

# Advocacy Bytes

Case studies of civil society engagement  
in multilateral forums

ITU-T Study Group 13

# 1 Introduction

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## Dates covered by this case study

March 4–15 ; July 1–2, 2024

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## Type of mechanism

ITU–T Study Group 13

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## Background

The International Telecommunication Union is a multilateral agency of the UN whose role is to set and regulate standards related to telecommunications. Its work is organised into three Sectors: **ITU–R** (Radiocommunication), **ITU–T** (Standardization) and **ITU–D** (Development). The mandates and leadership teams of each Sector’s Study Groups are decided by their respective assemblies. In the case of ITU–T, this is the **World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly (WTSA)**.

**ITU–T**—the focus of this case study—develops some of the technical standards that ensure networks and technologies connect seamlessly. It does this by producing **Recommendations** within **Study Groups** which, while non-binding, exert significant normative influence over the global regulatory ecosystem of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Regional groups within ITU–T Study Groups assist in ensuring that ITU standards meet the needs of all regions.

**The ITU–T Study Group 13 on Future networks (SG13)** specifically focuses on the management of next-generation networks (NGNs). NGNs refer to non-radio networks which are packet-based, in contrast to the older circuit-switched networks. One example is 5G.

Through its Recommendations, SG13 seeks to inform standards around network development and management: providing technical guidance on their technical requirements, architectures, functional capabilities and interfaces, and the application of machine learning technologies.

### Why are human rights defenders concerned?

Currently, some states are seeking to expand the remit of SG13 to cover areas like AI. As we discuss below, **this poses risks to the multistakeholder model and the wider enjoyment of human rights**, due to the closed and multilateral nature of ITU discussions.

This remit of SG13 is reviewed at each WTSA conference. Based on the consensus of delegates, the remit is then adapted, and determines the SG's work for the next four-year study period. WTSA-24 decides the SG13's focus for the 2024-2028 study period.

The modification for the current remit was a focus of attention during the SG13 meetings in 2024, and also the subject of additional ad-hoc meetings in between to build consensus moving into WTSA-24.

## Structure and decision-making processes

ITU-T Study Groups are venues for ITU members to work collaboratively in responding to the priorities of the ITU membership, defined through each group's study questions.

Study questions represent issue areas and organise the SG's work into 'themes' that can progress the ITU's standardisation work within a particular field. The ITU-T Study Groups include experts representing government, industry and academia. These experts can participate in Study Groups as country delegation members (requiring government approval) or as independent sector members (business or academia).

Study Groups work under the leadership of chair people/vice-chair people. These leadership teams are decided by the WTSA through compromise and consensus, while seeking to ensure fair regional representation. Rapporteurs and associate rapporteurs—experts responsible for the coordination of a particular area of a Study Group's work—are appointed by a Study Group's chairperson. A staff member of the Geneva-based ITU secretariat is assigned to each Study Group to assist chair people/vice-chair people and rapporteurs in the performance of their tasks.

Participation in Study Group meetings can be in person (in Geneva) or remote, according to what is decided by the Study Group chairperson. Although a UN body, in practice, ITU-T works primarily in English.

During Study Groups meetings there are "plenary sessions", "working parties plenary sessions" and "questions sessions". Additional meetings can be organised for updates in new work items or new study period questions when useful to exchange information and advance consensus. Decision-making on Recommendations is made in the working parties' plenary sessions.

At “questions sessions”, every contribution from a delegation has an editor responsible for managing progress on the text. Templates are provided for proposing new work items and contributions on existing work items. A Work Programme database is maintained by the Study Group secretariat after each meeting to facilitate overall monitoring and management of the Study Group’s questions and work items.

During the session, the delegation responsible for a contribution will be called upon to present it, usually from the floor. Following this, the chairperson will invite questions for clarification, followed by questions of substance, to which the submitter may normally respond.

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## 2 What was at stake

### | Scope expansion fears

The Study Group SG13 meetings in March and July discussed a proposal for the creation of a focus group on “AI Native for Future Networks”. The proposal submitted by China, India and Turkey raised concerns within numerous delegations and sector members over the lack of clarity of its scope and how it fits with the SG13 mandate—which is meant to be focused on network management, not broadly on AI.

There were also concerns around the lack of agreed definition on what is understood as “native AI”. Previously, ITU-T used the more widely understood and defined concept of “machine learning”, which is explicitly linked to network management. From a civil society perspective, this broader and more nebulous conceptual scope was of concern because it could exceed the remit of SG13. There were also concerns about this work being advanced in other standardisation bodies and therefore creating duplicative standards and contributing to fragmentation within technical standards.

#### Why remit expansion matters

Human rights defenders are concerned about the expansion of SG13’s remit for two main reasons;



Erosion of multistakeholder principles, setting a precedent for issues like AI being discussed in multilateral forums, decreasing transparency and accountability.



Risk of standards undermining human rights.

Finally, after relevant scope clarifications during the July meeting, the focus group was approved for a 12 month period. However, its work will only begin after WTSA to ensure alignment with the broader ITU-T strategy on AI issues. In addition, China and India proposed a new study question on “User centric networking for emerging web”. Several delegations and sector members raised strong concerns about the very broad scope of the proposal and lack of robust gap analysis in relation to relevant work happening in other standards bodies. Most members of the group agreed that there wasn’t enough understanding of what the group should do and how it would be sufficiently different from work carried out elsewhere, as the ad hoc group created for the topic couldn’t agree on the direction of the work and other technical forums seem to be better positioned to research the topic. No agreement was reached in the March meeting. But at the July meeting, long discussions led to an agreement to put forward a new question for consideration during WTSA 2024 on “trusted information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructures and their applications including Web 3.0.”

## | The return of ‘New IP’

Another focal point of attention during this year at SG13 meetings was the definition of Computing Power Networks (CPN) under “question 2” and the implications of this definition for relevant ITU Recommendations. Those work items include elements of the “New IP proposal”, originally presented by the Chinese delegation in 2018 at the ITU. Even if the original proposal has not progressed, some of its problematic elements have been revived in other standards bodies and ITU-T Study Groups via these proposals. New IP is a proposal which could undermine an open Internet by standardising and embedding the potential for greater centralisation and surveillance within the Internet’s architecture.

### **What is New IP?**

In 2018, representatives of a number of Chinese companies put forward a set of proposals at the ITU with the aim of establishing an alternative network architecture and set of protocols to the current system. One of the core features of this alternative vision for the Internet is the transformation of the network layer, which would be altered to allow it to carry greater information about the content and identity of users, posing risks to privacy and potentially impacting the decentralised management and open architecture of the Internet.

### 3 Challenges for civil society engagement

- The ITU's multilateral nature means **decision making power is limited to Member States**;
  - There are a **limited number of national delegations which welcome civil society** in their delegations, along with the high cost of registering as Sector Members;
  - **Access to ITU documents is linked to a TIES account** (which only Member State delegates and sector members can access);
  - **Remote access to the meetings is not always guaranteed**;
  - Meeting dynamics, including roles within the Study Group, modalities of discussion and agreement can be **idiosyncratic and difficult to follow** without guidance or experience;
  - The **lengthy duration of the meetings** (two weeks) and **high workload** demands a large amount of capacity and human resource from organisations. The complex nature of the work—requiring technical or engineering knowledge to grasp the implication of some proposals—can present barriers for many actors.
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### 4 What happened

#### → BEFORE THE MEETINGS

GPD, Data Privacy and Paradigm Initiative worked with experts with experience of engaging in SG13, to identify contributions to the Study Group's March and July 2024 meetings that could pose risks for an interoperable, reliable and secure Internet. Working with an experienced member of the Study Group, they supported civil society groups to follow discussions, providing guidance on coordinating across meetings and identifying and mitigating threats to an open Internet. They did this through the following actions:

- **An analysis of contributions to the Study Groups**, prior to meetings, which highlighted text proposed by Study Group members and whether this presented threats to an open Internet or human rights;
- **Coordination calls organised by GPD prior to the Study Groups to review the analysis of the text proposals**, understand the threats posed in greater detail, and discuss ways these could be addressed;
- **A system of distributing work among partners within the project**, allowing each organisation to identify the priority subject they would like to focus in the working meetings of the SG13, according to their own expertise and context, the relevant areas of interest for their national delegations, and other factors.

During the SG13 meeting in March, civil society organisations worked with an external expert with experience of engaging with the Study Group and coordinated in real time to exchange information about work items of concern, the new study period questions, and other relevant discussions. Identifying these contributions and raising them with government delegations that the civil society organisations were members of helped foster trusting relationships with the delegations. Civil society organisations met regularly with the external expert during meeting breaks, and set up communication channels to ask questions and share information.

#### → AFTER THE MARCH MEETING

Following the March meeting, and in preparation for the July meeting, GPD continued to collaborate with its government delegation by providing analysis and human rights perspectives on the delegation's review of specific work items. It also provided comments on the drafting of the Study Group questions for the next study period and engaged in coordination meetings and in the review of documents.

#### **Government delegations: to join or not to join?**

As we explore in our [Navigating the WTSA guide](#), joining a Member State delegation opens many critical opportunities to engage at the WTSA. However, it also comes with important caveats, depending on your national context. A full rundown of the process of joining, and what to consider, is available in the guide (pp. 9–13).

Ahead of the July meeting, GPD again worked with the external expert and fellow civil society organisations to plan engagement, analyse specific contributions to be discussed in the meeting, and identify concerns to be raised with delegations.

This preparation meant that, at the July meeting, GPD and partners could effectively follow discussions regarding the new study period questions submitted by the SG13 to be considered at WTSA, as well as to follow and participate in relevant discussions on the creation of the Focus Group for Native Artificial Intelligence (FG4NAI) mentioned above.

## 5 Outcomes

- **A better understanding of how SG13 works among civil society groups.** Specifically, civil society built capacity on some of the most salient issues relating to an open, interoperable, reliable and secure Internet that promotes and protects human rights. For example, GPD was asked by the UK's delegation to speak for it on topics relating to how proposed standards could impact user privacy, governance, and security.
  - **Enhanced and trusted relationships with Member State delegations.** By the end of preparatory meetings, civil society groups had been invited to participate in delegation meetings for the WTSA. This increased their ability to share approaches to preventing Internet fragmentation with delegations, as well as inserting human rights considerations into preparations related to WTSA-24 Resolutions
  - **Stronger coordination among civil society engaging in the ITU-T sector:** This included engagement prior to study group meetings and during; as well as information sharing and coordination calls, identifying shared concerns around human rights risks from the Resolutions to be discussed at the WTSA.
  - **Possible influence on the wording of the final text of the SG13 new study period questions.** While the final text is decided at WTSA-24, civil society supported the delegation in finding the most appropriate language to rule out an extension of SG13's mandate, averting duplication with other standards bodies."
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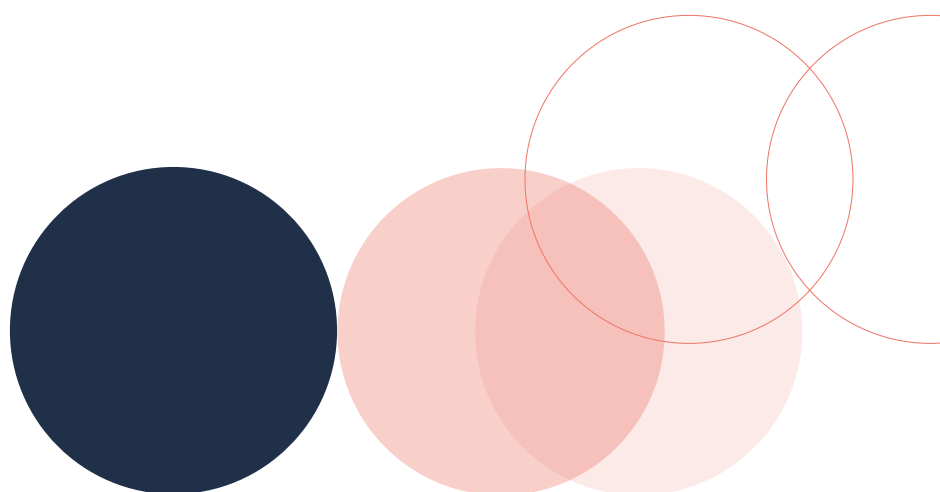
## 6 Lessons learned

- **Gaining access to a delegation is not the only way to engage.** Sector Membership can be also be a way in when there is no opportunity for government delegation membership (discounts for sector membership are available for developing countries). Engagement with delegations illustrated how sector members could actively engage and were able to maintain independence, offering expertise without a need to align with political expectations from country delegations.
- **Coordination within government delegations and across civil society organisations and other sector members is key.** A lot of information about the reasons for text proposals and for progress on work on standards happens behind the scenes—and so effective advocacy requires sharing this information and creating communication channels to do so. This can happen through being part of a delegation (where information will be shared and coordinated by the delegation), but as a civil society organisation it is also important to connect with other stakeholders, such as other civil society organisations or industry representatives, so that engagement is informed. However, it is



essential to be aware of the sensitivities of sharing information from delegations so as not to undermine trust or break any rules relevant to delegation membership. Normally, there are confidentiality rules in delegation participation that prevent the sharing of documents or information accessed as part of the delegation.

- **Look ahead to the agenda of the plenary sessions.** With hundreds of contributions for each meeting, and many new work items, it is crucial to identify in advance which specific questions you will follow—and even more specifically which contributions and work items will be the focus of attention for your engagement. You could consider reviewing your government delegation’s discussions on what to prioritise.
- **Agendas can rapidly change or be updated during meetings, with new sessions added to address topics needing additional time, or orders shifted.** To avoid missing out, make sure to continually check the schedule.



## Acknowledgments

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