Engagement of small-country actors in Internet Governance processes

- Area: ROADMAP FOR THE FURTHER EVOLUTION OF THE INTERNET GOVERNANCE ECOSYSTEM
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Abstract

This submission serves to highlight the prevailing concern of effective participation of small-country actors, and in particular those of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), within Internet Governance processes for which there are considerable policy implications for the socio-economic development and sustainability of such small countries.

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The articulation of a succinct global development agenda leveraging Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) at the turn of the new century proved valuable for the discussions among Small Island Development States (SIDS) on addressing *vulnerability.* Although implicitly, the traditional focus among associations comprising such constituents often excluded new areas and actors in external policy with some reason. It is worth reiterating that both phases of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) underscore the promise that the Information Society holds for the sustainable development of countries, and make mention of special attention to be paid to the particular needs of the citizens of developing countries including SIDS.

The multi-stakeholder governance model founded on clear rules and principles is undoubtedly the key to maintaining a free and open Internet through which all people are free to express, create, communicate and innovate and, more specifically, enjoy the human rights, fundamental freedoms and democratic values that are guaranteed to them

by the Universal Charter on Human Rights. To this end, the policy authority of the State is recognised and required to ensure that balance is afforded to all of its citizens using the Internet. The foundation of Internet economies, and the prosperity of economic constituents are also of vital interest to the State, given that SIDS are susceptible to becoming more *vulnerable* as a consequence of globalisation and increasingly liberalised trade.

Nonetheless, real challenges and complexities arise for small-country actors which are related to the existing multi-stakeholder process for Internet Governance where there is an acute dearth of capacity for the engagement of both state and non-state actors in said process. This results in low or no participation in diverse and sometimes fragmented fora regardless of their decision-making or shaping nature. Non-state actors are particularly challenged from the perspective of influence. In this context, a hybrid situation occurs where despite the existence of strong democratic tradition and practice, governments in SIDS, where appropriate, take the lead on various external engagements that, in turn, benefit all actors.

A two-fold dilemma arises where firstly, *access* achievements are incongruous to wider ICT/Information Society achievements (for which the State is attributable) because of a real organisational shortcoming within governments to address the diverse set of domestic public policy interests that are attendant to infrastructural development. These interests span across the areas of cybercrime, data protection/privacy, and intellectual property to name a few, and even touch upon traditional aspects of economic policy such as competitiveness and innovation. Secondly, the public policy process becomes distorted in that exogenous agents drive its development as opposed to internal conditions.

ICTs have been particularly useful in partially addressing the capacity challenge where training is increasingly being offered through distance learning to sensitise policy makers on the scope and nature of challenges within Internet Governance debates. These efforts appear somewhat disconnected to the diverse spaces through which public policy is addressed. For instance, the venue's distance from capital, duration and sometimes duplicative agendas of meetings put a considerable strain on the already limited resources of SIDS. While remote participation is also acknowledged as a tool for solving this matter, it may be inconsistent across fora and sometimes underdeveloped because of its dependencies and inherent shortcomings in facilitating meaningful participation and exchanges from small-country actors.

In light of the foregoing, there is a call for consideration and meaningful action to be made for developing countries including SIDS, which must be included in future formulae for multi-stakeholder governance.