

IGF 2024
Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation
(PNIF)



IGF 2024

Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation

Output report

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The PNIF activities were prepared and coordinated by a *PNIF Coordinating team: Ms Sheetal Kumar*, PNIF Co-facilitator; *Ms Bruna Martins dos Santos*, PNIF Co-facilitator and MAG liaison; *Mr Wim Degezelle*, PNIF Consultant, IGF Secretariat.

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Executive Summary

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](#). The Framework conceptualises three key dimensions of fragmentation: *Fragmentation of the Internet User experience, Fragmentation of Internet Governance and Coordination, Fragmentation of the Internet's Technical Layer*. The goal of the Framework is to serve as a general guiding tool for continuing the dialogue about fragmentation and technical, political and commercial developments that may have an impact on fragmentation.

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. The year was marked by the UN Summit of the Future and the Global Digital Compact (GDC), which dominated many global Internet governance debates, and significantly influenced the PNIF's work plan.

At the first PNIF webinar ([summary](#)), stakeholders reaffirmed that Internet fragmentation remains a matter of concern and stressed that it is important to be clear about what one wants to achieve by avoiding fragmentation. The socio-economic benefits of an unfragmented Internet are, however, difficult to translate into concrete indicators. At the time of the first webinar, preparations for the GDC were in their final stages. PNIF participants concluded that it was too late in the process to make a meaningful contribution to the discussions and would be better to wait for the final outcome.

In September 2024, the UN Member States convened for the *Summit of the Future* and adopted a [Pact for the Future](#) that includes a Global Digital Compact (GDC). Under GDC *Objective 3, Foster an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space that respects, protects and promotes human rights*, the 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)' (GDC, Objective 3, art 29, (c)).

The second PNIF webinar ([summary](#)) explored how Internet fragmentation is addressed in the GDC and what this means for the multistakeholder dialogue on fragmentation. The general sentiment was that the GDC commitment represents an important acknowledgement by the UN Member States of the risk of Internet fragmentation. However, the true measure of commitment will be the actions of governments and stakeholders. Currently, as it was pointed out, there is a notable lack of intergovernmental engagement and focussed dialogue on the issue.

A deeper dive into the interpretation of art. 29(c), amongst others at the third PNIF webinar ([summary](#)) and [PNIF main session](#) at the IGF in Riyadh, also examined other language in the GDC, including art. 26, under the same Objective 3. In this article, 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.*' This raised the question of whether it can be concluded that preventing fragmentation of the Internet, as committed to in article 29(c), means preserving this open, global, interoperable, stable and secure character. It was also noted that further exploration of the link between Art.29(c) and SDG 16, 'Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions', would be meaningful.

In addition to focussing on understanding the GDC commitment, the PNIF invited stakeholders to reflect on how the multistakeholder dialogue on internet fragmentation can support the operationalisation of the commitment in art.29(c) and contribute to other relevant processes, such as the WSIS+20 Review. Participants agreed that the IGF and PNIF are well-positioned to continue to serve as central platform for multistakeholder discussions on identifying risks of fragmentation and ways to address them. However, it was emphasized that the responsibility for preventing and addressing fragmentation ultimately lies with policymakers. Their actions should be locally driven but accountable to the commitments outlined in the GDC. Concrete ideas were proposed for the multistakeholder community to monitor and report progress.

The [PNIF Output](#) summarises the various discussions and is intended to serve as a foundation for further multistakeholder dialogue. A recording of the PNIF main session '*Avoiding Internet Fragmentation. Understanding and Contributing to Operationalising the GDC Commitment*' is available on [UN Web TV](#).

The Report of the IGF 2024 Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation is available at https://intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/256/28579 .

1. Introduction

1.1. The IGF Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation

Internet fragmentation is a complex issue. The many views, diverse opinions, different conceptualisations and definitions of what is and what is not internet fragmentation, or what risks of fragmentation exist and should be avoided or addressed can hinder an open and inclusive dialogue.

The proposal for a IGF Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation (PNIF) emerged from a community-driven initiative launched in 2021 by a multistakeholder coalition of civil society, business and technical community organisations. This initiative aimed to raise awareness about the technical, policy, legal and regulatory measures and actions that pose a risk to the open, interconnected and interoperable Internet.

The IGF Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) recognized Internet fragmentation as a priority topic for an IGF intersessional activity during the IGF 2022 cycle and reaffirmed its importance for the IGF 2023 and IGF 2024 cycles. The Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation (PNIF) was established to develop a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the issue, supported by case studies, to define Internet fragmentation, examine its intended and unintended causes, assess its potential effects, and explore ways to prevent it.

In 2022 and 2023, through bottom-up discussions, the PNIF developed its [PNIF Framework for discussing fragmentation](#). The Framework conceptualises three key dimensions of fragmentation: *Fragmentation of the Internet User experience*, *Fragmentation of Internet Governance and Coordination*, *Fragmentation of the Internet's Technical Layer*. Its overall goal is to serve as a general guiding tool for continuing the dialogue about fragmentation, engaging more people and stakeholders in a holistic and inclusive debate.

The work of the PNIF was acknowledged in the 2022 [Addis Ababa IGF Messages](#) and the IGF's Leadership Panel in its [contribution to the GDC Consultation](#) which stated: "the multistakeholder community must remain vigilant against new or developing risks of internet fragmentation. In this regard, the Leadership Panel welcomes the work done by the IGF Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation, and encourages the continuation of this work, to support governments, private sector, civil society and the technical community to be aware of possible threats to the open internet."

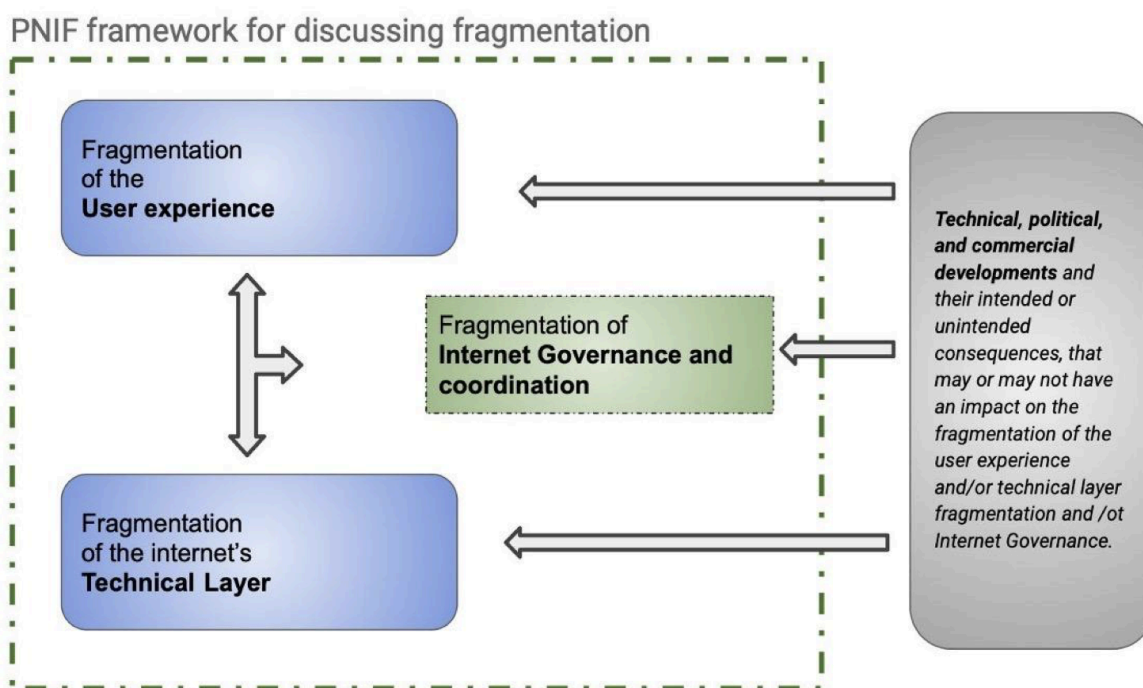
1.2. PNIF Framework for discussing fragmentation

The PNIF Framework for discussing Internet fragmentation was developed through bottom-up, iterative discussions in [2022](#) and [2023](#). It was presented as a draft at the 18th and 19th annual IGF meetings in Addis Ababa and Kyoto, respectively, where it underwent further discussion and refinement.

The Framework conceptualises three key dimensions of fragmentation:

- **Fragmentation of the Internet user experience,**
- **Fragmentation of the Internet's technical layer,** and
- **Fragmentation of Internet Governance & coordination.**

The Framework also highlights that **technical, political and commercial developments** and their intended or unintended consequences may or may not have an impact on fragmentation. It further captures potential **relationships and overlap** between the three dimensions of fragmentation.



Fragmentation of the Internet user experience

Fragmentation of the user experience is the phenomenon by which different end-users of the Internet, when trying to perform the same action online, are presented with different content, options or interfaces. This happens normally as the consequence of using different client-side instruments (devices, applications), different server-side platforms (search engines, social media), different languages and ways of expression, and also, as the consequence of being located in different parts of the world; moreover, this is often the result of per-user customizations applied by the services that are being used.

Many of these differences are actually beneficial, facilitating the user's success by providing a more familiar and effective experience, and helping them avoid the many online pitfalls and dangers. However, **when such fragmentation is forced upon the end-user by other parties, or when it hampers the communication among end-users and their ability to access content and services, it can deny the advantages and the freedoms that the Internet is supposed to offer.** This is the kind of fragmentation that is detrimental to an open internet as a whole, which is harmful, and which must be addressed

Fragmentation on the Internet technical infrastructure

The Internet is made up of a technical infrastructure that collectively interoperates at a global scale so that data (information) is reachable and can be transported over the Internet. **Fragmentation of the Internet's technical infrastructure thus relates to a range of challenges to this interoperability** at the transport layer that makes the Internet work as a medium of communications globally.

Fragmentation of Internet governance and coordination

Fragmentation of Internet governance primarily relates to the interactions between global Internet governance and standards bodies. When these bodies do not coordinate or are not inclusive, it can and does result in fragmentation.

This fragmentation can manifest in siloed or duplicative discussions and exclusion of specific groups from participation, resulting in decisions being taken without consensus from the global multistakeholder community. National governments can also contribute to fragmentation by introducing governance that conflicts with processes and policies agreed through multistakeholder Internet governance and standard bodies. Fragmentation at the governance level can also create knock-on effects for fragmentation at the technical and user experience layers.

The three 'baskets' are explored in detail in the PNIF output reports ([PNIF 2023](#), [PNIF 2022](#)).

The overall goal of the framework is to serve as a general guiding and orienting tool for continuing the dialogue about fragmentation and thus, to support a discussion with a greater diversity of stakeholders. The framework should allow a more holistic and inclusive debate, and at the same time, create space for focused discussion and work towards concrete solutions, policy approaches and guidelines.

Recommendations for addressing internet fragmentation

Throughout the PNIF activities in 2023 recommendations for addressing internet fragmentation emerged.

Recommendations for addressing fragmentation of Internet governance and coordination.

1. Do not introduce duplication within the internet governance landscape.
2. But, improve coordination between existing internet governance bodies.
3. To avoid siloed public policy discussions regarding Internet governance, all Internet governance bodies must be fully inclusive to stakeholders and enable meaningful multistakeholder participation.
4. Existing global Internet governance bodies should engage with national governments to promote inclusive policymaking.

Recommendations for addressing fragmentation of the Internet technical layer.

1. Recognise that there are critical properties of the internet/public core that require multistakeholder protection.
2. Measure to monitor the extent and nature of different types of technical fragmentation as the internet evolves.
3. Critically assess and avoid technical proposals (in standards and technology development) which reduce interoperability or otherwise would take the Internet away from the properties and design principles which have led to its success.
4. Protect the multistakeholder approach.
5. Promote inclusive policymaking that integrates consideration of technical expertise/impact of policies on critical properties of the internet, while protecting innovation.

Recommendations for addressing fragmentation of the Internet user experience.

Adherence to the following *principles* will contribute to addressing identified harms resulting from fragmentary behaviours:

1. *Equality principle* - Every user should - as a starting point - be able to access what was intended to be made publicly available, in the same manner.
2. *Enhancement principle* - Measures to enhance the user experience by making it more relevant, meaningful, understandable, secure, or accessible, and that are requested by the users themselves (...) should not be considered as “bad” fragmentation that contravenes the first principle, notwithstanding the potential effects on uniformity.
3. *Impact assessment principle* - Any measure - whether by governmental, private sector, or technical actors - that may have a directly intended effect (...) to diminish or render ineffectual the first principle, must be evaluated prior to its introduction or implementation to ensure that such a measure is proportionate, addresses a legitimate harm, is respecting of human rights, and follows democratic procedures with multi-stakeholder involvement.
4. *Harmonisation principle* - Fragmentation that may be driven by diverse national regulatory or legislative approaches to protect the human rights or legitimate interests (...) can be avoided through cooperation and multilateral instruments (informed by multi-stakeholder consultation) that set globally-applicable baseline standards and protections of those rights and interests, (...).
5. *Free Choice principle* - No user of the Internet should be coerced or unduly incentivised to use a particular platform, technology, or service provider - especially in order to provide or access content, resources, applications or services on the Internet that would not have otherwise been made possible or available to them (...). Users should be able to choose the applications, instruments and service providers that they use and should not be subject to unfair conditions deriving from dominant market positions, lock-in and network effects.

The recommendations are not carved in stone but intended as valuable input for further stakeholder discussion. The report identified areas for further research, and the identification of best practices. Testing and socialisation of the recommendations and practices in an inclusive stakeholder setting can be important in the context of the GDC process and upcoming WSIS+20 Review. The PNIF could serve as such a soundboard.

2. The PNIF 2024

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. The year was marked by the UN Summit of the Future and the Global Digital Compact (GDC), which dominated many global Internet governance debates, and significantly influenced the PNIF's work plan and this report.

Throughout the year, the PNIF organized a series of webinars and a dedicated session at the annual IGF meeting in Riyadh provided an opportunity to crowdsource community insights while continuing to monitor global developments and discussions.

The PNIF initially focused on exploring whether avoiding Internet fragmentation remains a priority concern for stakeholders in 2024.

Following the UN Summit of the Future in September, the PNIF shifted its attention to analyzing how Internet fragmentation is addressed within the Global Digital Compact, a key outcome of the Summit. Building on this, the PNIF concentrated on examining the role of the multistakeholder community in fostering an inclusive debate on fragmentation, supporting the implementation of the Global Digital Compact, and contributing to broader discussions on fragmentation—particularly in the context of the WSIS+20 Review.

The following chapters reflect the insights and outcomes of these discussions, capturing the key themes, perspectives, and recommendations that emerged throughout the year.

In the course of the year, a small team began efforts to conduct empirical research, based on crowdsourced examples, to document government and corporate actions and their intended or unintended impacts on Internet functionality. This initiative, proposed during the PNIF's first webinar, aims to translate real-world examples into a clear and cohesive narrative, providing specific, concrete illustrations of the impacts. While the work has not progressed sufficiently to report on results, it could be revisited and further developed if the PNIF continues or taken up through other appropriate channels. Such an inventory could help governments and corporations better understand, avoid and mitigate the consequences of their decisions.

3. Avoiding Internet Fragmentation, still a matter of concern in 2024?

In 2021, the UN Secretary General’s Our Common Agenda called for a Global Digital Compact that may include ‘reaffirming the fundamental commitment to connecting the unconnected; avoiding fragmentation of the Internet; providing people with options as to how their data is used; application of human rights online; and promoting a trustworthy Internet by introducing accountability criteria for discrimination and misleading content.’ (art 93). More recent IG discussions and documents mention fragmentation in varied contexts. Some examples are in the table below.

Avoiding Internet Fragmentation - still a matter of concern in 2024?

Some observations made early 2024

(2021)

UN Secretary General’s Report Our Common Agenda

- warning for ‘heightened fragmentation and “echo chambers”’ in the digital age (art 26)
- call for a GDC that may include: ‘reaffirming the fundamental commitment to connecting the unconnected; [avoiding fragmentation of the Internet](#); providing people with options as to how their data is used; application of human rights online; and promoting a trustworthy Internet by introducing accountability criteria for discrimination and misleading content.’ (art 93)

(2022-2023)

IGF Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation

- unpacked ‘avoiding Internet fragmentation’:
 - *Fragmentation of the Internet user experience,*
 - *Fragmentation of the Internet’s technical layer, and*
 - *Fragmentation of Internet Governance & coordination.*

(2024)

GDC Zero Draft rev.1 (15 May 2024)

- Objective 3, par 26. We recognize that the Internet is a critical global facility for inclusive and equitable digital transformation. To fully benefit all, it must be stable, secure and [unfragmented](#).’
- Objective 3, par 28. We commit to ... (c) Promote international cooperation among all stakeholders to prevent, identify and address [risks of fragmentation of the Internet](#) in a timely manner (SDG 16);
- Objective 4, par 36. We recognize that [data governance has evolved in a fragmented and uncoordinated manner](#). Diverse reg...

(2024)

Netmundial+10

- Subsection 2.3, Coordination of governance spaces is essential - ‘It is important to **avoid fragmentation and duplication of fora**, to make sure that Internet governance and digital policy processes can be effective. Instead, better coordination between processes dealing with overlapping issues is strongly needed.’
- Subsection 2.3, Coordination of governance spaces is essential - Through strengthening the IGF we would allow for the UN system to leverage on the legacy and relevance of the model while **avoiding further fragmentation of Internet governance and digital policy discussions.**’

In a PNIF webinar organized in June 2024, stakeholders were invited to reflect on whether the concept or phrase “*avoiding fragmentation of the Internet*” had evolved between 2021 and 2024. They considered whether this evolution signified a change in focus, a shift in priorities, or merely a change in wording, and what implications this might have for a holistic discussion on fragmentation.

Participants widely agreed that avoiding Internet fragmentation remains a significant concern in 2024, requiring a balanced, inclusive, and forward-looking approach. Several key insights emerged from this discussion:

- The term “*fragmentation*” lacks a universally shared definition, leading to varied interpretations. The repeated, undefined use of the term ‘fragmentation’ risks emptying it of meaning, making it a flexible term that risks to be manipulated for various purposes. Rather than overemphasising terminology, the focus should be on what one wants to achieve by avoiding fragmentation.
- A positive narrative framing the Internet as a public good and shared goals, such as ensuring an open, free, global, and interoperable Internet, may resonate more than a defensive approach centered on avoiding fragmentation.
- In regions where Internet access remains a primary concern, fragmentation is often viewed as a secondary issue. Framing the discussion positively—highlighting that the Internet and its opportunities and gains should be equally accessible to all—may resonate more effectively.

Technically, some level of fragmentation has always existed due to the Internet's design as a network of interconnected networks that functions based on voluntary standards. However, increasing fragmentation due to uncoordinated approaches and policy and regulatory measures by governments that pursue their public policy objectives, economic, and social

interests may pose a challenge to the future of the Internet. In some cases, a government's measures may have extraterritorial or unintended consequences. Similarly, commercial decisions by large platforms and providers also raise concerns, as they may risk further fragmenting the Internet, potentially undermining its openness and interoperability.

Stakeholders should address fragmentation across multiple layers. Inclusive and comprehensive approaches to social media governance and data management can help to assure access to unbiased data and information online. The economic benefits of an unfragmented Internet should be emphasized, despite the difficulty of quantifying them, while acknowledging concerns about Internet imperialism and the global South's call for more equitable distribution of benefits and gains.

4. Avoiding Internet Fragmentation. A UN Global Digital Compact Commitment

4.1. UN Summit of the Future and Global Digital Compact

On 22 September 2024, world leaders convened in New York for the *Summit of the Future*, where they adopted a [Pact for the Future](#) that includes a [Global Digital Compact](#) .

The Global Digital Compact (GDC) is a comprehensive framework for global governance of digital technology and artificial intelligence. The GDC sets out the objectives, principles, commitments and actions to achieve the goal of an inclusive, open, sustainable, fair, safe and secure digital future for all. (GDC art. 4)

In the GDC, UN Member States recognise the strong foundations for global digital cooperation, rooted in international law, including the UN Charter, human rights law, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They reaffirm commitment to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society, reflected in the Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action and the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society. The United Nations is highlighted as a critical platform for global digital cooperation, with Member States determined to harness existing processes. (GDC art. 5)

Governments further emphasise their intention to ‘work in collaboration and partnership with the private sector, civil society, international organizations, the technical and academic communities and all other stakeholders, within their respective roles and responsibilities, to realize the digital future we seek’. (GDC art. 6)

The GDC is structured around five objectives (GDC art. 7) that will be pursued to achieve the goal of an inclusive, open, sustainable, fair, safe and secure digital future for all:

1. Close all digital divides and accelerate progress across the Sustainable Development Goals;
2. Expand inclusion in and benefits from the digital economy for all;
3. Foster an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space that respects, protects and promote humans rights;
4. Advance responsible, equitable and interoperable data governance approaches;
5. Enhance international governance of artificial intelligence for the benefit of humanity.

4.2. A GDC Commitment to Address Internet Fragmentation

Under Objective 3, *Foster an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space that respects, protects and promote humans rights*, and within the subsection on *Internet governance*, UN Member States recognise 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.’ (SDG art 26) In the following articles, Member States recognise that ‘Internet governance must continue to be global and multi-stakeholder in nature’ (GDC art. 27) and acknowledge ‘the importance of the Internet Governance Forum as the primary multi-stakeholder platform for discussion of Internet governance issues.’ (GDC art. 28)

In article 29(c), 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 (SDG 16)’.

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.**

Objective 3, art 29, (c)

4.3. Unpacking the commitment in GDC Article. 29(c)

In the period following the Summit of the Future and the agreement on the GDC, the PNIF focused on unpacking the commitment outlined in GDC Article 29(c). At the PNIF webinars held in October and November, as well as its main session at the IGF annual meeting in December, participants engaged in exploring how to understand and interpret the

commitment. This section summarizes the insights gathered from these sessions, highlighting several points that would benefit from further clarification.

The GDC commitment is an acknowledgement by UN Member States of the risk of fragmentation. Having this commitment included in the GDC is a positive sign that despite the geopolitical context there is still an interest in remaining part of one global internet.

The text that is under Article 29(c) in the final document remained unchanged throughout the various iterations of the draft Global Digital Compact (GDC) during the preparation process. This suggests that there is a strong consensus that Internet fragmentation is a significant challenge. The GDC is now a key international document that can be invoked to remind countries moving toward fragmentation of the shared commitment to avoid such actions.

Internet fragmentation is portrayed as a negative phenomenon, a risk that must be prevented, identified, and addressed. This raises an important question: what positive qualities of the Internet need to be preserved? The GDC, however, does not explicitly define what constitutes an unfragmented Internet.

Article 29(c) is situated under GDC Objective 3, which aims to foster 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.’

Could it then be concluded that preventing fragmentation of the Internet means safeguarding this open, global, interoperable, stable and secure nature of the Internet?

Other sections of the GDC also provide valuable context for interpreting Article 29(c). For instance, Article 4 emphasises ‘an inclusive, open, sustainable, fair, safe, and secure digital future for all,’ while Article 7.3 highlights the need for ‘an inclusive, open, safe, and secure digital space.’ Additionally, Article 8(k) describes the multistakeholder principle, stating: "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 also be useful to further explore the connection that is being made between Article 29(c) and Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16)¹ on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

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

The risks of fragmentation often arise from unilateral actions taken to address issues within a national or local context. This raises a crucial question: how can international cooperation be better organised to ensure that such unilateral decisions and actions are addressed and prevented? While various declarations, statements, and discussions on preventing internet fragmentation predate the GDC commitment (e.g., G77, ITU, the Declaration of the Future of the Internet , etc), there remains a notable lack of intergovernmental engagement and focussed dialogue on the matter. Governments have not been talking to each other about what is and what is not fragmentation, and what should and should not be done. Moreover, the term ‘fragmentation’ has become politicised, often used by countries to criticize each other’s policies, further complicating productive discourse.

The envisaged coordination and follow-up for the GDC, as outlined in Article 72², have yet to be defined and clarified. Only the actions of governments and stakeholders will demonstrate if there is a genuine commitment behind the words in the GDC. Stakeholders should not take it for granted that the issue of internet fragmentation is being addressed; instead, they should continue to promote and have substantial and inclusive conversations on the matter.

The commitment to 'promote international cooperation among stakeholders' is open to interpretation and requires further clarification, specifically regarding who should be involved, where it will take place, and how it will be implemented (e.g., which stakeholders, through what mechanisms, and toward which desired outcomes?).

² 72. *We recognize that further strengthening of system-wide coordination is required to enable the United Nations to realize the inclusive platform for digital cooperation set out in this Compact. To this end, we request the Secretary-General, following consultations with Member States, to submit a proposal to the General Assembly during its seventy-ninth session 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. This proposal should include detailed information on operational functions, structure, location, mandate renewal, resources and staffing.*

5. Avoiding Internet Fragmentation. Contributing to Operationalising the GDC Commitment and Fostering an Inclusive and Holistic Dialogue

5.1. Fostering inclusive and holistic dialogue

The main purpose of the PNIF is to foster an inclusive and holistic dialogue on Internet fragmentation. It aims to contribute to building a shared understanding among stakeholders of this complex issue, including its various dimensions, the potential impacts of a fragmented Internet from diverse perspectives, and possible approaches to address it. Aligned with the IGF mandate, the PNIF seeks to promote and provide a platform for meaningful multistakeholder discussions, addressing the challenges and implications of Internet fragmentation, working towards more coordinated and effective solutions, and channeling this collective input into relevant Internet governance discussions and processes.

How to support and organize such a holistic dialogue is a central focus for the PNIF. This question has gained particular importance and urgency in the current context, with the adoption of the *Global Digital Compact* in 2024 and the forthcoming *WSIS+20 Review* in 2025. This section of the report highlights the PNIF-led discussions with the IGF community on this topic, summarizing the key suggestions and action points that emerged.

5.2. Structured discourse among governments

Internet fragmentation is not a new topic in global Internet governance discourse. In the GDC, UN Member States strongly and clearly acknowledge the risks of Internet fragmentation. Similarly, other declarations and statements, such as those from the G77, ITU, and the Declaration of the Future of the Internet, regard the potential fragmentation of the Internet as a negative outcome that must be avoided, with its associated risks effectively addressed.

However, these political statements and declarations fail to define the issue, its causes, and potential remedies. There is a significant lack of intergovernmental engagement and focused dialogue to address these gaps. Governments urgently need to engage in meaningful discussions to establish what constitutes fragmentation and what does not, identify its

causes and the risks it poses, and determine what actions should and should not be taken to address the issue effectively.

There is both an opportunity and a responsibility here for the multistakeholder community. By refining the broad political view that Internet fragmentation should be avoided, the multistakeholder community can help break it down into specific angles, aspects, and subtopics for guided and focused intergovernmental dialogue. The multistakeholder community is well-placed to assist in identifying these topics and facilitate discussions among governments by providing clear, simple explanations, identifiable cases that exemplify risks of fragmentation, and ways to avoid or address fragmentation. The IGF and the work of the PNIF can provide a solid starting point for this effort.

5.3. Contributing to Operationalising the GDC Commitment

In the GDC, UN Member States committed to promoting international cooperation among all stakeholders to prevent, identify, and address the risks of Internet fragmentation in a timely manner. For the multistakeholder community, Article 29(c) represents a critical opportunity to proactively contribute to the operationalisation of this commitment.

While 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’ it is equally important to consider the other elements outlined in the follow-up and review section, which spans Articles 64 to 74. These include:

- A recognition of the role of the IGF, the NRIs, the WSIS Forum, the WSIS+20 review, and the CSTD.
- A request to the Secretary-General to provide a GDC implementation map that reflects contributions from the UN and stakeholders ahead of the WSIS+20 review in 2025.
- A High-Level Review of the Global Digital Compact in September 2027, in conjunction with the 82nd General Assembly.

From these elements, it is clear that no single office or authority has been granted the power to interpret the GDC commitments authoritatively or to operationalize their follow-up. This underscores the continued relevance of the work carried out by the

multistakeholder community, including through forums like the IGF and initiatives such as the PNIF and NRIs.

Continuing the Inclusive Dialogue

Continuing the inclusive multistakeholder dialogue is key. Continuing the conversation focused on preventing, identifying, and addressing risks of fragmentation is essential, and the IGF/PNIF can play a pivotal role in driving and facilitating this dialogue:

- **Facilitating Dialogue:** Engaging the IGF stakeholder community in meaningful discussions on Internet fragmentation, fostering collaboration, and building a shared understanding of the issue.
- **Promoting Inclusive Participation:** Encouraging diverse perspectives and actively involving all relevant stakeholders in identifying risks and developing practical solutions to prevent fragmentation.
- **Supporting Coherence:** Bridging differing understandings of Internet fragmentation by fostering a shared comprehension of the issue, aligning perspectives, and coordinating actions among different platforms and mechanisms (as referred to above, for example).
- **Capacity Building:** Sharing best practices, resources, and tools—such as the ISOC Internet Impact Toolkit and ICANN’s monitoring of emerging technologies and legislation—to empower stakeholders to address and mitigate fragmentation risks effectively.

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). It is essential to involve governments in the conversations, as many risks of Internet fragmentation often arise from government actions or policies, frequently justified by security concerns.

To advance these discussions constructively, the focus should be on addressing security issues in a way that does not compromise the core principles and structure of the Internet. This approach ensures that solutions uphold both security and the integrity of the Internet. Bridging the gap between technical expertise and policymaking is essential for enabling informed and coordinated actions to prevent or address risks of fragmentation. The IGF can play an important role as a platform where stakeholders come together to facilitate these critical discussions.

NRIs can play a crucial role by organising debates on Internet fragmentation, ensuring the inclusion of all local stakeholders alongside some international participation. Such discussions would help familiarise local governments and other stakeholders with the topic while providing an opportunity to explore the risks and unintended consequences of certain measures they may intend to implement. Additionally, these debates create a platform to discuss alternative approaches to achieving the same objectives. Insights from these local discussions can also provide valuable contributions to global Internet governance dialogues on preventing, identifying, and addressing risks of fragmentation.

At the PNIF main session in Riyadh, a participant made a significant remark, cautioning that as the IGF community, it is essential to acknowledge our own elitism, privilege as seasoned Internet users, and the ways our experiences shape our perspectives on Internet fragmentation. The participant emphasised the importance of remaining aware that, for billions of people, user experience fragmentation — caused by various factors — is a harsh and immediate reality.

Reporting on Follow-Up and Progress One Year After GDC

With global agreement on the goal of avoiding Internet fragmentation and a clear commitment in the GDC, the multistakeholder community should seize the opportunity to present a report at the next IGF titled *“GDC Article 29(c): One Year On.”*

The report should compare the state of progress between December 2024 and May/June 2025, assessing the current state of fragmentation, identifying proposed measures that pose risks of fragmentation, and analysing any changes observed during this period. Key questions to address include: Has anything changed? Are we moving toward greater or lesser fragmentation?

During the PNIF webinar on 19 November 2024, participants were invited to share their thoughts on what elements should be included in the outline for a report titled *“GDC Article 29(c): One Year On.”* These are the key responses:

- The outline should examine how Article 29(c) has been received by different stakeholders, the extent to which it has been operationalized, and the outcomes observed after one year.
- Explore the link between fragmentation and SDG 16, including the various types of fragmentation that should be on government radar beyond Internet shutdowns, which received specific mention in the GDC.

- Address the concerns of member countries that have not committed to the GDC, and consider providing potential solutions to their concerns.
- Assess the efficacy of mechanisms created by the UN (if any), the level of take-up by different stakeholders (particularly governments and the UN in their roles), and the extent to which these mechanisms have contributed to reducing fragmentation (if at all).
- Include a case study on the relationship between conflict and Internet fragmentation.
- Evaluate the actions—or failures to act—of governments and regulators that are directly relevant to Article 29(c), focusing on risks and prevention.
- Highlight communication efforts related to Article 29(c).
- Using the framework developed earlier by the PNIF, analyze relevant global digital policy and governance discussions, identifying developments—both positive and negative—against the framework.
- Examine the issues of centralization and consolidation, and emphasize the importance of civil society’s role in addressing Internet fragmentation.

Multistakeholder Mechanism to Monitor and Evaluate Progress

The High-Level Review of the Global Digital Compact in September 2027 will require an assessment of what has been done to prevent, identify, and address internet fragmentation.

A key challenge today is the lack of clear metrics or statistics to measure progress. Without objective measurement tools it’ll be difficult for the UN to effectively review art. 29(c). The multistakeholder community, for example making use of the IGF or the PNIF, could take the lead in developing a framework to address this gap. This framework could define measurable indicators or establish KPIs to enable the UN to evaluate efforts to prevent, identify, and mitigate the risks of internet fragmentation. By creating such a system, the PNIF can ensure that future reviews are based on concrete data and meaningful insights. This should also leverage existing tools, such as impact assessments, developed by the internet governance community.

2027 is a very tight deadline to organise such a mechanism, and make it operational. However, the multistakeholder community should act promptly; otherwise, there is a risk that a follow-up mechanism could be established without inclusive multistakeholder participation.

Key characteristics of a multistakeholder mechanism for monitoring progress on the GDC Article 29(c) commitment should include:

- **Global Participation:** The mechanism must ensure the involvement of Internet communities from all regions worldwide, fostering diverse and inclusive representation.
- **Multistakeholder Engagement:** It should bring together all stakeholders, including governments, civil society, the technical community, and the user community (both businesses and individual Internet users), ensuring broad and balanced participation.
- **Structured and Supported Framework:** To meet the 2027 deadline, the mechanism must be well-structured and adequately supported. Preparations should commence as early as possible, ideally in the first half of 2025, to allow sufficient time for development and implementation.
- **Active Outreach to and Cooperation with the UN:** The mechanism should actively engage with the UN Tech Envoy and, later, the future Office, with the aim of being recognized as the primary mechanism for monitoring this specific commitment. This cooperation will help align efforts with broader UN initiatives and ensure the mechanism's effectiveness and credibility.

6. Conclusions and next steps

This report is presented as the output of the work of the IGF Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation (PNIF) in 2024. It is based on extensive discussions with the community, including three webinars and the PNIF main session during the IGF in Riyadh. Throughout the year, the PNIF continued to monitor global discussions on Internet fragmentation and explored ways to foster holistic, multistakeholder dialogue on the issue.

The year 2024 was shaped by the UN Summit of the Future and the adoption of the Global Digital Compact (GDC), which heavily influenced global Internet governance debates and the PNIF's work plan.

A key takeaway from the PNIF discussions was that avoiding Internet fragmentation remains a significant concern, requiring a balanced, inclusive, and forward-looking approach. This includes sustained efforts to foster an inclusive and holistic dialogue on the topic.

Additionally, and directly related to the follow-up on the GDC commitment, several opportunities for the multistakeholder community were identified. The NRIs and the IGF 2025 present themselves as key venues to address these opportunities.

1. Continuing the Inclusive Dialogue: Ensuring that discussions remain open and inclusive, with active involvement from governments.
2. Reporting on Follow-Up and Progress 'one year on': Proactively tracking and reporting on the GDC commitment one year after the GDC to assess progress and identify challenges.
3. Establishing a Multistakeholder Mechanism to Monitor and Evaluate Progress: Creating a mechanism to monitor and evaluate progress in light of the GDC's 2027 High-Level Review and beyond.

These findings are presented back to the IGF community and the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG). They highlight several opportunities for continued work within the IGF and PNIF, which should be considered by the incoming IGF MAG as they prepare the program for the IGF 2025.

Annexe PNIF activities and resources

PNIF 2024

IGF 2023 Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation Output

[PNIF 2023 Output Report](#)

PNIF 2024 Main session at IGF2024, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

[Meeting Recording](#)

[Summary](#)

PNIF 2024 Webinar 1, Avoiding Internet Fragmentation. Still a matter of concern in 2024?

[Summary](#)

PNIF 2024 Webinar 2, Avoiding Internet Fragmentation. Still a matter of concern in 2024 and beyond?

[Summary](#)

PNIF 2024 Webinar 3, Avoiding Internet Fragmentation. Contributing to Operationalising the GDC Commitment ?

[Summary](#)

PNIF 2023

IGF 2023 Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation Output

[PNIF 2023 Output Report](#)

PNIF 2023 Main session at IGF2023, Kyoto, Japan

Recording <https://youtu.be/5YFKR9EE-54>

The PNIF organised three intersessional webinars on the dimensions in the internet fragmentation discussion conceptualised in the *PNIF Framework for Discussing Internet Fragmentation* - Internet Governance and Coordination, Internet User Experience, and the Internet Technical Layer - that emerged as output from the PNIF discussions in 2022. These webinars gathered broad community views to unpack, prioritise, and address fragmentation and informed the drafting teams that produced the 2023 PNIF output.

PNIF 2023 Webinar 1, Internet Governance and Coordination

Recording <https://youtu.be/xFPloxBxXOM>

PNIF 2023 Webinar 2, Internet User Experience

Recording: <https://youtu.be/tn7hRw9xtGQ>

PNIF 2023 Webinar 3, Internet Technical Layer

Recording: <https://youtu.be/vAelE5gmsAU>

PNIF 2022

IGF 2022 Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation Output

[PNIF 2022 Output Report](#)

[Executive Summary](#)

PNIF 2022 Main session at IGF2022, Addis Ababa

[Meeting Recording](#)

[Summary](#)

PNIF 2022 Webinar 1: What does Internet fragmentation mean to you?

Identifying fragmentation and key stakeholders.

[Meeting recording](#)

[Summary](#)

PNIF 2022 Webinar 2: What can be done about Internet fragmentation, and who should be doing what?.

[Meeting recording](#)

[Summary](#)