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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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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>

CONGO, REPUBLIC OF

THE CHALLENGES OF INTERNET GOVERNANCE IN THE REPUBLIC OF CONGO



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Introduction

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) set up by the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society¹ is a forum in which various actors meet and discuss issues related to the evolution of the internet internationally, regionally and at the national level. Because of the interests involved, it is in fact necessary for all stakeholders to participate in the forum. Despite its importance, it is often confronted with several challenges, including the low participation of stakeholders due to difficulties in accessing funding, and, at the local level, the lack of national expertise on the issues. There has not been a national IGF in the Republic of Congo since 2010, when a once-off event was held, although the government has been represented in various sub-regional forums in Central Africa and hosted the event this year in Brazzaville.

This report considers the key challenges that internet governance faces in the Republic of Congo.

Political and economic context of the country

The Republic of Congo has about 4.8 million inhabitants. Its population is young, with more than 50% of the inhabitants less than 20 years old. The level of education is relatively high, and the literacy rate at 83% is among the highest in Africa. The Congo is highly urbanised: more than 60% of the population lives in cities, two of which alone comprise 55% of the population of the country (Brazzaville with approximately 900,000 inhabitants and Pointe Noire with approximately 600,000 inhabitants).

The Congolese economy² is very diversified, although focused mainly on the oil industry, which accounts for about 60% of gross domestic product (GDP). While the political situation in the Congo is more or less stable, despite the crisis in the Pool

region,³ economic growth in the country has slowed markedly since 2015 to become negative in 2016. This is due to the effect of the fall in the price of a barrel of oil since mid-2014. Such a situation affects all sectors of activity in the country, including funding a national IGF.

The Congolese internet governance context

The national internet governance context is still marked by a certain imbalance of power between the various actors: the government, the private sector, civil society and regional or sub-regional institutions. This does not facilitate the participation of all stakeholders in the development of public internet policies, and also reflects the failure to take into account the interests of specific groups such as women, children, youth and indigenous peoples.

A lack of awareness and shocking apathy among the youth

The importance of internet governance has not yet been realised by the Congolese. This is as true at the level of public institutions as it is in civil society organisations. For example, officials in the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications have acknowledged to us that they do not have enough information on internet governance. As a result, even when it comes to identifying stakeholders for the organisation of a national IGF, it is difficult to determine who should take the lead on the issue. This lack of knowledge of internet governance issues partly explains the irregularity of the national IGFs in the country.

Unlike some African countries which have set up an organisation to serve as an organising committee, there is no similar structure in the Congo.

Despite the existence of a national chapter of the Internet Society (ISOC) in the Congo, there is a crisis of leadership to the point where the organisations that were motivated in the past to deal with internet governance issues are no longer interested. This is acknowledged by Davy Silou, a member of the ISOC chapter who contributed to organising the first IGF in the Congo. The lack of motivation is due to the fact that there is no transparency in managing funds, few training opportunities, and a lack of leadership.

1 <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html>

2 www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr

3 <http://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/republic-congo>

A recent survey of young people in the Congo⁴ – which included government officials – revealed that 90% of respondents do not have any knowledge of internet governance. Many believe that it is up to the state alone to decide on the future of the internet, giving the example of the government’s decision to cut the internet during the presidential elections in 2016.⁵ For them, the government should decide everything.

For some, such as Darcia Kandza, a member of AZUR Development, this is a crisis. She stresses: “If a large number of young people do not master the stakes of internet governance and the opportunities that the internet is likely to offer them, it will not be of much use to them.” This lack of involvement, she added, “will not contribute to the development of the digital economy in our country.”⁶

Low stakeholder involvement in internet governance issues

The vision of the IGF is to engage all stakeholders in discussions on internet governance. However, in the Republic of Congo, the government does not really involve other stakeholders in the formulation of internet policy. According to Luc Missidimbazi, a member of the PRATIC Association,⁷ the stakeholders in the governance of the internet in the Congo are “the government, the regulator, operators and some civil society.” At the same time, the balance between the parties is not respected. “Only the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications gets to act,” he argues.

As far as civil society is concerned, there is little commitment to internet governance issues. According to Silou, civil society is not organised enough to be a force capable of contributing effectively to the development of public policies on the internet. In order for the government to be able to involve civil society, it must first be visible, for example, by organising internet governance activities and by beginning to formulate coherent positions on internet governance.

One consequence of the lack of participation by civil society in internet governance is that vulnerable groups such as women, indigenous peoples and people with disabilities are not taken into account by internet public policies. For example, indigenous peoples, who for the most part live in rural areas,

do not have public policies aimed at helping them benefit from the internet.

Although gender equality should be seen as a fundamental principle in the governance of the internet, very few women are involved in internet policy meetings in the Congo. By way of illustration, at the Central Africa IGF (CA-IGF) in April 2017, only one woman, Anja Gengo, gave a presentation; and only one woman, Darcia Kandza, is in the CA-IGF multistakeholder consultation group.⁸

Regional reflection

The Republic of Congo no longer organises a national IGF following its 2010 event, but has participated in the various sub-regional forums on internet governance, hosting this year’s Central Africa forum in Brazzaville in April. The fact that national IGFs are no longer being organised is a sign that participation in sub-regional forums has not had a major impact at the national level; perhaps because of a lack of interest on the part of different actors. Hopefully, this may change. Indeed, the recommendations put forward at the CA-IGF held in Brazzaville may lead us to believe that there will be changes. Among the recommendations were to increase internet governance capacity for users in the sub-region; to ensure that all stakeholders are well prepared for better contributions and interactions at the IGF; and to strengthen multistakeholder dialogue models for national IGFs.⁹

The Republic of Congo has been designated as an internet exchange point for Central Africa and will have to make an effort to move the internet governance discussion forward. This is probably why the government plans to set up infrastructure for a data centre. But Congo needs to do more to gain the maximum benefit from participating in sub-regional, regional and international forums on internet governance. This includes establishing an organising committee for a national IGF, and organising national forums regularly with the participation of all stakeholders.

Conclusion

In a context where the information society is characterised by increasingly complex issues, IGFs play an important role in bringing together diverse actors to discuss these issues. While some countries are already well on their way to achieving the dynamic of multistakeholder engagement, others still have a long way to go. This is the case in the Republic of

4 Conducted by the author in March 2017.

5 Konviser, B. (2016, 19 March). Congo orders telecom providers to shut down services for election day. *Deutsche Welle*. www.dw.com/en/congo-orders-telecom-providers-to-shut-down-services-for-election-day/a-19129396

6 Interviewed by the author.

7 osiane2017.cg

8 Report of the Central Africa Internet Governance Forum (CA-IGF) 2017.

9 Ibid.

Congo, where the government lacks the will to solicit input from all actors to discuss internet policy issues, and there is a lack of commitment from civil society which means that it is not being heard. The result is a lack of internet policies that benefit the population in general and young people in particular.

Action steps

To help change things, the following recommendations are proposed:

Government

- Institutionalise the IGF by setting up processes that ensure it can be held each year, and that all relevant stakeholders participate. This includes setting up an organising committee that can push the IGF agenda forward.
- Establish a national advisory committee on internet governance, which includes public, civil society and private sector actors, to promote research and development on internet governance.
- Adopt internet policies that take into account the specificities of certain vulnerable groups such as young people, women, indigenous peoples and people with disabilities.

- Establish capacity-building programmes on internet governance issues for all stakeholders.

Civil society

- Raise awareness among marginalised or vulnerable groups such as women, indigenous peoples and people with disabilities on the challenges of internet governance in order to encourage their participation and involvement in the IGF.
- Participate in Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN),¹⁰ Internet Society (ISOC)¹¹ and other internet governance training programmes to become better informed and equipped to participate in internet governance debates.
- Sensitise decision makers in institutions and companies on the social, legal, economic, political and diplomatic stakes of internet governance to increase their involvement.

Regional and international bodies and institutions

- Contribute to building the capacity of national internet governance actors.
- Fund civil society campaigns that raise awareness about internet governance generally.

¹⁰ <https://www.icann.org>

¹¹ <https://www.internetsociety.org>

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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