Findings from the Internet Society's Internet governance session at the INET meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, 4 May 2007

The recent Internet Society sponsored and organized INET Africa in Abuja, Nigeria, that took place alongside the AfriNIC-6 and AfNOG-8 meetings, confirmed the importance of capacity building, access and security as three of the most important overarching themes of concern to Africans under the umbrella of Internet governance.*

In a day dedicated to security, access and Internet governance issues, a range of expert speakers highlighted a series of priorities for Africa that should help guide future Internet governance discussions in Africa and the preparatory work for the upcoming Internet governance discussion at the Internet Governance Forum in Rio in November 2007.
Over eighty persons from around Africa and across the world, representing a range of organizations across all major stakeholder groups, attended the meeting. Internet governance issues were discussed in three sessions, the first dedicated to the state of play in Africa and at the international level, the second dedicated to access issues, the third to an open discussion of the Internet-related priorities.

Internet governance for Africa

In the first session on the state of play the speakers and participants discussed the importance and value for Africa of the Internet governance discussions that were occurring at the international level in meetings such as the Internet Governance Forum. While there was agreement that the discussions at the international level were important, there were still questions raised as to the material impact and value such discussions can have on some of the pressing issues facing the continent such as access and capacity building. Speakers suggested that value of the discussion at the international level could also be enhanced if there were greater efforts to ensure that African interests in Internet governance were represented and acted upon.

"Localizing" Internet governance

In reviewing the state of play of Internet governance discussions in Africa a number of the speakers and audience suggested that more should be done to enable representatives of African stakeholder groups to participate in the Internet governance debate, not only at the international level but, as importantly, at the local level. Much discussion revolved on how discussions at the international level could be actualized at the local level, and how local perspectives could be harnessed to influence international thinking. Speakers suggested that countries should focus on encouraging local participation under existing local and regional structures and organizations, with a particular importance placed on ensuring that individual and institutional capacity building supported their participation.

The importance of multi-stakeholder processes at the local level

Encouraging multi-stakeholderism at a local level was also identified as a key element in the successful "localization" of the discussion. Building local multi-stakeholder communities to address Internet governance issues in a "bottom up" fashion was seen as a key priority -- expecting the impetus to come from the international level was not considered realistic or overly useful. It was recognized that Internet governance related issues are multi-stakeholder in nature, necessitating government, the private sector, the technical community, academia and civil society to work together.

Addressing interconnection and access issues locally

In the expert session on access the discussion turned to the challenging issue of mitigating the costs of access. Speakers suggested that much can be done locally to address access issues, particularly in the area of encouraging regulatory reforms that will foster a more conducive and lower cost access environment. While interconnection costs are an issue, it was recognized that local regulatory reforms could go along way to solving the problems and that "resolution" of issues at the international level provided no certainly, either in the short or longer term. A range of possible local actions were discussed and supported from the implementation of Internet Exchange Points and national backbones, incorporating fiber into national infrastructure projects, encouraging trans-border traffic and regional traffic, encouraging competition among service providers, to creating the right kind of regulatory and enabling environment.

Building demand for communications and content

Speakers also pointed to the importance of creating an environment that drives change in access costs through increasing the demand for and use of communications and the Internet. It was suggested that the following are central to creating demand this demand: locally relevant content and diversity of language in content development, an environment that supports local content investment and business certainty (including in infrastructure to host local content), and the availability of content development training. In addition, it was noted that encouraging popular awareness of the benefits of the Internet in communications, and how it has become an increasingly important part of everyday life, would be useful. Building the communities to drive this demand, whether they be consumer communities, business associations, or communities promoting and supporting education and training, will be essential.

Access to knowledge

The access discussion also considered the importance of "access to access", in other words, access to the knowledge and skills that will enable one to actually benefit from access to the Internet. There was agreement that without the fundamental skills necessary to engage with the technology and use it for productive ends that there would be considerable portions of the population that would never have access – the importance of capacity building and skills development cannot be underestimated. Finally, it was also felt that greater awareness and knowledge of Internet governance related matters was needed at a local level in order for there to be a fuller discussion of Internet governance issues at international and regional levels.

Identifying priorities for Africa

The final session of the day provided for a unique opportunity to engage in an open microphone discussion to identify some Internet governance related priorities for Africa. Clearly the results were informal, but they provided a very useful "taking the pulse" of those with an interest in Internet governance issues in the region.

Not surprisingly, access rated as the most important issue for those at the INET meeting, and specifically the issue of connectivity and access costs, followed by regulatory frameworks for improving access for rural areas. Security was the second most important area. Here the participants focused on the need for greater stakeholder participation in security issues and for a greater sharing of best practices. Diversity was next with the promotion and protection of local content as the most important issue, followed closely by the importance of the role of communications to promote local content, and the importance of the Internet in addressing challenges with regard to literacy and to accessibility to content for disadvantaged communities.

* This document is an edited summation of the topics discussed at the INET meeting in Abuja and is intended to reflect the range of interests expressed by the participants.