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Background Guide

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Global digital law system and sustainable development in the era of AI

1. Background

With the fast growth of information technology, new tools like Artificial Intelligence (AI), big data, cloud computing, and blockchain are changing how the world works. These technologies are helping many areas like health care, education, transportation, and banking. But at the same time, they also bring serious problems related to laws and ethics. For example, people worry about privacy, unfair treatment by algorithms, who owns the data or AI-created content, and fake videos made with AI (called deepfakes). Because these problems often involve many countries and complex technologies, we need to build clear and fair global rules to manage them.

Right now, there are many problems in how countries manage digital technologies. Some rich countries make most of the rules and control the standards, which makes things unfair for poor countries. These poor countries often have weaker laws, less access to technology, and fewer chances to speak up. This makes the digital gap between rich and poor countries bigger.

That's why people are calling for a global digital law system that is united, fair, open, and includes everyone. This is important to protect justice and fairness around the world.

Building global rules for digital governance matches many of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). First, SDG 9 says we should build better digital infrastructure and support new ideas. A good law system will help guide digital development safely. Second, SDG 10 talks about reducing unfairness between rich and poor countries, especially when it comes to technology and data. A fair digital law can make sure everyone has equal rights. Third, SDG 16 wants strong and open institutions, which is something we really need in digital spaces today. Lastly, SDG 17 encourages countries to work together to solve big problems, which is the heart of digital governance.

AI is growing quickly and making these issues even more urgent. Tools like ChatGPT or Midjourney can create fake news easily, which may harm how people get correct information. AI is also used in facial recognition, emotion detection, and even policing, which could hurt people's privacy or freedom if there are no clear laws. Without shared legal rules, countries may argue over

who controls what, and global innovation could suffer. That's why building legal cooperation on digital issues is the key to using AI in a good way.

To build this global system, we need help from the United Nations and its groups, like the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), the Human Rights Council, and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). These organizations can lead global talks about privacy, AI ethics, digital ownership, and how data moves between countries. The system should also think about the differences between countries and offer support to help developing nations catch up.

In the end, creating a global digital law system is not just about managing AI. It's about helping all countries work together for a fair, peaceful, and sustainable future. By using law to guide technology, we can build a world where everyone shares the benefits of digital progress safely and fairly.

2. Key term

- Global Digital Governance

This means the rules and systems used around the world to

manage digital technologies like the internet, AI, and big data. It helps countries work together, control how data is used, and make sure technology grows in a fair and safe way.

- Digital Sovereignty

Also called network or data sovereignty, it means that each country should control its own digital tools, internet systems, and data. Countries should decide their own rules for using and protecting digital technology.

- Global Digital Compact (GDC)

This is a plan started by the United Nations in 2024. It wants countries, companies, and people to work together to create fair, open, and safe rules for using AI and digital technology around the world.

- Digital Governance

This means how governments, organizations, and society make decisions about digital areas like cybersecurity, data protection, and online services. It makes sure that technology is used to help the public.

- Digital Trust

This means how much people or groups believe that digital systems are safe, private, clear, and reliable. Trust is very

important for the digital world to grow and for people in different countries to work together.

- Digital Trust Label

This is a special badge or certificate given by an independent group. It shows that a digital service is safe, protects privacy, and treats users fairly. It helps people choose services they can trust.

- Polycentric Governance

This is a way of managing things using many decision-making centers, not just one. It means governments, businesses, and communities work together to solve digital problems, especially when they involve many countries.

- AI Sovereignty

This means a country should have control over how AI is made and used inside its borders. It includes control over data, computers, and the rules used to build AI, to make sure it's safe and matches the country's needs.

- Network Sovereignty

This is the power of a country to manage and protect its internet space using its own laws, tools, and systems. It's like a digital version of controlling its land and borders.

- Technological Sovereignty

This means that the technology used in a country should follow that country's laws and protect its interests. It also means not relying too much on other countries for important digital tools and systems.

3. International Action

In the area of global digital governance, the United Nations (UN) is playing a leading role in building a system for countries to work together. In 2023, the UN shared a plan called the *Global Digital Compact*. This plan hopes to create a fair and long-lasting platform for international cooperation. It focuses on important topics like how data moves between countries, the ethics of artificial intelligence (AI), and how to protect people's privacy and safety online. The Compact also supports giving developing countries a stronger voice and helping them build digital skills. It encourages teamwork between governments, businesses, and communities, rather than just rules made from the top down.

At the same time, the UN is working on other ways to improve the legal system for AI. For example, a UN report said AI laws should follow the UN Charter, support human rights, and help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The UN also created a group of AI experts who suggested making tools like a “Global AI Standards Sharing Platform,” an “AI Skills Network,” and an “AI Fund” to help countries work together better.

Besides the UN, many regions and organizations are taking action too. The European Union (EU) created an *International Digital Strategy* to work with other countries on things like digital infrastructure, data rules, and AI safety. The goal is to protect a digital world based on democracy and fairness. Other global groups like the *Global Partnership on AI (GPAI)* and the *Digital Cooperation Organization (DCO)* are also working on this. They hold meetings, create expert teams, and help build skills in different countries. These efforts help turn ideas into real international laws and shared digital rules.

4. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

SDG 5 – Gender Equality

In many developing countries, women use the internet much less than men. This shows a big digital gap between genders. For example, in some of the poorest countries, only a small number of women own mobile phones—up to 43% less than men. If the global digital law system includes a focus on gender, and uses technology to give women more power (Target 5.b), more women can join the digital world. This helps bring fairness in areas like education, jobs, and healthcare.

SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure

This goal supports building strong and inclusive infrastructure, including internet and communication systems. A global digital law system can help connect the internet across the world (Target 9.c), and support the growth of AI, big data, and cloud computing. This will help small businesses join the global market and increase new ideas in science and technology (Target 9.5), pushing forward fair and modern industry.

SDG 10 – Reduced Inequality

Digital gaps and control by big tech companies are making the rich–poor gap worse between countries and communities. A global digital law system that respects different countries'

abilities (called “differentiated responsibilities”) can help developing countries take part in rule-making and data sharing. Sharing resources and technology fairly can help these countries grow stronger in the digital world. This matches Target 10.7, which asks to give developing countries more say in decisions, and supports global fairness.

SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

This goal supports open, fair, and inclusive rules (Target 16.6) and decision-making that gives a voice to all groups (Target 16.7), including developing countries in global organizations (Target 16.8). A strong digital law system can help solve problems fairly and make governments, tech companies, and users more open and responsible. This can stop the misuse of AI and protect people’s rights. Also, it should make sure people can get correct information (Target 16.10), and stop unfair algorithms and fake content that harm democratic society.

SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals

This goal encourages sharing of technology and knowledge, especially to help developing countries build digital skills. A global digital law system supports this by setting up systems like a “Global AI Skills Network,” an “AI Fund,” and a “Standard

Sharing Platform.” These tools bring together the UN, governments, non-profits, and companies to help make strong agreements, test new rules, and give support to countries that need it. This creates real teamwork and win-win results.

In short, building a global digital law system brings together technology, law, ethics, and cooperation to form a complete solution. It is the path to making the vision of a shared future for all people real. By linking together SDGs 5, 9, 10, 16, and 17, this system supports gender equality, better infrastructure, access to technology, fair laws, and strong global teamwork. This ensures that AI and digital technology truly help the whole world move toward a fair and sustainable future.

5. National Positions

China and the Global South (G77)

China, along with many developing countries in the G77 group, believes in the idea of “sovereignty first,” meaning each country should manage its own digital space. China also supports the idea of “shared but different responsibilities” and inclusive development. China has called on the United Nations to lead the

creation of a global digital law system. It promotes cooperation through the “Digital Silk Road,” sharing standards and building skills. In UN meetings, China suggests creating a platform for AI ethics and skill-building and encourages working with G77 and BRICS countries to support safe, healthy, and fair AI development.

African Union and African Countries

African countries care about protecting their digital independence and people’s rights. They have created the “African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms” to make sure outside powers do not control their technology. African countries are also working on their own digital laws and rules. Thanks to cooperation with China, especially through the Digital Silk Road, many African countries are building digital infrastructure, training workers, and developing AI platforms.

United States

The U.S. supports a digital system led by innovation and open markets. It is against too many rules that may stop new ideas. At a recent AI summit in Paris, U.S. Vice President Vance said too much regulation could harm progress. The U.S. prefers voluntary rules and has created documents like the “AI Bill of

Rights” to make AI fair and transparent. The U.S. also works with other democracies to support a treaty called the “Framework Convention on AI,” which focuses on privacy and human rights.

European Union (EU)

The EU wants strong and clear digital laws. It has created the “AI Act,” which uses a risk-based approach to AI safety. It also made new rules like the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act to stop unfair actions by big tech platforms. The EU supports working with others and cooperates with the U.S. through the Trade and Technology Council (TTC) to align AI rules and safety systems. The EU is also working with the U.K. to create a binding AI treaty.

G7 Countries

The G7 group (which includes countries like the U.S., U.K., and Japan) believes in ethical, fair, and open AI. They support the AI Principles created by the OECD and want them to be used in real law. G7 members also work with the G20 and other countries to promote equal access to digital tools and help developing countries build digital skills.

G20 Countries

The G20 is more inclusive than the G7. It includes both rich and developing countries. It supports balanced responsibilities and wants both innovation and fairness. The G20 helps create common rules that work for everyone and supports wider cooperation through the UN.

Southeast Asia (ASEAN)

Countries in Southeast Asia prefer a flexible and step-by-step approach. They try to balance new ideas and safety. ASEAN has published a guide for AI ethics, based on rules from groups like the OECD, UNESCO, and the EU. Singapore is a leader with its advanced AI framework. Countries like Thailand and Malaysia are improving their digital systems and skills. Overall, ASEAN supports regional discussion, national choice, and international cooperation.

Middle East and Gulf States (GCC)

Governments in this region see AI and digital tools as very important for their future. Countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE are building data centers and AI research areas. Saudi Arabia has a special AI and Data Agency (SDAIA), and the UAE even has a Minister of AI. They are making their own AI

ethics rules and want to become trusted digital leaders. These countries often lead their own systems but also work with the U.S. and EU on shared rules.

Latin America

Latin American countries are still testing and learning. Countries like Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Argentina have started their own AI strategies and data laws, often using ideas from the EU's GDPR or the OECD. Mexico made a plan in 2018 focused on laws, skills, and infrastructure. The regional group ECLAC helps these countries talk and work together. Most countries in the region want fair cooperation and are building their own digital rules step by step.

6. Current Challenges and Possible Solution Directions

Right now, global digital governance faces many complex and serious problems. First, the laws about digital technology are very different across countries, which makes it hard for the world to work together. For example, the European Union uses strong rules to manage AI risks, while the United States prefers free markets with fewer rules. China focuses on national control

and digital sovereignty. These different approaches make it difficult to create shared global rules. In 2024 alone, over 69 countries made hundreds of new AI and cybersecurity laws, but many of these laws don't match. This makes it hard to enforce the rules or cooperate internationally.

Second, it's hard to keep up with fast-changing AI technology. New tools like generative AI, smart cars, and the Internet of Things are growing quickly. Governments are often slow to react. A report called *Regulating Under Uncertainty* says that problems often appear only after new systems are already in use. Also, there is no shared agreement on what exactly counts as "AI" or how to group different types of AI. This makes it hard to know what laws should apply.

Third, it is unclear who is responsible when AI causes harm. If an AI system makes a mistake, is it the fault of the programmer, the company that uses it, or the platform that hosts it? This is even harder when the AI is used in many countries. These questions make people worried and cause businesses to be unsure about using AI across borders.

Fourth, power struggles between big countries make cooperation more difficult. Right now, the world has three different main

approaches: the U.S. focuses on free markets and less regulation, the EU uses strict laws to protect citizens' rights, and China promotes a government-led model that supports national control. Because of these differences, it's hard to make one global treaty that everyone agrees on.

Another big challenge is the power of big tech companies. Today, only a few large companies control most AI technology. Their systems are often not transparent, and their algorithms can be biased, used for spying, or even to control public opinion. Generative AI tools can create fake news and deepfakes, which make it harder for people to trust what they see. Also, new kinds of AI services like automatic chatbots and decision systems are growing faster than laws can keep up. This weakens public trust.

We also see unfair development between rich and poor countries. Rich countries have strong research centers, legal systems, and skilled workers. Poorer countries often lack internet infrastructure, AI experts, and legal experience. This makes it harder for them to join international rule-making and protect their people from digital risks. Local governments and small businesses also struggle to follow complex laws or monitor AI use.

Finally, most international plans—like the Global Digital Compact—focus on friendly cooperation, but don't have strong tools to solve problems. There are few global systems to enforce laws, solve conflicts, or check how well rules are followed. Some UN expert groups have given good suggestions, like setting up shared rulebooks and testing ideas through pilot programs. But there is still no official system to make sure these ideas are put into action. Without strong legal tools, it's hard to stop problems or punish bad behavior between countries or tech platforms.

In short, global digital governance now faces many big problems: broken rules, slow regulation, unclear responsibility, country rivalries, tech monopolies, unfair development, and weak law enforcement. All of these problems are connected, and they stop AI from developing safely and fairly. To build a shared future for all people, the world needs to agree on common standards, create strong legal rules, help countries grow together, and build systems to solve disputes. Only then can we make sure digital technology is fair, safe, and useful for everyone around the world.

Questions for consideration

- In today's world, countries have very different laws. How can we build a global system for digital governance that respects each country's independence, but still includes voices from many groups?
- As AI changes quickly—with tools like generative AI and deepfakes—should we use a flexible and changing set of rules (“adaptive governance”) instead of old-style fixed laws?
- Should the world create a new international AI organization to make global safety rules and risk levels? Or should we use current groups like the UN, OECD, or ITU to lead and organize this work?
- How can we make sure developing countries, women, children, and minorities are included in the digital world? For example, should we add a training and support plan in the Global Digital Compact?
- What kind of system can help solve digital law problems and check if rules are followed? Do we need something like an “AI Court” or “Digital Dispute Center”?
- How can we build a “polycentric governance” model, where

governments, companies, schools, and people all work together and share responsibility?

- Should we add “digital rights and human rights” into the governance plan, such as protecting children online, freedom of speech, and the right to privacy?
- For data that moves across borders or is stored in the cloud, how can we make rules that respect each country’s control, but also keep the internet open and working?
- Should we set up a regular review system—like every five years—to check if digital laws are working and change them when technology changes?

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