

BEYOND MULTISTAKEHOLDER TOKENISM: A PROVISIONAL EXAMINATION OF PARTICIPATION IN THE IGF (2006-2020)

By Anri van der Spuy & Pablo Agüera Reneses

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Workshop17
17 Dock Road
V&A Waterfront
Cape Town, South Africa
Phone: +27 21 447 6332
www.researchictafrica.net

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Participation, particularly participation from the developing world, is at the core of the original Internet Governance Forum (IGF) mandate. Strengthening and diversifying participation has thus been a goal of the IGF since its inception. When I started my term as chair of the IGF's multistakeholder advisory group (MAG) in 2020, it struck me that calls to make the IGF more inclusive tended to be quite broad, and open-ended. Nor did they cite any specific evidence or analysis of participation in the IGF since its inception 2006. There also seemed to be a mismatch between these calls and how participation data was reflected on the IGF website. For example, calls of a "more inclusive IGF" would cite developing country or global South participation as being important, but the IGF Secretariat broke participation into regional clusters, some of which, like the Asia Pacific, includes both developed and developing countries.

To help manage expectations and set specific, achievable goals, better analysis of IGF participation data was needed. This study begins to provide such analysis. It also makes important recommendations on how collection of IGF participation data can be strengthened so as to facilitate setting of clear targets to achieve the goal of a more inclusive IGF. I want to thank Research ICT Africa for undertaking this important task, in particular Anri van der Spuy, who led the research. I also want to acknowledge the time and effort of the IGF Secretariat and those IGF supporters who made it possible through providing financial support and by making time available to be interviewed.

Anriette Esterhuysen, IGF MAG chair 2020-21

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic is the first pandemic the world has experienced in a datafied age. It has emphasised the importance of addressing digital inequalities and ensuring that the Internet can proffer equal opportunities to everyone. Internet governance processes that are inclusive and responsive to the needs of the digitally marginalised are critical to achieving this. Yet as the Internet becomes increasingly central to societies and economies around the world, the complexity and nature of related governance challenges we are faced with have also expanded. At the same time, expectations of participation in the Internet's governance have shifted.

Since the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) was founded in 2006, it has emphasised multistakeholder participation in the forum. Yet has the IGF evolved alongside the rapid changes in how the internet works since then? Has it kept up with the expectations of participation from stakeholders and even those excluded from the forum? Is it sufficiently diverse, equitable, meaningful, and inclusive today to effectively deal with the array of issues Internet governance is confronted with?

In an attempt to address some of these questions, this analysis set out to examine the evolution of participation in the IGF – the nature and extent of participation, and barriers to participation. However, the limited data made available to RIA meant that we had to scale down this aim to an analysis of basic questions on participation. These nevertheless show some useful trends.

The data indicate that participation in annual IGFs has increased and become partially more diverse over time. It suggests that the location of an annual IGF does not have a significant impact on overall participation rates, although it does impact the geographic diversity of participation; that civil society participation is greater than the participation of other stakeholder groups; that while government participation has remained stable, there has been some increase in the participation of the private sector and the technical community since 2017; that participation from LDCs remains consistently low; and that there has been a steady increase in the number of women participating in the IGF. It further suggests that mailing lists are not always an effective tool to encourage participation from diverse stakeholders, with the majority of participants being IGF staff.

Given inconsistencies in the data sets Research ICT Africa (RIA) had access to, the analysis is only provisional and more work needs to be done to understand the true extent of diversity and participation. For example, the data available fail to tell us much about participation from under-represented groups and the barriers they might face, about people with disabilities, about

constraints to online participation, about diversity in perspectives within stakeholder groups, about linguistic diversity, or about which government departments are attending annual meetings, and how actively they are participating.

As more nuanced investigations into these and other questions on the basis of better information are necessary before any conclusive findings and proposals can be made, the report concludes with the recommendation that the IGF Secretariat or multistakeholder advisory group (MAG) consider creating a dedicated task force or working group to ensure the IGF consistently and meaningfully gathers data on all IGF activities. The purpose of this would be to better inform efforts to improve diversity, equity and inclusion in the IGF and to improve the IGF's work and outcomes.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

APC	Association for Progressive Communications
BPFs	Best Practice Forums
CENB	Connecting and Enabling the Next Billion
CSTD	Commission on Science and Technology for Development
DCCG	Dynamic Coalition Coordination Group
DCs	Dynamic Coalitions
IGF	Internet Governance Forum
LDCs	Least Developed Countries
NRIs	National and regional IGF initiatives
RIA	Research ICT Africa
UN SG	UN Secretary-General
UNDSS	UN Department of Safety and Security
WSIS	World Summit on the Information Society

1. Introduction

As the world's first pandemic in a datafied age has shown, the Internet has become central to most aspects of many people's lives around the world.¹ But the Internet we are so reliant on today is very different compared to what it was when it was created almost fifty years ago. As the Internet has become increasingly central to societies and economies, more stakeholders have also gained an interest in the ways in which it is governed. Expectations of participation in its governance have thus shifted from the relatively narrow control of the technical community that conceived of it and navigated it into a global network.

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) has similarly evolved since it was launched in 2006 as a “global multistakeholder platform that facilitates the discussion of public policy issues pertaining to the Internet” following heated discussions during the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Its creation came at a time when there was newfound interest in the potential of collective action frameworks to address perceived global problems (e.g., the climate crisis, terrorism, and ‘information society’ governance).²

But much has changed since then. In 2005, only about 18.4% of the world's population were online. Today, an estimated 53.6% of the global population are estimated to be online.³ At the same time, the half of the world that are not connected to the Internet are becoming an important constituency for multilateral organisations, international and national leaders and rights advocates who recognise the significant role access to the Internet can play in exacerbating or reducing inequality between and within countries. All of these users (and those who are excluded) have a stake in the way in which it is governed – at least in theory.

The growing importance of the Internet to many people around the world has led to increasing complexity in the nature of policy problems that ‘Internet governance’ might need to address. Policy platforms purporting to respond to Internet governance dilemmas have also multiplied.⁴ The IGF today is just one of many organisations and processes in the Internet governance arena that prioritises broad participation in its activities by committing to be ‘multistakeholder’.⁵

Given the popularity of the notion of multistakeholder participation in Internet governance, and the number of platforms that aim to adhere to related principles, many have expressed concerns that the notion of multistakeholder participation is at risk of becoming ‘overused’⁶ and devolving into, among

¹ ITU, 2020b.

² Flew, 2020.

³ ITU, 2020a.

⁴ c.f. GCIG, 2016:8; World Bank, 2016:37; Raymond & DeNardis, 2015:609; Wagner, 2014; de la Chapelle, 2011; Mueller, 2010:253.

⁵ Van der Spuy, 2018.

⁶ GCIG, 2016:9.

other things, a smokescreen⁷ or a ‘new ‘ism’⁸. In this context, the breadth and depth of participation in multistakeholder platforms like the IGF is often questioned. For example, some have criticised the unequal nature of representation, especially from civil society participants and least developed countries (LDCs).⁹

These questions are both unsurprising and important. At a time when global discussions about racism and decoloniality are also gaining greater traction (e.g., in the context of movements like Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall), it is timely to ask whether the IGF’s participation is sufficiently diverse, equitable, meaningful, and inclusive – or whether it, like so many other policy arenas, ends up excluding stakeholders who should have a seat at the table. In other words, **does the ‘main global space’ convened by the United Nations for Internet governance and digital policy issues¹⁰ do enough to ensure participation that is sufficiently diverse, meaningful, and inclusive?**

In an attempt to interrogate some of these questions, Research ICT Africa (RIA) was asked to examine how participation in the IGF has evolved since it was created in 2006. This included looking at the nature of the participation in the forum, the extent of this participation, and barriers to participation. This work was launched to assess the current situation (as at 2020) and to make constructive recommendations for improvement. Given that the IGF’s multistakeholder modalities mean that it should be flexible enough to evolve in order to enable more diverse, meaningful and inclusive participation,¹¹ it was hoped that the findings could be used to improve participation in the future.

However, this remit was only partially achievable as a result of the unavailability of comprehensive data. The existing data collected by the IGF Secretariat for purposes of registration was useful, but lacked the level of detail required to make informed inferences (e.g., an inability to deduce reasons for certain trends, or to differentiate between types of private sector stakeholder). Data collection, such as identifying participants according to birth country rather than resident country, was also inconsistent. The data also showed significant discrepancies and gaps for some years, especially when compared to statistics reported in some IGF annual reports.¹² Yet relying on the annual reports was not deemed a viable alternative to using this data, as the ways in which statistics are reported in the reports differ across years (e.g., some summaries reflect the number of participants overall, including online and on-site participants, while others talk about participants who “picked up badges”). Moreover it was not possible to gain access to other datasets held by the UN, despite written requests for access to them.

⁷ Milan & Hintz, 2014.

⁸ Mueller, 2010:264

⁹ Souter, 2017e; Verhulst, 2016; Belli, 2015: 11; Dickinson, 2014:67; Esterhuysen, 2014: 60; Doria, 2013; Calandro, Gillwald & Zingales, 2013:5; Maciel & Affonso, 2011:17; Drake, 2011:69; Mansell & Raboy, 2011:12; Cogburn, 2006:62; Siganda, 2005:155.

¹⁰ UN High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, 2019.

¹¹ World Bank, 2016:296.

¹² See: <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/igf-annual-meetings-proceedings>.

Nevertheless, using available registration data we attempted to as best possible answer the following questions: what the data say about the overall numbers of participations; how many participants attend from diverse stakeholder groups; how many women and men attend from year to year (and how this differs depending on stakeholder group or regional group); how the location of a meeting might impact participation; how many participants from LDCs attend; and how many newcomers and youth participants attend.

To compliment this analysis, the assessment also sought to delve into the nature, frequency, and type of participation or interaction as far as some of the IGF's intersessional activities are concerned. This was achieved by analysing the mailing lists of four activities and assessing each of these activities over at least the previous three years. While this does not necessarily tell a complete story about participation in intersessional activities (as other working methods are also available besides the mailing lists), it does provide an indication of participation trends.

While the assessment provides some interesting insight into the ways in which participation in the IGF has evolved, and at least some indication of the extent to which the IGF has met its mandate, the limitation of data means the findings should be considered provisional.

With this as background, **Section 2** provides an overview of what the IGF's mandate says about participation, and briefly discusses some of the concerns that stakeholders have highlighted with regards to participation in the IGF. **Section 3** examines the data sources available for assessing participation, summarises some significant challenges faced in accessing and analysing this data, along with the key trends observed, and provides recommendations on improving data collection for future assessments. In the final section, we elaborate on recommendations to help support the gathering of more consistent, nuanced, and meaningful data pertaining to participation, including the need for reconciling different databases more regularly. The summary analyses found in these sections can be read in more detail in Annexes I and II.

2. The IGF's mandate and participation

Given the nature of the Internet as a multifaceted medium that does not generally adhere to traditional jurisdictional boundaries and evolves quickly, multistakeholder participation in its governance is often considered inherent or even endemic to this technology. Broad, meaningful participation in the IGF is not only said to inject expertise and enable the reflection of a diversity of needs and viewpoints in its

work, but can also enhance transparency¹³ in governance mechanisms while leading to potentially better outcomes.

The IGF is an outcome of international agreement, born from a series of commitments made at the WSIS, which took place in two phases between 2003 (in Geneva, Switzerland) and 2005 (in Tunis, Tunisia). The *Tunis Agenda for the Information Society*¹⁴ affirmed that ‘all *relevant* stakeholders’ (added emphasis) should be involved in Internet governance decisions (para 35), and it calls for inclusivity and responsiveness in relevant Internet governance approaches (para 62). It also repeatedly emphasises the importance of maximising the participation of developing countries in Internet governance decisions and processes (e.g., para 65), and encourages international organisations to “ensure that all stakeholders, particularly from developing countries, have the opportunity to participate in policy decision-making relating to Internet governance, and to promote and facilitate such participation” (para 52).

Building on these principles for participation, the Tunis Agenda called for the creation of a forum for multistakeholder policy dialogue – the IGF – which would, among other things, “make full use of the expertise of the academic, scientific and technical communities” and would “strengthen and enhance the engagement of stakeholders in existing and/or future Internet governance mechanisms, particularly those from developing countries” (para 72). It also states that the IGF should emphasise the complementarity between all stakeholders involved in this process – governments, business entities, civil society and intergovernmental organisations (para 73).¹⁵

The WSIS working definition of Internet governance, which is still commonly used to demarcate stakeholder groups, is:

...the development and application by governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet.¹⁶

Some have, however, warned that an overly simplistic application of definition can lead to ignoring differences in “power, capacities and resources” among and within different stakeholder communities,¹⁷ while others have pointed out that even within stakeholder groups, people or organisations often have diverse interests, perspectives, and needs, as well as priorities that shape the outcomes of

¹³ Raymond & DeNardis, 2015:573.

¹⁴ WSIS, 2005.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Esterhuysen, 2014:56-7.

multistakeholder processes.¹⁸ Perhaps more importantly, priorities and loyalties also shift and differ depending on the specific issue concerned, the context and even the region.

When the implementation of the WSIS outcomes was assessed in 2015, the IGF's mandate was extended for a further ten years and it was specifically encouraged to ensure the participation of relevant stakeholders from developing countries (para 63). While not directly referring to the IGF, the UN General Assembly argued for the need to:

...promote greater participation and engagement in the Internet governance discussions of Governments, the private sector, civil society, international organizations, the technical and academic communities and all other relevant stakeholders from developing countries, particularly African countries, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States and middle-income countries, as well as countries in situations of conflict, post-conflict countries and countries affected by natural disasters. (para 61).

In the assessment, the General Assembly also called for the implementation of improvements outlined in a 2012 report from the the Working Group on Improvements to the IGF, which was run by the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD). The CSTD report acknowledged that participation in the IGF had increased, but argued that it should be "broadened" at both the annual meeting and in "preparatory process" to involve "new stakeholders, in particular from developing countries and especially LDCs, and persons with disabilities and other underrepresented groups". It also argued that barriers to greater involvement should be addressed, including funding mechanisms for underrepresented communities, better online facilities, translation facilities, and special sessions for government representatives.

Since the CSTD report, the importance of collaborative, multistakeholder participation in Internet governance arrangements has been stressed in multiple documents, declarations and commitments concerned with ICTs or the Internet.^{19,20} At the same time, there has been no shortage of efforts to interrogate the inclusivity of the IGF and its ability to increase participation from communities that are perceived to be under-represented.²¹ (Most of these efforts, however, have not drawn on the data that is said to be available about participation in the IGF and its activities.)

While it is beyond the scope of this report to summarise all of these documents, an overall critique common across most of them is that the IGF is not sufficiently participatory, diverse and/or inclusive enough. But there are positive signs. The latest²² and potentially most influential is a report from the UN

¹⁸ Souter, 2017b; Belli, 2015:5.

¹⁹ e.g., NETmundial, 2014.

²⁰ Souter, 2017c.

²¹ e.g., the IGF Retreat, 2016.

²² As at November 2020, when this report was written.

Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, which among other things discusses perceived strengths and shortcomings of the IGF. While it argues that there is “limited participation of government and business representatives, especially from small and developing countries” it also recognises that participation is not all bad: it notes that the gender balance has improved and argues that the network of national, regional and youth IGFs developed over the past few years have become “incredibly meaningful”.²³

These positive developments aside, there remains a need for more depth, diversity and multidisciplinary at the forum. This was also highlighted by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, who has called for the IGF to become “more than multistakeholder”. Given Guterres’ call, which arguably amounts to a broader conception of participation than the WSIS definition catered for, this report construes a ‘relevant stakeholder’ as anyone or any entity with a legitimate a *bona fide* interest in a particular Internet governance issue at the IGF.²⁴

This notion is essentially performative, meaning that even if the concept of multistakeholder participation may on occasion have become little more than an end in itself, the IGF and its participants “identify with its tale of inclusion, diversity and bottom-up policymaking” and therefore “strive to make it a reality”.²⁵

3. Assessing participation in the IGF’s various activities

3.1 The data

When assessing participation in the IGF, one can draw upon a variety of potential data sources, ranging from the composition and activities of the MAG or national and regional IGF initiatives (NRIs), to participation in annual IGFs and/or in intersessional activities like the dynamic coalitions (DCs), best practice forums (BPFs), or Connecting and Enabling the Next Billion (CENB) (see fig. 1 for a depiction of potential data sources).

²³ UN SG, 2019.

²⁴ Van der Spuy, 2017.

²⁵ Hofmann, 2016:30.

While these sources of data can tell us about participation, they only go so far. This is partly why a separate section of this report is dedicated to recommendations for gathering more useful and nuanced data pertaining to diversity, equality and inclusivity in the future (see section 4 below).

Given our inability to gain access to physical registration data from the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), this investigation was limited in scope, and thus focused on two primary sources of data: a data set provided by the IGF Secretariat pertaining to participation in annual IGF meetings; and a selection of public mailing lists of intersessional activities. These were selected in order to provide insight into a mixture of both annual and intersessional activities and types of events, including diverse themes that might attract different types of stakeholders (e.g., cybersecurity or gender). This framing does not detract

from the importance of the MAG and its activities or of the NRIs and their activities, but because those are both analysed to some extent by various stakeholders already, a decision was taken to rather focus on the annual IGF gathering and certain intersessional activities.

3.2 Annual IGFs

In respect of the first (annual IGFs and participation), the registration forms participants have to complete when attending an annual IGF include requests for information such as name, region, stakeholder group, sex, and age. While much of the information gathered over the past 15 years that the IGF has taken place has remained consistent, there are gaps and incongruencies in certain years, which complicates potential analysis.



Figure 1: Variety of data sources available for understanding participation at the IGF, with examples of questions that can be asked of each.

Amongst these gaps are that the registration form does not go into a level of detail that is needed to develop a more nuanced understanding of participation patterns (e.g., “gender” typically only differentiates “male” and “female”, only adding the category of “other” over the past three years); the ways in which questions have been asked in different registration forms changed, making comparisons difficult if not impossible; different data sets are not reconciled, despite significant discrepancies between what each data set implies about participation; identifying participants according to birth country rather than resident country was inconsistent; the age of participants is only captured for some of the years, meaning that youth participation cannot be properly assessed; and, similarly, LDC data is not available for a number of years.

The data also does not capture *how* people attend annual meetings. For example, the data provides limited insights into how many registered ‘participants’ *participate* in sessions at the annual IGF, and how many attend the IGF without attending sessions (e.g., to host bilateral meetings, for networking, or for lobbying). (A good example of this sort of analysis is provided by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), which assessed gender diversity in workshops between 2012 and 2015).²⁶

Overall, the most significant challenge in interpreting this annual registration data was the inconsistencies across available data sets. However a discussion of this – along with our attempts to overcome these challenges – is beyond the scope of this report.

The data are nevertheless useful for discerning broad trends relating to physical participation. The trends observed – which are discussed at greater length in Annex I – include:

- overall, participation has steadily increased in the IGF’s lifetime (from 2006 to 2019);
- participation has become more diverse over time, but is not yet very diverse;
- the location of an annual IGF does not have a significant impact on overall participation rates, although it does impact the geographic diversity of participation;
- civil society participation in the meetings is more substantial than that of other stakeholder groups; government participation has remained quite stable; while the participation of both the private sector and the technical community started to increase from 2017 (the data does not provide insight into how diverse participation is within each of these stakeholder categories);
- over the past four years (since 2015), participation from LDCs has remained more or less consistent and low (approximately 5% of all participants were from LDCs); and
- the number of women participants in the IGF has steadily increased (one data set shows that only 30% of participants were female in 2006, while in 2019 the male-female split was 56% to 42%).

²⁶ See: <https://www.genderit.org/tags/gender-report-card>.

3.3 Intersessional activities²⁷

Besides the annual IGF, participation in the various processes that lead to the IGF (i.e., the activities that take place between the annual IGF meetings) is also important when trying to understand how inclusive and diverse the IGF is. This includes not only the activities and composition of the MAG²⁸ – including its preparatory meetings and the open forums that typically take place alongside it – but the IGF’s various intersessional activities, such as the DCs, BPFs, and CENB.

The methodological fluidity that has always characterised intersessional activities makes it tricky to analyse participation in them in any consistent way (although such flexibility is sometimes regarded as one of the strengths of these initiatives). While activities adopt different working approaches, some holding frequent fortnightly meetings and others meeting once a quarter, participant attendance has also only been registered for some years and activities. This means that data are not consistently gathered on participation, and the data that are gathered does not reveal more interesting trends (e.g., on who attends the virtual meetings, who contributes their time and why, whether participants are sponsored or paid to contribute their time, etc.).

Other potential measures of participation could be participant involvement in data gathering tools used by some of these activities (e.g., filling in surveys or sending in reports), as well as the nature and extent of feedback/input received on draft output documents (e.g., one could assess who provides inputs and comments, and to what extent do they do so). This, however, would require a detailed content analysis exercise which is beyond this report’s scope.

Given these challenges, this analysis focuses on the mailing lists of four intersessional activities to derive an indication of stakeholder participation in these activities. Every intersessional activity and working track within the IGF has a public mailing list in which participants can discuss relevant issues on specific topics as well as deal with administrative matters, such as scheduling meetings or determining topics for work. Mailing lists are one of the main and likely most popular and accessible channels for participation in the IGF’s intersessional work (although it is not the only one). Of course, participation on mailing lists is not a strong proxy for participation in intersessional activities per se: people might prefer to use alternative communication methods (e.g., more live online meetings). But given the lack of other consistent data sources, this method of participation was selected to at least obtain an indication of participation in intersessional activities.

²⁷ This section of the analysis was conducted by RIA fellow, Pablo Reneses Agüera.

²⁸ Given that the activities and composition of the MAG are determined to some extent at least by UN/DESA, this analysis focuses on intersessional activities.

The archives of these mailing lists are open-access, meaning that it is relatively simple to ascertain how many people subscribe to diverse channels. Determining to what extent subscription to a mailing list results in ‘active’ versus ‘passive’ participation (e.g., someone who is primarily observing the list, but does not participate actively by sending emails to it and engaging with other participants) requires a value judgment and is thus complicated. The remainder of this section nevertheless provides a best effort evaluation of the *type* and *frequency* of participation on some of the intersessional activities’ mailing lists, without any assessment of the content of the messages.

As for sampling, four of the most ‘historical’ mailing lists (as provided by the IGF Secretariat), were selected, namely the mailing lists of the:

- Dynamic Coalition Coordination Group (DCCG) (active April 2015 to present), with 194 participants on the list when the analysis was done. The Group holds monthly meetings where all DCs are invited to attend and share updates. As per its page on the IGF website,²⁹ the DCCG “also communicates regularly via its mailing list”;
- Intersessional Work and CENB (active December 2014 to October 2018), with 348 participants on the list. While still active, the list was used to communicate about the four phases/years of CENB work and intersessional activities overall;³⁰
- BPF on Gender and Access (active June 2016 to present), with 279 participants on the list when the analysis was conducted. In its fifth year of work when the analysis was done, the BPF investigates various challenges pertaining to women’s meaningful Internet access and use;³¹ and
- BPF on Cybersecurity (active May 2018 to present), with 378 participants on the list. The BPF started in 2016, but the list analysed started in 2018. The BPF is investigating best practices in relation to international cybersecurity initiatives.³²

To make the analysis more manageable, the focus was on each activity over the past three years, with the exception of the Intersessional Work and CENB list, which was closed in 2018 and had significant gaps in activity throughout, and was thus included in its entirety (i.e., from December 2014 to October 2018). It is important to note that the data available from the archives only includes people who have sent at least one email within the recorded timeframes, as is discussed in more detail, along with the findings, in Annex II.

In summary, the analysis found:

²⁹ See: <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/dc-coordination-activities>.

³⁰ See: <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/igf-policy-options-for-connecting-and-enabling-the-next-billions>.

³¹ See: <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/bpf-gender-and-access>.

³² See: <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/bpf-cybersecurity>.

- an overall, decreasing trend in the number of emails exchanged on select intersessional mailing lists;
- mailing list activity tends to increase closer to the date of an annual IGF meeting;
- a considerable amount of the messages analysed were sent by IGF staff (46.55%), compared to 53.45% sent by ‘external’ participants (i.e., non-staff); and
- most subscribers to the lists are either passive subscribers or are barely active.

The results from this part of the analysis suggest that most of the activity on the intersessional mailing lists is driven by a small number of users, mostly from within the IGF Secretariat/staff.

As mentioned above, the mailing lists are only one of the channels for participation in IGF’s intersessional activities. However, these findings are indicative of the levels of inclusion and diversity of participation in the processes that lead to the annual IGF. Going forward we recommend that consistent and uniform efforts be made to collect data pertaining to the nature, level, and extent of participation in intersessional activities

4. Provisional recommendations

Just as the Internet has evolved over the past thirty years, expectations of and participation in its governance have also shifted significantly. At the beginning of this report, the question of whether participation in the IGF, as the main global space convened by the UN for Internet governance, is sufficiently diverse, meaningful, and inclusive was asked.

Unfortunately, with the data available, there is no definitive answer to this question and only a provisional indication of certain trends is offered. While this might indicate increasing diversity in some regards (e.g., in terms of male/female participation and the participation from some developing countries), there are more questions than answers on the critical issues of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Some of the shortcomings with existing data (and ways in which data are gathered) have been detailed in this report. More needs to be done to enable us to gain a deeper understanding of issues pertaining to meaningful participation that improves outcomes. Remaining questions include the need to address:

- how active (or meaningful) as opposed to passive participation is measured
- how the themes that are used each year impact participation
- whether the usual stakeholder categories (derived from the Tunis Agenda) are sufficiently nuanced and still relevant today
- how to better assess diversity *within* stakeholder groups
- how diversity in perspectives within stakeholder groups or across them is assessed
- how interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary participation is promoted

- whether notions of diversity, equality, and inclusivity (or exclusion) are reflected in the term ‘participation’.

There is, for example, little assessment of the participation of under-represented groups and the barriers they might face, about people with disabilities, about online participation, about linguistic diversity, or about which government departments have attended. Another critical issue which remains unaddressed is how the IGF facilitates the importance of differences of perspective, including from people with different disciplinary backgrounds to the Internet and its governance (i.e., non-insiders such as development and environment specialists, trade unionists, or religious groups); people with different views about the issues to those which are dominant within the IGF; and people representing places where different perceptions of the Internet are widespread (e.g., China, Russia, or Iran).

Given this, and to better understand participation in the annual IGF, the IGF Secretariat or MAG could consider implementing the following recommendations:

- after each annual IGF gathering, the various registration data sets (e.g., IGF Secretariat data pertaining to pre-event registration and onsite, physical registration data hosted by the UNDSS) should be **audited**, consolidated, and/or reconciled in a transparent and methodologically rigorous manner (ideally by the IGF Secretariat);
- as far as is reasonably possible (subject to general data protection requirements), anonymised registration data sets should be stored in **data trusts** or similar arrangements should be made to ensure data openness and accessibility for researchers to consistently and transparently analyse participation;
- the annual IGF registration forms, workshop application forms, and other **relevant forms need to be revised** in order to gather more nuanced, detailed and useful data on participation (e.g., rather than merely asking about ‘gender’, the form should ask about ‘gender identity’ and provide options that extend beyond the current categories of ‘male’, ‘female’ and ‘other’ to whether someone identifies as ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘nonbinary’, ‘third gender’, ‘prefer not to identify’, ‘not sure’, ‘prefer to self-identify’); and
- once the forms have been revised, for comparative purposes, they should remain consistent unless there are strong grounds for changing questions.

In summary, more and better data are needed to understand and improve participation in the IGF. To be able to do so, the IGF Secretariat or IGF MAG should also **consider launching a dedicated working group (or BPF, for example) for promoting and assessing progress towards more diverse, equitable and inclusive participation in the IGF.**

Such a group could:

- map out the existing forms of data pertaining to all of the IGF's activities (e.g., the MAG, intersessional activities, and the annual gatherings);
- assess how such data are gathered and stored, and whether these arrangements meet the needs and requirements of data protection and justice demands;
- learn from other similar fora and how they address issues pertaining to participation, and what improvements could be made to gathering, storing, sharing (if appropriate) and analysing data on participation; and
- consider the potential usefulness of investing in and adopting select data management systems, email marketing platforms, social media monitoring platforms and website analytics to better analyse trends in participation.

This proposed group's overall purpose would be to ensure more consistency in gathering and safely storing data about participation in various IGF activities, including the annual meeting and intersessional activities, and the extent of participation in various processes or in response to public consultation processes. Without more and better data to thoroughly understand the situation, it is difficult if not impossible to know how to promote and work towards more meaningful participation in the IGF.

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Annex I

Participation in annual IGF: provisional data analysis

The data available illustrate a general upward trend in participation at annual IGF meetings, with the 2019 gathering having nearly 3700 participants (see fig. 2 below), while the average number of participants across the years is between approximately 1700 and 2000 (depending on the data set consulted). In figure 2, a general upward trend in the number of overall participants is visible, from just over 1600 participants in 2006 to almost 3700 in 2019 (the same upwards trend is present for both data sets³³). Since the IGF was created, therefore, overall participation in its annual gatherings has steadily increased (see the approximate trendlines in fig. 2).

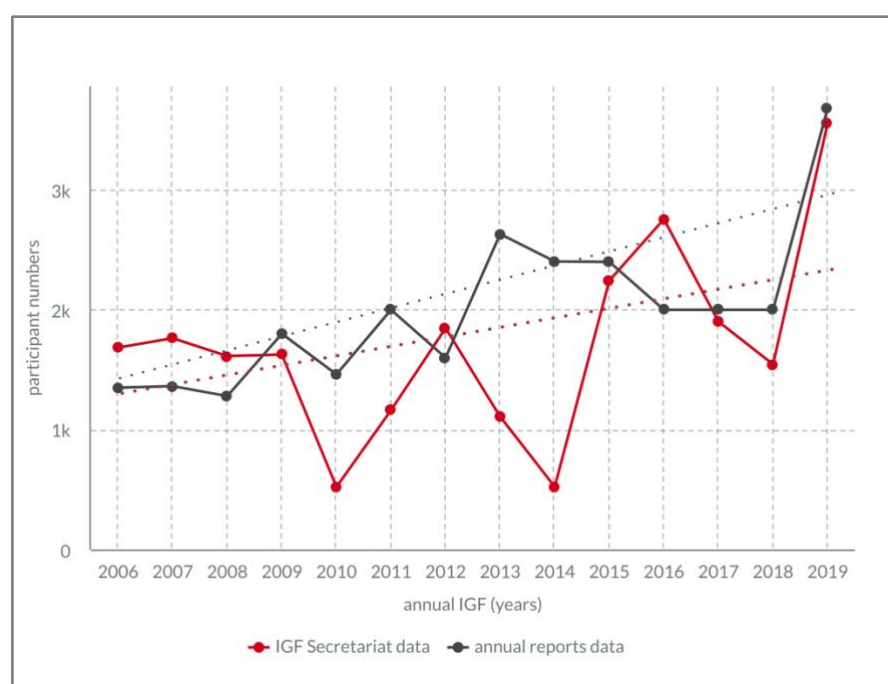


Figure 2: overall participation for two datasets, with trendlines (2006-2019).

Source: IGF Secretariat.

Some geopolitical and other significant events and their potential implications on attendance are important to note when trying to understand dips in participation. The 2008 IGF, which took place in Hyderabad (India), for example, occurred very shortly after three terrorist attacks in Mumbai, and many participants were warned by foreign offices or insurance providers not to travel to India. Nevertheless, participation at the 2008 IGF was not significantly lower than the preceding years. In June 2013, Edward Snowden released data on mass surveillance by countries, resulting in widespread critiques of the Internet's governance. Istanbul's annual IGF (which took place after Snowden's revelations) had

³³ The data set we were provided with by the IGF Secretariat (depicted by the red line in Figure x, and the data contained in separate annual reports of IGF meetings (available on the IGF's website and depicted by the grey line in Figure x).

significantly fewer registrations as per the data provided (pre-registration), although not significantly less according to the annual reports.

As mentioned, significant differences exist between data sets provided for the research by the IGF Secretariat, and those reported in the annual reports published after each annual IGF. In figure 2 the red line depicts data provided for analysis by the IGF Secretariat (which relate to heterogeneous registration data sources collected by the IGF) and the grey line depicts data reported in annual reports and extracted for our analysis. Of particular concern are years 2010 and 2014 in the data set obtained from the IGF Secretariat, as they seem disproportionately low, especially when compared to data from the annual reports.

a) Regional diversity

The IGF data make use of regional groupings common to UN methodologies, with the addition of “intergovernmental organizations” as a separate category. It thus differentiates between participants from the:

- African Group (AFG);
- Asia-Pacific Group (APG);
- Eastern European Group (EEG);
- Latin American and Caribbean Group (GRULAC);
- Western European and Others Group (WEOG); and
- people from intergovernmental organisations.³⁴

In the past, some have speculated that host locations that are more difficult to reach for most participants attract lower participation across the board. But the data available indicate that the location of an annual IGF has not had a significant impact on overall participation rates. Location does, however, affect the *diversity* of participation. Host countries tend to attract more attendees from their regions, as could arguably be expected due to savings in time and travel costs (see fig. 3 below). For example:

- in 2007, 2015, and 2016, when the IGF was hosted in Brazil and Mexico respectively, participation from GRULAC was proportionally much higher than participation from other regions;
- APG participation was relatively higher when the IGF was hosted in Bali and Hyderabad;
- AFG participation was proportionally higher when the IGF was hosted in Nairobi or Sharm El-Sheikh;

³⁴ In the following analysis, IOs have been omitted from the analysis.

- WEOG participation was much higher from 2017 to 2019 when the IGF was hosted in Western Europe.

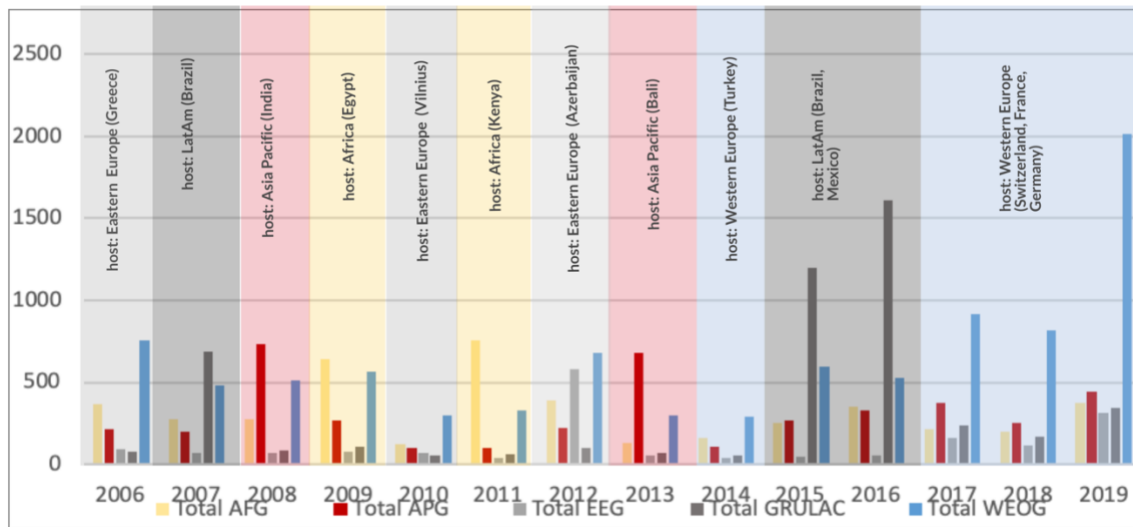


Figure 3: Regional diversity in participation (2006-2019).
Source: IGF Secretariat.

Given these trends, one might therefore predict that more stakeholders from the EEG are likely to attend in 2021, when the IGF is scheduled to be hosted in Poland (as was the case in 2012, when the IGF was in Azerbaijan), depending on the COVID-19 pandemic.

b) LDCs

Given that the IGF’s mandate to ensure the participation of developing countries, including least developed countries (LDCs),³⁵ we also investigated how the participation of LDCs has changed with time. In 2009, the IGF attracted the highest number of participants from LDCs (179 participants, or 8% of total attendance) but the 2014 gathering seemed to host the highest *proportion* of LDC participants (83 participants, or 13% of all participants).

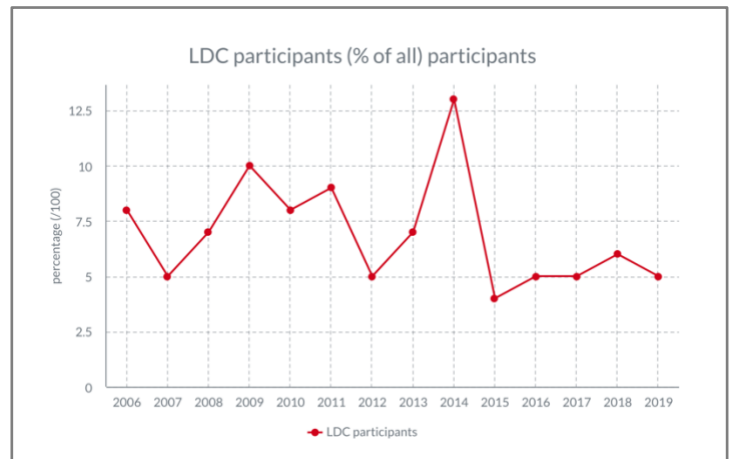


Figure 4: LDC participation (as percentage of total participation) (2006-2019). Source: IGF Secretariat.

While this suggests there are more factors involved in LDC attendance than purely regional considerations, the 2014 data as far as LDC participation is concerned need to be checked and compared to other sources before any definitive conclusions can

³⁵ Using the UN definition of LDCs: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category.html>.

be made. Over the past four years (since 2015), participation from LDCs has remained more or less consistent, i.e., approximately 5% LDC participation per year (see fig. 4 above).

c) Stakeholder diversity

Stakeholder diversity is unpredictable across the years, partly because many people might have more than one stakeholder identity, or might move from one stakeholder group to another. The analysis is further complicated because data were not gathered consistently over the years (e.g., in 2006, data were not gathered on the number of civil society or technical community participants), and only differentiate between civil society, government, intergovernmental organisations, private sector, the technical community, and press/media. As mentioned, a more nuanced understanding of important issues pertaining to diversity, participation, and inclusion cannot be gleaned from the existing data.

In general, the data that are available indicate that participants from civil society are the best represented since the IGF started, apart from in 2011, when participation from the private sector and technical community spiked to levels not matched in the following years. Figure 5 below shows overall trends in stakeholder participation, while figure 6 below shows the average stakeholder participation using a pie chart (for years with data available). It is important to note that while private sector stakeholder participation peaked at 30% in 2011 and seemed to decline from 2011 to 2016, it started picking up again in 2017.

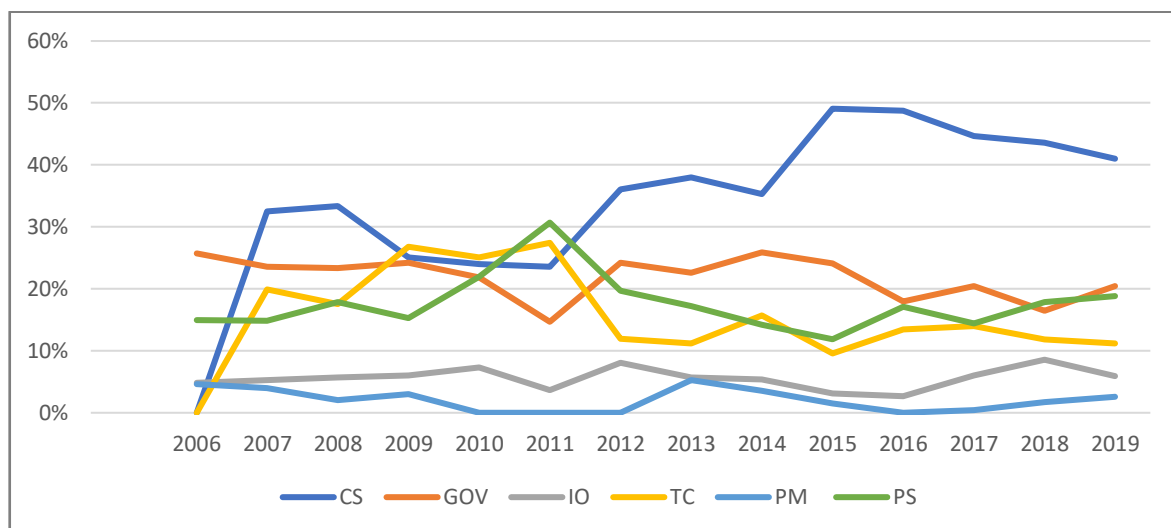


Figure 5: overall trends in stakeholder participation (2006-2019).

Source: IGF Secretariat.

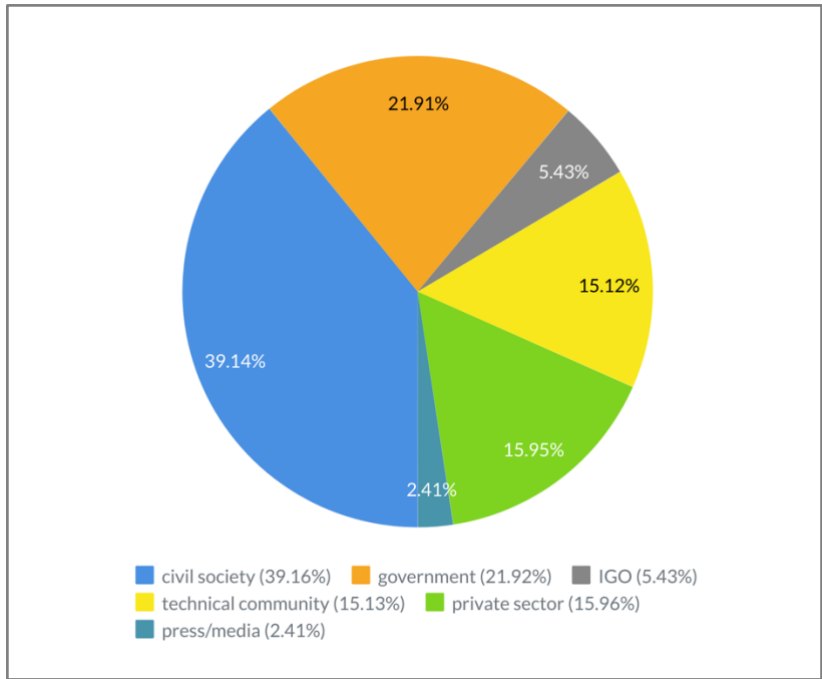


Figure 6: average stakeholder participation (from 2006-2019).

Source: IGF Secretariat.

d) Male/female participation

One area of general improvement in terms of inclusivity is gender. Although there is still scope for improvement (including in methodology), the number of women participants has steadily increased, especially since 2016 (see fig. 7). While in 2006, only 30% of participants were female and 70% male, in 2019 the male-female split was 56%-42%. It is important to note, however, that the data available only differentiate between male and female gender dimensions, and do not provide an indication of other genders (although for some years, a category “other” was included, which we had to discount for comparisons).

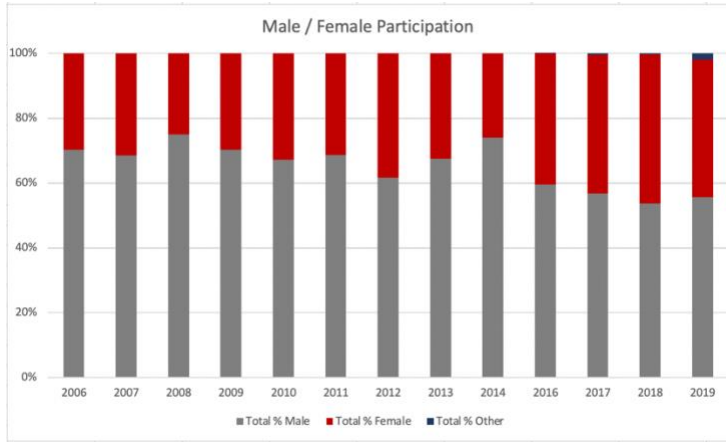


Figure 7: Male/female participation in the IGF (2006-2019).

Source: IGF Secretariat.

When the 'gender' of participants is furthermore broken down into distinct stakeholder groups, more male participants tended to attend from all stakeholder groups at all IGF meetings, with only some notable shifts in 2018, when the attendance gap between male and female participation amongst especially government and private sector stakeholders decreased. As far as the civil society stakeholder group is concerned, gaps between male and female participation started diminishing in 2015, with more female than male participants in 2018 and 2019 (see figures 8, 9 and 10 below).

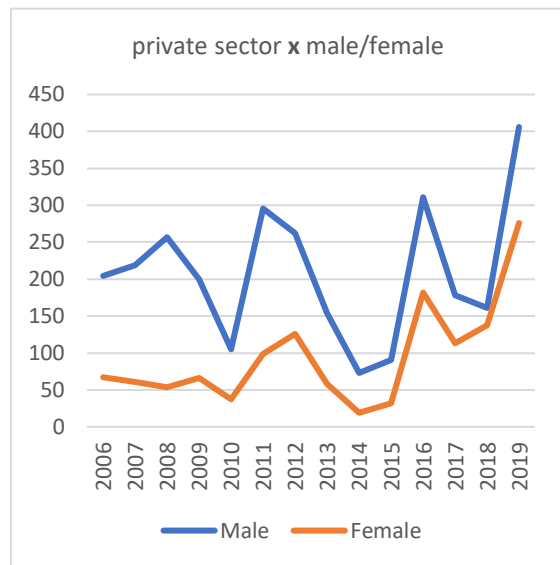


Figure 8: male/female participation from the private sector (2006-2019). Source: IGF Secretariat.

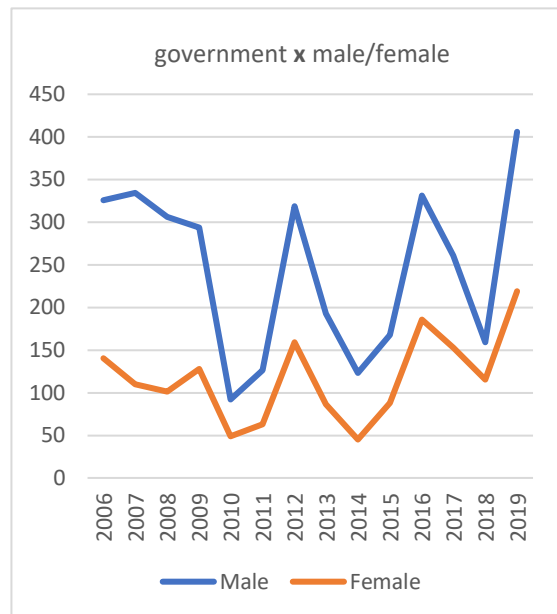
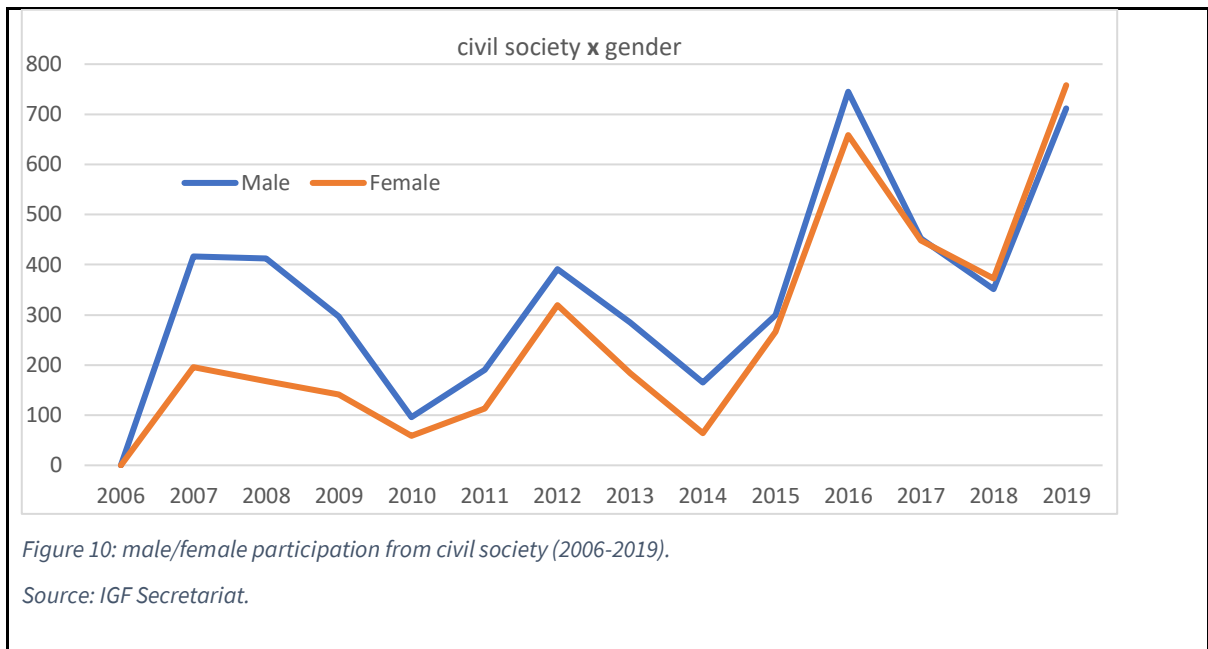
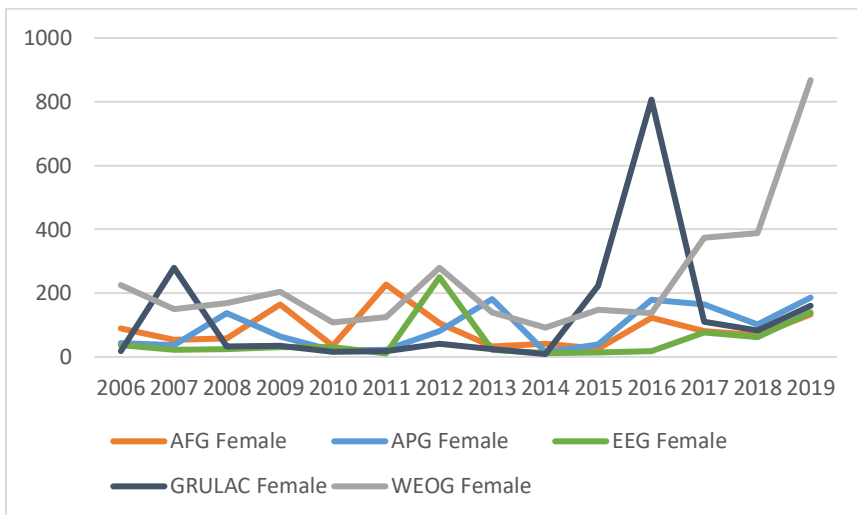


Figure 9: male/female participation from government (2006-2019). Source: IGF Secretariat.



As far as male/female participation from different regions is concerned, the attendance data are inconsistent. Until 2013, WEOG had a higher number of ‘females’ attending the IGF than other regions, with the exception of 2007 (when GRULAC female participation spiked) and 2011 (when AFG female participation increased) (see fig. 11 below). This, however, became a less consistent trend from 2013. The increase of female attendees from GRULAC countries in 2016 likely reflects the overall increase in attendance from these regions more generally in the respective years.



e) Newcomers

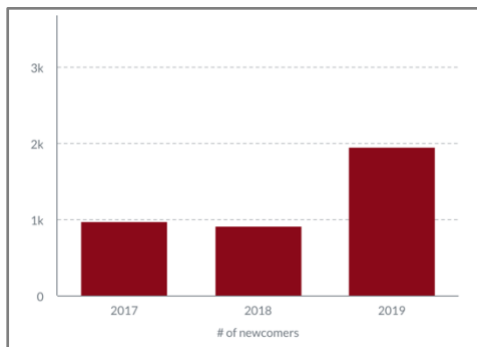


Figure 12: Newcomers (2017-2019).

Source: IGF Secretariat.

While the number of newcomers has only been tracked in the datasets we have since 2017, the general increase in attendance figures naturally implies that more newcomers attend the IGF every year. In the data that have been collected on newcomers, a significant increase is visible in 2019, when there were over 1900 new participants (compared to 973 newcomers in 2017 and 912 in 2018) (see

fig. 12).

Breaking these data down further could be helpful to identify areas of progress in terms of diversity in IGF attendance, and areas that need to be addressed. For example, despite a need for ensuring more participation from LDCs, the data indicate that LDC participants make up relatively few of the newcomers yearly. This could be related to the fact that newcomer attendance is related to the region of the host country, and in the past three years the IGF has been hosted in Europe.

f) Youth and young people

Youth participation data indicate generally consistent (slowly increasing) levels of youth participation up to 2019, when there was a significant increase in youth participation from WEOG (when the IGF was hosted in Berlin). Changes in youth participation levels seem to reflect patterns of regional diversity, with the location of the host country commonly leading to increased youth attendance from the same region (see fig. 13). For example, the increase in youth participants from GRULAC in 2016 is explained by the IGF being held in Mexico.

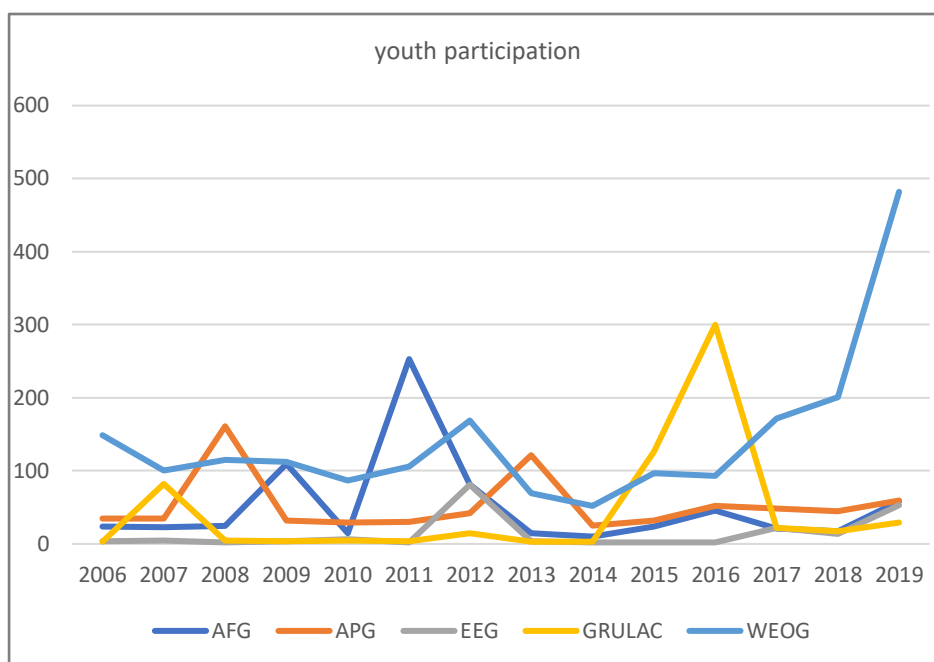


Figure 13: youth participation (2006-2019). Source: IGF Secretariat.

More detailed age data – differentiating between those participants who classify, according to the UN’s definition, as “youth” (24 years old and younger) or “children” (under 18 years of age) – have only been collected from 2019. In that year, 244 youth participants were registered, 95 of whom were younger than 18 years of age.

ANNEX II

Participation in intersessional activities: provisional analysis

Note: this section of the work was conducted by RIA fellow, Pablo Reneses Agüera.

The analysis below assesses when participation occurs, who sends messages (differentiating between IGF staff and ‘external’ participants), and how frequently messages are exchanged (differentiating between different levels of active and passive participation).

a) When are messages exchanged?

Within the IGF yearly cycle (taken to be from December to November, i.e. more or less from after one IGF finishes, to the next year’s IGF), there is a frequent increase in participation in quarters 3 and 4, which corresponds to the months that are closer to the annual IGF meeting. Overall, mailing list activity therefore tends to increase closer to the date of the annual IGF meeting.

The analysis (see fig. 14 below) also suggests a decreasing trend in active participation over time in terms of the number of emails sent on all of the mailing lists assessed. In terms of the overall level of emails sent and received on each of the lists:

- the Intersessional Work and CENB list exchanged 809 emails between December 2014 and October 2018;
- the DCCG exchanged 705 emails over the three years recorded;
- the BPF Gender exchanged 422 emails over the three years recorded; and
- the BPF Cybersecurity list exchanged 360 emails since its inception in 2017 (the lowest email activity of the four activities assessed).

The different levels of activity, as measured by the number of emails exchanged, do not coincide with the number of subscribers. The BPF Cybersecurity list, which has the most subscribers (378), is the one with the lowest number of emails exchanged in our dataset – although this might be because the list was only created in 2017. In contrast, the smaller list in terms of subscribers, DCCG, exchanged substantially more messages (705) in the same timeframe (see fig. 14).

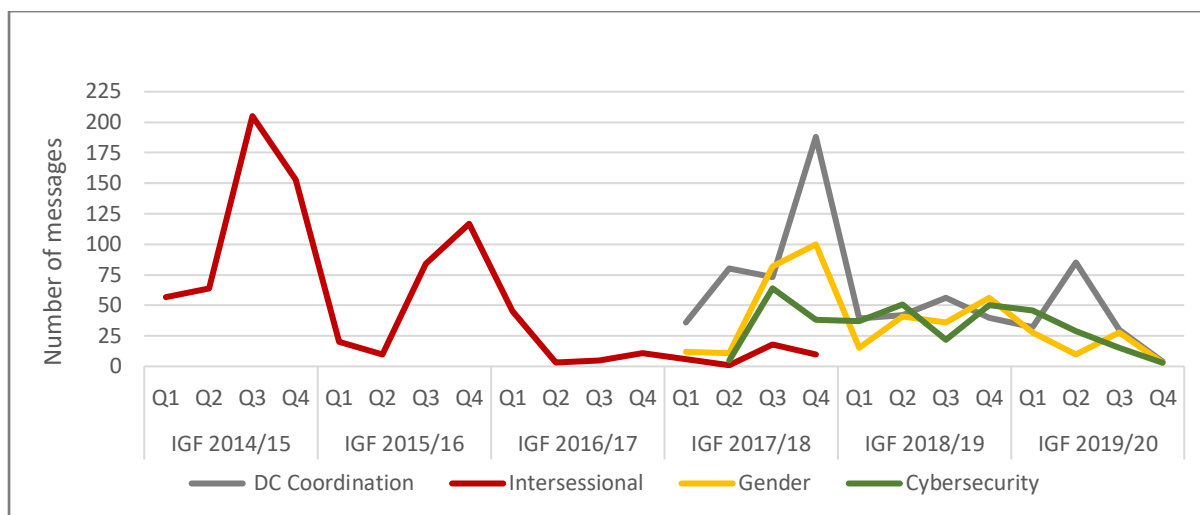


Figure 14: Number of emails sent on select intersessional mailing lists - data timeline.

b) Who participates?

The question of who participates on the mailing lists and how actively (or frequently) is interesting from a participation point of view. The analysis of sender identities were kept simple for various practical and privacy reasons. The analysis also only differentiated between ‘external participants’ and people who had previously worked for or are currently working at IGF (referred to as ‘IGF staff’).³⁶ Differentiating these participants is important given that one of the responsibilities of IGF staff is often to manage the mailing lists of these activities, and to help drive the process by sending updates and meeting details.

It was found that a significant proportion (46.55%) of the messages sent on the mailing lists analysed came from IGF staff, while 53.44% of emails sent overall came from external participants (i.e., not IGF staff). External participation was the highest in the BPF on cybersecurity (63.3%), and the lowest in the DC Coordination (45.2%) (see fig. 15, where ‘IGF’ relates to IGF staff and ‘external’ relates to messages exchanged by individuals who are not IGF staff).

³⁶ People who work for or who had worked for the IGF (described as ‘IGF staff’) are construed as full-or part-time staff members, fellows or interns, or consultants and contractors, and categorised separately from ‘ordinary’ members who were not being (directly) remunerated for participation on the list. While some consultants and contractors that used to be contracted (but are no longer) remain active on these lists, it was not possible to draw a finer distinction between *when* people worked for the IGF (and whether such date correlates to an email sent or not) because up-to-date staff lists from the IGF Secretariat were not available. (While a list of staff is available on the IGF website, it is outdated and inaccurate in parts.)

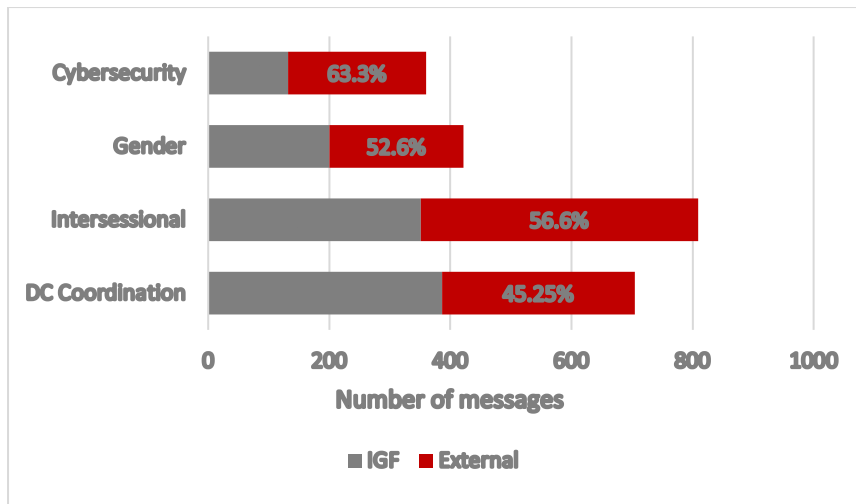


Figure 15: IGF staff versus 'external' messages sent in the time period analysed.

c) How frequently are messages exchanged?

Another relevant consideration is the frequency of participation – i.e., to what extent people actively participate on the lists. This was assessed by counting the number of messages sent by each person per year (fig. 16 below), including both staff and external participants. For each year, people in the dataset were grouped into five categories of participation:

- 'passive' (0 messages sent in that year);
- 'somewhat active' (1 to 5 messages/year);
- 'active' (6 to 20 messages/year);
- 'very active' (21 to 50 messages/year); and
- 'extremely active' (more than 50 messages/year).

The analysis found that a large proportion of subscribers to the four intersessional activities do not even send one message per year (i.e., they are passive subscribers). However, the percentage of these passive users varies significantly across different years and activities (see fig. 16). It was found that most people on these mailing lists exchange five or less emails per year. On average, 38.7% of people in the dataset (overall) are 'somewhat passive' users (i.e., they sent 1 to 5 messages a year). In contrast, the number of active users ranges from 13.51% to 1.24%. Only 16 people in the overall dataset participated more than 20 times in a given year. There were only three cases of 'extremely active users' (more than 50 messages a year) and 13 cases of participants that were 'very active' (21 to 50 messages). In accordance with the previous findings, we found that 11 of these two categories ('extremely active' and 'very active') were 'IGF staff'. The remaining four people work for or are affiliated to organisations like the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the Internet Society, ICANN, and Microsoft. However, they have also been actively involved in IGF as either advisors or group coordinators.

While the Intersessional Work and CENB list presents the lowest levels of participation, fig. 16 illustrates how this was the result of a progressive decline over the years. (The lack of activity in 2017/2018 might also be linked to it being the last year of operation of the list.)

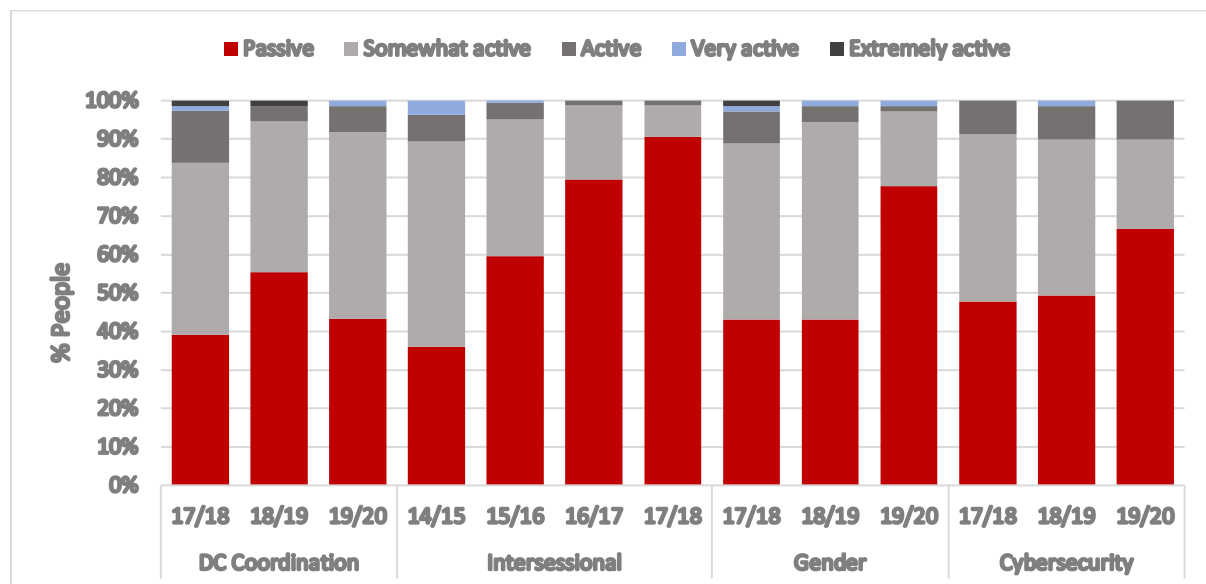


Figure 16: Frequency of participation per year.

A more accurate way of calculating the total number of passive users would be to compare the number of emails sent over the last year to the current number of subscribers to the mailing list. This method would include those subscribers who have never sent a message, and thus were missing from our dataset. According to this calculation (see fig. 17):

- the DCCG list has the smallest percentage of passive users (78.35%);
- BPF Cybersecurity has 93.91% passive users;
- the BPF Gender has 94.26% passive users; and
- the Intersessional Work and CENB list has 95.68% passive users.

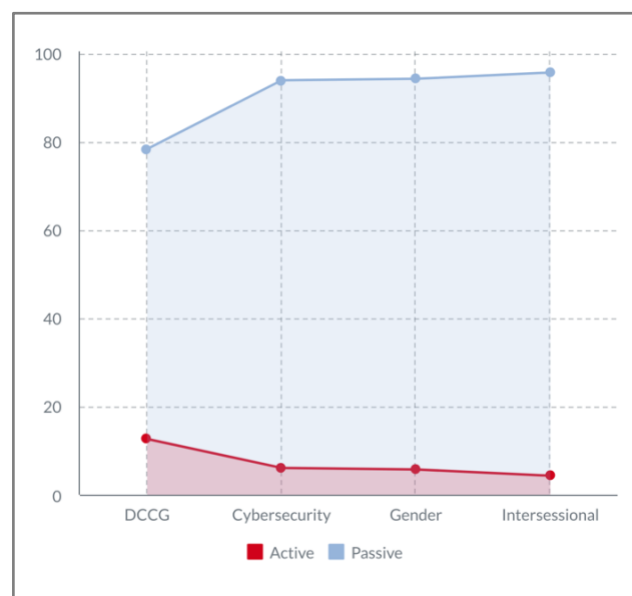


Figure 17: Active and passive participation.

The results from this part of the analysis suggest that most of the activity in the intersessional mailing lists is driven by a small number of users, mostly from within the IGF. As discussed above, the mailing lists are only one of the channels for participation in IGF's intersessional activities. However, these

findings can be indicative of the levels of inclusion and diversity of participation in the processes that lead to the annual IGF.