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SDG Zero?

A People-Centered Approach to Universal Connectivity

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Executive Summary

As the COVID-19 pandemic has increased reliance on digital technologies, it has highlighted the growing digital divide between and within societies. Universal access to the digital world has become more urgent than ever, and failure to achieve it could undermine progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. While closing the digital divide and increasing connectivity are among the UN secretary-general's priorities for 2021, this goal remains elusive and faces many obstacles.

One challenge is the lack of a shared understanding of what universal connectivity means. It is not just a technical challenge; it also requires addressing questions related to adoption, usage, accessibility, and the relevance and veracity of content. Another challenge is that funding for digital connectivity is uncoordinated and not easily accessible by those who need it most. There is also a lack of concerted leadership and coherent governance structures at all levels. Moreover, getting the framing right is key. National, global, and local leaders need to establish clear and compelling links between universal connectivity and the 2030 Agenda with its message to "leave no one behind."

Addressing these challenges requires a human-centered, human rights-based approach. Connectivity comes with risks, including privacy issues, misinformation and hate speech, and online violence and sexual harassment. While discussions on universal connectivity have gained momentum, these human rights considerations often remain an afterthought. Governments, businesses, and civil society need to understand connectivity as a right whose protection is their shared responsibility.

Ultimately, bridging the digital divide requires a stronger and more inclusive multilateral system. Geopolitics, a lack of shared understanding, knowledge gaps, and suspicion between actors continue to hold back digital cooperation at the UN. Governments need to meaningfully include private sector and civil society actors in formal decision-making processes. In parallel, the UN should create informal platforms to build trust among stakeholders. To achieve meaningful and sustainable progress toward digital inclusion, all actors need to commit to working through a multi-stakeholder platform.

Introduction

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and for the first time since 1990, human development is in decline.¹ Regaining momentum on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and in particular protecting the most vulnerable from the pandemic and its aftershocks, is therefore critical. At the same time, the pandemic has also dramatically accelerated our dependence on digital technologies. This dependence is likely to continue after the pandemic as the world scales up new ways of working and interacting online.

Digital technologies can be essential to personal, educational, health, and professional activity during lockdowns or social distancing. Yet the pandemic has also highlighted the growing digital divide between and within societies, accentuating existing inequalities and widening the socioeconomic and political gap between those with access to digital services and those without. Even before COVID-19, almost half of the world's population—3.6 billion—remained offline.² The pandemic has made most of these people even more marginalized and invisible, demonstrating and increasing the urgency of universal access to the digital world. The urgency is real and ubiquitous, in particular concerning access to education, the labor market, and health services.

Closing the digital divide and increasing connectivity are among the secretary-general's priorities for 2021. Yet the goal of universal connectivity remains elusive and faces many obstacles. The lack of a shared understanding of what universal connectivity for “everyone and everywhere” means—and consequently which policies and regulations should follow—hampers the urgent and concerted action needed by governments, companies, and civil society. Moreover, to secure the financing for universal connectivity, there is a need to better understand the level of investment required, which some estimate to be near \$2

The pandemic has demonstrated and increased the urgency of universal access to the digital world.

trillion.³ Beyond the figures, getting the type and nature of investments right also matters, and investments will need to be scaled up quickly and sustainably.

Yet the task is more complex than simply achieving and financing universal connectivity; it also has a human dimension. There is a need for additional thinking on and greater understanding of this human dimension among key stakeholders. If universal connectivity is to bring the benefits envisioned for sustainable development and peace, it needs to be achieved through a human-centered and human rights-based approach at the global, national, and local levels. If human rights are an afterthought, challenges such as privacy, cyberattacks, digitally disseminated misinformation and hate speech, and online violence and sexual exploitation will continue to grow.

The report of the secretary-general's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation and his subsequent roadmap provide a useful set of recommendations and an overarching framework for addressing some of these issues, but they are only the beginning. The obstacles to universal connectivity and digital inclusion demand sustained, collective, and comprehensive action, combining the leadership and comparative advantages of the public and private sectors. In the coming weeks and months, there will be many opportunities to advance digital cooperation and reframe the essential components required to achieve universal connectivity, including at high-level events this spring.

To this end, IPI, together with Microsoft, convened three roundtables in March and April 2021: (1) “Closing the Digital Divide in a Post COVID-19 Era”; (2) “Connecting the Disconnected: Human Rights Risks and Opportunities”; and (3) “Bridging the Digital Divide: Which Multi-stakeholder Models Work?”⁴ These roundtables gathered experts and leaders from the public and private

1 UN Development Programme (UNDP), “COVID-19: Human Development on Course to Decline This Year for the First Time since 1990,” May 20, 2020.

2 UN General Assembly, *Road Map for Digital Cooperation: Implementation of the Recommendations of the High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/74/821, May 29, 2020.

3 Vaishali Rastogi et al., “A \$2 Trillion Plan to Bring Two Billion More People into the Digital Age,” Boston Consulting Group, September 11, 2020.

4 These roundtables were held on March 11, 2021; March 24, 2021; and April 7, 2021.

realm. They were held under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution, and all participants spoke in their personal capacity. The roundtables provided the opportunity to discuss possible outcomes envisioned for 2021 and beyond. This paper highlights the main insights from these roundtables.

What Are the Main Barriers to Universal Connectivity?

COVID-19 has made connecting the unconnected more important than ever before. Across the world, people's ability to connect to digital services has had a major impact on how the pandemic has affected them. It is therefore not surprising that the UN75 Declaration adopted last year called for ensuring "safe and affordable digital access for all."⁵ While the 2030 Agenda, adopted in 2015, does not include universal connectivity as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the thinking is evolving, and some are now referring to universal connectivity as "SDG Zero," as an enabler and accelerator for the entire 2030 Agenda.⁶

But while agreement on the importance of universal connectivity may be growing, many barriers are hindering progress. One challenge is the lack of a shared understanding of what universal connectivity means. Attempting to define universal connectivity raises a number of questions: does connectivity mean having a signal on a device or actually using that device? Does it only mean increasing coverage, or does it also mean ensuring that access is affordable, or even free? Does it mean providing unfettered access without any codes of conduct? It is becoming increasingly clear that universal connectivity is not limited to the technical dimension of expanding geographic coverage; it also includes elements of adoption, usage, accessibility, and the relevance and veracity of content.

Moreover, raising these questions does not

minimize the technical challenges. While the technological capability to provide universal coverage exists, half of the world remains unconnected. Most of the underserved live in rural areas, but the pandemic has also revealed significant pockets of un-connectivity in urban and peri-urban zones. Paradoxically, many people around the world who live in areas that have coverage remain unconnected. Reasons for this could include unaffordability, digital illiteracy, lack of relevant local content, language barriers, and fear of online surveillance, abuse, or harassment.

Another challenge is the fragmentation of funding for universal connectivity. Funding is provided by different actors in an uncoordinated manner. Moreover, accessing this funding often requires going through burdensome processes such as feasibility studies that require a level of capacity that many governments and non-state actors lack.⁷ While investments in infrastructure are flowing in some regions, funding is severely lacking in others. Funding is especially scarce in least-developed and conflict-affected countries, where connectivity could provide pathways out of poverty. The private sector possesses the financing instruments, technology, and resources to fund universal connectivity, but it is often reluctant to invest in the places that need it the most given the associated risks, the lack of collateral, and limited short-term returns. According to one government official, "We need a bold, clear, and feasible funding structure. States who need this can't pay for this."⁸

In order to scale up funding, workshop participants suggested a pooled financing vehicle similar to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. They also recommended using new financing models such as sovereign guarantees or digital bonds.⁹ International financial institutions such as the World Bank will need to play a major role in financing the expansion of connectivity to reach the populations that need it most and "reach the furthest behind first"—a key principle of the 2030 Agenda. As part of these efforts, funding needs to be directed to the "last-

5 UN General Assembly Resolution 75/1 (September 21, 2020), UN Doc. A/RES/75/1.

6 Various participants in the three roundtables referred to achieving digital inclusion and universal connectivity as SDG Zero, or as the connecting thread for the SDGs.

7 Government representative at first IPI roundtable, March 11, 2021.

8 Government representative at first IPI roundtable, March 11, 2021.

9 Financial expert at first IPI roundtable, March 11, 2021.

mile” Internet providers—usually local entities that are often excluded. Including these providers in discussions and decision-making processes can also help global funders hear and understand the needs of end users in communities.

Finally, universal connectivity is held back by a lack of concerted leadership and coherent governance structures at all levels. Leaders at all levels need to make universal connectivity a priority. “To position universal connectivity in the global agenda, it first needs to be in the national agenda,” as one ambassador put it. Niger was mentioned as a good example of a country where both national and community leaders have approached connectivity as an essential service rather than a luxury and applied a “whole-of-government/whole-of-society approach.”¹⁰ It will be essential to avoid making connectivity “just a matter for the ICT ministry.”¹¹ It needs to be pursued by all.

For this to happen, getting the framing right is key. National, global, and local leaders need to establish clear and compelling links between universal connectivity and the 2030 Agenda with its message to “leave no one behind.” Thus, the narrative should be around digital inclusion rather than just universal connectivity. The role of the UN in this regard is not to negotiate and know all the technical details; it is to consciously position connectivity as an accelerator of the 2030 Agenda at the national and global levels, focusing on those who have been most vulnerable to and marginalized by technologies to date. These include populations that live in extreme poverty and minorities or other groups that are systematically excluded both online and offline.

To build consensus and mitigate risks and anxieties, universal connectivity also requires a “benevolent

roll-out.”¹² As one ambassador put it, “It needs to be affordable, and it has to be dignified, and it has to protect people and not increase the negative side [of] connectivity such as the exploitation of children, organized crime, and cyberthreats.”¹³ Governments, the UN, the private sector, international financial institutions, and civil society need to work together, adopting a people-centered approach. This people-centered approach is about putting individuals and communities at the center of the roll-out. As an expert highlighted, “It is not about industry interests but about the end user.”¹⁴

What Are the Human Rights Risks of Rushing to Close the Digital Divide?

To strengthen linkages to the 2030 Agenda, the narrative should be around digital inclusion rather than just universal connectivity.

A people-centered approach to universal connectivity needs to come hand in hand with a human rights-based approach. Universal connectivity “has to be a package” that includes a strategy for

protecting, respecting, and fulfilling human rights online and building capacity for cybersecurity.¹⁵ The rush to increase connectivity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is coinciding with a worldwide deterioration of human rights protections, both offline and online.¹⁶ The pandemic has accelerated the decline of global Internet freedom.¹⁷ While access to the Internet has increased, so have Internet shutdowns, surveillance, and privacy violations. “There has been an assault on freedom of expression,” according to one human rights expert.¹⁸ The pandemic has also highlighted the legitimate dilemmas posed by digital solutions. The health imperative to stop the spread of the virus led many governments to adopt tracking and tracing approaches that raised privacy concerns.¹⁹

10 Connectivity expert at first IPI roundtable, March 11, 2021. See: International Telecommunication Union, “Measuring the Information Society Report 2018,” 2018, p. 132.

11 Connectivity expert at first IPI roundtable, March 11, 2021.

12 Government representative at first IPI roundtable, March 11, 2021.

13 Government representative at first IPI roundtable, March 11, 2021.

14 Connectivity expert at first IPI roundtable, March 11, 2021.

15 Connectivity expert at first IPI roundtable, March 11, 2021.

16 Human rights expert at second IPI roundtable, March 24, 2021.

17 Adrian Shahbaz and Allie Funk, “Freedom on the Net 2020: The Pandemic’s Digital Shadow,” Freedom House, October 2020.

18 Human rights expert at second IPI roundtable, March 24, 2021.

19 Government representative at second IPI roundtable, March 24, 2021.

The risks are not limited to active government abuses. Passivity is a threat as well. If governments and other actors do not actively protect privacy, counter misinformation and hate speech, and prevent online violence and sexual exploitation, these rights abuses may continue to rise. Regardless of the source of the threat, the consequences are real. As several experts noted, wherever online rights are violated, offline rights are usually next.²⁰

The link between connectivity and human rights also extends beyond core political rights. As the pandemic has reminded us, it is increasingly difficult to enjoy fundamental economic, social, and cultural rights without access to the digital sphere. This is particularly true as many services critical to achieving the SDGs, from vaccination appointments to educational opportunities, are increasingly provided online.²¹

Yet while discussions on universal connectivity have gained momentum, the human rights dimension is the least articulated.²² At the UN in particular, there is still a

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palpable tension when it comes to discussing human rights in the digital sphere. It is hard to find consensus among member states on human rights issues generally, so perhaps it should come as no surprise that it is even harder when it comes to the digital sphere, where understanding is limited. The involvement of businesses, which run most of the digital sphere but whose responsibility to protect human rights online remains disputed, is another complication. So is the participation of civil society groups representing the users and those who may be left behind or hurt by online practices and rules. Regional and country-specific challenges to digital safety and security also make it difficult to address these human rights issues on a global level.

One way forward would be to start off by addressing areas where there is already consensus. There is near unanimity on the value of preventing online child abuse and sexual harassment, and growing recognition of the need to prevent hate

speech and misinformation.²³ These are areas in which the UN has expertise and tools that can assist countries in developing strategies to protect the rights of the most vulnerable online.

It may also be helpful to distinguish substantive issues such as privacy rights, on which disagreements prevail, from process issues, where there are already tools available to help actors manage risks associated with digital solutions. These tools include human rights impact assessments to anticipate the potentially nefarious consequences of new e-products, multi-stakeholder models to include new voices in the design and monitoring of new technologies, and oversight and remedy mechanisms to protect vulnerable people from online abuse. Human rights impact assessments conducted by both governments and companies are a particularly useful instrument for bringing

together diverse groups of actors and building a common understanding of the potential risks embedded in the design and roll-out of new digital technologies.

Another challenge is that protecting human rights in the digital sphere requires a breadth and depth of knowledge across a range of political, technical, legal, and ethical dimensions that are hard for many entities—public or private—to master. Listening to and learning from other stakeholders will be essential. Moreover, efforts to meet the specific needs and protect the rights of all will need to be tailored to specific technologies and their platforms, which further raises the knowledge barrier. Despite the challenges posed by this complexity, any attempt to circumvent it may only set us further back. Instead, there is a need to increase understanding of and capacity to address these human rights challenges. Greater understanding and capacity will also likely lead to increased action.

Protecting and promoting rights in the digital sphere will require will and commitment. On the private sector side, “companies need to ask

²⁰ Government representative at second IPI roundtable, March 24, 2021. This point was also echoed by several human rights experts.

²¹ Private sector representative at second IPI roundtable, March 24, 2021.

²² Government representative at second IPI roundtable, March 24, 2021.

²³ UN official at second IPI roundtable, March 24, 2021.

themselves, what are we doing to expand dignity and people's choices and opportunities? What are the unintended consequences of a product or a technology being developed, [and] how could it be misused?"²⁴ The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights are an essential starting point.²⁵ Companies have a responsibility to continuously prevent, mitigate, and remedy human rights abuses resulting from their products and operations. Tech companies in particular can benefit from participating in the UN Human Rights Office's B-Tech Project, both at headquarters and in the field.²⁶

Ultimately, both governments and companies need to be proactive in ensuring that their products and services uphold people's dignity. Toward this end, a business case must be made that the protection of human rights online is integral to prosperity, peace, and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. The responsibility for making this case should not be left to human rights advocates; it must be borne by governments and business leaders as well. Governments, businesses, and civil society actors should understand connectivity as a right whose protection is their shared responsibility.

Finding a Way Forward Together: A Multi-actor Approach to Digital Inclusion

The most pressing challenges of our time—from pandemic recovery to climate change to digital inclusion—require a stronger and more inclusive multilateral system. To achieve the aspirations embedded in global frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement on climate change, and the UN75 Declaration, government-centric UN bodies and platforms need to be broadened to include civil society, the private sector, academia, youth movements, and other actors. The same is true for digital inclusion, where stronger leadership

and concerted action is needed from a range of actors to put people at the center of efforts to increase connectivity and mitigate the risks people face when online. Governments cannot close the digital divide alone. They need inputs, knowledge, resources, and action from a much broader constellation of actors.

In the sphere of digital cooperation, however, geopolitics, a lack of shared understanding, knowledge gaps, and suspicion between actors continue to hold back concerted action at the UN. Instead, a plethora of multi-stakeholder initiatives on digital governance and collaboration is emerging at the periphery of the UN. These include the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the EDISON Alliance, Christchurch Call, and the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace. These initiatives help keep digital issues on the global agenda, and some can be leveraged to reenergize more formal UN processes. But at the same time, fragmentation among multiple mechanisms makes it difficult to align efforts at the global, national, and local levels, and these mechanisms often do not include actors from the Global South. Without a binding agent or overall ecosystem that nourishes cooperation, there is a greater risk of duplication and gaps.

Efforts to strengthen cooperation on digital inclusion should learn from existing models of multi-stakeholder cooperation, both within and beyond the digital sphere. In some areas, such as climate change, there has been "win-win" collaboration between the private and public spheres. Other efforts have been fraught with tensions and suspicion, ending in paralysis and often getting stuck in old ways of working that do not advance concerted action.²⁷ Others still have suffered from limited representation.

One challenge to multi-stakeholder engagement is that UN structures often formally exclude non-government actors from participating. But this does not mean that the rules and norms cannot be

²⁴ Company representative at second IPI roundtable, March 24, 2021.

²⁵ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights," 2011.

²⁶ See: Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "B-Tech Project," available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Business/Pages/B-TechProject.aspx>.

²⁷ Participants discussed how the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) could include a wider range of stakeholders and envisioned that it will evolve in that direction.

changed. At the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit, for example, the private sector and civil society were involved from planning to implementation and “shared the same stage as member states.”²⁸ This involvement contributed to increasing the level of ambition of member-state participants and made the process more dynamic and effective. It is important to remember the General Assembly is the master of its own rules and procedures and can create new ways of engaging a wide array of actors. For example, it can establish expert working groups where civil society and government representatives work on a topic with equal status.²⁹

Diversifying and tailoring the means of engagement available could be another way to enhance inclusivity. People should be able to participate in multi-stakeholder processes in a variety of capacities (e.g., as individuals or as representatives of organizations or geographic regions) and through a variety of methods (e.g., both in-person and virtually). This will require organizers to be flexible and to adjust procedures for participation, including the size and structure of participation platforms.

It is also important to move from symbolic engagement to meaningful participation. Merely inviting civil society and private sector representatives to speak at side events does not translate into real inclusion. Formal UN discussions and decision-making processes require expertise, and the quality of this expertise matters more than its source. When it comes to digital inclusion, the top experts are often not in governments or the UN.

In addition, multi-stakeholder cooperation on digital inclusion requires building confidence between governments and non-government actors. Informal platforms, operating in parallel with more formal, government-centric mechanisms, could make actors from different sectors feel more comfortable interacting with each other. They

could also allow these actors to build a shared understanding of the issues and what they are setting out to achieve. When negotiating the 2030 Agenda, for example, diplomats and civil society members spent the first two years in workshops and retreats developing a shared understanding of and language on the array of topics the agenda would cover. Regular, clear communication with all actors involved is also important to building a shared understanding and agreeing on the process, rules, roles and responsibilities, and goals. Beyond communication, some multi-stakeholder models have included an honest broker to ensure that all voices and interests are reflected in discussions.

Finally, many successful multi-stakeholder models have benefited from having a specific focus and setting clear and transparent targets. However, a key dilemma resides in the level of ambition:

To achieve meaningful and sustainable progress toward digital inclusion, all actors need to commit to working through a multi-stakeholder platform.

should multi-stakeholder models prioritize incremental progress, or should they seek transformative change? The answer may vary, depending on what is required to bring about change. For digital inclusion, a combination of

quick action and a long-term view may be the right approach.

These lessons all share one common feature: the importance of leadership in creating new norms and shifting toward more open, innovative, and inclusive ways of working. Inclusivity does not happen unless it is positioned up front as a core goal and responsibility of those leading multi-stakeholder models. The UN Secretariat has a critical role to play by making the case for and promoting meaningful inclusivity. But it also needs support from member states and civil society advocating for a multi-stakeholder ecosystem. These platforms will be meaningless if they are empty shells. To achieve meaningful and sustainable progress toward digital inclusion, all actors need to commit to working through a multi-stakeholder platform.

²⁸ Former assistant secretary-general and government representative at third IPI roundtable, April 2, 2021.

²⁹ The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is an example given a government representative. Third IPI roundtable, April 2, 2021.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased both our dependence on digital technologies and the gap between the connected and the unconnected. Having access to an open and safe Internet is no longer a luxury but a necessity. The pandemic has also elevated digital inclusion onto the global agenda. It is no longer an issue for ICT experts or tech companies alone but requires the concerted engagement and leadership of governments, the UN, civil society, and companies. The 2030 Agenda already offers a global framework for this multi-stakeholder engagement. The next step is to increase understanding of how digital inclusion can accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. In this spirit of collaboration and to stimulate further dialogue, the following recommendations are put forward:

- **Expand the definition of universal connectivity:** However universal connectivity is defined, it should be people-centered. The main goal of providing connectivity is to enhance people's lives and increase their prosperity and opportunities while protecting them from the risks of being online.
- **Tie digital inclusion to the 2030 Agenda:** The UN, governments, companies, and civil society need to work together to achieve digital inclusion. Stakeholders are already aligned around the 2030 Agenda, and this can serve as a common compass. The roll-out of universal connectivity should be closely connected to the implementation of and follow-up on the agenda and its call to "leave no one behind." Framing universal connectivity around digital inclusion can strengthen this link and keep the focus on a people-centered approach.
- **Ensure that the roll-out of universal connectivity is benevolent:** The roll-out of universal connectivity should not come at the expense of human rights protections. Governments and companies in particular need to ensure that connectivity comes hand in hand with protection and prosperity. Toward this end, they should employ existing human rights tools and mechanisms that can help uphold human

rights online.

- **Support context-specific national and local strategies:** Alongside a global expansion of digital inclusion tied to the 2030 Agenda, it is equally important to design context-specific strategies that fit the specific needs of local populations. This can be done in collaboration with the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF, and other UN agencies already working in this space at the country level. UN resident coordinator's offices could also support country-specific strategies and include digital inclusion in their sustainable development cooperation frameworks. UN regional commissions could play a role in connecting these national strategies to the regional and global levels.
- **Develop new financing models such as sovereign guarantees or digital bonds:** International financial institutions such as the World Bank, as well as regional development banks, will need to play a major role in financing the expansion of connectivity to reach the people who need it most. As part of these efforts, funding also needs to be directed to the "last-mile" Internet providers and to be made more accessible to governments in the Global South and civil society actors.
- **Build a common understanding of connectivity and digital inclusion:** No one actor has the required breadth and depth of knowledge of the legal, technical, policy, and ethical issues involved in digital inclusion. Stakeholders from different sectors need to work together to build a common understanding of their objectives and the challenges they face. Toward this end, companies need to engage more with governments and the UN. Governments and the UN, for their part, need to more systematically include the private sector and civil society in formal decision-making processes related to digital inclusion.
- **Build confidence among different actors:** Alongside more formal processes, there is a need for informal networks to build trust and confidence among actors from different sectors. This could help foster the willingness to engage in good faith that will be needed to

move from rhetoric to joint implementation. It could also foster the emergence of champions for multi-stakeholder approaches led by the Office of the UN Envoy on Technology.

- **Give the UN a leadership role:** The Office of the UN Envoy for Technology, together with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), should take the lead in helping countries prevent the most nefarious

consequences of connecting the unconnected. They should build capacity on conducting processes such as human rights impact assessments and human rights due diligence when increasing connectivity. They should also create a platform for governments, civil society, and companies to discuss the consequences of connectivity and how to protect the most vulnerable.

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