the UN system has deemed essential for delivering the SDGs.[xxx]
- Digital tech has also been pitched by these companies as a highly effective technical solution to many of the most pressing issues facing humankind.
- These companies, driven by an apparently inexhaustible desire to expand their markets and develop new ways to extract ever greater surplus value, have identified UN agencies and the Secretariat as a perfect vehicle for achieving these ambitions.

However, In a prescient paper published in 2007, Jens Martens identified eight important risks and negative side effects associated with partnerships between the UN and the private sector:[xxxi]
- Growing influence of the business sector in the political discourse and agenda setting.
- Risks to reputation: choosing the wrong partner
- Distorting competition and the pretence of representativeness
- Proliferation of partnership initiatives and fragmentation of global governance
- Unstable financing – a threat to the sufficient provision of public goods
- Dubious complementarity – governments escape responsibility
- Selectivity in partnerships – governance gaps remain
- Trends toward elite models of global governance - weakening of representative democracy

All of these have come to pass to a greater or lesser extent. There is no excuse for anyone in the UN not to have been aware of them. The leadership of the UN has therefore been complicit in this process whereby global governance has been co-opted by the private sector. Many might have done so in the belief that this was the only way to deliver the MDGs and the SDGs, but these agendas have failed.

This is not to say that the private sector cannot contribute hugely to international development, and that close relationships between governments and the private sector are not essential for the development of wise policies and practices especially relating to the creation and use of digital tech. However, it is to argue that the balance of power and influence has shifted far too far towards the tech companies and global corporations, whose fundamental interest is to make profits for their owners, staff and shareholders. Companies go bust if they cannot make profits. This is fine, but using digital tech to serve the interests of the poor can never be led by the profit motive. There needs to be a fundamental realignment towards wise government and a streamlined UN system[xxxii] so that the profit-focused drive to rapid economic growth and expansion can be moderated by citizen-focused policies and practices in the interests of all. To be fair, *Our Common Agenda* does indeed briefly emphasise a commitment to renewing the social contract between governments and their people, and to using measures other than GDP to measure development outcomes, but it extremely unclear how these ambitions will be delivered, and as

long as the private sector (and economists!) retain their power within the UN system this seems unlikely to change substantially in the near future.

A final point that also needs to be made is that although some of the intended outcomes of the GDC may be desirable for many stakeholders, they will be very complex to deliver, and there is little evidence that the UN Secretary General or the Office of his Envoy on Technology have the capacity or support to be able to deliver them sufficiently comprehensively and rigorously in the time scale envisaged. The *Summit of the Future* is only 17 months away. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is still continuing, tensions between the USA and both China and Russia are increasing, and new political configurations are emerging in the eastern Mediterranean and South-West Asia. This makes it extremely difficult to imagine global agreement on the issues that the GDC aspires to address.   Moreover, discussions on subjects such as whether we should have multiple Internets or a single global internet, how to ensure good ethical use of new technologies such as AI, or how to get the balance right over digital privacy concerns have been ongoing for many years and involve fairly intractable positions. Now does not seem to be a good time to try to resolve them.

Constructive alternatives
As mentioned earlier, I am surprised that so many people and organisation seem to be signing up to the UN Secretary General's Global Digital Compact Agenda (or at least the agenda that staff in the UN Secretariat have given him to front up), especially when so many conversations I have had in private with individuals in government, the private sector, civil society and various parts of the UN over the last year seem to consider it to be deeply problematic. Clearly, part of the agenda for UN agencies is that they need to be seen to be being supportive of the Secretary General, and this is entirely understandable, especially when they have strong interests in the outcomes. However, national governments, companies, and civil society organisations can indeed opt out. If, as I surmise, the GDC process is not going to produce anything new or of value – it simply cannot do so in the time available – then there is little to lose by not participating. To be sure, there is a natural fear of being left out of the decision making process (but most of the world's population is already left out), and of not being able to influence something that could perhaps have some value, but if enough entities indeed choose not to contribute then this would not only be a reflection of what they really think about the process, but it would help to ensure that it cannot be seen to have legitimacy as a representation of global opinion.

It is easy to be critical, but much harder to implement wise policies and practices. To conclude constructively, though, I offer the following as an alternative set of propositions about how we can move towards a more substantial and sustainable future for global deliberations around the future of digital tech:

- First, **it is much better to try to do a few things well, than to fail in trying to do too much**. Few of the 169 SDG targets and 232 unique indicators,[xxxiii] for example, seem likely to be achieved by 2030, not least because there are just too many for them to be realistically addressed.[xxxiv] Likewise, the recently agreed digital targets[xxxv] already seem to be unachievable; it is no excuse that they are merely called "aspirational targets". Instead we need to identify two or three of the most important issues relating to digital tech, and ensure that

they are appropriately considered, that binding wise agreements are reached about them, and that practices are implemented to deliver on them.

- Second, for me, **the most important issue is how to achieve equity in the impact of digital tech**, so that rather than increasing inequalities digital tech can be appropriately used by the poorest and most marginalised to enhance their lives. My views on this have changed little since I helped to draft the paper on the role of ICTs in the post-2015 development agenda agreed by the CTO's members in 2014. Yet the untied world community has made little headway over the last decade in achieving this.

- Third, there are enormous chasms of trust between governments in different parts of the world, between governments and UN agencies, and between UN agencies (including the UN Secretariat) themselves.[xxxvi] One way in which this can be reduced is to **begin with areas where agreement is most likely to be achieved**, and then move on to more intractable areas. The example most often given about an area of common agreement concerning digital tech is on the harms caused by child online pornography. Yet despite numerous global initiatives, and the work of individual organisations such as the Internet Watch Foundation,[xxxvii] the scale of this problem seems to have become worse rather than better. If we cannot make progress on this small area of deep concern, how can the UN Secretary General's ambitious GDC be expected to have an impact.

- Fourth, it needs to be realised that **some of the most difficult issues around the future of digital tech require many long discussions held privately and confidentially** between the most powerful global players, be they governments or corporations.[xxxviii] People of good will – and they exist in most governments and companies that I have worked with – must be given the time and space to build trust, and work collaboratively to achieve outcomes in the interest of us all. It might be that these need to take place between representatives of the leadership of regional groupings of states rather than trying to reach agreement between every state within the UN. However, realistically, it is the most powerful players who will have to commit to resolving these issues in the interests of all.

- Fifth, those engaged in these global deliberations around the future of digital tech need to be **realistic rather than idealistic**. There is far too much posturing and over-ambitious rhetoric in much of the present work of the UN Secretary General and those working most closely with him on this issue. Naïve gestures help no-one, least alone the world's poorest and most marginalised people.

- Sixth, **those involved in these discussions must stop trying to reinvent the wheel**, and instead learn from the wealth of existing knowledge that has been built up in the 20 years since the first gathering of the World Summit on the Information Society held in Geneva. The ongoing GDC consultation is highly unlikely to add anything new, and what matters most is the process through which agreement can be gained on what needs to be done collectively to address the future of the machine-human interface.

- Seventh it is crucial that **we abandon the naïve belief in environmental determinism** that dominates so much rhetoric and practice in the GDC discourse. Digital tech is not a solution to the world's problems, but their use is often the cause of many of them. It is essential to shift the balance of discussion to one which recognises that the design, construction and use of

digital tech serves very specific interests, and that they cause both negative harms and positive benefits. Emphasis needs to be on identifying and mitigating the harms so that the benefits can be enjoyed by all.

- Eighth, **there needs to be a fundamental restructuring of the UN system**, so that its decisions are informed by, but less influenced by, the private sector.[xxxix] As this paper has suggested, the GDC process is part of the problem not its solution.

- Ninth, rather than centralising control of the digital dialogue within the central UN Secretariat, and a specific office for a Tech Envoy,[xl] it would seem to make far more sense to **situate discussion and debate within and through existing UN mechanisms and agencies** that have very real and well established expertise.[xli] This would require resourcing them appropriately to deliver sensible outcomes. Surely the CEB and HLCP, with appropriate resourcing, could have been tasked with taking this agenda forward. After all, the HLCP was established to be responsible to the CEB specifically "for fostering coherence, cooperation and coordination on the programme dimensions of strategic issues facing the United Nations system".[xlii] Furthermore, the UN should seek to reduce the plethora of its events and conferences around digital tech, to reduce the very considerable overlap and duplication of effort.

- Finally, everyone involved in these processes needs to place **much more evidence on learning from the past rather than failing through adherence to the innovation fetish**. There is a vast wealth of collective knowledge about the interface between technology and human society, and increasing amounts of relevant research are being produced at an ever increasing pace. All we really need is the will actually to do something wise about it, in the interests of the many rather than the few.

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[i] Throughout this piece, I have deliberately avoided naming individuals partly because I am more concerned in the structural aspects of the processes surrounding the emergence of the Global Digital Compact, but also because some of what I write is conjecture and I do not want to appear in any way to be criticising the actions of individuals, some of whom remain good friends.

[ii] Interestingly, the remit and role of the Chief Information Technology Officer today is summarised as follows on the OICT site: "All Secretariat entities report to Mr. Bernardo Mariano Jr., Chief Information Technology Officer, Assistant Secretary-General, on issues relating to all ICT-related activities, resource management, standards, security, architecture, policies, and guidance. The Office is headquartered in New York City".

[iii] For some of my observations of the main challenges facing the UN, see A new UN for a new (and better) global order (Part One): seven challenges and for some suggested solutions to such challenges see https://unwin.wordpress.com/2022/01/13/a-new-un-for-a-new-and-better-global-order-part-two-seven-solutions-for-seven-challenges/

[iv] See, for example, my ICTs and the failure of the Sustainable Development Goals written in 2015, and followed up in 2018 by ICTs and the failure of the SDGs.

[v] For the short terms of reference, see https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/HLP-on-Digital-Cooperation_Terms-of-Reference.pdf. For a chronology of the wider process, see also https://dig.watch/processes/hlp.

[vi] Although the CEB and HLCP are often criticised, my own experience of working with them suggests that they have huge potential to support effective collaboration between UN agencies.

[vii] See https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/HLP-on-Digital-Cooperation_Terms-of-Reference.pdf.

viii Excluding its cover, this was only two and a quarter pages long, but provided the basis for the digital roadmap summarised below.

ix Kenya ranks as high as around 138th and Kenya 146th out of 193 countries in terms of GDP per capita https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(nominal)_per_capita.

x I cannot help but wonder how many of the panel had attended the original WSIS Summit Meetings in Geneva and Tunis, or had followed the existing processes noted earlier in this paper.

xi See https://www.un.org/techenvoy/content/about: "The United Nations Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation responds to the report of the High-Level Panel, setting out the Secretary-General's vision and noting that "the United Nations is ready to serve as a platform for multi-stakeholder policy dialogue on…emerging technologies"."

xii He is specifically named here because of the importance of this incident, and the widespread reporting thereof, although I do not know him personally. See for example https://www.passblue.com/2021/01/27/the-new-un-tech-envoy-is-put-on-leave-pending-an-investigation, https://www.passblue.com/2021/10/20/moves-at-un-signal-that-the-search-for-a-new-tech-envoy-may-be-underway, https://www.politico.eu/article/un-fires-tech-envoy-probe-harassment-claims/,

xiii https://twitter.com/HochschildF/status/1352789899938824192.

xiv See https://www.politico.eu/article/un-fires-tech-envoy-probe-harassment-claims/ for a summary of the case against Hochschild.

xv Our Common Agenda, p.3 https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf. Note my strong belief that the failure of the SDGs was built into their creation, and that they have significantly harmed the lives of the world's poorest and most marginalised by their emphasis on economic growth rather than equality and equity. To be more positive, *Our Common Agenda* does address some of these issues, and to that extent its commitment to renewing the social contract between governments and their people, and to using measures other than GDP to measure development outcomes are to be welcomed.

xvi See Unwin (2019) Why the notion of a Fourth Industrial Revolution is so problematic.

xvii https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/profiles/amandeep-gill

xviii See https://www.un.org/techenvoy/sites/www.un.org.techenvoy/files/PGA-CoFacilitators-letters_GDC-roadmap.pdf.

xix https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact/intergovernmental-process

xx The consultation process is described at https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact, with the guidance note for contribution at https://www.un.org/techenvoy/sites/www.un.org.techenvoy/files/Global-Digital-Compact_how-to-engage-guide.pdf. A summary of submissions is available at https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact/submissions.

xxi See Unwin (2014) Prolegomena on Human Rights and Responsibilities

xxii https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf, p.42.

xxiii For a detailed justification of this, see Unwin, T. (2007), No end to poverty, *Journal of Development Studies*, 43, 929-53.

xxiv DFID (2012) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67438/prom-innov-evi-bas-appr-build-res-resp-hum-cris.pdf

xxv Root, R.L. (2019) Q&A: DFID innovation adviser on learning from failure, *devex*.

xxvi See Unwin, T. (1992) *The Place of Geography*, Longman which draws heavily on the work of the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas, and especially his books *Theory and Practice* and *Knowledge and Human Interests* (English translation titles).

xxvii Unwin, T. (2004) ICT and education in Africa: partnership, practice and knowledge sharing, *Review of African Political Economy*, 31, 150-60.

xxviii The Broadband Commission https://www.broadbandcommission.org/commissioners/ is another good example of the very strong integration of the private sector with UN agencies (ITU and UNESCO) and national governments.

xxix The ITU, for example, highlights that "Today, ITU is unique among United Nations agencies in bringing together not just 193 Member States, but also over 800 private sector companies and international and regional organizations, as well as more than 150 academic institutions" https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/itus-evolving-membership.aspx.

xxx Currently it is estimated that the digital economy contributes more than 15% of global GDP, and it aspires to contribute 30% by 2030 https://www.itp.net/business/dco-2030-digital-economy-to-contribute-30-of-global-gdp-and-create-30-million-jobs-by-2030, and

https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/08/digital-trust-how-to-unleash-the-trillion-dollar-opportunity-for-our-global-economy/#:~:text=The%20World%20Bank%20estimates%20that,faster%20than%20physical%20world%20GDP..

xxxi Martens, J. (2007). *Multistakeholder partnerships: Future models of multilateralism?* Berlin, Germany: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung; see also Unwin, T. (2005) *Partnerships in Development Practice: Evidence from Multi-Stakeholder ICT4D Partnership Practice in Africa*, Paris: UNESCO for the World Summit on the Information Society (93 pp.)

xxxii See my see A new UN for a new (and better) global order (Part One): seven challenges and for some suggested solutions to such challenges see https://unwin.wordpress.com/2022/01/13/a-new-un-for-a-new-and-better-global-order-part-two-seven-solutions-for-seven-challenges/

xxxiii https://sdg-tracker.org/

xxxiv https://unwin.wordpress.com/2018/04/23/icts-and-the-failure-of-the-sdgs/.

xxxv https://www.itu.int/itu-d/meetings/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2022/04/UniversalMeaningfulDigitalConnectivityTargets2030.pdf

xxxvi But one indication of the moribund state of the UN is the observation that the Presidency of the UN Security Council is currently held by a country that has invaded another sovereign state and in so doing has committed heinous atrocities at a scale not often witnessed in recent years.

xxxvii https://www.iwf.org.uk/news-media/.

xxxviii Note the wording here, focusing on "powerful" rather than "important". We need to recognise existing power structures, and work within them while at the same time trying to change them for the better.

xxxix For a much fuller discussion of my constructive critique of the UN system, see my A new UN for a new (and better) global order (Part One): seven challenges and for some suggested solutions to such challenges see https://unwin.wordpress.com/2022/01/13/a-new-un-for-a-new-and-better-global-order-part-two-seven-solutions-for-seven-challenges/

xl The Tech Envoy, Amandeep Singh Gill's personal background is primarily as an Indian diplomat (having joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1992, and serving thrice at headquarters in New Delhi in the Disarmament and International Security Affairs Division, 1998-2001, 2006-2010 and 2013-2016; https://www.crunchbase.com/person/amandeep-singh-gill). Although his bio on the Office of the Secretary-General's Envy on Technology says that he is "A thought leader on digital technology" (https://www.un.org/techenvoy/content/about), the experience he has in this field is primarily in digital health and AI, alongside his interests in nuclear disarmament. His role as Project Director and CEO of I-DAIR only began in 2021, and built on his work as one of the two co-leads of the HLPDC process (2018-19).

xli In the interests of transparency, it would be useful to know how much the UN Secretary General's entire digital exploration has cost, and how this money might have been spent better to achieve more desirable outcomes..

xlii https://unsceb.org/high-level-committee-programmes-hlcp.