



## WACC Partner Recommendations on the Implementation of the Global Digital Compact (GDC)



*WACC partners gathered in Kathmandu, Nepal, at a forum entitled “Communication Rights: Building Blocks for Digital Justice”. Photo Credit: AMARC AP/WACC*

*In September 2024, the United Nations adopted a “[Global Digital Compact](#)” at the Summit of the Future in New York City. The Compact is a non-binding international agreement that seeks to foster collaboration between governments, technology companies, the technical community, and civil society to help create a “an inclusive, open, sustainable, fair, safe and secure digital future for all” (Global Digital Compact, p. 1). The idea for the Compact came out of growing concerns about the risks of digital technology to democracy and peace that emerged within international institutions some seven years ago. In response, the UN sought to create a set of common principles that could help mitigate these risks and boost sustainable development efforts all over the world.*

Given the importance of the Global Digital Compact, which covers topics as essential to communication rights as connectivity, digital public infrastructure, and information integrity, WACC invited 25 of its grassroots partners in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to a week-long conference in Nepal to analyse the contents of the document and develop a series of recommendations on how the GDC could be made more relevant as UN member states and other stakeholder begin to implement it. The event in Nepal during which these recommendations were developed took place between the 22<sup>nd</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup> of October in Kathmandu and was held in partnership with [AMARC-Asia Pacific](#). This document presents the recommendations developed by WACC partners on the GDC. The full list of attendees and contributors can be found in the final section of this document. This

work builds on the advocacy work WACC did in the lead up to the Summit of the Future along with organizations part of the [Global Forum on Media Development](#) and the [Global Digital Justice Forum](#).

## A Communication Rights Take on the GDC



*Community members setting a local telecommunications network in Malawi. Photo credit: Ulalo/WACC*

WACC and its partner are committed to the theory and practice of communication rights, which understands communication as an essential social process that impacts how societies organize themselves, how public agendas are set, and how decisions about common challenges are made. Given the impact of digital technologies on our communication and information ecosystems, WACC believes in advancing a view of the digital that upholds human rights and the public interest, democratizes public debate, and contributes to positive social change. It is important to underline that the GDC focuses on digital technologies and AI. It does not set out to relate communication rights to the GDC, nor is there any mention of communication rights, the right to communicate, or the democratization of communication. There is scant reference to freedom of expression and none to media and press freedom. Paradoxically, key terms that emerge are those that undergird communication rights: accessibility, affordability, participation, integrity, tolerance, respect, accuracy, reliability. Objective 7.3 of the GDC is emblematic: “Foster an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space that respects, protects and promote human rights.”

At the outset, the GDC establishes two key principles: one aimed at tying the GDC to the SDGs (somewhat akin to the emphasis at WSIS Tunis 2005 on ICTs being the solution to development problems) and the other at tying digital technologies to the protection of human rights online and offline (as if the observance of digital rights is the solution to political, economic, and social breaches of human rights law). The two key principles are:





- 8 (b): “This Compact is development-oriented and rooted in the 2030 Agenda. Our cooperation will harness technologies to fast-track progress, eradicate poverty and leave no one behind. This includes targeted efforts to address the needs of developing countries, in particular the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States, as well as the specific challenges facing middle-income countries.”

- 8 (c): “This Compact is anchored in international law, including international human rights law. All human rights, including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and fundamental freedoms, must be respected, protected and promoted online and offline. Our cooperation will harness digital technologies to advance all human rights, including the rights of the child, the rights of persons with disabilities and the right to development.”

Where the GDC comes closest to communication rights principles (still without mentioning them) is in the section on information integrity:

- 33. “Access to relevant, reliable and accurate information and knowledge is essential for an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space. We recognize that digital and emerging technologies can facilitate the manipulation of and interference with information in ways that are harmful to societies and individuals, and negatively affect the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.”

- 34. “We will work together to promote information integrity, tolerance and respect in the digital space, as well as to protect the integrity of democratic processes. We will strengthen international cooperation to address the challenge of misinformation and disinformation and hate speech online and mitigate the risks of information manipulation in a manner consistent with international law.”

- 35 (b). “Promote diverse and resilient information ecosystems, including by strengthening independent and public media and supporting journalists and media workers (SDGs 9 and 16).”

One criticism is that the GDC does not acknowledge that technology is a product of human labour in its design, production, and implementation. The GDC seems to promote “a sort of mysticism about technology as seen in its third paragraph: ‘We recognize that the pace and power of emerging technologies are creating new possibilities but also new risks for humanity, some of which are not yet fully known. We recognize the need to identify and mitigate risks and to ensure human oversight of technology in ways that advance sustainable development and the full enjoyment of human rights.’”

It is important to acknowledge tech as a product of human beings because this is crucial for accountability. Even for negative impacts of new tech that may not be intended, there should still be accountability, especially because testing and quality assurance are part of the development process. This is also relevant to environmental/climate impacts. Environmental impact studies should also be included in the development process.

As much as the drafting of the GDC was a contentious process at the global level where different visions of the digital played out, WACC and its partners believe that the extent to which the GDC is a success or a failure will depend on how it is implemented, especially at the local, national, and regional levels. As such, the paragraphs below list a number of general recommendations from a communication rights perspective as well as more specific thematic recommendations in relation to the areas of expertise of WACC partners: **gender justice, climate justice, and the rights of migrants.**

These recommendations are offered to UN members states and other stakeholders involved in the implementation of the GDC that go beyond the compromises that had to be made in New



York to ensure the GDC was adopted and that move towards a more progressive and social justice-oriented view of digital technologies.

### **General Recommendations from a Communication Rights Perspective**

1. The idea that digital resources need to be democratized and that governance decisions about digital technologies must prioritize the public interest over private profits is mostly absent from the GDC. The implementation of the GDC should consider these two ideas as guiding concepts to avoid perpetuating the current market-oriented model, which is perpetuating social and economic inequality and has failed to connect half of humanity to the Internet.
2. Media viability, particularly from a financial perspective, is absent from the GDC despite the negative influence that digital platforms have had on the financial models of media outlets all over the world. The implementation of the GDC should take this issue seriously as it is essential for democracy and social cohesion and should consider new financial mechanisms to support public interest media.
3. Closing the digital divide is indeed a priority. But policymakers should consider solutions that place communities in control over their own communication rather than see people as mere users that can help telecom companies grow their profits. Connectivity policies should consider community-managed, non-profit telecommunication infrastructure, as well as efforts that strengthen local cultural and language.
4. The multistakeholder model that has governed international digital policymaking since WSIS 2005 needs to be reviewed to account for power differences between stakeholder groups. New funding and capacity building mechanisms are needed to enable civil society to have a stronger voice. Greater political will to open decision making spaces to civil society is also needed.
5. All people have the right to affordable access to media, digital platforms, and AI; to receive and produce communication content; to express themselves freely; and to receive the training needed to use effectively all tools of human communication and interaction. In many ways the GDC does consider these issues, but WACC partners underlined that they should be seen as rights, not simply as nice-to-haves.
6. A media and tech sector regulated in the public interest must include public service, civil society (community) and the private sector, and must not be dominated by big tech and markets alone.
7. Media, computing, digital platforms, data, and AI must be made available as public utilities, and cannot be regarded solely or primarily as commodities given their impact on the realization of people's human rights. There should be a clear system of checks and balances for the people and institutions in control of those digital public goods.
8. The design and content of media, digital platforms, data, and AI must mirror the complexity of human experience. Protective discrimination and affirmative action initiatives are essential to maintain cultural and linguistic diversity and to guarantee the active participation of communities of colour, gender minorities, LGBTIQ communities, disabled communities, particularly in the Global South.
9. Regulation of digital platforms and social media must mandate interoperability – meaning that users can easily design each interface; select what content they want to receive and share; and swap information and data seamlessly between different platforms.
10. Data subjects, individually and collectively, must own their data. Media and digital regulation need to protect users from state and/or corporate surveillance, and data extraction for

control or marketing purposes. Useful application of data must be fair and equitable, and under the control of the respective individual/collective data subjects.

### **Recommendations from a Communication Rights and Gender Justice Perspective**



*Iraqi refugee women in Jordan learn computer skills with help from one of their daughters. Photo credit: Paul Jeffrey/Life on Earth*

The GDC addresses gender inequality in several ways. It makes commitments to mainstreaming a gender perspective in digital connectivity strategies (Objective 1), addressing gender-related capacity gaps and participation in science (Objective 1), encourage digital entrepreneurship among women (Objective 2), tackling online gender-based violence (Objective 3), and begin to address gender inequality in relation to data (Objective 4). However, WACC partners made the following recommendations to advance gender equality as the GDC is implemented:

1. The GDC fails to unpack the category “women”, misses a clear recognition of women’s heterogeneity, clear actions for specific groups of women and a clear strategy to empower women and girls. This approach is needed for the successful implementation of the GDC.
2. Gender needs to be understood in an intersectional way to meet the needs of more specific demographics, such as women with disabilities, rural women, Indigenous women, sexual and gender minorities, women living in poverty, etc.
3. The GDC should do more to tackle negative, violent, patriarchal, and hateful portrayals of women circulating on digital platforms by creating additional supports for women digital content producers, as well as for media organizations producing digital content seeking to advance gender equality.

4. The GDC fails to explicitly recognize that the starting point for women is bias. Gender biases should be addressed across the digital landscape in more tangible ways, for instance, through education on gender equality, gender rights, gender justice and critical digital literacy.
5. The leadership of women and diverse gender identities needs to be promoted within the tech sector to ensure the needs and concerns of these demographics are taken seriously.
6. The digital rights of women and girls need to be especially protected in contexts of war, armed conflict, and emergency situations. The GDC needs to underline the need for online protection of women and children living in these situations.
7. Digital technologies have sometimes fostered polarization and enabled backlash against gender justice activists. There is a need for additional safeguards for this demographic and for platforms to foster dialogue and understanding.
8. Financing for digital inclusion and support for women's tech entrepreneurship needs to be increased.
9. While the GDC seems to be comprehensive and includes all the important issues raised and debated, it overlooks contextualities. One example is Pakistan, where communication rights are contested. What is happening on ground in Pakistan greatly impacts our take on the GDC. See for example <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/social-issues/does-peca-law-empower-women> and <https://www.dawn.com/news/1888224>

#### **Recommendations from a Communication Rights and Climate Justice Perspective**



*A participant in the citizenship journalism training run by the Communication Foundation for Asia in March for members of the Alangan-Mangyan community, Philippines. Photo Credit: /WACC*

Climate and environmental issues are barely mentioned in the GDC. Under Objective 5, the text mentions the need to ensure that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is governed in the public interest, which includes addressing potential negative environmental impacts. And throughout the text, the GDC makes references to the role of digital technology in advancing sustainable development, which is understood to also include solutions to the climate crisis. However, WACC partners noted several gaps and made the following recommendations:



1. The GDC fails to acknowledge the massive environmental impact of digital technologies, especially in terms of energy and water consumption, as well as in relation to greenhouse emissions and mineral extraction. Any efforts to expand the reach of digital technologies, as is expected to happen with AI, needs to pursue net-zero emissions and little to no environmental impact while also upholding human rights and respecting the locations where digital infrastructure is installed.
2. Digital technologies should be seen as tools to ensure that those communities most impacted by the effects of climate change have platforms to express their views and concerns, as well as to access relevant information. The implementation of the GDC should make specific efforts to ensure climate-impacted communities have meaningful access and that their voices are given the importance they deserve.
3. Many environmental and climate justice groups, as well as investigative journalists, have been targeted online, especially when their actions challenge dominant economic models. There is a need to establish additional safeguards for those voices and to find ways to make them heard among the cacophony of disinformation and misinformation online.
4. Digital platforms have amplified climate disinformation and misinformation. There is an urgent need to censor such content and to amplify science and human rights-based narratives.
5. Stakeholders responsible for implementing the GDC should establish rules to ensure that digital devices are not manufactured with planned obsolescence in mind and that contents are recyclable to reduce impacts on the environment. Industry needs to be held accountable. This is referred to under Objective 1 (d) but needs to be strengthened.
6. Implementation of the GDC needs to create support mechanisms for journalists and media, including the citizen journalism and community media sectors, to produce climate-related, solutions-oriented news and content.
7. There is an urgent need to include and/or amplify the role of Indigenous knowledge systems by using modern digital technology and AI to promote climate justice.

### **Recommendations from a Communication Rights and Migration Perspective**



*Migrant citizen journalists in Colombia. Photo credit: WACC/Grupo Comunicarte*



Migration and displacement do not feature prominently in the GDC. References are limited to digital inclusion surveys to identify digital needs among migrants (Objective 1), commitments to build the media literacy skills of migrant population (Objective 1), and efforts to collect development-oriented data that would help policy makers meet the needs of migrants (Objective 4). WACC partners identified several gaps and produced these recommendations:

1. Fear of migration, a phenomenon rooted in racism and aporophobia (negative feelings and attitudes towards people who are poor, disadvantaged, or helpless), has been one of the main drivers of polarization, the collapse of social cohesion and mutual trust in many countries, as well as digital hate speech. Primarily because they lack a public voice, migrants are often scapegoated in media and digital content for social ills as diverse as unemployment, crime, and drug use.

The root causes of migration are rarely explored. The implementation of the GDC needs to take this situation into account and make every effort possible to tackle xenophobic, racist, and anti-migrant discourse while promoting rights-based narratives of migration. This can be done in several ways:

- a. Providing support for migrant-led networks of digital content producers and citizen journalists so they are better equipped and positioned to advance their own narratives.
- b. Creating mechanisms for migrant organizations to partner with media outlets and digital platforms to inform public narratives of migration.
- c. Specific support for news media so that they have the capacity to produce balances and rights-based content on migration issues.

2. The GDC, especially under Objective 2: Digital Economy, needs to establish mechanisms to facilitate safe and secure financial transactions for migrants including the sending and receipt of remittances sent by overseas migrants to their home countries. It should support efforts to reduce transaction costs and to have governments “match” the amounts sent by migrants, which should be allocated towards development programs that do not depend on labour export and will meaningfully address forced migration.

To explain: (1) Beside remittances, there are multiple other financial transactions of migrants. There should be protection from fraudulent transactions and scams. (2) Remittance and development is a contentious topic. Many migrant organisations are critical of linking remittance to development as it perpetuates a development framework that is based on a current migration design that is exploitative and oppressive. The above formulation is intended to reflect a valid demand for migrants (safe and secure transactions, lowering of transaction costs) but also directs the “matching” in more strategic development direction.

3. Also under Objective 2: Digital Economy, the GDC needs to acknowledge the essential economic role of migration for the world’s economy, particularly in terms of labour, business innovation, and remittances. Along with such acknowledgement there should be mechanisms to support migrants in their efforts to participate in and benefit from the digital economy.

4. Migrants – particularly women – face several barriers, from high fees to limited time to linguistic barriers, in accessing digital platforms, completing paperwork online, and fully participating in the digital ecosystem. The GDC needs specific provisions to tackle those barriers.

5. Digital platforms have become enablers of human trafficking due to lack of regulation and the spread of misinformation. Governments and tech companies must step up their work to prevent this crime and to persecute perpetrators





6. Digital platforms can be very useful tools to enable migrants to report abuse without facing retaliation. However, governments and tech platforms need to step up their work in this regard.

WACC encourages stakeholder from all sectors to consider these recommendations and to collaborate with civil society in their implementation.

In line with its communication rights mandate, WACC will continue to contribute to the global conversation about digital justice sparked by initiatives such as the Global Digital Compact by highlighting the communication and information needs of the most vulnerable and by calling for a public interest approach to life in the digital era.

### **Contributors**

1. Dev Kumar, Cultural Survival, Nepal
2. Gitiara Nasreen, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh
3. Vincent Rajkumar, CISRS, India
4. Sarita Shrestha, ASMITA, Nepal
5. Margaret Sentamu, UMWA, Uganda
6. Tasneem Ahmar, UKS, Pakistan
7. Pie Fenomeno, CFA, Philippines
8. Neema Mujesia, KICTANET, Kenya
9. Kim Cantillas, CPU, Philippines
10. N. Ramakrishnan, INDEOSYNC, India
11. Buhay Bangcawayan, APMM, Hong Kong
12. Kudzaiishe Ndawana, MEDRA, Zimbabwe
13. Mah'd Ahmad, CMN, Jordan
14. David Iribagiza, WOUGNET, Uganda
15. Aaron Ceredoy, APMM, Hong Kong
16. Abida Pehlic, NOVI PUT, Bosnia and Herzegovina
17. Hisham Allaham, TAM, Palestine
18. Trang Hoang, CGFED, Vietnam
19. Mark Aquino, MIGRANTE ME, United Arab Emirates
20. Paula Janer, APRN, Philippines
21. Afaf Zaddem, LDA, Tunisia
22. Patience Zirima, GMC, Zimbabwe
23. Jack Nassar, VACA, Palestine
24. Gustaff Iskandar, COMMONROOM, Indonesia
25. Suman Basnet, AMARC Asia Pacific, Nepal
26. Gisèle Langendries, WACC, United Kingdom
27. Philip Lee, WACC, United Kingdom
28. Sarah Macharia, WACC, Kenya
29. Lorenzo Vargas, WACC, Colombia