

COMMENTS ON THE PROCESS TOWARDS ENHANCED COOPERATION PROVIDED TO THE UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

15 November 2010

The Internet Society is pleased to respond to the invitation by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs to make a submission to the United Nations' consultation on the process towards enhanced cooperation called for in the Tunis Agenda[1].

The Internet Society (ISOC) is a nonprofit organization founded in 1992 to provide leadership in Internet related standards, education, and policy. ISOC is a global organization with offices in Reston, Virginia, USA, and Geneva, Switzerland, dedicated to ensuring the open development, evolution, and use of the Internet for the benefit of people throughout the world. Building from the base of its technical roots, ISOC has engaged actively with governments, the private sector, civil society and relevant international organizations for many years. As part of its mission, ISOC offers partnership and advice in the development of approaches to international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet that will encourage rather than restrict its potential for economic and social innovation. This contribution is intended to share with UNDESA some of the lessons ISOC has learned in more than 15 years of this activity.

First, we have learned that multi-stakeholder cooperation is essential, not an option. The Internet has grown from a small research network to become a vital link among the world's peoples and a major force advancing human freedom, creativity, as well as social and economic development around the globe. But the Internet is a complex system that is still evolving rapidly. The Internet is a network of networks working cooperatively together designed to operate without centralized control or governance mechanisms. As a matter of design, the intelligence of the network is predominantly at the edges, with the users. The users' activity and equipment decide what information goes where, and what it will do when it gets there. This model has proven to be flexible, adaptable and responsive to users' needs, and is itself the source of the tremendous innovation the Internet has created. But, there is no doubt that the Internet model presents a challenge to traditional governance players and mechanisms that have evolved to regard central control as the norm.

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[1] specifically paragraphs 69, 70 and 71.

Adding to the challenge, the Internet is inherently global, so it can operate trans-jurisdictionally as easily as within national boundaries. And as bits of information trigger activity at their end points in different jurisdiction, the cultures and institutions at the two end points of the transmission do not always share an agreement on what is acceptable and what is not (with some obvious exceptions). While this may be true, it is evident that the challenge is not unique to the Internet.

In practical terms, what does the Internet model mean? There are several aspects that need to be understood as background to an informed discussion of enhanced cooperation. First, the Internet is a network of networks, characterized by shared global ownership without central control. Second, it is now governed primarily through the engagement of all relevant stakeholders in many organizations. People and organizations from many backgrounds and with different expertise are involved: researchers, business people, civil society actors, people from academia and from governments. This diversity is key to the model's success. Third, the development of the Internet is based on open standards, which themselves are openly developed. Participation is based on knowledge and need rather than formal membership in the Internet organizations (another benefit as it encourages broad participation and works to reduce any barriers). And finally, the Internet model is also based on openly developed and widely supported key principles (such as the "end-to-end principle" which means that the job of the Internet is simply to carry bits of information from originator to receiver without modifying them while in the network).

In short, the Internet model is an inter-related set of open, bottom-up, freely accessible, public, multi-stakeholder processes for both technology and policy development. The Internet truly functions as an ecological system[2]. As we know, ecological systems are composed of intricate, interdependent and sometimes undetected interrelationships. They are not easily taken apart and reassembled, especially if you want the system to work well in the future. And it does work well now, precisely because of the effective integration among the stakeholders, and its continuing openness to participation and developing new linkages as required.

The Internet model has served the Internet and its users well. For the Internet to continue to be an engine of growth, creativity, commerce and social development, it is vital that the model is understood and encouraged so it will continue to function.

We believe it is important that the stakeholders in the WSIS process who expressed their desire for enhanced cooperation in the realm of Internet governance become acquainted with the deeply cooperative mechanisms that now exist, and continue to evolve to make the Internet work as a responsive and responsible system.

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[2] Please see: http://www.isoc.org/internet/issues/ecosystem.shtml

With this vital information as background, the Internet Society believes that since the 2005 WSIS, enhanced cooperation has become an active force in the field of Internet governance and international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet. As we have emphasized in our Annual Reports on Enhanced Cooperation[3], the Internet Society and other Internet organizations have increased their outreach to governments and other relevant stakeholders. These efforts take three forms. First, we have taken steps to engage with governments and intergovernmental organizations, including official involvement with UN ECOSOC, ITU, UNESCO, several UN Economic Commissions, WIPO, OECD, APEC, the African Union, CITEL, and others[4]. Second, we have encouraged governments and intergovernmental organizations to become involved with the Internet Society and other Internet organizations where standards and policies relevant to Internet governance are developed. And third, we have extended our efforts to provide unbiased, technically-sound briefings on a number of international public policy issues related to the Internet, which have been offered to governments and all stakeholders through our participation in conferences as well as on our web site.[5]

Many governments and international organizations have said that they appreciate our involvement through these avenues, and we are proud of our contribution to achieving the goal of enhanced cooperation. However, we believe there is room for improvement. Our experience shows that many governments have yet to fully act on the call to join in "the process towards enhanced cooperation involving all relevant organizations and all stakeholders in their respective roles," as called for in paragraph 71 of the Tunis Agenda. Yet we believe the progress achieved so far should be cause for optimism.

We also believe there is a significant role for the agencies of the United Nations system to continue "assisting the process towards enhanced cooperation in order to enable Governments on an equal footing to carry out their roles and responsibilities in respect of international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet but not of the day-to-day technical and operational matters that do not impact upon those issues".

That role should start with capacity building. The UN agencies have tremendous resources at their command, including the deep respect of Member States and other stakeholders, that can be used to spread knowledge about the Internet, the Internet model, and means of participating in existing Internet governance processes. As a practical suggestion, the Internet Society recommends that UNDESA could take the lead on publishing a series of best practice reports from which governments and other stakeholders can learn. The material for these

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[3] http://www.isoc.org/isoc/conferences/wsis/

[4] http://www.isoc.org/pubpolpillar/community/

[5] http://www.isoc.org/pubpolpillar/governance/globalengage.shtml

reports should be drawn from the extensive information provided by the relevant organizations in their past annual performance reports to the United Nations.

Second, it is vital for the UN agencies and Member States to reach out very broadly to all relevant stakeholders to ensure there are genuine opportunities to contribute to developing appropriate public policy on issues related to the Internet. Only genuine cooperation will ensure that all of the world's people have access to the benefits of Internet access, which we know encourages innovation and growth. It is vital to recall that cooperation is a two-way street; it is the process of working together toward the same end. The Internet Society and other Internet organizations have taken up the challenge of assisting the process towards enhanced cooperation by reaching out to governments. We encourage governments to accelerate their engagement in those processes. We also look forward to receiving and accepting reciprocal invitations from governments and international institutions to assist in the development of informed mechanisms to address international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet.

The Internet Society respectfully submits these comments to the United Nations' consultation on the process towards enhanced cooperation. We look forward to continuing our participation in the process as it develops in future.

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About the Internet Society

The Internet Society (ISOC) is a non-profit organization founded in 1992 to provide leadership in Internet related standards, education, and policy. ISOC is the organizational home of the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the Internet's premier technical standards body. With offices in Washington, D.C., and Geneva, Switzerland, it is dedicated to ensuring the open development, evolution, and use of the Internet for the benefit of people throughout the world. For more information see http://InternetSociety.org