Session Title: NRIs Collaborative Session: Access sand existing barriers on national and regional levels

Date and Time: 21 December 2017, Room XXIII, 10:10-11:40 a.m.

Session Organizers:

1. Afghanistan IGF
2. Colombia IGF
3. Georgia IGF
4. LACIGF (Latin American and Caribbean IGF)
5. Malawi IGF
6. Sri Lanka IGF
7. West Africa IGF

Onsite Moderator: Marilyn Cade, IGF-USA

Online Moderator: Shabana Mansoory, Afghanistan IGF

Rapporteur: Anja Gengo, IGF Secretariat

List of speakers:

1. Maheeshwara Kirindigoda, Sri Lanka IGF
2. Mary Uduma, West Africa IGF
3. Aziz Taqwa, Afghanistan IGF
4. Julian Casasbuenas G., Colombia IGF
5. Ucha Seturi, Georgia IGF
6. Kevon Swift, LACIGF
7. Salieu Mansaray, West Africa IGF

Summary Report

The session was opened with a brief introduction by the moderator on the nature of the concept of the eight NRIs collaborative sessions which are designed as collaborations across NRIs who have addressed a particular topic. The eight topics were selected by the full NRIs network. Noting the significant growth of the NRIs in the last few years, the Moderator described the Access session as a product of broad consultations among the co-organizers for bringing bottom up inputs on the topic of access to the 12th IGF. The session was designed around a few guiding questions which the moderator used to invite comments from each of the participants in the panel.

The moderator launched the substantive part of the session by inviting the representative from Afghanistan IGF, stating that the issue of access is a high and alarming priority for the

community of Afghanistan, mostly because of the high prices for accessing the Internet. In addition, there are members of the community that do not see the benefits of having Internet access, given that the online content is not available on any of the local languages.

The representative from the West Africa IGF noted that this community faces access issues related to technological barriers, due to the lack of infrastructure. Concerns were raised in regard to non-effective Internet policies. Internet shutdowns were identified as a challenge; and it was noted that some Governments are the main actors of these actions that affect basic human rights, and overall life conditions of citizens.

The speaker from Sri Lanka National IGF noted that a significant number of citizens are still not connected, or are under connected. This is especially still the case with rural areas.
The speaker emphasized the importance for youth and people with disabilities to have access provided. He also stated that access conditions need to be made possible and improved for all, as citizens will depend more and more on many e-services.

The Government of Sri Lanka is aware of the issue related to access, and is taking appropriate measures to improve the conditions. There were attempts of private companies, such is Google, to have Sri Lanka be the first connected country through their services, but unfortunately, it was noted that this project was unsuccessful.

The West Africa subregional IGF speaker added that a major barrier to access in this region is the lack of infrastructure, and digital literacy. In addition, it was stressed that Internet services are not adjusted to people with disabilities, which is recognized as another alarming problem.

The National IGF of Colombia remarked that the topic of access is among priorities during several past annual meetings of their national IGF. During the latest Colombian IGF, the Government's action plans for improvements on access were discussed.
It was noted that access is in particularly an issue in rural areas. Under-connectivity, due to infrastructure and digital literacy is a present issue within the region.

The national IGF of Georgia noted that similarly as previous remarks, they also find access to be among the priorities on the discussion agenda. Inadequate infrastructure and digital literacy are reasons for having community be unconnected and/or under-connected. It is encouraging however, that the multistakeholder community, established through this national IGF, works on improving the overall situation related to access. Some examples of related positive action plans were outlined, for example, an initiative focused on developing the needed optic infrastructure that would allow for many households from remote areas to access the Internet; and another focused on providing capacity building training for having the community to understand what is the Internet and how to use it.

In the next round of questions to the panelists, the Afghanistan IGF followed with remarks of more detail about challenges, noting that this country has a very low number of citizens that are connected to the Internet. It was explained that only 5 % of the 30 million population are connected. Digital literacy rate is low as well, and represents an issue for itself in regard to achieving a meaningful connectivity for citizens. Availability of online content on local language

was noted again, as another layer of this complex issue, as many citizens are able to read only on some of local languages.

The speaker also noted that digital literacy goes beyond just reading the content. It is closely connected to how the end-users use the Internet, which for this respective community represents an issue, as many use limited and basic services.

Remarks were concluded with noting that there are not enough e-services available in Afghanistan, and it was advised that the relevant stakeholders take appropriate actions in this respect.

From the LACIGF, it was noted that the region itself if very diverse in terms of capacity, and landscape, as well as in the context of the overall conditions for accessing the Internet. The region is specific as it has a big concentration of small island developing states; as well as some densely populated countries. This is why the question of access is heterogeneous across the region. Estimations on the number of connected users stand at around 56 %. However, looking at specific countries, it can be seen that there are some where a significant number of citizens are connected, while on another side, there are cases where an alarmingly low number of citizens are connected.

With having these specificities in mind, the speaker noted that the community of the LACIGF has discussed extensively the matters of access on this regional IGF's annual meeting(s). It was said that the discussion was focused on the citizens having meaningful access to the Internet, that primarily refers to the availability of skills and capacities for end-users to fully benefit from the Internet, mainly in terms of social and economic opportunities. For those that have access to the Internet, lack of content available on local languages was stressed as a problem.

The digital divide in this region reflects the indigenous communities as well. Digital literacy, and lack of awareness of what the Internet offers, are present across the region. With noting that some existing policies are inadequate, it was said that the LACIGF process has resulted in some Governments understanding what are the policy aspects that should be improved, and what are the new ones to be developed.

The Sri Lanka IGF said that the traditional culture of the society affects the use of the Internet, noting the examples of indigenous people, as well as parents that are concerned for their children's online safety.

The moderator then turned the questions to recommendations for improvements. The Colombia IGF said that it is important to understand the needs of communities, especially underlining the importance of the role of the Government toward the private sector, and the usage of open and free software and hardware. Existence of cultural barriers that reflect the access, were noted.

The national IGF of Georgia followed with stressing that there are not social or religious barriers that would affect the access in this country.

However, from the Afghanistan IGF, it was noted that there are social barriers that reflect acceptance of access. This particularly relates to women who are not connected and who are not treated equally in an online environment, with elaboration on the causes related to patriarchal reasons and online safety.

From the West African IGF, it was noted that access barriers are related to religious reasons, that reached its extreme through the existence of the terrorist organizations that see and use the Internet as a negative tool.

Examples of the Internet content that are not adjusted to different cultures were presented as challenges.

From the audience, one participant asked the representative of the Afghanistan IGF to elaborate more on the costs of accessing the Internet in this country. After it was confirmed that the costs for a flat rate of a maximum speed of 1mb/s are around 150 USD, several participants said that it is very expensive, especially for a country recovering from conflict.

Another participant from the audience asked the speakers to share their thoughts on how can communities influence the approach of the Governments to be more flexible with regulations toward the Internet.

In a response to this question, from the West African IGF it was said that through the NRIs, recommendations for effecting policies should be channeled to the Governments. The national IGF of Colombia followed by remarks that the national Governments should be integrated into the major international developing trends. However, it was said that even if the international frameworks are adopted, their implementation on a national level depends on the specificities' of the existing conditions, and as such should be looked at carefully. The LACIGF followed to this response, by noting that this regional IGF was involved in some important intergovernmental processes on this subject. However, it was said that the non-state actors should be involved in the implementation of the outcomes of these types of mentioned processes, such for example is the development of the "Agenda for Latin American and the Caribbean region".

The need for involvement of all stakeholders in the processes of developing adequate Internet policies was supported by the Sri Lanka IGF. The national IGF of Georgia followed with remarks that this national IGF has been focused on discussing the effective policies toward the Internet. It was noted that the new amendments to the Constitution reflect the access to the Internet as a human right.

One participant from the audience spoke about the Arab IGF that has developed a roadmap, that will be subject to public consultations. This roadmap is significant for this topic, as access is among priorities for this community to focus on, given that a high number of citizens of this region remain unconnected.
With these remarks, the moderator thanked all participants, remote moderator, and rapporteur and the present audience. She also noted with appreciation the co-organizers of the Access NRI Collaboration session. The importance of this session was noted, as it allowed for different perspectives to be presented. Because of this, the moderator invited the co-organizers to continue

working on this topic, both at their national and regional IGFs, and to consider returning to IGF 2018.

Video recording of the session available here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJrcLuWW5HU

Full transcript of the session available here:
https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/igf-2017-day-4-room-xxiii-nri-collaborative-session-access-and-existing-barriers-on-0