



Aligning the Global Digital Compact with the Sustainability Agenda

*A Policy Brief by the Coalition for Digital Environmental Sustainability (CODES)
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Summary /// This policy brief is a contribution by CODES to inform discussions at the 2026 HLPF. The Global Digital Compact (GDC), adopted at the 2024 Summit of the Future, is a milestone in aligning the digital with the sustainability agenda. The Compact aims to accelerate progress across all the SDGs and mandates in §73 the HLPF to review the Compact's progress for SDG implementation. This brief advances three perspectives: addressing digital opportunities and challenges for the 2026 focus SDGs, operationalizing the linkage between GDC and HLPF processes, and developing options for embedding digital into the Beyond 2030 sustainable development architecture.

1. The Digital Resource Paradox: Cross-Cutting Pressures on the 2026 Focus SDGs

The rapid expansion of digital infrastructure – including semiconductor production, data centers, the entire lifecycle of AI systems – is creating cross-cutting resource pressures that challenge multiple 2026 HLPF focus SDGs simultaneously. The most immediate tension appears in water and energy systems: semiconductor fabrication and data center cooling require vast quantities of ultrapure water, with chip manufacturing alone consuming 751 million cubic meters in 2021, while major providers like Google reported a 17-20% increase in water use in 2023. The International Energy Agency projects data center electricity consumption will reach approximately 945 TWh by 2030 – about 3% of global electricity – with these facilities accounting for over 20% of total demand growth in advanced economies through 2030. These pressures strain SDG 6 (water), SDG 7 (energy), and SDG 9 (infrastructure) alike. Meanwhile, SDG 11 (cities) benefits from smart systems that

optimize resource use, but these same technologies risk surveillance, vendor lock-in, and exclusion of non-digital populations. For SDG 17 (partnerships), digital platforms enable new forms of collaboration, yet power imbalances, digital divides and intellectual property constraints can undermine equity. The core challenge is clear: digital is both essential lever for SDG progress and a growing consumer of the resources the SDGs seek to sustain. Addressing this requires an integrated approach that maximizes digital benefits while mitigating its environmental and social costs across all five focus SDGs.

2. Closing the Implementation Gap: From GDC Mandate to HLPF Integration

Nearly two years after the Global Digital Compact established its mandate, its paragraph 73's call for HLPF to review digital implementation has yet to translate into systematic action within HLPF processes. While mechanisms like the STI Forum, 10-Member Group, and Inter-Agency Task Team on STI for the



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SDGs provide valuable discussion platforms, they do not address the core issue: HLPF's own processes – particularly Voluntary National Reviews – lack explicit obligations or even clear space to assess digital impacts. Analysis of recent VNRs shows digital considerations are inconsistently included, often treated as peripheral rather than cross-cutting. Furthermore, new GDC digital governance bodies – the Independent International Scientific Panel on AI and the Global Dialogue on AI Governance – must proactively link their emerging findings to HLPF outcomes, ensuring AI governance principles directly inform SDG implementation and review. To bridge this gap, HLPF needs clearer reporting guidance that explicitly encourages digital dimensions, dedicated thematic sessions on digital-SDG linkages, and strengthened mutual coordination across forums to treat digital as a core sustainable development issue, not a niche technical add-on.

3. Beyond 2030: Designing a Digital-Ready Sustainable Development Framework

The post-2030 agenda offers a chance to fundamentally rethink how digital is treated in global sustainable development frameworks. Three paradigmatic approaches stand out: First, a *standalone digital SDG* would elevate digital rights, inclusion, and sustainability to the

highest level, but risks isolation from other priorities. Second, a *mainstreaming approach* would embed digital targets across relevant SDGs, ensuring integration but potentially diluting focus. A *hybrid model* – combining a dedicated digital goal with multiple goals-specific targets – may offer the best balance. Beyond these, more visionary options include structuring the framework fundamentally around digital and sustainability as the two defining transformations of our era. A shift that could inherently reflect the new geopolitics of digital development – rising tech nationalism, fragmentation of digital markets, and competing governance models. Another path is adopting the WSIS community's proposal to align the future sustainable development architecture more coherently with so called Action Lines from the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) framework. Beyond immanent architecture options, a digital planetary intelligence approach, leveraging and combining diverse environmental and societal data sets, could enable more transparent measurement and oversight of SDG implementation across the globe. Crucially, whatever governance architecture design is chosen, it must move beyond voluntary reporting toward a more transparent, comparable, and accountable implementation system that reflects digital's central role in sustainable development.

Collaboration for the goals /// The global CODES community is committed to further investing in this thinking and collaborative endeavour, working with partners across the UN system, Member States, academia, civil society, and private actors to develop strategic guidance, political agency and practical, evidence-based approaches that ensure digital technologies serve as enablers of, rather than obstacles to, sustainable development. The discussions at HLPF 2026, HLPF 2027 and the 2027 SDG Summit are critical milestones to shape a future where digital and sustainability are mutually reinforcing.