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# **When Internet Governance Meets Digital Cooperation**

## **Navigating IGF Growth and Development in the Context of an Evolving Internet Governance Ecosystem**

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# When Internet Governance Meets Digital Cooperation: Navigating IGF Growth and Development in the Context of an Evolving Internet Governance Ecosystem

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The UN Secretary-General talks about a new “more inclusive multilateralism” in his report, entitled “Our Common Agenda.”<sup>1</sup> This should not lead to a debate on multi-lateral versus multistakeholder approaches. “Multilateral” refers to a system with its own legitimacy and failings. “Multistakeholder” is an approach, not a substitute for accountable governance. It is a way of creating more learning and understanding through dialogue between different types of stakeholders with different perspectives and interests. Whether a global internet-related decision-making process is multistakeholder, or led by governments in a multilateral arena, the extent to which it is supported by open and inclusive debate will impact the effectiveness and sustainability of its outcomes. The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) has been and continues to be the most open, diverse, and inclusive space for multistakeholder dialogue on Internet-related policy, including in the context of broader digital cooperation. The IGF is currently in its 16th year, with renewal of its mandate<sup>2</sup> by the UN General Assembly scheduled for 2025. The Forum, on which Member states

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agreed at the conclusion of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Tunis in 2005, has grown and evolved extensively since its first iteration in Athens in 2006—in scope, reach, format, and scale. So has the Internet. In 2005, the concept of the Internet as a network of networks was still abstract to many UN Member states. Nowadays, the Internet and related issues have priority on many policy agendas. Having grown from 1.1 billion users in 2005 to more than 4 billion users today,<sup>3</sup> the Internet is at the center of a process of digitalization that is transforming the workplace, social and political processes, business, and trade, as well as people's personal lives. Many of the policy questions that were on the table in 2005 are still priorities today. Access to the Internet and information and communication technologies remains extremely unequal, between and within countries and regions. The availability and affordability of infrastructure, devices, content, language, and the human capacity needed to reap the benefits of using the Internet remain key Internet governance challenges.

At the other end of the spectrum, hyper-connectivity and the resulting dependence on Internet-based systems and services are presenting new challenges, threats, and risks. A stable and secure Internet is more important than ever before. Downtime or failure may have a real economic impact or even human cost. New developments and technological trends that use the Internet in combination with, for example, the Internet of Things, datafication, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and automated decision making, create a whole new range of policy challenges. The common denominator is that the range of Internet-related policy and regulation issues continues to expand, cross borders, and intersect with other spheres. Linked to this is a proliferation of venues that deal with Internet-related issues; some of these are new venues, but many are not, and pre-date the Internet, for example national legislatures, regulators, competition commissions, human rights institutions, and those dealing with peace and security. What is new is that they must give serious attention to Internet-related aspects of their areas of work.

Is the IGF still needed when Internet governance issues are being discussed everywhere? And how can the IGF evolve to remain relevant? The aim of this article is not to add yet another wish list to the existing body of ideas on strengthening the IGF; rather, it aims to point out where ideas can be consolidated, where strategic choices will have to be made between conflicting visions, and where attention needs to be given to the IGF's institutional configuration and capacity.

The IGF's broad mandate in the Tunis Agenda<sup>4</sup> and its unique identity as both part of the UN, but not bound by member-state driven processes in a narrow sense, allowed it to create a space where different stakeholder groups<sup>5</sup> can table and debate policy challenges in an atmosphere of open dialogue<sup>6</sup> without the pressure and limitations presented by having to negotiate agreed outcomes. There was no template for this kind of forum in the UN system and this encouraged innovation from the outset. The steady growth of the IGF demonstrates the need for a forum for open dialogue about Internet governance.<sup>7</sup> Its unique value stems from its ability to serve as a place where issues can emerge, be examined and debated from diverse perspectives, and thus be better understood before they move to spaces for more in-depth consideration and decision making. Bringing discussions to the IGF prevents issues from being discussed in parallel silos, without cross linkages and the exchange of ideas. Because it is inclusive and accessible, the IGF can avoid situations in which the views of those who do not have access to more specialized policy forums are ignored. "Community input" on the program content and organization of the annual meeting has grown into a central pillar of the IGF process. Early on the IGF introduced Open Consultations<sup>8</sup> and calls for input from participants and other interested stakeholders. It is

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complemented by a “stock-taking” session on the final day of the annual meeting where participants have access to an open microphone and can share what worked for them, and what they felt should change.<sup>9</sup> As a result, community input has also been the driver for the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG)<sup>10</sup> and the IGF Secretariat<sup>11</sup> to introduce new elements into the IGF process.<sup>12</sup> Innovations such as regional, and later national IGFs, and Internet Governance Schools, emerged outside of the IGF itself, but soon formed strong links with the global process. The first Dynamic Coalitions—open, multistakeholder communities of practice dedicated to an Internet governance issue or set of issues—emerged at the first IGF meeting, held in Athens in 2006. Best Practice Forums (BPFs) were introduced to gather existing and emerging solutions to specific internet policy-related challenges. Through the organic growth of national and regional IGFs, the IGF process has found a way of responding to a challenge that applies to all global governance processes: effective linkages between national, regional, and international levels.

So, how can the IGF evolve to remain relevant? Innovating in response to received input is a key part of the answer, but it is not enough. The strength of relying on the “bottom up” approach to discuss IGF evolution is two-fold: it is responsive to expressed needs, and involves stakeholders dealing with policy as well as those participating in implementation. Its weakness lies in the fact that discussions do not easily lend themselves to introducing changes of a more strategic, or structural nature, such as, for example, how to effectively relate to other institutions, including governments, and multilateral processes. To remain relevant, the IGF needs the leadership and institutional capacity to represent the IGF, assess proposals for improvements strategically, implement them, and ensure that all the different elements of this growing IGF ecosystem work in a complementary manner toward achieving clearly articulated goals.

Discussions and ideas for improving the IGF are as old as the IGF. In what follows, the article highlights some of the most promising suggestions for improving the IGF from three sources: WSIS-processes (2012–2016), the IGF MAG Working Group on IGF Strategy and Strengthening (2020–21), and the UN Secretary-General’s Roadmap for Digital Cooperation and Common Agenda (2020–2021). As mentioned before, responding effectively to these concrete calls for improvement requires identifying where ideas can be consolidated, where strategic choices have to be made, and where attention needs to be given to the IGF’s institutional configuration and capacity.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) reviews the implementation of and follow-up on WSIS outcomes, including the IGF, which has been the subject of intense debate. The CSTD became the arena in which UN member states supporting the multistakeholder approach argue with those in favor of more oversight by governments.<sup>13</sup> IGF supporters would point to its inclusiveness, the large number of participants, and the strong program content. IGF critics say that IGF was not a decision-making body, produced no clear outcomes, and that governments were not effectively represented. In July 2010 the CSTD established a multistakeholder Working Group on Improvements to the IGF to recommend improvements in line with the Tunis Agenda mandate, based on input from Member states and others.<sup>14</sup> In its report the Working Group homed in on broadening participation, producing more tangible outputs, strengthening links to other IG entities, and ensuring the IGF Secretariat has sufficient capacity.<sup>15</sup>

An “IGF retreat,”<sup>16</sup> convened by the UN DESA in July 2016, in the aftermath of the IGF’s mandate renewal,<sup>17</sup> affirmed the CSTD Working Group’s recommendations. The retreat’s report added in more detail to the recommendations and is rich in suggestions, but unfortunately remains short on specifics of who should be taking things forward.



Perspectives on the extent to which the recommendations of the CSTD Working Group have been implemented vary.<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that many of these recommendations resurfaced in the report of the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, and, to some extent, also in the Roadmap. Both documents are addressed below.

In 2020 the UN Secretary-General published the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation,<sup>19</sup> which includes a broad range of action areas, from trust and security to artificial intelligence and digital inclusion.<sup>20</sup> It recognizes the growing complexity and diffusion of the existing digital cooperation architecture, observing that “global discussions and processes are often not inclusive enough,” nor, necessarily, effective, and that this “is exacerbated by the lack of a common entry point into the global digital architecture, which makes it especially hard for developing countries, small and medium-sized enterprises, marginalized groups, and other stakeholders with limited budgets and expertise to make their voices heard.”<sup>21</sup>

Its holistic approach to digital cooperation makes the Roadmap a significant document. At the same time, it is striking that the IGF, a forum where Internet-related public policies are approached holistically and discussed openly, does not have a more prominent place in the Roadmap implementation. This is even more surprising considering that the source document for the Roadmap, the Report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation (HLPDC), “The Age of Digital Interdependence,”<sup>22</sup> proposes an evolved IGF as one of the options for an over-arching mechanism for global digital cooperation.<sup>23</sup> The suggestions—outlined in paragraph 93 (a) of the Roadmap—include ideas that echo the CSTD WG's recommendations, but do not acknowledge that several were already being implemented by the IGF Secretariat and the MAG. In addition, the Roadmap introduced the idea, which provoked quite some controversy, of a new and empowered multistakeholder high-level body. Paragraph 93 (a):

- a) Creating a strategic and empowered multistakeholder high-level body, building on the experience of the existing multistakeholder advisory group, which would address urgent issues, coordinate follow-up action on Forum discussions and relay proposed policy approaches and recommendations from the Forum to the appropriate normative and decision-making forums;
- (b) Having a more focused agenda for the Forum based on a limited number of strategic policy issues;
- (c) Establishing a high-level segment and ministerial or parliamentary tracks, ensuring more actionable outcomes;
- (d) Forging stronger links among the global Forum and its regional, national, subregional, and youth initiatives;
- (e) Better integrating programme and intersessional policy development work to support other priority areas outlined in the present report;
- (f) Addressing the long-term sustainability of the Forum and the resources necessary for increased participation, through an innovative and viable fundraising strategy, as promoted by the round table;
- (g) Enhancing the visibility of the Forum, including through a stronger corporate identity and improved reporting to other United Nations entities.

In a reaction to the Roadmap, the MAG Chair, in cooperation with the Government of Switzerland, organized a “Roadmap” session during the First Open Consultations on IGF 2020,<sup>24,25</sup> and the MAG established a working group on Strategy and Strengthening to act as a focal point for its participation in the Roadmap process. During 2020, the MAG Chair, in collaboration with the working group, convened a series of online discussions<sup>26</sup> on topics such as expanding participation in the IGF, making the IGF more multilingual, integrating more effectively with national and regional and youth IGFs, and learning lessons from several years of working with Best Practice Forums<sup>27</sup> and Dynamic Coalitions.<sup>28</sup> In September 2020, and based on extensive consultation with different

stakeholders, the Governments of Germany and the United Arab Emirates<sup>29</sup> submitted a paper called “Options for the Future of Digital Cooperation” to the UN Secretary-General,<sup>30</sup> which affirms the idea of the IGF being central in the architecture of digital cooperation. The way forward should rest on maintaining and upgrading the IGF’s existing structures and making the organization more outcome-oriented. Their vision is for the IGF to be “a facilitator which connects existing discussions that are already taking place,” and that the discussions at the IGF result “in action-oriented, but non-binding recommendations or reports” to ensure that they can find their way into policy-making processes.<sup>31</sup>

The UN Secretary-General’s interest in the IGF, even if some proposals such as the multistakeholder high-level body raised questions, encouraged the supporters of the IGF and multistakeholder approach. This positive reaction was voiced, for example, in the IGF 2019 Main Session on Internet Governance and Digital Cooperation,<sup>32</sup> the January 2020 Open Consultation,<sup>33</sup> the IGF 2020 Main Session on the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation,<sup>34</sup> and the work of the MAG Working Group on IGF Strategy and Strengthening. It was evident that governments who supported the IGF were also deeply invested in the forum taking on and responding to the Roadmap, as illustrated through the Options Paper discussed below. The IGF MAG, through the MAG Working Group on IGF Strategy, formulated, apart from a comprehensive set of operational suggestions for IGF 2021, longer-term strategic measures by which to achieve a more strategic, inclusive, and impactful IGF. These include proposals to adopt a multi-year planning cycle<sup>35</sup> and a more consistent issue-driven approach to IGF program development; strengthen, develop, and integrate the IGF’s intersessional activities (BPFs, DCs, NRIs, and now Policy Networks); consolidate integration of national legislators through an IGF Parliamentary Track; consolidate liaison with decision-making bodies; and strengthen communications strategies and mechanisms.<sup>36</sup>

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They also responded with specific proposals on how to operationalize the proposed new multistakeholder high-level body which was discussed in detail in the Options Paper.<sup>37</sup> In 2021 the Secretariat introduced a new modality, policy networks, to the IGF ecosystem which can be said to respond to the “policy incubator” and “cooperation accelerator” ideas in the HLPDC’s IGF plus model.<sup>38</sup> Two policy networks, one on the “environment” and one on “universal access and meaningful connectivity,” were launched in the first half of 2021 with the intention of developing specific recommendations related to their focus areas. The Secretariat also embarked on a capacity-building program—an initiative they started long before the Roadmap was published, which included a report the Secretariat commissioned in 2019 on an IGF framework for capacity development. This responds to a recommendation originally made in the CSTD Working Group on Improvements to the IGF. Other components of the IGF that definitely respond to the Roadmap are the high-level leaders sessions, which have grown in scope since the first one in 2011, and the parliamentary track, which started in 2019. These add to the weight of the IGF and bring policy makers into the process, but they can also easily become isolated from the broader, more inclusive IGF process.

In November 2021, after doing its own round of further consultations on the proposed high-level body,<sup>39</sup> the IGF Secretariat published, at the request of the Executive Office of the United Nations Secretary-General, a public call for nominations for members and terms of reference for what has been named the “IGF Leadership panel.”<sup>40</sup> It will consist of ten members to be appointed by the Secretary-General, drawing on a pool of candidates nominated by all IGF stakeholder groups.<sup>41</sup>

The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Group will rotate among members of the group, elected by members of the group. The role of the Leadership Panel will be to address strategic and urgent issues, highlighting Forum discussions and possible follow-up actions to promote greater impact and dissemination of IGF discussions. Its responsibilities are to provide strategic input and advice on the IGF; promote the IGF and its outputs; support both high-level and at-large stakeholder engagement in the IGF; and exchange IGF outputs with other stakeholders and relevant fora, also facilitating input of these decision-makers and fora into the IGF's agenda-setting process.<sup>42</sup> The terms of reference outline relations between the Panel and the MAG, saying that "the two bodies will function as distinct entities" to ensure there is no overlap between them, but that they should work "with close linkages and continuous efforts to promote collaboration and cooperation within the IGF."<sup>43</sup> The MAG will lead on the IGF annual work program and the global forum while the Panel will "contribute strategic inputs to the programme-setting and support the visibility of the IGF" and "provide high-level input and promote IGF outputs." The panel will be supported by the Secretariat. In several respects, the panel's terms of reference do respond to the proposals in the Options Paper. Relations with the MAG are less clear. What is most unclear is whether the Leadership Panel will have any authority in relation to the IGF Secretariat and to others inside the UN responsible for the IGF.

Put simply, the terms of reference for the Leadership Panel describe the main role of the IGF MAG as being to gather input from the community and plan the IGF's annual work program, while that of the Leadership Panel is to increase the IGF's visibility and promote its outputs to decision-makers.

As with earlier sets of recommendations, what remains unclear is where precisely oversight and institutional responsibility—and accountability—for following up on recommendations for IGF strengthening is located. The assumption is that it lies with the Department for Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (UN DESA), the UN department entrusted with supporting and overseeing the IGF, but how this oversight layer relates to the Leadership Panel is as unclear as has been the case with regard to the MAG.

In late 2020 the Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Technology<sup>44</sup> was established<sup>45</sup> to lead implementation of the Roadmap, working closely with various United Nations entities and organizations from civil society, business, and the technical community. More recently, the Office has also been assigned with responsibility for parts of the Common Agenda (published in September 2021 and discussed below). According to its website, the Office of the Envoy is intended to serve "as an advocate and focal point for digital cooperation so that Member States, the private sector, civil society, academic and technical communities, and other stakeholders have a first port of call for the broader United Nations system,"<sup>46</sup> and is expected to work closely with the IGF community and with UN DESA to strengthen the IGF.<sup>47</sup> However, in spite of the active participation in IGF events by members of staff of the Office, and some presence of UN DESA and IGF staff in Roadmap processes, the implementation of the Roadmap process has largely bypassed the IGF. It has certainly not used the extended IGF ecosystem (National and Regional and Youth IGF Initiatives, BPFs, Policy Networks, and Dynamic Coalitions) in its roll-out process. This might change once the Leadership Panel starts its work, as the Envoy will be an ex-officio member.

In September 2021, on the occasion of its 75th anniversary, the UN Secretary-General presented his report—entitled "Our Common Agenda"—to the General Assembly.<sup>48</sup> This visionary and ambitious document "builds on and responds to the declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations, in which Member States made 12 critical commitments: to leave no one behind; to protect our planet; to promote peace and prevent conflict; to abide by

international law and ensure justice; to place women and girls at the centre; to build trust; to improve digital cooperation; to upgrade the United Nations; to ensure sustainable financing; to boost partnerships; to listen to and work with youth; and to be prepared for future crises, including but not limited to public health crises.<sup>49,50</sup>

The IGF is presented with a challenge, but also with a massive opportunity. The challenge is clear in paragraph 93 of the Common Agenda: “It is time to protect the online space and strengthen its governance. I would urge the Internet Governance Forum to adapt, innovate and reform to support effective governance of the digital commons and keep pace with rapid, real-world developments.”<sup>51</sup> The opportunity follows when the Secretary-General proposes that, building on the Roadmap, the United Nations, Governments, the private sector, and civil society come together “as a multistakeholder digital technology track in preparation for a Summit of the Future to agree on a Global Digital Compact.” This Compact<sup>52</sup> “would outline shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all.”<sup>53</sup> The issues the Secretary-General lists to be addressed by this Compact are all issues that have been, and continue to be, central to discussions at the IGF: “reaffirming the fundamental commitment to connecting the unconnected; avoiding fragmentation of the Internet; providing people with options as to how their data is used; application of human rights online; and promoting a trustworthy Internet by introducing accountability criteria for discrimination and misleading content” and “promoting regulation of artificial intelligence to ensure that this is aligned with shared global values.”<sup>54</sup> It is striking, again, that the text of this document does not, in any way, give recognition to the fact that the IGF has constantly adapted and innovated and that it has made a substantial contribution to the international community’s understanding of challenges related to digitalization and cooperation in responding to such challenges.

In fact, measures and initiatives to strengthen the IGF that are taken by the Secretariat, MAG, and UN DESA seem to have remained largely unnoticed, even within the UN system. This raises questions as to whether these measures have been communicated effectively as serious responses to the calls for strengthening and improving the IGF, and as part of a longer-term strategic vision of an IGF for the future.

Nevertheless, exploring what the Secretary-General means by “adapt, innovate and reform” and “supporting effective governance of the digital commons” might mean that the IGF remains relevant, particularly considering the relatively open-ended nature of IGF evolution and improvement over the last decade.

The opportunity for the IGF to be the leading platform for engagement and consultation on the proposed Global Digital Compact is appealing. What is not clear, however, in the Common Agenda but also in other documents, including the terms of reference of the new Leadership Panel, is who is being addressed as the “IGF.” Is it the MAG, the Secretariat and UN DESA, the components of the extended IGF ecosystem, or participants in the IGF process? The implication is that it is all of these, and therein lies the fault line: responsibility and accountability are not clearly allocated. As mentioned above, a core feature of the IGF is its bottom-up nature, which constantly leads to evolution and innovation in the margins. Although there certainly is an “IGF community,” that community is particularly diverse, open, and is made up of voluntary contributions—both in the form of time and through financial support. The political, intellectual, and networking capital represented by this community is immense. What the IGF lacks is clear institutional identity, accountable leadership and management, and the human resources with which to facilitate linkages within this community and between the IGF and other components of the IGF ecosystem, including within the UN system. Neither the Leadership Panel nor the MAG have any kind of overarching role with regard to the IGF as an organization (or institution).



Some of the proposals in the Roadmap are covered by the terms of reference of the Leadership panel, such as increasing the visibility of the IGF and communicating IGF outputs. Some, such as “(b) Having a more focused agenda for the Forum based on a limited number of strategic policy issues,” “(d) Forging stronger links among the global Forum and its regional, national, sub-regional and youth initiatives,” and “(e) Better integrating programme and intersessional policy development work,”<sup>55</sup> are covered by the MAG’s terms of reference. But ultimately both the Leadership Panel and MAG’s roles are only advisory. Based on the published terms of reference, the Leadership Panel is not being charged with overseeing the Roadmap proposal to enhance the visibility of the Forum “through a stronger corporate identity and improved reporting to other United Nations entities.”<sup>56</sup> If the organizational structure<sup>57</sup> of the IGF still included an Executive Coordinator<sup>58</sup> that led the Secretariat, as was the case up to 2010, and a Special Advisor chairing the MAG,<sup>59</sup> these advisory bodies would be able to interact with clearly accountable internal leadership and management.

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**Should the mandate of the IGF be reviewed?** This question might come up in the course of negotiations on the renewal of the IGF’s mandate in 2025. The answer has implications for the improvements to be logically pursued in the remainder of the current mandate. The IGF mandate outlined in the Tunis Agenda emphasizes an open and inclusive process, a “multistakeholder policy dialogue” on “issues related to key elements of Internet governance in order to foster the sustainability, robustness, security, stability, and development of the Internet” and “discourse between bodies dealing with different cross-cutting international public policies regarding the Internet.”<sup>60</sup> The mandate also instructs the IGF to “discuss issues that do not fall within the scope of any existing body” and to interface with appropriate inter-governmental organizations and other institutions on matters under their purview.<sup>61</sup> The current mandate does not stand in the way of answering calls for strengthening the IGF in the Roadmap, or playing the role envisaged for it in the Common Agenda. The IGF mandate outlined in the Tunis Agenda remains fit for purpose and should be extended. It might be worth considering—in light of the broader scope of issues under discussion—changing the name of the IGF from “Internet Governance Forum” to “Digital Governance Forum.”

**Are current efforts to evolve the IGF going in the right direction? Or are they simply contributing to spreading the IGF Secretariat and MAG’s resources even more thinly?**

Both assertions are true. Recommendations by the CSTD, efforts emanating from the Digital Cooperation process, and the Office of the UN Secretary General’s Envoy on Technology have served to elevate the relevance of digital development and cooperation. The holistic approach of the Roadmap reflects the broad approach to Internet governance taken by the WSIS and in the program content of the IGF. In other respects, however, the Roadmap process does not seem to consider the IGF as an effective platform for facilitating cooperation and engagement of its own action plan. If the Leadership Panel can operate in a manner that complements the IGF MAG, and that can help fill the leadership gap in the IGF mentioned above, it could definitely contribute to a stronger IGF. If not, it could just spread the financial and institutional resources of the Secretariat even more thinly than is already the case. If its role is to promote particular policy approaches that emerge from IGF discussions, it is likely to reinvigorate previous critiques of the IGF and the demand for “enhanced cooperation” as a distinct process.<sup>62</sup>

### **Should the IGF continue to diversify or consolidate?**

In the last decade, what is referred to as the “IGF ecosystem” has diversified, with around 140 national and regional IGFs, youth IGF initiatives, Best Practice Forums, Dynamic Coalitions, Policy Networks, and IGF capacity-building framework. Providing these activities with effective support, and ensuring that they all remain inclusive, interactive, and focused, is a massive challenge. The IGF either needs to consolidate the current diversification of intersessional activities but with a stronger capacity to “connect the dots” and do effective outreach and communications, or it might be better off by just being a very inclusive annual event with more focused content.

Regardless of the choice, the IGF should maintain its open, bottom-up character; cooperate and partner with other institutions; be more inclusive (and there are different angles to this, from language to region, to discipline, to Internet governance insiders and outsiders); focus the subject matter it discusses (which would also make it easier to establish continuity between annual meetings and avoid the annual events that are stand-alone events, silos on their own); be able to navigate multistakeholder and multilateral forums and, most importantly, acts as a place for them to connect with one another and facilitate other people’s navigation across these spaces. The IGF is, and continues to be, the only existing, and in the authors’ view, the only viable interdisciplinary, global, multistakeholder platform for open and inclusive engagement and public participation in Internet governance.

**Filling in the leadership gap in the IGF.** This can be done by filling in the role of IGF Executive Coordinator, by appointing a new person in this role, or by promoting the current head of the Secretariat to this position. This will provide clear and empowered executive leadership within the IGF’s organizational layer, which can work with both the MAG and the Leadership Panel and assume accountability for operationalizing strategic advice received from these bodies and from the broader IGF community. The role of the Special Advisor is also important and it remains to be seen whether the Leadership Panel will be an effective substitute.

**Focus on longer-term strategic planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the IGF.** The Secretariat is the center of the entire IGF ecosystem. As this ecosystem grows, and as the IGF becomes more visible, their workload and the strategic relevance of the role they play will increase. To ensure that the IGF Secretariat, ideally through the Executive Coordinator, receives the necessary strategic advice and support, we recommend the establishment of a small body made up of members of the MAG and the Leadership Panel to provide advice and support to the UN DESA and the IGF secretariat on organizational matters, including multiyear strategic planning, and monitoring and evaluation of outputs, outcomes and, from time to time, impact.

**Formalize the role of the IGF in the Roadmap implementation process.** The Roadmap implementation has a broad scope and the team responsible for coordinating it should be commended for bringing a wide variety of actors, including from within the UN system, into the process. However, it would be economical in terms of time and financial resources for this process to work with the IGF ecosystem more systematically. Many of the champions and key constituents (concepts used in the Roadmap process) are also active in the IGF. Closer collaboration would rationalize efforts, and allocate responsibility and follow up strategically. Where there is a need for additional institutional capacity to coordinate Roadmap implementation, building this into the IGF plus should be considered before parallel processes are initiated elsewhere. In other words, rather than an ap-

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proach whereby the IGF is challenged to “improve” to be relevant, its existing relevance should be recognized and enhanced through using IGF processes actively in coordination with Roadmap implementation.

**Harmonize Roadmap and Common Agenda follow-up with WSIS follow-up and implementation.** The ITU, working with other UN agencies such as UNESCO, continues to oversee follow-up on the WSIS action lines. There is extensive overlap between the WSIS goals and the Roadmap, as well as with aspects of the Common Agenda. It would enable participation and optimal utilization of resources for these processes to work collaboratively in a more harmonized manner.

**Use the IGF as the leading consultation and participation platform for the 7th commitment in “Our Common Agenda.”** The IGF ecosystem has the credibility and reach across stakeholder groups around the world needed to do the consultation to develop a “Global Digital Compact” in a participative and inclusive manner. This would also provide an opportunity for the IGF to build its capacity to interact more deliberately, on a sustained basis, with decision-making institutions, including national governments. We are not, by any means, suggesting that the IGF should be the sole entity involved in this process. What we propose is that it should be the central platform for facilitating broad engagement and for channelling this into the process of building awareness of the Global Digital Compact and gathering input to go into its drafting.

**Maintain the IGF’s bottom-up character and continue to maximize its inclusiveness of individuals, but also of institutions.** There is a risk reflected to some extent in the terms of reference of the IGF Leadership panel for it to focus on the “high-level” components of the IGF where CEOs, governments, and high-profile individuals from all stakeholder groups get to speak. These spaces are important, but privileging them over the community-organized sessions comes with the risk of overlooking the insights and the concerns of stakeholders “closer to the ground.” A high-level layer cannot substitute for building sustainable relationships with decision-making institutions, including governments. That capacity has to also reside in the Secretariat and be available to the MAG.

As the web of governance grows more complex, there is a natural tendency toward specialization, which can lead to a myopic focus on just a small subset of stakeholders. Making policy is no easy task, and with countless policy development processes taking place around the world, participants in those processes simply end up working in their own silos, unaware of how their outcomes could affect the global Internet, other users, or even their own stakeholders. It’s here that the IGF can play an important role. A venue for building shared understanding, awareness of what other governance activities and initiatives are ongoing, and what lessons have been learned is precisely what is needed. A chance for stakeholders in government and national authorities to meet not only with each other, but with the organizations whose focus is on maintaining the global nature of the Internet.<sup>63</sup>

Navigating the IGF for it to remain relevant, and to play the role outlined by Chris Buckridge, above, does not mean navigating the IGF to a safe haven; on the contrary, it means navigating the IGF to the center of the current where it can serve as an inter-disciplinary platform for stakeholders—from the global North and the global South, from government business, the research and academic community, civil society and the technical community—to discuss the diverse and growing range of policy questions pertaining to the Internet.

The IGF is a forum where all participants have some degree of agency, but, when it comes to establishing who is responsible and accountable for its longer-term strength and impact, there is a distinct vacuum. For the IGF to effectively respond to calls for it to grow, to change, and to remain relevant, there is a need to strengthen its organizational and leadership structure. It needs sufficient institutional capacity, funding and leadership to be able to effectively navigate its own growth and development and to maintain a clear presence in the broader Internet governance ecosystem. Clarity on its status and on relationships inside the UN system is also needed to create realistic expectations and lower the threshold for partners from within the UN system to fully participate and to make use of the discussions at the IGF.

The landscape of Internet governance as a concept, a discipline, and a set of diverse processes evolves constantly. The IGF has to position itself as the one, known, trusted space for those who wish to engage, discuss, and learn, that traverses this shifting Internet governance landscape. A place where there is a comfortable seat and safe space for everyone who cares about, and is affected by Internet-related policy, to say their piece, argue and disagree if needed, and thereby better grasp one another's perspectives, and strive for solutions. This implies having to maintain a delicate balance between, on the one hand, staying the same—such that the IGF is where one can meet old friends and colleagues, and rekindle old debates—and, on the other hand, changing, taking risks, opening up to new and different voices and interests, and interrogating the status quo, but not at the expense of remaining relevant to people and institutions from across the political and stakeholder spectrum.

**For the IGF to effectively respond to calls for it to grow, to change, and to remain relevant, there is a need to strengthen its organizational and leadership structure.**

## Endnotes

- 1 UN Secretary-General, "OUR COMMON AGENDA. Report of the Secretary-General," United Nations, 2021. [https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common\\_Agenda\\_Report\\_English.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf)
- 2 The IGF is currently in its third mandate. After two five-year mandates, the IGF mandate was renewed for ten years in 2015 at the ten-year review of the WSIS.
- 3 According to data from the International Telecommunications Union, 50% of the world population (around 4 billion) used the Internet at the end of 2019. Other sources, such as "Internet World Stats," puts the mid-2021 figure at well over 4.5 billion. See International Telecommunication Union – Development Sector, "Measuring Digital Development: Facts and figures 2020," ITU Publications, 2020, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2020.pdf>
- 4 World Summit on the Information Security, "Tunis Agenda for the Information Security", ITU, November 18, 2015, Art 72, <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html>
- 5 The Tunis Agenda identifies the main stakeholder groups as being governments, inter-governmental organizations, the private sector and civil society. Later, an understanding of this approach evolved to also include the academic and technical communities as a key stakeholder group.
- 6 Markus Kummer, "From Tunis to Sharm El Sheikh – The Role of the IGF," Telos – Fundacion Telefonica, <https://telos.fundaciontelefonica.com/archivo/numero080/from-tunis-to-sharm-el-sheikh-the-role-of-the-igf/>
- 7 Aside from overall growth in the number of participants, indicators of demand are the large numbers of applications for workshops and other sessions, including from an increased number of institutions and processes applying to the "open forum" format at the IGF to present and discuss their work. There has also been a growing number of first-time participants every year. In 2020, 59% of the 6,150 registered participants attended the IGF for the first time. "IGF 2020 Participation and Programme Statistics," IGF, <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/igf-2020-participation-and-programme-statistics>. In 2019, for the Berlin IGF, 53% of 3,679 participated were first-timers, "IGF 2019 Participation and Programme Statistics," IGF, <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/igf-2019-participation-and-programme-statistics>
- 8 Open Consultations are typically organized two or three times per year, in conjunction with MAG face-to-face meetings.
- 9 Aspects of the IGF process can be attributed to the influence of meetings of technical community organizations, particularly those of ICANN and the Internet Society.
- 10 A multistakeholder advisory group (MAG) was established by the Secretary-General to advise on the program content and schedule of the IGF meetings. The term "Multistakeholder Advisory Group" was only coined a few years into the IGF process. Initially, they were just referred to as the IGF Advisory Group. MAG Terms of reference available at "MAG Terms of Reference," IGF, <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/mag-terms-of-reference>
- 11 The core of the IGF's organizational structure is the IGF Secretariat, which is located in Geneva but operating under the oversight of the Under-Secretary-General (USG) of the UN Division for Social and Economic Affairs (UN DESA) based at the UN headquarters in New York. This lightweight and decentralized structure is funded through extra-budgetary contributions from entities from all stakeholder groups.
- 12 Examples of changes introduced in response to the community range from opening up the topics discussed at the forum to providing support for newcomers and adding shorter session formats. In 2011, a "high-level leaders" track was introduced, creating a space for senior officials from governments and other stakeholder groups to engage in interactive discussion on IGF-related topics. A parliamentary track was introduced in 2019 and "policy networks," designed to make recommendations, in 2021.



13 The latter prefer either an existing institution such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) or a new UN office or entity to be as the place to deal with Internet-related matters. An example is the proposal made by India to the UN 66th Session of the UN Annual General Assembly for the establishment of a United Nations Committee for Internet-Related Policies (CIRP). <https://cis-india.org/Internet-governance/blog/india-statement-un-cirp>

14 United Nations General Assembly and Economic and Social Council, "Report of the Working Group on Improvements to the Internet Governance Forum," A/67/65-E/2012/48, United Nations, March 16, 2012, [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/a67d65\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/a67d65_en.pdf)

15 The report also addressed IGF processes such as the nomination of MAG members, emphasizing the need for transparency. Even though there were still only a handful at the time, it also encouraged stronger interconnection with regional IGFs.

16 IGF, "IGF Retreat. Advancing the 10-Year Mandate of the Internet Governance Forum, Summaries" IGF, July 2016, <http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/documents/igf-meeting/igf-2016/812-igf-retreat-proceedings-22july/file>

17 The mandate was extended for a further ten years at the end of 2015.

18 The MAG Working Group on IGF Strategy and Strengthening in the course of 2020 concluded that most of the recommendations made by the CSTD working group and the IGF retreat had not been implemented fully. MAG Working Group on IGF Strengthening and Strategy, "Unpublished Background document: Analysis of previous recommendations on Improvements to the IGF," IGF, August 2020, [https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot\\_download/10447/2388](https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/10447/2388)

19 UN Secretary General, "Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation," United Nations, June 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/>

20 "Roadmap on Digital Cooperation Key Action Areas as outlined on the website—One, Achieving universal connectivity by 2030; Two, Promoting digital public goods to create a more equitable world; Three, Ensuring digital inclusion for all, including the most vulnerable; Four, Strengthening digital capacity-building; Five, Ensuring the protection of human rights in the digital era; Six, Supporting global cooperation on artificial intelligence; Seven, Promoting trust and security in the digital environment; Eight, Building a more effective architecture for digital cooperation." The report itself follows a different structure but the ideas are consistent across the site and the full document.

21 Paragraph 67 of the Roadmap. UN Secretary-General, "Report of the Secretary-General. Roadmap for Digital Cooperation," United Nations, June 2020, [https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/assets/pdf/Roadmap\\_for\\_Digital\\_Cooperation\\_EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/assets/pdf/Roadmap_for_Digital_Cooperation_EN.pdf)

22 In chapter four, "Mechanisms for global digital cooperation," an IGF-plus is one of three proposed mechanisms. UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, "the age of digital interdependence," United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/DigitalCooperation-report-for%20web.pdf>

23 The Roadmap recognizes that different digital architecture models proposed by the HLP-DC are still under discussion, but clearly highlights ideas that have emerged to make the IGF "more responsive and relevant to current digital issues."

24 "Consultation on the follow-up on the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation convened by the MAG Chair supported by the Government of Switzerland," IGF, January 14, 2020, [https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/index.php?q=filedepot\\_download/9615/1986](https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/index.php?q=filedepot_download/9615/1986).

25 Submissions made by various parts of the IGF ecosystem, from national, regional, and youth IGF initiatives, (NRIs) to Best Practice Forums and from many institutions in the broader IGF community, in response to the above-mentioned January 2020 IGF Open Consultation, echo and welcome the idea of a strengthened IGF that also maintains its essential "bottom-up" character.

26 "MAG Chair Activities", IGF, <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/mag-chair-activities>

27 "IGF 2020. Reviewing past BPFs to enhance future BPF work: a "BPF on BPFs," IGF, September 2020, [https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot\\_download/3405/2212](https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/3405/2212)

28 A learning study on Best Practice Forums produced a report and recommendations in 2020, and a similar study on Dynamic Coalition will be published in November 2021.

29 In their capacity of co-champions for following up on recommendations 5A/B on the architecture for digital cooperation in the report of the UN Secretary-General's HLPDC.

30 Germany and the United Arab Emirates, "The Options Paper," Global Cooperation, September 3, 2020, <https://www.global-cooperation.digital/GCD/Navigation/EN/The-Options-Paper/the-options-paper.html>

31 Germany and the United Arab Emirates, "The Options Paper," Global Cooperation, September 3, 2020, <https://www.global-cooperation.digital/GCD/Navigation/EN/The-Options-Paper/the-options-paper.html>

32 "IGF Main Session on Internet Governance & Digital Cooperation," IGF, November 26, 2019, [https://www.global-cooperation.digital/GCD/Redaktion/EN/Downloads/igf-main-session-on-Internet-governance.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=2](https://www.global-cooperation.digital/GCD/Redaktion/EN/Downloads/igf-main-session-on-Internet-governance.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2)

33 Report of the First IGF 2020 Open Consultations submitted as input for the Options paper. "First IGF 2020 Open Consultations and Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) Meeting United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG)," IGF, January 14, 2020, [https://www.global-cooperation.digital/GCD/Redaktion/EN/Downloads/contribution-geneva-multistakeholder-advisory-group.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=2](https://www.global-cooperation.digital/GCD/Redaktion/EN/Downloads/contribution-geneva-multistakeholder-advisory-group.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2)

34 "IGF 2020 Main Session: Digital Cooperation," IGF, November 12, 2020, <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/igf-2020-main-session-digital-cooperation>

35 This was also not a new idea. The previous MAG chair initiated a MAG working group on multi-year planning in 2018.

36 MAG Working Group on IGF Strengthening and Strategy, "MAG Working Group on IGF Strengthening and Strategy (WG-strategy) proposals on strategic improvements to the IGF and operational measures in 2021," IGF, January 22, 2021. [https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot\\_download/10447/2458](https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/10447/2458)

37 Internet Governance Forum Multistakeholder Advisory Group Working Group, "Internet Governance Forum Multistakeholder Advisory Group Working Group on IGF Strategy and Strengthening, 2020: Response to the paper on 'Options for the Future of Digital Cooperation,'" IGF, September 29, 2020. [https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot\\_download/10447/2267](https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/10447/2267)

38 UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, "the age of digital interdependence," United Nations, p.24 <https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/DigitalCooperation-report-for%20web.pdf>

39 Early in 2021, the Secretariat initiated a consultation to gain further input on the proposed Multistakeholder High-level Body (MHLB). They received 85 submissions in response, but at the time of writing the future form and terms of reference of this body were not yet known. The list of inputs received in response to the consultations on paragraph 93(a) in the Roadmap for digital cooperation, <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/93a-public-responses>

40 "INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUM LEADERSHIP PANEL - Call for Nominations," IGF, <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/internet-governance-forum-leadership-panel-call-for-nominations>

41 The Leadership Panel will include two ministerial-level or above representatives from Governments that are Member States of the United Nations or regional intergovernmental organizations that have observer status in the General Assembly; two CEO-level (or deputy-level) representatives from each of the other three stakeholder groups (private sector, technical community, and civil society) and two at-large members (distinguished or prominent persons who do not fall under the above stakeholder groups). Ex-officio members will include three senior representatives (Minister or head of agency-level) made up of the current, immediately previous, and the immediately upcoming host countries, the Chair of the IGF's Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG), and The Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology.

42 “Terms of Reference for the IGF Leadership Panel,” IGF, <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/terms-of-reference-for-the-igf-leadership-panel>

43 “Terms of Reference for the IGF Leadership Panel,” IGF, <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/terms-of-reference-for-the-igf-leadership-panel>

44 “United Nations. Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology,” United Nations, <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/>

45 This followed up on a recommendation in the report of the Secretary General’s High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation: UN Secretary-General’s High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, “the age of digital interdependence,” United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/DigitalCooperation-report-for%20web.pdf>

46 “About the Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology,” United Nations, <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/> (accessed 16 Nov 2021).

47 With regard to the architecture for digital cooperation, their website states that “In line with the key recommendations of the Roadmap, discussions are ongoing, including with the IGF community and efforts underway to strengthen the IGF. On this, the Office works closely with the UN DESA,” “Building a more effective architecture for digital cooperation,” United Nations, <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/content/global-digital-cooperation> (accessed 16 Nov 2021)

48 UN Secretary-General, “OUR COMMON AGENDA. Report of the Secretary-General,” United Nations, 2021. [https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common\\_Agenda\\_Report\\_English.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf)

49 UN Secretary-General, “OUR COMMON AGENDA. Report of the Secretary-General,” United Nations, 2021, p. 83, paragraph 131. [https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common\\_Agenda\\_Report\\_English.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf)

50 The 12 commitments can be found on page 7 of “Our Common Agenda.” UN Secretary-General, “OUR COMMON AGENDA. Report of the Secretary-General,” United Nations, 2021, p.7. [https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common\\_Agenda\\_Report\\_English.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf)

51 UN Secretary-General, “OUR COMMON AGENDA. Report of the Secretary-General,” United Nations, 2021, p.63, paragraph 93. [https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common\\_Agenda\\_Report\\_English.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf)

52 Included in the Common Agenda, under “Improve Digital Cooperation”, the 7th of the 12 commitments. UN Secretary-General, “OUR COMMON AGENDA. Report of the Secretary-General,” United Nations, 2021. [https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common\\_Agenda\\_Report\\_English.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf)

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 UN Secretary-General, “Report of the Secretary-General. Roadmap for Digital Cooperation,” United Nations, June 2020, paragraph 93 [https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/assets/pdf/Roadmap\\_for\\_Digital\\_Cooperation\\_EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/assets/pdf/Roadmap_for_Digital_Cooperation_EN.pdf)

56 Ibid., paragraph 93 (g).

57 From 2011 onward for a few years, the IGF Secretariat did not have senior leadership at all, until eventually Mr. Chengetai Masango, IGF Programme and Technology Manager, became established as the Head of Office of the Secretariat. He is supported by a small team of staff and consultants but he does not have the authority of an Executive Coordinator.

The IGF Secretariat in October 2021, “Team”, IGF, <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/about#team>

58 From 2005 to 2010, the IGF Secretariat was led by an Executive Coordinator, Mr. Markus Kummer, who had also led the Working Group on Internet Governance (the group mandated by the UN Secretary General to develop recommendations on the future of Internet governance in the period between the two phases of the World Summit on the Information Society.

59 When the advisory group that later became known as the MAG was first convened in 2006,

it was chaired by Nitin Desai, at that time a retired Under Secretary-General of the UN, in his capacity as Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General. Nitin Desai's presence contributed significantly to the legitimacy of the IGF in two respects: it provided a high-level link to the United Nations as an institution, and in particular to the UN Secretary-General, and it contributed to maintaining a global-South perspective and development-oriented focus. After Nitin's retirement, the position of IGF "Special Advisor" remained vacant, in spite of frequent calls from all stakeholder groups for it to be filled.

60 World Summit on the Information Security, "Tunis Agenda for the Information Security", ITU, November 18, 2015, paragraph 72, <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html>

61 The mandate also asks the IGF to: "Facilitate the exchange of information and best practices, and in this regard make full use of the expertise of the academic, scientific, and technical communities; advise all stakeholders in proposing ways and means to accelerate the availability and affordability of the Internet in the developing world; strengthen and enhance the engagement of stakeholders in existing and/or future Internet governance mechanisms, particularly those from developing countries; identify emerging issues, bring them to the attention of the relevant bodies and the general public, and, where appropriate, make recommendations; contribute to capacity building for Internet governance in developing countries, drawing fully on local sources of knowledge and expertise; promote and assess, on an ongoing basis, the embodiment of WSIS principles in Internet governance processes; discuss, inter alia, issues relating to critical Internet resources; help to find solutions to the issues arising from the use and misuse of the Internet, of particular concern to everyday users; publish its proceedings," "About Us," IGF, <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/about#about-us>

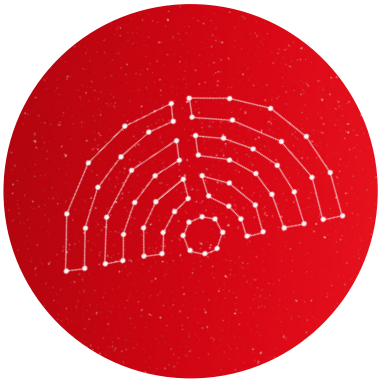
62 The Just Net Coalition statement on the MHLB in response to the 2020 consultation convened by the Secretariat reflects this perspective. The Just Net Coalition, "More than 170 Civil Society Groups Worldwide Oppose Plans for a Big Tech Dominated Body for Global Digital Governance," Just Net Coalition, <https://justnetcoalition.org/big-tech-governing-big-tech.pdf>

63 Chris Buckridge, "Do We Need The IGF? Now More Than Ever!," RIPE Labs, November 2, 2021, <https://labs.ripe.net/author/chrisb/do-we-need-the-igf-now-more-than-ever/>. Chris Buckridge is advisor to the RIPE NCC managing director on issues of Global Strategic Engagement.

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