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Multistakeholder Approaches to AI Governance in Geneva

APPLIED RESEARCH
PROJECT

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Executive Summary

This applied research project explores how International Geneva¹, as an important seat of diplomacy and multilateralism, can strengthen its role in global AI governance through more inclusive, coordinated, and action-oriented multistakeholder approaches. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review, 20 semi-structured interviews with AI specialists from academia, government, international organizations (IOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and the private sector, plus a focus group with five participants, this analysis reveals both significant opportunities and challenges for Geneva's role in AI governance.

Geneva holds unique institutional advantages that position it as a critical hub for AI governance. The city benefits from unparalleled multilateral density with 43 international organizations, 184 permanent missions, and 750 NGOs concentrated in one location, alongside proven capacity for large-scale coordination through 5,000 annual meetings hosting over 500,000 delegates. As the birthplace of institutionalized multistakeholder internet governance through the 2003 Geneva Declaration of Principles, Geneva has a proven track record in digital governance. The city serves as home to key organizations including the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and hosts a comprehensive AI event ecosystem, while Switzerland's reputation for neutrality and innovation creates a trusted environment for diverse stakeholders to engage in governance discussions.

However, the research reveals that AI governance remains fragmented and driven by multiple political and contextual scenarios, with gaps emerging in coordination, accountability, and representation. Despite Geneva's potential, challenges in engaging the larger ecosystem of the private sector and other diverse actors limit the opportunities for inclusive dialogue. The current landscape continues to suffer from a disconnect between technology and policy, unclear identification of priorities, ambiguity in fundamental concepts, and conversations that are not sufficiently representative, particularly of Global South voices.

Nevertheless, this analysis identifies concrete opportunities for Geneva to serve as a trusted space for governance and standard setting, bridging technical and political spheres to complement rather than replicate global AI governance efforts. The research conducted between March and April 2025 demonstrates strong stakeholder consensus on Geneva's potential to enhance coordination, improve inclusivity, and focus on actionable outcomes in AI governance.

¹ The city of Geneva has a long tradition of hosting international organizations. The term International Geneva designates this particularity. The world recognizes it as much a center of expertise in matters of cooperation as a center of multilateral diplomacy. Organizations present in Geneva include, but are not limited to, UN agencies, permanent missions, embassies and consulates, international NGOs, and academic institutions, notably EFPL hosted at the Campus Biotech. "International Geneva," CAGI, accessed June 1, 2025, <https://www.cagi.ch/en/international-geneva/>.

Key Recommendations

1. Use Technology to Improve Accessibility and Inclusion

Leverage technology solutions to broaden participation by implementing hybrid meeting formats, AI-powered translation tools, and offline engagement strategies to reach underconnected communities. Establish community feedback mechanisms to ensure governance keeps pace with rapid technological change.

2. Improve Multistakeholder Engagement and Governance

Establish clear definitions of key terms (AI, governance, multistakeholder engagement) and transition from consultative to co-creative approaches with communities. Implement rotational participation systems for civil society and develop neutral platforms that can bridge geopolitical divides.

3. Enhance Geneva's AI Ecosystem

Strengthen Geneva's position as an AI governance hub through initiatives like the Geneva AI Initiative, enhanced communication strategies, and year-round engagement mechanisms. Address the current private sector participation gap by attracting more technology companies beyond Microsoft's current presence.

4. Coordinate Events for Representation

Reduce fragmentation across the 15+ key AI events by streamlining overlapping forums and holding more meetings in developing countries. Follow successful models like the IGF's decentralized approach, using regional consultation processes that feed into global discussions.

5. Build or Finalize Structures and Institutional Frameworks

Ensure new entities like the Independent International Scientific Panel on AI complement existing initiatives rather than duplicate efforts. Establish Geneva-based coordination structures that can compile findings and facilitate communication with New York-based political processes.

6. Shift the Focus from Risk to Opportunity

Balance risk-focused discussions with positive applications of AI, highlighting local and contextual uses of the technology. Promote open-source approaches and showcase how smaller actors can tailor AI solutions to specific community needs.

7. Communication, Translation and Awareness

Bridge the critical disconnect between technology and policy by supporting "boundary-spanners" who can translate across sectors. Develop educational campaigns to improve AI literacy among policymakers and ensure youth voices are included in decision-making processes.

8. Data Sharing, Monitoring and Enforcement

Create secure data-sharing mechanisms and accountability frameworks, learning from successful models like the Paris Agreement. Implement public dashboards, independent audits, and community-led monitoring systems with clear metrics to track governance initiative effectiveness.

9. Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing, Especially in the Global South

Prioritize AI capacity building in the Global South over the next 3-5 years through targeted funding, digital skills programs for diplomats, and localized initiatives in local languages. Address financial barriers that prevent equal participation in Geneva-based discussions and incorporate lived experiences alongside data in evaluation processes.