



INDEPENDENT COMMISSION ON MULTILATERALISM

The Impact of New Technologies on Peace, Security, and Development

Executive Summary

A new wave of technology is driving rapid global change. This change has created new opportunities for multilateral cooperation in the areas of sustainable development, governance and state-society relations, peace and conflict, international security, and global governance. But at the same time, the UN and other multilateral institutions have at times struggled to keep up with the pace of change. To effectively keep up and adapt, the UN must determine where it can play a useful role and where existing mechanisms and other actors are better placed.

The UN has been seeking to find its role both in addressing new technologies and in integrating these technologies into its other areas of work. This integration is more advanced in some areas than in others. For example, the growing role of technology in sustainable development was highlighted in the outcomes of a number of major UN conferences in 2015. In other areas, the UN is earlier in the process of integrating new technologies into its work.

Sustainable development: The potential of new technologies to support development is widely recognized. For example, new ways of gathering and processes data can improve understanding of which development efforts are working. However, significant challenges to achieving this potential remain, from the enduring “digital divide” to negative environmental impacts. These challenges notwithstanding, sustainable development is the area where the UN has come the farthest in integrating new technologies into its discussions and work. The ten-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+10) drew a strong link between new technologies and sustainable development, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Several mechanisms have also been put in place to transfer technology to the developing world and improve coordination on collecting and sharing data.

Governance and state-society relations: New technologies have the potential to transform the relationship between governments and their people, including by increasing popular participation through crowdsourcing and empowering people to network with each other. This transformation can also have negative consequences, however, such as by breaking down trust through mass surveillance. Multilateral responses in this area have been relatively limited, but

selection of the next secretary-general presents the UN with an opportunity to use crowdsourcing tools to increase the transparency and participatory nature of its own processes.

Peace and conflict: New technologies provide opportunities throughout the conflict cycle, from preventing conflict by reducing the gap between warning and response, to facilitating peacekeeping by giving peace operations new tools to operate in increasingly complex environments, to supporting peacebuilding by empowering local actors. At the same time, these technologies are not a panacea and are not equally useful in every context, so their risks must be carefully managed. The UN has recognized the important link between new technologies in peace, including in the 2015 reports of the Expert Panel on Technology and Innovation in UN Peacekeeping and the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations.

International security: The impact of new technologies on security has been particularly evident in cyberspace, where cybercrime and cyberattacks can undermine the safety of Internet users, disrupt economic and commercial activity, and threaten military effectiveness. Technologies such as drones and robots are also reshaping warfare and raising questions about how to apply international humanitarian law. The UN has undertaken several initiatives to determine the norms and rules that govern offensive state action in the cyber domain and through new forms of warfare. But some argue that new rules are necessary, whether in a treaty addressing cybersecurity or measures aiming to build confidence among stakeholders.

Governing cyberspace: Governance of the Internet is one of the areas related to new technologies where multilateral actors have played the smallest role, and many believe it should stay that way. Nonetheless, a growing number of actors recognizes that, depending on the issue and the stage of discussions, there is space for both multilateralism and multi-stakeholderism in Internet governance, as long as what is already working well is preserved.

Based on these opportunities, challenges, and multilateral responses, the paper provides a number of recommendations for the UN system:

- Map UN venues dealing with new technologies to help streamline and consolidate efforts.
- Identify a UN focal point on cyber issues to help bridge regional and UN efforts.
- Recognize and build on multi-stakeholder approaches and build partnerships with private and civil society actors.
- Ensure coherence among mechanisms aiming to improve access to new technologies.
- Make the UN the depository and safe-keeper of big data.
- Consolidate and build analytical capacity.
- Crowdsource international negotiations.
- Recognize cyberspace as a “global common good.”
- Support confidence-building measures.