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Responsibility in the Global Information Society

Towards Multi-stakeholder Governance

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Summary

Globally active ICT companies are central to the Global Information Society. They act as:

- network providers connecting people and institutions;
- enablers of innovation, commerce and socio-economic development;
- information intermediaries.

These roles bring significant responsibilities in areas such as security, privacy and sustainability. This paper analyses:

- the responsibilities of ICT companies – and BT in particular – in the Global Information Society;
- the changes that affect the responsibilities of ICT companies as a result of converging technologies and markets;
- the increasing difficulties of compliance with formal regulation and its enforcement;
- how ICT companies may act responsibly in the future.

However, the Global Information Society is also multi-stakeholder. It is composed of relationships between ICT networks and non-ICT firms, governments, NGOs, consumers etc., each of which participates in a variety of roles; so it is also a multilayered, complex system.

In order to meet the challenges of the above mentioned responsibilities, a new, multilayered, multi-stakeholder dynamic concept of responsibility is necessary. Individual stakeholders and the sector as a whole must engage in effective, collaborative ways, balancing the benefits of inclusiveness and consultation on one side and effectiveness in directing and enforcement on the other. This report suggests three 'actions':

- structured rebalancing;
- cross-cutting awareness;
- sector-specific engagement.

The structural rebalancing of responsibilities is based on:

- who can best bear it;
- the alignment of interests;
- effective leverage.

Such a development can only be effectively achieved if enhanced by awareness-raising around cross-cutting issues, such as:

- security;
- enforcement;
- privacy;
- sustainability.

At the same time, thematic targeted engagement specific to each sector is required on essential policy domains:

- privacy;
- communication rights;
- digital inclusiveness;
- security;
- reliability.

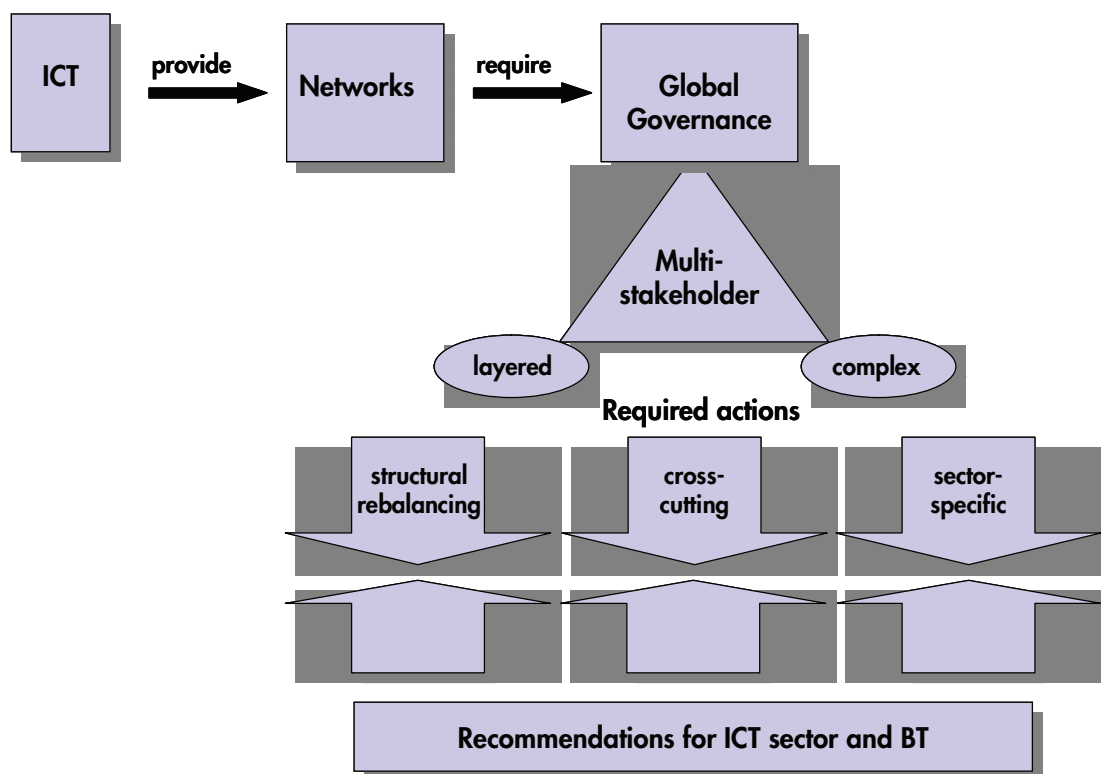


Figure 1 Conceptual logic

BT occupies a relatively unique position due to the UK ICT sector's pre-eminence in addressing many of these problems, and BT's own:

- engagement with these social issues;
- relationships with its regulator;
- roles as the pre-eminent incumbent (telecom network provider) in its home market, and competitor and strategic partner of competitors across the globe.

Its diverse business and legal environment also means that BT's own internal governance has a strong multi-stakeholder quality. BT can thus assume a leadership role in actions to strengthen global governance, by:

- resolving internal coordination issues;
- leveraging strategic power to address problems;
- serving as a Corporate Social Responsibility exemplar and a mobiliser of multi-stakeholder governance;
- finding a platform for pro-active engagement that minimises the inevitable suspicion of 'special pleading'.

This report recommends two specific ways in which BT can further advance its already very active engagement as a global corporate citizen and exemplar:

- further reinforce its sustainability operations down the supply chain in developing countries, by extending its mainly post-contract assessment to the pre-contract phase;
- exercise 'ethical leadership' in promoting further integration of decision-making on commercial and 'responsibility' strategies, and helping all stakeholders to share in progress towards advancing the sustainability agenda.