

Submission to the Internet Governance Forum Open Consultation 3 September 2007 on the Agenda for the Rio Meeting

I am a post-graduate student at Murdoch University, Australia, pursuing doctoral research into the Internet Governance Forum, including its role, structure and processes. I have already submitted a substantive contribution to the Rio IGF meeting based on excerpts from the final three chapters of my PhD thesis, which is available from the IGF's official Web site, and I also maintain a constructively-critical IGF commentary site at <http://igfwatch.org/>.

However for the purposes of this submission, I intend to restrict my focus to one particular issue; namely the loss of the proposed thematic speed dialogue sessions from the draft agenda of the Rio IGF meeting. I would urge that their removal be reconsidered.

The IGF Secretariat's original proposal to hold speed dialogues in conjunction with each of the four main plenary sessions was both judicious and creative. The suggestion was in effect an acknowledgment of the inherent limitations of the moderated panel format as used in Athens. These limitations include:

- ◆ it is not adequately inclusive, as very few have the opportunity to speak at all, and those who do tend to be those most comfortable in speaking to a large group;
- ◆ the moderated format is quite an unnatural and confronting mode of communication for participants from many non-Western cultural backgrounds;
- ◆ it tends to create a power imbalance between panelists and audience, that is at odds with the conceptual equality of all stakeholders within the forum; and
- ◆ it does not provide an accurate feeling of the views of the whole group, as will be necessary if the IGF is to fulfill its mandate to generate recommendations.

In comparison, the speed dialogue process, which takes place in smaller groups, is much more conducive to natural conversation and consensus-building. The key to the success of the speed dialogue process, and similar processes which have been developed by scholars of deliberative democracy, is that it is a process of deliberation among equals aiming to create a rational consensus.

Originally, the speed dialogue sessions were scheduled to take place prior to the corresponding plenary panel session. It is suggested that, if they are reinstated, they should instead take place afterwards. In that way, the panel session can provide participants with the factual and policy background that they will require to participate in the speed dialogue discussions in a more informed and effective way.

The face-to-face discussions should be supplemented by online speed dialogues, in which a "virtual" table group of similar size convenes in an Internet chat forum (such as an IRC channel), and with the assistance of a moderator, deliberates upon the same issues in much the same way as the face-to-face table groups.

It is also suggested that each table group taking part in the speed dialogues should, with the assistance of its moderator, endeavour to produce a statement in the form of a series of bullet points or the like, to which all participants are agreed. It does not matter that full consensus cannot be reached immediately; what is

important is that stakeholders engage directly with each other with the aim of finding some new common ground.

These statements, including those from the virtual groups, would then be collected and synthesised by the moderators and the Secretariat to produce a summary of the views of the session as a whole. In the event that the summary records areas of general consensus, this could in appropriate cases form the basis for a recommendation of the IGF, to be drafted and posted to the IGF's Web site for comment by all stakeholders before being formalised at the following plenary meeting.

The simple procedure described above demonstrates that it is incorrect to contend that the IGF cannot meet its mandate to produce policy recommendations simply because it does not have a defined membership. If all stakeholders (both present in person and participating remotely) are given the opportunity to present and debate their perspectives using deliberative techniques such as the speed dialogue, there is no reason why they could not in appropriate cases develop a consensus view.

Even leaving aside the IGF's mandate to produce recommendations, the use of the speed dialogue procedure is also better adapted than the use of panel presentations alone to provide the IGF's plenary body with an open, equal and inclusive forum for pluralistic discussion in which the perspectives of all affected stakeholders can be debated and refined.

I therefore strongly encourage the new Advisory Group to reinstate the use of speed dialogues at the Rio meeting, in order to better equip the IGF to fulfill its mandate from the Tunis Agenda, and to meet the former Secretary-General's challenge to be creative in developing new structures and processes for the governance of the Internet.