



Two sides of the same coin? Future of the internet and sustainable development

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Published by

European University Institute (EUI), Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014, San Domenico di Fiesole (FI), Italy

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Key Takeaways

- 1. Goals Synergy and Complementarity:** The Declaration for the Future of the Internet (DFI) aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in areas such as resilient infrastructure, quality education, gender equality, economic growth, and strong institutions. It also complements existing SDGs by addressing policy gaps related to the digital infrastructure, focusing on software and digital services.
- 2. Infrastructure and Innovation:** The DFI fosters the development of a secure Internet infrastructure and encourages innovation, directly advancing SDG 9's goals of building a resilient infrastructure and promoting technological progress.
- 3. Educational Access:** By promoting equal Internet access and enhancing digital literacy, the DFI advances SDG 4, which aims for inclusive and equitable quality education.
- 4. Economic Growth:** The DFI stimulates innovation and entrepreneurship, aligning with SDG 8's objective of sustained, inclusive economic growth.
- 5. International Consensus to Tangible Results:** The endorsement of the DFI by over 70 countries worldwide highlights its potential to turn international agreements into actionable outcomes at the national level. While the SDGs establish global targets, the DFI can mobilize the multistakeholder community in signatory countries to implement specific projects, as demonstrated by several case studies in this policy paper.
- 6. Policy Recommendations:** To maximize the DFI's impact, it is crucial to focus on integrating its principles with national policies, promoting cross-sector collaboration, and ensuring the effective implementation of digital infrastructure and services.

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established by the United Nations in 2015, constitute a universal call to action aimed at eradicating poverty, safeguarding the planet, and ensuring that all individuals achieve peace and prosperity by 2030.¹ Comprising 17 interconnected goals, the SDGs address a wide array of global challenges including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice. Each goal is associated with specific targets and indicators, providing a comprehensive framework to guide international development efforts and measure progress over time.²

By addressing critical aspects of digital infrastructure governance and policy, the principles and commitments contained in the Declaration on the Future of the Internet (DFI) commitments play an important enabling role for several SDGs³. The DFI acknowledges the transformative power of the open, free, global, interoperable, reliable, secure and rights-respecting Internet. Both the SDGs and the DFI are underpinned by a commitment to human well-being and sustainable development. The Internet, as envisioned in the DFI, serves as a key enabler for achieving the SDGs, by providing the infrastructure and platforms necessary for innovation, information sharing, and inclusive multistakeholder participation in the global digital economy. Moreover, the principles enshrined in the DFI align closely with the overarching objectives of the SDGs, particularly in promoting equality, inclusivity, and access to opportunities for all.⁴

This issue brief highlights the intersections between the SDGs and the DFI, illustrating how the principles embedded in the DFI can help achieve specific SDGs. While the SDGs primarily address ICTs, they provide limited coverage of broader Internet governance issues and emerging technologies mentioned in the DFI, such as artificial intelligence. Complementarily, the UN Global Digital Compact (GDC) represents a significant step towards addressing these gaps. These policies and advancements are discussed below, comparing digital topics covered by the SDGs with those addressed by the GDC in the context of the DFI and its aims. This comparison enhances the understanding of how an open, reliable, and secure Internet contributes to sustainable development across various dimensions.

2. Relevance of DFI principles for sustainable growth

As noted in a 2015 Internet Society report,⁵ the SDGs represent a significant leap in international development policy; however, they inadequately capture the transformative potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the Internet. Despite recognizing ICTs' role in infrastructure and innovation under Goal 9, the SDGs lack a comprehensive framework that fully acknowledges the Internet's

1 United Nations General Assembly. (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015. A/RES/70/1.

2 For detailed metrics and reports see: United Nations (2024). Sustainable Development Goals, <https://sdgs.un.org/>; United Nations Statistics Division (2024). *Global Indicator Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and Targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/>; United Nations Statistics Division (2024) SDG Indicators Database. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal/>; United Nations (2024). Voluntary National Reviews Database. <https://hlpf.un.org/vnrs/>; Our World in Data (2024). SDG Tracker. <https://sdg-tracker.org/>.

3 The White House (2022). Declaration for the Future of the Internet. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/28/fact-sheet-united-states-and-60-global-partners-launch-declaration-for-the-future-of-the-Internet/>.

4 The DFI principles, particularly in sections on “Inclusive and Affordable Access to the Internet” and “Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms,” align closely with the overarching objectives of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), as outlined in the United Nations’ Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1) and the United States White House’s Declaration for the Future of the Internet (2022) .

5 Internet Society (2015). The Internet and Sustainable Development. <https://www.internetsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ISOC-ICTs-SDGs-201506-Final.pdf>

pervasive impact on development. The report highlights that the absence of a dedicated goal for ICTs and the Internet misses the fundamental ways these technologies drive economic growth, social inclusion, and innovation across various sectors.

The SDGs' targets, while emphasizing the importance of increasing access to technology and information, often fail to integrate ICTs systematically into development strategies or offer clear pathways for their expansive use. This issue represents a missed opportunity to harness the Internet's full potential as a cross-cutting enabler that supports the achievement of all SDGs. For the 2030 Agenda to be fully realized, a more robust inclusion of Internet and ICT-related goals is called for, ensuring that the digital revolution contributes effectively to sustainable development rather than remaining a peripheral consideration.

The DFI addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive framework that emphasizes the key role of the Internet in achieving sustainable development, ensuring its integration into global development strategies. The principles outlined in the DFI are linked to the achievement of the SDGs, particularly through the emphasis on digital infrastructure. This latter plays an integral role in advancing the SDGs by enabling connectivity, encouraging innovation, and promoting inclusive access to information and services.

Yet it is worth noting that SDGs predominantly emphasize the development and expansion of physical hardware, such as infrastructure and connectivity, which are essential for bridging the digital divide and improving access. This focus ensures that foundational elements like broadband networks and data centres are in place to support economic growth and social inclusion. But the SDGs pay relatively less attention to the area of software, which encompasses crucial aspects like cybersecurity, digital rights, and online safety. The commitments expressed in the DFI are, therefore, universal and offer valuable guidance for the international community beyond the DFI signatories.

The DFI is comprehensive in focus; it addresses software-related issues, including critical areas such as DNS security, protection against cyberattacks, and the safeguarding of digital rights. The DFI's approach is more holistic and nuanced, recognizing that a robust digital infrastructure alone is insufficient without secure and reliable software systems. By addressing issues such as Internet shutdowns, online scams, and fraud protection, the DFI complements the SDGs hardware-focused goals with a comprehensive strategy that ensures a secure, open, and equitable digital environment. This dual focus—on both hardware and software—enhances the overall effectiveness of global digital governance and supports a more balanced approach to sustainable development. This nuanced approach by the DFI, which emphasizes security in addition to the SDGs' focus on resilient infrastructure, bridges the gap between hardware and software needs, ensuring the digital infrastructure supports technological advancements and economic growth as well as safeguarding against risks and promoting equitable access.

3. Specific DFI principles relevant to advancing SDGs

Digital infrastructure is referenced in several SDGs, including Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), Goal 4 (Quality Education), and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Goal 9 explicitly highlights the need for resilient infrastructure and inclusive industrialization, which encompass digital networks and technologies. The SDGs' focus on resilience, however, does differ from the DFI's emphasis on security. While resilience means the ability to withstand disruptions, security under the DFI encompasses a broader spectrum, including the management of high-risk vendors, protection of sensitive data, and control over infrastructure. Similarly, Goal 4 highlights the role of digital infrastructure in facilitating equitable access to educational resources, and Goal 8 underscores technology's contribution to job creation and economic growth.

The DFI's focus on secure infrastructure and connectivity (considered foundational and referred to as SDG0) complements these goals by addressing security concerns and ensuring robust, safe, and accessible digital environments. The following sections discuss concrete examples of how SDGs and DFI principles are mutually reinforcing.

SDG 4: Quality education

Google's **Internet Saathi** initiative in India exemplifies how targeted digital literacy programmes can advance SDG 4, to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. This program aligns with DFI principle 3 on Inclusive and Affordable Access to the Internet, particularly addressing commitments related to expanding digital literacy and fostering digital inclusion.⁶

Internet Saathi ("Internet Companion" in Hindi) empowers rural women with the necessary digital literacy skills, thus enhancing educational access and furthering socio-economic development. The programme trains women to become digital literacy ambassadors (Saathis), equipped with smartphones and tablets. These ambassadors travel to rural communities to teach other women how to use the Internet effectively, covering basic skills such as information search, use of educational resources, and accessing online services.⁷

Similarly, the **Kenya Education Cloud**⁸ provides a relevant comparison, as it demonstrates how digital literacy initiatives can support the educational infrastructure. By enhancing digital skills and providing access to educational content, the Kenya Education Cloud aligns with SDG 4 and contributes to building robust digital infrastructure, reflecting the DFI's commitment to integrating education with technological advancement.

Additionally, the Internet Society's (ISOC) support for digital literacy programmes, which also leads to the establishment of Internet Exchange Points (IXPs), highlights another way in which these efforts align with broader development goals.⁹ These initiatives not only enhance digital literacy but also contribute to building local-based, secure, and accessible digital infrastructure, in line with DFI commitments.

The impact of these initiatives on achieving SDG 4 is substantial. By bridging the digital divide, they grant access to educational resources that were previously out of reach, particularly in remote areas where traditional educational materials are scarce. This access facilitates self-education, online learning, and educational support for children and adults, thus improving educational outcomes in targeted communities.¹⁰ Collectively, these examples demonstrate how targeted digital literacy programmes can bridge educational gaps, enhance learning opportunities, and support sustainable development by integrating digital technology into education and infrastructure.

SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth

Improving **digital connectivity in Small Island Developing States** (SIDS) is crucial for advancing SDG 8, which emphasizes sustainable economic growth and decent work for all. The Partner2Connect Digital Coalition (P2C), led by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), exemplifies efforts to enhance connec-

6 Tata Trusts (2024). Internet Saathi. <https://www.tatatrusters.org/our-work/digital-transformation/digital-literacy/Internet-saathi>.

7 World Bank (2021). Google's Internet Saathi Program. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/732651613724922041/google-s-Internet-saathi-program>

8 Kenya Educational Fund (2024). <https://kec.ac.ke/>

9 Internet Society (2024). Internet Exchange Points (IXPs). <https://www.internetsociety.org/issues/ixps/>.

10 Google (2019). Toward Gender Equality Online: Research with the Next Billion Users. http://services.google.com/fh/files/misc/toward_gender_equity_online.pdf.

tivity.¹¹ For instance, Vanuatu's expansion of its telecommunication infrastructure, including shared towers, has significantly increased Internet access across the islands.¹² This improved connectivity supports local businesses by opening global markets, enabling remote work, and creating new job opportunities, thereby driving economic growth.¹³

Challenges persist. High infrastructure costs, attributable to geographic isolation, limited financial resources, and frequent natural disasters complicate development. Partnerships with technology companies are essential, as they provide the infrastructure and high-speed Internet needed for schools and clinics, improving educational and employment prospects. These collaborations help equip educational institutions with digital tools, supporting skill development and lifelong learning.

Addressing digital literacy and equitable access is vital if the benefits of digital investments are to be maximized. Enhanced connectivity advances innovation and economic participation, enabling SIDS to engage more effectively in the global digital economy. The case of Vanuatu illustrates how strategic investments in digital infrastructure can transform economies and create opportunities for decent work. Balancing the benefits of improved digital infrastructure with ongoing challenges will help SIDS integrate into the global digital economy and achieve the objectives of SDG 8.

SDG 9: Industry, innovation, and infrastructure

The deployment of **Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite connectivity in Canadian Nunavut** illustrates how the principles outlined in the DFI can substantially advance SDG 9, which focuses on industry, innovation, and infrastructure. This effort aligns also with DFI principle 4, which emphasizes improving digital infrastructure and supports the development of secure and resilient Internet networks; and principle 3, which focuses on ensuring universal and affordable access to the Internet. The deployment of LEO satellites in Nunavut not only addresses significant infrastructural challenges but also exemplifies the DFI's commitment to fostering a digital ecosystem that is open, free, global, interoperable, reliable, and secure. By improving connectivity in a remote region, this initiative supports the DFI's broader goals of ensuring that digital technologies promote human rights, enhance access and affordability, build trust through secure infrastructure, and encourage fair competition and innovation, all of which contribute to a more inclusive and equitable global digital landscape.

Nunavut, known for its remote and harsh geographical conditions, encounters significant difficulties in establishing robust Internet infrastructure.¹⁴ Traditional ground-based solutions are often impractical and prohibitively expensive because of the vast and sparsely populated landscape.¹⁵ The introduction of LEO satellite connectivity in Nunavut brings multiple benefits aligned with SDG 9. First, it promotes inclusive and sustainable industrialization by enabling local businesses to access global markets, participate in digital commerce, and utilize online services that were previously inaccessible. This connectivity supports economic growth and job creation in a region where traditional industries may be limited.

11 ITU (2024). Partner2Connect Digital Coalition. <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/sites/partner2connect/landing>

12 GSMA (2023). The Mobile Economy: Pacific Islands 2023. <https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-economy/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/GSMA-ME-Pacific-Islands-2023.pdf>

13 Microsoft News Center (2022). Microsoft and Viasat announce new partnership to deliver Internet access to underserved communities globally - Stories. <https://news.microsoft.com/2022/12/14/microsoft-and-viasat-announce-new-partnership-to-deliver-Internet-access-to-underserved-communities-globally>

14 Dhir, T. J. (2024). Nunavut communities say CRTC money for fibre Internet is good news, but question how it will work. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/nunavut-fibre-Internet-crtc-1.7260682>

15 Townsend, W. (2024). Is 2024 The Year Of Low Earth Orbit Satellite Services? Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/moorinsights/2024/01/26/is-2024-the-year-of-low-earth-orbit-satellite-services>.

Second, LEO satellites facilitate innovation by providing educational institutions and students with access to vast online resources and e-learning platforms. Enhanced connectivity also enables healthcare innovations, such as telemedicine, allowing residents to receive medical consultations and services without the need to travel long distances.

The case of secure infrastructure in Canadian Nunavut illustrates how leveraging cutting-edge technology in line with DFI principles can drive progress towards SDG 9. It presents significant opportunities for enhancing digital connectivity, supporting local businesses, and bridging the digital divide in remote communities. Challenges such as high deployment costs, technical limitations, and the need for robust ground support infrastructure must be addressed. The DFI's commitments to secure and reliable infrastructure, increasing access and affordability, and cultivating innovation can help mitigate these challenges, ensuring that LEO satellite systems contribute effectively to Nunavut's digital and economic development.

SDG 16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions:

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) encompasses various initiatives aimed at fostering a secure, just, and effective global framework. The **Global Digital Compact** (GDC), proposed in September 2021 by the UNSG and endorsed in September 2024, aims to build a new digital governance roadmap for the coming years.¹⁶

The GDC aims to establish common principles to strengthen an open, free, and secure digital future for all, which aligns closely with the objectives of SDG 16 and links it with the DFI: its principle 5 focuses on multistakeholder Internet governance and directly contributes to SDG 16. This principle emphasizes two key commitments: first, ensuring inclusive and transparent governance mechanisms for the Internet that involve multiple stakeholders, and second, strengthening accountability and preventing misinformation through robust, collaborative frameworks. These commitments address the key aspects of SDG 16, including promoting the rule of law, enhancing digital connectivity, and safeguarding data privacy while ensuring human rights online and preventing the fragmentation of the Internet. By establishing these principles, the GDC aims to encourage a safe, equitable, and trustworthy digital environment, with a particular emphasis on advancing digital infrastructure. The GDC supports the development of resilient and inclusive digital infrastructure by promoting principles that align closely with those outlined in the DFI.

Key initiatives include the creation of mechanisms such as a dedicated fund and an advisory board to support and oversee infrastructure projects. These efforts are designed to enhance global connectivity, prevent digital divides, and ensure that infrastructure developments are secure and accessible. Through these mechanisms, the GDC reinforces the DFI's commitment to creating robust and reliable digital infrastructure, thereby contributing to global stability, peace, and justice by addressing significant gaps in digital governance and infrastructure development.

The GDC aligns with the objectives of the DFI by ensuring inclusive and affordable Internet access, safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms through equitable and non-discriminatory digital engagement, promoting global data flows with trust, and advancing multistakeholder governance to address the needs of underserved communities and to protect privacy.

16 United Nations (2024). Global Digital Compact - SOF. <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future/global-digital-compact>.

Figure 1. Alignment between DFI commitments and selected SDGs goals

DFI/SDG	SDG 4: Quality Education	SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth:	SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure	SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions:
<p>DFI Principle 1. Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: Equitable Internet use without discrimination./ Inclusive governance, access for unserved and underserved communities, privacy protection.</p>	<p>Example A: Google’s Internet Saathi in India</p>		<p>Example C: Low Earth Orbit Satellite Connectivity in Canadian Nunavut</p>	<p>Example D: Global Digital Compact</p>
<p>DFI Principle 3. Inclusive and Affordable Access to the Internet</p>				
<p>DFI Principle 2. A Global Internet: Promote benefits of data free flows with trust.</p>		<p>Example B: Digital Connectivity in Small Island Developing States (SIDS)</p>		
<p>DFI Principle 5. Multistakeholder Internet Governance</p>				

4. Policy recommendations

Embedding DFI principles into national development plans

Governments should strategically incorporate the principles of the DFI into their national development frameworks to ensure digital policies align with broader sustainable development goals. For developing countries and national development agendas in developed countries, integrating DFI principles can foster a comprehensive approach that aligns digital advancements with social, economic, and environmental objectives. This integration should involve crafting clear guidelines and standards that embody DFI's core values, such as digital inclusivity, privacy, and security. By doing so, governments can develop coherent policy frameworks that enhance digital infrastructure, support innovation, and ensure equitable access to digital resources, thereby reinforcing broader SDGs. Countries that have signed the DFI should continue to operationalise its principles integrating them into national policies and development plans. Non-signatory countries should consider the best ways to align their policies with the DFI principles.

Public awareness campaigns

To build widespread support and engagement for digital inclusion and sustainable Internet practices, practices, comprehensive public awareness campaigns are indispensable. These campaigns should aim to educate the public about the benefits of digital technologies and responsible behaviour in cyberspace. Highlighting the positive impacts of digital inclusion—such as enhanced educational opportunities, economic growth, and improved access to services—can galvanize public interest and involvement. Additionally, these campaigns should address the importance of sustainable Internet practices, including data privacy and cybersecurity, to encourage a culture of digital responsibility. Engaging diverse audiences through targeted messaging and a variety of media platforms can enhance the effectiveness of these campaigns, leading to greater public understanding and support for DFI-related initiatives.

When developing public awareness campaigns, the focus should be tailored to the specific needs and priorities of different income categories of countries to ensure relevance and effectiveness. In high-income countries, where Internet access is generally widespread, campaigns should prioritize issues like consumer protection against online fraud and scams, reflecting commitments from the DFI on safeguarding digital rights and ensuring secure online transactions. These campaigns can address topics such as privacy protection, digital literacy in navigating complex online environments, and strategies to avoid cybercrime; these are areas where high-income countries may face significant challenges despite their advanced infrastructure.

Conversely, in low-income countries, where digital infrastructure and access are more limited, public awareness campaigns should concentrate on foundational issues such as promoting digital literacy, expanding Internet accessibility, and educating communities about the basic benefits and uses of digital technologies. These campaigns might focus on how to use digital tools safely, access online educational resources, and understand the importance of connectivity for economic and social development. By addressing these fundamental areas, such campaigns can help bridge the digital divide and support the broader DFI goals of inclusive and equitable access to the Internet.

Promoting public-private partnerships

Encouraging collaboration between governments, the private sector, and civil society is crucial if the implementation of the DFI and the integration of SDGs is to be a success. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can leverage the unique strengths and resources of each sector, facilitating the development and deployment of digital technologies that align with sustainable development objectives. Governments should create an

enabling environment for these partnerships by offering incentives such as tax breaks for technology investment, grants for research and development, and streamlined regulatory processes that ease the deployment of digital infrastructure. The private sector can contribute through innovation, investment, and expertise, while civil society organizations can provide valuable insights into community needs and advocate for equitable digital access. Effective PPPs can drive the implementation of DFI principles by pooling resources, sharing knowledge, and addressing challenges in a coordinated manner. The private sector should be interested in operationalizing the DFI principles because doing so can enhance their market opportunities by promoting a more secure, interoperable, and inclusive digital environment, which drives innovation and consumer trust. Additionally, aligning with these principles can offer benefits such as improved access to new markets, increased investment opportunities, and a stronger competitive edge through adherence to globally recognized principles for digital infrastructure and governance.

Monitoring

To ensure accountability and transparency, robust mechanisms that monitor and evaluate the impact of DFI principles on SDGs must be established. Governments should implement regular assessments and transparent reporting practices to track progress, identify gaps, and adjust strategies as needed. This approach will enable continuous improvement and ensure that the implementation of DFI principles contributes effectively to achieving sustainable development outcomes. **Governments should develop a comprehensive matrix that links each DFI principle and commitment to specific SDGs, facilitating robust monitoring, evaluation, and accountability in their implementation.** Engaging stakeholders in the monitoring process can enhance the credibility and effectiveness of these efforts, encouraging a more inclusive and accountable digital future.

Bridge DFI principles with the Global Digital Compact

The GDC,¹⁷ approved in 2024, and the DFI are closely linked, each reinforcing and expanding upon the principles and objectives set forth by the other. The GDC is viewed as a strategic advancement from the SDGs agenda, building upon the foundational principles of the DFI to address a broader array of digital governance issues which have emerged in the global digital landscape.

The DFI emphasizes the importance of an open, secure, and inclusive Internet, focusing on key principles such as digital rights, cybersecurity, and equitable access. It lays the groundwork for a globally interoperable and resilient digital infrastructure. The GDC builds on this by providing a more comprehensive framework that includes enhanced commitments to digital rights, global digital cooperation, and the establishment of robust mechanisms for addressing emerging challenges such as misinformation, digital sovereignty, and the protection of fundamental freedoms online.

By aligning the DFI's foundational principles with the GDC's expanded framework, stakeholders can create a more cohesive and comprehensive digital governance strategy. This synergy enhances the ability to address global digital challenges, supports the achievement of sustainable development goals, and fosters a more inclusive, secure, and resilient digital future.

17 United Nations (2024). Global Digital Compact Draft Version 3. https://www.un.org/techenvoy/sites/www.un.org.techenvoy/files/general/GDC_Rev_3_silence_procedure.pdf.

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Publications Office
of the European Union

doi:10.2870/4603450
ISBN:978-92-9466-622-2
QM-01-24-138-EN-N

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