

# **An implementation proposal for the Internet Governance Forum**

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This document, inspired by discussions that happened during the WGIG process, both inside and outside the group, and in Tunis, represents a personal contribution in the spirit of providing practical, workable suggestions on how to turn the concept of an Internet Governance Forum into a successful reality.

## **The concept**

The concept of a “forum”, as designed by the WGIG report and received in the Tunis Agenda, is not meant to duplicate, substitute or control the work that is already being done in other institutions, and certainly not to create one single authoritative source of global policies for the Internet. The Forum should be one more element in a network of institutions and stakeholders that each support a part of the Internet governance workload.

On the other hand, the Tunis Agenda clearly describes the new Forum as a non-binding venue. For this reason, the action of the Forum should be mostly based on “soft power” and on authoritativeness rather than authority.

It is clear that, due to the decentralized architecture of the Internet, to the important roles exerted by all stakeholders, and to the need of acting by moral suasion and non-binding power, such a forum can only be effective if all stakeholders support it and participate in it. As recognized by the WGIG report, this requires participation on an equal footing by members of all stakeholder groups. This also requires openness and transparency in all processes.

At the same time, it is important to design a practical and effective structure that can provide both a discussion space and a mechanism to approve recommendations and documents. A mere discussion space would not be of great use, if not coupled with the ability of coming to practical advances that can be agreed and released. Institutions that do not have an impact on reality are doomed to fail.

## **Dealing with issues**

The problem of coupling effectiveness and inclusiveness in dealing with specific issues has been long debated over the Internet. Through the years, an effective model for the common determination of consensus policies was developed: the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF). Even if the IETF processes themselves are under continuous discussion, some of their basic principles derive from

the nature of the Internet, have been proven to work, and should be considered for the Forum, while being adapted to the different political and social environment.

To start, the agenda of the Forum should be set from the bottom. Any stakeholder feeling the need for a given issue to be addressed could post a request to the Forum, that would then determine whether the issue falls into the mandate of an existing organization (and thus forward the request, together with any relevant recommendation) or whether it needs the creation of a specific working group.

In that case, an online working group would be created; participation in the working group would be open to any stakeholder, providing that he/she abides by some minimal rules of netiquette and good conduct. Representatives of affected stakeholders and of involved Internet governance institutions, and, more generally speaking, any interested individual, would participate in the working group and contribute to the result. All discussions and deliberations should happen online, by the use of mailing lists and conferencing facilities; physical meetings, and even thematic conferences, could be arranged, but would not have decision-making authority. This would enable cheap and effective participation by those stakeholders who cannot afford flying around the world.

The aim of the working group should be the production of documents (best practices, policy suggestions, assessments...) and tentative recommendations, that would be adopted by the working group on a rough consensus basis. The role of the coordinator of the working group would be that of mediating among different positions until some consensus can be reached with satisfaction for all stakeholders. If consensus cannot be reached fully, different options could be presented. The results would then be forwarded to the plenary IGF for consideration and, possibly, approval.

All the recommendations and documents produced in this way would not have binding power, but would be subject to voluntary adoption by the stakeholders. At the same time, if the process worked well, it is imaginable that the majority of the stakeholders would be ready to accept such documents, or to consider them for adoption in the appropriate binding venues.

## **Participation and meetings**

Given the vital need for inclusiveness, it is necessary that participation in the Forum is open to all members of stakeholder groups, from governments to individual users. To this purpose, no barriers or requirements should be posed to accreditation, except simple verifications about the factual existence and identity of the applicant. Accreditation procedures should be quick and simple and it should be possible to carry them on entirely through online interaction.

As most factual discussion would happen in working groups, yearly plenary meetings should then be focused on reviewing and discussing the results of the working groups, debating high level directions and principles, and setting priorities for the work. Workshops and meetings on specific issues, in cooperation with the appropriate working groups, could be scheduled in the days before the plenary meeting. The plenary should then become an institutional moment to showcase the work of one year, assess the effectiveness and plans for the IGF in general, and prepare the work of the following year; lined up with side events, hosted each year in a different place, the IGF meeting could become the main “ICT policy and trends fair” in the world.

## Taking decisions

An assembly in which all stakeholders can participate, or an online working group where people exchange opinions, are useful tools to help the understanding of problems and the construction of consensus; at the same time, in processes where policy is discussed – even in a non-binding form – there is sometimes the need to formally take decisions.

This brings forward the need for a “steering group”, similar to what in the IETF is called the “Internet Engineering Steering Group” (IESG). This group would be tasked with the coordination of the work of the various working groups and discussion processes, and with the approval of their creation and their results. It could also take care of practical, organizational matters, such as deciding where and when to hold plenary meetings, their agenda and programme.

The group would not take decisions on the content of policy recommendations, other than finally approving or rejecting the results of the working groups; rejection could happen only in specific cases, for example if the result of the working groups contrasts with that of other working groups or with the general principles agreed at the WSIS, and would only have the effect to send the document back to the working group for modification.

In general, the steering group should also work by consensus; given the “soft power” principle of the entire mechanism, serious breakups among stakeholders would basically impede the work anyway. In any case, voting should be used only to formally confirm the adoption of documents and decisions; well qualified majorities (75% or 80%, for example) should be required, to prevent attempts to ignore the views of a significant part of the stakeholders by forming alliances to out-vote them.

The steering group should be composed by 15 to 30 members – one third from governments, one third from private sector, one third from civil society and individuals. Members would serve two year terms (renewable). Members would participate as individuals and act as peers, in the interest of the Internet as a whole. Members would elect a Chair and other officers among themselves, and approve their own working rules.

In the initial setup, members would be appointed by the Secretary General of the United Nations, after consultation with the stakeholders. However, members should then be self-selected by each stakeholder group, with mechanisms to be developed by each constituency and approved by the steering group itself. At the same time, the selection of individuals with broad expertise, open minds and cross-stakeholder experience should be recommended.

Institutions dealing with Internet governance should appoint “connectors” to participate as observers in the work of the steering group, and to manage communications between the Forum and their institution.

## Resourcing and funding

The practical needs of the IGF are relatively limited: it should have a secretariat made of two or three people and funds to set up a website and other online cooperation and communication tools,

organize meetings as necessary, and cover travel and outreach costs for the members of the steering group and other key participants (at least those from disadvantaged stakeholders, including participants from developing countries and from civil society).

It is imaginable that funds or in-kind donations for the Forum, including temporary staff, could come in three ways:

- From existing international Internet Governance institutions;
- From the budget of the United Nations;
- From donations by individual private or public stakeholders.

Once a tentative structure is agreed, an attempt should be found to raise money for the first one or two years of operation. In the meantime, permanent funding mechanisms could be studied (the IETF, for example, found permanent funding through the Internet Society, which was indirectly awarded the role of registry for the .org gTLD).

Further money that could be necessary to create specific processes and working groups on a given issue could be raised as necessary. In any case, the IGF should not be financially or operationally dependent on any single Internet governance institution.