

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2017

*Internet governance from the edges:
National and regional IGFs in their own words*



GISWatch 2017
SPECIAL EDITION

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Global Information Society Watch 2017 Special edition
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Global Information Society Watch 2017 special edition:
Internet governance from the edges: NRIs in their own words

Disclaimer: The views expressed in survey responses are not necessarily the views of APC or of its members.

This report is a special companion edition to Global Information Society Watch 2017: National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs), which can be downloaded from <https://www.giswatch.org/2017-local-and-regional-internet-governance-forums-igfs>

Overview

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)¹ emerged in response to the success of the first two global Internet Governance Forums (IGFs) held in Athens in 2006 and Rio de Janeiro in 2007, respectively. The Tunis Agenda for the Information Society,² the outcome document of the final phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), alongside the call for the creation of the Internet Governance Forum, served as the foundations for the model of bottom-up, multistakeholder internet governance.

The first NRIs were set up in 2007 and 2008, and there are now close to a hundred initiatives, comprising national, sub-national, regional and youth initiatives, which organise autonomously. Many of them cooperate with the IGF Secretariat, hosted by the United Nations Division for Social and Economic Affairs (UNDESA). The importance of NRIs has increased throughout the years, as they have grown in number and their work has expanded in scope. They have acquired such relevance within the IGF that an NRI session was included in the IGF 2016 and 2017 main sessions agendas.

NRIs aim to bring the perspectives of their respective communities to the global IGF, reflect the agenda of the global IGF in their local NRI events, and facilitate multistakeholder discussion around key issues in internet governance. The baseline principles for their organisation are captured in an “NRIs Toolkit”³ developed by the IGF Secretariat in collaboration with NRIs themselves, and include an “open and transparent, inclusive, bottom-up, multistakeholder, and non-commercial” approach to internet governance. The materials gathered in this report provide precious insight into this approach and bring forth some of the challenges involved in maintaining it.

As mentioned in the preface, this year, APC has taken the initiative to compile two editions of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) focused on NRIs. While the main 2017 GISWatch “annual report” provides independent and analytical

perspectives on the role of NRIs in internet governance broadly, the present companion edition, *Internet governance from the edges: National and regional IGFs in their own words*, aims to give voice and visibility to the stories of each NRI, share their experiences and achievements, and highlight their perspectives on internet governance. The compilation of their inputs was undertaken by APC, with the support of the IGF Secretariat, which contributed to ensure the accuracy of factual information.

Methodology

The perspectives that are presented in this volume were gathered by means of an online questionnaire that was circulated on the NRI mailing list and among NRI contact points and coordinators contacted individually, and was publicised on the APC homepage.

It comprised 10 open-ended questions, centred around three themes: NRI founding stories and their development from inception up to the present; internal governance, members, stakeholders and activities; and their perspectives on their role in internet governance at the national, regional and global level.⁴ Although the survey was circulated in English, respondents were given the option to submit responses in French and Spanish, the translation of which was undertaken by APC staff. These inputs were gathered over a period of three months, from September to November 2017, and any that underwent substantial changes during editing were sent back to their respective authors for approval before publication. Proofreading was guided by the choice to privilege authenticity in the style and tone of each testimony, but at times slight alterations were needed for the sake of legibility and clarity.

A total of 30 responses were received, 27 of which appear in the report, resulting in roughly a third of the current estimated number of existing NRIs being represented here. One response was omitted because the acronym NRI had been misunderstood as “Networked Readiness Index” and did not appear to be relevant to the purpose of this volume. In the case of two initiatives, the Mauritius IGF and Cameroon IGF, two responses were submitted

1 <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/igf-regional-and-national-initiatives>

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

3 <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/nris-toolkit-how-to-start-your-igf-initiative>.

4 See Appendix 1.

by different people. In the former case, it was possible to contact the authors who agreed on a single testimony; this however was not possible in the latter case, as one response had been submitted anonymously and could therefore not be included. The responses submitted by each NRI vary in length and detail, highlighting differences in organisation, engagement and perspectives among NRIs. These testimonies, contributed by both official and unofficial initiatives, offer insight into the reality of local internet governance, its challenges and outcomes, and it is interesting to contrast them against the principles which inspire their activity.

NRI founding stories and development

The circumstances of the origin of each initiative vary significantly. The earliest initiatives often emerged out of pre-existing initiatives. Often they have been established with the support of civil society organisations and international or regional institutions engaged in internet governance or of actors that deal directly with technical matters like top-level domain name and number management and internet service provision. Others, interestingly, were inspired by the activities of their regional NRIs, started after 2008, or by other national IGFs in their region, or were created after having hosted a global IGF or other internet-related events or initiatives. Governments were present in the foundation of some NRIs, but were most often accompanied by other stakeholder groups.

Despite the diversity in their origins, the objectives and agenda of each NRI do not vary substantially. Themes that recurred most often in the survey responses were privacy and data protection, cybersecurity, the sharing economy – topics that will be included in the NRI session at the 2017 global IGF, highlighting the continuity from NRIs to the global meeting. Most of the topics addressed by NRIs involve the policy level of internet governance; with the exception of exchange points and questions related to telecommunications infrastructure, NRIs deal only marginally with technical matters, and their area of interest can be broadly framed within the realm of human rights and economic development.

NRI outreach and internal governance

The main difficulties in the development of the NRIs reported in the questionnaires are related to the novelty and informality of their organisational structure, which are often perceived as obstacles in the pursuit of recognition and legitimacy in their respective contexts. Despite some dramatic cases, like the withdrawal of funding experienced in one

case, funding instability and difficulties in involving all stakeholder groups seem to progressively be resolved through sustained engagement with the community, which also ensures attendance and participation in the annual local forums. Although the formalisation of the secretariats and working groups and the development of set organisational structures and mechanisms has been a contentious process in the development of NRIs – sometimes leading to takeovers or to the capturing of funds by one stakeholder group – the majority of the survey responses gathered depicted it as a way to stabilise the functioning of NRIs, which are often run on a solely voluntary basis. The development of a local ecosystem of internet governance involving the various actors in a community, in order to acquire relevance and recognition, seems to be the ambition of the majority of NRIs.

It is hard to assess, however, how national specificities emerge in each context: although reported procedures for the choice of topics were most often consistent with a bottom-up approach, their similarity across the globe highlights certain trends in agenda setting, such as marked interest in fake news, artificial intelligence (AI) or other currently “hot” topics worldwide. These potentially fail to acknowledge local needs and interests, reducing this decentralised approach to internet governance to a simple channelling of global issues to local communities, which is a tendency that emerges in particular among newer NRIs.

This poses a series of challenges, at the level of both the global IGF and the NRIs, to the inclusiveness of the internet governance process. The first challenge concerns language barriers: unlike other bodies affiliated with the United Nations, the official language of the IGF, which also is used to communicate on the NRI mailing list and with the Secretariat, is only English, despite the fact that many NRIs work in different languages. Although English is broadly understood and spoken, the testimonies gathered recorded highly variable written proficiency, raising questions about how difficulties in expression hinder the representation of some stakeholders and NRIs in the processes of internet governance.

The second challenge concerns the visibility and accessibility of the NRIs: many initiatives are hard to reach and do not have a particularly strong online presence, whether through websites or on social media, which renders them rather unapproachable, raising questions about stakeholder participation. For this purpose, a directory has been included at the end of this volume, with updated contact points and websites for each NRI.

A specific question was dedicated to gender equality within NRIs, and although it appears to be accepted as a relevant concern, it seems to be unevenly addressed between countries/regions. Many answered affirmatively to the questions, “Do you measure gender balance in your NRI? Did you undertake measures to encourage gender balance?”, but failed to provide any detail on how they did this. A number of initiatives reported interesting attempts to secure equal participation and to empower women in dealing with ICTs. Some implemented procedures to ensure equal representation in the selection of speakers in the forum, in the working groups and among overall participants; others set up specific events like TECHgirls in Taiwan or the WOMEN IGF in the DRC, some of which have been presented at the IGF Best Practice Forum on Gender.

Finally, the most significant challenge experienced by NRIs derives from the actual implementation of the multistakeholder model of governance, which for some NRIs that rely primarily on governmental participation or civil society engagement is difficult to apply. This presents problems of equal participation, in terms of capacity to provide substantial contributions, as well as in terms of ability to take part in the internal governance and funding for each NRI. As highlighted by David Souter in his thematic report in the GISWatch 2017 annual report, although the baseline principles for NRIs are not contentious within the IGF community, “what they mean in practice might be differently interpreted by different stakeholders and in different countries.”⁵ In some places, it is virtually impossible to set up an NRI without extensive government or intergovernmental organisation involvement or even leadership; in others it is, on the contrary, very difficult to attract the attention of the government. Private sector involvement is often mentioned only as a source of funding but is limited to international tech corporations, with scarce representation of local small and medium enterprises, except for the presence of internet service providers and telecom industries, although those can be counted as representatives of the technical community. The implementation of the multistakeholder model of governance is often reported as one of the greatest difficulties encountered by NRIs, as it can hinder an NRI’s legitimacy in its regional or national context and even give rise to marked opposition.

A second problem linked to the multistakeholder approach concerns the lack of substantial diversity among stakeholders, despite their belonging to different stakeholder groups. The gathering of like-minded people results in a similarity in perspectives that might explain the absence of controversial issues reported in almost half of the survey responses, despite the significant controversy that some of the subjects addressed currently provoke. This undoubtedly weakens the incisiveness of NRI contributions at the global IGF and the capacity of the forum itself to serve as the locus of discussion on public policy issues relating to the internet.

The role of NRIs within internet governance processes at the national, regional and global level

In several responses to the survey question on this theme, concerns were expressed that the role of NRIs in encouraging locally relevant debate is limited by the mere channelling of perspectives encountered at the global IGF. Others, however, highlighted the role of NRIs at the regional level, encouraging the formation of other NRIs and disseminating best practices of particular relevance to the local context. The role of regional initiatives was often highlighted as one of mediation and as an important mechanism of coordination, with regional institutions as well as with the annual global IGF.

Perspectives expressed about the future role of NRIs in internet governance processes focused on the cooperation among initiatives and actors at the different levels of internet governance and on the establishment of stable structures and mechanisms internally. This can be complemented by building capacity, for example, through schools of internet governance or best practice forums at regional level, allowing the specific needs of each NRI to emerge, and by ensuring wider representation, so that voices outside of the IGF choir can be heard.

Hopefully, the background provided here will help guide the reader through each testimony with a critical eye, providing insight into the key challenges that NRIs have encountered and the solutions they have found throughout their development and their establishment in the panorama of internet governance.

5 Souter, D. (2017). NRIs: Role, impact and inclusiveness. In Finlay (Ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2017: National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)*. <https://www.giswatch.org/2017-national-and-regional-internet-governance-forums>

Internet governance from the edges: National and regional IGFs in their own words

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