Internet governance and the need for an inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogue

Markus Kummer,
Executive Coordinator, Secretariat of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF)

The Internet has now become a global resource and a key factor in today's globalized world. It is therefore not a surprise that more and more people – governments, businesses, but also ordinary users – take an interest in issues related to the Internet. The Internet today has a huge social and economic impact on all countries and it has become so important that governments are interested in what they consider to be part of their critical infrastructure and they want to know how it is being run; they want to have a say in it. There are also many issues of interest to all countries and governments would like to address questions such as security, privacy or the costs related to the use of the Internet. The importance the international community attaches to the Internet came to the fore at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held in two phases in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005. WSIS put the Internet in the limelight of an international policy debate. The debate was characterized by a sense of frustration from developing countries. They see the Internet as a powerful tool to help them reach objectives of their economic and social development. However, developing countries to a large extent feel left out of existing governance structures. It will be important to bring them into this debate as equals and facilitate their participation in existing institutions and arrangements and thus give them some sense of ownership.

Developing countries, with their limited human and financial resources, find great difficulty in making their voices heard. Their point of reference is the world of telecommunications, where the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) provides a central clearing house for all policy discussions. They see the various institutions dealing with the Internet as being dominated by the North and feel marginalized. What is more, due to the complex and fragmented nature of the various mechanisms that run the Internet, they have difficulty in finding out what is going on and identifying which institution is dealing with what aspect and what possibilities they would have giving meaningful input into ongoing processes. Developing countries and other critics of the status quo also argue that the US Government should share its authority over some of the Internet core resources with the rest of the world, as they consider the Internet a global good. In their view, a model similar to the ITU should apply to the Internet. On the other hand, non-governmental stakeholders from all parts of the world have made it clear that they feel left out of classical intergovernmental arrangements and prefer the bottom-up collaborative way the Internet is being run.

Key to the debate is the role of governments in managing this global resource and the relationship between governments, the private sector and other stakeholders. The Internet grew outside the sphere of government influence, with the scientific and technical communities playing the lead role. Their distributed informal, bottom-up decision-making process is alien to the world of governments, who have a tradition of pyramidical top-down decision making structures. Those who defend the traditional approach would like to see the governments at the top of the pyramid, while other governments are happy to take a back seat and let the non-government actors take the lead.

Several subtexts run through all dimensions of the debate. Human rights in general and freedom of expression in particular rank high among these, as this touches on the very essence of the Internet which from its beginning has been an extraordinary medium of empowerment, giving a new level of access to information and knowledge irrespective of borders, unprecedented in history.

Cultural and linguistic subtexts have gained in importance during the process. There is a strong link between this issue and the developmental and political dimensions of the debate. Many non- native English speakers resent the dominance of the English language. They want to make use of their own language on the Internet, and this includes the DNS as well as the content they access. The major European languages were quick to catch up as regards content. But even these languages took some time in developing domain names that are compatible with their own spelling. This process is only at the beginning. For languages that are not based on Latin script the problem is much more complex. Chinese, Japanese, Korean or Arabic are languages where much progress has been made. These languages have a critical mass to generate their own content and contribute to the introduction of internationalized domain names (IDNs). Languages that are spoken by fewer people face a more arduous up-hill struggle. Their market may be too small for developing commercially viable software that allows the transcription of the language for computer use. Equally, their lack of political clout puts these languages further down the IDN agenda. This mix of dominance of one language, linked to what can be seen as a better deal for some other languages, mainly from rich and developed countries, can lead to a feeling of marginalization, if not alienation. The question clearly is linked to development, as the richer and the more developed a country is, the easier it is to put its language or languages on the Internet. WSIS has raised much awareness for this issue. The other side of the coin for these efforts to make the Internet truly multilingual is the danger of its fragmentation. Internationalizing domain names without endangering the stability and security of the Internet will remain one of the biggest challenges.

There are also the economics of the Internet infrastructure. By and large they are also part of the developmental dimension. As in the off-line world, the economics are dominated by players in the North. Developing countries find this unfair and compare the situation with the telecommunications sector, where compensatory payments are made to the operators in the country that terminates the call. Many developing countries would therefore like to change charging arrangements and adapt them to the telecom model, i.e. share the cost of international leased lines and move to a 'settlement regime' of Internet traffic. This is rejected by the Internet community as not adapted to the architecture of the Internet. They point out that a large amount of the connectivity costs are locally generated and that the right regulatory environment, with liberalized markets and increased competition, will bring down prices. There is no doubt however that developing countries face a problem. The problem is multi-faceted and there is no simple solution to solve it. It is an issue that is part of the "digital divide" nexus. The most appropriate level to address issues of access seems to be the national level and the main locus for policy development and implementation should be at that level. Part of the solution is getting the domestic policy environment right and creating a climate where the Internet can develop. In doing so, developing countries may also need assistance to get started, to set up their IXPs and regional backbones and to develop their local content.

The final documents adopted by the second phase of WSIS in 2005 gave the existing institutions in charge of running the Internet fairly good marks, but they also made it clear that the international community expects some improvements. Thus, WSIS did not conclude the debate on Internet governance; it was rather the beginning of an ongoing debate. Against the back-drop of this complex debate, the Summit gave a mandate to the Secretary-General of the United Nations to convene a new multi-stakeholder forum for public policy dialogue – the

Internet Governance Forum (IGF) - to continue the dialogue on Internet governance in a new setting. The IGF mandate is very broad and allows for discussing almost any policy subject related to Internet governance. It is also clear insofar as it states that the IGF is not a decision-making body.

Four very broad themes were chosen as main themes for the first IGF meeting: Openness, Security, Diversity and Access. These four headings allowed for the discussion of the most burning issues which are of concern to governments, industry and everyday users. They included the issues mentioned above, in particular multilingualism and interconnection fees.

There is merit in discussing the issues on this agenda openly, with all actors involved. The apparent weakness - the lack of decision-making power - can be the strength of the IGF. Nobody needs to be afraid of the IGF. It will not be able to make "the wrong decision", it has no power of redistribution. However, the IGF has been given the power of recognition. It can serve as a laboratory, a neutral space, where all actors can table an issue. The IGF will provide this space for dialogue where interested actors can take up an issue without any fear. Instead of being a decision-making body, the IGF can be an enlightened space for debate. It has no vested self-interest, except from being recognized as a meaningful platform for the debate that can be useful in shaping the agenda, in preparing the ground for negotiations or decisions that will take place or will be taken in other institutions.

WSIS in general and the IGF in particular saw in many ways the beginning of a dialogue between two different cultures: the private sector and the Internet community with their informal processes and culture of "rough consensus" on the one hand, and the more formal, structured world of governments and intergovernmental organizations on the other hand. In this respect it is a learning process in which both cultures are taking first steps towards working with each other. The IGF is also an experiment in international cooperation. It is weak institutionally, but the concept behind it is strong enough to build bridges between the various actors involved. Ultimately, the involvement of all stakeholders, from all countries will be necessary for the future development of the Internet. To achieve this objective, there is a need for a multi-stakeholder dialogue at all levels – the national, the regional and international levels.

_____