GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)

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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

UNITED STATES

THE IGF-USA, FROM ONE PERSPECTIVE
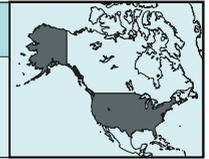
Technicalities
Avri Doria

Introduction

The United States Internet Governance Forum (IGF-USA) has been "in construction" for as long as the global IGF itself. It has gone through several stages, including a reconstruction, and is evolving. Like the global IGF, the IGF-USA is all about the one meeting a year. It neither discusses ongoing US internet[1] governance issues in an ongoing manner, nor does it have yearly goals for output. Unlike the global IGF, it has not yet begun to have any intersessional work on the issues. The focus is solely on the yearly meeting.

The IGF-USA has gone through several stages of development so far. In its formative years it was very much the direct effort of a few people who pulled together the meetings. In general, the planning meetings were organised on a catch-as-catch-can[2] basis by a group of people devoted to both the global IGF and to the idea of the US having an IGF-type meeting. The group of people working on an IGF in the US grew from a core that had worked together during the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) to inform the Washington DC Beltway and beyond about the WSIS activities. The early IGF-USA planning group was open to all comers, but for the most part, given the firm geolocation in Washington DC and the inadequacy of remote participation methods at that time, the group remained DC-centric. After the first attempt at reorganisation, the group became an *ad hoc* gathering of the interested and the committed, without any formal structure. At that time some considered the meetings as having been "catalysed", and one individual carried the title of Chief Catalyst. As they were largely a group of Washington DC professionals, they often had professional contacts with a wide selection of political luminaries, both local and from elsewhere, who could be pulled

in as speakers and panellists. Consequently, in many ways, the meetings resembled nothing so much as a set of the panels that are ubiquitous in every institute in the DC Beltway. The one difference from normal DC panels was the fact that the DC professionals sitting on the dais at the IGF-USA were from diverse groups of stakeholders. Since the first meeting, participation has grown from just under 100 participants to over 200 participants. Anecdotally,[3] the participant mix appears to include all stakeholder groups. In terms of panels, the IGF-USA is very careful to make sure that all stakeholder groups are represented. Meetings of the planning group are open to all participants without regard to stakeholder group.

The IGF-USA is still trying to figure out whether they can or should move beyond Washington DC. Part of the issue revolves around an uncertainty of how to hold the meeting in another location when the organisers are predominantly resident in DC. An early decision was made to hold the first one-day session in Washington DC instead of New York. The decision to stay in DC has been nearly automatic ever since.

The last few IGF-USA meetings have been successful. I do not believe, however, that the IGF-USA has yet become a fully national IGF. Over the last years it has become a well-formed DC multistakeholder conference.

Sustainable governance of IGF-USA

While the IGF-USA was putting on yearly events in the years before 2016, there were those who felt that the effort was neither properly organised nor sustainable. Each year's meeting was like a rabbit pulled from a hat.

Those concerned for organisation and sustainability in an *ad hoc* catalysed IGF-USA became noticeably vocal in 2015. The small groups of participants who grew concerned about the future of the IGF-USA began discussions on how the situation could be remedied. In June of 2016 a working group was formed to discuss ways of setting the IGF-USA on a path that would allow for a sustainable, principle-based organisation.

The working group was formed "to develop a governance structure for the IGF-USA that supports

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1   On the capitalisation of the word "internet" in this report: when referring to the single network of autonomous IP networks under a common naming authority and known by the proper name of Internet, it is capitalised. In other uses where it describes some aspect of a type of network of networks, such as internet policy or internet protocols, it is not capitalised.

2   "Taking advantage of any opportunity; using any method that can be applied." www.dictionary.com/browse/catch-as-catch-can

3   In researching this report, no statistics on the stakeholder mix at the IGF-USA was found.

transparency, openness, inclusivity, diversity, and bottom-up, multistakeholder development of the IGF-USA organizational process and event."[4]

Over the course of about a year, the working group developed a set of principles and documented an operational structure. The structure mostly documented the practices that had developed in a bottom-up manner in 2015 and that were refined in 2016, both through practice and through two public comment periods.

The principles – created within the context of the principles for IGF National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs)[5] – that were accepted in 2017 are:

- Openness: The IGF-USA is open, participative and accessible to all without fee.

- Bottom-up: The activities of the IGF-USA are based on ideas developed through open consultation.

- Multistakeholder participation: The IGF-USA is built upon open, inclusive and democratic processes, with the meaningful participation of all stakeholders.

- Decision making: Decisions are made by broad consensus, where all opinions expressed are considered, discussed and understood.

- Transparency: Participants, decisions and activities of the IGF-USA, including finances, should be publicly documented.

- Accountability: As stewards for the IGF-USA community, IGF-USA leadership is accountable to that community.

- Diversity and inclusion: The IGF-USA strives for diverse and inclusive participation, including people regardless of their gender, colour, age, sexual preference, gender expression, disability or specific needs, stakeholder perspective or location.[6]

The organisational structure reflects these multistakeholder principles. The steering committee is open to anyone who wishes to participate. The core of the steering group is defined by who attends the majority of the meetings and gets work done. The leadership of the steering committee is selected by the full steering committee yearly. There are flexible term limits: while limiting a leader to two one-year terms, they allow one to serve longer if no one else can be recruited – often a problem in small organisations.

The organisational structure also created a secretariat that serves at the pleasure of the steering committee. The secretariat's mandate includes not only the functional aspects of the IGF-USA meetings and the yearly event, but also ensuring the transparency and accessibility of IGF-USA activities. With the approval of the steering committee, ISOC-DC[7] has taken on this responsibility in the start-up phase of the new organisational setup.

While it is still new, the new organisational paradigm for organising the IGF-USA, governed by a set of principles, seems to be off to a good start. The process of planning for the IGF-USA 2018 will be a good test, as it will be the first year when the operational structure and principles are set from day one.

Moving beyond IGF_USA@DC to becoming IGF-USA

The organisation is still very much rooted to Washington DC and one could despair in the hope of it becoming a national effort. All preparatory meetings are held in DC, and though there is remote participation that is ever improving, that is not the equivalent of participation by a group of people who encounter each other in the local environment, meeting face to face monthly. Except for a few voices on speakers, the perceptions of the steering group are predominantly the perceptions of those in the room in Washington DC. The idea of organising the meeting in another city seems daunting and is not clearly understood.

It is not, however, as if there were no interest in the Internet and its governance in the rest of the country. The example of Internet Society (ISOC) chapters[8] and Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) At-Large Structures[9] in a variety of US areas shows that there are other geographical areas in the US that care as much about internet governance as do those in DC.

Washington DC puts on a fine day of discussions. The topics are rich and the speakers informed. But it is a national IGF only in the sense that a capital

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4 igf-usa.org/pipermail/igf_usa_swg_igf-usa.org/2016-June/000000.html

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

6 https://wiki.igf-usa.org/images/5/5f/IGF-USA_2017_Organization_Structure_final.pdf

7 *The Washington DC chapter of the Internet Society.* https://isoc-dc.org

8 Internet Society chapters "bring together members in local and regional groups that run programmes and activities dedicated, among other things, to informing policy and educating the public about Internet-related issues." See: https://www.internetsociety.org/chapters

9 An ICANN At-Large Structure (ALS) is a "wholly independent organization from ICANN. The ALS accreditation recognizes that these groups meet ICANN's criteria for involving individual Internet users at the local or issue level in ICANN activities, and for promoting individuals' understanding of and participation in ICANN." See: https://atlarge.icann.org/get-involved/about-als

city often stands in as the symbol of a nation. Topics covered have included, among others, the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA)[10] transition, the domain name system, cloud computing, the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) for disaster response, myths about digital natives, crime on the Internet and other forms of malicious behaviour, as well as privacy, access and security. The IGF-USA also places a strong emphasis on youth participation.

There may be existential paralysis within the IGF-USA on the issue of whether it is better to stay where the power and speakers are or to move out into the rest of the country. I believe this has prevented the IGF-USA from growing to meet its potential. It is not that this is never discussed, just that there never seems to be a way forward.

The IGF-USA encourages other cities to hold events, but it is unclear whether those events would be initiatives that are separate from IGF-USA planning, an integral part of the event, or somehow ancillary. Recently, some people in the IGF-USA have spoken about the possibility of planning meetings in other places, especially if they can be tied to other events or meetings. This would be a baby step forward, but progress nonetheless.

It is probable that the issue of where to hold the IGF-USA 2018 will come up as the planning for next year begins. It is hard to say how the discussion will go. The inability to move beyond DC is a limitation in the IGF-USA's chances to become a truly national IGF.

It is important to note that at this point there is not a North American IGF. While there have been a variety of informal discussions about creating one, nothing formal has yet to get underway. Maybe in 2018, it could happen, though it is not clear who would take the lead in creating yet another IGF regional initiative and what its goals and strategies would be. In fact, there is not even consensus as to which countries are in North America when speaking of internet governance instead of geography.

IGF-USA as a multistakeholder organisation

The IGF-USA is serious about being a multistakeholder organisation that works within the bounds set by the IGF for the NRIs. It works according to multistakeholder principles that have been adopted by the organisation. It is open to all, both at the planning stage and for the meeting. It gathers priorities each year from the IGF-USA community on the topics to be covered and attempts to organise around those themes. It is good about working in a transparent manner and archives meetings for those who cannot

attend and for the future. It provides a degree of remote participation and puts effort into its improvement. With the new organisational structure it has established accountability to the community.

The participation is diverse both in terms of Tunis Agenda-based stakeholder groupings[11] and in terms of gender, but much less so in terms of US geography. As far as I know, no metrics are kept or consulted on the degree of geographic or other diversity in either the planning process or the meeting itself.

As discussed above, if there is a flaw, it is in the inability of the IGF-USA to reach out into the rest of the US. Perhaps this is the next problem to be worked on. The IGF-USA has strong core members, who put a lot of effort and caring into making sure it develops as a well-formed multistakeholder organisation, so there is hope.

Conclusion

The IGF-USA is coming along nicely as a local multistakeholder conference. But it has much that can be improved. It needs more outreach and it needs to move beyond the DC Beltway. It needs to understand the needs for internet governance in the US and needs to determine whether there are multistakeholder goals that should become part of an ongoing strategy and action for the organisation. It has yet to discuss whether there should be output of any sort.

Action steps

The following action steps are suggested for civil society:

- Civil society groups should involve themselves in the process of originating the yearly meetings. The steering committee is open to all who participate and contribute to getting the work done.

- Civil society should work together to organise IGF-USA-related events in locations other than Washington DC and should participate in efforts to create a North American event in a location other than Washington DC.

- Work should be done to start including the collection of statistics at the IGF-USA meeting to determine the extent to which it is diverse.

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10 https://iana.org

11 The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) defined a notion of stakeholder groups in the Geneva Plan of Action in 2003: "We recognize that building an inclusive Information Society requires new forms of solidarity, partnership and cooperation among governments and other stakeholders, i.e. the private sector, civil society and international organizations. Realizing that the ambitious goal of this Declaration – bridging the digital divide and ensuring harmonious, fair and equitable development for all – will require strong commitment by all stakeholders, we call for digital solidarity, both at national and international levels." See: https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/documents/doc_multi.asp?lang=en&id=1160|0

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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