

PNIF webinar 3 - *Avoiding Internet Fragmentation. Contributing to Operationalising the GDC Commitment ?*
19 November 2024

Summary of the discussion

Introduction

1. The IGF Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation (PNIF) was set up in 2022 to address the question of Internet Fragmentation, to raise awareness of actions and measures that risk fragmenting the Internet, and to facilitate discussion on what could be done to avoid such fragmentation. In 2022 and 2023, the PNIF developed its [PNIF Framework for discussing fragmentation](#).
2. In 2024 the PNIF continued to track the global discussion on Internet fragmentation and explore ways to contribute to fostering holistic multistakeholder dialogue on fragmentation. At the first PNIF webinar ([summary](#)), stakeholders confirmed that Internet fragmentation is still a matter of concern and stressed that it is important to focus on what one wants to achieve by avoiding fragmentation. The second PNIF webinar ([summary](#)) explored the outcomes of the UN Summit of the Future and how Internet fragmentation is addressed in the Global Digital Compact and what this means for the multistakeholder dialogue on fragmentation. This third webinar further unpacked the GDC article 29(c) and discusses how stakeholders can contribute to operationalising the commitment made by Member States.

Global Digital Compact commitment

3. In the [Global Digital Compact](#) UN Member States commit to '*Promote international cooperation among all stakeholders to prevent, identify and address risks of fragmentation of the Internet in a timely manner (SDG16)*' (Objective 3, art 29, (c)).

Summary of the Discussion

Internet fragmentation. Exploring the GDC commitment

The aim of the first discussion is to explore the meaning and interpretation of the commitment outlined in GDC Article 29(c) and to highlight questions and issues that require clarification for its follow-up.

4. The term 'fragmentation' appears only once in the GDC (Article 29(c)) in the context of internet fragmentation and once in the *Pact for the Future* (Action 38(e)), where it refers to the fragmentation of the multilateral system.

5. Internet fragmentation is portrayed as a negative phenomenon—a risk that must be prevented, identified, and addressed. This raises a logical question: what positive aspect needs to be preserved? The GDC, however, does not offer a clear answer or definition of what constitutes an unfragmented internet.
6. Article 29(c) falls under GDC Objective 3, which focuses on fostering an inclusive, open, safe, and secure digital space. It follows Article 26, where Member States ‘recognize that the Internet is a critical global facility for inclusive and equitable digital transformation. To fully benefit all, it must be open, global, interoperable, stable and secure.’
Can it be concluded that preventing fragmentation of the Internet means preserving this open, global, interoperable, stable and secure character ?.
7. Other language from the GDC should also be considered when interpreting Article 29(c). This includes the reference to "an inclusive, open, sustainable, fair, safe and secure digital future for all" in Article 4, to "an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space" in Article 7.3, and the description of the multistakeholder principle in Article 8(k): "Governments, the private sector, civil society, the technical community, academia and international and regional organizations, have roles and responsibilities in advancing an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital future. Our cooperation will be multistakeholder and harness the contributions of all." It would be useful to further explore the link between Article 29(c) and SDG 16¹ (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).
8. The risks of fragmentation often stem from unilateral actions taken to address issues within a national or local context. A key question remains: how can we better organise international cooperation to ensure these unilateral decisions/actions are addressed and/or not repeated??
9. It needs to be further clarified what specific and tangible impact the GDC aims to achieve, including what is perceived as the positive counterpart of a fragmented internet. The GDC was not developed through a multistakeholder process, and stakeholders can voluntarily choose to commit to it fully or partially. For UN Member States that adopted the GDC by consensus, and for the UN system, the document holds greater significance and serves as more than just a guideline. Other stakeholders can leverage the GDC to hold governments and UN institutions accountable to the commitment of Article 29(c)..

How can the Multistakeholder dialogue on Internet fragmentation contribute to operationalising the GDC commitment and other relevant processes, including the WSIS+20 review

The aim of the second discussion is to explore concrete actions the PNIF and other stakeholders can take to further an inclusive and holistic multistakeholder discussion on fragmentation that contribute to other relevant processes.

¹ <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/16-peace-justice-and-strong-institutions/>

10. Much of the discussion on the GDC follow-up focuses on Article 72, which requests the UN Secretary-General to submit a proposal for the establishment “of an office, building on and incorporating the activities and resources of the existing Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology, to facilitate system-wide coordination, working closely with existing mechanisms.”
11. It is equally important to consider the other elements outlined in the follow-up and review section, which spans Articles 64 to 74, and amongst other,
 - acknowledges a role for the IGF, the NRIs, the WSIS Forum, the WSIS+20 review, and the CSTD,
 - asks the SG to provide a GDC implementation map that reflects UN and stakeholder contributions ahead of the WSIS+20 review in 2025
 - foresees a High-Level Review of the Global Digital Compact in September 2027 (during the 82nd GA).
12. Based on Articles 64 to 74, one can conclude that no single office or authority has been granted the power to interpret the provisions of the GDC in an authoritative manner. This also means that work carried out, for example, in the IGF through the PNIF, remains highly relevant.

Towards a multistakeholder mechanism to monitor and evaluate progress

13. In light of the 2027 High-Level GDC Review, it is recommended to establish a robust and credible multistakeholder mechanism to monitor progress, evaluate, and report on the outcomes of the significant commitment made in Article 29(c).
14. The IGF/PNIF is well-positioned to contribute to the design of such a multistakeholder mechanism. As part of this work, the IGF/PNIF should continue to serve as a central platform for multistakeholder discussions on identifying risks of fragmentation and ways to address them. The responsibility for preventing and addressing risks of fragmentation, however, lies with policymakers, whose actions should, to an important extent, be locally driven but held accountable to the commitment outlined in Article 29(c).
15. 2027 is a very tight deadline to organise such a mechanism, collect the information and report, and the multistakeholder community should not delay in taking action; otherwise, they risk that a follow-up mechanism may be established without inclusive multistakeholder participation.
16. Key characteristics of such a mechanism for monitoring progress must include:
 - a) Global participation: It should involve internet communities from all regions across the world.
 - b) Multistakeholder engagement: The mechanism must include all stakeholders: governments, civil society, the technical community, and the user community (both businesses and individual internet users).
 - c) Structured and supported framework: It should be well-structured and supported, given the 2027 deadline, first preparations should start as early as possible and preferably in the first half of 2025.;

- d) Active outreach to and cooperation with the UN: The mechanism should actively engage with the UN Tech Envoy and later with the future Office, aiming to be recognized as primary mechanism for monitoring this particular commitment.

Additional comments

17. Additional observations were made regarding the “future of the IGF” discussion and how more permanent work could be integrated into the IGF model. Furthermore, it was suggested that the commitment to refrain from internet shutdowns is relatively weak and that efforts should be made to bring this critical issue within the scope of Article 29(c).

Next steps

18. The PNIF will present the outcomes of its webinars at the IGF meeting in Riyadh for further feedback and discussion. The PNIF's main session is scheduled for **Thursday, December 19, from 9:00 to 10:15 AM local time (6:00 to 7:15 AM UTC for online participants)**.
19. The PNIF continues to crowdsource examples of measures that cause or risk to cause fragmentation. Examples can be submitted via this [online form](#).

Acknowledgements

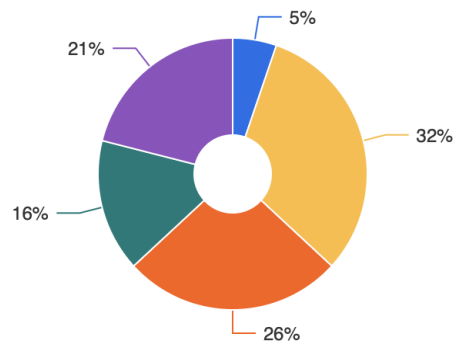
Thank you to all participants to the webinar whose input is incorporated in the above summary, the discussant *Mr Jorge Cancio* who helped to jumpstart the discussion; and the PNIF coordinating team, *Ms Bruna Martins dos Santos, Ms Sheetal Kumar, Mr Wim Degezelle*.

Annexe

During the webinar, a series of online polls were conducted to initiate the discussion. The results are presented below for reference.

1. Is your organisation doing something to ...

(19/19) 100% answered



■ to prevent risks of fragmentation ■ identify risks of fragmentation ■ address risks of fragmentation ■ none of the above ■ all of the above

2. If the PNIF compiles an outline for a report on 'art.29(c) one year later', what should be included in the outline

- the outline should outline how Art 29(c) has been received by the different stakeholders, how widely has Art 29(c) been operationalized by the stakeholders and what is the outcome after a year.
- The link between fragmentation to SDG 16, the different kinds of fragmentation that should be on government radar apart from internet shutdowns which got a specific mention in the GDC?
- Address concerns of those member countries who are not committed to GDC. We may try to provide some solutions to their fears.
- Efficacy of the mechanisms created by the UN (if any), take-up by different stakeholders (esp. governments and the UN in their roles), how much it has led to a decrease in fragmentation (if at all)...
- case study regarding war and Internet fragmentation
- Evaluation of individual actions - or failures to act - by governments and regulators that are directly relevant to 29 c) on risks and prevention.
- Communication
- I'm not sure
- using the framework developed earlier by the PNIF, look at relevant global digital policy/governance discussions and identify developments (positive or negative) in reference to the framework.
- centralization / consolidation, importance of the role of civil society