

**ICEGOV Keynote: Digital Cooperation – International Governance of Emerging
Technologies & the Global Digital Compact**

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Distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues, and all participants joining us today,

It is an honour to address you on a topic that is not only timely but crucial for our shared future: digital cooperation and the governance of emerging technologies, framed by the principles of the Global Digital Compact.

As we stand in the midst of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, technological advancements are reshaping our economies, industries, and societies at an

unprecedented pace. Artificial intelligence (AI) is at the heart of this transformation, offering immense potential to innovate and address some of the world's most pressing challenges. Yet, as we embrace these new frontiers, we must also confront a pressing question: How do we govern this rapidly evolving field responsibly and ethically?

This question lies at the core of what I call the AI balancing problem. We must ask ourselves: how do we push the boundaries of innovation while ensuring that human values, rights, and dignity remain central? How do we foster progress while safeguarding against the risks AI presents?

AI will be critical as we reassess our strategies for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In fact, it is estimated that AI could contribute to 134 targets across 79% of all SDGs, accelerating progress on issues from poverty

eradication to climate action. But as we look to AI to support the 2030 Agenda, we must also acknowledge that technological advancement without responsibility could exacerbate the very inequalities we seek to eliminate.

The road ahead is not without obstacles. Data-driven development, for all its promise, brings new risks. For instance, in this year alone, over 2 billion people will have participated in democratic elections worldwide. Yet we have seen how technologies like deepfakes can undermine the integrity of these processes, posing serious threats to global democracy. The challenge, then, is clear: comprehensive governance frameworks are not just desirable; they are essential to protecting our systems and institutions.

The risks posed by AI are far-reaching. Another concern is the biases ingrained in AI systems, particularly when trained on unrepresentative or skewed data. These

biases can lead to discriminatory outcomes, often disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. I worked with this firsthand when exploring the challenges faced by AI language recognition technologies in understanding low-resourced languages, such as Ju/'Hoansi San, spoken by an indigenous group here in southern Africa. Being spoken only by tens of thousands, this language is underrepresented in digital contexts, leading to AI systems that struggle to capture its nuances.

These challenges, however, are not insurmountable. Addressing bias in AI is both a technical and moral imperative. Governments and institutions must take active steps to ensure that diverse datasets are used, and that countries with fewer resources have access to the tools they need to thrive in a digital world. Inclusivity must be at the heart of AI development—this is not only an ethical issue but one of economic and social justice.

In the international sphere, we are seeing progress. Last week, at the Summit of the Future, UN Member States adopted the Pact for the Future, a global call for enhanced cooperation to address pressing global challenges and promote sustainable development through collaboration and innovation. Central to this pact is the adoption of the Global Digital Compact (GDC), which will serve as a guiding framework for the governance of digital technologies moving forward.

The Global Digital Compact is built on shared principles and a united commitment to bridge the digital divide while fostering an inclusive and safe digital environment. It calls for cooperation between governments, the private sector, civil society, and international organisations to create a digital future that benefits all.

Of particular importance is the GDC's focus on AI. One of its key objectives is to enhance the international governance of AI for the benefit of humanity. As AI

continues to extend human capabilities, it is critical that its use is firmly rooted in international human rights standards. AI development must not only reflect technical proficiency but also ethical integrity, ensuring that its applications are equitable and transparent.

Furthermore, the Compact emphasizes the need to close the digital divide between the Global North and Global South, a divide that—if unaddressed—threatens to further entrench existing inequalities. It calls for gender-sensitive approaches and a renewed focus on ensuring that digital technologies are accessible to all, regardless of geography or socioeconomic status.

These commitments come at a pivotal moment. Progress on the SDGs is stalling on multiple fronts, and the time to act is now. Emerging technologies, including AI, must be harnessed not as tools of exclusion but as catalysts for transformation.

Achieving the SDGs will require renewed international cooperation in the field of digital governance. Transparent discourse between the Global North and South is essential, as is ensuring that the Global South is not merely a consumer of technology but an active innovator. When harnessed for the benefit of those in need, AI has the potential to drive meaningful change in sectors like agriculture, healthcare, education, and economic development.

Here in South Africa, AI-driven water management systems are already helping to mitigate the impacts of water scarcity. In Tanzania, AI is revolutionising education through personalised tutoring systems. Meanwhile, Rwanda's healthcare system has seen significant cost reductions through AI-enabled procurement systems. Across Africa and Asia, AI-powered credit scoring is enhancing access to financial resources for people with no formal credit history, helping to build more inclusive economies.

When AI is developed within the Global South for the Global South, it becomes both contextually relevant and culturally appropriate. The key to enabling full participation in the digital economy lies in ensuring that developing countries have access to the technologies and resources they need to innovate and grow. Equally important is investing in youth education and equipping the next generation with the skills required to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

We should not underestimate the transformative power of education. I grew up in a small village in Venda, far from the fields of AI and international governance. It was through educational opportunities and international cooperation that I was able to engage with these areas and ultimately contribute to the global effort to harness AI for the greater good.

My journey has led me to work on projects such as the World Health Organisation's AI Guidelines in Medicine, UNESCO's Ethics of AI, and AI for Good at the International Telecommunication Union. More recently, I have been appointed to the UN Secretary-General's Scientific Advisory Board and the High-Level Advisory Board on AI. Through these roles, I have seen how emerging technologies can be both transformative and perilous, depending on how they are developed and governed.

Looking ahead, education in the Global South will be critical to shaping the future of AI. By investing in emerging leaders and fostering collaboration between institutions, we can ensure that the next generation is equipped to lead in both AI innovation and governance.

As we strive towards a more equitable and sustainable digital future, the role of public engagement and evidence-based policy is indispensable. The United Nations University plays a unique role in this space, offering policy-relevant research and providing a platform for dialogue between diverse stakeholders. Our work contributes to ensuring that the development and use of AI aligns with the SDGs and the principles of the Global Digital Compact.

We are also expanding our capacity for AI research with the upcoming launch of a new institute in Bologna, Italy—our 14th research institute. This institute will focus on the intersection of AI, big data, and sustainable development, aligning with the commitments outlined in the GDC. It represents a significant step forward in ensuring that AI is not only developed ethically but that it contributes to a more sustainable future.

As we close, I would like to leave you with a reflection on the power of choice. The future of AI, and indeed the future of all emerging technologies, will be shaped by the decisions we make today. Oren Etzioni, the founding CEO of the Allen Institute for AI, once said, “AI is a tool. The choice about how it gets deployed is ours.”

Let us make the conscious decision to deploy AI and emerging technologies in ways that prioritise human rights, uphold social justice, and foster sustainable development. Together, through cooperation and shared vision, we can build a digital future that works for everyone.

Thank you.