

# An Overview of the United Nations High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation

By Edson Prestes

**W**e are witnessing the rise of a world driven by digital technologies. Understanding the potential of these technologies, several nations now are racing to assume leadership of the artificial intelligence (AI) world. One of the main problems is we, as a global community, do not clearly understand the implications behind this race. At the same time that digital technologies bring many benefits, such as raising the standard of living and quality of life of people around the globe, they also can deepen inequalities and undermine human rights.

Currently, we can easily find examples of systems violating our privacy [1] and, consequently, our right to a private life; providing unequal opportunities based on gender [2], consequently violating the right for gender equality; degrading or having the potential to degrade the environment [3], violating the right to a decent standard of living; discriminating against minorities [4], [5], violating access to justice and the right to a fair trial; and so forth [6].

Specifically regarding the AI-related domain, we need to be aware, despite all the hype involved, that AI-based systems are just computational systems, far from being as intelligent as humans. This will help to shape the conversation and preserve human agency and decision-making abilities, especially in scenarios that may pose risk to human life.

We comprehend that one-size-fits-all solutions are not adequate to address the potential issues related to technology. Any solution should take into account the social, economic, and cultural diversity that exists across the globe. Therefore, it is urgent to have a worldwide conversation; consequently, cooperation is necessary to address all potential unintended outcomes and avoid a dystopian future. We need to make a joint effort to try to understand how digital technology can impact our lives so as to understand our own role regarding its limitations and potentialities to reap all possible benefits. This implies ascertaining the effects on our basic needs, values, and rights as individuals and as a society as a way to preserve our rights and agency while diminishing existing gaps (infrastructure, educational system and social barriers, and so forth) rather than creating new ones.

On 12 July 2018, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres established the High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation. This panel aims to propose ways to strengthen cooperation at a global level in the digital realm to ensure a safe and inclusive digital future for everyone, following the premise that no one gets left behind. This panel is chaired by Melinda Gates, cochair of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Jack Ma, executive chairman, Alibaba Group. It is composed of 20 independent experts from government, industry, civil society, academia, and the technical community. I'm deeply honored for being invited to

join this panel together with very distinguished members that include Vinton Cerf, Google vice president and Turing Award recipient; Jean Tirole, Nobel Prize laureate in Economic Sciences; Mohammed Al Gergawi, minister of cabinet affairs and the future, United Arab Emirates; Nikolai Astrup, minister of international development, Norway; and Isabel Guerrero Pulgar, past World Bank vice president (Figure 1).

The first in-person meeting took place on 24–25 September 2018 at UN headquarters in New York, where we discussed inclusive technology, trade, and development; principles, mechanisms, and approaches to digital cooperation; capacity building and closing the digital gap; data as a transformative resource; human rights and human agency in the digital age; and digital security.

In particular, I gave a speech on human rights and human agency in the digital age, discussing our global scenario with current examples of human rights violations from technology misuse. In addition, I advocated in favor of how our domain can create a bright and inclusive world based on the responsible development of robotics and automation (R&A) innovations. As R&A is my “alma mater,” I sincerely believe the field has the potential to positively transform our society, bringing many benefits to humanity, such as universal access to health systems, an increase in human well-being, creation of new businesses, equality of opportunities, environmental sustainability, and others that are also aligned to the UN's sustainable development goals.



**Figure 1.** At center (from left): Melinda Gates, António Guterres, and Jack Ma. Edson Prestes, IEEE Robotics & Automation Society Industrial Activities Board vice president, is third from the left in the second row, between Jean Tirole and Mohammed Al Gergawi. (Source: High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation.)

At the end of the second day, we decided to focus our attention on values and principles, methods and mechanisms, and illustrative action areas,

aiming to answer such questions as the following.

- What are the key values that individuals, organizations, and countries should support, protect, foster, or prioritize when working together to address digital issues?
- What are the priority areas for improved cooperation among stakeholders? How do we enable cooperation? What methods and mechanisms of cooperation are we missing?
- What are successful examples of cooperation among stakeholders in these areas? Where is additional cooperation needed?

Currently, we have delegations gathering inputs from governments, the private sector, civil society, international organizations, and technical and academic communities worldwide, through visiting capital cities, attending or hosting in-person events, convening discussions, and launching open calls for contributions. All inputs collected will be evaluated by the panel, which will produce a report for the UN Secretary-General with key findings and actionable recommendations. This report is planned for release in mid-2019.

Our most recent in-person meeting was held at the UN office at Geneva, Switzerland, the Palais des Nations, 21–22 January 2019. If you want to

know more about our work, please visit <https://digitalcooperation.org>.

## References

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