

IGF 2014 – Producing Tangible Outcomes on Best Practices

Submission by the Internet Society

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In response to the Request for Public Input posted on the IGF website, the Internet Society submits the following general reflections as an input into the planning of the IGF 2014 and proposes some concrete innovations for the Istanbul meeting. The core of the proposal is to enable the IGF to produce policy outcome documents open for voluntary adoption. In order to get there, it is suggested to seek inspiration from the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) in terms of producing outcome documents based on voluntary adoption and starting substantive intersessional work. The proposal also suggests reviving Best Practice Forums and introducing Bird of a Feather-type sessions.

General Reflections

The IGF has proven it worth as an open and inclusive multistakeholder platform to address policy issues related to the Internet, as a “go to place” where the community gathers to share experiences and exchange information. Since its inception in 2006 the IGF has continuously evolved and matured. The Bali meeting demonstrated that the IGF has created a sense of community that allowed discussions of challenging issues in an open and frank manner. Part of the value of the multistakeholder approach is both agreeing and disagreeing on various issues and encouraging participants to show respect and listen to each others' arguments, positions and needs.

In Tunis in 2005, Heads of State and government gave away part of their prerogative and invited other stakeholders to participate as equals in the continuation of the dialogue started by the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). The Internet Society along with others holds the view that the essential characteristic of the IGF is that it has a mandate to foster dialogue, without the ‘hard power’ to reach any binding decisions.

Paradoxically, this apparent weakness – the lack of decision-making power – is the true strength of the IGF. It enhances the quality of the dialogue, as it provides a platform for the unencumbered and frank exchange of information and opinions that is freed from the constraints of negotiations and decision-making. While the IGF has no ‘hard power’ or the power of redistribution, it has the power of recognition: it can identify issues of concern and it can help shape decisions that are taken elsewhere. This is ‘soft power’. This ‘soft power’ relies to a large extent on the legitimacy and authority of the Secretary-General of the United Nations as the convener of the IGF.

The Internet Society is aware that not all stakeholders share a similar understanding of the IGF. Indeed, the IGF has been criticized in the past for “not providing solutions”, for being a mere “talking shop” or for “going around in circles”. These critics have overlooked the many valuable discussions documented on the IGF website and a serious effort to analyze its content¹ would produce concrete takeaways, ranging from reports of workshops on how to go about setting up IXPs to discussions on principles.

While Para 72 (g) of the Tunis Agenda (“Identify emerging issues, bring them to the attention of the relevant bodies and the general public, and, where appropriate, make recommendations.”) allows for the possibility of making recommendations, the IGF, in the first years of its existence, would have been too fragile to allow for a robust discussion on how to work towards a consensus.

As the IGF evolved, the quality of the dialogue progressively matured. In Bali, the IGF was ready to take the discussions forward, towards points of convergence. The agenda for the 2013 meeting was guided by the attempt to make the IGF more responsive to the broader policy discourse defining the Internet governance space. Now is the time to take the IGF a step further, towards more tangible outcomes, as recommended by the CSTD WG on Improvements to the IGF². However, the Internet Society holds the view that any such development should not change the very nature of the IGF; it should continue to encourage substantive deliberations by all stakeholders. Similar to the need to preserve the open Internet as a driver for innovation, the key characteristic of the IGF as an open platform for discussion needs to be preserved.

2014 will be a pivotal year for Internet governance. The accelerated pace of Internet governance discussions in 2014-2015 is exemplified by the many major conferences (World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC), Brazil event, WSIS Review, ITU Plenipotentiary,) shaping the future agenda, with some of them aiming to restructure existing arrangements. It will, therefore, be important for the IGF to contribute to the shaping of a new international consensus on Internet governance. This context provides a unique opportunity for the IGF to occupy a central place in this debate.

International consensus on Internet policies and principles is unlikely to come from only one source; instead it is likely to be derived from the voluntary adoption of compatible principles developed in different fora. The IGF and its national and regional meetings could take a pre-eminent role in this regard. The IGF, throughout its years of operations, has been the neutral focal point of Internet governance. This should not change.

The IETF Experience

The Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) could serve as a model for how the IGF might evolve. No model will translate entirely but rather can provide lessons to learn from. In concrete terms, the IGF could adopt a policy development process inspired by the approach taken in the IETF with respect to the development of Internet protocols and informational documents.

The Internet Society takes pride in providing the institutional home of the IETF and would like to bring to attention of the IGF community some key characteristics of the IETF. The IETF is the Internet’s premier standards developing organization. It shares some characteristics with the IGF insofar as it is not a membership organization and is open to all interested participants. In “The Tao of IETF: A Novice's Guide to the Internet Engineering Task Force”³ it is stated that “The IETF is really about its participants. Because the IETF welcomes all interested individuals, IETF participants come from all over the world and from many different parts of the Internet industry”. The same document also explains that “The IETF makes voluntary standards that are often adopted by Internet users, but it does not control, or even patrol, the Internet. “

The fundamental principles of standards development are set out in the OpenStand paradigm⁴:

1. Cooperation
2. Adherence to Principles
3. Collective Empowerment
4. Availability
5. Voluntary Adoption

The principle of voluntary adoption of standards is central to the IETF's mission. Its standards are not mandatory; the market and Internet users will eventually decide on their adoption. Equally central is the concept of "rough consensus". The way to achieve "rough consensus" is described by the IETF as follows:

"Working groups make decisions through a "rough consensus" process. IETF consensus does not require that all participants agree, although this is, of course, preferred. In general, the dominant view of the working group shall prevail. (However, "dominance" is not to be determined on the basis of volume or persistence, but rather a more general sense of agreement). Consensus can be determined by a show of hands, humming, or any other means on which the WG agrees (by rough consensus, of course). Note that 51% of the working group does not qualify as "rough consensus" and 99% is better than rough. It is up to the Chair to determine if rough consensus has been reached (IETF Working Group Guidelines and Procedures).⁵

The IETF creates several categories of documents, including: Informational, Experimental, Best Current Practice (BCP), and Standards (either Proposed Standard or Internet Standard). No matter what the category, all documents start as Internet-Drafts and must go through a community review process prior to being approved for publication as RFCs. The BCP category is unique in that it allows for several RFCs to be rolled up into a single BCP number.⁶

³ <http://www.ietf.org/tao.html>

⁴ <http://open-stand.org/principles/>

⁵ [RFC 2418](#) -IETF Working Group Guidelines and Procedures. 1998

New ideas usually get tested first in a Bird of a Feather (BoF) session.⁷ While the IETF meets three times a year, most of its work is done between sessions, by Working Groups (WGs) through email lists and conference calls.

Towards IGF policy outcomes

These key concepts – or parts thereof – could be adapted and transferred to the IGF. The Internet Society suggests exploring ways of how best to adapt some of the IETF key characteristics to the IGF and how best to produce non-binding policy outcomes. Reflecting on IETF practices, some ideas could inform the IGF's future processes. The advantage of the IETF model is that it provides options to the community regarding how they choose to address an issue with a variety of documents, ranging from Informational to Experimental and Best Current Practice (BCP). The IGF community could explore the various choices and through trial and error find the most suitable approach in the field of policy.

The Internet Society considers that in the context of the IGF the concept of documentation related to best practices could prove the most suitable one for providing tangible outcomes. In the past, the IGF tried to promote best practices sessions and organized Best Practice Forums. Unfortunately, after some successful individual sessions this format ran out of steam and, due to lack of resources, was not documented sufficiently. Revived Best Practice Forums could be reflected in policy documents.

For all this to happen, a lot of work and preparation is required. The Internet Society believes a good starting point would be to develop intersessional work on substantive issues, build on the work of the Dynamic Coalitions and create working groups chaired by MAG members or relevant experts of the IGF community, focused on particular topics or issues. The working groups would mostly work online, and meet physically during the MAG and Open Consultations meetings as well as the IGF. Ultimately, the IGF would have to develop a process that allows for adoption, by rough consensus, of documents, which would not be binding, but open to voluntary recognition and adoption by all stakeholders.

The IGF's meeting structure would need to be adapted accordingly and include Bird of Feather meetings (BoFs), revived Best Practice Forums as well as working group sessions.

The IGF mandate is sufficiently flexible to allow for such an approach, which would have to evolve over the years. The Istanbul meeting could be the starting point for such an evolution, which would make the IGF more relevant and encourage multidisciplinary, collaborative, global and regional policy development on pertinent issues and the sharing of best current practices, building on voluntary principles and standards for interoperable global policy solutions. However, there is also a sense of urgency: the IGF needs to

⁷ According to Wikipedia, "the term is derived from the proverb '[Birds of a feather flock together](#)'. (In old poetic English, "birds of a feather" means birds which have the same kind of feathers, so the proverb refers to the fact that birds congregate with birds of their own species.)"⁷

demonstrate that it is able to renew itself and adapt to a changing Internet governance landscape. The Istanbul meeting is therefore an opportunity it cannot afford to miss and the February open consultations/MAG meeting needs to provide the basis for strengthening to IGF.

Proposal for the 2014 IGF Meeting

In concrete terms, the Internet Society proposes the following innovations for the 2014 meeting, thus evolving the current meeting structure and enhance intersessional work:

1/ Create a new category of meetings -“Bird of a Feather”(BoF)-type sessions.

The MAG would decide how to allocate these slots, based on a call for proposals to examine a new issue for further consideration by the IGF. Any interested stakeholder would be entitled to submit a proposal. These slots could be 30 – 60 minutes and would take place in a room reserved for workshops.

2/ Revive Best Practice Forums and give them main slots.

Issues that are sufficiently mature are technical issues, such as spam, IXPs, peering and interconnection, where the IGF can be instrumental in promoting solutions. Discussions on Internet governance and multistakeholder principles have moved towards points of convergence and could also lend themselves to be dealt with in a Best Practice Forum. The outcome of these sessions should be reflected in form of a descriptive outcome document.

3/ Start substantive intersessional work.

The MAG could kick-start intersessional work at its February meeting. Working Groups could be formed, under the supervision of the MAG, to bring forward the discussions. The Working Groups would need a process to develop a mission and scope that will form and drive their work and bring it to fruition at the 2014 IGF in Istanbul.

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