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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: Role, impact and inclusiveness

David Souter¹

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National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs) have become an important part of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) family in recent years. They are frequently cited among the IGF's success stories – giving the global IGF more influence, allowing more dynamic interchange between global and national contexts, extending the reach of multistakeholder approaches to the internet in countries where that approach might not otherwise take hold.

Supporters of the global IGF have a strong incentive to applaud the growth of NRIs. They add to the collage of multistakeholder governance initiatives which IGF supporters welcome. But their success has been measured mostly by their numbers. How many NRIs are out there (a number that has been growing)? How many people have been taking part in them? Much less attention has been paid to assessing what they have done: how much they have contributed to national internet governance debates; where and when, if anywhere, they have influenced outcomes.

This GISWatch review is therefore timely. This commentary suggests some lines of enquiry concerning NRIs which might contribute to their future development.

The context for the NRIs: The IGF itself

It is worth beginning with some history, and of the IGF itself, not just of NRIs.

The IGF has become a fixture on the calendar for those who are interested in internet governance. Its survival after five and ten years was contested, but it was easily renewed at the United Nations' (UN's) WSIS+10² review in 2015. It is beginning to look permanent.

For many people, that is recognition of its value. It does substantially fulfil the mandate set out for it in paragraph 72 of the Tunis Agenda³ that concluded WSIS; rather better, in fact, than might have been expected.

I think there is considerable value in the IGF remaining largely a discussion forum, provided that diverse ideas and opinions are reflected there. However, not everyone agrees. There have long been rumblings of discontent that it does not produce more, and more substantive, outcome documents – and the fact that it does not undoubtedly reduces participation by some governments and some big players from the private sector. Each year, beneath the public praise for what it is doing, there are sub-currents of dissatisfaction with what the IGF has achieved, and whether it will retain its influence.

NRIs were not part of the original concept of the IGF. The first started spontaneously, as participants in early global IGFs thought the model would be useful back home too. There was initially no framework for supporting them (perhaps because the IGF Secretariat was – as it still is – under-resourced); but, when renewal of the mandate first came under question, around 2010, they were seen as part of the case for that renewal. A working group on improvements to the IGF, which followed, called for greater integration between NRIs and the global event.

NRIs now feature significantly on the agenda for the global IGF – though the session in which they feature will be more stimulating if it addresses general issues than if it consists of reports-back. There is also a formal recognition process. To get on the IGF website and have access to other “benefits”, NRIs must adhere to a set of principles set out in a toolkit⁴ put together by the Secretariat in collaboration with existing IGF initiatives. Although this calls itself “advisory”, it would be hard to run a national IGF without compliance.

1 David Souter's blog for APC, *Inside the Information Society*, is published weekly at <https://www.apc.org/en/column/inside-information-society>

2 Outcome document of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the overall review of the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society, para. 63. [workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN96078.pdf](https://www.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN96078.pdf)

3 Tunis Agenda for the Information Society (2005). <https://www.itu.int/net/ws/is/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html>

4 <https://www.intgovforum.org/review/toolkit-to-help-communities-to-establish-igf-initiatives>

Playing by the rules

The rules within the toolkit are not complex. To be recognised as an NRI, initiatives have to be “open and transparent, inclusive, multistakeholder, bottom up and non-commercial.” These are described as “baseline principles” of the global IGF (which, indeed, they have been). They are subject to limited elaboration in the toolkit. Organisers should, for example, begin with involvement from at least three stakeholder communities. They must not sell tickets, but they may have sponsors. They should also submit meeting reports to the global Secretariat.

Those that fulfil these requirements, the toolkit says, will be “valuable contributors in conducting an inclusive and open multistakeholder discussion on matters pertaining to the Internet,” while collaboration between them will “significantly [help] participants at the global IGF to better understand the substance of the issues existing around the world.” Encouragement is also given to Youth IGFs (though other demographic groupings are not mentioned).

These baseline principles are not contentious within the IGF community, though what they mean in practice might be differently interpreted by different stakeholders and in different countries. The remainder of this commentary asks three questions in the light of the experience to date:

- What is the purpose of the NRIs?
- How important is the national context?
- What other factors than those “baseline principles” are needed for success?

What is the purpose of the NRIs?

I have attended a number of NRIs – national events in several countries, and regional events in several continents. These have demonstrated significant similarities but also substantial differences. The similarities arise largely because they are (at least) trying to follow the same rules (described above) and conventions (drawn from the global IGF, with which their organisers are generally familiar). The differences are, therefore, more interesting.

There is a clear distinction between regional and national IGFs. The latter naturally focus on national priorities; the former look for consensus and synergies between national perspectives.

EuroDIG – the European regional event – resembles the global IGF in ethos and practice: more free-flowing, with lots of people who work full time on and in the internet exchanging views, collaborating and contesting, carrying on discussions which they have in other internet events outside the context of the IGF.

The other regional events I have attended have often felt more formal, perhaps because intergovernmental agencies have played a larger part in organising them. They have been more concerned than EuroDIG with elaborating a regional position which can feed into other regional gatherings and forums as well as into internet events. Governments have played a powerful role in some, but not all, of them. From the perspective of participants, the most useful outcomes may well have been the opportunities that they provide to exchange experience of different internet environments and policy approaches – on issues such as net neutrality and zero-rating, broadband regulation, and the blocking and filtering of content.

National IGFs vary between two different orientations. Some countries, including mine (UK), have toyed with both at different times.

Some NRIs have seen themselves as preparatory meetings for the global IGF. Some have based agendas on the themes that are to be discussed the next time the global meeting comes around. Others – and these have often been more interesting – have concentrated on the issues that are most important within their country at the time in question. These national priorities – as Monica Kerretts-Makau and I illustrated in work for the Internet Society some years ago⁵ – vary substantially between countries and over time.

Both these approaches are legitimate, but NRIs should clarify which they are trying to pursue and when. In practice, it might be most useful to participants if they included both, prioritised for national context, in their planning and agendas. The most interesting discussions I have attended at NRIs have been those that have addressed contentious issues of the moment from a national perspective, and have deliberately brought internet outsiders affected by them into the debate (see below).

How important is the national context?

The NRI toolkit is concerned primarily with ensuring that NRIs meet a common standard that can grant legitimacy within the context of the global IGF. It is equally important, however, that an NRI has legitimacy in its regional or national context. This has two important aspects, concerned respectively with content and with process.

5 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.pdf

The toolkit pays more attention to the content side of this, where it requires “bottom-up” agenda setting. “NRIs are encouraged,” it says, “to run public consultations, in order to ensure that the community is aware of the initiative’s work.” “It is important,” it adds, “to ensure that the program agenda reflects the needs of the respective community.”

This suggests that agendas should look towards national priorities rather than towards those of the global IGF (see previous section). But a central question here concerns the nature and identity of “the community” that is to be consulted. The priorities of internet insiders, who primarily attend the IGF and NRIs, are often different from those of internet outsiders, who may use it and depend upon it but do not obsess about it, earn their livings from it or consider it their top priority.

Process, too, is difficult. It is much easier to organise a multistakeholder conference in a region or a country where multistakeholder engagement in policy and practice is the norm than where governments assert greater authority or do not generally welcome multistakeholder approaches. In some countries, an NRI may be impossible to organise without extensive government involvement or even leadership. Civil society organisations are weak in many countries, lacking organisational capacity and leverage as well as substantial policy engagement with the internet. Private sector involvement can be dominated by international data corporations or national telcos/ISPs, with little engagement from local businesses (whether in the ICT sector or just users of the internet).

Content and process may combine here, in interesting ways. In Pakistan (see the Pakistan country report in this volume), attempts to organise an NRI were made by digital rights activists in opposition to legislation that had been proposed by the government. But NRIs are intended to be meeting places for all stakeholders, including governments. Would Pakistan’s digital rights initiative, had it got off the ground, have met the criteria set out in the toolkit?

There is a need here for contextual diversity. Not everyone could or should do things exactly the same way. Indeed, the internet is surely built upon the principle that they do not, should not. Compliance with the toolkit does not guarantee success. Equally, it may need to be flexibly interpreted in order to accommodate alternate (innovative?) ways of doing things. What should matter here is whether an initiative generates real debate about the issues that affect its country or region.

Are the Secretariat’s “baseline principles” sufficient?

The wider issue with the toolkit’s “baseline principles” is that they are insufficient to ensure this. To be successful, NRIs need to air different views about issues that matter to local populations. There are a number of challenges here for NRIs which are not resolved by rules that focus only on stakeholder involvement. I will illustrate from experience at events I have attended.

First, NRI organisers have different views on what they are trying to achieve. Some focus on “awareness raising” and “capacity building”, for example. These are laudable objectives. It is hard, but not impossible, to locate them alongside policy debates within a single-day event. But there is a risk that they become didactic: in particular that they are dominated by those with particular perspectives – government, business or civil society – who confuse awareness raising and capacity building with advocacy, seeking to persuade others to agree with them.

Second, “multistakeholder” formats are not necessarily “inclusive”. I will illustrate.

The panel on cybersecurity at one NRI that I attended recently was multistakeholder, as required by the toolkit. Diverse stakeholder groups were represented on it. Yet everyone on that panel was white, male, aged over 50 and shared the same perspective on the subject (“we’re doing all we can; it’s tough but we’re confident that it’s in hand”). None had much to say about the future.

There are two problems here. The first, obviously, is that the panel lacked demographic diversity – of gender, ethnicity or age. This is a common problem. A panel is not diverse if it includes different stakeholder communities but ignores gender, age, geography, education and ethnicity. (This is true generally. Youth NRIs, which are promoted by the IGF Multistakeholder Advisory Group and Secretariat, will not add inclusiveness if – as one South Asian participant put it to me at an IGF – they are composed only of high-income, highly educated youths from elite schools and universities in national capitals.)

The second problem is that the session I described lacked different perspectives. Everyone said much the same and no one said much that was new. This was internet insiders talking to other internet insiders – there were some 50 in the room – within a comfort zone. That may give those present a glow of satisfaction but it is not going to influence political opinion in the country or build wider understanding of the impact of the internet amongst internet

insiders or the wider public; and it will not have much value when reported at the global IGF.

Two points; two challenges – both of which relate to the global event as well as to the NRIs.

First, debate about the internet needs to reach beyond internet insiders to include those who do not share the dominant perspective at the IGF: those who are anxious about the internet; those who fear its impact on their societies, economies and cultures; those indeed who do not share the IGF's prevailing ethos that its governance should be multistakeholder, not multilateral. At present, neither the IGF nor NRIs do this sufficiently. They should.

Second, debate about the impact of the internet needs to reach beyond those internet insiders to

include the views of experts on other areas of society, economy and culture that are impacted by it. Too many panels on issues like human rights and sustainable development at the IGF and NRIs are led by internet insiders who think they know about them. Organisers should invite specialists on those issues to take the floor or, better, lead in those discussions. We who focus on the internet have much to learn from them.

In conclusion

I support the IGF. I think that NRIs have added significantly to it and, more importantly, add value to national discussions about the internet. To do so more effectively, though, they must move forward to become more wide-ranging and inclusive.

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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