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Internet Governance Forum: Twenty Years of Multistakeholder Cooperation and the Road to Nairobi 2026

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The Internet Governance Forum

In order to understand the Internet Governance Forum, its origin and significance for internet governance as a whole, it is essential to briefly address the state of internet governance in the times leading up to the establishment of the IGF. The early days of internet governance were heavily impacted by ideas of cyberlibertarianism or technoliberalism, in which liberty, individuality, responsibility and decentralisation are prioritised. The digital realm was considered outside or unsuitable for classical understandings of authority and governance; specifically, the primacy of the nation-state was heavily questioned. David Clark, one of the founding designers of Internet architecture, famously said: 'We reject kings, presidents, and voting. We believe in: rough consensus and running code'.[1] Due to the origin of ICTs and their development, the internet governance mechanisms grew outside of traditional public policymaking and were conducted by a variety of non-governmental organisations.

On the other hand, nation-states made increased efforts to (re)-gain control over the internet as they argued for notions of governance centred around hierarchy and closeness as opposed to openness and collaboration. By the 1980s–1990s, the field of Internet Governance was characterised by a patchwork of different stakeholder groups among which these

Highlights

The IGF emerged from a long-standing tension between network-centred and state-centred visions of internet governance, which peaked at the World Summit on the Information Society (2003–2005).

Over twenty years, the IGF's agenda has expanded from technical topics, such as security and access, to sociotechnical ones, including human rights, emerging technologies such as AI, and environmental sustainability; security and access remain constant concerns, now also covering social factors such as online safety and meaningful digital inclusion.

The WSIS+20 review revived debates over the role of governments and the future of the multistakeholder model; in December 2025, it committed to making the IGF a permanent UN forum.

The IGF's permanent status leaves open questions on funding, its relationship with other UN processes, and the role of governments, affecting the balance between intergovernmental decision-making and multistakeholder participation.

IGF 2026 in Nairobi, focused on governing the internet in the age of AI, will be the first test of a permanent IGF.

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tensions were found. These were especially heightened by the increased commercialisation and the onset of the World Wide Web, which gave rise to powerful private companies. Internet Governance thus was a balancing act between competing interests of these groups, which can be understood at the core as being a tension between the network-centred and the state-centred approaches to governance.[2]

One attempt to overcome these growing tensions was the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which was held in two phases in Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005). These summits, convened by the United Nations, brought together diverse stakeholders to discuss how information and communication technologies could be used for development, and how their governance should be structured. Markus Kummer, then Executive Coordinator of the WGIG Secretariat and later of the IGF Secretariat, described WSIS as 'a confrontation of two visions of the world, or two schools of thought,' which clashed on the issue of 'private sector leadership vs intergovernmental cooperation' in Internet governance.[3] One outcome of the WSIS Tunis Agenda was the creation of a new space for dialogue about Internet Governance. This resulted in the creation of the Internet Governance Forum, which was formally convened by the United Nations Secretary-General in 2006.

According to the Tunis Agenda, the IGF, 'in its working and function, will be multilateral, multi-stakeholder, democratic and transparent'.[4] Its first meeting took place in Athens, Greece, under the theme "Internet Governance for Development." The goal of the IGF is to foster inclusive, democratic, and transparent dialogue on the policy issues that affect the evolution and use of the internet. Unlike intergovernmental organisations that adopt treaties or make binding resolutions, the IGF serves a more facilitative role. It is a convening space that helps shape discourse, promote understanding, and feed into decision-making processes elsewhere. The IGF aims to bring all stakeholders together to exchange information, share best practices, and build mutual understanding. In doing so, the IGF demonstrates a strong commitment to the multi-stakeholder model of internet governance. This governance model holds that governments, the private sector, civil society, academia, and the technical community all have legitimate and important roles to play.

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) is a United Nations initiative, specifically through the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). However, the forum operates with a high degree of autonomy and community-driven engagement. A central coordinating body of the IGF is the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG), composed of representatives from all stakeholder groups and geographic regions. Members of the MAG are appointed by the UN Secretary-General. The MAG is responsible for planning the program of the annual IGF, selecting sessions, and ensuring balance and representation across issues and participants.[5] Supporting the MAG is the IGF Secretariat, a small team based in Geneva that handles day-to-day operations, communications, logistics, and reporting.

The IGF holds annual global meetings, hosted by different countries on a rotating basis. Despite being hosted by the UN, the IGF relies on independent sources of funding. The forums attract thousands of participants from all over the world and feature a wide array of sessions, including plenary discussions, workshops, open forums, and networking events. The agenda is built through an open and participatory process, with stakeholders submitting proposals and shaping the themes in advance. In addition to these annual events, the IGF carries out intersessional activities through mechanisms such as Dynamic Coalitions, Best Practice Forums, and more recently, Policy Networks. These working groups delve into specific topics such as gender and internet governance, public access, cybersecurity norms, and artificial intelligence.

One important innovation of the IGF has been the development of National and Regional IGFs, often abbreviated as NRIs. These forums extend the principles and processes of the global IGF into local contexts. National and regional IGFs are independently organised but share the same core principles as the global forum: openness, inclusivity, transparency, and a commitment to the multi-stakeholder model. For example, the European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EuroDIG) functions as a regional IGF for Europe, while the Asia-Pacific Regional IGF (APrIGF) and the African IGF serve their respective continents. These national and regional forums often serve as entry points for new participants, especially from civil society and academia, who may not have the resources to attend global meetings.

The Evolution of IGF Themes (2006–2025)

Since its inaugural meeting in 2006, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) has progressively expanded its thematic focus in response to global digital challenges.[6] Early editions (2006–2012) featured a core set of stable themes — access, openness, security, diversity, and critical internet resources — which reflected the foundational concerns of Internet infrastructure, governance, and inclusiveness. Up to 2012,

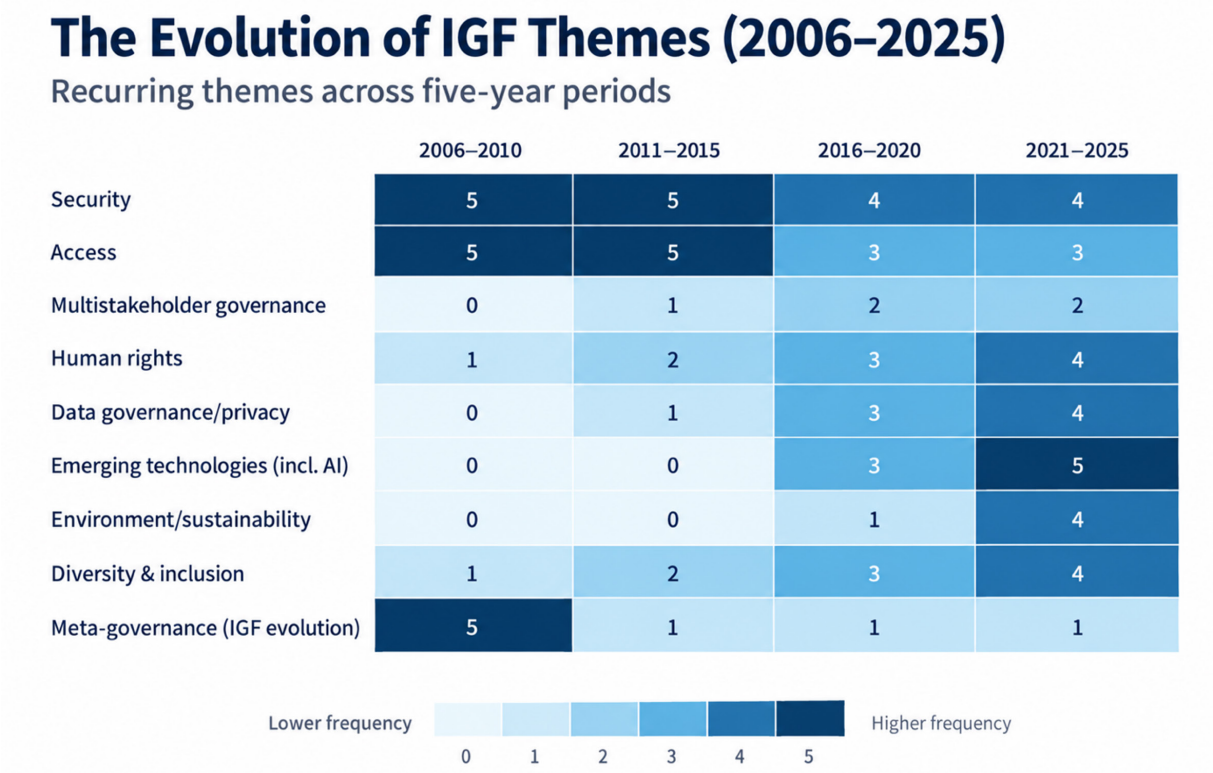


Figure 1: The evolution of IGF themes from 2006-2025, in five-year periods (Source: authors, figure created with ChatGPT, GPT-6 Luna)

this thematic structure remained relatively consistent. From then on, the IGF agenda diversified to reflect a broader spectrum of policy issues, emerging technologies, and rights-based frameworks. Figure 1 helps to show how certain topics changed frequency, while others remained more constant.

Overall, across the full period (2006–2025), access, security, and human rights have remained the most frequently addressed themes:

Access & Inclusion featured consistently from 2006 onward, evolving from basic access (e.g., "Reaching the Next Billion" in 2008) to meaningful connectivity (2019, 2021, 2025);

Security first appeared in 2006 and has remained stable, developing into diverse notions of the term, including cybercrime, cybersecurity, trust, and online safety from 2014 onward;

Human Rights was framed initially under openness and diversity, but became a standalone pillar from 2013 onward, increasingly intertwined with discussions on inclusion, gender, youth, and digital rights.

Interestingly, when analysing every five-year period, we see shifts in emphasis:

2006–2010 was dominated by **infrastructure-focused topics** — access, openness, security, critical internet resources, and IG4D (internet governance for development);

2011–2015 continued infrastructure themes but introduced **more content-focused and rights-based concerns**, such as human rights online, net neutrality, and zero-rating;

2016–2020 marked a significant expansion into **emerging technologies**, data governance, and the digital economy;

2021–2025 expanded to new topics, such as **sustainability, AI governance, trust, resilience, and digital cooperation** — reflecting a matured, multidimensional digital policy agenda.

Some themes have remained largely stable throughout the IGF's history, notably security and access, which have appeared in nearly every edition. Multistakeholder cooperation and governance is another recurring theme, first explicitly highlighted in 2013 and consistently reappearing from 2016 onward. It is often tied to broader discussions on

the IGF's evolution and its role in shaping Internet governance. Meta-governance topics — those reflecting on the future of the IGF itself — were particularly prominent between 2006 and 2012, with recurring references to "The Way Forward," "Taking Stock," and "Future Challenges." These reflections resurfaced in 2014 and 2018 under themes like "The Future of the Internet Ecosystem" and "Evolution of Internet Governance," and again in 2024 with "Improving Digital Governance for the Internet We Want," demonstrating the Forum's ongoing concern with its own legitimacy, adaptability, and long-term relevance.

Emerging technologies became a distinct focus at the IGF starting in 2016, with structured tracks on Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), and blockchain appearing since then. AI was first explicitly mentioned in 2017 and has since become a consistent theme, addressed in multiple editions, often framed within broader discussions on innovation, risk, and responsible governance. Similarly, sustainability and environmental issues entered the IGF agenda in 2016 under the theme of "Sustainable Development," but gained prominence from 2020 onward. Environmental topics were treated as dedicated tracks in 2020 and 2021, and have been increasingly integrated into broader conversations about peace, development, and innovation since 2023. Once peripheral, these themes are now firmly embedded in the IGF's ongoing agenda.

The thematic evolution of the IGF mirrors the increasing complexity of the digital age, where societal concerns have become more deeply intertwined. While foundational issues like access and infrastructure remain relevant, they now coexist alongside critical discussions on rights, regulation, and sustainability. Thus, the agenda has matured to encompass the increasingly intricate intersections between governance, technology, society, and the environment. As the IGF approaches its third decade, this progression reveals both the enduring importance and the expanding scope of global Internet governance discussions.

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The WSIS+20 Review and the Future of the IGF

The IGF was not created as a permanent body in 2005. The Tunis Agenda gave it a limited mandate, meaning that its continued existence depended on periodic renewal by the UN General Assembly. The General Assembly renewed the mandate in 2010 and again in 2015, requesting an intergovernmental process involving all stakeholders to assess implementation of the WSIS outcomes by 2025.[7] This review, 20 years after the Tunis Agenda, known as WSIS+20, therefore became a key moment for deciding the future of the Forum.

The review took place in a governance landscape that had changed considerably since Tunis. The adoption of the Global Digital Compact (GDC) in 2024 led to new mechanisms such as the Global Dialogue on AI Governance, which raised questions about how the WSIS framework, the GDC and the IGF should relate to each other.[8] The negotiations also reopened, or brought back to the forefront, the tensions already present in 2005 between multi-stakeholder and state-centred approaches.

During the 2025 consultations, some governments called for 'enhanced cooperation', a term already found in the Tunis Agenda and historically associated with proposals for stronger intergovernmental oversight of the internet.[9] In the final phase of the negotiations, some states called for an 'IGF Governmental Track' within the IGF, with a mandate to negotiate recommendations. Other stakeholders criticised this, arguing that such a track would undermine the multistakeholder character of the Internet Governance Forum. Others supported the idea, believing it could encourage more dialogue among governments on digital issues.[10] The negotiations proved difficult, requiring multiple drafts, but the outcome document was adopted by consensus on 17 December 2025.[11] Its most significant decision concerned the continuity of the IGF itself, as, after twenty years, it is now a permanent forum of the United Nations.[12] A compromise emerged on the governmental track in paragraph 101, which does not settle the debate but keeps it open; it seeks to preserve the multi-stakeholder model while also calling on governments to take a more active role.[13]

Although the permanent mandate resolves the IGF's long-standing institutional uncertainty, it also raises new questions.

During discussions following the review process, many noted that important questions, such as future funding structures and the Forum's relationship to other UN processes, remain unanswered.[14]

Towards IGF 2026

Twenty years after its creation as an experiment, the IGF now holds a permanent status. The tensions that shaped its origins, between network-centred and state-centred visions of internet governance, have not disappeared, as the WSIS+20 debates showed. Yet, making the forum permanent suggests broad recognition that an open, non-binding space for dialogue among all stakeholders remains valuable, especially as the number of digital governance processes continues to grow.

The 21st IGF, held from 14–18 December 2026 in Nairobi, Kenya, under the overarching theme 'Governing the Internet in the Age of Intelligence: Our Shared Responsibility', is the first annual meeting under this permanent mandate.[15] The choice of theme reflects the thematic trajectory described above. Artificial intelligence, which first appeared on the IGF agenda in 2017, now frames the entire meeting, while the emphasis on 'shared responsibility' echoes the Forum's enduring commitment to multi-stakeholder cooperation.

The preparations for 2026 also show how the IGF is adapting institutionally. The MAG approved four Policy Networks focused on AI, cybersecurity, digital inclusion, and open digital infrastructure, and merged the Best Practice Forums into these Policy Networks. These four priorities closely mirror the themes that have dominated the IGF's history: access and security as its foundational concerns, and AI and digital infrastructure as the newer frontier. In addition, the MAG supported introducing Policy Labs as a pilot at IGF 2026 and discussed possible approaches to a Government Dialogue component, showing that the questions left open by WSIS+20 are already shaping the Forum's design.[16]
IGF 2026 will therefore be an important pilot of what a permanent IGF can become. The challenge in the coming years is to show that the Forum can do more than host dialogue: it can produce outputs that inform decision-making elsewhere, secure stable funding, and remain inclusive as digital governance is increasingly shaped by AI, geopolitical competition, and calls for digital sovereignty. How the Forum responds to these pressures will shape not only its own relevance, but also the future of the multistakeholder model it has come to represent.

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