

The Internet Governance Forum Framework for design *

FRAMEWORK

The Internet Governance Forum was born of WSIS. Prior analysis, from that experience, brought to light a *framework* that can orient our thinking for IGF:

A suitable governance regime will put in place two opposite halves of a repeated cycle.

- a. *Stable operations*. Community, and the working of its protocols, is in the fore.
- b. *Change – innovation* – in the stable order. The individual and initiative take precedence.¹

Dynamics of movement through the two phases, constantly repeated – particularly handoff between groups in opposite halves – is the essential challenge.

A fuller description of this essential cycle is in the [prior analysis](#). For convenience, descriptive paragraphs are reproduced and adapted in a one-page appendix below.

SETTING – what guides use of the framework?

1. OBJECTIVE, for the IGF

Choices for the IGF can only be made against a stated objective for IGF. The Tunis Agenda provides a long list.² To suggest a workable summary objective, against which to judge:

Create conditions where those with long-held and deep differences on Internet governance may find common ground.

2. HISTORICAL PATH

Besides the struggle over ‘Net governance that led to this point, there is another relevant evolution underway. The UN system is beginning to add participants, such as the private sector and civil society. New participants mean new modalities. Naturally

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¹ Yes, this is a bald statement – addressed, immediately below. And yes, there is a great deal more to it, than in even the prior analysis. That is for a later occasion.

² Paragraph [72](#)

the incumbents, the governments, will be unsure and seek only what they consider an appropriate opening.

FRAMEWORKS – DO THEY MATTER?

The description of the framework above is a bald statement. Why?

Partly for clarity. But also to emphasize the importance of starting with the conceptual framework, when tackling such questions.

Consider: The several-year history of WSIS begins with many views, largely flown past each other, because implicit conceptual foundations remained essentially unplumbed. If they had been inspected, the wide gulfs separating views may have been clearer early. With differences explicit, starting points for a more shared journey can perhaps then be found.

As WSIS matured, the framework of deep differences between two sides was impressed upon the proceedings, despite a separate agenda and purpose supposed to guide the meeting. Those who will shape IGF will want to get out in front of this; they will want stated purposes more in line with what in fact happens. *A framework that accurately accounts for the forces at play can be the springboard to successful deliberations – then objectives may be met.*

TESTING THE FRAMEWORK – IGF DESIGN

The framework here is bald in two ways. It is stated flat out, and it is also relatively abstract. Clearly, it needs to be tested. Let's test it on the question of design for the IGF.

1. NON-CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS? – toward the IGF objective

Consider for instance candidate topics, to start IGF. Will they be non-controversial, and so not engender old differences and the next chapter in an old struggle?

- a. Multilingualism – There is in effect a disconnect between the existing actor (ICANN) and several powerful linguistic groups who have already gone their own way, with their own roots. So-called balkanization is gathering steam. The frame for this disconnect? Just as outlined in the framework here.
- b. Spam – One side sees a technological solution, others see legal and social measures. The frame, for these differences? As outlined in the framework here.
- c. Affordable Internet access – One side depends on the private sector, others would counsel more concerted action. The frame? As outlined here.

‘Calmer’ topics such as these can be an effective place to start. Since they will in the end – as we see – also invite a continuation of struggles from the past, they might be used to bring the core differences to the surface. In other words, they may be useful vehicles to test the framework here and, if confirmed, use it to empower discussion about differences that matter.

Then there finally could arise the prospect to find some shared ground – the objective for IGF that was identified above.³

Where else can we test the framework, on the IGF design question?

2. GOVERNMENTS and evolution of the UN system → IGF STRUCTURE in action

Governments will not be so comfortable with an open-ended plenary arrangement, which is almost a civil society trademark – “y’all come,” as it has been put in the vernacular of the US South. But governments will likely find some value in a more formal Program Committee. The framework points out that we should aim to have *both* the formal and the informal. Whether governments take comfort in a framework that explains it, there is a basis for trying the ‘experiment.’

Grounds for the incumbents to make choices, in the evolution of the UN system, are one of the historical imperatives we identified.

More generally, the framework here counsels for the shape of an IGF structure overall. As said, that is both a formal and an informal component – a formal Program Committee and informal plenary. It also points at the handoff between the two, which requires legitimacy in the selection of the smaller, guiding group. Further, the PC settles – decides on – work put forward by plenary.

Dynamics, in a handoff between two opposite functions, is the framework in action. With the framework applied to the IGF, we can take a snapshot to see the dynamics in (this version of) IGF.

- *Plenary and working groups,⁴ on the one side, and the Program Committee, on the other, each bring one of the necessary opposites.*
- *Open-ended plenary, and particularly working group, sessions invite new ideas and creative thinking. There is explicit consideration of the two sides, the two opposites that will run recurrently through many policy issues. Key creative strokes, in that dialog, may fathom how opposites can be knit together workably.⁵*

³ We also see how the framework applies across the range of topics, the core question of governance as well as the collection of related issues that arise.

⁴ See Startup, below.

⁵ As the framework would guide.

- *Since IGF is a forum for discussion of differences on ‘Net governance issues,’⁶ the Program Committee, the more formal decision-making body, deals in the ‘state of resolution.’ Their essential question is: Have two sides of a question found mutual elements with potential to account for both sides of concern? If the results put forward by plenary / working groups can be knit into a satisfactory resolution in PC deliberation, PC puts the policy proposal forward for consideration by those outside IGF. If a topic remains unresolved, the topic is put back in inventory for some later place on some next plenary / working group agenda.*
- *Handoff between plenary / working group and the Program Committee – in both directions – turns on judgment, goodwill and trust. The PC, together with plenary / working groups, judge when creative ideas in plenary / working group have reached some fruition, or not. Equally, handoffs back to plenary / working group require the same measure of trust.*
- *It hardly needs be said – this means a) government participation in plenary and working groups and b) civil society / private sector participation in the Program Committee.*

3. STARTUP

With the framework’s focus on behavior in the community setting, we can see that most productive work is done in groups of about ten or less. That argues for ‘working groups’ as the main locus for IGF productivity. In turn, that mandates organizing some WGs well in advance of the first IGF this fall. Then there could be substantive work to present to the plenary gathered – rather than another unwanted ‘talk shop,’ there could be engaging sessions for breakouts and panels.

4. THINK AND DO

Finally, the framework divides effort between thinking and doing.⁷ Though an artificial distinction, with both always present, it is still a useful divide. In our context the divide is between research and policy.

WSIS tilted more toward the doing, at least in its professed mode, while IGF is slated to be more on the thinking side – that notwithstanding: IGF actually needs both, but we need to keep roles appropriately differentiated⁸ – research and its creativity when indicated, policy formulation to pull those pieces together when it is time.

Because IGF is not empowered to set policy, there will be confusion about IGF’s policy role. The framework argues, in effect, that IGF should not neglect policy

⁶ Posited, anyway, in Objective above.

⁷ Thinking, in the creativity of innovation; doing, in the choice and implementation of a stable path forward.

⁸ As the framework would counsel.

proposals, even though others will implement. Participants need to be clear there is work to do on action-planning.⁹

But we must take some care to know when we are doing research and when policy. For research to be trustworthy and useful, it must be independent of the biases endemic to policy advocacy. To structure and protect that independence is a real challenge – the challenge does not reduce the requirement.

So as usual by now, clear differentiation in roles is essential. And as usual, the greatest challenge is the handoff between research and policy. Thinking and doing, here research and policy – as the framework brings out – run on different mindsets. To make research and policy fruitful to each other – the handoff – is an interesting mission.

FRAMEWORK, REVISITED¹⁰

The framework will have to be tested by all in the IGF ambit. If there is something to it – if it is useful – various steps above lay out how to set a test in motion. And after it may be used in design of IGF, its purpose in the first place is to address the tensions that the deliberations bring forward.

The idea *itself*, of the framework, is a microcosm of the rigors it would explain. The idea is new and so inevitably controversial. The idea itself must go through familiarization, testing, probably modification from other inputs; perhaps in time a new synthesis gains acceptance as part of a revised order ...

We hope IGF design may benefit. And after that, especially, the deliberations.

⁹ Some might think this is mission creep, an encroachment on policy turf that was put out of bounds. Such concerns can be put to rest with a thought experiment: Try to imagine an IGF *without* discussion of policy.

¹⁰ Demonstrably, the ideas in this piece have benefited from discussions online and online notes from the Diplo conference. That sort of cumulative building together is a core characteristic of the framework.

APPENDIX **

FRAMEWORK – INDIVIDUAL INNOVATION, COMMUNITY CONSENSUS

The history of the creation of the Internet – notably the dynamic used by the IETF¹¹ – presents a model for the necessary alternation between two opposites, across time repeatedly.

For a network to operate, its pieces have to conform to some standard. But to introduce innovations, which may make for a better network, some of those standards must in effect be broken, to be re-assembled as a renewed, better network. That is the essential tension. The IETF moved artfully back and forth between the two opposites in this simple, dynamic cycle, in fact with great frequency across time.

During standardization, the IETF coalesced as a more formal community, to decide on a common approach – “rough consensus.” In a next half of the cycle, but now for innovation, the IETF once again broke apart into its constituent individuals, some of whom would propose new approaches – “running code.” The results from these innovations would eventually be considered in yet a *next* cycle, as input to a next phase of standardization. This simple cycle, artfully executed countless times, produced one of the greatest runs in the annals of human innovation.

Perhaps the cycle is simple to picture, but ... the *social* complexity is obscured because the same individual switches back and forth. The same individual first wears an entrepreneur hat, then switches to a hat in a hierarchy for consensus, repeating that switch back and forth, again and again.

When many others groups besides the IETF eventually enter the mix, there must be institutional separation of roles. But the handoff between the opposite halves of the cycle nonetheless needs to carry on. In a global world with numerous cooks for the stew, there is a constant handing back and forth, between groups more concerned with stable operation and other groups more concerned with innovation and change. Socially, that is indeed complex.

Our challenge is to fathom how we put the two opposites together, institutionally, particularly with *dynamic processes* that make for workability. The processes deliver the payoff.

** Reproduced and adapted from "[Internet governance: A tale of community structure and individual initiative](#)"

¹¹ Internet Engineering Task Force