ARTICLE 19

# NAVIGATING THE ITU

## Four routes for civil society engagement

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IT CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO EFFECTIVELY ENGAGE AT THE ITU.

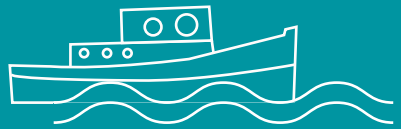
- The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is a UN-specialized agency that is mandated to develop policies and standards related to transnational telecommunication infrastructure. In recent decades, the ITU has expanded its focus to include key technical and policy aspects related to the Internet, including the Internet of Things (IoT), device identification, artificial intelligence (AI), and cybersecurity. It's therefore clear that the work of the ITU has major implications for the potential of the Internet to function as a robust global civic space—one that enables the full exercise of human rights online.

- However, the ITU suffers from a structural lack of transparency and openness that especially impacts stakeholders operating outside the public and private sectors. In particular, this opacity hinders civil society stakeholders from following decision-making processes as they occur within the ITU. And if we cannot even access these processes, then we cannot effectively consider and respond to the implications that ITU policies and standards have on human rights online.

- In response, we have developed this brief as a resource for civil society: here, we provide an overview of four opportunities that civil society stakeholders can avail to effectively engage at the ITU.

# 1 APPLY FOR ITU MEMBERSHIP

For interested stakeholders, navigating the ongoing work of the ITU can be challenging: only Members can access and participate in the decision-making processes that result in formal ITU policy recommendations, technical standards, and other outputs. Therefore, depending on eligibility requirements, civil society stakeholders may consider applying to become ITU Sector Members, Associates, or Academia.



Though it's possible, we don't necessarily recommend that civil society stakeholders seek membership. This route usually incurs a high annual financial cost that may be difficult to maintain in addition to the costs of regularly attending the ITU's high-level conferences and study group meetings. It's important to note that Sector Members, Associates, and Academia have more limited voting privileges in comparison to Member States. And even with a formal designation, non-state Members may still not have access to all discussions in decision-making processes.

If civil society stakeholders are interested in pursuing ITU membership, certain options may incur less financial burden depending on eligibility. If stakeholders are interested in targeted engagement, they may consider applying for membership to one or two specific ITU sectors as an Associate. Alternatively, organizations based in certain developing countries may be eligible for membership at a reduced fee to the Development Sector of the ITU, or ITU-D.Additionally, civil society stakeholders have the opportunity to seek membership fee waivers at the Plenipotentiary Conference, held every four years.

**You can find more information about securing ITU membership here ▸**

# 2 JOIN THE DELEGATION OF A MEMBER STATE

It's clear that Member States are the most powerful stakeholders in ITU processes. They determine the nature of the ITU's structure and operations, and they fundamentally influence the trajectory of policy and standards development. Requesting a position as an observer of a national delegation may provide unparalleled access to ITU decision-making.

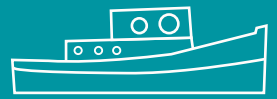
Though civil society stakeholders generally act as countervailing forces that hold governments accountable, participating as an observer or member of a national delegation can prove to be a highly effective method of engagement.

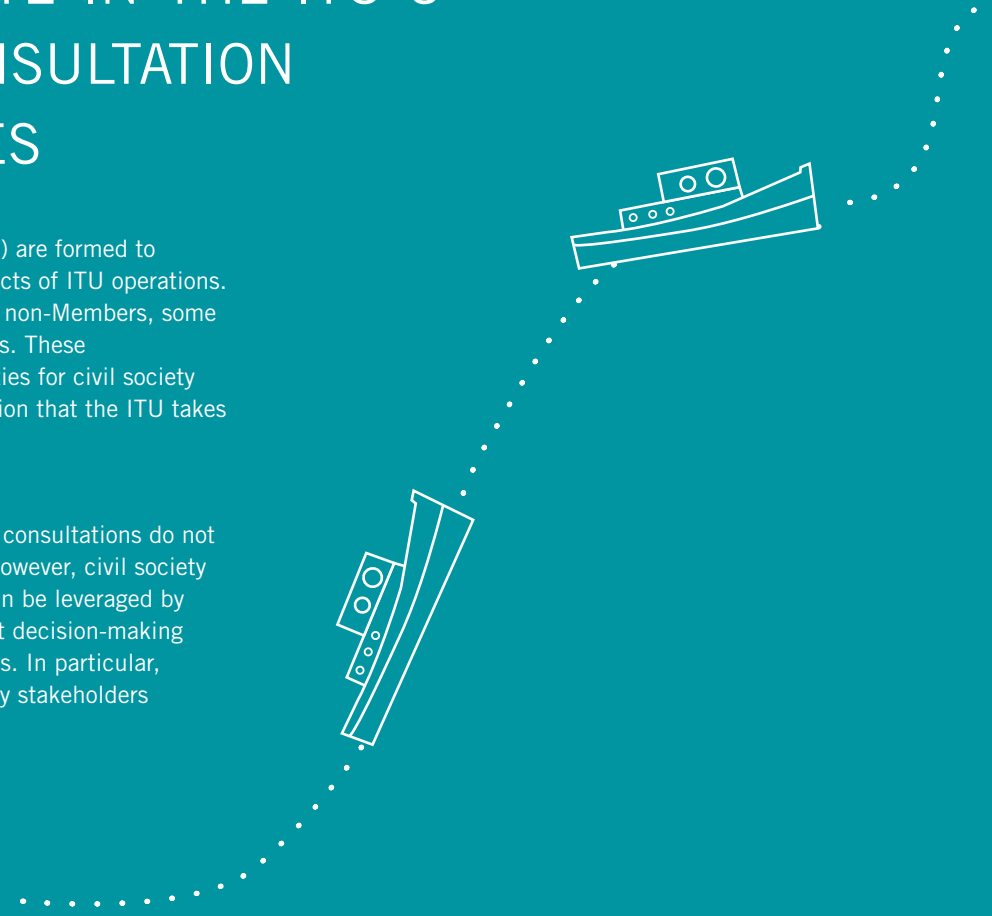
By building cooperative trust over time, civil society stakeholders may eventually play crucial roles in influencing the direction of ITU decision-making, advising other delegates or assisting in the development of official positions. By including civil society representatives in delegations, Member States can in turn demonstrate their commitment to multistakeholder participation in Internet-related policy and standards development.

# 3 PARTICIPATE IN THE ITU'S OPEN CONSULTATION PROCESSES

ITU Council Working Groups (CWGs) are formed to address specific issue areas or aspects of ITU operations. Though most CWGs are not open to non-Members, some do hold open or public consultations. These consultations can be key opportunities for civil society stakeholders to influence the direction that the ITU takes in shaping its scope of work.

It's true that the outcomes of these consultations do not directly determine ITU processes; however, civil society contributions offer expertise that can be leveraged by allied Member States in subsequent decision-making that takes place behind closed doors. In particular, there are two CWGs that civil society stakeholders should follow closely:





**Council Working Group on Internet-related Public Policy Issues (CWG-Internet) ▸**

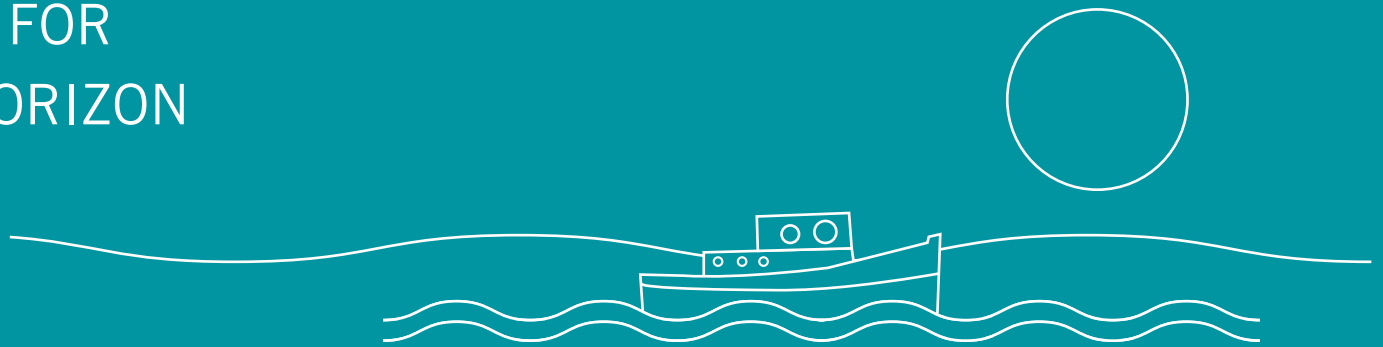
- The CWG-Internet usually holds two open consultations per year on various issues related to Internet policy: in general, the first runs from June to September and the second runs from October to January. It's the most multistakeholder initiative regularly held by the ITU.
- Due to their ostensibly open nature, these consultations may be captured by certain Member States as justification for launching contentious issues into mainstream ITU processes and pushing the ITU's mandate into new areas of policy development. Civil society contributions can thus be powerful tools for curtailing these attempts.

**Council Working Group for Strategic and Financial Plans (CWG-SFP) ▸**

- Every four years, the ITU sets its agenda for the forthcoming study period at the Plenipotentiary Conference. Nearly two years before this conference is set to take place, the ITU Council convenes the CWG-SFP, which holds public consultations on aspects of its strategic and financial plans. These consultations are a prime opportunity for civil society to influence the vision and scope of the ITU.
- The CWG-SFP is currently convened in advance of the 2018 Plenipotentiary Conference. It will hold one more public consultation in early 2018.

# 4 KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR WHAT'S ON THE HORIZON

Understanding the trajectory of policy and standards development at the ITU shouldn't be limited to participating in processes within the ITU itself. Civil society stakeholders can learn to anticipate the technological trends that the ITU seeks to include in its scope of work by closely following its parallel activities.



**Other UN-Sponsored Forums**

- The annual Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and WSIS Forum are venues that the ITU participates in and hosts, respectively. During these forums, the ITU regularly organizes workshops or sessions; often, these events may convene exploratory discussions on issue areas that the ITU seeks to include in its scope of work. In recent years, ITU-sponsored events have focused on AI, IoT, and blockchain.
- By following the discussions put forth in these events, civil society stakeholders may identify areas into which the ITU seeks to expand its mandate and may begin to push back against problematic developments.

**Focus Groups ▸**

- Focus groups are internal processes of the Standardization Sector of the ITU, or ITU-T, that are established in tandem with study groups to quickly develop sectoral understanding on specific issue areas. These focus groups are important to monitor as their outcomes may influence the future scope of work of study groups.
- Unlike study groups, focus groups may allow non-Members to follow developments through common mailing lists. Though we do not recommend that civil society stakeholders consider participation in focus groups, requests for more information can be made to focus group secretariats.

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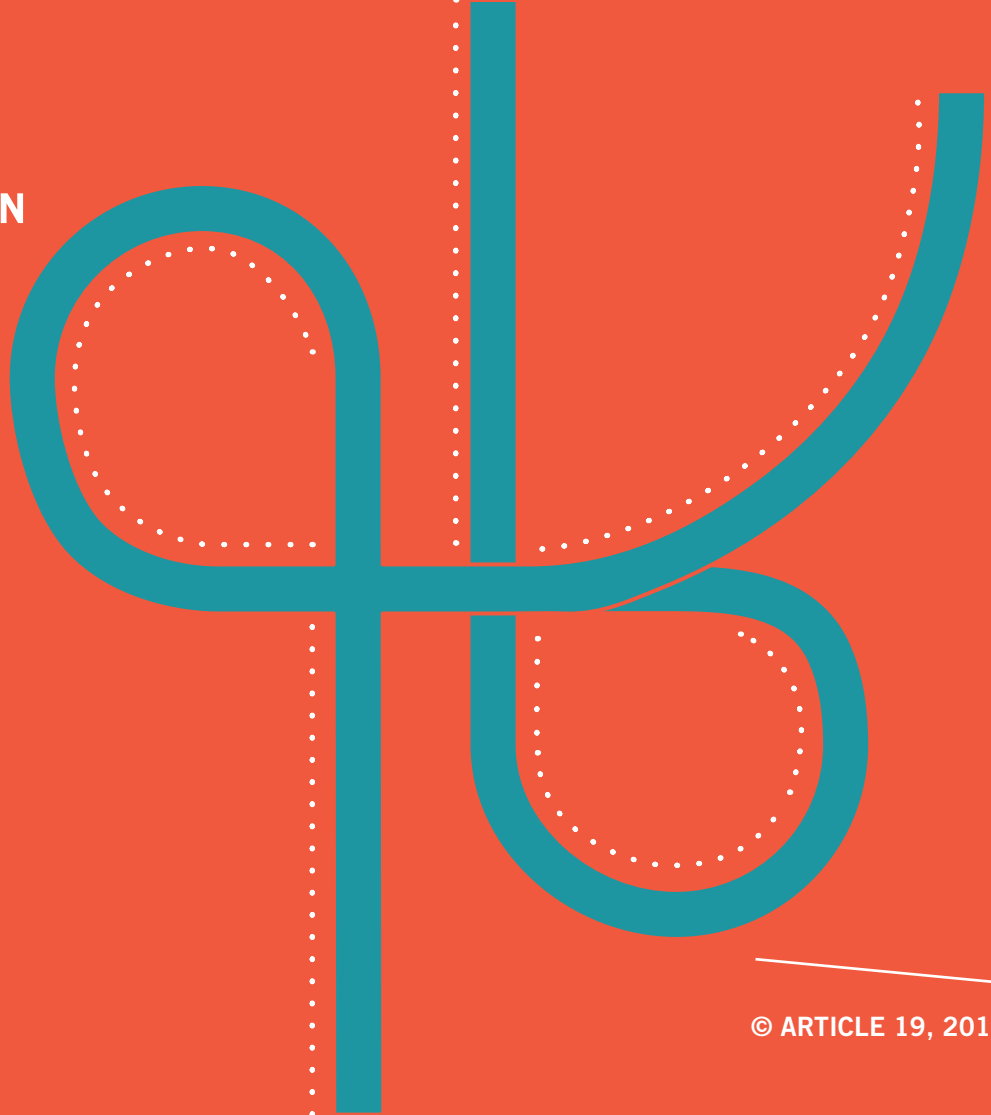
**DEFENDING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND INFORMATION**



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