Internet Governance

An Internet Society Public Policy Brief

November 2025

Executive Summary

Realizing the vision of an Internet for everyone also hinges on how the Internet is governed. The Internet is developed, operated, managed, and governed openly and collaboratively by multiple stakeholders for the benefit of the public. This open and collaborative model of governance is uniquely suited to the challenges of the Internet. Without this global cooperation between many stakeholders, in many countries, from many cultures, we would not have the global digital society we have today. This policy brief explores the key considerations, challenges, and provides guiding principles of multistakeholder Internet governance of openness, inclusiveness, transparency, collaboration, shared responsibility, accountability, consensus-driven and pragmatic evidence-based approaches.

Introduction

The global Internet consists of tens of thousands of interconnected networks run by service providers, individual companies, universities, and governments. No single actor manages or controls the Internet. However, with Internet services and applications being foundational to everyday life around the world, questions about how best to "govern" the Internet surfaced at national, regional, and international levels.

This issue was addressed as part of the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and in 2005 a working definition for Internet governance was adopted.

> "... 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."

This definition recognizes the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder group and emphasizes the importance of cooperation when seeking solutions for the benefit of Internet growth and development. This collaborative governance approach is known as the multistakeholder model.

Key Considerations

The Multistakeholder Model

The "multistakeholder model" is a short way of saying that the Internet is developed, operated, managed, and governed openly and collaboratively by multiple stakeholders for the benefit of the public. This open, decentralized, and collaborative model of governance is uniquely suited to the challenges of the Internet, an environment where:

- Decisions impact a wide and distributed range of people and interests,
- There are overlapping rights and responsibilities across sectors and borders,
- There are interdependence and shared resources,
- Different forms of expertise are needed, and
- Legitimacy and acceptance of decisions directly impact implementation.

The multistakeholder model is more inclusive than other decision-making models because it ensures that all interested parties can be involved and decisions are usually made by consensus. It is also designed to be applied in a distributed and decentralized manner, adaptable for different communities and cultures. Those features also make it the most effective for governing a shared public resource that is managed and operated by thousands of different entities, including individuals, governments, businesses, non-profits and communities from across the world.

Because anyone can participate in Internet governance, decisions about how the Internet operates and evolves have benefited from the expertise of a wide range of disciplines. This approach is also what provides a more robust, more resilient, and more scalable Internet that drives innovation and economic growth.

The Internet Ecosystem

The Internet's success is due to its unique model: shared global ownership, open standards development, bottom-up and freely accessible processes for technology and policy development.

The Internet ecosystem comprises the organizations and communities that have emerged and evolved to guide the operation and development of the technologies and infrastructure that comprise the global Internet. These organizations share common values and a commitment to the open development of the Internet. They include:

- Technical standards bodies such as the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), and the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE)
- Organizations that manage resources for global naming and addressing capabilities such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the Internet Assigned

Numbers Authority (IANA), Regional Internet Registries (RIRs), and Domain Name Registries and Registrars.
- Organizations and communities that provide network infrastructure services including network operators, Domain Name Service (DNS) providers, content delivery network (CDN) providers, and Internet Exchange Points (IXPs).
- Governments, organizations, communities and individuals involved in Internet policy development and capacity building, providing government, business, civil society, academia, and technical expertise.
- Individuals, communities and organizations that use the Internet, or offer services and applications, or share content on the Internet.

The Internet Governance Forum and National, Regional, and Youth Initiatives

For two decades, the Internet Governance Forum[1] (IGF), an outcome of WSIS, has served as the world's primary multistakeholder platform for dialogue on Internet governance issues. The IGF and more than 180 National, Regional, and Youth IGFs (NRIs), Best Practice Forums, Policy Networks, Dynamic Coalitions[2], schools on Internet governance (SIGs), have fostered meaningful information exchange, shared understanding, and opportunities to advance solutions, which have contributed to real-world change (for examples, see Footprints of 20 Years of the Internet Governance Forum: ICANN and Internet Society Joint Report, 2025).[3] While the IGF does not have decision-making power, it does have the power to shape opinions, suggest best practices, encourage dialogue, and influence Internet policies at a national, regional, and international level.

Challenges

Navigating Decentralized Processes

One of the challenges of a decentralized governance approach is the time and resources required to participate in the broad range of global, regional, and local forums where issues are discussed, especially by unpaid volunteers. This can be especially burdensome for smaller developing countries. Many stakeholder groups address this challenge by coordinating their participation. Others provide funding and training in Internet governance, Internet policy, and Internet technologies. Remote

[1] https://www.intgovforum.org/en

[2] For more information, see https://publicadministration.desa.un.org/capacity-development/igf

[3] *Footprints of 20 Years of the Internet Governance Forum: ICANN and Internet Society Joint Report (2025),* https://www.internetsociety.org/resources/doc/2025/footprints-of-20-years-of-the-internet-governance-forum/

participation has been particularly important for civil society participation, especially from developing countries.

Balancing Stakeholder Roles in Internet Governance

There is an implicit assumption that there should not be a power imbalance among stakeholders engaged in Internet governance, because if there were, one stakeholder could direct the outcome, and even how the Internet is developed and managed. Initially, the principal concern from non-governmental stakeholders was that governments would exercise too much control. At the same time, governments were concerned that they would not have enough say in Internet governance, or they lacked the expertise to contribute effectively to technical discussions. Balance comes through open, transparent, accessible and consensus-based processes, and through the participation of a diversity and multiplicity of voices. More recently, however, the emergence of a handful of extremely large tech companies has raised questions about how to balance their influence and how to ensure business interests do not dominate.

Complexity of Crossing Boundaries

Internet-related issues can cross geographic, sectoral, and technological boundaries, such as online safety and cybersecurity, and involve actors from multiple jurisdictions. Newer technologies and services, such as artificial intelligence, tend to dominate Internet governance conversations, potentially leaving older, yet still important issues, such as connecting people in remote, rural, and other underserved areas, without the attention they need. To address these complex issues effectively, stakeholders need a wide range of skills, including the ability to collaborate with industry experts, be they policymakers, technologists, business leaders, or civil society.

Guiding Principles

Openness, Inclusiveness, and Transparency

Governance processes should be open and transparent to all stakeholders. Openness and inclusiveness are the basis of legitimacy in collaborative decision-making. Those significantly affected by a decision should have the chance to be involved in making it. Inclusiveness is not just an admirable goal, but an essential part of an effective process. The less inclusive a process is, the less likely it is to engender the trust and support of those outside of the process and the less likely it is to produce results that can be successfully implemented. Transparency is an essential condition for inclusiveness, as it brings expert and affected groups into the process. Transparency of inputs, process, and decision-making is fundamental to the Internet.

Collaboration and Shared Responsibility

All stakeholders share collective responsibility for the continued vitality of the Internet and the benefits it brings to our societies. This involves having a common understanding of key problems, developing shared solutions, recognizing mutual benefits, and maintaining open communication.

Effective Accountable Decision-making and Implementation

The most effective decisions are those based on an open, deliberative and accountable process that considers a broad range of information sources and perspectives. This holds for both the quality and implementation of the decision. As the Internet is operated by a variety of public, private, and civil society stakeholders, the successful implementation of decisions requires imaginative and collaborative solutions. It is not as straightforward as passing a national law or an international treaty. Stakeholders who have been part of the process work harder to make its implementation a success. It also leads to more legitimate, informed and sustainable outcomes.

Consensus-driven

Decisions made by rough consensus among all stakeholders are more likely to be implemented than those made by voting. Rough consensus does not mean everyone agrees with the decision. Rather, the decision is the outcome of stakeholders having addressed all issues together and selected the option that makes the most sense in the circumstances. Voting tends to lead to decisions that the majority wants, often leaving minority communities' interests having been excluded. Consensus-based decision-making, however, encourages stakeholders to explain their perspectives and positions to other stakeholders to seek their agreement. This helps ensure that problems and solutions are thoroughly discussed. A consensus-based approach also encourages stakeholders to negotiate and compromise, rather than continue to push their own positions. They are also more likely to "own" the outcome.

Pragmatic and Evidence-based Approaches

Internet governance discussions, debates, and decisions must be informed by, and depend upon, objective and empirical information.

The Internet draws its strength from the involvement of a broad range of actors employing open, transparent, and collaborative processes. Cooperation is essential to the Internet's continued innovation and growth.

The Internet Society and Internet Governance

The Internet Society participates in Internet governance activities as a member of the technical community with other Internet standards and technical organizations such as the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the Regional Internet Registries (RIRs), the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE). In the technical community, we share a sense of collective stewardship towards the Internet and the open standards on which its technologies and networks are based. These characteristics fortify stakeholder trust in the way that the Internet is operated and governed.

Additional Resources

The Internet Society has published papers and additional content related to this issue. These are available for free on the Internet Society website.

Footprints of 20 Years of the Internet Governance Forum: ICANN and Internet Society Joint Report (2025), https://www.internetsociety.org/resources/doc/2025/footprints-of-20-years-of-the-internet-governance-forum/

Internet governance - Why the multistakeholder governance approach works, https://www.internetsociety.org/resources/doc/2016/internet-governance-why-the-multistakeholder-approach-works/

A pivotal moment for global digital cooperation, https://www.internetsociety.org/resources/doc/2025/a-pivotal-moment-for-global-digital-cooperation/

Published with ICANN, Footprints of 20 Years of the Internet Governance Forum, https://www.internetsociety.org/resources/doc/2025/footprints-of-20-years-of-the-internet-governance-forum/

Internet governance page, https://www.internetsociety.org/issues/internet-governance/

Internet governance course, https://www.internetsociety.org/learning/internet-governance/