The November 2007 meeting of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), held in Rio, was another sound step in building a new model for sharing governance of a global resource. Existing "dynamic coalitions" (thematic multi-stakeholder working groups) reported on progress, new ones were founded (for instance, on digital education), and a good mix of workshops provided spaces for frank discussions among delegates from government, the private sector, NGOs and the technical Internet community. Reports from entities from civil society (e.g., the Association for Progressive Communications – APC); the private sector (e.g., the International Chamber of Commerce/ Business Action to Support the Information Society initiative – ICC/BASIS); the technical community (e.g., the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers – ICANN); and governments (e.g., the European Union – EU) by and large made a similar conclusion: that the IGF, with two successful meetings under its belt, is a valuable blueprint for discussing the future development of the Internet.

The laudable diversity of voices and topics discussed, however, created a concern about a lack of recognition of overarching issues. The Rio meeting, at times, seemed to consist of too many separate conversations going on at the same time, without a unifying direction. The low turnout in plenary sessions, where workshop reports were presented and discussed, is an indication of the lack of cross-over in discussions on topics like spam, privacy, open standards, linguistic diversity, freedom of Internet media, gender, critical Internet resources, economic impact of access, net neutrality, security, local content

2 http://www.iccwbo.org/uploadedFiles/BASIS/IGF_Closing_Ceremony_Speech.pdf
3 http://www.icann.org/announcements/announcement-2-15nov07.htm
and youth participation. In this regard, one would think that a common denominator for all these separate and yet obviously interconnected issues could be articulated in advance. This would allow for future plenary sessions to set forth opportunities for interdisciplinary orientations and joint endeavours, and to identify the points of divergence among practitioners in different fields.

As a result of a lack of commonality of direction—or perhaps its cause—very few explicit linkages between Internet governance and sustainable development have been made at the IGF. While its procedural inclusiveness and transparency would indicate that the IGF has implicitly embraced sustainable development principles as a set of guiding standards, the lack of explicit discussion of sustainable development is cause for concern.

A focus on sustainable development is in fact the “missing link” that should guide the many IGF conversation threads toward a more clear understanding of the connection among the many issues of concern. The increasing tendency of most aspects of global human activity to be governed—as well as facilitated—through networks, all dependent on Internet communications, places questions of sustainability of emerging systems of Internet governance at the centre of the IGF debate.

**Sustainable Development First**

In her presentation at the 3rd Global Knowledge Conference (GK3), IISD’s Heather Creech outlined a possible lens through which to reflect on evolving Internet governance issues and, with the convergence trend continuing so strongly, ICT governance questions in general. The lens borrows from the United Nations Environment Programme Global Environmental Outlook Scenarios, to consider how the future of the Internet might unfold, depending on whether decisions are made based on markets, policy, security and sustainable development priorities.

Creech speculates that if decision-makers give markets first priority, Internet development is likely to further increase the gap between the haves and the have-nots, expanding the so-called digital divide. A “policy first” approach could result in an attempt by governments to manage the Internet through regulatory tools, reflecting existing public policy, which would vary from country to country, potentially resulting in a lack of tools to address transnational issues. Placing security first, which has been proposed as an approach by some IGF delegates, would create serious challenges to the protection of privacy, freedom of expression and access to information, and, eventually, to the very sustainability of the Internet governance frameworks involved. As a fourth option, IISD proposes that the commitment to prioritizing sustainability principles would support more open and partnership-based approaches, resulting in higher levels of cooperation, to ensure access to knowledge and innovation for sustainable development for all.

By weighing and incorporating the economic, technical, social and security concerns, a “sustainable development first” agenda at the IGF would allow the Forum to build on the success it has achieved, and provide it with a direction that is neither restrictive nor inconsistent. It is worth noting that our intention is not to suggest that a single formula can produce answers for the myriad of questions discussed at the IGF; rather, we propose that seeking balanced decisions in each instance, through a careful examination of concerns of each of the stakeholder groups, will result in better governance of the Internet.

In addition to a conceptual framework that places SD at the centre of the IGF, the opportunity to build on the Forum’s success would be lost without continuous support from the highest levels of the UN system. The

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5 It should be noted that sustainable development as a concept includes broader economic and social issues, and not only environmental concerns with which the community is most readily identified.

6 http://www.gkpeventsonthefuture.org/gk3/compiled/p735.htm

small IGF secretariat has already done much with very little, and needs to have the necessary resources and political support if it is to continue on this path. If it does, the IGF has the potential to serve as an example of extraordinary, demand-driven innovation within the UN system.

Towards a “Sustainable Development First” Agenda in Hyderabad

With two successful IGF meetings on record, the innovative formula proposed by the Working Group on Internet Governance is a promising one, in that it supports the Forum in fulfilling the mandate given to it by the Tunis World Summit on the Information Society: to generate a multi-stakeholder policy dialogue about a range of Internet governance issues. More widely than its focus on the Internet, the Forum provides a new, seemingly viable blueprint for global-level deliberation about a crucial resource.

As the most critical infrastructure of our time, the Internet itself is a powerful potential means of supporting sustainable development. And as a precedent-setting model of multi-stakeholder governance, it will be crucial for the IGF to thoughtfully integrate sustainable development principles into its deliberations, through the careful weighing and balancing of stakeholder interests. This should not serve as an opportunity to water down specific discussions, but, rather, to provide clarity.

According to the Chair’s Summary, “the linkages between Internet governance and sustainable development was seen as an important area of debate and new dialogue” by the Emerging Issues session participants, on the last day of the Rio meeting. We are looking forward to working with partner organizations towards further strengthening and enriching the discussion of IG-SD linkages in 2008, both in plenary sessions during the Hyderabad, India, meeting (December 3–6, 2008), and through the work of dynamic coalitions in the meantime.

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IISD has identified five areas where linkages between Internet governance and sustainable development are apparent, in an effort to encourage further thinking about their connections: a) governance models; b) economic barriers to development; c) the capacity of developing countries to participate in international governance; d) access to local knowledge as a critical input to decision-making, and e) indicators for development. See http://www.iisd.org/infosoc/gov/igsd/