GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

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

NRIs and the United Nations IGF: A reciprocal relationship

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Introduction

National and Regional Internet Governance Forums (NRIs) grew organically and spontaneously in the first few years after the United Nations (UN) Internet Governance Forum (IGF) – what we have come to know as the global IGF – was established in 2006. These national and regional IGFs focused on internet governance and broader internet policy issues that reflect national and regional priorities.

It is not clear when exactly the NRIs were created, but for the first two years, the global IGF did not refer to national and regional activities, neither in the agenda of the IGF meeting itself nor in annual IGF publications.[1] The lack of representation and mention of national and regional IGFs in the early IGF meetings demonstrates that the global IGF did not have an active role in shaping these initiatives.

There were various reasons for the formulation of national and regional IGFs. Mostly they were created as a way to have local voices and issues brought to the global IGF, a bottom-up approach we recognise from internet policy making in general. In 2008, four East African countries – Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda – each held national IGF meetings and together organised an East African Internet Governance Forum (EA-IGF) with the explicit purpose of sharing the region's views at the global IGF to be held later that year in Hyderabad. The Asia Pacific regional IGF (APrIGF) was created following the 2008 IGF in Hyderabad to bring more attention to that region, building on the momentum and interest that the global IGF had created.[2] A United States IGF was first held in 2009, and one of its major aims was to discuss the continuation of the UN IGF, which was a hot topic at the time.[3] In other instances, national IGF initiatives were formed to contribute to the global IGF.[4] Many of them were strongly supported by local country code top-level domain (ccTLD) registries such as .CA and .UK.

Gaining traction at the global IGF

While NRIs started to flourish from 2008,[5] two years after the inception of the IGF, they first gained prominence at the global IGF in 2010. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in Tunis in 2005 gave the IGF an initial five-year mandate, and this was to be reviewed by the UN General Assembly a few months after the 2010 forum was held. The global IGF Secretariat began enlisting NRIs in preparation for the 2010 meeting.[6]

The ever increasing number of these regional and national meetings was a tangible example of the success of the IGF's multistakeholder approach to policy dialogue. The IGF Secretariat rightly saw the inclusion of NRIs in the programme as one of the major achievements of IGF, something that could be a factor in convincing the UN General Assembly to extend the IGF's mandate. We should not disregard other simple reasons, such as the opportunity they gave for the IGF Secretariat to travel and make speeches, which extended the Secretariat's visibility and influence beyond just the annual global IGF and its home in Geneva. For the global IGF, an annual meeting with few resources to undertake outreach, national and regional meetings were an opportunity to create strong linkages with local actors.

The view that the emergence of the NRIs was a notable success of the IGF process was advanced by the participants in both IGF plenary sessions and workshops. For example, the Chairman's Summary from the Vilnius IGF in 2010 notes that several speakers, including parliamentarians, "mentioned

1   See, for example, Doria, A., & Kleinwächter, W. (Eds.). (2007). *Internet Governance Forum (IGF): The First Two Years*. www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/filedepot_download/3367/5

2   Fifth Meeting of the Internet Governance Forum. (2010). *Chairman's Summary*. www.intgovforum.org/cms/2010/Chairman%27s.Summary.Expanded.pdf

3   Marilyn Cade, Vilnius IGF, 16 September 2010. www.intgovforum.org/cms/component/content/article/102-transcripts2010/685-rnusa

4   Fifth Meeting of the Internet Governance Forum. (2010). Op. cit.

5   Ibid.

6   Epstein, D., & Nonnecke, B. M. (2016). Multistakeholderism in Praxis: The Case of the Regional and National Internet Governance Forum (IGF) Initiatives. *Policy & Internet*, 8(2), 148-173.

the IGF's success and growth over the years. One of the significant examples was the widespread introduction of regional and national IGF type meetings that have occurred over the last two years. These regional and national IGF initiatives had contributed to the debates between government, parliamentarians, industry and civil society."[7]

Acknowledging the importance of the NRIs to the whole process, the IGF Secretariat started to pay them more attention after the global forum's mandate was extended in 2010. In preparation for the 2011 IGF in Nairobi, the NRI mailing list became more active and the Secretariat started arranging sessions at the IGF where various local IGF initiatives could present their work. However, the main stakeholder groups represented in the IGF Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG), which was tasked with convening each year's global IGF, wanted to make clear that these local forums were not official activities of the UN IGF. The word "initiatives" was added to what had until then been ad hoc references to national or regional IGF meetings. The word "initiatives" communicated their independence from the global UN IGF and we now refer to National and Regional (Internet Governance Forum) Initiatives or NRIs.

The recommendations of a working group on improvements to the IGF were another element that helped strengthen the relationship between the UN IGF and NRIs. In 2010, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) adopted resolution 2010/2 on the "Assessment of the progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society".[8] A working group was formed to report to the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD)[9] to provide recommendations to improve the IGF in line with the mandate set out in the Tunis Agenda.[10]

The CSTD working group paid a lot of attention to NRIs and recognised them as a strong linkage between local internet governance issues and the global IGF. They asked for more information and materials about the NRIs.[11] These recommendations were adopted by the IGF Secretariat, although slowly.

Getting more formalised

Until around 2012, the IGF Secretariat had no formal criteria for the creation and operation of NRIs. The executive coordinator of the IGF Secretariat used to relay some soft criteria during IGF meetings or when IGF initiatives wanted to be listed on the IGF website. However, this changed in 2012 when the IGF Secretariat, prompted by civil society groups, announced the minimum criteria for NRIs to be listed on its website. These criteria, which previously had been verbally communicated and not stringent or restrictive, stemmed from IGF and internet governance principles: NRIs should be multistakeholder, non-commercial, open and transparent. The requirement reads:

The IGF initiatives are expected to follow the principles and practices of being open and transparent, inclusive and non-commercial. They work in accordance with the bottom up consensus process of the IGF and need to have a multistakeholder participation (at least three stakeholder groups initially, and evolve toward inclusion of all stakeholder groups), in both formation of the Initiative and in any other Initiative related events.[12]

The newly formed NRIs need to contact the Secretariat, provide a report and demonstrate that they are open, multistakeholder and transparent. They will then be listed on the website.

Members of the MAG, selected by the Under-Secretary-General of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA),[13] emphasised throughout their deliberations that NRIs had an organic nature and the criteria for their formulation should be very minimal. Moreover, the IGF Secretariat did not police the IGF initiatives, but when initiatives asked to be listed on the IGF website and be recognised by it, they would have had to comply with these minimum criteria. This was an effective measure that led to at least one NRI holding its previously closed meetings open to the public.[14]

When the stakes get higher

Not all IGF initiatives were listed on the IGF website for a while. This increasingly changed when the IGF Secretariat started paying attention to these initiatives and gave them a space on the agenda of global IGF annual meetings to present their work. Moreover, being listed on the UN IGF website started

7   Fifth Meeting of the Internet Governance Forum. (2010). Op. cit.

8   unctad.org/Sections/un_cstd/docs/ecosoc_res2010d2_en.pdf

9   unctad.org/en/Pages/CSTD.aspx

10 unctad.org/Sections/un_cstd/docs/
    UN_WGIGF2011d07_summary_en.pdf

11 Ibid.

12 https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/
    igf-regional-and-national-initiatives

13 https://www.un.org/development/desa/en

14 For confidentiality reasons, the author cannot name the initiatives
    or make references to personal emails.

gaining legitimacy for these initiatives locally and internationally.

Locally it showed their legitimacy to their communities. Affiliation with UN entities is much valued in developing countries and this also held true for newly established NRIs. Although NRIs were not a branch of the UN IGF, the attendance of a UN representative – often from the IGF Secretariat – in their meetings and sometimes the similarity of their agenda and structure to those of the UN IGF gave the impression that they were closely working with the UN IGF. This mirrored the growing tendency of the UN IGF to embrace the NRIs to secure its own legitimacy.

The relationship between the IGF Secretariat, the UN IGF annual meeting and the NRIs was strengthened when the IGF Supporting Association (IGFSA)[15] was formed. Before the establishment of the IGFSA, the IGF Secretariat could not easily accept donations nor sponsor the NRIs. The IGFSA was created to address these difficulties in providing support for NRIs and for the IGF Secretariat.

Potential access to funding created more incentives for the NRIs to strengthen their linkage with the UN IGF. The IGF Secretariat also provided more support: working with some of the NRIs, the Secretariat came up with a toolkit[16] on how to formulate NRIs and assigned a focal point for managing the relationship between the NRIs and the Secretariat.

Conclusion

The relationship between the UN IGF and NRIs is very reciprocal. The UN IGF and NRIs grant each other legitimacy. This is evident from the emphasis of the UN IGF over time on reporting on the activities of NRIs. NRIs extend the influence of the IGF and very importantly the multistakeholder approach to internet governance and internet policy development to the regional and national level. They can be the champions of open, multistakeholder and transparent processes for internet governance in their local communities. However, to what extent they truly can and will uphold these values should be measured.

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15 www.igfsa.org

16 www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/index.
php?q=filedepot_download/3568/480

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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