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Getting a Seat at the Adults' Table: How can Multistakeholder Organizations Shape the Influence of Youth in International Governance? A case study on how stakeholder-led institutional reforms at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) impacted youth organizations and their influence on the forum's messages.

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Diego Salomão Takahashi

**Getting a Seat at the Adults' Table:
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Organizations Shape the Influence of
Youth in International Governance?**



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Master Thesis

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A case study on how stakeholder-led institutional reforms at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) impacted youth organizations and their influence on the forum's messages.

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I would also like to dedicate this work to all the young people around the world who have been sidelined from the rooms where decisions are made, yet must live with the consequences. The world we are receiving may be fractured, unjust, and endangered, but so many of us are rising. May this thesis be a small act of resistance to resignation: let us defy the systems that tell us we must wait our turn, and believe that change begins not when we are given permission, but when we claim our voice.

¹ The art for the cover page was designed by Anna Pospelov (2025)

Abstract

This thesis investigates how multistakeholder organizations shape youth influence in international governance, using the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) as a case study. Anchored in new institutionalism and multistakeholderism theories, the research analyzes IGF developments from 2020 to 2024 through process tracing and archival data. It finds that stakeholder-led structural reforms, such as the creation of the “Youth Track”, have contributed to the establishment of institutional mechanisms for youth participation. It also finds that this institutional development led to the creation of a further mechanism, the “Youth Messages”, which positively impacted youth organizations’ agenda-setting capability, and therefore, their influence in shaping the IGF Messages. However, it recognizes that challenges such as symbolic inclusion and structural inequalities persist. The study concludes that the adaptive institutional framework of the IGF mostly fosters meaningful youth engagement, serving as a relevant case study for the topic of inclusion in international governance.

Keywords

Advocacy, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Digital Governance, Institutional Reforms, International Governance, International Institutions, Internet Governance Forum (IGF), Multilateralism, Multistakeholderism, New Institutionalism, Policy Development, Youth Organizations, Youth Participation.

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1. Introduction

Starting in 2025, a new generation, “Generation Beta”, will emerge, marking the first group of people born into a world where generative AI programs like ChatGPT and Copilot are an integral part of their daily lives (NBC News, 2024). This technological immersion will shape not only how they interact with information, but also how they perceive truth and authority in an increasingly digital world. In this context, AI can be seen as more than just a tool for efficiency; it is also a tool with the capacity to shape what people see, think, feel, and even believe (Smuha, 2021). This development is particularly relevant given the shifting landscape of digital governance, where major tech companies, such as Meta and X, now have the freedom to alter or even eliminate fact-checking protocols for political reasons (AP News, 2025; NBC News, 2025). The result is an intensified spread of misinformation and fake news, further complicating the already fragile information ecosystem (Ünal & Çiçeklioğlu, 2019).

This, in turn, raises profound regulatory challenges. The entities that set the rules for AI and Internet governance also dictate the ideological framework that underpins digital information flows (Maas & Villalobos, 2023). Borrowing a famous concept from public and business administration, a first-mover advantage in regulation can have long-term consequences, shaping the trajectory of governance structures for years to come (Kerin et al., 1992). In this race to define oversight, the stakes extend far beyond technological advancement; they encompass the very foundations of knowledge, power, and political influence in the digital age (Smuha, 2021).

The inclusion of youth engagement holds particular relevance in this realm, as it has the capacity to shape the foundational systems of contemporary life, including privacy, access to information, and the regulation of artificial intelligence (Smuha, 2021). As digital technologies evolve at a rapid pace, policies developed today will significantly influence the opportunities and constraints faced by future generations. In this context, youth, as digital natives, possess unique insights into the impacts of emerging technologies and the societal shifts they engender (Lievens et al., 2018). Scholars such as Helberger et al. (2020) argue that digital governance requires diverse and forward-looking input to ensure equitable, inclusive, and sustainable policies (Helberger et al., 2020). Integrating youth perspectives into digital governance frameworks not only aligns with principles of intergenerational justice but can also enhance the legitimacy of governance outcomes (Jongen & Scholte, 2024).

Such complex issues demand comprehensive discussions and international cooperation. Traditionally, cooperation has taken form in international forums such as the United Nations (UN) or the World Trade Organization (WTO). However, a growing aversion to multilateralism among states currently fosters a trend that weakens these existing international governance structures. In recent years, major powers have increasingly prioritized regional or unilateral approaches over broad-based cooperation (Ikenberry, 2018, p.8). This retreat from multilateral engagement hinders the ability of organizations like the UN to establish cohesive global frameworks for AI regulation and digital governance. Without strong international cooperation, regulatory fragmentation becomes inevitable, leading to competing standards, regional blocs, and an overall erosion of trust in multilateral institutions (Maas & Villalobos, 2023).

As a possible alternative to this system, multistakeholder groups, involving members of the private sector, civil society, governments, etc., emerge frequently in debates as a possible silver bullet to international cooperation. In this context, the important dimension that analyzes the influence of individual characteristics such as gender, race, or age on the capacity to influence outcomes in multistakeholder organizations has not received significant attention from academia. For example, in the discussion of the role of age, international organizations have on multiple occasions praised the relevance of including youth actors in decision-making processes to develop sustainable and effective frameworks (United Nations Youth Office, 2018). Despite these numerous calls for inclusivity, young voices remain largely underrepresented in international decision-making bodies, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, central actors in developing policies affecting long-term global stability (O'Brien et al., 2018). By focusing on this critical area, the research aims to answer the question:

“How can multistakeholder organizations shape the influence of youth in international governance?”

The question arises from the issue that, if youth influence is considered significant, it is essential to understand how the institutions in which they are present can shape their impact. The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) serves as a unique case for exploring this issue. On one hand, it was established as a multistakeholder platform to promote dialogue on public policy issues related to the Internet, and it explicitly acknowledges the need for diverse participation (IGF, 2025a). On the other hand, the IGF attracts powerful actors with

significant financial and institutional resources, such as major technology companies and nation-states. These actors can often dominate discussions, leaving little room for youth contributions to gain visibility or traction (Raymond & DeNardis, 2015). To bring balance to these disputes, institutional reforms to make the forum more inclusive have been implemented (Tjahja et al., 2022). As a first step to study those contradictions and the solutions developed to bridge them, the following sections will establish the general framework utilized for this thesis.

2. Literature Review

The participation of youth in governance has emerged as a crucial topic in contemporary political and social scholarship, reflecting broader debates about democracy, representation, and intergenerational justice. Parallel to that, multistakeholder organizations and their legitimacy have also been a frequent point of contention in scholarship. To address both topics, as they build the thematic basis of this dissertation, this literature review first critically examines how different schools of thought have conceptualized youth participation, debated its desirability, and analyzed the structural, cultural, and technological factors shaping young people's influence in decision-making processes. It then brushes upon the relevant discussion about the notion of legitimacy for multistakeholder organizations.

Early theoretical models set the groundwork for understanding youth engagement in governance. Arnstein's (1969) concept of the "ladder of citizen participation" presents participation as a spectrum, ranging from tokenism to genuine power-sharing (Arnstein, 1969). Expanding on these foundations, contemporary scholars such as Checkoway (2011) and Bessant (2020) propose that youth participation must be "intentional, inclusive, and supported by institutions" (Checkoway, 2011, p.341) to avoid institutional mistrust for future generations (Bessant, 2020). Some authors add to the notion of a spectrum by defining forms of engagement that can range from informal activism and grassroots mobilization to formal involvement in policymaking bodies (Taft & Gordon, 2013).

A second major strand of literature grapples with whether and why youth participation is desirable. On one side, proponents argue that youth bring unique, future-oriented perspectives vital for tackling intergenerational challenges such as climate change and digital governance (Kamaruddin et al., 2023; O'Brien et al., 2018; Pietilä, 2022). Youth activism, as highlighted by Kara (2007), has already catalyzed significant shifts in policy discourse globally (Kara,

2007). Nevertheless, despite the increasing rhetorical emphasis on youth empowerment, exemplified by initiatives like the UN's Youth Strategy 2030 (United Nations Youth Office, 2018), scholars argue that the inclusion of youth often remains superficial, confined to consultation rather than genuine decision-making (Pawłowska, 2022). This suggests a gap between the discourse on youth empowerment and the structural realities that inhibit their substantive participation. Which, in turn, raises the question as to why formal governance structures remain resistant to institutionalizing youth insights meaningfully.

A dominant strain across critical scholarship attempts to answer this question by concerning itself with the systemic barriers inhibiting meaningful youth engagement. Studies identify entrenched age-based hierarchies, rigid institutional practices, and restricted access to decision-making processes as key obstacles (Hornyak et al., 2022; Weekes et al., 2024). More critical voices (Pawłowska, 2022; Uzun & Lüküslü, 2023) emphasize that institutional and societal perceptions often marginalize youth by questioning their experience. Following the findings of those researchers, the claim that without structural reforms, such as institutionalized youth councils with real authority, participation risks remaining merely symbolic becomes stronger (Pawłowska, 2022).

To achieve progress in this direction, some scholars advocate for a shift towards co-creation models, where youth are involved from the outset in policymaking rather than relegated to later-stage consultations (Aflaki et al., 2023). Proponents of deliberative democratic theories also stress the relevance of inclusivity and dialogue (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012), but, as O'Brien et al. (2018) argue, they often fall short of providing actionable pathways for substantive youth influence (O'Brien et al., 2018).

A further relevant school of thought is the legitimacy perspective. Authors argue that legitimacy within multilateral institutions, including multistakeholder governance, is always being contested. Jongen and Scholte (2021) highlight how legitimacy deficits arise when key stakeholders perceive processes as exclusionary or when decision-making lacks transparency. They argue that without formalized representation mechanisms, specific groups may struggle to gain recognition in multistakeholder settings, leading to their marginalization despite nominal inclusion. This reinforces concerns about whether such governance structures genuinely democratize decision-making or merely reproduce existing power hierarchies. However, in this specific study, most members of typically marginalized groups considered

that their inclusion in the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) spoke to a high level of legitimacy for the forum (Jongen & Scholte, 2021).

Beyond institutional analysis, parallel to the strong development of constructivist approaches, some researchers in the 1990/2000s emphasized the importance of cultural and intersectional factors. Checkoway et al. (2003) and Hofstede (2001) point out that societal norms regarding age and authority significantly mediate the extent of youth empowerment. In societies where elders are the primary bearers of legitimacy, youth contributions may be dismissed irrespective of their value (Checkoway et al., 2003; Hofstede, 2001). Moreover, local sociocultural contexts intersect with global governance frameworks in ways that can either facilitate or constrain youth involvement (Ardoin et al., 2013). These findings suggest that a “one-size-fits-all” model for youth participation is inadequate.

Finally, the domain of digital governance presents both opportunities and challenges for youth participation. Scholars such as Lievens et al. (2018) advocate for the inclusion of youth, who will disproportionately experience the consequences of technological developments (Lievens et al., 2018). Yet, cautionary perspectives, particularly from Pietilä (2022), warn that over-reliance on digital tools may exacerbate existing inequalities, disadvantaging already marginalized youth populations with limited internet access (Pietilä, 2022).

In sum, while scholarship on youth participation offers rich insights into the forms, benefits, and limitations of young people's engagement in governance, it consistently points to deeper structural and systemic barriers that inhibit meaningful inclusion. However, existing literature falls short of adequately addressing the puzzling discrepancy between the growing rhetorical commitment to youth participation from international organizations and the persistent scarcity of genuine, influential opportunities for young people to engage in decision-making processes. Focusing on institutionalist theories and the concept of multistakeholderism, this paper will address this critical gap by critically assessing how institutional structures and actor configurations can either constrain or enable youth influence in governance processes.

3. Theoretical Framework

a. Between “Old” and “New” Institutionalisms: Adaptability & Reforms

This study adopts an institutionalist approach to governance as its primary theoretical framework. Institutional reforms have long been a focal point, particularly in discussions

about governance, representation, and policy change. The developments in institutionalist frameworks set the theoretical foundation for understanding how change occurs within governance systems: moving from rigid, top-down mechanisms toward more fluid, negotiated arrangements. New institutionalism's (such as sociological institutionalism) emphasis on incremental change, informal norms, and actor-driven adaptation (Saurugger, 2017) is particularly relevant for interpreting the IGF, where formal authority may be diffuse but where strategic actors, like youth organizations, can leverage participatory norms to incrementally reshape governance dynamics.

Under old institutionalism theories, institutions were seen as relatively static entities, defined primarily by their formal rules, structures, and legal frameworks. This perspective emphasizes stability, path dependency, and the constraining effects of institutional arrangements on political behavior. Change within institutions was largely viewed as the result of external shocks, such as revolutions or major policy shifts, rather than endogenous adaptation (Olsson, 2020). Consequently, under this framework, the representation of specific groups was often shaped by formal access to decision-making structures, with little attention paid to informal mechanisms of influence or evolving power dynamics. Groups with historically limited representation were typically excluded unless explicit institutional provisions, such as legal mandates or quotas, were introduced to include them (Olsson, 2020).

In contrast, new theories on institutionalism present a more dynamic understanding of institutions, recognizing that they evolve through both formal and informal processes. This perspective is particularly relevant for analyzing institutional reforms, as it highlights the role of norms, ideas, and agency in shaping institutional trajectories. Rather than seeing institutions as rigid structures, new institutionalism conceptualizes them as sites of contestation where actors negotiate, adapt, and reinterpret rules over time. This adaptability can offer significant opportunities for the influence and representation of specific groups, including youth, in governance processes (Saurugger, 2017).

In this context, since the IGF falls into the scope of new institutionalism theories, it would be expected that its structural reforms take place incrementally and are shaped by strategic interactions among stakeholders (Olsson, 2020). For example, youth actors may leverage existing norms of inclusivity and participatory governance to expand their role within the forum, even in the absence of formal decision-making power (Orchard & Wiener, 2022). By

following this premise, this paper also recognizes the role of the actors who work within institutions to push for change, suggesting that youth and other marginalized groups can shape governance outcomes by strategically engaging with institutional norms and processes (Battilana, 2006; Orchard & Wiener, 2022). By leveraging new institutionalism's focus on both structural constraints and opportunities for agency, this research can better investigate how institutional reforms can either reinforce or challenge existing power hierarchies in governance.

b. Multistakeholderism: A Silver Bullet to Multilateralism?

Over the past two decades, multilateralism has faced mounting challenges, leading many scholars and practitioners to describe the current moment as a “crisis of multilateralism” (Guilbaud et al., 2023; Ikenberry, 2018; Smith, 2019). Traditional multilateral structures, primarily state-centric and rooted in post-World War II institutions like the UN, have struggled to adapt to a rapidly changing global landscape characterized by complex, transnational issues such as climate change, cybersecurity, and digital governance (Patrick, 2017). Growing geopolitical rivalries, nationalist movements, and a weakening commitment to collective problem-solving have further eroded the effectiveness and legitimacy of multilateral institutions (Guilbaud et al., 2023). In the context of digital governance, these shortcomings are particularly acute: the rapid pace of technological change and the global diffusion of digital infrastructures demand agile, inclusive decision-making frameworks that conventional multilateralism, with its often rigid, state-centered protocols, is ill-equipped to provide (Raymond & DeNardis, 2015).

This theoretical backdrop provides the rationale for turning to multistakeholderism as a practical instantiation of new institutionalist logic. The IGF, differently from other multilateral structures, is designed to accommodate diverse actors in its governance processes. It focuses on the inclusion of governments, private sector companies, civil society organizations, technical communities, and academia (IGF, 2025b). Its flexibility and participatory ethos reflect the kind of adaptive, norm-driven institutional change described by new institutionalists. This model reflects a recognition that no single actor, including nation-states, can effectively govern complex transnational issues alone (Manahan & Kumar, 2021). Therefore, it creates new arenas of influence where youth actors could assert themselves by participating, for example, in agenda-setting. Thus, multistakeholderism serves as both a response to the limitations of “old” institutional approaches and a platform for

realizing the kind of incremental, actor-led structural changes predicted by “new” institutionalism.

Proponents of this theory have mainly championed the fostering of dialogue and cooperation across sectors. They argue that by including technical experts, directly engaged members of civil society such as NGOs and activists, and private companies, these forums offer a high-level space for effective policymaking with more direct representation (Manahan & Kumar, 2021). However, critics argue that power asymmetries often persist within multistakeholder settings, allowing more resourceful and influential actors, such as governments and multinational corporations, to dominate decision-making processes, for example, in the field of Internet governance (Raymond & DeNardis, 2015).

Departing from this theoretical foundation, it follows that if the IGF's multistakeholder model indeed allows for institutional adaptability, then it should also facilitate the implementation of structural changes when they are negotiated by its stakeholders. Such examples could be, for instance, the creation of youth-led initiatives, recognition of youth coalitions, or procedural inclusion mechanisms. In turn, these changes are expected to enhance the capacity of youth to set agenda topics, therefore, influencing the forum's messages.

Having laid out the theoretical approach, this research will investigate the following connected expectations:

Expectation 1: “The adaptability from the multistakeholder framework at the IGF allows for an increased implementation of structural changes, such as the institutionalization of youth participation mechanisms, through the creation of the Youth Track and the Youth Messages.”

Expectation 1a: “The increased implementation of structural changes leads to a higher capability by youth organizations to set agenda topics, therefore also enhancing their level of influence in the development of the forum's messages.”

The proposed model through which this process should happen is depicted in the following image (Figure 1):

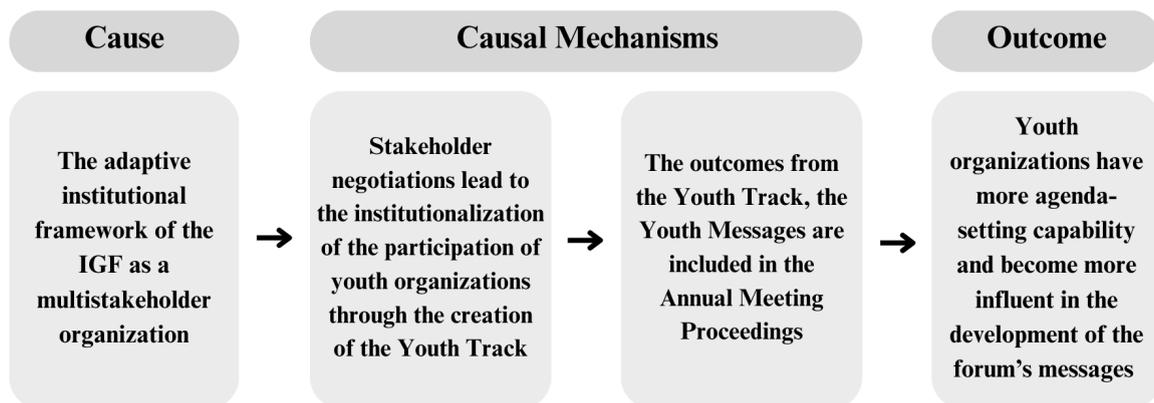


Figure 1: Chart depicting the theoretical framework of the study, which showcases the process through which the two proposed hypotheses are connected.

4. Methodology

a. Case Selection: The Internet Governance Forum

The current system of international digital governance is built on a complex network of multiple organizations, forums, high-level summits, policy advisor groups, etc., that experience significant overlap in mandates and a lack of interorganizational coordination (Kurbalija, 2016). To make sense of this intertwining scenario with so many actors to select from, in this universe of cases, the most logical decision was to find the most relevant multistakeholder organization on digital governance. With over 11,000 participants from 170 countries in its last occurrence, the IGF transmits all its resulting outputs to global and national decision-making bodies (IGF, 2025b). Its position as the biggest international multistakeholder forum on the topic suggests that if trends can be observed in any such organization, then most likely it would be at the IGF (Estier, 2024).

The IGF was established in 2006 as a key initiative from the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), a series of high-level meetings held in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005 to discuss the future of digital governance. In those summits, the WSIS emphasized the growing need for a global platform to discuss Internet governance issues, culminating in the creation of the IGF. The forum was designed as a multistakeholder venue to facilitate open dialogue on Internet governance, focusing on fostering collaboration among governments, the private sector, civil society, technical experts, and other stakeholders (IGF, 2025b).

Unlike other UN bodies, the IGF does not produce binding resolutions or agreements. Instead, it serves as a discussion forum, enabling stakeholders to exchange ideas and best practices on Internet governance without the pressure of formal negotiations or decision-making. This informal structure highlights the IGF's role as a facilitator of dialogue rather than a policymaking entity (Malcolm, 2008). Since its inception, the IGF has evolved significantly. Efforts to increase inclusivity have been central to its evolution. The IGF has launched initiatives aimed at engaging underrepresented groups, such as youth, women, and participants from the Global South (Spuy & Reneses, 2021).

This structure aligns directly with the theoretical framework of new institutionalism, which emphasizes the role of norms, informal mechanisms, and agency in shaping institutional evolution and actor influence. The IGF's dialogue-based model exemplifies the theoretical claims of adaptable institutions by creating space for incremental, norm-driven institutional change. Its ongoing efforts to increase inclusivity, illustrate how actors can strategically use informal participation opportunities to influence discussions and shape emerging standards, even in the absence of binding authority (IGF, 2025c). In this way, the IGF's evolution reflects the kind of adaptive institutional behavior described by new institutionalists, where change emerges from internal advocacy, stakeholder interaction, and evolving expectations, rather than from formal constitutional redesign. Therefore, analyzing the IGF through this lens allows the research to explore how structural changes rooted in norm-setting and participatory practices can ultimately expand the influence of marginalized groups in digital governance, making the forum an ideal case (Seawright & Gerring, 2008) for investigating the interplay between institutional design and actor agency.

The last argument that solidifies the relevance of this case is its perceived legitimacy. Despite its non-binding nature, the IGF has had notable impacts on Internet governance. It has fostered dialogue that influences policymaking in other international forums, such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the WTO. For instance, discussions at the IGF have informed national and regional policies on net neutrality, privacy standards, and cybersecurity frameworks (Epstein & Nonnecke, 2016).

b. Operationalization

i. Youth Participation

Another key step in establishing the building blocks of this research is to define what is to be understood from the central concepts that form the theory. In this context, youth participation will refer to the active engagement of youth organizations in global internet governance, specifically within the institutional setting of the IGF. Rather than focusing on individual young participants, this study conceptualizes youth participation through the lens of organized collectives. Both youth-led and youth-focused organizations represent meaningful cases for analysis due to their capacity to represent structured forms of agency. These organizations often have clearer mandates, defined roles, and greater institutional continuity, which enhances their potential to influence policy discussions and outcomes (Taft & Gordon, 2013).

This methodological choice is also driven by pragmatic considerations. Tracking and assessing the influence of individual participants would require a qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews or ethnographic observation, methods that are not feasible within the scope of this study. In contrast, it is arguable that youth organizations have the means to leave a more identifiable and traceable footprint in policy spaces. For instance, through formal statements, session organization, stakeholder roles, and participation in multistakeholder consultations. Therefore, making them more suitable for analysis based on publicly available data.

At the IGF, youth organizations are structured through a network of national, regional, and thematic initiatives that collectively form the Youth IGF Movement. The detailed classification and form of engagement of each organization can be found in the table below (Figure 2). The table also denotes which organizations have been selected for the data collection. According to the IGF's official portal, these organizations aim to empower young people to engage in internet governance discussions, raise awareness on digital rights, and contribute perspectives rooted in the experiences and priorities of youth communities. They participate through organizing sessions, submitting policy inputs, engaging in regional and global IGF events, and fostering dialogue across stakeholder groups (IGF, 2021b).

Model	Definition	Examples (Selected for Analysis)	Features (Scope & Focus)
Model I	Youth programmes integrated within National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs).	Asia Pacific Youth IGF, Netherlands Youth IGF.	Focus on national/regional priorities, hosted within national IGFs.
Model II	Independently organized youth IGFs.	Youth LACIGF, Youth Russia IGF.	Fully youth-led, autonomous governance, and publish independent policy messages.
Model III	NRIs with youth-dedicated capacity-building tracks.	South Eastern European Dialogue on Internet Governance (SEEDIG), Brazil Youth IGF.	Hybrid events, intensive pre-IGF training, and mentorship pipelines.
Model IV	Global youth empowerment projects not tied to NRIs.	Youth Coalition on Internet Governance (YCIG), Youth IGF.	Global reach, transnational collaboration, youth-authored publications, and campaigns.

Figure 2: Table depicting a summary of the four different models of Youth IGF Institutional Models as showcased in the “Youth Engagement at the IGF” Report of 2021 (IGF, 2021).

The choice of the representative organizations stems from two main reasons. Firstly, the goal to increase the transferability of the results. By choosing organizations that vary in geographical region, this study can offer a more inclusive and diverse view of the key messages that youth advocate for globally. Secondly, from the constraint of data availability, such as missing session reports and official messages on the public websites. The difficulty in finding data was a problem that presented itself for many of the official organizations recognized by the IGF, speaking to the still-developing phase that many encounter.

These youth groups are active across various levels of the IGF ecosystem (most notably through regional and national IGFs), therefore, this study will first focus on the development of their general messages over the years in the period of analysis. Then, it will analyze their participation within the global IGF, as this is the primary arena where global digital policy norms are debated and where institutional reforms aimed at enhancing multistakeholder inclusivity are most visible (IGF, 2025a). The progressive scaling up in analysis from their general messages in the multiple arenas they engage to the global level allows for a better alignment with the central inquiry of this research: to assess whether institutional reforms at the IGF have impacted the influence of youth organizations on the forum's messages.

ii. Influence on the IGF Messages

Within the same scope, meaningful influence shall be understood as the observable impact that youth organizations exert on the outcomes and agenda of the global IGF. Influence in multistakeholder forums like the IGF can manifest in various forms. It can range from informal discussions and symbolic presence to active agenda-setting and outcome shaping (Kara, 2007). This study, however, narrows its scope to two primary indicators of influence: the extent to which youth organizations' possess institutional mechanisms that allow for their engagement at the Annual Meeting Process (e.g., a dedicated track for youth) and their ability to contribute to the agenda-setting process (e.g., having topics relevant to youth organizations reflected in the IGF Messages). This operationalization is based on the process tracing between the policy priorities and demands articulated by youth groups (as found in their session reports and statements) and the content of the IGF's formal documentation, particularly the Annual Meeting Proceedings and official reports. Influence, in this context, will be considered meaningful when there is a clear alignment between what youth organizations have called for and what appears in the formal outputs, namely the IGF Messages.

There are, of course, broader ways in which youth participation may exert influence. They can include, for example, informal influence through networking and behind-the-scenes interactions, symbolic influence by contributing to the legitimacy and diversity of the forum through their presence (thus encouraging more youth engagement). There are also more concrete forms of influence, such as institutional influence through participation in organizing committees or advisory structures such as the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) or the IGF Secretariat. However, this research will not investigate them and will limit

its focus to agenda-setting power and institutional influence, both of which can be more concretely assessed through document analysis and archival research. This choice is driven by both data availability and the methodological limitations of not conducting interviews or having access to participant observations. While informal forms of influence are undoubtedly important, they are more difficult to trace without qualitative fieldwork (Masaryk, 2014). Furthermore, from an institutional lens, the presence of youth perspectives in formal meeting outcomes serves as a more robust indicator that participatory mechanisms in place at the IGF can translate into substantive influence (Crowley & Moxon, 2017).

c. Process Tracing

To understand how the IGF impacts youth influence in digital governance, the best methodological approach is process tracing. This approach is particularly useful for studying governance processes, as it allows for a detailed examination of the mechanisms that enable or constrain youth influence within multistakeholder organizations (Beach & Pedersen, 2011). Process tracing is also relevant because it can help determine whether youth actors effectively contribute to decision-making or whether their participation remains largely symbolic. By systematically analyzing the steps through which youth engagement translates into policy impact, the research can isolate the specific mechanisms at play (Collier, 2011). The exact description of how the proposed process will be investigated follows in the “Data Analysis” section.

i. Data Collection

To implement process tracing, the research will construct a timeline of youth involvement in IGF decision-making processes from 2020 to 2024. The choice for this period comes from the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic marked a milestone in internet governance discussions, as the whole world experienced firsthand its centrality in their lives. Moreover, previous to 2020, the discussion concerning the inclusion of youth had not become a mainstream line at the forum, which hinders a more precise process tracing analysis. It also arises from the constraint that the most recent IGF Annual Meeting Proceedings were published in 2024. The first step in data collection involves retrieving these documents. They serve as authoritative records of the forum’s discussions, providing a standardized basis for tracking the presence and visibility of youth-related inputs over time. Their selection is driven by the need to

systematically capture the formal channels through which youth participation manifests at the IGF.

Other than these documents, the data pool for this study also includes the key messages from youth organizations over this period of time. One consequence of the creation of the IGF was the creation of multiple national and regional subgroups that conduct meetings and produce outcomes and messages on their own (IGF, 2021b). These documents highlight how youth perspectives are presented, and their reflection in the centralized IGF outcomes could be a relevant indicator of whether they are capable of influencing broader decision-making. Analyzing the messages and reports generated by youth organizations adds a necessary bottom-up perspective, enabling a critical examination of how grassroots contributions are (or are not) reflected in centralized decision-making outputs.

As explained in the “Operationalization” section, for the scope of this analysis, based on data availability and the attempt to broaden the analysis spectrum by including organizations from different engagement models, only a representative number will be selected. They will have their data compiled for cross-referencing with the IGF Annual Meeting Proceedings. Reiterating the reason for this choice, it stemmed from both the goal to detect possible variations in the results linked to different levels of formalization or proximity to the IGF’s institutional structures and data availability constraints.

Speaking to the feasibility of this study, IGF records, reports, meeting summaries, etc., are all publicly accessible documents. That is also the case for most documents of the youth stakeholder organizations selected. Therefore, accessibility shall not impose any major hurdles to the data collection process. Lastly, the timeframe from 2020 to 2024 provides a manageable dataset while allowing for meaningful longitudinal analysis.

ii. Data Analysis

The analysis of collected data will follow an interpretivist logic and will attempt to establish causal links between youth participation and policy outcomes through structured processes. For that, the first step will be to produce a chronological mapping aimed at highlighting the cause of the process that is being traced, namely the adaptable institutional framework of the IGF. To offer a background of how it came to be, a brief timeline of institutional changes aiming at stakeholder, and especially, youth inclusivity within the forum’s framework from its conception until 2020 will be showcased. After this step, it will then be possible to focus

in depth on the institutional changes that can be found in the Annual Meeting Proceedings from 2020 until 2024. The main focus will be on the institutionalization of youth participation through the creation of the Youth Track (first causal mechanism).

The next step will be to investigate the second causal mechanism in this process. To analyze whether the outcomes from the Youth Track, the Youth Messages are mirrored in the general forum's messages, this paper will look into representative organizations for each model presented, tracing their development, published messages, and contributions to multistakeholder discourse. The sources consist of a mix of communiqués, official meeting reports, websites, policy recommendations, and key messages. As different organizations advocate and are also structured differently, the mixing of sources was necessary to grasp the key points they want to influence.

As a standard procedure for process tracing, the final stage will be to critically discuss whether the proposed process led to the proposed outcome of enhanced agenda-setting capabilities and influence on the IGF Messages. Parallels to that, it is also necessary to isolate the findings from alternative explanations (Beach & Pedersen, 2011). For example, given the multistakeholder nature of the IGF, youth influence may be constrained by more powerful actors, such as governments and large tech firms. The analysis will consider whether policy shifts attributed to youth advocacy could instead be explained by interventions from other stakeholders or broader geopolitical developments.

iii. Standards for Causal Inference

To rigorously apply process tracing, it is essential to distinguish between necessary and sufficient conditions (Collier, 2011) for youth influence. In the case at hand, the necessary condition is the presence of institutionalized youth participation mechanisms in multistakeholder organizations. Without formal inclusion mechanisms (e.g., youth-dedicated sessions, agenda-setting opportunities, or institutionalized participation frameworks), youth cannot meaningfully influence policy outcomes. The sufficient condition is that the presence of youth-inclusive multistakeholderism guarantees youth influence. If multistakeholder organizations are inclusive, but a clear and isolated causal relationship demonstrating youth shaping outcomes is not present, then inclusivity is not sufficient by itself.

iv. Validity, Reliability, Transferability & Replicability

Reliability in this research is ensured through the sourcing of data from multiple sources, such as official IGF records and qualitative insights from stakeholder (youth organizations) reports. By cross-referencing these diverse sources, the study mitigates the risk of relying on potentially biased or incomplete data, thereby enhancing the robustness of its conclusions. Additionally, process tracing plays a crucial role in reinforcing credibility, as it will systematically examine the causal mechanisms linking youth participation to governance outcomes. This method allows for a step-by-step validation of claims, reducing the likelihood of erroneous causal attributions and increasing confidence in the study's findings (Collier, 2011).

The transferability of this research lies in its identification of key enabling factors, such as adaptable institutional design and the presence of inclusive norms. These elements can inform the adaptation of multistakeholder frameworks in other global governance settings facing similar representation challenges. While the IGF represents an innovative governance setting, it is not unique, therefore, the insights gained from analyzing youth participation can be extended to other multistakeholder frameworks. However, the fact that it represents a most likely scenario calls for further research into different organizations. For that, the whole methodological process, coding schemes, etc., will be rigorously recorded to ensure replicability in future studies.

v. Reflexivity

As the researcher of this paper and a young person myself, especially due to the qualitative nature of this research, it is necessary to recognize potential biases that could influence my interpretation of youth participation (Beach & Pedersen, 2011). The biggest bias could surge, particularly in distinguishing between what can be considered symbolic and substantive contributions, as my interpretation might include a different hurdle than people from different age groups. For example, more senior policymakers might consider the opportunity to speak on a plenary panel at the IGF as a substantive contribution, especially given the visibility and recognition it could bring. However, I would argue that it is largely symbolic, particularly if it is not accompanied by involvement in shaping policy drafts, agenda-setting, or follow-up mechanisms.

Additionally, there is a risk of overempathizing with youth actors, which could lead to an overestimation of their influence or the significance of their contributions. Confirmation bias may also arise, particularly if there is a subconscious inclination to highlight examples that support the narrative of meaningful youth impact while overlooking instances of tokenistic participation. Finally, as this research involves interpreting documents and workshop reports often framed in advocacy language, there is a risk of conflating aspirational rhetoric with actual influence on decision-making processes. Recognizing these potential biases is crucial for maintaining analytical rigor and ensuring that findings are presented with appropriate critical distance (Berger, 2015). To mitigate this, all decisions in the research process and their rationale are detailed and transparently reported through the standards mentioned above.

Conversely, my inclusion in the target group of the case study at hand offers me a privileged position of awareness concerning what young people wish for in their calls for systemic inclusivity and what the tokenistic experience looks like. These privileged insights further allow me to delimit which topics inside such a big scope should be addressed, and also how to communicate them effectively to people who could be interested in the findings of this study.

5. Results

a. A Background History of Youth Participation at the IGF (2006-2020)

The first step in this process tracing (the cause) consists of the institutional adaptability of the IGF as a multistakeholder organization. Therefore, the first step consists of understanding its creation and development. Although the core analysis will focus on the period between 2020-2024, to understand the mechanisms that shaped youth organizations' influence, it is essential to first look at the intertwining historical relationship between young people and the IGF itself. For that, the best approach is to visualize a timeline with all key elements from the creation of the forum until 2020, that either directly impacted youth engagement or were brought about because of it.

The information presented in this section stems mainly from the “Youth Engagement at the IGF” publication from 2021 (IGF, 2021b), which summarized and highlighted how youth participation took place at the IGF and which institutional mechanisms granted them this access. Additionally, academic works that have evaluated stakeholder engagement at the

forum until 2020 will also offer interesting insights into its development history (Aguerre et al., 2018; Epstein & Nonnecke, 2016; Spuy & Reneses, 2021; Tjahja et al., 2021).

Within the IGF arena, the inclusion and empowerment of young voices has been a gradually evolving process. Its journey at the IGF spans nearly two decades and reflects the stated growing recognition that young people must be integrated into discussions shaping the digital landscape (Spuy & Reneses, 2021). From indirect early appearances to the creation of structured, youth-led initiatives and institutional reforms designed to foster their presence, the history of youth at the IGF charts this progression in different phases.

i. The Formation of Institutional Roots (2006 - 2010)

In its early years, youth engagement was relatively informal and minimal, with young participants attending as general observers rather than as formal contributors to discussions or decision-making processes. Although young people were present, no formal institutional mechanisms were in place to foster their active participation (Tjahja et al., 2021). The foundational principles of the IGF (openness, transparency, inclusivity, and a bottom-up approach) laid the groundwork for greater youth involvement. These principles encouraged diverse stakeholder participation, creating a vision for a future in which youth voices would be recognized as essential in global Internet governance dialogues (IGF, 2021).

ii. First Inclusionary Waves and NRI Expansion (2010 - 2015)

The period from 2010 to 2015 marked a pivotal phase in the institutional development of youth engagement at the IGF. One of the most significant shifts during this time was the emergence of National, Regional, Subregional, and Youth IGF Initiatives (NRIs), which were inspired by the global IGF model and replicated in various countries and regions (IGF, 2021). Local communities began to establish their own IGF-like processes that adhered to the core values of the global forum. These NRIs gradually started integrating youth-focused programs into their annual meetings (Epstein & Nonnecke, 2016).

Notable developments during this period included the development of recurring youth segments within national IGF frameworks, such as in the case of the “Netherlands Youth IGF”, which provided dedicated spaces for young voices to discuss relevant issues. In the Asia-Pacific region, the Youth IGF organized by “NetMission.Asia” emerged as an exemplary model. Held parallel to the Asia Pacific Regional IGF (APrIGF), this initiative

employed a multistakeholder camp-style format where participants assumed stakeholder roles and deliberated on governance issues, simulating the IGF environment (IGF 2021).

This period also saw the institutional recognition of these initiatives by the IGF Secretariat. Initiatives that adhered to IGF's baseline principles were formally listed and supported, further legitimizing youth participation and encouraging replication across different regions (Aguerre et al., 2018).

iii. The Mandate Extension and Formal Recognition of Youth IGFs (2015 - 2020)

A significant institutional milestone was reached in 2015 when the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) extended the IGF's mandate for another ten years under Resolution 70/125. This renewal catalyzed a surge in youth-focused engagement and structural reforms within the IGF ecosystem (Spuy & Reneses, 2021).

A surge of youth movements both inside existing structures and as independent organizations became clear. By the end of the IGF 2020 cycle, there were 91 recognized national IGFs, 19 regional and subregional IGFs, and 22 independently organized Youth IGFs. Many NRIs also embedded youth programs within their standard operations, even if they were not classified as separate Youth IGFs (IGF, 2021).

Prominent independently organized initiatives included the Youth LACIGF, which became operational in 2016. This initiative was structured around public polling, stakeholder inclusivity, and quadrilingual communication strategies to engage diverse communities across the region (YouthLACIGF, 2025). The German Youth IGF also emerged as an example of autonomous youth governance. For its participation in the Annual IGF of 2021, it employed a bottom-up process that included public consultation for agenda development and offered grants to ensure equitable participation, while youth representatives held seats on the national IGF steering committee (Youth IGF Germany, 2021).

A hallmark of these independent youth initiatives was the production of messages, which captured the priorities and policy recommendations of participants (IGF, 2020). These were formally submitted to both national and global IGFs, signaling a shift toward an increasing understanding of the relevance of youth contribution to Internet governance discourse (IGF,

2021). However, they were not officially added as a section of the final output document until 2022 (IGF, 2022).

Parallel to this development, the evolution of youth engagement also extended into the IGF's core governance structures. The MAG, responsible for organizing the annual IGF programme, began to actively support the inclusion of young people in its processes. From 2016 onward, youth were encouraged to contribute session proposals, take part in open consultations, and participate in intersessional work such as Dynamic Coalitions (DCs) and Best Practice Forums (BPFs) (IGF, 2021).

All of these developments culminated in the establishment of the Global Youth Summit in 2020. Conceived as a centralized platform to amplify youth perspectives across national, regional, and global levels, the summit brought together young stakeholders from around the world to consolidate their priorities and feed them directly into the broader IGF agenda (IGF, 2020). The Global Youth Summit marked a significant institutional acknowledgment of youth as legitimate and necessary actors in digital governance.

b. The Annual Meeting Proceedings: A Roadmap for Institutional Developments

At this point, with a clearer overview of the cause of the process, it is now possible to start analyzing the causal mechanisms that theoretically lead to a bigger influence of youth in the IGF Messages. The first causal mechanism concerns the institutionalization of the participation of youth organizations, which was pushed for by stakeholder negotiations. As explained in previous sections, the best documents to offer a clear evolution of institutional developments of the forum are the "Annual Meeting Proceedings".

The recommendations that follow the yearly IGF process to broader UN institutions and the international community concerned with Internet governance appear in distinct formats. The Annual Meeting Proceedings consist of the central document issued after every global IGF that summarizes all key discussions, workshops, and messages from the sessions (IGF, 2025b). A central part of it is the key messages, which will be analyzed separately, as they represent the clearest outline of policy recommendations by the forum. However, before focusing on the content of the documents, it is necessary to understand what they generally entail and how the documents are structured.

Each IGF annual meeting is designed through a collaborative and multistakeholder process led by the MAG, with administrative support from the IGF Secretariat under the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) (IGF, 2025a). The planning phase typically begins months in advance with a public call for thematic input, allowing stakeholders to propose priority issues to be addressed at the upcoming forum. This consultation phase informs the creation of overarching themes and thematic tracks (IGF, 2025b). Once thematic priorities are established, the programme structure is developed. The highlights are frequently the “Main Sessions”, curated by the MAG and typically led by high-profile speakers and experts. These sessions address the Forum’s core themes and often result in structured summaries that contribute to the final meeting messages (IGF, 2020, 2021a, 2022, 2023, 2024). The High-Level Leaders Track, initiated in earlier forums but significantly expanded after 2020, provides space for ministers, CEOs, and heads of international organizations to deliberate on pressing global digital issues (IGF, 2025a). Complementing the central sessions are community-driven activities, such as workshops that offer thematically focused discussions proposed by stakeholders across sectors and geographies.

Departing from a clearer understanding of everything that can be found in the Annual Meeting Proceedings, it is now possible to analyze their development over the years. Starting with the 2020 IGF, it is possible to notice that it was shaped significantly by the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a fully virtual format. This was a turning point that redefined how accessibility and participation could be scaled. With themes structured around Data, Environment, Inclusion, and Trust, the IGF 2020 established a foundation for more focused dialogue that would also be observed in the following editions (IGF, 2020). Importantly, it also marked the debut of the Global Youth Summit, a landmark event that included young participants from around the world in high-level discussions (IGF, 2020, p.13). The main turning point pushed by its creation was the recognition of the importance of youth as policy actors rather than just beneficiaries of digital governance (IGF, 2020, p.20).

In 2021, the IGF began aligning more closely with the United Nations Secretary General’s (UNSG) “Roadmap for Digital Cooperation” (UNSG, 2020). It introduced preparatory and engagement phases that allowed for a more consultative and deliberative programming process (IGF, 2021a, p.54). Moreover, the 2021 edition strengthened the position of youth through dedicated working groups and pre-forum consultations. The Global Youth Summit,

organized in cooperation with youth-led groups like the Youth IGF Poland and the YCIG, became a space where youth not only participated but also contributed strategic messages, particularly related to digital rights and data governance (IGF, 2021a, p.33). In parallel, the IGF saw increased representation of NRIs, with 141 recognized by that year, and many of these incorporating youth-specific tracks or organizations, further embedding youth in national and regional digital discourse (IGF, 2021a, p.54).

The year of 2022 is the key point of analysis in this study, as it is when both the causal mechanisms hypothesized in the theoretical approach came into existence. First, the institutionalization of the Youth Track marked the decisive shift toward formalizing youth participation through institutional mechanisms (first causal mechanism). It comprised four capacity development workshops held in conjunction with regional IGFs such as the LACIGF, culminating in a consolidated Global Youth Summit (IGF, 2022, p.17). The track engaged over 7000 young people and represented a maturation of the youth engagement model, where youth were no longer dispersed participants to isolated sessions but actively shaped discussions about emerging technologies, rights, and governance models (IGF, 2022, pp.16). Furthermore, the Youth Track culminated in the first “Messages from Youth”, which represents the second causal mechanism, and the third step in this process tracing. A more in-depth analysis of them will follow in the key messages section, however, their sole existence already highlights the relevance youth voices were gaining inside the Annual Meeting process.

The IGF 2023 built on these structural innovations, expanded the thematic breadth of the forum and deepened intergenerational dialogue. The 18th IGF introduced eight thematic sub-tracks, including topics such as AI and Emerging Technologies, Digital Inclusion, Human Rights and Freedoms, and Sustainability and Environment (IGF, 2023, p.21). These categories reflected a stronger alignment with the UNSG’s agenda for a Global Digital Compact (EOSG, 2023). Beyond content, 2023 also saw notable progress in accessibility mechanisms. Innovations such as a 3D venue for remote attendees, interactive dashboards, and multilingual livestreaming expanded the IGF’s inclusivity, facilitating hybrid participation at unprecedented scale (IGF, 2023, p.15).

By 2024, the IGF had significantly transformed both in structure and content. The Riyadh-hosted forum saw over 300 sessions and introduced more systematic integration of regional, national, and youth voices into core policy deliberations (IGF, 2024, p.52). The

Youth Track, once again, ran through four regional preparatory workshops and culminated in a high-level intergenerational dialogue focused on AI in education. Thousands of young participants contributed ideas on algorithmic fairness, inclusive AI education, and multilingual digital tools, which were consolidated into a comprehensive Youth Message submitted during the forum (IGF, 2024, p.29). This marked a high point in youth influence within the IGF, with their perspectives feeding into central discussions on the future of global digital governance. Structurally, the IGF 2024 report also highlights institutional innovations such as the launch of a dedicated mobile app, bilateral remote meeting capabilities, and travel grants specifically earmarked for participants from the Global South, including young journalists (IGF, 2024, p.20). These features also demonstrate the forum's deliberate attempt to democratize access and influence.

c. The Development of Youth Organizations' Messages

Having grasped how the adaptability of the IGF's framework led to the institutionalization of youth organizations through the Youth Track, the next step consists of analyzing the second causal mechanism. According to the proposed process, once youth organizations have a clear platform at the forum to disseminate their messages, their increasing mirroring within the general forum's messages would be expected. To investigate whether that is the case, the coming sections will analyze the development of the messages of the different selected youth organizations over the years, as well as the IGF Messages themselves. Reiterating the data selection approach, those organizations represent a variety of operational models and geographical origins, offering a broader overview of how engagement at the IGF looked over the years. A detailed analysis of all the examples, therefore, contributes to a stronger transferability of the findings of this study.

i. Youth Programmes Integrated Within NRIs

Youth programs embedded within NRIs represent an essential entry point for localized engagement. These initiatives often operate as sessions or tracks within broader IGF national or regional structures, offering youth the chance to participate alongside institutional stakeholders while learning about governance processes (IGF, 2021). A great example is "The Netherlands Youth IGF", as it remains one of the most institutionalized Model I initiatives in Europe. It is organized with support from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Policy and is embedded within the Dutch national IGF. Between 2021 and 2023, the

“Netherlands IGF” initiative focused mainly on privacy, surveillance, and ethical tech design, topics that reflect the country’s national security concerns. From the event reports, it was not possible to single out the presence of youth or specific messages from “The Netherlands Youth IGF” (NLIGF, 2021, 2022, 2023).

Although following the same model, the Asia Pacific Youth IGF showcases a different reality. As a part of the “NetMission.Asia” NRI, this organization, has found significantly more independence to voice its priorities. In 2020, the forum adapted to a virtual format due to the global pandemic, focusing on foundational issues such as digital inclusion, cybersecurity, and the ethical use of emerging technologies (Asia Pacific Youth IGF, 2020). By 2021, the discussions had expanded to encompass topics like sustainable digital development and the environmental impacts of technology, reflecting a growing awareness of the intersection between digital governance and broader societal challenges (Asia Pacific Youth IGF, 2021). The 2022 edition emphasized the importance of trust in digital environments, addressing concerns related to data privacy, misinformation, and the need for transparent governance mechanisms (Asia Pacific Youth IGF, 2022). In 2023, the forum highlighted the role of youth in shaping policies around artificial intelligence, digital literacy, and equitable access to digital resources, underscoring the increasing sophistication of youth engagement with complex policy issues (Asia Pacific Youth IGF, 2023). The 2024 event further advanced this trajectory by focusing on intergenerational collaboration and policy innovation, aiming to bridge gaps between youth perspectives and established policymaking processes (Asia Pacific Youth IGF, 2024).

ii. Independently Organized Youth IGFs

Independently organized youth IGFs operate autonomously, often with their own steering committees, funding sources, and agendas. These initiatives mirror the format of NRIs, but are fully youth-led (IGF, 2021). As one of the most prominent cases, the “Youth Latin America and the Caribbean IGF (LACIGF)”, launched in 2016, plays a vital role in the Latin American region. Similar to other independently organized IGFs, its agenda-setting process involves public consultations and regional polling. In 2020, adapting to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the forum transitioned to a virtual format, engaging 76 young participants from 15 countries. The discussions centered on digital inclusion, privacy, and the ethical implications of data usage during health emergencies (Youth LACIGF, 2020). By 2021, participation expanded to 89 youths from 16 countries, with a broader agenda that

incorporated topics such as digital rights, online education, and the impact of emerging technologies on youth (Youth LACIGF, 2021). The 2022 edition saw further growth, with 180 participants from 17 countries, however, there were no official documents available to showcase the thematic focus of the event (Youth LACIGF, 2025). The 2023 forum marked a return to hybrid events, totaling 266 participants from 21 countries. Key themes included artificial intelligence, digital inclusion, and the protection of human rights online (Youth LACIGF, 2023). In 2024, although the official report was not available, the agenda of the event demonstrates its focus on AI and data governance, digital rights and freedoms, cybersecurity, and environmental sustainability (Youth LACIGF, 2024).

A further very relevant example can be found at the “Youth Russian Internet Governance Forum (Youth RIGF)”. In the context of increasing geopolitical tensions and Russia's exclusion from various multilateral forums, its continued organization from 2021 to 2024 stood out as a significant platform for Russian youth to engage in digital governance discussions. The lack of mention of the Russian war on Ukraine over the years and the relevance of the digital environment in this context must also be discussed. It is evident that under an authoritarian regime that limits freedom of speech, it could be dangerous for the participants to voice their opinions on the war (Tertychnaya & Tiratsoo, 2024). Thus, showcasing the susceptibility of multistakeholder organizations to the political constraints that can be imposed by States. The inaugural Youth RIGF in 2021 focused on topics such as digital economy, personal data protection, and the impact of social networks on youth (YRIGF, 2021). In 2022, the forum expanded its scope, introducing awards for outstanding youth IT projects and emphasizing discussions on metaverses and esports (YRIGF, 2022). The 2023 edition highlighted digital literacy and child online safety, introducing the “Safe Digital Childhood” award to recognize initiatives promoting a secure digital environment for children (YRIGF, 2023). By 2024, Youth RIGF had evolved into an international event, with participants from 11 countries launching the “Friends for Internet” community, an attempt to demonstrate a commitment to global collaboration despite political challenges (YRIGF, 2024).

iii. NRIs with Youth-Dedicated Capacity Building Tracks

This model reflects a hybrid design: NRIs that include dedicated capacity-building tracks or parallel schools to train youth before participation in broader IGF processes (IGF, 2021). As the first case from this classification, the “South Eastern European Dialogue on Internet

Governance (SEEDIG)” showcases very well what this engagement can look like. SEEDIG first introduced its Youth School in 2017. It consists of a capacity-building initiative aimed at equipping university students and young professionals from 18 countries in the SEEDIG region with foundational knowledge and skills in internet governance and digital policy (SEEDIG, 2025). The SEEDIG Youth School 2020 culminated in a debate on facial recognition technologies (FRT). The consensus was published online and emphasized the need for multistakeholder involvement in FRT implementation, protection of public interest and human rights, and the drafting of laws and regulations to prevent misuse (SEEDIG, 2020). The 2021 edition offered introductory online courses and meetings to participants on general topics of internet governance and digital policy, selecting a smaller group of students for further courses to foster deeper engagement with the topics (SEEDIG, 2021). The years 2022 and 2023 represented a hiatus for the SEEDIG Youth School. It is not clear whether the initiative did not take place or whether there is no public information on it. Nonetheless, as of 2024, information about the Youth School cohort is available on the website, indicating a similar program to previous editions before the hiatus (SEEDIG, 2024).

Another organization that offers a similar project, but from a national perspective rather than a regional one, is the “Brazil IGF”. Since 2015, it has organized the “Programa Youth” in a similar format to the SEEDIG Youth School. Although it does not publicly release specific messages or key topics of advocacy, it prepares its participants to engage at other Youth IGFs and the global IGF (Brazil IGF, 2025). Its structure follows a two-phased model: The first phase, called “Directed Study Phase”, includes up to 150 young individuals to participate in a five-week online capacity-building course. The curriculum evolved over the years to cover topics such as the technical foundations of the internet, the internet governance ecosystem, principles of internet governance in Brazil and globally, and current issues in internet governance. As for the second phase, the “Event Participation Phase”, 20 participants are chosen to attend the Brazil IGF. From those, 10 are further selected to participate in the LACIGF, and another 10 in the global IGF (Brazil IGF, 2025). With the caveat of 2021, records of the selection processes can be found on its website (Brazil IGF, 2020, 2022, 2023, 2024).

iv. Global Projects for Youth Empowerment

These initiatives are not tied to NRIs but operate globally, often leveraging digital tools and transnational networks to connect youth around shared Internet governance goals. Differently

to all previous models, these organizations operate more as centralizers of youth engagement at the global level. The “Youth IGF Movement”, for example, founded by “TaC-Together Against Cybercrime International”, operates in more than 40 countries. Although there are no official reports of messages, their positions can be found in their archive of publications directed to digital governance decision-makers (Youth IGF Movement, 2025). Starting in 2021, the Youth IGF Movement's publications addressed issues related to digital rights and online safety. Articles such as “Keeping children safe online is even more crucial during the pandemic” (Youth IGF Movement, 2021b) and “Green IT: ‘Fashion trend’ or asset?” (Youth IGF Movement, 2021a) highlighted their concerns with the importance of data privacy, the impact of misinformation, the role of youth in promoting digital literacy, and environmental impacts. As of 2022, publications expanded the discourse to include emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and their implications for society. A strong shift towards topics of cybersecurity due to the war in Ukraine could be perceived in publications such as “Cybersecurity skills in times of war: EU strategy” (Youth IGF Movement, 2022). The most recent publications, from 2023, reflected a more global perspective, with reports on events like the “Swiss Youth IGF” and discussions on international digital policy developments (Youth IGF Movement, 2023). The lack of articles since the middle of 2023 showcases the shift from the organization towards different methods of engagement, such as live reporting from the global IGF and the organization of podcasts (Youth IGF Movement, 2024).

The last organization that was considered for the data analysis is the “Youth Coalition on Internet Governance (YCIG)”. Since 2020, it has published regular position papers, open letters, and annual reports, offering a comprehensive overview of its activities. As one of the most prominent youth organizations in the IGF ecosystem, it also organizes a series of panels and delivers statements during the IGF Annual Meeting closing plenary (YCIG, 2025). In 2020, to cope with the pandemic situation, YCIG pivoted to virtual formats and emphasized foundational capacity-building. Its activities included hosting multiple sessions at IGF 2020, such as “Designing Inclusion Policies in Internet Governance”. By 2021, YCIG had expanded its programming and deepened its community engagement. Notably, it submitted multiple proposals to the IGF 2021, participating in sessions on youth and AI, cybersecurity, platform regulation, and environmental challenges like e-waste (YCIG, 2021). In 2022, it launched a series of preparatory webinars for IGF 2022, covering topics like AI governance, the metaverse, data privacy, and youth inclusion. It submitted 13 session proposals, 11 of which were accepted, including sessions such as “The Future of Interplanetary Networks”

and “Youthful Approaches to Data Protection” (YCIG, 2022). As of 2023, the YCIG focused more on strategic advocacy and representation at high-level events such as the World Forum on Human Rights and the GDC consultations (YCIG, 2023). The organization has yet to publicly release its 2024 Annual Report.

d. The Evolution of the IGF Messages: A Mirror of Youth Messages?

The next step consists of comparing the development of the messages from youth organizations with the general IGF Messages. Therefore, this section will provide, firstly, a contextualization and an overview of the evolution in content from the IGF Messages and the Youth Messages (since their creation in 2022) over the years. Secondly, it will analyze whether the separate messages from youth organizations (as discussed above) can be recognized in the Youth Messages. Lastly, it will investigate whether the second causal mechanism, namely the mirroring of content from these messages, can be found in the general IGF Messages.

Despite not being a decision-making body, the IGF plays a critical normative role through the generation of policy-relevant outputs. One of the most visible of these outputs is the “IGF Messages” document, released as the concluding part of the Annual Meeting Proceedings. These messages compile the core recommendations and insights from session organizers, thematic tracks, and stakeholder groups. The content is arranged by theme, with each section summarizing challenges, recommended actions, and stakeholder perspectives in concise, policy-friendly language (IGF, 2025a).

Communicating discussions and outcomes at high levels of policymaking has always been a big challenge in politics, also extending to international governance (Sanders, 2017). The IGF Messages were introduced to tackle that and offer a structured, accessible summary of key policy discussions (IGF, 2025a). The key differential point of such a structure to deliver messages is that it can serve both as a documentation and advocacy tool, communicating summarized outcomes to policymakers, UN agencies, civil society organizations, and the broader Internet governance community.

In the initial year of analysis, 2020, the IGF Messages were divided according to four thematic tracks: “Data, Environment, Inclusion, and Trust”. These categories broadly reflected the concerns of the digital governance ecosystem in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular attention to inclusion, health-related digital infrastructure, and the

importance of universal access (IGF, 2020, p.17). Key insights called for affordable access to the Internet globally, digital literacy investments, and the establishment of national digital health strategies (IGF, 2020, pp. 17-19). Concerning youth representation, although messages from the Global Youth Summit were attached as an annex, the document could not be accessed. Therefore, a clear transmission of youth perspectives could not be analyzed.

As of 2021, the “Katowice IGF Messages” expanded the thematic range into six issue areas: “Economic and Social Inclusion and Human Rights, Universal Access and Meaningful Connectivity, Emerging Regulation, Environmental Sustainability and Climate Change, Inclusive Governance, and Trust and Security (IGF, 2021a, pp.17-25). The process became more inclusive, with the Secretariat publicly inviting key takeaways and calls to action from all participants at the end of each session (IGF, 2021a, p.17). In this edition, the Global Youth Summit messages were attached successfully as an annex; however, they still did not represent a direct part of the forum’s Key Messages (IGF Global Youth Summit et al., 2021).

As highlighted in the Annual Meeting Proceedings section, the major transformation occurred in 2022. In general, the “Addis Ababa IGF Messages” continued to reflect key takeaways across five thematic areas: Connectivity and Rights, Data Governance, Avoiding Internet Fragmentation, Safety and Accountability, and Advanced Technologies (IGF, 2022, p.51). Interestingly, this was the last set of messages to mention the Covid-19 pandemic (IGF, 2022, p.52) and the first to make AI a separate theme for the messages (IGF, 2022, p.66). However, the biggest change concerning youth influence came with the introduction of the “Youth Messages” section for the first time. This marked a formal recognition of youth as independent policy contributors within the IGF process (second causal mechanism). These messages, curated from four regional youth preparatory workshops from the Youth Track and the Global Youth Summit, emphasized issues such as meaningful youth participation in governance structures and the importance of intersectionality with other marginalized groups, such as those focused on gender and race-based approaches (IGF, 2022, pp.22). This development reflects the impacts of the institutional reforms aimed at better embedding youth engagement into the IGF architecture.

The 2023 “Kyoto IGF Messages” reinforced this approach. The expanding range of overarching themes in the key messages was structured around eight tracks, including (amongst others): Artificial Intelligence, Cybersecurity, Digital Inclusion, and Global Digital Cooperation (IGF, 2023, p.55). A relevant characteristic that permeated other documents but

is especially noticeable in this edition is the avoidance of the mention of direct conflicts. Policy recommendations in the area of respect for human rights and freedoms advise governments to curb restrictions on access to information and mention the relevance of private companies in the dissemination of information in conflict zones, but do not escalate from that (IGF, 2023, pp.70). This year's "Messages from Youth" section captured once again insights from the Global Youth Summit and regional preparatory sessions. Key takeaways emphasized the role of youth in shaping digital policy, the inclusion of digital literacy in educational curricula, and the urgent need for intergenerational collaboration on cybersecurity, privacy, and digital rights (IGF, 2023, pp.24).

Finally, in 2024, the Riyadh IGF Messages underscored the forum's alignment with the Global Digital Compact and the WSIS+20 review. The overarching theme of the forum was supported by a more focused structure (in comparison to previous editions) of four pillars: "Innovation and Risk, Peace and Development, Human Rights and Inclusion, and Digital Governance" (IGF, 2024, pp.62). The messages of this edition did not present a significant thematic shift from the previous years, focusing more on the renovation of the IGF mandate and its future. The Youth Messages remained a formal component, demonstrating an institutional reinforcement of youth engagement (IGF, 2024, p.30). The 2024 Youth Messages specifically focused on the intersection of artificial intelligence and education, reflecting broader forum priorities regarding emerging technologies. Youth representatives called for the development of AI tools that streamline educators' workloads and support independent student learning. Furthermore, they highlighted the necessity of involving young people directly in the design, development, and deployment of AI tools in educational contexts, thereby recognizing youth not only as beneficiaries but as co-creators of digital policy (IGF, 2024, pp.30).

From comparing the topics raised by the youth organization in the previous section and the main themes of the Youth Messages observed here, it becomes clear that both are directly aligned. Arguably, by structurally including youth organizations in the preparatory processes of the Annual Meeting as well as in the execution of sessions in Youth Track, the IGF was able to offer a centralized platform for them to convey their messages. Having established that, it is now possible to analyze whether youth actors' messages are indeed being mirrored in the IGF Messages. For that, a comparative analysis of key messages was conducted across three consecutive years, 2022-2024 (the three years when the Youth Messages have been

added to the Annual Meeting Proceedings). The table below (Figure 3) presents selected examples where youth messages align closely in both content and language with the IGF Messages.

Only two examples per year were selected to maintain analytical clarity and conciseness. This choice allows for a focused yet representative exploration of the broader trend without diluting the argument through excessive enumeration. The selected examples reflect thematic diversity (e.g., AI, muktistakeholder framework, digital rights) and are drawn from distinct policy areas, making them sufficient to demonstrate both the pattern of alignment and its significance within the IGF ecosystem.

<p align="center">Content Comparison of Selected Sections from the Youth and IGF Messages (2022–2024)</p>		
Year & Topic	Corresponding passage found in the “Youth Messages”	Corresponding passage found in the “IGF Messages”
<p>2022 - The Digital Divide & Inclusion of Marginalized Communities</p>	<p>“Sustainable digital transformation requires a focus on the Internet as a public space that does not exclude marginalized communities (such as gender-diverse people, ethnic and racial minorities, women) [...]” (IGF 2022, p. 22).</p>	<p>“Digital disadvantage is greater among vulnerable and marginalised communities, and many people experience multiple disadvantages through the combination of factors related to age, gender, ethnicity, language, social class, and other factors. Targeted initiatives in infrastructure, devices, and services [...] need to be accompanied by measures to address other deficiencies in meaningful access [...]” (IGF 2022, p. 53).</p>
<p>2022 - Education as a Tool for Digital Transformation</p>	<p>“Tools and processes for education and participation have to be accessible in order for youth to be a positive force in a sustainable digital transformation” (IGF 2022, p. 23).</p>	<p>“The internet provides opportunities for enhancing rights to education, as part of broader policies for educational improvement. The quality of education in the Global South, particularly during the pandemic, has suffered due to a lack of connectivity. [...] Experience during the</p>

		<p>pandemic can be used to improve the use of digital resources in the future” (IGF 2022, p. 54).</p>
<p>2023 - Digital Literacy and Safety</p>	<p>“Empowering youth with digital skills and knowledge is essential for protecting their rights and privacy in the digital era” (IGF 2023, p. 24).</p>	<p>“To achieve true value, (Internet) access must be inclusive, useful, sustainable, affordable and linked to digital literacy opportunities that respond to users’ circumstances, skills, needs and priorities” (IGF 2023, p. 66).</p>
<p>2023 - Multistakeholder Governance Model</p>	<p>“A multistakeholder approach is essential to establish international standards for online safety, engaging diverse voices and expertise” (IGF 2023, p. 24).</p>	<p>“The multistakeholder model has been a defining characteristic of Internet governance, allowing a diverse range of stakeholders, [...] to participate in decision-making, facilitating both inclusivity and collaboration and promoting a balanced and fair approach to addressing the challenges of the digital age” (IGF 2023, p. 66).</p>
<p>2024 - Equitable Access to AI</p>	<p>“Implement targeted policies to address the digital divide, ensuring equitable access to AI tools and digital technologies for underserved and marginalized communities” (IGF 2024, p. 30).</p>	<p>“As the AI divide exacerbates the digital divide, promoting equitable access to AI tools for underserved communities is crucial” (IGF 2024, p. 65).</p>
<p>2024 - Youth Co-creation of Digital Governance Frameworks</p>	<p>“Involve young people in the design, development, and implementation of AI tools in education to ensure their needs are addressed” (IGF 2024, p. 31).</p>	<p>“Recognizing youth as stakeholders in digital governance frameworks ensures that policies reflect diverse perspectives and the needs of future generations” (IGF 2024, p. 77).</p>

Figure 3: Table comparing approaches to selected topics relevant to youth between the “Youth Messages” and the “IGF Key Messages” in the IGF Annual Meeting Proceedings between 2022-2024.

Comparing the content presented in the table, it becomes evident that after the creation of the Youth Track and the subsequent inclusion of the Youth Messages in the Annual Meeting Proceedings in 2022, an increasing mirroring of topics and positioning from the youth organizations can be observed in the general IGF Messages. Although this evidence indicates that youth organizations have gained in agenda-setting capability, therefore, enhancing their influence in the forum's messages, a critical discussion concerning the outcome (last step in the process tracing) is still needed. The following section will first assess the results obtained for the process tracing thus far, and then debate whether they indeed lead to the proposed outcome.

6. Critical Assessment

a. Multistakeholderism at the IGF

The IGF represents a paradigmatic case of how multistakeholderism can evolve as both an institutional structure and a normative commitment. Due to its size and relevance in the international digital governance sphere, it is clear that the IGF shapes the agenda of global discussions. Simultaneously, the forum operates under inclusive principles that should welcome a diversity of actors, including governments, civil society, the technical community, and the private sector. Therefore, investigating how its institutional framework shapes the participation and influence of its stakeholders is also of extreme relevance.

This paper has worked exactly within this scope, focusing on one of the multiple stakeholders that are part of the forum: youth. Throughout this analysis, the IGF has shown a relatively high degree of institutional adaptability to foster the inclusion of its stakeholders. For youth organizations, this could be particularly observed through initiatives such as the Global Youth Summit and, especially, the Youth Track, which have been created and expanded throughout the analysis period. These findings align with Expectation 1: that the multistakeholder structure of the IGF allows for increased implementation of structural reforms. As new institutionalist scholars such as Saurugger (2017) argue, institutions can evolve through actor-led norm shifts, and the IGF has proven responsive to internal and external pressures for inclusivity (Saurugger, 2017). The effects of the institutional inclusion of youth organizations through the creation of the Youth Track become evident in the significant rise of recognized youth IGFs and organizations participating across NRIs, regional IGFs, and global consultations. This growth to a number of over 175 (amongst which, 20 directly connected to youth topics) officially recognized NRIs has been accelerated, particularly after

this development (IGF, 2024, p.8). The findings thus validate the necessary condition for the causal inference on youth influence, namely, the existence of institutionalized youth participation mechanisms within multistakeholder organizations.

It is also essential to recognize the symbolic and strategic value that youth participation and the inclusion of other marginalized groups bring to the legitimacy of the IGF. In global governance spaces where representativeness is increasingly scrutinized, the inclusion of such groups not only as a normative ideal but also as a strategic resource can enhance the forum's democratic credentials (Jongen & Scholte, 2024). In this regard, the IGF's efforts to institutionalize youth participation through dedicated sessions, tracks, and consultative mechanisms can be seen not only as a response to normative pressures for inclusion but also as an exercise in safeguarding its own legitimacy in a fragmented and contested governance landscape. This is particularly relevant as multilateral institutions face declining trust and growing criticism for being outdated or unresponsive to contemporary challenges (Weinhardt & Dijkstra, 2024). The visible presence of youth signals an openness to future generations and may provide the IGF with a participatory edge that can distinguish it from more rigid multilateral counterparts.

Moreover, the structure of multistakeholderism at the IGF allows for a distinct form of influence that is not necessarily tied to formal power but to discursive authority. Youth organizations, by aligning their messaging with broader societal trends, such as digital rights, environmental sustainability, and ethical artificial intelligence, can occupy a discursive space that shapes norms and values even in the absence of binding outcomes (Tjahja & Potjomkina, 2024). In this way, youth actors can become important contributors to the ideational landscape of digital governance, not by necessarily dictating policy, but by framing the terms through which policy discussions are held. This aligns with constructivist perspectives on global governance, which emphasize that power in these spaces often resides in norm entrepreneurship and agenda-framing rather than formal institutional control (Orchard & Wiener, 2022). The IGF, by offering institutional channels through which youth can perform these roles, can enhance and leverage its function as a site of norm articulation and contestation.

b. Youth Participation: Influence Beyond Tokenism?

A central concern of this research is to go beyond the notion of youth participation and to evaluate whether youth engagement at the IGF constitutes meaningful influence or stops at tokenistic inclusion. Here, the two core metrics for assessing influence, (1) institutional mechanisms enabling participation (first causal mechanism), and (2) agenda-setting power (second causal mechanism), reflected in the forum's messages, offer a more nuanced evaluation of the forum's effectiveness.

The first metric, namely the growth in formalized pathways for youth participation, has already been discussed in the previous section. On the second metric of agenda-setting capability, there is a clear pattern of convergence between youth priorities and the IGF's central themes. Although some reflection was observed in 2020 and 2021, the creation of the "Youth Messages" from 2022 onwards ensured, first, an effective centralization of messages from youth organizations into a single document, and second, a clear connection between their priorities and the global IGF. The comparative table (Figure 3), which analyzed the content convergence based on selected examples from these years, showcases how the agenda points set out by youth organizations in the development of the Youth Messages were reflected in the general IGF Key Messages (IGF, 2022, 2023, 2024).

These examples align with Expectation 1a: that structural reforms within multistakeholderism can translate into greater youth influence in agenda-setting and, therefore, the forum's messages. Although both expectation are then validates (therefore, also the proposed process) and the correlations are clear, it is not possible to claim that this alone validates the sufficient condition that the establishment of institutional participation mechanisms lead to more influence. With the selection of only a handful of examples coming only from formal output documents, it is not possible to claim a complete translation of the messages from youth organizations into the whole forum. To establish a clear causal claim for this condition and isolate it from further mechanisms, qualitative work such as interviews is still warranted. However, while inconsistencies remain, particularly in the integration depth and implementation of youth recommendations, it is arguable that the IGF is making meaningful progress.

In an attempt to lay out a basic groundwork to start the isolation process of these findings from alternative explanations, it is important to note that the thematic convergence between

youth messages and the general IGF messages observed across the 2022–2024 period may result from a variety of influencing factors that go beyond direct agenda-setting power by youth actors. One potential explanation could be the alignment of youth priorities with those of their domestic contexts. As demonstrated in the analysis of national and regional Youth IGFs, host states and institutional partners often shape the focus of youth engagement through funding structures, agenda-setting processes, or localized concerns. For example, the Netherlands Youth IGF emphasized privacy and security in line with national policy orientations. In such cases, youth messages may reflect the embedded priorities of the states or institutions that support them, rather than autonomous agenda-setting by youth themselves. Furthermore, broader global trends in digital governance, such as the rise of discussions about artificial intelligence, cybersecurity risks, and environmental sustainability to the mainstream global stage, have naturally transformed them into central themes across all stakeholder groups, including youth. The widespread attention to AI, in particular, may not uniquely signal youth influence, but rather a shared sense of urgency that transcends age demographics.

Nonetheless, while these alternative explanations help account for thematic overlap, they fall short of fully explaining the increasing structural efforts made by the IGF to elevate youth voices. The institutionalization of the Youth Track, the proliferation of regional preparatory workshops, and the consistent inclusion of the dedicated Youth Messages section in the official IGF Annual Meeting Proceedings all point to a deliberate commitment to recognize and incorporate youth contributions. This sustained expansion of youth engagement infrastructure suggests more than mere alignment; it indicates a growing consensus that youth deserve a formalized, visible space in global governance processes, one that enables them not only to reflect prevailing agendas but to help shape them.

c. Possible Obstacles

While the IGF has made significant strides in promoting youth inclusion, persistent structural and normative barriers continue to hinder full participation. First, the framework of the IGF itself, which does not produce binding resolutions, places limits on how far any stakeholder can push for enforceable policy change (Malcolm, 2008). While this study does not seek to establish a causal link between financial contributions and influence within the IGF, it is important to acknowledge that disparities in access to resources may shape the dynamics of participation and visibility. States and private sector actors often provide critical funding for

the forum's operations, including the financing of Annual Meetings, support for NRIs, and contributions to the IGF Trust Fund. In some cases, these actors also offer logistical and technological infrastructure, such as venue hosting, digital platforms, or translation services, that are essential for the forum's functioning (IGF, 2025b). While such support is vital for sustaining an open and global forum, it raises questions about how resource provision may correlate with agenda-setting power, session prominence, or behind-the-scenes influence.

Secondly, although youth messages have increasingly found their way into the Annual Meeting Proceedings, their practical policy uptake remains uncertain. Measures, such as listing youth input without implementing corresponding recommendations, continue to offer a risk of symbolic inclusion. New institutionalism cautions that procedural reforms can mask deeper normative resistance to redistributive changes (Saurugger, 2017). While youth demands for ethical AI, inclusive governance, and digital rights align with many IGF priorities, youth voices can often function as normative endorsements rather than strategic shapers of the agenda (Tjahja & Potjomkina, 2024).

Third, logistical and cultural barriers persist. Disparities in institutional maturity between youth IGFs, such as the established Asia Pacific Youth IGF versus more fragile initiatives in other regions, reveal uneven development. Moreover, barriers related to language, internet access, and time zone coordination can hinder participation, especially from the Global South. This reinforces the intersectional critiques raised by scholars like Ardoin et al. (2013) and Hofstede (2001), who point to the compounded effects of cultural hierarchies and material constraints in global deliberative spaces (Ardoin et al., 2013; Hofstede, 2001).

d. Ways Forward & Recommendations

To consolidate and expand youth influence at the IGF, several forward-looking strategies can be considered. First, a youth advisory mechanism could be embedded within the IGF's architecture. Youth seats in the MAG, as well as observer or rotating positions in the Leadership Panel, would institutionalize the representational gains made over the past five years. These positions should be supported by consistent funding and training to ensure equitable and effective participation.

Second, enhancing regional capacity building is crucial. National and regional IGFs should adopt the best practices of initiatives like SEEDIG Youth School and Youth IGF Brazil's training model, which have demonstrated success in building sustainable, informed youth

engagement pipelines (Brazil IGF, 2025; SEEDIG, 2025).

Finally, an additional recommendation would be to establish a formal monitoring and evaluation framework within the IGF process, specifically focused on youth engagement. This mechanism could track the translation of youth messages into policy discussions and outputs, providing metrics on how often and how substantially youth proposals influence the IGF agenda and outcomes. Regular public reporting on these findings could improve transparency, enhance institutional accountability, and create feedback loops to further empower youth as legitimate contributors to global digital governance (Relly & Sabharwal, 2009).

e. Limitations & Future Research

This research, while providing a detailed longitudinal analysis of youth participation at the IGF from 2020 to 2024, faces several inherent limitations, particularly in relation to its methodological approach. The reliance on process tracing through archival research (primarily official IGF reports, youth messages, and organizational documents) offers valuable insights into institutional developments and the formal mechanisms of inclusion. However, this method is constrained by the fact that it captures only the officially documented aspects of youth participation. It does not account for informal influence, backstage negotiations, or the nuanced perceptions of participants themselves. This limitation still allows this study to claim the validity of the proposed process, expectations, and infer causality through the necessary condition. However, it does not allow establishing causality through the sufficient condition. As briefly mentioned above, qualitative interviews with youth participants, organizers, and institutional actors would present a great opportunity to capture subjective experiences, power dynamics, and informal mechanisms of influence that are not visible in formal outputs.

Additional limitations arise from the scope and delimitations of the study. While the focus on the IGF as a most likely scenario contributes to the generalizability of findings to other multistakeholder arenas, the selection of youth organizations was shaped by data availability, linguistic access, and institutional visibility, which may exclude smaller or less resourced groups. The temporal frame (2020-2024) also constitutes a limitation, as it coincides with unique global disruptions (e.g., COVID-19) that influenced participation patterns and digital governance priorities. Therefore, this paper encourages future studies to conduct similar

analyses within other delimitations.

Finally, further research is also warranted to examine how youth participation at the IGF translates into national and regional policymaking. While this study has demonstrated that the IGF serves as a discursive and symbolic forum for youth inclusion, the real test lies in whether these engagements lead to tangible policy influence. Comparative analyses across other multistakeholder platforms and follow-up studies on the implementation of youth recommendations could yield valuable insights into the durability and depth of youth influence.

7. Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore the question: “How can multistakeholder organizations shape the influence of youth in international governance?”. Using the IGF as a case study, and anchored in theories of institutionalism and multistakeholderism, the research has traced the evolution of youth participation at the IGF between 2020-2024. Through an in-depth analysis of the adaptable institutional framework of the forum, its organizational developments, and message alignment, it has provided empirical evidence that aligns with both expectations: (1) that the multistakeholder structure of the IGF has facilitated structural reforms, such as the Youth Track, ensuring institutional mechanisms for youth participation, and (1a) that these reforms have, to some extent, translated into agenda-setting influence for youth organizations.

Breaking down these findings into the individual steps of the hypothesized theory, this paper first provides an overview of the creation and development of the adaptable institutional framework of the IGF until the starting point of the analysis in 2020. Following the 2015 extension of the IGF mandate under UN Resolution 70/125, youth-focused reforms accelerated, culminating in the 2020 launch of the Global Youth Summit. On the first causal mechanism of the process, the study concluded that institutional mechanisms enabling youth participation grew significantly. The above-mentioned initiatives culminated in the institutionalization of youth participation by embedding regional preparatory processes and formalizing a channel for youth contributions through the Youth Track. By 2024, the number of youth IGFs, either independently organized or embedded within NRIs, had expanded to more than 20, covering regions as diverse as Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Russia, and South-Eastern Europe. This structural diversification showcased the IGF's capacity to serve

as a “scaffolded institution” that enables bottom-up engagement through top-down openness. These findings allowed for the causal inference through the necessary condition for influence, namely, institutionalized participation mechanisms. As for the second causal mechanism, namely, the mirroring of the messages from the youth organization into the IGF Messages through the creation of the Youth Messages, there was an observable convergence between the thematic priorities of youth and those of the forum itself. This demonstrated an increase in the forum’s perception of the relevance of youth as a policy-contributing actor, which arguably translated into the outcome of higher agenda-setting capability by them. Nonetheless, it was not possible to establish an isolated causal relationship for the sufficient condition, that the presence of youth-inclusive multistakeholderism guarantees youth influence.

Furthermore, while the IGF has demonstrated significant progress in integrating youth, practical obstacles, ranging from financial constraints and uneven regional capacities to cultural hierarchies, continue to limit the depth and consistency of youth participation. These challenges underscore the need for structural safeguards and funding mechanisms that can institutionalize youth representation in key IGF bodies, such as the MAG. Nonetheless, despite the caveats that permeate the study, the findings support the core arguments and structure of the proposed process.

Additionally, the research also emphasized the adaptability of youth actors themselves. Organizations like YCIG, Youth LACIGF, and Asia-Pacific Youth IGF have not only matured institutionally but also strategically aligned their outputs with the IGF’s evolving discourse. This reveals a form of embedded agency, where youth do not merely demand space but shape it by adapting to institutional norms and strategically inserting their messages into the forum’s epistemic fabric.

In the evolving landscape of digital governance, where norms are still negotiated more than legislated, the voices of youth must find their space and resonance. The IGF, with its flexible architecture and normative openness, has demonstrated that meaningful youth participation is not only possible but increasingly institutionalized. Yet, for this momentum to be sustained and deepened, both structural safeguards and cultural shifts are needed. The IGF offers a hopeful yet cautionary template of what youth influence can achieve, and where it may still fall short.

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