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GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

*National and Regional Internet
Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)*



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)

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National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

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A special edition of GISWatch, "Internet governance from the edges: NRIs in their own words", is being published as a companion edition to the 2017 GISWatch annual report. It looks at the history, challenges and achievements of NRIs, as recounted by their organisers. It is available at <https://www.giswatch.org>

“Where everyone can ask a question...”

Alan Finlay

There are 40 country reports collected in this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) – these are preceded by seven regional reports offering perspectives on regional governance forums in Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Arab region.

While authors were encouraged to write about their experience of national and regional internet governance forums (IGFs) – or, in the case of countries like China, Serbia, Yemen, and the Seychelles, the absence of IGFs – the approach they took in understanding and evaluating the forums was up to them. Included here are stocktaking exercises, organisational reviews, interview-based surveys, stakeholder analyses, polemics and personal reflections, amongst them.

Although we might talk of an IGF “community”, these reports show that the participants in this community face radically diverse experiences and contexts – financially, economically, politically, in terms of capacity, networks they can draw on, and knowledge. As a result, their agency and ability to influence national and regional internet governance mechanisms is markedly different. This whether setting up a forum from the Washington DC Beltway or in post-revolution Tunisia; in Colombia, described as “a country with great social challenges – including when it comes to constructing the space for discussion,” or in India, an exponentially expanding economy, whose drive to digitisation is experienced as “coercive”; or Bosnia and Herzegovina, which suffers “deep gender inequality” and violence.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) the first IGF “started two hours late. The owner of the hall refused to let people in as the organisers had not finalised the contract to rent the hall for the two full days of the forum. The doors were only opened when the hall manager received a guarantee that the fee would be paid eventually.”

“This,” writes the organisation Si Jeunesse Savait, “says a lot about the struggle of convening a national IGF in the DRC.”

Yet despite these differences, several similar concerns stand out in the country reports:

- *A struggle with inclusion:* Typical “core stakeholders” found at IGFs are governments, the private sector, the technical community and civil society, with some authors also listing academia and the media. Within these “sectors”, frequently absent are women, young people, minorities, and poor and rural communities. Further marginalisation occurs through language, and a lack of knowledge and technical know-how – and through ignorance, either of the importance of internet governance, or even that the IGF exists, despite it encouraging open participation.

“Why don’t we know about these things?” an Uber driver asks the author during an Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) meeting in South Africa.

Authors see the need to connect with “non-traditional” actors who have a stake in internet governance. In Kenya, KICTANet says these include “mainstream human rights organisations, the health sector, the financial sector, agriculture, and manufacturing.” Similarly, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the agriculture, health and environment sectors are important.

Reports are critical of a convergence of perspectives at events, the “same people speaking to the same people.” More inclusive multistakeholder discussions does not necessarily mean “more people”, but a deeper representation of more diverse positions. There is a need to take risks. Although EuroDIG has grown over the years, “[t]he debates have progressively become less constructive with more and more participants more worried about illustrating their positions than building common ones.”

BlueLink.net argues that in Bulgaria, stakeholder diversity must go beyond ticking the boxes of “government”, “business” and “civil society”: “The government has also been clever enough to create its own quasi-NGOs that look independent, but which are controlled by insiders,

to give a sense of credibility in the policy-making and implementation process, while drawing on state funding.”

Alternatives highlights the absence of indigenous communities in Canada from internet governance discussions, suggesting that IGFs can replicate exclusions found elsewhere. “The exclusion of stakeholders such as women, youth and persons with disabilities is [...] the cause for the failure of development,” writes the Senegalese organisation Jonction.

- *Specific mechanisms are necessary to ensure balanced participation:* It is not sufficient to have an “open” call for participation and expect participants to be “multistakeholder”. As the Colombian Bureau of Internet Governance finds, “more efforts are needed to expand the coverage and diversity of [...] conversations.” Amongst others, the Bureau envisages a “permanent” presence in the regions “where it is most strongly needed to encourage citizen participation in decision-making processes related to the use of the internet.”

EMPOWER writes that in Malaysia “[i]t is unrealistic to expect civil society or activists who are less well-resourced to be able to present or reflect their stories in the international arena [...] there is a lack of immediate relevance of the IGF to their struggles, there are language barriers, and there is a competitive workshop selection mechanism.”

“Convening preparatory meetings, renting the forum’s venue, providing food for the attendees, paying for the panellists’ per diems [...] require huge means that are out of the reach of civil society organisations in Cameroon,” writes PROTEGE QV. “This immediately puts them at a disadvantage in terms of equal participation in the IGF.”

Capacity building and awareness raising are critical to strengthen stakeholder engagement. In the Republic of Congo, a survey of young people including government officials “revealed that 90% of respondents do not have any knowledge of internet governance,” while in the Seychelles, the importance of inclusive, multistakeholder internet governance needs to be promoted.

Capacity-building activities include holding Youth IGFs and running pre-events at regional forums, holding special capacity-building sessions during a national IGF (see Colombia), and working with the media in order to improve

coverage of a forum (see Uruguay). Reports – including those from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Paraguay, Argentina and South Africa – suggest that universities have a key role to play, and relevant school-level programmes need to be developed.

- *A successful forum depends on commonly held ideas of citizenship and democracy:* Active participation is dependent on the willingness of stakeholders to participate, which draws on ideas of agency, citizenship and democracy. In some countries there is a sense of apathy that strikes against active participation in people-centred policy making over matters that impact directly on citizens’ lives. In Serbia, write the authors from SHARE Foundation, “it is not that some stakeholders are excluded, but many [...] do not even want to join the conversation out of a lack of desire or interest. They see such conversations as irrelevant outside of government.” In the Republic of Congo, “[m]any believe that it is up to the state alone to decide on the future of the internet.”

“For them,” AZUR Development writes, “the government should decide everything.”

- *Governments can be an unstable and unpredictable stakeholder:* As a pivotal stakeholder in national and regional internet governance deliberations, the attitude of governments to IGFs can be unpredictable. As the Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA) found in the Philippines, the government may shun a local IGF meeting, but send delegates to international forums, such as those run by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), ICANN or a regional telecommunications body. Or a government may allow itself to be unduly influenced by the private sector “which has an interest in keeping regulators away from multistakeholder dialogues,” the organisation observes.

Governments may harbour resentments towards civil society, or other stakeholders. Pakistan shows how the IGF can be derailed by ongoing “hostile” policy-making processes, in its case the passage of a cybercrime bill.

It can be a problem if government officials leave their posts in institutions, abandoning any continuity to a nascent IGF. In Peru: “At the end of the event the members of the organising committee did not keep up communications; some left their positions at their institutions and there were no further meetings.”

It can also be a problem if officials remain in their positions, as is the case in Bulgaria, which “enjoys a stable pool of policy makers [but] this is not a positive sign, as this stability is associated with crony relationships and a lack of motivation for radical reform.”

- *Civil society has to assess its commitment to openness and to working together:* Civil society is dealt with critically in a number of reports, and can be a bottleneck to positive progress in internet governance. While in Ecuador “actors have complained about the co-option of organisations,” in Argentina civil society organisations are described as “absorbed in their own projects” and “focused on international events” rather than on the “construction of [governance] spaces.” In Pakistan, “competitive activism ... pitches activists against each other in competition for the same pool of resources.” In Cameroon, civil society is “divided and plagued by internal discord.”

This, the author remarks wryly, “hardly helps the situation.”

- *There is an anxiety of impact – but as reports suggest, showing impact is a slippery affair:* Despite the recognition that the IGFs are not decision-making forums, questions to do with the concrete impact of the event remain. Reports show it is possible to put mechanisms in place that are likely to maximise influence – such as holding intersessional meetings (see Colombia for a good example of this), ensuring institutional buy-in into the event (EuroDIG, with the participation of the European Commission and Council of Europe, perhaps an extraordinary example of this), or even through increasing the diversity of stakeholders and issues confronted at an IGF. Concrete follow-up mechanisms are also mooted, such as an “impact review” that tracks recommendations for the extent to which they were actually implemented or tabled by the relevant legislative bodies (again, see EuroDIG). Political will plays a significant part in the impact mix: “[A] failure [of IGFs] with respect to concrete policy outcomes is not necessarily the fault of the forums,” writes BlueLink.net, “but of the national commitment to creating these outcomes in the multistakeholder environment that is available. To a certain extent, the IGF works for countries that already have good governance and working relations between stakeholders [...] and is less effective in countries where these are absent.”

Impact is also related to usefulness, and in some countries activists need to ask: Is there a need for an IGF? “How much impact does the [South Korea IGF] have on the policy-making process? Not so much,” writes Jinbonet. “Part of the reason is that there are many alternatives for discussing internet governance in South Korea. [...] One can attend almost any workshop anytime if you have the interest and on almost any topic – especially in a small country like South Korea, where you can travel to the other side of the country in half a day.”

A similar situation is found in New Zealand. “The NetHui format has attempted to develop outcomes, but with limited success,” write the authors. “[T]he public policy-making process in New Zealand is already open and accessible and a new forum to directly shape those processes was not seen as necessary.”

In Togo, getting stakeholders to be responsive to policy windows in a collaborative way is a significant result of multistakeholder engagement. Stakeholders are “motivated” to “deepen the debates on mailing lists [...] to produce more recommendations for policy and legislative change in the country.”

But in countries like Nigeria this is not sufficient: “In the Nigerian context, describing recommendations as merely advisory is as good as asking that they should be ignored.”

A space for addressing imbalances in society

What is obvious from all the reports gathered here is that running a successful IGF is difficult – open, transparent, inclusive and meaningful discussions are not easy to achieve. IGFs are also not typically robust – and many lack sustained interest from stakeholders or funding. Brazil and Turkey show how IGFs suffer under political crisis. In Turkey, participation in the Youth IGF dropped off following a state of emergency, because young people feared “investigation or interruption to their businesses by authorities.” “Several participants who joined the meeting also asked to be excluded from lists, photographs and records of the meeting for similar reasons,” the author writes.

Many reports describe crumbling attempts to get IGFs off the ground – the first national IGF in Costa Rica was “half-a-day long and showed low participation,” despite the country hosting the regional IGF the previous year. The IGF in Italy is “nothing more” than an annual gathering: “a two-day event, with random preparation process and

with no follow-up.” Although billed as a sub-regional event, the Central African IGF held in Kinshasa in 2013 had a mere 40 people in attendance, and “the only country other than the DRC represented was Cameroon, and it by only two civil society delegates.”

Yet despite many of these challenges, the IGFs are also useful and even critical mechanisms of deliberation, for learning and capacity building, creating essential links and building networks and partnerships, and, even, for some, influencing policy.

“It is worth turning around when there are false starts,” the authors write of the troubled forum in the Arab region.

In Italy, despite the apparent haphazardness and lack of follow-up, there is something still worth pursuing: “[T]he absence of structured dialogue [means] government institutions will decide for the country at international forums on their own; and businesses will do the same in their international associations and initiatives.”

The IGF can – perhaps most importantly – serve as an opportunity to counterbalance inequalities and exclusions that exist in society, and offer some measure of remedy to those imbalances. “The [South Eastern Europe] region faces problems that are different from those found in Western and Central Europe,” writes One World Platform, “and as a result, these challenges are not widely talked about.” An absence of young voices in internet governance can be counterbalanced by holding Youth IGFs. In Senegal, the absence of women in the policy-making process means that “gender should be at the heart of the priorities of the IGF.”

Forums can be “safe spaces” for vulnerable groups, allowing them to engage openly in discussions, free from the threat of “harm and violence” (see New Zealand and Bosnia and Herzegovina). The IGF is a space where “everyone can ask a question, and all must answer,” writes Nodo Tau. It offers a way, says One World Platform, to enact a “real democracy.”

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs) are now widely recognised as a vital element of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) process. In fact, they are seen to be the key to the sustainability and ongoing evolution of collaborative, inclusive and multistakeholder approaches to internet policy development and implementation.

A total of 54 reports on NRIs are gathered in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch). These include 40 country reports from contexts as diverse as the United States, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Colombia.

The country reports are rich in approach and style and highlight several challenges faced by activists organising and participating in national IGFs, including broadening stakeholder participation, capacity building, the unsettled role of governments, and impact.

Seven regional reports analyse the impact of regional IGFs, their evolution and challenges, and the risks they still need to take to shift governance to the next level, while seven thematic reports offer critical perspectives on NRIs as well as mapping initiatives globally.

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