

The IGF needs diverse participants, not leaders

An appeal to the UN Secretary General to roll back the IGF Leadership Panel

To

The Secretary General,

United Nations, New York.

And

The Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology.

We wish to express our disappointment at the decision of the office of the UN Secretary General (SG) to add a selective and exclusive 'Leadership Panel' (LP) to the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). We see the Leadership Panel as fostering the increased stratification of IGF participants into status-based categories that undermine the Forum's original goal of encouraging bottom-up stakeholder participation.

Although we fully understand and support efforts to make available the outcomes from IGF meetings for policy making bodies, we do not see the need for a dedicated Panel to do that. IGF outcomes that have widespread support will be promoted by members of the community, and there is no need to designate a special set of "leaders" to do this. Creating a LP increases the possibility that its own decisions about what to promote and what to ignore may take precedence over the views emerging from the broader community.

Although the LP's [Terms of Reference](#) claims that "there is no overlap between the functions of the Panel and those of the MAG," we are concerned about the absence of clear role boundaries and the possibility that, over time, the Leadership Panel's remit will expand or encroach on the Multistakeholder Advisory Group.

We believe that this move reflects a fundamental misconception about the nature of the IGF. The IGF website describes the Forum as a way "to bring people together from various stakeholder groups as equals, in discussions on public policy issues relating to the Internet." It is not like other UN bodies that develop norms and soft law. A UN Summit has mandated the IGF to be an institutionalized, standing, participatory sphere for digital policies, which has by practice become self-organizing. It is a unique experiment in the UN system. The attempt by the office of the UN SG to create a LP will

undermine this experiment. IGF's key purpose is to broaden the participatory base of digital policy making. Placing a star cast of leaders into the process, thus focusing attention at the top of the IGF rather than its base, goes against this main objective of the IGF.

As an open space for inclusive discussions on digital policy issues, IGF's purpose is not to forge consensus, which has very different institutional requirements. A policy dialogue forum needs a light touch governance structure, devoted to process rather than substance. It must enable a variety of voices to be heard, including those otherwise marginalized; providing the space and means for people to listen to one another; and keeping the dialogue politically topical and purposeful. As a bottom-up process, the IGF is intended to inform and help policy making. But the IGF is certainly not intended or mandated to have any policy positions of its own. It simply provides knowledge and options for policies for whoever may want to take them.

The formation of an IGF Leadership Panel will incentivize wrong kinds of contests to push one's preference on various policy issues as the 'IGF position', whether explicit or implied. It will take away energy and effort from IGF's real task of providing the best conditions for open, diverse and inclusive policy discussions. One part of the IGF will then become focused on getting their respective policy positions represented as the 'IGF position'. Another part, the big majority, will begin to disengage, not wanting to be seen as legitimizing such a process, or simply because their own view is not getting into 'IGF positions'.

We therefore appeal to the UN Secretary General to take back the decision of setting up an IGF Leadership Panel.

In the interim, we urge the stakeholder groups, especially the civil society and technical community, to refrain from sending any nominations for the IGF Leadership Panel.

We remain available for any dialogue on the issues that we raise.

With regards

– Parminder Jeet Singh, on behalf of IT for Change, India, and Just Net Coalition

– Dr Milton Mueller, on behalf of the Internet Governance Project, Georgia Institute of Technology School of Public Policy.

Copy to: Representatives of various stakeholder groups that may be considering making nominations for the IGF Leadership Panel