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

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of NRIs, as recounted by their organisers. It is available at https://www.giswatch.org

SEYCHELLES

SETTING UP A NATIONAL IGF IN SEYCHELLES
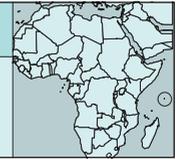
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Independent writer, with inputs from the Seychelles
Association of Media Professionals and Stand Up Step
Up Seychelles

Introduction

A high percentage of the population in Seychelles has access to and uses the internet on a regular basis. Social media is extremely popular and there is a scheme that makes it possible for school children and students to own their own laptops. The country has well-developed information and communications technology (ICT) structures, and the Department of Information and Communication Technology (DICT) clearly states its intention[1] to promote electronic communication and access to the web. Information available shows that Seychelles does not actively participate in the global Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and that so far only two individuals from Seychelles have participated in a regional IGF. The country does not currently have a national IGF.

It is to be remembered that the purpose of the IGF is "to bring people together from all stakeholder groups – governments, the private sector, civil society and the academic and technical communities – to stimulate debate and discussion, exchange information and share good practices. Participants at the IGF engage as equals in a dialogue on public policy issues related to the Internet and its governance."[2]

This report makes a case for the establishment of a national IGF in Seychelles, based on the conviction that it would be a considerable and positive step forward if such a multistakeholder forum were to exist.

Context

The internet was first introduced to Seychelles in the mid-1990s when services were made available essentially to institutional clients. The sector grew at a very rapid pace and by the end of 2016, there were 35,380 internet access service subscriptions and 151,857 mobile phone subscriptions for a population of around 95,000.[3] Internet bandwidth capacity has also increased from 200.50 mbps at the end of 2010 to 5,500.00 mbps at the end of 2016.[4] According to the 2016 Central Bank of Seychelles Annual Report: "The telecommunications sector remained one of the industries with the largest potential for growth. Activities in this sector are estimated to have expanded by 6.0 per cent in 2016 [...]. The main driver was internet and data services where demand has maintained an upward trend."[5]

Most of what has been achieved in this area has been led by the DICT working with, and setting parameters for, telecommunications and IT companies such as Cable and Wireless (Seychelles),[6] Airtel,[7] Intelvision,[8] Atlas Seychelles[9] and Kokonet.[10] The organisational structure of the DICT and existing national strategies, policies and regulations regarding the internet are clearly presented on the department's website.[11] There is also, on that site, a link to a page where members of the public can report complaints.

The head of the DICT, Principal Secretary Benjamin Choppy, acknowledges that the work of the department is "cross-cutting across government and even nationally," and gives examples of how the internet can be used: for dialogue relating to the passing of legislation in the national assembly; for interactions between individuals, businesses and government; or for the functioning of the tourism industry. He also emphasises the importance of cybersecurity for online transactions and e-commerce, and the need for data protection.[12]

1   www.ict.gov.sc/homecnt/strategic.aspx

2   Doria, A., & Kleinwächter, W. (Eds.) (2008). *Internet Governance Forum (IGF): The First Two Years*. www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/filedepot_download/3367/5

3   www.nbs.gov.sc/downloads?task=document.viewdoc&id=104

4   www.ict.gov.sc/Documents/Performance_of_the_ICT_sector_as_of_December2016.pdf

5   Central Bank of Seychelles. (2016). *Annual Report 2016*. www.cbs.sc/Downloads/publications/Annual%20Report%202016.pdf

6   https://www.cwseychelles.com

7   www.africa.airtel.com/wps/wcm/connect/africarevamp/Seychelles/

8   www.intelvision.sc/index.php

9   An internet services company now owned by Cable and Wireless. www.cwseychelles.com/about-us/media-center/press-release/2006/01/cable-wireless-acquisition-atlas-successfully-concluded

10 www.seychelles.sc

11 www.ict.gov.sc/Infotech/itfunc.aspx

12 World Investment News. (2017, 31 May). Seychelles, Republic of: Interview with Mr Benjamin Choppy. www.winne.com/sc/interviews/mr-benjamin-choppy

Nonetheless, after looking at various relevant official websites and speaking with individuals who operate in this area, it is clear that, so far, the process of strategy development and policy making for internet governance in Seychelles cannot be described as widely inclusive. The stakeholders with the greatest decision-making prerogatives remain public sector bodies and IT service providers.

Towards a Seychelles IGF

The idea of internet "governance" may be seen by some as a double-edged sword. An IT specialist who worked in Seychelles for a number of years feels that "governance" implies greater controls, which would result in the creation of bodies and mechanisms to exert that control. For example, when it comes to internet content, he says:

> The idea of having a governance council gives tacit validity to the existence of a governance mechanism. That governance mechanism is ultimately controlled by whoever has their hands on the wheel. [...] In my opinion, Seychelles would be particularly vulnerable to misuse of a governance mechanism (monitoring, censoring) because of its small population, limited internet providers and telecom point-of-presence. If you are looking at the physical layer (through which information travels) that's a different topic. I could see some benefit in there being open discussion on where and how resources would be spent to increase capacity to certain parts of the islands, etc.[13]

Another point of view is put forward in a paper presented at the 2015 Southern African IGF (SAIGF):

> Since its inception, the internet has been governed. This governance has been exercised by users, who choose and create content to a degree not possible in traditional media; by corporations, through peering agreements and other contractual arrangements for exchange of traffic; by national governments through their state owned or regulated communications infrastructures; by international treaty organisations like the WTO [...] and WIPO [...]; and by non-governmental standards bodies that develop the protocols and other technical standards, which often embody policy choices affecting individual interests.[14]

It is therefore assumed that national IGFs could make these processes at national level more transparent, less geared towards narrow individual interests, and less susceptible to control by particular influential groups.

Should a national IGF be set up for Seychelles, it is expected that it would work as it ideally does elsewhere: from the bottom up. The process, as it is envisioned, starts at the "grassroots" national level, then moves on to the regional level, which in turn feeds into the continental level, and ends at the global level. According to the IGF convenor for the SAIGF, this makes it possible for national stakeholders' opinions and priorities to be presented and taken into consideration at the annual world forum.[15] But first and foremost, the national IGF would be a mechanism that would allow all stakeholders in the country to discuss, articulate and agree on national priorities for the internet in the country.

A national IGF would also need to abide by other key principles of the global IGF, these being openness and transparency (in communications, decisions and their implementation); inclusiveness; and a non-commercial approach, in addition to supporting language diversity and optimising remote participation.

The IGF functions according to a specific model. For example, the continental Africa IGF (AfIGF) is hosted by the African Union and is guided by a committee whose members "serve in their personal capacity, but are expected to have extensive linkages with their respective stakeholder groups."[16] At the regional level, the SAIGF was set up as a consortium led by a Multistakeholder Coordinating Team (MCT), with a secretariat hosted by the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Existing national IGFs in the Southern African region are found in Malawi,[17] Mauritius,[18] Mozambique,[19] Namibia[20] (launched in 2017), South Africa[21] and Zimbabwe.[22] These six IGFs are among the 16 national IGFs currently on record for Africa.[23]

Global, regional or national IGFs typically meet once a year. The global IGF meetings are usually

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13 Email exchange with K. Keeton, 10 August 2017.

14 Zvavanjanja, C. (2015). A case for multi-stakeholder partnership for critical internet resource security in the region. Thematic paper presented at SAIGF 2015, Harare, Zimbabwe, 8-9 November.

15 Interview with Dr. G. Ah-Thew, 21 August 2017.

16 www.afigf.org/sites/default/files/documents/tors_for_afigf.pdf

17 www.malawi.intgovforum.org

18 www.mauritius.intgovforum.org

19 www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/african-regional-group

20 https://namibia.intgovforum.org

21 https://www.zaigf.org.za/about.htmlwww.zaigf.org.za/about.html

22 www.zigf.org.zw/www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/african-regional-group

23 www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/african-regional-groupwww.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/african-regional-group

held in November/December, while continental level meetings are usually held around September/October. The Southern African regional IGF (SAIGF) states that it strives to organise its meetings around the months of June/July. This approach implies that any national meeting would need to take place earlier in the year so that information is then fed into the next level as described above.[24]

An important aspect regarding a national IGF in Seychelles would be the willingness of stakeholders to become involved in the venture. There are suggestions that the Citizens Engagement Platform Seychelles (CEPS),[25] which is the national platform for the country's NGOs/civil society groups, or specific organisations like the Association of Media Professionals, could, with some external support, host a Seychelles IGF.

The Association of Media Professionals includes professionals from all local media houses, and its aim is to further the cause of journalism and other media professions, as well as to push for more training and get recognition for the work that media professionals do. One of its representatives, Maria Annette Ernesta, believes that an IGF would be useful for Seychelles. Ernesta says:

> Seychelles is at a crossroad right now politically, economically and socially. So many things that appeared impossible in the past, are now possible. A lot has to do with access to the internet in the islands. Social media has opened up the political dialogue like never before and with such a forum so many things like online training, debates and discussions could be possible.

She adds that the IGF "would be making use of [internet] technology to do a number of activities, networking, and advance education. There are no drawbacks with a project like that, it just requires motivation and good connectivity." She does caution, however, that "some of the setbacks are the still very expensive and often slow internet" – an issue that could be central to discussions at a national IGF.

Ernesta's interest in an IGF appears to be shared by others in Seychelles. Stand Up Step Up Seychelles,[26] a non-governmental organisation led by Trevor Louise, serves as a platform for youth empowerment and provides help for victims of bullying as well as bullies (at school in particular) and also for parents. The NGO is currently partnering with the Association for Rights, Information and Democracy (ARID) to offer a free helpline for cases of bullying, with the support of Cable and Wireless Seychelles. Louise agrees that "there is a necessity for an Internet Governance Forum in Seychelles" and expresses interest in being part of a national IGF.

It was suggested by the SAIGF that national IGFs in the region tend to be hosted by government bodies, rather than NGOs and civil society, because they have access to resources. However, there are examples of civil society taking the lead in setting up a national IGF. In Armenia, the national chapter of the Internet Society (ISOC) successfully organised the first national IGF by securing funding from ISOC and from the IGF, creatively using the resources available, and involving student volunteers. It is reported that "ISOC Armenia engaged the Ministry of Transport and Communication and local businesses from the very beginning on a partnership basis. This meant that these partners took over the organisation of certain sessions and provided speakers or moderators across the agenda. Also, the Ministry and local businesses facilitated the invitation process within their respective communities."[27]

It should be noted that ISOC contributed to the Seychelles Internet Exchange Point (IXP) which was launched in 2015.[28] ISOC's website offers the possibility for individuals or groups to start a local chapter, and the approach is clear and uncomplicated.[29]

The SAIGF, for its part, is able to offer technical assistance, help in drafting an agenda, and some financial support (up to USD 2,000) to organise the event. The recommendation of the SAIGF is that interested parties in Seychelles should approach the DICT and collaborate with it in order to organise a national IGF.

Conclusions

It is clear that in Seychelles, decision-making processes regarding the internet do not yet include civil society, the vast majority of the private sector

24 Interview with Dr. G. Ah-Thew, 21 August 2017.

25 www.civilsociety.sc

26 www.facebook.com/
    Stand-Up-Step-Up-Seychelles-278316985930353/

27 Palovirta, M. (2015, 3 November). The First Armenian Internet Governance Forum: The Lessons Learnt. *Internet Society.* https://www.internetsociety.org/blog/2015/11/the-first-armenian-internet-governance-forum-the-lessons-learnt

28 "The IXP was established with the support of the African Internet Exchange System (AXIS), a project of the African Union implemented by the Internet Society. Under the AXIS project, the Internet Society conducted an IXP best practices workshop in Victoria [Seychelles] from 22-23 July 2013, followed by a hands-on technical training to 19 network engineers from 24-28 February 2014." Hailu, B. (2015, 26 February). Internet Exchange Point launched in Seychelles. *Internet Society.* internetsociety.ngo/blog/africa-bureau/2015/02/internet-exchange-point-launched-seychelles

29 www.internetsociety.org/who-we-are/chapters/start

(except those who operate in IT), and some parts of the public sector. Yet these groups represent a large proportion of end users, and their views need to be considered in shaping the internet.

The readiness for greater collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders and a focus on the principles of the IGF may already exist, as implied in the words of the head of the DICT, who says that the department "is cross-cutting across government and even nationally. [...] In terms of transparency, accountability, and governance, I think that by nature e-government and ICT systems, in general, are inherently enablers of promoting and supporting the practice of these values."[30]

Some of the people consulted for this report felt that there was a need for a national IGF in the country, while others were not entirely convinced. Concerns seemed related more to the name of the initiative – their focus being on "governance" rather than "forum" – despite attempts to explain the nature of the IGF. For some, the word "governance" evokes greater controls, rather than collaborative discussions on the future of the internet in the country.

Overall, it was evident that the concept of the IGF is generally neither known nor understood in Seychelles and that it could certainly benefit from more visibility. The IGF needs to be marketed to the relevant stakeholders because it is hardly reasonable to think that people will be interested in something they have never heard of.

The setting up of a national IGF would allow stakeholders from all sectors in Seychelles to openly voice concerns and put forward suggestions for an internet that is playing an increasingly important role in their lives and that is having such a strong, and not yet fully understood, societal impact.

Action steps

There are two key actions steps that are necessary in Seychelles:

- The first involves engaging organisations that would be willing to host the forum, and act as the facilitator in setting up a multistakeholder coordination committee. Funding opportunities for hosting an IGF, as well as institutions such as SAIGF that can support such an initiative, need to be identified. Potential organisations which may be interested in playing this hosting role are the Association of Media Professionals and Stand Up Step Up Seychelles. However, there are likely to be others. Government agencies should also be approached to be involved from the start.

- Secondly, there is a need for awareness raising on the importance of holding a national IGF, including on the principles of progressive, multistakeholder and transparent governance and policy-making processes. Ways to engage a wide range of stakeholders across different sectors – including the chamber of commerce, civil society and the private sector – need to be investigated. Media interest should be encouraged in order to increase the quality and frequency of reporting on internet governance issues.

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30 World Investment News. (2017, 31 May). Op. cit.

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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