

The future of the IGF: mandate renewal?



*This week, internet governance debates will centre on the UN General Assembly, which is due to make a decision about the future of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF); specifically, whether or not to renew its mandate. In advance of that decision, **Luca Belli**, Researcher at the Center for Technology and Society (CTS) of Fundação Getulio Vargas Law School, Rio de Janeiro, outlines the value of the IGF and why he believes that its mandate should be renewed. This is the **second blog** to be published by the Media Policy Project which considers the issue of the IGF's mandate.*

This week, the UN General Assembly will decide on the mandate renewal of the UN **Internet Governance Forum (IGF)** at the **World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)+10 High-Level Meeting**, the official UN meeting aimed at assessing the implementation of the **Tunis Agenda for the Information Society**. The IGF is one of the main outcomes of WSIS and, over the past decade, the Forum has allowed world policymakers, private sector representatives, techies, academics and human rights advocates to congregate and debate the most salient Internet policy issues in a multistakeholder environment.

The Forum has proven to be a valuable platform for policy discussions and a significant catalyst for cooperation by allowing different stakeholders to organise new partnerships. However, multistakeholder dialogue is not the exclusive goal of the Forum, and the **IGF mandate** explicitly states that the Forum shall “find solutions to the issues arising from the use and misuse of the Internet” as well as “identify emerging issues [...] and, where appropriate, make recommendations” (Tunis Agenda, para. 72.k and 72.g).

There is no doubt that the first decade of the IGF has triggered a number of stimulating debates and has managed to engage a critical mass of stakeholders into a self-organised, yet incredibly wide-ranging, process. However, it also clear that this process has not realised its full potential yet, and the production of “recommendations” and “solutions” has been long – and unjustifiably – deferred.

As emphasised by the 2012 Report of the Working Group on Improvements to the IGF (**adopted by both the UN General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)**), the need for “more tangible outputs” has become patent, and the reluctance to do so can only undermine the credibility of the whole IGF process. The lack of formal IGF outcomes has been criticised by many as a failure to fully comply with its mandate. Such dissatisfaction seems justified, not only due to the fact that the development of solutions and recommendations is explicitly requested by the mandate, but also in light of the fact that tangible outputs already exist yet are waiting to be formally recommended.

Habemus outcomes!

Over the past few years, a great number of IGF participants have expended considerable efforts in open and participatory processes, leading to concrete outputs through the IGF **Dynamic Coalitions** and the **Best Practice Fora**. Despite the absence of a formal process of “recommendation” of outcome documents, it is worth noting that some have already inspired the work of several institutions. For instance, the **Charter of Human Rights and Principles of the Internet**, developed by the **Internet Rights and Principles Coalition**, was a considerable source of inspiration for the **Declaration of Internet Rights**, put forward by the Italian Chamber of Deputies. Similarly, in their effort to **frame net neutrality**, European policymakers have taken substantial inspiration from the



Model Framework on Network Neutrality, developed by the IGF Dynamic Coalition on Network Neutrality.

The documents produced by Best Practice Fora and Dynamic Coalitions are a clear example not only of the possibility of achieving concrete IGF outputs, but also of the willingness of many IGF participants to collaborate to produce them. The undeniable benefit of any multistakeholder approach is not only to nurture discussions with experts holding a wide range of views, but **to apply the knowledge such experts have to attempt to address common problems**. Therefore, it is a very positive sign that, following the 10th IGF, the documents produced by Dynamic Coalitions and Best Practice Fora have been finally acknowledged as outputs of **the IGF intersessional work**.

“The best IGF ever”

One of the reasons why ‘**Internet Father**’ **Vint Cerf** acknowledged IGF 2015 as **“the best IGF ever”** is probably because this year, the IGF has been the most outcome-oriented ever, demonstrating that multistakeholder fora can be much more than a ‘talking shop’.

For the first time in the IGF history, the IGF community was allowed to express its own opinion on concrete outputs, having a say on the content of the proposed documents, **using Idea Rating Sheets**. Although this participatory experiment may be seen as quite timid, it is remarkably innovative for a forum that has shied away from the adoption of any official outputs for over an entire decade. Furthermore, to make this experiment even more inclusive, the IGF **Idea Rating Sheets** have been kept open until the end of December 2015 to allow individuals to express feedback on key policy issues such as **net neutrality**, online **platform responsibility** and the **Internet of Things**.

The way forward

The first step to making any future ambition for the IGF a reality is the renewal of the Forum’s mandate by the UN General Assembly. This is not yet certain, although is highly probable. A very telling sign seems to be the recent decision to **display the UN logo** on the IGF website, particularly as the UN has avoided to allow the display its logo on the IGF website for almost a decade. In addition, the IGF’s capability to produce concrete outputs seems to be a very good argument in favour of the mandate renewal – not to mention the fact that once an international body is established, it becomes virtually impossible to disband it.

If the mandate is renewed, a crucial element for the future will be how to enhance stakeholder cooperation to enable the production of stable outcomes. Many IGF participants cheerfully herald “the beauty of the multistakeholder model” but the atmosphere becomes slightly less cheerful when stakeholders are asked to debate how to concretely implement such a model (assuming that they would even agree there is only one in the first place).

It seems undeniable that the current trend towards further cooperation and outcomes – particularly within Dynamic Coalitions and Best Practice Fora – appears to be beneficial and it would be unwise to curb such cooperative momentum. Besides fostering stakeholder engagement in the IGF process, the production of tangible outputs is instrumental in producing policy suggestions that may be valuable for national and international policymakers and that may ultimately lead to interoperable legal frameworks, based on compatible rules inspired by shared principles.

To date, Dynamic Coalitions and Best Practice Fora have been the only components of the IGF structure allowing for the production of “tangible outputs”, although there are no formal impediments to the experimentation of new forms of multistakeholder cooperation. The organisation of IGF main sessions in a more outcome-oriented fashion may be considerably more productive than keeping the current super-workshop format that allows, at best, repetition of the same kind of discussions enabled by regular workshops and, at worst, sterile collections of micro-statements.



The IGF process is on the right path to becoming more output oriented, and the João Pessoa meeting has clearly proven that the IGF can go further than mere debate. This year, the IGF has finally provided participants with the possibility not only to debate but also to table concrete suggestions. This is why the IGF 2015 has truly been the best IGF ever.

This blog gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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