

Turning toward Sustainability?

Looking at the Third Meeting of the Internet Governance Forum

An IISD Commentary

Maja Andjelkovic

March 2009

For a conference that is—by the virtue of its UN mandate¹—all talk, the Internet Governance Forum gets surprisingly high marks from a diverse set of participants. Over the course of three years, what started as a safety valve to ensure World Summit on the Information Society discussions did not break down over the single issue of domain names management, has grown into an open² space for considering equally crucial questions surrounding the future of the Internet, including open standards, universal access, security, diversity and, most recently, the explicit linkages with sustainable development.³

If the recent report produced by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) is any indication,⁴ the evaluation of the IGF, due to be carried out later this year, can be expected to uncover practical suggestions for improving a constructive experiment in global, multistakeholder governance of an important set of issues. The contributions, submitted by individuals from business, government, civil society and technical communities, describe the Forum as “tangible,” having created “shared trust and confidence,” containing “less posturing and position-taking than [...] other international forums” and “the most significant and innovative public policy space to emerge in the new millennium.” These positive sentiments are a result of two factors. The first is the IGF Secretariat’s invariably meticulous, sensitive and tactful approach to all aspects of the Forum, from summarizing written contributions to resolving last-minute workshop scheduling conflicts. The second factor, however, is the growing realization on the part of Forum participants, that stakes are indeed very high, and that the IGF plays an important part in ensuring the development of a stable, open and secure Internet, critical for the world’s sustainable future.

¹ The mandate of the IGF is set out in Paragraph 72 of the Tunis Agenda, available at: <http://www.intgovforum.org/mandate.htm>

² Anyone with an understanding of the issues can attend.

³ See: http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2008/com_igf_hyderabad.pdf

⁴ “Internet Governance Forum (IGF) – The First Two Years” can be downloaded from: <http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/index.php/component/content/article/57-2008igf/311-internet-governance-forum-the-first-two-years>

The IGF received high marks from a range of stakeholders:

“When it comes to the possible renewal of its mandate, one must bear in mind that the IGF is neither a self-contained process, nor a decision-making body. Its efficiency cannot be measured based on the quality of its outcomes alone. The IGF is rather a facilitating process for the implementation of all WSIS action-lines regarding Internet governance. In this context, the decision on the continuation of the IGF should be made in view of the contribution it can offer to the success of the WSIS implementation process in the future.”

Hadil da Rocha Vianna, “Message from the Hosts of the 2007 IGF Meeting,” Brazil

“In spite of the diverse interests of its stakeholders, from its first meeting held in Athens in 2006 via Rio de Janeiro to its 2008 meeting in Hyderabad, the IGF has become a melting pot for a common understanding of issues. While the IGF does not have decision-making authority, it can inform and inspire those who are in a position to make decisions. The IGF is thus a tangible contribution to the implementation of the WSIS Tunis Agenda.”

Sha Zukang, Under-Secretary-General, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)

“From the Council of Europe perspective the IGF is an efficient, mutually reinforcing process for Europe and the world in driving forward a culture of human rights, rule of law and democracy for the Internet. The increasing volume of Council of Europe deliverables, the resulting ‘network effects’ and, no doubt, its cost-effectiveness, clearly demonstrate that the IGF plays a very valuable role.”

Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, Council of Europe

“The IGF, with multistakeholders involved, allows all of us to exchange ideas and suggest solutions that work. It also allows us to learn what more needs to be done to address the new challenges now known as Internet governance.”

Global Information Infrastructure Commission (GIIC), confederation of IT CEOs and business leaders, contribution to the 2008 IGF ([http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/Substantive_3rd_IGF/GIIC--%20IGF%20Position%20Paper%202008v3.pdf](http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/Substantive_3rd_IGF/GIIC-%20IGF%20Position%20Paper%202008v3.pdf))

“IGF is one of the most significant and innovative public policy spaces to emerge in the new millennium. However, if it is to grow its legitimacy and continue to be innovative it needs to be able to consistently create spaces for addressing controversial issues and find ways to ensure that some effective follow-up on issues discussed at the IGF that are of common concern, and that require further exploration and intervention, take place.”

Anriette Esterhuysen, Association for Progressive Communications

Unless otherwise noted, above quotes are from “Internet Governance Forum (IGF) – The First Two Years,” available at <http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/index.php/component/content/article/57-2008igf/311-internet-governance-forum-the-first-two-years>

A turn toward considerations of sustainability

IISD has been investigating the linkages between the Internet and sustainable development since 1994, when it first took a conscious approach to utilize Internet and Web-based technology to

inform decision-makers working at the intersection of environment, economics and social development. Since then, it has considered networked governance approaches in many publications, including a foundation manual on managing networks and communications (*Strategic Intentions*, published in 2001), and a series of case studies examining the interdependence of environment and information policies at the national level.⁵ Through active participation in both World Summits on the Information Society and the IGF process, it has engaged with governments, the private sector, academics, technical experts and civil society organizations, urging serious consideration of the potential of the Internet to help bring about sustainable development⁶ as well as of the potential harmful effects of the increase in global connectivity⁷ on specific areas such as climate change.

At times, the conversation has been strained: Internet policy experts do not always have a background in sustainable development (SD) and can be hesitant to take the leap of faith required to bridge technical issues and questions of sustainability. Over time, however, the IGF community has become increasingly concerned about SD issues, and interested in discussing the implications for Internet policy. The last IGF meeting, held in Hyderabad, India, in December 2008, seemed to mark a tipping point: whether due to a combination of IISD's and others' work within the Forum community, the urgency created by climate change issues among the general public, or a combination of the two, IGF 2008 participants actively sought guidance and advice on topics normally considered by sustainable development professionals, clearly expressing concerns about the wider economic, societal and environmental impacts of the Internet.⁸

This leaves IISD, and a host of other concerned organizations and individuals, with an unprecedented opportunity to influence the continued evolution of a critical global infrastructure in a way that will support sustainability. It also requires a level of focus on specific issues that both SD and Internet governance stakeholders have had difficulty defining in simple terms. As Jeanette Hoffman, a member of the UN Secretary General's Multistakeholder Advisory Group on Internet Governance, commented: "The IGF is a global level communications policy framing exercise; we don't have a common understanding of *the* problem. But we know there is a multitude of serious problems."

As a start, IISD has outlined a number of uncertainties that may prove critical for sustainable development, including, among others, the universal provision of broadband access, a smooth transition to "Version 6" of the Internet Protocol (IPv6), a review of existing intellectual property rights in light of the emergence of the so-called "hybrid" economy,⁹ the scalability of the Internet Engineering Task Force to manage the system, the policy implications of new and

⁵ See: <http://www.iisd.org/infosoc/>

⁶ See: <http://www.iisd.org/infosoc/gov/igsd/>

⁷ See: http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2008/ict_global_con_sd.pdf

⁸ Please see the selection of quotes provided in the second textbox.

⁹ See "Internet Governance and Intellectual Property Rights" by Francis Gurry, World Intellectual Property Organization contribution to "Internet Governance Forum (IGF) The First Two Years," at http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/hydera/IGFBook_the_first_two_years.pdf. Also see Lessig, Lawrence. *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in a Hybrid Economy*, New York: Penguin Press, October 2008

old media convergence, and certainly not least of all, the environmental footprint of the Internet. In considering these issues over the next few years, IISD counts on the IGF to provide the much needed space, leadership and learning opportunities, in order to continue advancing an open Internet as a critical component of a sustainable future.

Over the past three years, recognition of the wider implications of the Internet on global public policy—including questions of sustainable development—has increased dramatically

“The IGF has, in its short history, broadened the debate on Internet governance. Issues of child protection for instance came to the fore at the second meeting in Rio de Janeiro, as did linkages with sustainable development and climate change. So, the IGF succeeded in creating a space for an issue-oriented policy dialogue on Internet governance with shared trust and confidence among all stakeholders concerned.”

Markus Kummer, Executive Coordinator, Secretariat of the Internet Governance Forum

“The impact of the Internet extends to many areas of policy beyond Internet and Telecom management. The challenge is to create a space that draws in an increasingly wider class of participants.”

Nitin Desai, Chair of the Internet Governance Forum

“India is an old civilization and a young nation. It is a melting point of religion, culture, language and philosophies. The success of Internet and IT activities in India is due to its kaleidoscopic ethos that encompasses all facets of human thought and activity.”

H.E. Andimuthu Raja, Government of India

“That the scope of Internet governance is extraordinarily broad and complex can hardly be disputed. The utility of common agreements on Internet policy can hardly be overestimated.”

Vint Cerf, one of the “Fathers of the Internet”

“It is interesting that in a survey for Chinese Internet users, there is no one [who] considers [...] Second Life [to be] virtual, most of the answers are ‘it is [a combination] of the real and cyber.’ The human society and the Internet seem to be interweaving into each other.”

Qiheng Hu, China Association for Science and Technology

“Of itself, Internet has no power to change society or anything else. Technology and content are partnerships which together change the world, and help us to find our identity.”

Jean Reveillon and Richard Sambrook, European Broadcasting Union

Source: “Internet Governance Forum (IGF) – The First Two Years,” available at <http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/index.php/component/content/article/57-2008igf/311-internet-governance-forum-the-first-two-years>