



Permanent Mission of Iceland



Glion Human Rights Dialogue 2020 (Glion VII)

Human rights in the digital age: making digital technology work for human rights

Policy Dialogue on:

**'Putting digital technology at the service of equality and non-discrimination,  
including in the area of economic, social and cultural rights'**

1:30PM-3:00PM, 20 October 2020

Zoom

The Human Rights Council and the wider UN human rights system have regularly considered the human rights implications of the rapid evolution and spread of new technologies. There is clearly an important role to play for the UN in general, and the human rights pillar in particular, in clarifying universal human rights norms as they pertain to new and digital technologies.<sup>1</sup> In preparation to the Glion retreat, this policy dialogue will consider: how the UN human rights system and UN more broadly can best provide a platform for cooperation regarding the opportunities and risks associated with mobilising digital technology to fulfil the sustainable development goals; how to tackle 'digital divides'; ensuring digitised provision of services meets human rights standards; and what role could technology companies play in this process.

### **Recognition of the need to put digital technology at the service of equality and non-discrimination, including in the area of economic, social and cultural rights**

The most recent Human Rights Council text on the human rights implications of new technologies – resolution 41/11 on 'New and emerging digital technologies and human rights,' adopted in June 2019, highlighted the positive and negative implications of digital technology for equality and non-discrimination.<sup>2</sup> It also noted the importance of putting such technology 'at the service' of economic, social and cultural rights.

The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, has spoken of the 'enormous' benefits of digital technology 'for human rights and development.' In a speech to the Asian Society in New York in late 2019,<sup>3</sup> she warned that digital technology may – either accidentally or deliberately – also be used to undermine or violate human rights: 'The digital revolution is a major global human rights issue,' she said, 'its unquestionable benefits do not cancel out its unmistakable risks.' The High Commissioner concluded: 'We must ensure that every machine-driven process or artificial intelligence system complies with cornerstone principles such as transparency, fairness, accountability, oversight and redress.'

### **The digital divide**

On 11 June 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres presented a set of recommended actions for the

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.universal-rights.org/blog/do-digital-technologies-hurt-or-support-human-rights/>

<sup>2</sup> PP10, Council resolution 41/11

<sup>3</sup> Keynote speech by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Japan Society, New York, 17 October 2019

international community to help ensure all people are connected, respected, and protected in the digital age. The Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation<sup>4</sup> was the result of a multi-year, multi-stakeholder, global effort to address a range of issues related to the Internet, artificial intelligence, and other digital technologies.

The Roadmap and website also present recommendations in a number of key areas, including 'universal connectivity by 2030,' and 'ensuring digital inclusion for all, including the most vulnerable.' The Roadmap recognises that numerous barriers exacerbate this 'digital divide' among States, including financing challenges in securing the necessary materials, unfavourable market dynamics, and a lack of digital skills for adopting digital tools. This digital divide also reflects and amplifies existing social, cultural and economic inequalities at the national and local level as well. The gender gap in global Internet use is a stark example – in two out of every three countries, more men use the Internet than women.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the urgency in bridging these divides. Digital tools have been a lifeline for millions of people. Without prompt action, there is a risk of layering the current barriers to digital inclusion on top of existing obstacles to development.

### **Putting technology at the service of economic and social rights, and the SDGs**

One of the ways in which digital technology is being mobilised to support human rights is through the 'digitalisation' of social security systems. By increasing efficiency and ease of access such processes have the potential to increase access to services to those that need them while reducing cost and therefore allowing more people to benefit. For those well connected in rural areas, this increased access to services can even increase coverage of such services.

However, such schemes, albeit conceived to improve efficiency, may result in human rights violations and abuses if not designed in line with international human rights standards. These digital technology solutions (affecting social services, unemployment benefits, disability allowances and health coverage) are often being rolled out with little public consultation or parliamentary debate.

These potential benefits, as well as potential serious threats and challenges, to economic and social rights, and to the equality and non-discrimination principles that underpin international human rights law, are increasingly being considered at the UN, a conversation this dialogue will contribute to.

Key questions to be considered during this digital policy dialogue:

1. How can the UN play a role in establishing human rights norms as they pertain to the application of digital technology in the promotion and protection of economic and social rights, so that such technology supports equality, non-discrimination, and the principle of leaving no one behind? How could the UN, especially the Human Rights Council and General Assembly, also provide useful platforms for States and other stakeholders to share good practices and lessons learnt in this regard?
2. How might the UN practically involve technology companies in such an exercise?
3. What role can UN human rights mechanisms play in support of wider UN efforts, such as the Secretary-General's Roadmap, in helping to bridge the global digital divide?
4. How can governments effectively ensure that the digitalisation of social service provision is undertaken in a manner that is consistent with international human rights norms?

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/>

