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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>

PARAGUAY

A COUNTRY WHERE “CLOUD” STILL MEANS RAIN¹



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Introduction

In this report we are going to share how internet governance has reached a rather backward country in South America, and suggest how the process is taking place in the context of structural, social, economic and political contradictions.

Despite holding three national Internet Governance Forums (IGFs),² and currently organising a fourth, the actual impact of the events on internet governance policy is questionable. Instead, what is most noticeable is how in our country, despite very favourable conditions, we end up missing out on opportunities.

It may be that the most relevant explanation is the one provided by Benjamin Fernández Bogado in his book *No Da Más* when he writes: “The Paraguay of democracy looks a lot like the one during the dictatorship.”³ Bogado argues that although there is no longer a tyrant ruling the country, Paraguay has several tyrants who reproduce the behaviour that guided earlier generations. He writes: “They have no pity, no sense of history, and even less commitment to the future.”⁴

My modest contribution in this report is to suggest that a future determined by selfish politics, mediocre education, a corrupted state and an unfair economy will continue to determine Paraguay’s fortunes in a world that is global, digital and very closely interconnected.

Political, economic and policy context

After the recovery of the rule of law in 1989 following a 35-year dictatorship, Paraguay suffered a period of political instability which ended in the parliamentary coup that removed President Fernando Lugo from power in June of 2012,⁵ a few months before the end of his presidential term. From February 1989 until August 2017, the country has had eight presidents.⁶ According to the country’s constitution (1992), their terms should last five years, but they have only lasted an average of three each. This shows the weakness of democratic institutions in the country, and naturally, the absence of stable state policies.

It is a paradox that under these conditions, the economy in Paraguay is one of the fastest-growing in South America. The country’s gross domestic product (GDP) grew some 24% over the last five years, according to the annual report from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).⁷

The lack of political continuity has generated erratic behaviour when it comes to internet policy. Several government organisations were formed that sporadically participated in internet governance discussions, until the end of 2013, when the National Secretariat for Information and Communications Technologies (SENATICs) was created.⁸

But while SENATICs⁹ has brought stability to the policy-making institutional environment, its role and autonomy have sometimes been obstructed by other institutions such as the telecoms regulator, CONATEL,¹⁰ and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The latter participates in events depending on how important they are and on which stakeholders are participating – in others words, while it undermines the independence of SENATICs, its participation in

1 Paraguay is a sub-tropical country, with trees that easily reach 15 and 20 metres in height. In rural areas, it is common to see a peasant climb to the top of a tree with a mobile phone, searching for a signal in order to be able to talk to his children who have migrated to another city or abroad. In Asunción, the country’s capital city, modern businessmen working from the 25th floor move data to the “cloud” with a single click, while in rural areas, a cloud is still and only an announcement of rain.

2 The first one was held on 4 October 2014.

3 “No da más” can be roughly translated as “This cannot continue.” Fernández Bogado, B. (2017). *No Da Más*. Asunción: Editorial Libre.

4 Ibid.

5 https://elpais.com/internacional/2012/06/23/actualidad/1340409945_936908.html

6 <https://www.geni.com/projects/Presidents-of-Paraguay/16459>

7 www.lanacion.com.py/2017/01/30/paraguay-la-economia-mas-avanzo-pib-sudamerica

8 https://www.senatic.gov.py/application/files/2414/5200/6345/ley_4989_senatic.pdf

9 <https://www.senatic.gov.py>

10 www.conatel.gov.py

internet governance debates is inconsistent. The same pattern of behaviour has been seen with the country's three IGFs.

Despite open government policies¹¹ promoted by the Secretariat of Technical Planning (STP), the government is still using selective criteria in deciding which information to share with the public, and can be secretive about its agenda, a tendency regularly criticised by the media. High-level policy decisions have limited public engagement, while more operational roll-out plans regarding the development of the internet are more transparent.

As a result, the behaviour of the government, which regards itself as “the most transparent in the history of Paraguay”,¹² does not facilitate a balance among the different stakeholders who participate in the internet governance process.

Bringing stakeholders together

I believe that despite the obstacles mentioned in the previous section, the IGF in Paraguay has been able to consolidate itself as a space for national dialogue. In the planning for each event, priority issues are defined based on surveys regarding what is most important for society. What is most significant is the leadership role that the Paraguay IGF plays in the internet governance debate, fostering a space where the points of view of all interested parties can be shared.

Both civil society and academia have been very active in the IGFs, and have shown that they can influence debates, but without over-determining their outcome.

At all the national forums, civil society has played a leading role in the initial call for participation and in the execution of the organisational activities themselves. The organisation of the debate roundtables have the participation of organisations such as CONATEL, the state-owned telecoms company COPACO,¹³ the Paraguayan Chamber of Electronic Commerce (CAPACE),¹⁴ universities, and other occasional stakeholders such as private sector companies.

The media are not excluded from the local IGF processes, but unfortunately, they limit themselves to covering the event in general terms, rather than dealing with the topics discussed in detail.

While this shows that key stakeholders have been engaged in the IGF, we still have some way to go to make the IGF truly multistakeholder. Firstly, there is in general a low level of participation from stakeholders,¹⁵ even though some key sectors are represented. Secondly, important actors and communities are left out of the IGF process.

Although the government actively participates – through, for example, SENATICs offering its offices for preparatory meetings for the IGF – this is not the case with other government institutions, whose officials have not received a specific mandate to be involved. Although they occasionally participate in regional or global forums, it is unlikely that they will share lessons learned with other stakeholders or apply best practices from other countries in the region in the local context.

Two institutions that should have participated more in the IGFs are the Ministry of Education and the Office for Childhood and Adolescence. Working with UNICEF and other organisations, the two have organised interesting campaigns¹⁶ dealing with violence against children and adolescents online, and their digital rights.

Telecommunications service providers have also been absent from the IGFs, even though they have been specifically invited to participate each year. Currently, their absence means that the interests and goals of those who manage the Paraguayan telecommunications market and who are powerful economically are not represented in the discussions.

Women's groups who have worked for many years on gender issues, both in rural and urban areas, have not engaged in the IGF. Highlighting gender issues is a good example of one of the issues that we have struggled to foreground at the forum over the years. As a result, a specific effort has been made to include them in the fourth forum being held this year.

Similarly, with regard to representatives of underserved or rural communities, their participation is practically nil; and the projects that have been developed regarding access to the internet, literacy, introducing computers to classrooms or the launching of websites for rural communities have nothing to do with the IGF.

11 www.gobiernoabierto.gov.py

12 While addressing the UN General Assembly in September 2017, President Horacio Cartes claimed that during his tenure, the political culture of the country would be transformed by promoting transparency and opportunities.

13 <https://www.copaco.com.py/portal>

14 www.capace.org.py

15 A total of 87 people participated in the first forum, 143 in the second, and 305 in the third, according to the registration records of participants.

16 https://www.unicef.org/paraguay/spanish/32252_36369.html

Saying no to “oparei”

Paraguay’s Guaraní culture has a popular and widely used expression: *oparei*, meaning “it ended in nothing”.¹⁷ “Oparei” is the total opposite of “efficiency and efficacy” and other concepts used recently by President Horacio Cartes in his speech at the UN, where he also talked about the transformation of Paraguay’s way of doing things: “During my government, a political culture based on patronage has been transformed into a model of transparency, access to public information, and greater opportunity.”¹⁸

However, the fact that Paraguay has organised three consecutive national IGFs and is about to organise the fourth one, set for 30 November, has not always translated into concrete and actionable policy outcomes. In other words, sometimes one feels a sense of *oparei* because of the lack of policy impact.

We interviewed Natalia Enciso from the Paraguayan chapter of the Internet Society (ISOC), who gave the following explanation for the low participation of representatives from Paraguay in the regional forums:

This is a very sensitive issue, as participation in any of the forums is limited to obtaining external financing in order to be able to participate. There is no aid from the state or from local companies in order to ensure Paraguayan representation either in the national or regional forums. That is why the Paraguayan participation is always very scarce, and the people who participate vary. To date, there is still not an organised and united participation from our country’s delegates, and this would be one of the main deficits I have observed at the local level.¹⁹

Despite efforts to attract marginalised groups and communities to the IGF, I consider it necessary that issues that are very close to the needs of the people are more forcefully pushed onto the agenda, in order to take the IGF away from the usual spaces, and to make it relevant to the more dynamic sectors of Paraguayan society. I believe that we have the moral duty to do this: internet service providers and telecommunications companies do not see internet governance from the perspective of access by people who are currently excluded, nor through a human rights lens.

Setting the agenda

In February 2017 the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) for the global IGF was approved and the new list of elected members included Miguel Candia, from the Permanent Mission of Paraguay to the UN Office in Geneva, representing Paraguay. This gives our country visibility, and allows us to position some issues on the international scene. Although operating from offices in Geneva, Candia²⁰ is very involved in the IGF in Paraguay and participates actively, providing information about the global forum and allowing local stakeholders to stay abreast of the latest issues. We believe that new multistakeholder alliances can now be formed at the international level, allowing progress in Paraguay to be made more rapidly.

A key issue that was incorporated in the agenda in the last national forum was space for dialogue about internet governance participation in public policies. This included an analysis of successful models from the region where internet governance was successful. The models selected were: the Brazil Steering Committee (CGI),²¹ the Consultation Council of Costa Rica,²² the Federal Authority for Information and Communications Technologies of Argentina (AFTIC)²³ and the Grupo Iniciativa, Mexico.²⁴

Although the influence of regional and global issues has a certain impact on Paraguay, at the local level, our principal problem – due to our geographic situation of being a landlocked country – continues to be centred on access infrastructure. This is followed by concerns with issues such as human rights, cybersecurity and the digital economy. These will also need attention at the IGF, as will issues such as freedom of expression online, which recently received attention from the Special Rapporteur at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and has been the subject of training workshops for journalists by organisations such as IPANDETEC²⁵ in Panama.

The principal goal of the IGF in Paraguay is to create a national forum that deals with internet governance and internet policies in a participatory, inclusive and transparent manner. There is consensus among stakeholders that there is a need for such a forum. It has been decided that next year’s

17 www.portalguarani.com/777_leni_pane/6529_los_paraguayismos_2005_por_leni_pane.html

18 www.ultimahora.com/cartes-habla-transformacion-la-cultura-politica-paraguaya-asamblea-la-onu-n1108832.html

19 Interviewed on 28 August 2017.

20 <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/mag-2017-members>

21 www.cgi.br

22 www.ccnrs.com

23 www.enacom.gob.ar

24 www.facebook.com/IniciativaMex

25 www.ipandetec.org

IGF will be held in April 2018, to coincide with the national elections, and a new government offering a renewal of hope.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that Paraguay, being one of the countries with the lowest levels of connectivity in the region (33% of the Paraguayan population is online),²⁶ has experienced a significant leap in the last five years. But while there has been growth in demand for infrastructure, and a dynamism injected into industry and other sectors, there has not been the simultaneous modernisation of the state and a reduction of its powers. This has impacted on the performance of parastatal companies. For example, while private telecommunications providers have experienced exponential growth, COPACO is the worst performer in the country.²⁷

While the state remains the main employer in the country, and foreign investors take advantage of the tax haven offered by Paraguay, there is little investment in rural connectivity. Similarly, key sectors such as education are receiving little attention – the World Economic Forum ranks the country 131st out of 144 countries in an e-education index.²⁸

There is no doubt that the current model cannot continue.

In spite of having a small population, Paraguay has a history of large tragedies. First the Triple Alliance War, which wiped out the country's male population, leaving only women, children and older men to survive, then 35 years of dictatorship. But there are no more epic histories or wars ahead. The country suffers the absurdity of a parasitic political class with egotistical and greedy leaders locked in personal disputes. The new war has to be fought against a corrupt and oversized state that daily promotes an unfair economy that results in profound exclusions and the marginalisation of the country's people.

It is difficult to think about the democratisation of communications and access to new technologies without making profound changes that will contribute to the democratisation of society.

Action steps

The following action steps are suggested for Paraguay:

- It is necessary to strengthen the role of SENATICs as a vital part of the state mechanism for transparent and accountable internet governance. Civil society needs to support SENATICs to achieve this.
- It is important to continue to support the Paraguay IGF, to encourage the participation of more and diverse stakeholders, and diverse themes for discussion. It should be remembered that a greater number of participants does not mean more diverse participants, and organisers need to be vigilant that the interests of all communities, especially marginalised groups, are actively represented. Civil society should not be dependent on the state for money to secure its engagement in the IGF or in internet governance generally, but should seek independent funding sources to participate actively in shaping the future of the internet in the country. The use of technology to raise awareness and to debate issues at the IGF can also be improved, specifically the use of social media, and other online forums.
- Encourage the interest and participation of the youth in internet governance. While activists should seek to replicate successful global programmes and best practices aimed at young people in Paraguay, it is also necessary to create more spaces for debate in universities so that academics and students can talk about internet governance, and learn about the current and future trends. Internet governance as an issue should also be introduced at the primary and secondary school level to train future leaders and to encourage an active interest among the country's youth in how the internet is managed. Programmes that raise awareness of internet governance issues that are relevant to primary and secondary students – such as child safety online, cyberbullying, education and health – should be developed.

26 www.abc.com.py/edicion-impresa/economia/acceso-a-internet-se-duplico-en-5-anos-con-los-telefonos-inteligentes-1461285.html

27 www.paraguay.com/nacionales/la-expansi%C3%B3n-de-las-telecomunicacion-1248356

28 www.abc.com.py/edicion-impresa/locales/el-sistema-educativo-paraguayo-sigue-entre-los-peores-del-mundo-447311.html

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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