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GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

*National and Regional Internet
Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)*



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)

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National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

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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>

CONGO, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF

BABY STEPS: CHALLENGES WITH MULTISTAKEHOLDERISM IN THE DRC



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Introduction

In 2013, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) hosted the Central Africa Internet Governance Forum (IGF). Although 40 delegates attended the event, the only country other than the DRC represented was Cameroon, and it by only two civil society delegates. Alongside them were around 30 Congolese participants and a handful of representatives from international NGOs and agencies, including the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), the World Wide Web Foundation¹ and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Moreover, no delegates from the provinces in the DRC were able to attend.

The meeting started two hours late. The owner of the hall refused to let people in as the organisers had not finalised the contract to rent the hall for the two full days of the forum. The doors were only opened when the hall manager received a guarantee that the fee would be paid eventually.

This says a lot about the struggle of convening a national IGF in the DRC, as well as the difficulties that countries in the region have in securing both national and sub-regional attention on information and communications technology (ICT) issues. More alarming is Cameroon's low attendance and difficulties in fundraising for participation, given that it had held the sub-regional IGF the previous year.

The DRC is a huge country sharing a border with nine different countries (Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, the Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Angola, Zambia and South Sudan) and with a land mass equaling the size of all Western Europe combined. With a population estimated at 80 million, it is the third most populous country in Africa. The DRC is one of the poorest countries in the world, with a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of USD 475 in 2014, and with 64% of the population living below the national poverty line in 2012. Social and political unrest have also affected the country in recent years.

Nevertheless, the country is said to be a vast lucrative market for ICTs. The liberalisation of the ICT sector to open it up to private partners in the framework of the economic reforms initiated by the country's authorities enabled it to rank among the growth sectors of the Congolese economy.² Given this growth in the sector, one would think that internet governance was a national, if not regional priority.

This report explores some of the challenges in organising a national IGF in the DRC based on the principles of multistakeholderism.

Labour pains: Convening a national IGF

The idea of convening national stakeholders around ICT issues in the DRC started almost a year after the IGF was formally announced by the United Nations Secretary General in July 2006. In 2007, at the first national civil society forum, an annual event convening all social movements, including universities, churches as well as all non-political initiatives, some of the actors who were already taking part in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process felt they needed to strategise to make ICTs a cross-cutting issue to be discussed by civil society as well as the government in this country. The UNDP, which funds several initiatives to make sure that civil society has a voice in all governance issues, agreed to start preparatory discussions with different stakeholders, including academia and the media. A few civil society coalitions³ were founded, but they did not last long, and the government still had not been persuaded to place internet governance on its agenda.

Despite raising the possibility of a national IGF early on, stakeholders struggled with the idea of multistakeholderism, and the kind of commitment it required from each one. This was, however, one of the key principles of the IGF. The Ministry of Post, Telecommunications and ICTs did not fully understand the process. "This combined with the several changes in administration we witnessed at the ministry, and, on the other hand, civil society being willing to organise, but in its own spaces to avoid being crushed by the government, didn't help

1 <https://webfoundation.org>

2 www.generaff.com/newsite/en/index.php/ct-menu-item-13/ct-menu-item-14/ct-menu-item-72

3 Such as REPROTIC.

much,” says Baudouin Schombe, an internet activist and national IGF convenor who has followed the process since its beginning.

Illustrating these difficulties was the fact that internet activists, the private sector and the Ministry of Post, Telecommunications and ICTs were only able to organise the country’s first annual National ICT Day⁴ to celebrate World Telecommunication and Information Society Day⁵ two years after it was declared in 2006.

It is in this context that – following the example of Cameroon hosting the first Central Africa IGF – the DRC decided to host the second sub-regional forum in Kinshasa from 28 to 30 August 2013. However, this happened with almost no support from the different stakeholders, and it would not have happened if it were not for two international organisations – APC and the World Wide Web Foundation – who decided to sponsor the participation of the Cameroon participants and their own representatives.

2016: From crawling to standing

In 2016, with a new change at the Ministry of Post, Telecommunications and ICTs, and many initiatives at the government level to reform the ICT sector, around 10 stakeholders, mostly drawn from civil society, decided to meet regularly and become the multistakeholder advisory group (MAG) for a national IGF.⁶ Soon after this, some delegates from the private sector were able to join and helped to draft an action plan. To show its political will, the Ministry proposed to draft a ministerial order to make the IGF advisory group official, and include it in the national budget.

Multistakeholderism: A concept that varies according to actors

When asked what multistakeholderism means and how it plays itself out in the process of organising the national IGF in the DRC, the stakeholders interviewed for this report gave different responses.

For Patience Luyeye, a member of Si Jeunesse Savait, a women-led organisation taking part in the MAG, there is an even power balance in the group: “The fact is that the government, civil society and private sector are taking part equally in the discussions.” However, for Schombe, while everyone has a role to play, the final word remains with the government, a perspective that is held by most of the

stakeholders I spoke to. This power is reflected in the institutional arrangement of the MAG: the Ministry hosts the MAG and the budget is determined by the government, even though others can contribute to it.

Funding of the IGF process has been a very difficult question from the start. Although civil society has made in-kind donations (skills to build event websites, providing office furniture, helping with local transport, etc.) and the private sector has put aside small amounts of funding for preparatory meetings, the bulk of funding is expected from the government. While there are often delays in receiving the funds from the government on time, the funds are also not enough to support the participation of delegates from outside of Kinshasa in the organisation of the national IGF, to meaningfully involve stakeholders in the development of ICT policy, nor to support delegates from the DRC in sub-regional and regional IGF meetings.

Contributions to the sub-regional and regional IGFs

The first sub-regional IGF was held in 2012 in Douala, Cameroon thanks to the funding of the government of Cameroon. With the participation of delegates from the Republic of Congo, the DRC, Chad and Cameroon, most of them remotely, this sub-regional forum suffered from a similar fate that befalls the national forums. The sub-regional IGF still does not have a secretariat, still expects funding from governments, does not meaningfully include the private sector beyond accepting financial contributions for events, and civil society is not taken seriously as a stakeholder by the government. According to Avis Momeni, general secretary of PROTEGE QV,⁷ a Cameroonian organisation that promotes the use of technologies to support the environment and quality of life, and a delegate to the Central Africa IGFs held in the DRC and Cameroon: “Getting the governments to recognise civil society at the national level as a respectful, responsible and necessary partner as well as getting the same governments as a stakeholder to understand and make use of the multistakeholder approach to promote better internet governance at national, sub-regional and regional level is an issue. To that you can add the lack of financial means to support the process.”

According to Momeni, “the sub-regional process, in my view, is not fully ‘multistakeholdered’

4 www.mediacongo.net/article-actualite-2421.html

5 The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution in March 2006 stipulating that World Information Society Day shall be celebrated every year on 17 May. See: www.itu.int/en/wtisid/Pages/about.aspx

6 The MAG includes the Ministry, representatives of women’s organisations, young people, universities and the media.

7 <https://www.protegeqv.org>

because very often it is the governmental institutions that fund the organisation of the sub-regional IGF and set the agendas. Because of this, inclusiveness or multistakeholderism in its preparatory phase is a failure – political interest prevails over a collegial view and also undermines the alignment with the regional or the global IGF in terms of a multistakeholder approach.”

Tidjiani Mahamat Adoum, an internet activist from Chad who is also taking part in the convening of the Central Africa IGF, thinks the same: “The IGF process both in the DRC as well as in the Central Africa region is not inclusive enough. Until today we have not yet organised a sub-regional IGF where all the relevant actors have actually taken part and all agree on the organisational processes. The DRC does not participate institutionally; there are individual volunteers whom I salute who have the courage and bravery and who are making progress.”

The weaknesses observed above can make one feel that the internet governance discussion is taking a wrong turn in the DRC. There is a need to stop organising the IGF just for the sake of organising the IGF, and to come up with a new strategy or set of principles to make sure the multistakeholder approach is fully understood. A fundraising plan needs

to be developed that is in line with this approach, supporting the growth and meaningful participation of all stakeholders at different levels, not just those who can afford to attend the meetings.

Action steps

The following action steps can be suggested for the DRC:

- Organise a session on the multistakeholder approach so that DRC actors and their sub-regional counterparts can learn from it.
- Support the organisation of ICT stakeholders at the national level to reduce dependency on government funds.
- Allow full participation of stakeholders in the MAG, including those from the provinces working on internet governance issues.
- Align the national and sub-regional internet governance agendas with the global agenda to contribute to a common perspective despite the different national contexts.
- Support the participation of DRC delegates in the regional and global IGFs as a way of building capacity.

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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