

Navigating key digital governance processes: Practical handbook for civil society organisations

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About the project:

Civil Society Alliances for Digital Empowerment (CADE):

CADE is a project co-funded by the European Union. CADE aims to enhance the capacity of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) for effective advocacy in multilateral and multistakeholder internet governance (IG) processes. It will foster inclusive participation, particularly from the Global South, and promote a human centric policy approach in shaping digital policies and standards.

[Find more information here.](#)

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List of abbreviations

CSO - Civil Society Organisation

ECOSOC - UN Economic and Social Council

FOC - Freedom Online Coalition

FOC-AN - Freedom Online Coalition-Advisory Network

GDC - Global Digital Compact

GFCE - Global Forum on Cyber Expertise

GPD - Global Partners Digital

HLPF - UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

HRC - UN Human Rights Council

ICTs - Information and communication technologies

IGF - Internet Governance Forum

ITU - International Telecommunication Union

MAG - Multistakeholder Advisory Group

OEWG - Open-ended Working Group on security of and in the use of information and communications technologies

OHCHR - Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

SDGs - Sustainable Development Goals

UN - United Nations

UN CSTD - UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development

UNGA - The UN General Assembly

UPR - Universal Periodic Review

VNR - Voluntary National Reviews

WSIS - World Summit on the Information Society

Introduction

For civil society to be successful at influencing policies, standards and practices in the Internet Governance space, they must expand beyond silos and strategically contribute to key international processes with direct or indirect impact on Internet Governance.

This handbook outlines eight key internet and digital governance processes and forums that are crucial for determining the policies and norms shaping the digital future and human rights. It describes their focus and link to Internet Governance, analyses upcoming opportunities and modalities of participation as well as provides tips on engagement and how to overcome existing challenges. Our goal is for civil society to use this material as guidance on how they can get involved in such processes and how to make a significant impact and contribution, drawing from past civil society experiences.

UN General Assembly

The General Assembly (UNGA or GA) is the main intergovernmental body of the UN, located in New York City and bringing together every UN member state and observer. Each GA session lasts a year, opening in September with a high-level week, where member states are represented at the head of state or ministerial level. Following high-level week, the GA meets at the technical level in six thematic committees until the end of the calendar year. These committees negotiate and adopt resolutions (which are then finally adopted in full plenary each December) and engage in general and thematic debates. For the remainder of the session, the GA meets ad hoc in plenary on special occasions for urgent debates or to pass resolutions, usually at the ambassadorial level.

In September 2024, the Global Digital Compact (GDC) was adopted at the UN Summit of the Future, held at the start of the GA. The GDC paved the way for the creation in January 2025 of a new UN Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies (ODET), to replace the former UN Secretary General's Envoy on Technology. This office is intended to coordinate implementation of actions set out in the GDC - but the specific mandate, activities and future resources of this new office will be discussed throughout 2025. There is also a new UN inter-agency Working Group tasked to monitor GDC implementation, chaired by ODET.



Opportunities for CSO involvement

GA meetings, including committees, are public and web-streamed, and the statements made by states are on public record. The most relevant committees are the second committee (sustainable development), third committee (human rights) and fifth committee (budget). Civil society organisations (CSOs) with UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) accreditation can attend in person, but speaking opportunities are rare during formal GA meetings.

CSOs can, however, participate in, speak at and co-organise side events at key moments during the GA – these take place during high-level week, during committees, and at other ad hoc moments during the year. Side events in the UN building need to be organised together with a member state and/or a UN entity, but other events can also be organised off-site. These can be good moments to raise the profile of an issue, to ask for specific commitments, or simply to get different actors around a table.

Resolutions at the GA can be adopted by vote but are usually adopted by consensus following intense closed-door negotiations. The final text adopted in GA resolutions can be of particular importance to CSOs, as this becomes UN 'agreed language' (see examples of resolutions below). However, GA working methods present major challenges to CSOs in following negotiations.



Challenges to meaningful participation

Now more than ever, the GA is often seen as resolutely intergovernmental, with greater general hostility towards CSO participation than in other fora. This can be seen during GA meetings and whenever thematic or modalities resolutions are negotiated, where CSO participation and the role of civil society in general can often be one of the most contentious issues. This was also the case at the Summit of the Future and during the GDC negotiations.

Unlike in the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) (see more details below), CSOs do not have the right to participate or speak during either formal GA sessions or informal resolution negotiations. In many cases, meetings are held behind closed doors and CSOs are not allowed in the room at all. For CSOs to be allowed in the room to observe negotiations, the co-facilitating states need to agree in advance, and there cannot be objections raised by any other states in the room. While some co-facilitators, individual states, or regional blocs occasionally hold specific consultations with CSOs during the drafting and negotiation phases, this is ad hoc and depends on those involved. As a result, CSOs typically rely on informal, bilateral contacts with states to stay informed about negotiation progress. Informal networks of CSOs often form around particular resolutions to support each other in following developments and coordinating advocacy outreach - and the earlier these connections are made the better, before negotiations start.

Whilst side events can be a useful way to bridge the gap and elevate the voice of civil society at the GA, a lot of planning needs to be done to ensure that there will be sufficient effective follow up. This is particularly the case during high level week, when there is very little time and many competing events taking place. Often it is better to hold side events at other times of the year, for example during committee sessions, to enable more constructive discussions.



Key issues and processes

The 79th session of the GA opened on 10 September 2024 and will run until the 80th session begins on 9 September 2025.

Discussions on implementation of the GDC will continue throughout 2025, including on the role of the new UN Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies, and the interplay between different structures. Many of these discussions will go hand-in-hand with the WSIS+20 review - which culminates in the adoption of a GA resolution at the WSIS+20 GA High Level meeting in New York in December 2025. The GDC itself will be reviewed in 2027. Throughout these and other discussions at the GA, the importance of CSO participation, and of a multistakeholder approach, will continue to be one of the most contentious issues.

Digital-related GA resolutions planned for 2025 include (others may be scheduled):

- * WSIS+20 review modalities resolution (possible adoption March 2025).
- * Resolution establishing the AI Scientific panel and dialogue - as outlined in paragraph 57 of the GDC (must be negotiated and adopted before the end of the 79th GA session in September 2025).
- * WSIS+20 review resolution (negotiations start July 2025, adoption at the WSIS+20 high level meeting in December 2025).

Digital-related resolutions recently negotiated and adopted at the GA include:

- * 79/194 on 'Information and communication technologies for sustainable development' (negotiated in Second Committee and adopted in plenary 19 December 2024).
- * 79/175 on 'The right to privacy in the digital age' (negotiated in Third Committee and adopted in plenary 17 December 2024. Due to be renegotiated in 2026).
- * 79/1 'The Pact for the Future' and 'Global Digital Compact', adopted at the UN Summit of the Future on 22 September 2024. These were negotiated and adopted as a single GA resolution, with the Global Digital Compact (GDC) annexed to the Pact.
- * 78/265 on 'Seizing the opportunities of safe, secure and trustworthy artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development' (adopted in plenary on 21 March 2024).
- * 78/213 on 'Promotion and protection of human rights in the context of digital technologies' (negotiated in Third Committee and adopted in plenary 19 December 2023).



Want to know more?

Further details on the agenda of the current GA, plenary and committee meetings, and planned, draft and adopted resolutions can be found on its main [website](#) and the [iGov portal](#).

UN Human Rights Council

The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) is an intergovernmental body within the UN system, based in Geneva and made up of 47 states who are responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of all human rights around the globe as well as addressing situations of human rights violations. The HRC serves as an international forum for dialogue on human rights issues with UN officials and mandated experts, states, civil society, and other participants.

The HRC adopts resolutions or decisions during its regular sessions to represent the international community's position on specific human rights issues. These resolutions send a powerful political message, often motivating governments to take steps to address the highlighted concerns, especially in the digital age. Examples of key HRC resolutions significant to CSOs include the resolution on Civil Society Space and New and emerging digital technologies.

Specifically in relation to internet governance, the HRC passed a resolution requesting the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to develop a work stream on the relationship between human rights and technical standard-setting processes for new and emerging technologies. The OHCHR report presents numerous recommendations for states, standards bodies, and CSOs on how to integrate human rights in the standardisation processes.



Want to know more?

HRC Monitor by the International Service for Human Rights provides up-to-date news and developments when the UN HRC is in session, which can be received as a [newsletter](#).



Opportunities for CSO involvement

CSOs must be accredited (ECOSOC status) to participate in the HRC sessions as observers. They can address the council during interactive discussions and debates, thus highlighting human rights situations around the globe.

As observers, CSOs are able, amongst other things, to:

- * Attend and observe most HRC proceedings.
- * Submit written statements.
- * Make oral interventions: Participate in debates, interactive dialogues, panel discussions and informal meetings.
- * Organise parallel events on issues relevant to the work of the HRC.

Notably, CSOs can provide expert input and submissions to the reports requested by the HRC, typically via the OHCHR. Calls for such submissions are published on the [OHCHR website](#). Additionally, CSOs may attend various events by invitation from the event organisers and must register as invited participants. This grants them access to the venue for the day.

Practical guide to participation as a CSO: This Guide, produced by OHCHR, is intended to facilitate and support CSO work.



Challenges for meaningful participation

In practice, it is challenging for smaller, national-level CSOs to follow the HRC broadly. Forging alliances and developing coordination with other networks or CSOs working on HRC issues is essential for gathering useful informal knowledge as well as amplifying each other's messages. In addition, building consistent relationships with diverse member state missions in Geneva is useful for two reasons: keeping them informed about particular issues or country situations and gathering additional information about the internal workings of the HRC on the topics of interest. It is useful to schedule meetings in the main building of the HRC where most of the delegates are present, gravitate to, and can easily reach. For access, CSOs need to have accreditation or an invitation from a host of an event or member state mission.



Key issues and processes

Many CSOs on the national level primarily engage in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) to keep their governments to account. UPR is a unique mechanism of the HRC that calls for each UN member state to undergo a peer review of its human rights records and commitments every 4.5 years. The UPR provides each state the opportunity to regularly:

- * Report on the actions it has taken to improve the human rights situations in their countries and to overcome challenges to the enjoyment of human rights
- * Receive recommendations – informed by multi stakeholder input and pre-session reports – from UN member states for continuous improvement

CSOs can submit information for the report to be considered during the review. Information they provide can be referred to by any of the states taking part in the interactive discussion during the review. CSOs can also attend the UPR Working Group sessions and can make statements at the regular session of the HRC when the outcome of the state reviews is considered.



Want to know more?

For further details, visit the HRC page on [explanation of the practical process and guidance with templates/resources for engagement](#).

World Summit on the Information Society



Key issues and processes

With the aim to assess the progress and challenges over the two decades since the inception of WSIS, the UN General Assembly (GA) is facilitating the WSIS+20 Review – taking place in July 2025. Towards the WSIS+20 review, efforts have been made to establish a unified WSIS+20 review preparatory process involving all UN agencies, with a key role by ITU and the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development (UN CSTD), which is tasked to develop a report on WSIS. Regular meetings are organised to facilitate collaborative discussions and planning, reflecting the joint and dedicated approach towards the WSIS+20 review. WSIS Forum 2025, branded as WSIS+20 High-Level Event 2025, is scheduled to take place from **7 to 11 July 2025 in Geneva, Switzerland**. The UN General Assembly will hold a high-level meeting in December 2025 (as requested in Resolution A/70/125) on the overall review of the implementation of the outcomes of WSIS, involving the input and participation of all stakeholders. This meeting aims to take stock of progress on the outcomes of the process and identify areas of continued focus and challenges. The UNGA will adopt a high-level resolution on WSIS by the end of 2025, deciding the future of this process.

Outcome documents from WSIS Forum 2024, focusing on global efforts to leverage information and communication technologies (ICTs) for sustainable development and digital inclusion:

- * The WSIS Forum 2024 Outcomes page outlines key achievements from the event.
- * Chair's summary of the key outcomes and discussions from the WSIS Forum 2024 High-Level Event.



Opportunities for CSO involvement

There is an informal external stakeholder email list on WSIS+20. To be included on the email list, you would generally need to contact WSIS or the UN office for ICT. Reach out to the focal points via the WSIS stakeholder engagement page or reach out directly to wsis-info@itu.int.

A group of CSOs and networks have established informal coordination for this process. If your organisation wishes to join these efforts, please contact ECNL (info@ecn.org).

Two main elements have been identified as relevant: the review process itself, and the substance of the review. At a minimum, the civil society coalition wants a clear call to uphold/safeguard multistakeholderism, both as part of the process, but also in the final review document. On the substantive side, the definition of internet governance, enhanced cooperation, and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) are three topics expected to be key for the review; this [slide deck](#) provides more information about the process and opportunities available to CSOs.

All stakeholders are encouraged to participate in the Open Consultation Process (OCP), an open and inclusive consultation between WSIS stakeholders in preparation for [WSIS+20 High-Level Event 2025](#), planned from 7-11 July 2025, in Geneva, Switzerland. The OCP process aims to identify gaps in the Geneva Plan and WSIS action lines to ensure a stronger event program and is used as a pathway to contribute to the WSIS+20 review process. Stakeholders have the opportunity to get involved through '[Calls to Action](#)', which will remain open until 14 March 2025.



Challenges to meaningful participation

Stakeholder engagement in the WSIS process was identified as an area of common concern where coordinated action could be valuable, with the upcoming decision on WSIS review modalities constituting a key milestone and opportunity for joint action. These should **prioritise facilitating robust stakeholder engagement modalities** to ensure that the process is **inclusive and informed by the perspectives of diverse stakeholders**.

Internet Governance Forum

The IGF is an annual, ongoing process comprising two main components: inter-sessional work and the forum itself. Hosted in a different country each year, the forum is jointly organised by the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) and the host nation. The MAG provides expertise, coordinates the process, and supports panel selection, ensuring a balanced and inclusive agenda.

Originally, the IGF primarily focused on **internet governance**, exploring the dynamics between states and other stakeholders, including policymakers, civil society, and the private sector. However, its scope has broadened considerably over the years. Discussions now encompass **emerging technologies** and their societal implications, extending beyond internet-specific issues to address topics such as artificial intelligence, digital inclusion, and the sustainability of technology. 'IGF Messages' are the primary outputs of the forum. They are high-level summaries capturing the key points and discussions from all sessions. These messages are prepared by the **IGF Secretariat**, which reviews session summaries and recordings, often with the support of consultants. The aim is to present a snapshot of the state of the debate rather than an official position from the UN or the Secretariat.

Currently, there are conversations about the renewal of the IGF mandate. The Global Digital Compact (GDC) challenged the IGF substantially but did not provide a substitute.



Key issues and opportunities

The yearly IGF cycle looks as follows:

- * Stocktaking call for the IGF community – civil society can add reviews and comments about previous editions.
- * Call for input for topics of the year.

First MAG meeting – MAG will formulate the topics of the year, e.g. for 2024 they were the following:

- * Harnessing innovation and balancing risks in the digital space;
- * Enhancing the digital contribution to peace, development, and sustainability;
- * Advancing human rights and inclusion in the digital age;
- * Improving Digital Governance for the Internet We Want;
- * Call for proposals for sessions – CSOs should contribute session proposals;
- * Second MAG meeting, where sessions are selected for the agenda, together with the open forums and lightning talks;
- * MAG finalises the sessions and invites participants;
- * The main forum, the IGF, typically in November or December with an exception for IGF 2025 in Oslo which will be hosted in June - IGF messages are published.

Key processes during 2025:

- * Taking stock and calling for input on topics happened in January 2025.
- * Norway will host IGF in Oslo between 23 and 27 June 2025.
- * The WSIS+20 review will happen in 2025 and will coincide with the IGF+20 review. We will know whether the IGF mandate will be renewed or not (the duration of the renewed mandate will depend on the UNGA resolution).



Opportunities for CSO involvement

- * Civil society can apply to be a part of the IGF-MAG – the call for applications is online every time a member leaves, or there's a rotation. Normally the MAG rotates regionally. Historically, civil society has been suggesting names through coalitions (nominating and endorsing a member). The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the IGF Secretariat appoint an individual, a decision made behind closed doors. Anyone can apply, but the selection is typically based on long-term engagement with the IGF and relevant expertise. The call has some prerequisites around these topics and happens around September of each year. The new MAG composition is always announced on the last day of the IGF.
- * Anyone in the community can join the inter-sessional working groups (e.g. policy networks, best practice forums, dynamic coalitions). It is thematic work that is developed throughout the year. In 2024, themes were AI, cybersecurity, and internet fragmentation. The themes are proposed by the broader community, and anyone can suggest a topic.
- * Two open consultations per year, typically in January and July, are open to all and are opportunities for external members to provide suggestions to the MAG and Secretariat.
- * Civil society can propose sessions and workshops to take place during the annual IGF.
- * CSOs can also use informal pathways for engagement, e.g. corridor conversations with Member States during the IGF or through meetings between the IGF Secretariat and civil society regarding topics such as host country, indication of speakers for sessions etc.



Challenges to meaningful participation

- * Financing the IGF – sponsorship of the IGF relies entirely on contributions from member states. Depending on who will be the next host country, there might be more or less funding. The UN needs to ensure sustainable and consistent means of resourcing for the IGF.
- * Bring more transparency to the whole process. How are host countries selected? The UN and IGF Secretariat decide, but there's no real understanding of what happens behind closed doors (what are the conditions/ criteria?).
- * Civil society is one of the most committed and engaged stakeholders, but the IGF's priority has been concentrated on engaging more with member state. Managing the concerns of the community is an ongoing process, even if it is understandable that funding is a concern.
- * The IGF is predominantly led in English, usually excluding groups who aren't fluent in the language.



Current CSO initiatives and tips for effective participation

- * Be present in MAG meetings, bring positions during the year and don't focus only on the IGF itself. For example, APC engages with the MAG throughout the entire year, including taking the opportunity of the open mic at the end of the IGF conference.
- * Send position papers to the MAG and Secretariat. There's an open mailing list so anyone can send information to a member and ask them to share it publicly in the MAG. It will ultimately be archived. Anyone can subscribe to the MAG public list. All the links are on the website.
- * The IGF leadership panel is in place until 2025, and civil society can reach out to friendly members, asking them to communicate or elevate their messages.
- * Strategies for preparing engagement plans and advocacy activities:
- * Communicate as many policy positions and concerns as possible to MAG members, especially the civil society ones.
- * Focus on communicating with friendly member states who are long-term supporters of the IGF (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the U.S., Brazil, Canada, Austria, Denmark, Finland, the EU, etc). The list of former hosts is also a good guide of member states supporting the IGF, but note that some of them don't have good human rights records (e.g. Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia).
- * Submit a session proposal as the proposals shape the overall agenda.
- * Based on ECNL experience or the experience of other CSOs (feel free to hold consultations with others if needed): tips/recommendations for contributing to consultations, preparatory processes, the processes themselves?
- * When submitting a proposal, try to partner with newcomers and get them to submit the proposal on their own or in partnership because the MAG values diversity of voices.
- * First-timers are encouraged to request a meeting with the IGF Secretariat. They are very available and have the expertise to present the IGF in an accessible and simple way. Contact igf@un.org.
- * Regional IGFs don't have a fixed model; they have their own priorities and coordination. They're a resource for organising digital rights in the region, but their effectiveness depends on their model and funding. Most countries have their own national IGF, too, on a country level, and it is interesting to follow those.

UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) is the annual ministerial meeting, which takes place in New York each June. Its main objective is to review and advance progress in implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda. Most governments in the world are usually represented at the ministerial level. It occurs at the same time as the annual ministerial of the ECOSOC. The main business of each HLPF consists of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of a limited number of countries; a global thematic review of a few individual SDGs; a plenary discussion and adoption of a political declaration on a specific theme; and a programme of side and parallel events, both in and outside the UN building.



Key issues and opportunities

Each year at the HLPF, there are **VNRs** of individual country-level implementations of all SDGs. In June 2025, thirty-nine states will present their VNRs, including: Angola, Bahamas, Bangladesh, Belarus, Bhutan, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Finland, Gambia (Republic of the), Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Lesotho, Malaysia, Malta, Micronesia (Federated States of), Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Qatar, Saint Lucia, Seychelles, South Africa, State of Palestine, Sudan, Suriname, Thailand.

In these VNRs, governments make presentations on SDG implementation and take questions from other governments and stakeholders, including civil society. As this is a voluntary process, there is no set form for these presentations, and the quality of the review varies significantly between countries.

Alongside the VNRs, at each HLPF, there is a theme and global thematic reviews of a few individual SDGs.

- * In 2025, the theme will be 'Advancing sustainable, inclusive, science- and evidence-based solutions for the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs for leaving no one behind'. The SDGs to be reviewed in-depth are Goals 3, 5, 8, 14 and 17. HLPF will be held from Monday, 14 July – Wednesday, 23 July 2025.
- * In 2026, the theme will be 'Transformative, equitable, innovative and coordinated actions for the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs for a sustainable future for all'. The SDGs to be reviewed are Goals 6, 7, 9, 11, and 17.
- * In 2027, the theme will be 'Scaling up just transitions to achieving sustainable development, poverty eradication and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs'. The SDGs to be reviewed are Goals 4, 10, 12, 15 and 17.

There is no specific SDG related to digital technologies or governance, as this is a thread that runs through most if not all of the 17 goals. Therefore, in every VNR and every thematic review there are potential points of relevance.



Opportunities for CSO involvement

CSOs can engage with the HLPF and SDG review process at both the country level and in New York.

At the country level, many governments have SDG National Action Plans, some of which are developed, implemented and reviewed together with domestic CSOs. In some countries, there are also CSO coalitions that focus on SDG implementation. In any case, CSOs can try to engage with governments on SDG implementation, especially if they are preparing a VNR or an Action Plan. This can be a good vehicle to mobilise and engage at a national level, and can be a good way to initiate contact with officials – but these plans and the VNR are all voluntary, and there is no specific CSO participation obligation, so it really does depend on national contexts. Regarding New York, governments can include CSOs in their delegations to the HLPF and include CSO speakers in their VNR presentations. There is the opportunity for all CSOs to ask questions or make comments, and many domestic CSOs or coalitions produce shadow VNR reports. A lot of the CSO activities relating to HLPF are coordinated through the Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGOS).

The VNR process is voluntary, and does not have formal recommendations (unlike for example, in the UPR), so the value of this engagement varies from country-to-country.

Formal and informal participation pathways

At each HLPF, there are formal plenary discussions on these topics and the reviewed SDGs – speaking time during the formal discussions is usually allocated to/through the MGOS. There are also many side events organised through HLPF, both on and off the UN site. CSOs can both organise these events and participate in them. Side events in the UN building need to be co-organised with individuals or a group of states and/or UN bodies, and applications for rooms need to be sent months in advance. These can be useful for throwing a spotlight on particular issues or in getting specific actors together.

HLPF is usually a time when many CSOs are present in New York, and it can be useful for networking, coalition-building and strategising, particularly on a cross-regional or international level.

There are further details on the [2025 HLPF website](#), where there will also be practical details on CSO registration and organisation of side events.



Challenges to meaningful participation

At its heart this is a voluntary process, so progress is only made when there is already some willingness on the part of individual governments. At national level, the HLPF and VNR processes may present new opportunities for more concrete discussions between CSOs and a government - especially when these can be tied directly to progress and actions needed to meet SDG commitments. However, what is possible and how this can impact policy-making varies greatly from country to country.

In New York, the only formal output adopted at each HLPF is a Political Declaration, which is a general resolution on each year's theme, negotiated between member states in advance, without CSO participation (in a similar way to GA resolutions). Side events and other networking opportunities can be critical for raising the profile of an issue or for coalition building - but there are a lot of competing events during HLPF and a lot of people involved, so it is even more important to establish clear objectives and plans for follow up in advance.

UN Open-Ended Working Group on security of and in the use of information and communications technologies

The UN General Assembly established the Open-ended Working Group on security of and in the use of information and communications technologies (OEWG) in December 2020 for the period of 5 years. The group meets for 11 substantive sessions in New York. The OEWG's mandate ends in July 2025, but delegations agreed in 2024 that a new form of permanent regular institutional dialogue to discuss ICT security could be established by consensus in the future.

The group's mandate is to create a space for dialogue at the intersection of security and information and communications technologies. In particular, they aim to:

- * Develop the rules of responsible behaviour of States in the area of security and IT.
- * Study existing and potential threats in the sphere of information and data security.
- * Explore possible cooperative measures to prevent and counter such threats.
- * Discuss how international law applies to the use of information and communications technologies by states.
- * Develop confidence-building measures and capacity-building.



Key upcoming opportunities

The OEWG adopts annual progress reports which summarise the state of discussions and recommendations. The last two sessions will take place on:

- * 10th substantive session: 3–7 March 2025.
- * 11th and final substantive session: 7–11 July 2025.

Key deliverables in 2025 include the decision on a new mechanism to follow the OEWG, including the modalities of stakeholder engagement. Chile and Canada are leading on the latter issue and have presented a working paper on stakeholder engagement during the OEWG session in December. Civil society can still provide input in this process.



Opportunities for CSO involvement

CSOs can benefit from engagement with the OEWG for the following reasons:

- * **Key forum for cybersecurity norm-setting:** The OEWG sessions are the only UN forum where international cyber norms for responsible behaviours norms are discussed, giving civil society a structured, though increasingly limited, entry point into high-level cybersecurity discussions with all UN member states.
- * **Visibility:** Engaging in the OEWG elevates civil society's role in cybersecurity, enhancing legitimacy and potentially fostering trust among states.
- * **Influence:** CSOs can advocate for norms that align with human rights, including transparency and accountability. Civil society's contributions to these sessions can influence norm-setting by bringing attention to human rights, transparency, and accountability. When civil society voices are heard, they can steer debates toward inclusive and people-centric cybersecurity norms, which is crucial given that many government-driven cyber policies tend to prioritise state security over public interest.
- * **Multistakeholder engagement:** OEWG sessions allow direct access to state representatives, enabling networking and collaboration with other stakeholders.

The OEWG's effectiveness for civil society as a forum for engagements would depend on the quality of multistakeholder engagement that the forum is able to foster. Civil society has seen some success in bringing issues like digital rights and privacy into the conversation, yet the lack of binding commitments and the increasingly politicised nature of discussions (which create deadlocks in the OEWG discussions), often limits the effectiveness of their advocacy. Civil society participation in the OEWG has increased awareness of these issues, but achieving tangible commitments or policy shifts within the OEWG remains challenging.

1. Formal participation pathways:

- * **Accreditation requirements:** To formally engage in the OEWG, CSOs need to undergo an accreditation process, which varies based on whether the organisation has ECOSOC consultative status. If an organisation does not have correct accreditation from ECOSOC, member states can reject the application. Accredited CSOs receive notifications on meeting details, and applications for accreditation typically open six weeks before each session. Notifications on the application status are sent two weeks before each session begins.
- * **Access to meetings and speaking opportunities:** Accredited organisations can attend formal OEWG meetings and dedicated stakeholder sessions (where they are permitted to make oral statements) held within each substantive meeting. These sessions provide a direct avenue for CSOs to share perspectives, concerns, and recommendations with member states. Additionally, CSOs may submit written inputs, which are incorporated into the official records of discussions.

2. Informal participation opportunities:

- * **Consultative meetings with the OEWG Chair:** In addition to formal sessions, the OEWG Chair occasionally convenes informal consultative discussions between substantive sessions, inviting feedback from CSOs and other interested stakeholders. These meetings offer a more flexible platform for CSOs to engage in dialogue on the topics under consideration, even if they are unable to participate in the formal sessions.

- * **Side events:** CSOs can also organise and participate in side events held alongside OEWG sessions, provided they have a state co-sponsor. These events enable CSOs to share their expertise, network with other stakeholders, and hold in-depth discussions on specialised cybersecurity issues, such as human rights in the digital age or the importance of multistakeholderism in ICT governance. CSOs can approach the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) office for more details. A recent example includes the Geneva Dialogue side event on the Geneva Manual, co-organised by Diplo Foundation during the OEWG's 7th substantive session, which illustrates how such events create space for focused exchanges on specific themes.



Challenges for meaningful participation

- * **Limited access and speaking opportunities:** civil society often faces restricted access to OEWG sessions, including limited speaking slots and formal constraints, which reduce the scope for meaningful engagement. Without regular and substantive participation, it can be challenging for civil society to maintain continuity and exert lasting influence on complex, ongoing policy discussions. Further, organising travel arrangements to be physically present during the OEWG sessions can be very expensive.
- * **Political sensitivity:** Some states are wary of CSO input, especially on issues like state sovereignty.
- * **Focus on state priorities:** The OEWG's state-driven discussions often marginalise civil society's human rights advocacy.



Current CSO initiatives and tips for effective participation

- * Resource platform consisting of OEWG's external stakeholder contributions.
- * Some organisations presented joint statements in support of multistakeholder engagement but did not – at least based on publicly available documents – subsequently engage in the work of the OEWG. **In general, there are at least three possible types of inputs:**
 - * Specific inputs as responses to the specific questions addressed by the Chair;
 - * Inputs with comments to the OEWG documents, such as Annual Progress Reports;
 - * General submissions (on topics related to the OEWG's mandate).
- * **Define core messages:** Clarify advocacy goals and align them with the OEWG mandate.
- * **Use data and case studies:** Support arguments with practical examples.
- * **Network with sympathetic delegations:** Engage with states supportive of civil society inclusion.
- * **Leverage informal events:** Side events allow for extended discussions with delegates and can increase CSO visibility.
- * **Highlight unique contributions:** Emphasise civil society's role in safeguarding human rights, advancing inclusivity, and promoting peace.

Freedom Online Coalition

The Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) is a partnership of 41 governments dedicated to promoting internet freedom on a global scale. Members collaborate closely to align diplomatic efforts and engage with civil society and the private sector, striving to protect online rights such as freedom of expression, association, assembly, and privacy. Typically, member states are represented by their diplomatic bodies, such as ministries of foreign affairs or state departments.

The FOC's mission extends broadly under the umbrella of internet freedom, addressing diverse issues at the intersection of technology and human rights. Its scope covers areas such as digital inclusion, connectivity, internet shutdowns, and the impact of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence. The FOC can influence internet governance spaces (e.g. GDC implementation, cybercrime treaty, WSIS, IGF), especially when the outcomes are not rights-respecting. The highest impact can be seen if the FOC can speak out strongly against a process and use the coalition to take a position and make a joint statement (e.g. cybercrime treaty). The FOC sometimes takes country-specific positions, condemning severe violations of human rights at the national level (e.g. internet shutdowns in Iran). FOC statements are consensus-based, which means that a statement is issued by the chair and then member states can sign onto them. In practice, it's very difficult to get all member states to sign on to a statement.

Coordination is handled by the FOC Support Unit, a third-party secretariat providing administrative support to the coalition and its members. The FOC support unit primarily maintains and strengthens the coalition's structures and institutional capacity to respond and support diplomatic coordination and multistakeholder engagement; this position has been held by Global Partners Digital (GPD) since 2014.

Besides governments, the FOC includes the Advisory Network (FOC-AN), with members from civil society, academia, and the private sector. The FOC-AN is composed of civil society, academia and private sector representatives that support the FOC's mission of advancing internet freedom and human rights by providing advice on objectives and activities. The members of the FOC-AN are elected to serve two-year terms, for instance, the fourth cohort is set to serve from 2024 to 2026. The FOC-AN typically gives proactive advice to governments (e.g. proactive advice on the Global Digital Compact) as well as reacts to developments (e.g. requesting that member states respond to a specific question or issues).

Finally, there are ad hoc working groups and task forces, which provide additional avenues for engagement between external stakeholders and governments. In 2024, there are three task forces: Task Force on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights; Task Force on Digital Equality; and Task Force on Internet Shutdowns. These groups are co-chaired by the member states and civil society represented, but they can also be open to outside experts. Their outputs can vary in nature and frequency, depending on the mandate of the task force.



Key upcoming opportunities

Governments typically put out joint statements consisting of best practices around a topic area (e.g. human rights and standard setting; human rights and cybersecurity) with the goal of protecting internet freedom. Overall, there's continuous diplomatic coordination, generally happening among UN offices based in Geneva, New York, and San Francisco, as well as between the various offices on internet freedom-related issues.

Regarding gatherings, governments typically hold events (including side events) at all key conferences (e.g. RightsCon, the IGF, the UNGA, etc.). Previous examples include events on AI and human rights and multistakeholder engagement. Individual task forces also tend to organise sessions or events. Most sessions, especially those which are part of the official program, are open to all attendees. If it's a regional workshop or one-off event, attendees then might need to be personally invited. Previously, there was an annual FOC conference that everyone was invited to. The new model shifted to one of smaller strategy and coordination meetings, held twice a year, depending on which government chairs the FOC during any given year.

In 2025, key opportunities to watch for include the following:

- * Application process to join the FOC-AN (January-February). External stakeholders apply online, and the FOC-AN evaluates the applications based on criteria and ultimately votes on new members.
- * Publication of new program of action by the new chair (January). Estonia will chair the FOC in 2025. Presence of FOC members at key events such as RightsCon, the IGF, the UNGA, Summit for Democracy and related events.



Opportunities for CSO involvement

Civil society representatives can apply to join the FOC-AN when it goes through election cycles. They can then input into joint statements. A less formal mechanism to participate is to intervene as an expert during occasional briefings with external stakeholders hosted by the FOC-AN; typically, external experts are personally invited. Finally, external stakeholders can request to join and participate in one of the task forces without being a member of the FOC-AN.

At times, it's possible to participate in regional workshops, especially those open to the public and hosted in the context of broader conferences or events. Anyone can write to the FOC support unit, supported by GPD, to be added to the mailing list to be informed about future events and opportunities to participate.

Other informal avenues include reaching out to individual members of the FOC-AN or member states (missions and other diplomatic arms) and asking them to raise specific issues with the broader FOC or being invited to intervene during expert briefings.

CSO participation is primarily through the FOC-AN. There are sometimes informal collaborations with other groups, e.g. the GNI would co-host a dinner or Freedom House launched its Freedom of the Net report in The Hague on the sidelines of a FOC-AN meeting, etc.



Current CSO initiatives and tips for effective participation

It's helpful if external stakeholders frame internet freedom-related asks with specific actions that the ministries of foreign affairs or diplomatic arms could take (e.g. speaking out as a coalition on a specific issue or diplomatic coordination). There's no open channel to submit issues beyond being a member of the FOC-AN, so the best way is to raise issues at conferences or informally to members of the FOC-AN.

It's most helpful to have civil society push the FOC to intervene in key internet governance spaces (e.g. GDC implementation, cybercrime treaty, WSIS, IGF, etc.), especially when hosted in non-rights-respecting countries. If the FOC can speak out against something and use that coalition to take a position, that would be meaningful.

When CSOs are not part of the FOC-AN, we recommend raising issues directly with friendly FOC-AN members, especially those from civil society. When they have the capacity to formally join the FOC-AN, we encourage them to apply to do so, as it significantly strengthens their influence and access to information. When joining the FOC-AN, all travel is covered, but staff time and participation is not. Time capacity depends on how much people contribute in practice – for example, participating in a task force is relatively light as it's only a monthly call. On the FOC-AN side, there's always one or two proactive statements per year and occasional statements that are more reactive. Active participation does take a fair amount of time, but can be beneficial as members gain first-hand information and access to member states.



Challenges to meaningful participation

These FOC processes are relatively closed because the main way for external stakeholders to engage is by joining the FOC-AN. The FOC is also under-resourced; for example, the FOC Support Unit only has two employees.

As the chair rotates every year (one-year mandate), so do the points of contact, which can lead to significant turnover. It can also lead to a lack of continuity between the mandates. There are attempts to mitigate this by gathering members from various years to ensure a smooth transition and coherence in the program of action.

