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

Introduction
The IGF and NRIs: A high-impact outcome of an unintended consequence

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Introduction

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) is generally seen as one of the most significant outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). While its value as a platform for dialogue is on the whole widely appreciated, there has been some persistent criticism for the lack of concrete output. However, this criticism tends to overlook the spread of IGF offshoots in all continents, in the form of national and regional IGF-type meetings. These meetings were first known as IGF initiatives and are now referred to as National and Regional Internet Governance Forums, or by their acronym NRIs. This piece is written from the double perspective of someone who witnessed the emergence of the NRIs as head of the IGF Secretariat between 2006 and 2010 and, from 2011 to 2014, saw the growth and maturing of their network as a member of the Internet Society (ISOC) team; and, from 2014 onwards, through the lens of the IGF Support Association (IGFSA). In various capacities I was able to attend NRIs in all regions and thus gain a first-hand impression of their diversity.

The NRIs were not part of the WSIS outcomes, they were more of an unintended consequence of the IGF. As such, they are a success story – they have spread the multistakeholder approach to Internet[1] governance across all continents, and also into countries where governments were not in the habit of consulting non-governmental actors. The NRI success story is also an IGF success story – it is a concrete outcome of the IGF, however spontaneous and unintended it may have been.

It is also an outcome with a direct and concrete impact. Much of the Internet governance debate at the global level relates to broad principles or abstract concepts. In contrast, at the national level the discussions can influence policy.

"Good Internet governance begins at home"[2] is a motto I like to quote in this context. There are examples that provide proof of concept to that motto. The first and foremost is maybe Kenya, where the government developed an Internet-friendly policy through a multistakeholder consultative process.[3] The policy was in place when the undersea cable landed in Mombasa and allowed the country to bring down prices, make broadband Internet access affordable and make rapid progress in Internet-related services. Among other things, Kenya became a pioneer in providing mobile e-banking, allowing people who, until then, had never even had a bank account, to access financial services.

The beginning of the NRIs

The first regional IGF to emerge was the Caribbean IGF in 2005, driven by the Caribbean Telecommunications Union (CTU),[4] but without any linkages to the IGF Secretariat or the global IGF at that time. In Europe, the United Kingdom (UK) was the first country to promote a national IGF. In July 2006, I attended an event in the House of Commons which was the precursor of the UK IGF. The event was organised by Nominet,[5] the operator of the national country code top-level domain (ccTLD). Nominet was also the driving force behind the first UK IGF which was held in 2007 and was brought to the attention of the second global IGF meeting held in Rio de Janeiro that year.

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1   Although APC spells internet with a lower-case "i", the author holds the view that the internet as a network of networks should be spelt with an upper-case "I", a spelling favoured by all relevant internet organisations and also used in the WSIS outcome documents.

2   Axel Pawlik, CEO of RIPE NCC, the European regional internet registry, speaking on a panel at the Russia IGF, 2011.

3   Souter, D., & Kerretts-Makau, M. (2012). *Internet Governance in Kenya: An Assessment for the Internet Society*. https://www.researchictafrica.net/multistake/Souter_Kerretts-Makau_2012_-_Internet_governance_in_Kenya_-_an_assessment_for_the_Internet_Society

4   www.ctu.int/projects/caribbean-internet-governance-forum-cigf

5   www.nominet.uk

A year later, more regional IGFs were created, among them the East African IGF and the European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EuroDIG). These meetings, held in Nairobi and Strasbourg respectively, were very different and showed that every country, every region has different problems to tackle and has different sensitivities and priorities.

While in Africa access to the Internet was the number one priority (and the excitement about the imminent landing of the undersea cable and the accompanying broadband services was palpable – "Making Kenya a top ten global ICT hub" was the meeting's motto), the Europeans were more concerned about issues related to privacy, freedom of expression and other human rights. In the context of the global IGF, the NRIs manifested themselves in the way they had set themselves up, in a spontaneous, bottom-up fashion. They were not created by the IGF Advisory Group, which from 2008 onwards became referred to as the Multistakeholder Advisory Group, better known by its acronym, MAG, but they were self-organised and emerged the same way at the global IGF.

At the 2008 annual global IGF meeting in Hyderabad, India, there was a workshop devoted to NRIs, with participants from Senegal, Kuwait, Italy, the UK, Germany, France, the Council of Europe, Brazil and Kenya. The NRIs also claimed a space on the centre stage, taking advantage of the final main session – an open mike session devoted to taking stock – to highlight their existence and also make a concrete proposal to form a Dynamic Coalition on national and regional IGFs in order to exchange experiences both on processes and content and share best practices.[6]

The following year, in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, the NRIs were given a 90-minute main session slot in the morning of the first day, that is, before the official opening ceremony. The session, entitled "Regional Perspectives", had speakers representing the East and West African IGFs, the Latin American IGF as well as EuroDIG, and was intended to highlight commonalities between them and to look at the differences of their respective approaches.[7] It established the principle of "no one size fits all" both in terms of format and substance. There was also broad agreement that all NRIs should follow the basic multistakeholder approach of the global IGF and be open, inclusive and bottom-up.

By 2010, NRIs had spread to all regions, including the Asia Pacific region, which held its first APrIGF meeting in Hong Kong in June.

At the annual global IGF meeting held in Vilnius, Lithuania that year, the NRIs held a roundtable discussion to compare notes and share experiences, mainly dealing with organisational matters. It also became clear by then that there were two basic approaches: some saw their IGF as an event with a focus on issues that mattered to their country or region, while others conceptualised the NRIs as preparatory events for the global IGF, much in the United Nations (UN) tradition of holding regional conferences to prepare for a global summit, as was the case for WSIS. In the discussions among the NRIs, the focus on national or regional issues proved to be more popular and sustainable. However, the more classical UN-type approach also gained some traction and there were increasing voices calling for more and better interlinkages between the NRIs themselves on the one hand and the global IGF on the other.

The Internet Governance Forum Support Association and the NRIs

The growth of the NRI network was also one of the factors that motivated the creation of the Internet Governance Forum Support Association (IGFSA) in 2014. It was set up as a non-profit association incorporated in Switzerland with the purpose "to promote and support the global IGF as well as the national and regional IGF initiatives" and "provide funds to maintain and strengthen the IGF Secretariat and national and regional IGF initiatives and seek and promote exchange and collaboration with national and regional IGF initiatives."[8] Since 2014 the IGFSA has provided direct support to the UN IGF Trust Fund[9] but also, increasingly, to the NRI network.

The IGFSA support, mainly to NRIs from developing countries and economies in transition, consists of USD 3,500 to regional IGFs and USD 2,000 to national IGFs. Up until November 2017, the IGFSA had sponsored 65 national and 25 regional IGFs.

The IGFSA contribution may appear modest, but has proved very helpful to many as seed funding. In addition, it has proved helpful to developing common minimal standards, basically reflecting the IGF approach of being open, inclusive, transparent, bottom-up and non-commercial. The IGFSA made it a funding condition for NRIs to respect the IGF

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6 https://www.intgovforum.org/cms/hyderabad_prog/TSAWF.html

7 https://www.un.org/webcast/igf/ondemand.asp?mediaID=pl091115am2

8 IGFSA Articles of Association: www.igfsa.org/articles-of-association

9 The IGF is a so-called "extra-budgetary activity" of the UN, i.e. an activity that is not funded through the UN regular budget, but through voluntary contributions that are channelled into a Trust Fund. See also: https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/funding

Secretariat rules for being listed on the IGF website. In addition to the basic IGF principles, the requirements also include the obligation to have a website and to publish a report of the meeting. Coupling the IGF Secretariat's requirements with the prospect of getting funding from the IGFSA proved a useful method for ensuring that the NRIs would adhere to the same basic principles, thus bringing some coherence to the network.

Conclusion

To conclude, a few words on the NRIs' impact. Their main merit is the promotion of a multistakeholder approach to Internet governance. While there is no single definition of what constitutes a valid multistakeholder approach, there are a wide variety of interpretations thereof. The global IGF adopts an approach where all stakeholders participate as equals, while others differentiate between stakeholders in their respective roles, echoing the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society.[10] At the national level, governments remain the ultimate decision makers. There is a difference between the IGF as a platform for dialogue with no operational tasks and the role of governments in charge of the welfare and security of their citizens. Some of the Internet institutions which do have operational tasks, such as Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the Regional Internet Registries (RIRs) or the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) are somewhere in between. They all advocate a multistakeholder approach, but again, there is no single model. Common to all, however, is that the role of governments is different from other stakeholders.

At the national level, some form of multistakeholder consultation is essential for sustainable policy-development processes. While this may not be the IGF-type multistakeholder approach with all stakeholders having an equal say, it is a significant step forward compared to governments taking lonely decisions. Since the 19th century, in mature Western market-based democracies, a sophisticated network of non-governmental structures has evolved. Professional bodies, business and employers' associations, economic pressure groups, farmers' organisations as well as civil society institutions such as environmental or consumer protection advocates, established themselves as interlocutors of their respective governments and helped shape policy. Governments had to consult them and listen to their opinions if they wanted to be re-elected. These non-governmental structures are much weaker in countries where the government has traditionally run large sectors of the economy. It is a big step in the right direction towards good governance if the NRIs help encourage a dialogue with governments.

At the first West African IGF in 2009 I heard a representative of the local technical community say: "This is the first time the Minister is talking to us." The Minister attended the meeting because of its link, however weak, to the UN. It is this link that is important. It makes the NRIs relevant and fosters a multistakeholder approach at all levels. "It can be painful, but it helps us make better decisions" was the comment of a senior Kenyan government official, when asked why he participated actively in civil society list discussions. This defines the very essence of the multistakeholder approach.

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10   Tunis Agenda for the Information Society, paragraph 33.
     https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html

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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