



The Road to Rio and Beyond: Results-based Management of the UN Internet Governance Forum

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“If you don't know where you are going, you might not get there.”

– Berra (2002)

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) was given a five-year charter by the United Nations General Assembly in 2005. In 2010 the Forum's effectiveness in implementing the objectives of the World Summit on the Information Society will be assessed by the Assembly. This paper argues that the road to the 2007 meeting of the Internet Governance Forum in Rio de Janeiro and beyond must be paved with effective management practices. Results-based management principles employed elsewhere in reform of United Nations agency practices provide that base.

Like all United Nations programs, the IGF should be subject to results-based management (RBM), in which a program is accountable for delivering results to its stakeholders. The RBM approach is now central to all discussions of accountability in the United Nations system. The progress of the IGF from Athens to Rio and beyond could benefit from the same discipline that is being required of all other UN system programs. (Joint Inspection Unit, 2004, Mathiason, 2004)

The essence of results-based management is that an end-state – a result – is expressed as the objective of the program. Then the intermediate things that have to happen to achieve that objective are set out. When this planning is done properly, progress can be measured and results assessed.

Granted, the Forum differs from a typical United Nations program, because its main function is to foster discussion. But discussions in the Forum are expected to have consequences, namely, to improve our understanding of the issues and to advance negotiations in other forums. The Forum can therefore define its expected results and use the RBM approach to determine whether those results have been achieved.

Where should IGF be in 2010?

What result is the IGF supposed to achieve by 2010? Defining where to arrive is the first element of good results-based planning. The Tunis Agenda in

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its paragraph 72 describes the mandate of the IGF as activities (“to discuss”, “to examine”, “to assess”) rather than as end-states (what would happen as a result of the activities). However, implicit in the list of activities is the following end state:

- The discussions should help narrow down the issues to those that would require action by States and/or other stakeholders in the appropriate formal decision-making forums
- Interrelationships between different Internet governance issues have been explored and outlined
- New, emerging issues have been connected with old ones, including those issues that arise because of technological changes.

This end-state does not imply that decisions have been made, nor an agreement on actions to take. However, as is well-known in international negotiations, binding decisions cannot be reached in any forum unless there is a clear view, generally understood and agreed, of the facts about a given situation and their implications. IGF discussions should therefore lead to rough consensus about the facts underlying the basic issues of Internet governance and a general agreement on the implications of those facts. That rough consensus could enable agreements in formal institutions.

An element of this end-state is that the experiment of creating a forum in which both State and non-State stakeholders can participate will set a precedent for democratizing an international area of concern to them all. The process is expected to promote transparency and create a forum considered by all to be a legitimate place to debate issues, debates that would not have the same legitimacy if they were held elsewhere. In that respect, it could help achieve the result suggested by Florini (2005).

How can IGF get there?

The core of results-based management is obtaining what are called “outcomes.” An outcome is a necessary intermediate end-state that will contribute to achieving an objective. Outcomes are causally influenced by a program’s output. In the case of the IGF, outcomes can be seen generally as the extent to which issues are successfully assessed, focused and narrowed, as well as the extent to which new technological developments are related to existing issues. These outcomes should flow from the discussion process (for which the outputs are the reports of the discussion.)

In fact, the main sessions and workshops that will take place in Athens are supposed to express outcomes in their reports. If they do, they will have been successful. However, there should be a general outcome of narrowing the issue focus for the next meeting in Rio in 2007. And an outcome in Rio will to narrow the issue focus for India in 2008. Thus, the Athens process should

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identify and narrow the issues to those that need even more in-depth assessment and discussion at Rio. There are two types of outcomes, in that model. The first is the extent to which discussion in the main sessions, supported by the workshops, have clarified the issues they examined. The second is this general narrowing of focus.

The specific outcomes for Rio and beyond can be defined after Athens, on the basis of the results observed there. However, there should be clear process outcomes from Athens itself. These would include:

1. Whether the discussions in the main sessions and workshops lead to an agreed narrowing of issues on which to focus;
2. Whether all stakeholders are satisfied with the process; and
3. Whether rough consensus is reached on any of the main issues considered at Athens.

The extent to which these outcomes are achieved at Athens will determine in large measure whether successive forum meetings will be successful.

What activities will get IGF there?

The Athens meeting is atypical of those that will follow because there has been very little time to prepare strong substantive analyses of issues to be considered. Ideally, analysis of the factual questions about issues and how they can be best approached should be set out in advance as a way of narrowing the focus. This has not been possible. However, Athens can be seen as defining the baseline from which progress can be measured. The four main sessions and 35 workshops that will be held were proposed because they reflected what was thought to be the range of issues with which the Forum should be concerned. They have had very little preparation other than the efforts made by their sponsors to define their scope.

In subsequent Forum meetings, substantive preparation is both possible and desirable. If the Forum is to achieve its 2010 objective, the preparations should enable an in-depth discussion and assessment of each issue. Preparations should include review of intergovernmental practice, technological developments, evidence of cause and effect relationships in policies and practices. The preparations should mobilize the expertise of all stakeholders (governments, the private sector, civil society and academia). Each Forum meeting should have clear predefined expected outcomes against which progress can be assessed, including process outcomes like those suggested above. Activities should be planned with these outcomes in mind.

The IGF has a light structure, meaning that it has a technical rather than substantive secretariat. Many of the usual United Nations substantive secretariat functions will have to be performed by volunteers from various stakeholder groups.¹ For them to do so, the issue content to be taken up by Rio and subsequent meetings should be known as soon as possible. If this could be done at Athens, it would allow almost a year of preparatory activities. Each month that this is delayed will reduce the effectiveness of preparations.

Some procedural considerations

An RBM framework implies that expected results are written down so that they can be monitored and evaluated. The governance structure of the IGF currently consists of its technical secretariat and the Multi-stakeholder Advisory Group (MAG), whose term finishes after Athens. While light, the structure can be used to produce a plan that is acceptable to all stakeholders.

To start the process, the organizers should reserve time at the first forum meeting for discussing possible outcomes. This might be done at the "Taking Stock and Way Forward Session". A draft with suggestions could be prepared on-site. The output of that meeting on the last day would be a report on the meeting.

The MAG, or its successor, should adopt a plan early in 2007 to cover the period to 2010. The plan should be based on the report produced at the end of the Athens meeting, proposals from the Secretariat and contributions from interested stakeholders.

Having a clear sense of where the IGF is going and how it plans to get there would help ensure that it arrives successfully.

¹See our earlier paper John Mathiason, "The Distributed Secretariat: Making the Internet Governance Forum Work" (May 17, 2006). Internet Governance Project. Paper IGP06-002. Available at <http://internetgovernance.org/pdf/distrib-sec.pdf>

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