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Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)*



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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>

Asia Pacific Regional Internet Governance Forum (APrIGF)

DIVERSITY MADE VISIBLE: THE ASIA PACIFIC REGIONAL INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUM

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Introduction

Since the first Asia Pacific Regional Internet Governance Forum (APrIGF) in 2010 in Hong Kong, the process has grown in many ways – in terms of awareness, participation, and governance issues pertinent to the region. The last eight years have seen the APrIGF overcome issues of visibility, diversity in participation, as well as funding for the hosting of the annual event. It has also become more organised by having a formal structure.

While the process started late compared to other regional IGFs, Asia Pacific has had its unique achievements. It takes pride in being the first regional IGF to have had the participation of the youth since its inception. It is also the first to come up with a synthesis document that aims to identify common internet governance interests in the region.

But just like any other process, organising the annual APrIGF has its challenges. As more people in the region get connected to the internet, the challenge is how to include and engage new users and “industry” players, and how to make the government listen to them. There needs to be more meaningful participation of a wider array of groups and stakeholders in the process, so that their needs can be articulated, heard and addressed, and so that the voices of the marginalised, including those who are not physically present in the forum, can be heard as well.

The many sessions at the APrIGF generate a lot of meaningful discussions and recommendations, but these should not remain on paper. The APrIGF, as an established body, can and should play a role in encouraging Asia Pacific governments to participate in internet governance initiatives, both regionally and in their own countries; it should encourage governments to listen, and to act on issues of common concern.

Policy, economy and political background

The Asia Pacific region, with over 4.5 billion people in 2016, is home to nearly 60% of the world’s population.¹ It is a very diverse region in terms of culture, religion, language and politics. The region has seven of the world’s ten most populous countries, and also some of the world’s smallest island nations in the Pacific.

The region generated two-fifths of the global gross domestic product (GDP)² in 2015.³ However, there are also marked disparities across economies in the region. For instance, in terms of 2011 purchasing power parity (PPP), Singapore’s per capita GDP is 44 times that of the Solomon Islands. Asia Pacific is one of the regions that was able to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of halving its poverty rate between 1990 and 2015, but it is also where 330 million people are still living on less than USD 1.90 (according to 2011 PPP) a day. Approximately 1.2 billion people in the region live below the poverty line of USD 3.10 (2011 PPP) a day.⁴

Broadband internet subscriptions in the Asia Pacific increased in 45 out of 47 reporting economies between 2000 and 2015, but 58% of the region’s population remains unconnected to the internet.⁵ Because of this, when we speak about connecting the next billion, the Asia Pacific is where a large chunk of them would be coming from.

Today, Asia has the strongest growing demand for internet addresses in the world. This means that more and more people in Asia are using the internet. In contrast to North America and Europe, demand for the internet in Asia is not only growing, but also growing at an accelerating rate. In fact, in the first quarter of 2011, Asia released the last block of IPv4 addresses available in its pool.⁶ This

1 www.unescap.org/our-work/social-development/population-dynamics

2 In 2011 purchasing power parity (PPP).

3 Asian Development Bank. (2016). Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2016. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/204091/ki2016.pdf>

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Vaughan-Nichols, S. (2011, 14 April). It’s official: Asia’s just run out of IPv4 Addresses. *ZDNet*. www.zdnet.com/article/its-official-asias-just-run-out-of-ipv4-addresses

is largely due to the unprecedented fixed and mobile network growth in the region.⁷

As markets in the region continue to grow, its access to the internet cannot be taken for granted. Internet governance therefore becomes more relevant.

Coming together as stakeholders

The creation of a regional IGF in Asia had its beginnings during the global IGF held at Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt in 2009. Edmon Chung from DotAsia⁸ recalls that right after the event, there were already general talks about having an IGF in Asia.⁹ In particular, he cites Ang Peng Hwa of Singapore,¹⁰ who started talking to people about the formation of a regional IGF in Asia. During that time, there were already parallel forums happening in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and in Africa, but not in Asia.¹¹

On his way back to Hong Kong from Egypt, Chung found himself on the same flight as the Chief Information Officer of the Hong Kong government. As they had an eight-hour layover in Amman, he took the opportunity to convince the government official to host the first regional IGF in Asia. The government official agreed and preparations for the first Asia Pacific Regional IGF were shortly underway. Communications with Peng Hwa, Paul Wilson from the Asia Pacific Network Information Center (APNIC),¹² Rajnesh Singh from the Asia Pacific chapter of the Internet Society (ISOC) and a few others started the ball rolling,¹³ and the following year, in 2010, the first Asia Pacific Regional IGF Roundtable was held in Hong Kong, alongside the Hong Kong IGF and the Youth IGF.¹⁴

The first APRIGF attracted more than 200 participants, and aimed to widen awareness and involvement in internet governance by holding activities and meetings to discuss issues pertinent

to the use and development of the internet in the Asia Pacific region.¹⁵ From then on, the process grew from strength to strength in the region.

Issues and interests, roles and their reviews

The APRIGF practises the multistakeholder approach. All stakeholder groups operate on an equal footing, and each has a role to play.

Issues discussed at the first APRIGF were more of a technical nature, although there were also non-technical discussions on cybersecurity and the use of technology for disaster recovery. This was a reflection of the interests of the various stakeholders who were actively engaged at the onset. In subsequent years, submissions from the stakeholders defined the theme and topics for the APRIGF.

Governments have an important role in helping facilitate access to the internet for their constituents. Governments implement legal reforms needed for continuous development of the internet in the region. Nevertheless, a common observation in IGFs both at the global and regional levels is the lacklustre participation of governments. The IGF has no significant impact at the national level if governments are not present to listen.

It is usually civil society that brings the issue of human rights to IGFs. However, it was observed that while civil society groups are present at IGFs, there is not enough focus on human rights issues in the discussions.¹⁶ Gender issues are also not that popular.

An annual synthesis document, an output of the regional IGF that was started in 2015, identifies items of common interest and relevance to internet governance in the Asia Pacific region that emerged during the forum discussions. It contains inputs from the participants at the APRIGF, including those contributions made through remote participation. This document is presented to the global IGF, and can also be used at international forums. The inputs can be used by all stakeholders to influence their governments at the national and local levels. Though not representative of the region, the document is nevertheless presumed to be able to help drive active participation in the IGF, given that the perspectives of stakeholders are documented and shared widely.

According to recent APRIGF synthesis documents, common issues of interest in the region

7 According to statistics from the International Telecommunication Union, in Asia and the Pacific, 28 of 45 reporting economies had mobile phone subscription rates exceeding 95 subscriptions per 100 people while 26 economies had mobile phone subscription rates higher than 100 subscriptions per 100 people in 2015. Asian Development Bank. (2016). Op. cit.

8 <https://www.dot.asia>

9 Interview with Edmon Chung on 27 July 2017.

10 Prof. Peng Hwa is from the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

11 rigf.asia/about.html

12 Aside from being active in the different sessions of the APRIGF, APNIC has been providing funding support to the APRIGF from the time it started in 2010 to the present. Wilson has also served as chair of the Multistakeholder Steering Group for many years. See <https://www.apnic.net> for more information about APNIC.

13 Interviews with Edmon Chung and Ang Peng Hwa on 27 July 2017.

14 Since then, the APRIGF has been held annually, in Singapore (2011), Japan (2012), South Korea (2013), India (2014), Macao SAR (2015), Taiwan (2016) and Thailand (2017).

15 See the Hong Kong Conference Report at rigf.asia/documents/reports/Conference_Report_APRIGF_2010_Hong_Kong.pdf

16 See the section on "Civil Society in Internet Governance/Policy-Making" in the Tokyo Conference Report at rigf.asia/documents/reports/Conference_Report_APRIGF_2012_Tokyo.pdf

include continuing efforts to bring the next billion users online, security issues, human rights, the multistakeholder model, the digital economy and trade, and the future of the internet and how it will impact on the region. Most of these are not different from the issues that are discussed in other regions and at the global level.

As interesting and important as internet governance is, participation in IGFs remains limited because of certain barriers. The language of participation at internet governance spaces may turn off some individuals and groups from joining. Previous participants have noted that it is elitist and technical, which requires technical capacity and time to analyse complex technical issues.¹⁷ Other factors that inhibit wider representation of civil society in internet governance include lack of awareness and information on forums related to internet governance, lack of resources to attend regional and global processes, and the fact that remote participation is limited to a few participants and could be further inhibited by technical problems.

There are still many stakeholders excluded from the process. The big or professionalised civil society organisations remain the usual participants, since they have the means to acquire funds to attend, while those belonging to the grassroots are left out of the discussion. How do we bring them to the table? Local IGFs may be a venue for grassroots groups, but they should be made aware of the relevance of internet governance to their work, and advocacy is needed so that they are encouraged to engage in the process.

Another critique about regional and national IGF initiatives is that they are just “talk shops”. But these rich discussions and interactions have their use. The very existence of these initiatives encourages multistakeholder discussions on emerging issues. They contribute to identifying solutions to the problems generated by the issues discussed, which can then influence and inform the policy-making processes that take place within national and regional decision-making bodies.

One of the good practices of the APriGF is the inclusion of a Youth IGF.¹⁸ A regional Youth IGF has been a part of the annual APriGF from the start. Initially, most of the youth participants were from Hong Kong, but in recent years others from the

region have joined in. In 2016, more than 20 youth delegates from the Philippines participated in the Youth IGF at their own expense. By 2017, a scholarship grant was made available for the participation of selected youth delegates from the different countries. The youth bring the voices and views of digital natives to the IGF – those born and raised in a society where internet access was a given. The Youth IGF is also a capacity-building space to prepare young people for future engagement in other similar forums, including the global IGF.

From local to regional, from regional to local

While there are common issues of interest among the countries in the region, there are also country-specific concerns that are raised at the APriGF. As IGFs are open and inclusive, local themes can be proposed for panel sessions. Given the social, economic, political and geographic diversity in the region, it is inevitable that specific country needs and interests are raised. For example, Japan and other countries prone to disaster hold discussions about the internet being used for recovery and disaster relief. Among Pacific island countries, while the improvement of regulatory and technical capacities is important for them, effective global action on climate change is equally or even more important as it relates to their very existence. It is essential to surface these local interests and conduct comparative analyses of cross-regional trends to allow the development of a policy framework.

Each year, the APriGF is held in different countries. Hosts may be government or business. When the regional IGF is held in one particular country, it is an opportune time for the citizens of that country to engage with wider and more diverse groups from the region. It is also a time to raise issues particular to the host country. Further, it is an opportunity to engage as many local stakeholders as possible, including those that do not usually engage in the internet governance process.

In the same manner that local issues are raised at the regional IGFs, regional and global issues are also discussed in local IGFs. But of course, more country-specific issues are taken up in local and national IGFs. There is also a better chance for grassroots groups that are unable to take part in regional and global IGFs or similar events to participate in this process.

In the Asia Pacific, the following countries have conducted their own national IGFs: Afghanistan, Armenia, Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, New Zealand, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The Pacific Islands have also had their own IGF.

¹⁷ This was an observation shared by Sean Ang of the Southeast Asian Center for eMedia in one of the sessions of the 2012 APriGF. See the section on “Civil Society in Internet Governance/Policy-Making” in the Tokyo Conference Report at rigf.asia/documents/reports/Conference_Report_APriGF_2012_Tokyo.pdf

¹⁸ Net Mission, a project of DotAsia, coordinates with the APriGF in organising the Youth IGF.

The impact of local IGFs on a country's economy and development has to be further studied. It is important to continue and sustain the dialogue among stakeholders, even outside of the regional or national IGFs.

It should also be noted that the IGF is not the only space where civil society can influence governments. There are other existing processes that civil society should consider, such as the UN Human Rights Council, and, at the regional level, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).¹⁹

“En-gendering” the APriGF

Gender balance at the APriGF has always been a challenge. Gender issues are often an afterthought. The initial regional IGFs had very little participation of women as moderators, speakers or participants.²⁰ Even the Multistakeholder Steering Group, which functions as the advisory body, is male-dominated. There has never been a female APriGF chair.

In 2014, the Philippine-based NGO Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA) started to engage in the regional IGF and held a session on the importance of incorporating human rights and gender issues at the APriGF. FMA noticed the gender disparity among the participants and session speakers. Most of the sessions also did not incorporate human rights and gender issues as themes in their discussions. These observations were fed back to the Women's Rights Programme of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), of which FMA is a member organisation. The following year, APC organised the Gender and Internet Governance eXchange (gigX) in Macao SAR,²¹ prior to the holding of the main APriGF in 2015. Activists from women's rights, sexual rights and internet rights groups took part in the gigX to learn more about internet governance and how the issue of gender fits into the discussions. After gigX, the participants proceeded to attend the 2015 APriGF and took it upon themselves to conduct a gender scorecard of the sessions that they attended. The scorecard included an observation of the number of men and women participating in a session, the number of male and female moderators

and panel speakers, and the inclusion of gender issues in the session topics.

In the same year, the APriGF Secretariat agreed to include gender questions in the workshop evaluation form to be submitted by all workshop organisers. Since then, the questions on gender have remained in the workshop reports. This may have been a factor that has led to the awareness of session organisers to include gender in their discussions.

Based on the annual APriGF Conference Reports, the number of women participants increased from about 20% of the total in 2014 to 30% in 2015 to 43% in 2016.²²

At the 2017 APriGF, with the support of APNIC and the Internet Society,²³ fellowships were given to 50 participants, with an equal number of male and female fellows. There was also gender balance in the selection of participants to the 2017 Youth IGF.

Conclusion

The APriGF creates a platform where multistakeholder groups from the region can exchange and share experiences, ideas and practices, as well as collaborate, thereby contributing to better engagement between and among different communities. It is also a space for capacity building, including to prepare its attendees for participation at the global IGF and other international forums.

In the last eight years, the APriGF has grown from strength to strength in terms of both participation and content. It has gathered various representations from the region and generated a lot of relevant discourse on various internet-related issues. But all these discussions should be translated into action and should influence governments and other decision makers as well.

Despite the growing participation, the challenge of including more voices in the APriGF remains. The diversity of the region should be reflected in the participation.

The APriGF should extend its efforts to encourage wider, more diversified participation and engagement from all sectors of society in this vast region, and ensure that the outputs of these discussions do not remain talk, but will be articulated, heard and addressed by the sectors involved, especially by governments.

¹⁹ In line with the integration of ASEAN into an economic community, it developed an ASEAN ICT Masterplan for the years 2010-2015, where four key outcomes were identified: (1) ICT as an engine of growth for ASEAN countries; (2) recognition of the ASEAN as a global ICT hub; (3) enhanced quality of life for the ASEAN population; and (4) provision of contributions towards ASEAN integration. The ASEAN ICT Masterplan 2020 is now in place.

²⁰ Based on APriGF reports from 2010 to 2016, available at rigf.asia/events.html

²¹ Special Administrative Region.

²² The 2014 APriGF Conference Report featured a graph on gender participation but did not cite the exact figures, thus the 80% mentioned above is an estimate. For 2015, there were 61% male participants, 30% females and the rest did not specify their gender. In 2016, there were 43.3% females, 55.4% males, while 1.2% did not specify their gender.

²³ <https://www.internetsociety.org>

As Asia Pacific countries transition into digital economies, and as more people connect to the internet, it becomes imperative for these countries to play a role in internet governance. While a number of countries have conducted their own national IGFs, there are still a few that have yet to do so, possibly reflecting their lack of awareness of what they can get from the process.

Action steps

As the internet continues to evolve and as more people from the Asia Pacific region connect to the internet, more issues will arise. There will as a result be a growing need for groups, communities and stakeholders to participate and engage in the APrIGF process. This presents a need to:

- Encourage more people to engage in the process by offering fellowships. It is important especially to bring the voices of the marginalised and

vulnerable sectors, such as persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and rural folk, to name a few, to the discussion.

- Encourage the participation of governments in the process so that they can listen to the voices and views of various stakeholder groups. Civil society and other groups that have been actively participating in the process should, where necessary, consider initiating talks with representatives of their governments on the importance of the APrIGF.
- Localise internet governance discussions through the holding of national IGFs in countries where they have yet to be held. Draw on lessons learned from other countries in the region which have strong national IGFs, or from best practices in other countries across the world.
- Promote a gender balance in participation and a human-rights based approach in the sessions.

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs) are now widely recognised as a vital element of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) process. In fact, they are seen to be the key to the sustainability and ongoing evolution of collaborative, inclusive and multistakeholder approaches to internet policy development and implementation.

A total of 54 reports on NRIs are gathered in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch). These include 40 country reports from contexts as diverse as the United States, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Colombia.

The country reports are rich in approach and style and highlight several challenges faced by activists organising and participating in national IGFs, including broadening stakeholder participation, capacity building, the unsettled role of governments, and impact.

Seven regional reports analyse the impact of regional IGFs, their evolution and challenges, and the risks they still need to take to shift governance to the next level, while seven thematic reports offer critical perspectives on NRIs as well as mapping initiatives globally.

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2017 Report

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