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*National and Regional Internet
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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>

The national IGF landscape in Latin America and the Caribbean: Mapping the initiatives

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Introduction

The regional Internet Governance Forum of Latin America and the Caribbean (LACIGF) celebrated its 10th event in August 2017. This is a landmark for a developing region that is still striving to connect the remaining 50% of its inhabitants to the internet. In tandem, national internet governance initiatives flourish in the region.

This report, based on a regional mapping study, considers the rise of national IGFs in the LAC region and the factors and mechanisms that influenced their creation. Although drawing on a regional analysis, the preliminary findings have global relevance and significance in understanding the potential factors that drive the creation of forums across the world.

Research features

While the region has many problematic fronts in terms of infrastructure, digital literacy and internet policy more generally, there has been a marked increase in recent years of national IGFs.¹ Although the Tunis Agenda² adopted at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) acknowledged the relevance of national mechanisms for internet governance in 2005, it was only after 2013 that these national IGFs clearly began to emerge as a consistent pattern in the region. Several questions arise from this trend: Why has this only taken place after more than five years after Tunis? Have they been triggered by domestic processes? Has the international context determined their creation? Or, are

they a combination of both national and international forces? In both scenarios – domestic or global influences – it is vital to identify the main factors that underlie the creation of these mechanisms, the current processes and formats for the forum that have been set up, and the consequences they have had for internet governance and policy in their local and regional context more generally.

This report is based on ongoing research focused on mapping different internet governance initiatives in the LAC region. This research aims to provide information on the evolution and status of the internet governance agenda within different countries, including by offering a comparative perspective.³ Due to the lack of systematic information on national internet governance initiatives, the project seeks to promote a comprehensive approach to the issue, based on the existing evidence and literature on the subject. A broader aim of the research is to enhance the value of National and Regional IGF Initiatives (NRIs) and internet governance more generally in national public policy processes and cycles in the region as a means to achieve fairer, more accountable and open societies.

The approach to the overall research is largely empirical, based on both qualitative approaches and quantitative data. The key dimensions that are considered for the mapping exercise are the following:

- Themes: evolution of the internet governance agenda in each country and, from a comparative perspective, in the region.
- The formats of these initiatives, including governance structure, work modality and processes.
- Identifying the resources that sustain these initiatives (human and financial).

¹ Please refer to the report “A mapping of national and regional IGFs” in this edition.

² World Summit on the Information Society. (2005). *Tunis Agenda for the Information Society*. <https://www.itu.int/net/osis/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html>

³ The project is expected to be finished by April 2018 and one of the outputs is to produce a website mapping the different national initiatives in the region. The research addresses the cases of Argentina, Barbados, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Paraguay, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago and Uruguay, since they have already organised their own internet governance initiatives and are all in different stages of formalisation. This research project is supported by the Internet Policy Observatory, University of Pennsylvania.

- Analysis of the impact of the initiatives on internet policy in the country and region.

While we cannot comprehensively address these dimensions in all the national contexts for this current report, we will focus on the origins and evolution of individual initiatives, as well as their agendas and emerging challenges.

The evolution of national initiatives in LAC

Some countries undertake some Internet governance activity to a small extent by running Country Code Top Level Domain (ccTLD) administrations, although quite a number lag behind even in this basic activity. Some also participate in varying degrees in the activities of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers' (ICANN) Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC), attend international forums such as those organized by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and have a regulatory regime for the Internet services sector. Nevertheless these efforts can be characterized as being disparate, uncoordinated and not involving all stakeholders. The national Internet governance regimes in most countries at the moment do not meet the WSIS criteria of being transparent, accountable, democratic and involving the full participation of all stakeholders.⁴

As reflected in the above quotation of one of the members of the global Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) in 2005, at the time of the Tunis Agenda, national mechanisms for internet governance were insufficient and did not comply with the principles underscored by the WSIS process for internet governance processes more generally. Despite this gap, it was only six years after the Tunis Agenda was adopted that a national forum was created in Brazil. But only in 2014 did the region see more initiatives emerging to configure what could be labelled as a trend, as illustrated in Figure 1.

In the case of Brazil, the existence of the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee was already an advanced national mechanism on its own.⁵ The cre-

ation of a forum can be interpreted as an extra step in the consolidation of national internet governance activities. Other national contexts that had already developed a process around internet governance issues were:

- Mexico, with the Mexican Dialogues on Internet Governance initiated in 2013.
- Costa Rica, which had developed the Internet Consultative Committee (CCI) in 2012 and five years later organised its first national IGF.
- Colombia, with the Colombian Bureau of Internet Governance,⁶ a platform for multistakeholder dialogue created in 2013 during the 6th LACIGF.

While Argentina did not have a mechanism that could be compared to these other initiatives, it had organised a pre-IGF event in 2015 to start organising the community for a fully-fledged multistakeholder event in 2016. In other countries in the region, the initiatives were mostly driven by the need to generate a national forum as a multistakeholder space for informed dialogue on internet policy issues, with stakeholders on an equal footing.

In a preliminary analysis of these initiatives,⁷ there are several issues that emerge forcefully. First, the country code top-level domain (ccTLD) of the country is involved in all cases. This fact is related to the historic role played by these organisations in the operation of critical internet resources. In that capacity, they had to abide by global principles for the interoperability of the root zone, and at the same time, to look at the needs of their national communities. In a similar vein, Internet Society (ISOC) chapters⁸ are the national nodes of a larger organisation with the mission to maintain the core architectural and policy principles of the internet, and many country initiatives are sustained and supported by these. In this way, ccTLDs and/or ISOC chapters play a catalysing role.

Another finding is related to a pattern: the first wave of national IGFs emerged clearly in 2014, shortly after the Edward Snowden surveillance revelations and the consequent effects on global internet policy. The impact of these revelations of global, mass cybersurveillance cannot be underestimated, since it forcefully pushed the relevance of internet governance onto the agenda of regional policy makers, and rallied civil society around a fresh urgency

⁴ Siganga, W. (2005). The Case for National Internet Governance Mechanisms. In W. J. Drake (Ed.), *Reforming Internet Governance: Perspectives from the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG)*. New York: The United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force.

⁵ Glaser, H. R., & Canabarro, D. R. (2016). Before and after the WGIG: Twenty years of multistakeholder Internet governance in Brazil. In Drake, W. J. (Ed.), *The Working Group on Internet Governance: 10th anniversary reflections*. Association for Progressive Communications. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/IG_10_Final_o.pdf

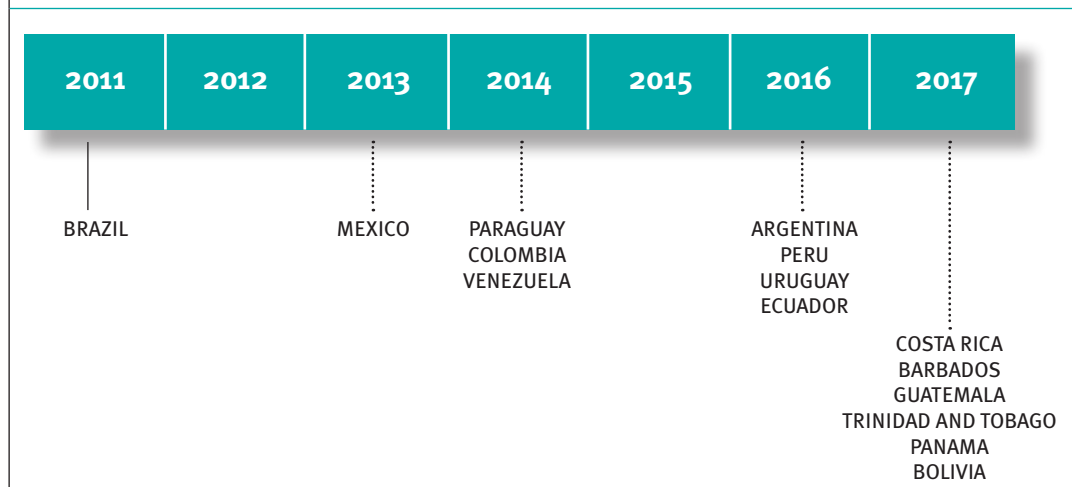
⁶ See the Colombia country report in this edition for more information on the Colombian Bureau of Internet Governance.

⁷ As was stated previously, at the time of publication, the research was still ongoing.

⁸ <https://www.internetsociety.org/chapters>

FIGURE 1.

Timeline: Emergence of national IGFs in LAC



of cause.⁹ For the first time, addressing internet governance was not a niche topic for specialists: it was reflected prominently in the media and it became a public policy issue that demanded the attention of governments. In this context, the organisation of a national IGF made sense as a space to discuss and address issues of concern for many stakeholders, and for wider audiences. In all the cases where a national IGF emerged in 2013-2014, there was a direct interest in beginning to address internet governance issues from the perspective and possibilities of a national IGF as well as with other mechanisms. That need was captured by the Global Multistakeholder Meeting on the Future of Internet Governance (NETmundial) held in 2014.¹⁰

A second wave of national IGF initiatives in the region appeared in 2016-2017. One of the most important explanations for that development is the fact that the organisational aspects become clearer

for the interested stakeholders: as there were more national IGFs in the region, it became easier to share best practices and find guidance. One such best practice is the creation of pre-events in order to set the scene and generate capacity building before the actual national IGF. Another is the development of open consultation mechanisms for the development of the agenda, where input from the community is sought to organise the programme. Many of the regional and sometimes global representatives of ICANN,¹¹ ISOC and the regional registry, the Latin America and Caribbean Network Information Centre (LACNIC),¹² have participated in these events, helping to legitimise them and provide sustainability.

In addition, funding and general support for holding a forum is more readily available. The global internet governance ecosystem is providing more assistance to these initiatives by providing clearer expectations as to the sources of funding now available from organisations such as the Internet Governance Forum Support Association (IGFSA),¹³ ISOC and ICANN, as well as by offering toolkits and recommendations developed by organisations such as ISOC¹⁴ and the National and Regional IGF Initiative group of the IGF Secretariat.¹⁵

⁹ Aguerre, C., & Galperin, H. (2015). *Internet Policy Formation in Latin America: Understanding the links between the national, the regional and the global*. Internet Policy Observatory, Center for Global Communication Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. globalnetpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CarolinaHernan_InternetPolicy_final.pdf

¹⁰ The final statement adopted during the meeting reads as follows: "There is a need to develop multistakeholder mechanisms at the national level owing to the fact that a good portion of Internet governance issues should be tackled at this level. National multistakeholder mechanisms should serve as a link between local discussions and regional and global instances. Therefore a fluent coordination and dialogue across those different dimensions is essential." For further information on the NETmundial process, see: Drake, W. J., & Price, M. (Eds.), *Beyond NETmundial: The Roadmap for Institutional Improvements to the Global Internet Governance Ecosystem*. www.global.asc.upenn.edu/app/uploads/2014/08/BeyondNETmundial_FINAL.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.icann.org>

¹² www.lacnic.net

¹³ www.igfsa.org

¹⁴ ISOC Internet Governance Event Toolkit: <https://www.internetsociety.org/blog/2015/07/isoc-internet-governance-event-toolkit-bringing-the-discussions-to-the-people>

¹⁵ <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/es/content/igf-regional-and-national-initiatives>

Even though the global internet governance regime constitutes a much more open, less formalised and “inchoate” system vis-à-vis others,¹⁶ it is very close to the concept of an institution in its capacity to provide structure, stability and reference values.¹⁷ From the initial evidence of these cases, the international regime – structured in a mesh of institutional actors and policy processes – has managed to exert its influence by promoting a framework that has “streamlined” these initiatives to conform to these expectations in terms of format and overall objectives.

Despite these effects from the international environment, one can see strong variations from country to country, related with how these national forums become integrated with the national policy environment and local institutional culture. In addition, there are distinct differences among them. One of the most salient is related to whether they are once-off annual events, or whether they manage to become part of a broader mechanism, as is the case with Brazil, Colombia and Costa Rica. Nevertheless, while mainstreamed in those countries, the national IGF is only one of the initiatives dealing with internet governance.

Themes and issues

While the format and organisational settings of these initiatives are vital aspects, since they tend to show their adherence to and way of materialising the principles and best practices enshrined in the discourse of the internet governance regime, the issues that are addressed in their respective agendas are key dimensions for a comparative analysis, as they present the substantive element of each individual forum. As previously stated, most of these initiatives include a consultation period on the issues to be addressed at the forum, in order to reflect the interests of the community.

While the issue of *internet infrastructure and the digital divide* – the “digital divide” not just from a material point of view, but also including intangible dimensions of this concept, such as digital literacy – is undoubtedly a key theme which is far from being solved in the region, it is by no means the main topic in most of these forums as one might expect in a developing region. Sometimes these issues are framed more generally under sustainable development and human rights.

Cybersecurity and surveillance and the rights that are affected by these issues have become a common theme in most of these events. The effect of international scandals and attacks on fundamental human rights should not be underestimated. Sometimes these discussions have a grounding in the national context, but in other cases these are topics that set the scene regarding what is expected by a national community in the policy-making process around these issues in a country.

A more recent example that has spread widely among these forums in the last two years is that of issues related to the concept of the “*digital economy*”, which featured prominently in Peru, Panama and Trinidad and Tobago’s IGF events in 2017, as well as in Argentina’s first and second events. This theme highlights opportunities that the countries should seize and challenges they must face in order to reap the benefits of pervasive digitalisation in the different productive sectors.

Lastly, another pattern seen in the agenda of both national IGFs and the global one is related to the meta-governance dimension.¹⁸ It is based on the normative perspective that guides the mechanisms of interaction among the stakeholders, which also implies reflecting on the rules and mechanisms within each initiative. This takes the shape of a special session, such as “Taking Stock”, which assesses the main takeaways of the processes as well as evaluates the challenges lying ahead, which is a vital aspect for their development.

Emerging challenges

Probably one of the most pressing challenges for these initiatives is their impact on the wider policy-making environment, both at the national but also at the international level. While most stakeholders involved in the organisation of these initiatives are aware of the difficulties in tracing a direct linkage between a national IGF and a policy outcome, there is pressure to show results. This is more evident in the case of those forums which are annual once-off activities rather than sustained efforts with regular interactions throughout the year. If there is a perception that these events have no consequence in the policy-making process or in the ecosystem more generally, the incentives for participation tend to decrease. One of the most interesting problems for these initiatives, which was also part of an exercise conducted during

16 Raymond, M., & DeNardis, L. (2015). Multistakeholderism: Anatomy of an Inchoate Global Institution. *International Theory*, 7(3), 572–616. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971915000081>

17 Peters, B. G. (2005). Gobernanza y Burocracia Pública: ¿Nuevas formas de democracia o nuevas formas de control? *Foro Internacional*, XLV(4), 585–598.

18 Peters, B. G. (2010). *Governing in the Shadows*. Berlin: DFG Research Center (SFB) 700; and Koolman, J. (2004). Gobernar en gobernanza. *Instituciones y Desarrollo*, 16, 171–194.

the global IGF in 2014, is to identify and establish different criteria to evaluate the success of these initiatives.

Another threat facing these initiatives is the continuity and predictability of the work in the near and middle future, as well as the sustainability of intersessional work between annual events. These initiatives rely on voluntary work in most cases and unless there is a formal secretariat – which is usually sustained by either a ccTLD or a local ISOC chapter – the organisation of these initiatives tends to become more difficult. For example, in the case of the Mexican Dialogues on Internet Governance, there has been a mechanism in place for multi-stakeholder work on internet governance issues for nearly five years, but it has only managed to organise two national IGFs.

A major challenge for these projects is to attract new voices and new leaders. There is a risk

of “elitisation”¹⁹ and closure among the groups that participate in these initiatives and which have become more clearly defined as an “epistemic community”, understood as a network of professionals with recognised experience and competence in a certain policy field. This community shares principles, norms and beliefs, notions of validity and causality, as well as policy objectives,²⁰ which promote a closure around the groups. A major indicator that these initiatives tend to be self-referenced is that the same people tend to appear in these programmes. While this is certainly relevant to promote consistency, identity and a common mission, it is also problematic that these initiatives might exclude new perspectives and voices from joining these debates, which could be harmful for innovation, particularly considering the rapid technological progress concerning the internet and the ever-increasing policy implications that it carries.

¹⁹ Chenou, J.-M. (2014). *The Role of Transnational Elites in Shaping the Evolving Field of Internet Governance*. PhD dissertation, Université de Lausanne.

²⁰ Haas, P. M. (1992). Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination. *International Organization*, 46(1).