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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>

CAMEROON

THE IGF IN CAMEROON: A ROCKY ROAD TOWARDS EFFECTIVE MULTISTAKEHOLDERISM



PROTEGE QV

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Introduction

Cameroon has been engaged in the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) from the start. The country was part of the two phases (2003 and 2005) of the World Summit on the Information Society that paved the way to the global IGF. It also hosted the Central African IGF in May 2012, and the country's first national IGF took place in August 2013.

When it comes to developing the internet as a socioeconomic tool in the country, Cameroon has some way to go. According to a 2016 report by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) which analyses the development of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and telecoms in 175 countries worldwide, Cameroon is ranked 18th on the continent and 148th at the global level.¹ Given this, one would imagine that the IGF presents an important opportunity for stakeholders to engage on critical policy issues facing the roll-out of the internet in the Central African country.

The IGF is described as an open and inclusive space bringing together various stakeholders on an equal footing. Does our national IGF really fall within this frame? How is the process leading to the IGF initiated in Cameroon? How is the forum's agenda determined, and what stakeholders are involved?

Policy context

Considered by many as the economic engine of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), Cameroon boasts the image of a politically stable country. The government embarked on the process meant to lead the country towards modernity through the adoption and implementation of ICT reforms back in 1998 with Law No. 98/014 of 14 July 1998 which regulates telecommunications.

Subsequently this Act was repealed in 2010 by the following:

- Law No. 2010/013 of 21 December 2010 governing electronic communications, amended and completed by Law No. 2015/006 of 20 April 2015.
- Law No. 2010/012 of 21 December 2010 on cybersecurity and cybercrime.²

In addition, Decree No. 2002/092/PR of 8 April 2002 created the National Agency for Information and Communications Technologies (NAICT)³ which was set up to facilitate and accelerate the uptake of ICTs in Cameroon so they can contribute to the development of the country.

In Cameroon, the NAICT is the key actor in the IGF. This stakeholder, representing the government, has the upper hand over civil society, the private sector, as well as the academic and technical communities when it comes to organising the country's IGF.

The overwhelming powers of the NAICT

Building on the momentum generated by its successful organisation of the Central African IGF in 2012, Cameroon hosted its maiden IGF in August 2013. The NAICT was in charge of leading and supervising the process, and still is. The role of the NAICT will therefore constitute the focus of this section.

The IGF in Cameroon is largely dominated by the government. The other stakeholders (civil society, private sector, the academic community and the technical community) do not play a meaningful role in the processes.⁴

Concerning the interests of the various stakeholders, at the uppermost level of the state, the internet is perceived as an engine for innovation and growth. President Paul Biya's statement that "Cameroon needs widespread access to the internet" made during his oath of office in 2004⁵ was based on the belief that ICT tools had the potential

1 ITU. (2016). Measuring the Information Society Report 2016. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/publications/mis2016.aspx>

2 For more information on these laws, see Siyam, S., & Daho, S. (2014). The stammerings of Cameroon's communications surveillance. In A. Finlay (Ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2014: Communications surveillance in the digital age*. APC & Hivos. www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/communications-surveillance/cameroon

3 www.antic.cm

4 The secretariat is made up of NAICT staff and is also housed at the NAICT headquarters. The process that led to its formation is unknown to other stakeholders.

5 Upon initiating another seven-year term on 3 November 2004.

to benefit both the country's economy and the society as a whole. Yet some years later, as in many other countries, the internet is now considered a serious threat by the Cameroonian authorities.⁶ When it comes to the national IGF, the state's interest is increasingly to stifle critics, as was reflected through this year's domestic IGF theme, "Internet governance and social networks".⁷ However, it is worth pointing out that the previous years' themes were economically and development oriented.

Given civil society's proximity to local people, and their knowledge and understanding of communities, they are well located to promote the internet in these communities, as well as to advocate for the rights of the least well-off. The internet becomes a tool allowing the most vulnerable to surface their concerns, to share their knowledge and interests, and to network. Because of this, internet governance spaces in Cameroon have always served as a rostrum for civil society organisations to advocate for a more egalitarian society through affordable and universal access to the internet. Civil society organisations are also campaigning for IGFs in Cameroon to be truly inclusive and open processes, allowing stakeholders an equal footing.⁸

The technical community is a slippery term in the IGF context.⁹ Let us simply say it encompasses people with a technology and engineering background, but includes anyone from an organisation oriented towards technology. In Cameroon the technical community taking part in IGF processes is often made up of members of the local Internet Society chapter.¹⁰ Their role is mainly to keep attendees abreast of the latest developments and trends in the field of the internet. This may include cybersecurity, critical internet resources, the work and the role of the regional internet registries

(RIRs), the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), and so on.

The global economy is increasingly a "digital" economy, and the business sector, whether large, medium-sized or small, relies on an open, stable and trusted internet. This alone suggests the importance of the business sector in the IGF process. However, despite its importance, there is a sense that the private sector is merely "represented" in Cameroon's IGF processes, with little substantial engagement.

After this brief introduction of the actors involved in IGF processes, let us now get into the heart of the matter by discussing what really happens among these players who are supposed to be given equal voice during these processes.

In the course of his opening remarks at the country's first national IGF on 27 August 2013, NAICT's general manager, Ebot Ebot Enaw, prided himself for organising the event and thanked the other stakeholders for "joining" the NAICT to make the forum a successful one. This was a clear indication that the NAICT was the one running the shop. Indeed, up to now, it is the NAICT that decides when and where the IGF is going to take place in Cameroon, without consulting other stakeholders. This year's event was postponed at least once, without any explanation to other players. Four days prior to Cameroon's 2017 IGF, the exact venue in the town of Kribi was still unknown to the other stakeholders, as well as to the general public. It is as if the IGF agenda were subject to the availability of the NAICT's top management. At the end of the gathering, no recommendations were made. This further demonstrates the casualness surrounding the NAICT's IGF style.¹¹

The other stakeholders are clearly on the sidelines. True, they are always informed whenever there are preparatory meetings, but their role is limited. For example, the selection of panellists is made only by the NAICT, and in the process, NAICT staff always take the lion's share of panellist slots for themselves.¹² Because of this, internet governance spaces in Cameroon often look like NAICT workshops – NAICT representatives usually

6 Cameroonian authorities shut down MTN's Twitter service from the 8 to 18 March 2011, allegedly for security reasons. More recently, internet service was suspended in the country's two English-speaking regions from 17 January until 20 April 2017. This was the longest ever internet shutdown on the continent, purportedly once more for security reasons.

7 Users frequently receive text messages from the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MINPOSTEL) on their mobile phones warning them not to use social networks to help destabilise the country. The IGF speakers mostly alluded to legal infringements made using social networks. It is also worth pointing out that this was in the wake of the ongoing Anglophone crisis in the country and the subsequent internet blackout.

8 Civil society spearheaded the recommendation to set up a multistakeholder secretariat for Cameroon's IGF during the first edition in August 2013.

9 Woolf, S. (2014, 29 August). What do terms like multistakeholderism, internet governance, and technical community really mean? *ARIN*. www.teamarin.net/2014/08/29/terms-like-multistakeholderism-internet-governance-technical-community-really-mean

10 www.internetsociety.cm

11 However, the NAICT is not the sole player to be blamed. Civil society and other actors bear a responsibility for making sure that at least resources as important as the IGF's reports are available online. You cannot find Cameroon IGF reports online.

12 With regard to the process leading to the selection of themes and panellists, PROTEGE-QV was asked to participate in 2013 on the eve of the first national IGF, but merely to give an opinion concerning the various presentations received by the NAICT. However, at the end of the day, the final decision was made solely by the NAICT. Since then, we have never been associated with the process, and the the NAICT decides on the themes and selects the panellists alone.

account for nearly half of the panellists. Clearly, key principles of the global IGF, such as a bottom-up approach and transparency, are being rolled back by a powerful NAICT.

Regional reflection

One of the recommendations made at the end of the May 2012 Central African IGF was for participating countries to organise their own national IGFs.¹³ In this light, Cameroon's maiden IGF was greatly inspired by the sub-regional IGF and took place the following year (end of August 2013). The sub-regional IGF's recommendations have always made a point for the countries taking part to push their concerns and challenges onto the regional agenda. Similarly, the first ever Central African IGF (10-11 August 2010) was primarily meant to prepare the region for participation at the global IGF scheduled to take place in Nairobi in 2011.

At the same time, issues discussed and debated at the regional or global level such as cybersecurity, cloud computing, critical internet resources, human rights, and growth and development of the internet, among others, have often set the scene for our domestic IGFs.

Broadly speaking, the interplay between the national IGF and other IGFs is a reality. Regional and global IGF spaces have a strong influence on our domestic IGFs. But the latter are an opportunity to nurture our internet-related positions and bring them to light at the regional and global levels. Similarly, in the months before the global IGF, most other world regions host their own version of the forum to incubate positions to take at the global IGF.¹⁴ The quality of speakers and the relevance of the subjects covered at the national and regional levels are among the means to help improve these processes, and to strengthen the quality and value of internet governance engagement with global stakeholders.

Conclusion

There is still a long way to go before we have a truly inclusive IGF that brings stakeholders together on an equal basis in Cameroon. In the process, civil society is almost forced to clutch at straws. Cash is king! A sole stakeholder – the government – holds the bulk of resources needed to host the IGF in its

hands, a fact that only strengthens the political power it already commands.

One thing is for sure: convening preparatory meetings, renting the forum's venue, providing food for the attendees, paying for the panellists' per diems, and other related costs, require huge means that are out of the reach of civil society organisations in Cameroon. This immediately puts them at a disadvantage in terms of equal participation in the IGF. Funding sources for civil society organisations is a constant concern and constitutes a major hurdle to successfully tip the scales during IGF debates and discussions. At the same time, civil society in the field of ICTs in Cameroon is divided and plagued by internal discord, which hardly helps the situation.

Equally concerning is the lack of engaged participation by the business community in Cameroon. IGF processes and outcomes seem far away from their concerns. We believe that the business community has not properly thought of the issue of power when it comes to setting the ICT policy agenda, and how this can be shifted. It is hard to explain why the private sector seems miles away from events focusing on the internet – despite the fact that the internet offers opportunities, stimulates economic development, creates quality jobs and improves productivity.

Overall, the Cameroonian authorities seem to pay very little considered attention to the IGF processes. No wonder the country is scarcely represented officially during global IGFs; no wonder also our domestic IGFs fail to yield significant or tangible outcomes and are far from being considered as decision-making or policy influence spaces.

Action steps

Civil society organisations in Cameroon are made up of people of good will who are genuinely concerned about the future of the internet in the country.

However, the question still stands: how should they avoid a future where the internet is owned and controlled by the government? Below are some points to ponder for the future:

- Begin a discussion on how the IGF is funded: Start the discussion by calling upon donors and other stakeholders to finance the country's IGFs, in part to financially empower other stakeholders, including civil society, so that they can be on an equal footing with the government.¹⁵

13 This was stressed on 27 August 2013 both by the NAICT general manager, Ebot Ebot Enaw, and the Cameroonian Minister of Posts and Telecommunications at the time, Biyiti bi Essam, in their opening remarks during the country's first IGF.

14 Fidler, M. (2015, 20 October). The African Governance Forum: Continued discomfort with Multistakeholderism. *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/african-internet-governance-forum-continued-discomfort-multistakeholderism-o>

15 The IGF secretariat is funded through donations from various stakeholder groups. <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/funding>

- Revisit the spirit of multistakeholderism: The recommendation to set up a secretariat for the country's domestic IGF that was made back in August 2013 during our maiden IGF needs to be revisited in order to align with the multi-stakeholder character of the IGF. Awareness needs to be raised among stakeholders about the concept of multistakeholderism, and how it impacts on conduct at these events. This can be achieved through online campaigns and during face-to-face meetings organised, convened or attended by civil society organisations
- Act as one: Civil society organisations in Cameroon should leave aside their multitude of uncoordinated and fruitless individual initiatives and stand as one. By so doing, civil society will serve as a counterweight to the NAICT.
- Work with the private sector: The internet is the backbone of our globalised world and the backbone of the globalised economy. Because of this, the private sector should team up with civil society to advocate for a stable and reliable internet, and an internet not subject to disruption or government shutdowns.¹⁶ The two sectors' interests at this level should be aligned.

¹⁶ A conservative estimate by Access Now pegs economic losses of the 94-day internet shutdown in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon at a minimum of USD 4.5 million. See Ndi, N. E. (2017, 24 April). Cameroon counts losses after unprecedented Internet shutdown. *Africa Review*. www.africareview.com/special-reports/Cameroon-counts-losses-after-unprecedented-Internet-shutdown/979182-3901456-a550902/index.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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2017 Report

<https://www.GISWatch.org>

