GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)

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A special edition of GISWatch, "Internet governance from the edges: NRIs in their own words", is being published
as a companion edition to the 2017 GISWatch annual report. It looks at the history, challenges and achievements
of NRIs, as recounted by their organisers. It is available at https://www.giswatch.org

IPANDETEC
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Introduction

IPANDETEC had the unique opportunity to be the host organisation for the 10th Preparatory Meeting for the Internet Governance Forum for Latin America and the Caribbean (LACIGF),[1] an event that brought hundreds of people from the internet governance community in the region to Panama City on 2-4 August 2017. For an organisation founded in 2013, hosting the LACIGF represented a big step for IPANDETEC, increasing its visibility and involvement in the internet governance process in the LAC region.

As a central actor in the process of hosting the event, IPANDETEC was able to understand more clearly the needs and challenges behind regional IGFs. In this sense, we could see that the process had two main dimensions that demanded a critical assessment.

The first deals with the impact of such an event on the internet governance environment locally, in this case in Panama. Considering the incipient state of the discussion of internet governance issues in Panama and the need to continue advancing the internet governance agenda nationally, the role of LACIGF 10 in mobilising and activating the internet governance agenda in the national context needs to be assessed.

The second deals with the challenges involved in organising and making an event of this magnitude happen. In this regard, we will briefly consider the preparation of the event in light of the challenges we faced, and the process of involving different stakeholders in the region.

National context: The consolidation of an internet governance ecosystem in Panama

Panama was selected among seven other candidates to be the host of the 2017 LACIGF. The selection was the culmination of the efforts of recent years to establish a national community of stakeholders involved in the internet governance agenda – a process that is important to acknowledge to properly understand the relationship between national efforts and the regional forum.

The initial talks around establishing an internet governance community in Panama date back to April 2013, when the government hosted the 5th South School on Internet Governance (SSIG).[2] This event was organised by the National Authority for Governmental Innovation (AIG)[3] and SSIG, and aimed at training and motivating Latin Americans to join the international debate on internet governance.

The event brought important actors involved in the internet governance ecosystem in Latin America to Panama, and mobilised representatives of the public sector – such as the AIG, the National Authority of Public Services (ASEP)[4] and the Ministry of Commerce and Industries (MICI) – as well as the academic and technical communities of the country, represented by the Network Information Centre of the Technological University of Panama (UTP),[5] better known as NIC-Panama.

A year later, in April 2014, a group of key players from the Panamanian digital ecosystem[6] met at the NETmundial event in Brazil,[7] which brought together different stakeholders from around the world to discuss and shape the principles of internet governance. The same group met once again at the 7th LACIGF, held in San Salvador, El Salvador in 2014, and at the 8th LACIGF in Mexico City, in 2015. Back in Panama, they engaged in a series of meetings with the purpose of putting together representatives of the different parties interested in the development of internet governance in the country.

During 2016, prior to the 9th LACIGF held in Costa Rica in July, IPANDETEC organised a series of three public forums to inform and involve a broader audience, such as teachers, students, businesspeople and government entities not already involved in internet governance, and civil society in general. Through a series of six meetings convened by IPANDETEC

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1   https://lacigf.org/en/lacigf-10/#1496775922148-e699f39e-d82a

2   More information on the South School can be found here: www.utp.
ac.pa/escuela-del-sur-de-gobernanza-de-internet-panama-2013

3   www.innovacion.gob.pa

4   asep.gob.pa

5   www.nic.pa

6   Edna Samudio de Jaén, NIC-Panama; César Díaz, LACNIC; Pablo
Ruidíaz, AIG; and Lia Hernández Pérez, IPANDETEC.

7   netmundial.br

(civil society), and sponsored by AIG and ASEP (public sector), UTP (technical and academic sector) and the Panamanian Chamber of Information Technology, Innovation and Telecommunications (CAPATEC)[8] (business sector), a working group was created to reinforce the commitment of all stakeholders. This process culminated in the organisation of the first Internet Governance Dialogue Table in April 2017[9] – the talks that have started the work towards a national IGF in Panama – just when the Panama chapter of the Internet Society[10] was established and shortly after the nomination of IPANDETEC as the host organisation of the 10th LACIGF.

The facilitation of participation in both regional and international governance forums in Panama influenced the national policy process because it brought different stakeholders around the same table. In particular, by bringing together experts from different sectors in Panama, both the NETmundial meeting and the LACIGF played an important role in fostering the creation of a group made up of people engaged in internet governance issues in the country. The two regional initiatives also helped by providing the expertise and the contacts of people in other countries across LAC who shared best practices in establishing a national and regional community focused on internet governance.

Strengthening cooperation and awareness

The national internet governance ecosystem in Panama has become more active since IPANDETEC was awarded the opportunity to host the 10th LACIGF in March 2017. With a view to holding the event in August 2017, actors involved in the consolidation of a national edition of the IGF were committed to ensuring the success of the discussion panels that were an integral part of the regional event. We believe that, without the LACIGF on the horizon, stakeholders in Panama would not have been mobilised enough to organise the first Dialogue Table back in April 2017.

Initially, the public sector's participation was timid, but it ended up being a very active and supportive actor,[11] especially after the decision that Panama City would be the host city. This enthusiasm, however, was not shared by the private sector, which remained distant from the evolution of the internet governance talks. To improve the participation of the private sector on the event's panels and in discussions, we decided to work through the Programme Committee.[12]

In this regard, we consider the participation of actors such as CAPATEC, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Panama (CCIP) and Cable Onda,[13] a major internet provider in the country, a success. They got together to discuss topics such as the digital economy and the future of the internet in Panama.[14] These were fruitful exchanges that demonstrated their increasing interest in topics that go beyond questions related to the digital infrastructure of the country. They also explored the opportunities and benefits that information and communications technology (ICT) regulation can bring to the country.

We believe that the discussions opened doors for closer cooperation between stakeholders in the Panamanian context. While we cannot assess the full impact of the event with respect to the consolidation of stronger and more diverse internet governance deliberations in Panama at this point, we believe our relationship with the private and public sectors has been strengthened through the country hosting the LACIGF. We anticipate that public sector agencies involved in the event will help us include other relevant actors in the country, such as the Ombudsman, the Freedom of Expression Director and the Ministries of Education and of Social Development. Despite our close cooperation with the AIG in the months prior to the event, we still need to foster the participation of other stakeholders in the process – especially ASEP, given its role in the regulation of telecommunications.

On the civil society side, we believe the event helped in increasing the awareness of internet governance issues among human rights groups in the country, but we still have a long way to go to get their full support in national discussions on internet governance issues. Many human rights and advocacy groups are not aware of the importance of a free and safe internet in order to fully achieve their strategies, and in this sense we do not foresee any immediate improvement as a direct result of hosting the LACIGF.

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8   https://capatec.org.pa

9   The report on the first Panama IGF Dialogue Table can be found here: www.igfpanama.pa/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Relatoria-1era-mesa-de-diálogo_Abril-2017.pdf

10   www.isoc.org.pa

11   Especially the Authority for Governmental Innovation (AIG), with the kind support of Irving Halman.

12   The Programme Committee is responsible for the general coordination of the forum, as well as the suggestion of topics and speakers at the event. It is composed of three members selected by each of the following stakeholders: regional organisations representing the private sector, governments of the Latin American and Caribbean region, civil society organisations, and regional entities representing the internet technical community.

13   https://www.cableonda.com/acerca-de-cable-onda

14   More details on the programme of the LACIGF 10 can be found here: https://lacigf.org/lacigf-10

This may change. Increasingly, human rights groups are aware of the potential and risks of using social networks and online forums for their work. Topics such as fake news, hate speech, freedom of expression and privacy in the online sphere are gaining ground among these groups. In fact, IPANDETEC recently partnered with the Alliance for Equality on an initiative tackling the violation of the human rights of the lesbian, gay, trans, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) community online.

Where do we go from here?

It is hard to assess, such a short time after the event took place, what the full impact of hosting the LACIGF on the internet ecosystem in Panama will be in the long run. However, the positive response from the various actors involved both in the preparation at the Dialogue Table and during the event was definitely a good start for the country. The actors involved in the panel "The future of the Internet in Panama in the next five years"[15] encouraged events like these to happen more frequently, opening doors to a more cohesive ecosystem in the years to come.

Our plan is to gather the stakeholders together again in the coming months in an event that will discuss the challenges and future of internet governance in Panama; in doing this we hope to consolidate the discussions started in the Panama LACIGF, and also to involve more actors in these discussions.

Regarding the event itself, some considerations should be taken into account as we continue to build an inclusive and participatory process in the region in order to make our voices stronger in other forums such as the global IGF. Throughout the whole process of organising the 10th LACIGF, the Programme Committee was a central actor in defining the topics for the panels, as well as the panel speakers, moderators and participants. In this process, the host organisation does not have any type of formal role for providing input or making suggestions, and it lacks the power to mediate in the selection of actors to be panellists or moderators.

We believe that the role of host has to be more active, beyond the performance of logistical tasks needed for the realisation of the event. Given its strategic position of being a national organisation, the host is the actor that is supposed to know more about the important actors involved in the internet ecosystem in the country and its region – in our case, Central America – and would definitely be a good collaborator in shaping the event's content.

The inclusion of key stakeholders in the event was nevertheless successful – but this happened less through formal channels than through behind-the-scenes suggestions made by the director of IPANDETEC, Lia Hernández, directly to some members of the Programme Committee. In this way she ensured that important Panamanian and Central American actors were included in almost all panels. This would not have been possible using formal consultation processes nor through the voting rights granted to Programme Committee members.[16]

Action steps

The following action steps are suggested for Panama:

- In the short term, we aim to reinforce the commitment of the actors involved in the LACIGF in Panama in order to foster their participation in the global IGF. Acknowledging that we made considerable advances in the last year in consolidating the internet ecosystem in the country, it is important to share our experiences at the IGF in Geneva in December.

- In the medium term, it is essential to sustain the inclusion of national actors in internet governance deliberations in Panama – especially the government regulatory bodies and the private sector. This needs to be done with the aim of strengthening national strategies, such as open government and data protection laws.

- Regarding civil society, it is important to increase awareness of why internet governance topics are essential for human rights defenders and activists. A second step would be to include human rights activists in the national internet governance talks.

- When it comes to the organisation of regional forums, we believe that empowering the host organisation is important and beneficial. There must be formal participation that goes beyond informal consultations and exchanges between the host organisation and the Programme Committee. In this sense, we call for a change in the statutes governing the LACIGF, in order to give the host organisation a voice in setting the agenda of the event.

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15 Ibid.

16 More information on the Programme Committee can be found in its statutes, available at: https://lacigf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/lacigf-estatuto-es.pdf

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs) are now widely recognised as a vital element of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) process. In fact, they are seen to be the key to the sustainability and ongoing evolution of collaborative, inclusive and multistakeholder approaches to internet policy development and implementation.

A total of 54 reports on NRIs are gathered in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch). These include 40 country reports from contexts as diverse as the United States, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Colombia.

The country reports are rich in approach and style and highlight several challenges faced by activists organising and participating in national IGFs, including broadening stakeholder participation, capacity building, the unsettled role of governments, and impact.

Seven regional reports analyse the impact of regional IGFs, their evolution and challenges, and the risks they still need to take to shift governance to the next level, while seven thematic reports offer critical perspectives on NRIs as well as mapping initiatives globally.

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