**Asia Pacific Regional Internet Governance Forum (APrIGF)**

**Session Report**

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| **Session Name:** ***Civil Society in Internet Governance/Policymaking (C5), 20 July 2012*** |
| **Moderator:** **Yap Swee Seng** (Executive Director, Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, FORUM-ASIA) |
| **Discussion Questions:**  Process level:   1. Why is civil society largely underrepresented in various processes in Internet governance? 2. Does the current multi-stakeholder model of the IGF provide a sufficient platform for inclusive and meaningful civil society engagements in Internet governance? 3. Does the current inclusion of civil society organizations in the IGF adequately address the issue of representation beyond professionalized NGOs? 4. Are civil society organizations in Asia fully utilizing the available platforms of engagements in Internet governance?   Outcome level:   1. Do these multi-stakeholder dialogues at the regional and international levels affect the realities at the national level? What are the concrete ways forward to move beyond these multi-stakeholder dialogues? 2. Are there best practices of engagements by civil society with governments, international organizations, and/or the private sector at the national, regional and/or international levels that the various stakeholders in Asia can learn from? |
| **Panelist: Pirongrong Ramasoota** (Director, Media Policy Center, Head of Department of Journalism & Information, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand)  **Summary:**  Pirongrong listed several factors that have led to the underrepresentation of civil society in Internet governance:   * Lack of information/awareness on forums relating to Internet governance; * The structure, functioning and working methods of the IGF; * Lack of financial resources to attend regional and international meetings on Internet governance * Lack of technical capacity on ICT, which has caused a barrier for participation; and * Weakness in national and regional policy processes and institutions.   On the structure of the IGF, Pirongrong noted that the IGF indeed has several strengths, including that it allows for equal participation through the model of multi-stakeholder dialogue. However, this same current model of multi-stakeholder dialogue has also proven to be inhibitive to the participation of civil society. For example, the IGF has been and remains merely a “talk shop” with a weak mandate and this, according to some, rendered it an ineffective forum to participate in. Coupled with the limited financial resources, this has led to many civil society groups seeing the IGF as a forum that is not worth investing in.  Pirongrong also noted that professionalized NGOs have the competitive edge (especially in financial terms) over other civil society groups in participating in the IGF, leaving most grassroots civil society groups largely underrepresented in the IGF.  Finally, Pirongrong also stressed that the IGF has sometimes failed to promote open discussions despite its “multi-stakeholder dialogue” approach, citing the example of the IGF in Egypt in 2009, where a civil society event was marred by the taking down of banners, which had apparent reference to China, by UN officials. |
| **Panelist:** **Shahzad Ahmad** (Bytes for All, Pakistan) (remote participation via Skype)  **Summary:**  Shahzad noted that resources and capacity remain a major challenge in civil society’s engagement in Internet governance/policymaking. According to Shahzad, many in the civil society do not consider Internet governance as their priority, as compared to the more “traditional issues”.  Shahzad also commented on the process of the IGF, which according to him is only good on paper. He stressed that the IGF process has been nominated by NGOs from the North, and civil society participation from the rest of the global South, especially non-professionalized civil society groups, is still minimal. While remote participation may be a solution, it is also sometimes not feasible (oftentimes due to technological challenges), citing that his own remote participation from Pakistan is difficult due to power outages in Pakistan.  Furthermore, he also highlighted the issue of the increasing national security discourse particularly by states, who assert that the Internet may be harmful for national security. As a result, according to Shahzad, there is a “balkanization of cyberspace” in Asia.  Another point stressed by Shahzad is the lack of participation of governments in the Internet governance debate, including in the IGF processes. As a result, the IGF has not brought much impact to the national level. In this sense, the multi-stakeholder model of the IGF has failed, or at least not worked in a way it should have. Shahzad thus noted the importance for civil society to also engage in other mechanisms to discuss issues relating to Internet governance, including the UN Human Rights Council and the ASEAN, as well as discussions surrounding the SAARC.  Finally, Shahzad stressed the importance of engaging with “traditional” civil society movements who largely do not consider the Internet a priority in their work. |
| **Panelist:** **Sam DuPont** (Freedom House)  **Summary:**  Sam DuPont observed that while civil society groups (including human rights NGOs) are permitted to participate at the IGF, the treatment of human rights issues at the IGF remains highly problematic. DuPont pointed out that discussions at the IGF do not generally focus on issues of human rights. He recommended that there should be greater focus on human rights and issues related to socioeconomic development in Internet governance discussions.  DuPont also noted that most relevant policies – for most part – are at the national level. Furthermore, the IGF has no treaty power, and therefore cannot force political will upon governments to improve policies and practices related to issues of human rights and socioeconomic development in Internet governance.  He also examined the effectiveness of civil society even at the national level, by taking the SOPA/PIPA protests as an example. DuPont pointed out that the SOPA/PIPA protests did not get much attention initially despite campaigns by several civil society groups. However, attention really picked up when Google and Wikipedia blacked out in protest against the bills.  Finally, DuPont pointed out that it is important to re-examine the effectiveness of the current IGF model of dialogues, and suggested that other models can also be utilized for discussions on Internet governance, citing the UN Human Rights Council as one example. |
| **Panelist:** **Sean Ang** (Southeast Asian Centre for e-Media, SEACeM)  **Summary:**  Ang talked about the language of participation in the IGF, which is oftentimes elitist and technical. He further elaborated on other factors that has inhibited a larger representation of civil society in Internet governance, namely:   1. Lack of resources; 2. Lack of time to analyze complex technical issues; and 3. Current remote participation being limited to a few participants only, and could be further inhibited by technical problems.   Ang offered three possible models for improved civil society participation, namely:   1. E-ranking model, where Internet users submit Internet-governance issues to be prioritized and ranked according to its popularity; 2. E-debate model, involving online debates on opposing views of particular issues related to Internet governance; and 3. “Facebook page” model, involving discussions through comments – largely based on the format currently used on Facebook.   He further pointed out the problem of the non-implementation of recommendations even by the organizers of the IGF, where previous years’ recommendations are not implemented by the IGF organizers. He thus recommended that civil society’s recommendations need to be clear and specific. |

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| **Summary of Discussion** |
| **Issues which reached a common view**  On factors that has led to the underrepresentation of civil society in Internet governance:   1. Financial constraints of civil society organizations; 2. Internet as an issue of “low-priority” for many “traditional” civil society organizations; 3. Ineffectiveness of the IGF as a forum to affect positive changes at the national level; 4. The lack of government participation, which has inhibited meaningful dialogues between governments and civil society at the IGF; and 5. The current focus on technical discussions at the IGF, largely subordinating the issues of human rights and socioeconomic development. |
| **Issues where opinion varied**  The following issues were left as open ended questions, with a variety of recommendations (listed in the next section, below):   1. On what model of participation should be adopted to improve the multi-stakeholder dialogue model of the IGF. Sean Ang offered three different models (see above); 2. On how to ensure greater prioritization of Internet governance-related issues among civil society organizations; and 3. On how to ensure greater participation of governments in the IGF processes (some suggestions are included in the next section, below). |
| **Summary of Recommendations/Suggestions**   1. Remote participation may increase civil society participation, but it also has its weaknesses. As such, it has to be improved. Several different models were suggested (See Sean Ang’s presentation); 2. The IGF processes should be bottom-up, and the space for agenda setting should be widened to also include civil society in the process, using ICT tools such as BarCamp; 3. Different levels of governments – local, regional, etc. – must be encouraged to participate in discussions on Internet governance. In relation to this, the host government of IGF should have more participation than it currently does; 4. More work should be done between annual IGFs, and at the national-level in engaging national governments since it is at the national level that hard laws are made and have the most real impacts on the Internet; 5. Civil society should engage governments on equal footing at Internet governance discussions and processes; and 6. More financial resources should be allocated to support the participation of civil society organizations in regional and international Internet governance meetings. |