



JOINT SUBMISSION TO THE GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT ON EARTH JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

April 2023

Introduction

This joint submission is a response to the Global Digital Compact consultation process and its expected outcome to outline shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all. We envision a Global Digital Compact that responds to the socio-environmental impacts of digital technologies, and adopts an intersectional and rights-based approach to the future of digital technologies. This submission is the result of a participatory consultation process hosted by the APC network and the Latin American Institute for Terraforming. This consultation process included an online survey, virtual meeting, and open drafting for input from participating organisations and individuals.

We have identified two intersecting principles towards a future of digital governance for Earth justice and sustainable development:

1. Respect planetary boundaries and the rights of nature in the design, production and deployment of digital technologies.
2. Ensure meaningful access to information, participation in decision making, and access to justice for environmental rights and the rights of nature.¹

These principles are aligned with existing international standards and commitments, and respond to the urgent need for action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Commitments made by all stakeholders to uphold these principles must adopt intersectional and rights-based approaches towards the future of digital technologies.

Summary of core principles and key commitments

Principle 1. Respect planetary boundaries and the rights of nature

Digitalisation must respect planetary boundaries and the rights of nature. Principle 15 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) states:

1. Putzer, A., Lambooy, T., Jeurissen, R., & Kim, E. (2022). Putting the rights of nature on the map: A quantitative analysis of rights of nature initiatives across the world. *Journal of Maps*, 18(1), 89-96. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17445647.2022.2079432>

In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.²

Governments must strengthen binding national, regional and global frameworks to implement a precautionary approach to digitalisation. Environmental and human rights impact assessments must be developed with the meaningful participation of impacted communities, and as part of broader processes of due diligence that cover all stages of the life cycle of digital technologies.

All stakeholders must commit to supporting local community-led initiatives to design, develop and deploy appropriate technologies according to their needs and local contexts. The need for autonomous and appropriate technologies is especially relevant in remote and isolated territories where extractive industries are threatening the rights and safety of traditional and Indigenous communities.³ Government and private sector commitments related to the design and deployment of digital technologies should support environmental stewardship and community-led connectivity initiatives that respect planetary boundaries and the rights of nature.

A circular economy approach to the design, production and deployment of digital technologies offers important guidance towards respecting planetary boundaries and the rights of nature. We believe that a circular economy approach must include anti-extractive, decolonial and feminist approaches.

Principle 2. Ensure meaningful access, participation and justice

Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) states that environmental issues “are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at relevant levels.” It also framed three pillars for civic engagement in environmental decision making that form the basis of

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2. https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_26_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf
 3. A good example is Rhizomatica’s HERMES initiative. See: Romano, M. (2022, 11 August). Seeding change: Rhizomatica’s high frequency radio showcases the power of communication in remote regions of the Amazon. APC. <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/seeding-change-rhizomaticas-high-frequency-radio-showcases-power-communication-remote-regions>

procedural environmental rights: access to information, participation in decision making, and access to redress and remedy.⁴

In 2019, a United Nations Environment Programme report on environmental rule of law stressed that:

These three pillars are not only practical mechanisms for implementing civic engagement, but access to these procedural guarantees has increasingly been acknowledged by the international community as the necessary basis for ensuring protection of both the emerging right to a clean and healthy environment and other substantive rights.⁵

The Aarhus Convention and Escazú Agreement are important binding regional agreements that require effective enforcement by governments and cooperation among all stakeholders. Digital technologies play a critical role in access to information and participation in decision making; however, this role is being increasingly undermined by the use of technology to target environmental activists and human rights defenders through surveillance, censorship and criminalisation of expression, online attacks, cyberstalking and disinformation.⁶

Article 9 of the Escazú Agreement commits all parties to “guarantee a safe and enabling environment for persons, groups and organizations that promote and defend human rights in environmental matters, so that they are able to act free from threat, restriction and insecurity.”⁷ Commitments are needed from all stakeholders to respond to digital attacks that target environmental defenders, including sustainable funding for holistic and contextualised support for digital safety and security.⁸

Private companies must prioritise transparency and meaningful access to information relevant to the socio-environmental impacts of their operations and planned technology development. Asymmetry in access to data and information severely restricts robust and evidence-based responses from local communities to the socio-environmental impacts of digital development

4. https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_26_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf

5. United Nations Environment Programme. (2019). *Environmental Rule of Law: First Global Report*. <https://www.unep.org/resources/assessment/environmental-rule-law-first-global-report>

6. Moolman, J., Kamran, H., & Smith, E. (2022). *Freedom of expression and participation in digital spaces*. Association for Progressive Communications. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/EP.14_Jan%20Moolman.pdf

7. <https://www.cepal.org/en/escazuagreement>

8. Poetranto, I, Chan, S, & Anstis, S. (2020). On/offline: Multidimensional threats faced by environmental human rights defenders in Southeast Asia. In A. Finlay (Ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2020: Technology, the environment and a sustainable world*. <https://giswatch.org/node/6228>

projects. Intellectual property rights must not supersede the right to a healthy environment.

Civil society representatives have important roles in amplifying the voices of impacted communities and excluded groups, and supporting their meaningful participation in decision making in processes of digital and internet governance. The rights of nature and of communities most affected by the socio-environmental impacts of digitalisation must be central to digital governance processes, and embedded in global norms and standards.

About APC

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is an international networked organisation of activists and organisations, founded in 1990, dedicated to empowering and supporting people working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). We work to create a just and sustainable world by harnessing the collective power of activists, organisations, excluded groups, communities and social movements, to challenge existing power structures and ensure that the internet is developed and governed as a global public good.

More at <https://www.apc.org>

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