

Submission to the UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF) Consultations – 31/03/06

[NB: The below is in the standardized format agreed by the civil society Internet Governance Caucus for IGF theme submissions from its members]

Suggested theme for the first meeting of the Internet Governance Forum:

Defining and fostering the ‘public-ness’ of the Internet – issues of public interest, public domain, public infrastructure and public good in the context of the Internet.

Proposed by IT for Change, India, with support of the following civil society organizations.

1. World Radio and Television Council
2. Comunica-ch, the platform of Swiss civil society for the Information Society
3. HIVOS, Netherlands
4. African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET)
5. Foundation for Media Alternatives, Philippines
6. Public Affairs Foundation, Bangalore
7. Alternate Law Forum, Bangalore
8. femLINKPACIFIC: Media Initiatives for Women, Fiji Islands
9. International Gender and Trade Network – Asia
10. IP Justice
11. United Nations Association of Uganda
12. Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)
13. Third World Institute (ITeM), Uruguay
14. Association for Progressive Communications
15. Isis International-Manila
16. Madhyam, Bangalore
17. The Centre for Women's Research, Sri Lanka
18. Action Aid International-India
19. Panos Institute West Africa
20. Danish United Nations Association
21. Voices, Bangalore
22. Mahila Samakhya, Karnataka, India
23. Mazdoor Kissan Shakti Sangathan, India
24. Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan, India

25. Abhiyan, India

a. A concise formulation for the proposed theme

In determining global public policy issues and directions for IG, it is important to first define and characterize the Internet. Its essential public and egalitarian nature must be asserted as basic principles through open discussions at the IGF. And these principles can then be interpreted in terms of specific issues that face us today - content issues (protecting and promoting the public domain, network neutrality) infrastructure issues (universal access, public infrastructure, open spectrum, Internet as public good), as well as many other issues.

b. A brief description of why it is important

The Internet, as understood by most of us, is what it is basically because of its egalitarian and public nature. It is important to articulate these fundamentals of the Internet strongly, and use them as the guiding principles to debate and develop global public policies on IG. WSIS was an arena that required quick resolutions for consensus positions. This imperative did not allow sufficient informed debates on developing public policy principles for IG, including characterizing the essential public and egalitarian nature of Internet as the technology that promises a 'better world for everyone'. IGF is the right forum for initiating this process, and taking it forward in a sustained manner. Formulating these 'essentials' of the Internet, and due exposition of their implications in various contexts, will enable better global policy responses to pressing issues including network neutrality and universal access. If these essential principles that define the Internet are not discussed and settled urgently, the Internet is likely to disintegrate, along both political and economic lines. Even if it is going to be a difficult and protracted process, discussing and resolving this is essential and the IGF is the right forum to initiate it.

c. How it is in conformity with the Tunis Agenda of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

The WSIS Declaration of Principles assert "... .. our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life.....".

The earlier mentioned issues of characterizing the global resource of the Internet fall within these overall ideals agreed at the WSIS. Para 31 of the Tunis Agenda declares

"We recognise that Internet governance, carried out according to the Geneva principles, is an essential element for a people-centred, inclusive, development oriented and non-discriminatory Information Society."

d. How it fits within the mandate of the IGF as detailed in para 72;

Discussion on the stated issue is important in order to develop guiding principles for laying down a public policy framework on IG.

(72 a of Tunis Agenda: Discuss public policy issues related to key elements of Internet Governance in order to foster the sustainability, robustness, security, stability and development of the Internet;)

Such discussions will lay the guiding principles for, and help clarify, possible policy responses to important emerging issues of network neutrality, public internet infrastructure, spectrum de-licensing etc.

(72 g: Identify emerging issues, bring them to the attention of the relevant bodies and the general public, and, where appropriate, make recommendations;)

And most importantly, it puts IG discussions in the context of the broad guiding principles adopted at Geneva, and later in Tunis.

(72 i: Promote and assess, on an ongoing basis, the embodiment of WSIS principles in Internet Governance processes;)

e. Who the main actors in the field are, who could be encouraged to participate in the thematic session

All stakeholders – from governments, civil society, business and multi-lateral organizations to those organizations currently involved with IG, like the ICANN, have an important role in discussing these issues. However, more stress needs to be placed on the inclusion of representation from developing countries and (2) the development community without core ICT backgrounds.

f. Last but not least, why should this issue should be addressed in the first annual meeting of the Forum rather than in subsequent ones.

The first phase of Internet development was driven purely by enterprise and innovation, and in many ways by private sector leadership, which served us well. Internet grew mostly autonomous of public policy in this phase.

But now with the power of Internet firmly established, and its economic and political threat to many entrenched interests increasingly obvious, we are into an important phase of development of the Internet where its egalitarian and public nature is increasingly under threat. To stem this trend and possibility, global public policy response in the form of clearly establishing the public and egalitarian nature of the Internet, and laying out its policy consequences, needs to come in urgently.

In the absence of this, it may soon be too late to reclaim the promise of the Internet for developing a “people centred and development oriented information society” as envisioned by the WSIS. As a commentator recently said in the context of the issue of ‘network neutrality’, if urgent policy action is not taken, the situation may soon become intractable, and it will then be like trying to push the ‘genie back into the bottle’.

For any clarification please contact Parminder@ITforChange.net