

The who, the what and the how. Mapping stakeholders, issues and mechanisms of Internet governance in Latin America

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This article maps the Internet governance ecosystem and its evolution in the region concerning three critical dimensions: multistakeholderism, the evolving agenda and the approaches and bridges that connect the national, the regional and the global. While this is not a comprehensive approach, it is an exercise at tracing the contours of the interplays surrounding this topic in Latin America. The last section addresses the evolution and effects of NRIs in the region. Although they are but a part of the Internet governance ecosystem and not the focal point of Internet governance, they capture the principles that have been prevalent since WSIS on how this should be approached and discussed. Although they are expanding in the region since 2014, the initial findings suggest they should be more proactive in assessing relevance and need of their respective communities in order to achieve higher legitimacy and effectiveness in the discussion of Internet policy. Finally, the work suggests that there is a need to adapt to an evolving agenda of Internet governance which is not only changing some of the issues, but new stakeholder compositions and mechanisms to address them.

Introduction

The Internet celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2019. Although it might be questionable to mark that date as its birthday since its main protocol – the TCP/IP - had not yet been developed, from a socio-technical perspective in 1969 the technical principles underlying this new networking approach espoused values of human freedom, innovation and creativity. These have been central to the development of a general-purpose technology that in the 21st century is now pervasive for more than half of the world's inhabitants. Despite an Internet that is increasingly controlled, centralized and used for surveillance practices, it still remains a space for social and institutional experimentation, including its governance models and approaches.

The access to an open and secure Internet that is respectful of human rights is an aspiration that could be equated to the access to a sort of global public good in the 21st century¹. Increasingly, and despite the dystopia surrounding many narratives of the digital future, citizens rely on the Internet to access and exchange information that helps improve their everyday lives. The Internet's openness challenges a centralized control and hence one single approach to its design and control; it relies on multiple actors and levels of cooperation to work. With the birth of this technology, a governance challenge emerged that is part of the critical issues of the 21st century.

Internet governance can be characterized by three main attributes: it is *multistakeholder*, since it cannot be governed by one player, or a single set of actors - for example, governments – and it has relied on governance mechanisms to guide, steer and provide

¹ The Internet is not a global public good as such, since it relies on rival infrastructure that at the same time generates excludability. Yet, the approach at conceptualizing Internet access from this perspective works as a normative approach that frames many human rights. Nevertheless, it is important to underscore that the perspectives of public goods and human rights provides two registers of political thought. If combined, they contribute a general response to the challenge of how to work out a global ethics of collective social responsibility, as carriers of ideas of global justice and global governance.

frameworks; it is *multi-issue*, based on the Internet's layered model, its architecture comprises a physical, link, protocol, transport, application and content layers and each one implies different approaches, mechanisms and stakeholders; a third attribute is that it is *multi-level*, which implies that the global, regional and national /local are increasingly involved and it is owed to both the jurisdictional dimension of legal and institutional enforcement and application to the types of actors involved (van Kersbergen and van Waarden, 2004).

The Internet developed and became organized in many of the richer countries as early as the 1980's, but there were less than a handful of Latin American states with access to it at the time. The underlying values of this new technological approach to networking threatened centralized control and telecommunications' monopolies, which were at odds with the political and institutional climate in many of the national contexts in South America in those years. But this changed during the decade of the 1990's, when connecting to the Internet increasingly became a priority for the region, as it was more relevant not only for universities and firms, but for individual users following the trends in other parts of the world (Castells, 2000; Council of Europe, 2009).

During the 1990's, the political climate of democracy in the region not only encouraged the adoption of this networking technology but was also prone to multistakeholder mechanisms for policy development. The overall aim of introducing these new instruments was to improve citizen participation channels with the government, enhancing accountability and more comprehensive public policy formulation (ELLA, 2012). This new political timing favored the approach of openness and decentralization, embedded in the Internet's core architectural principles.

The expansion of the Internet in Latin America exposed regional actors to address the main features of Internet governance described above: the multistakeholder approach in a region that had to learn from these processes; the multi-issues embedded in the agenda of a multi-layered technology that involve capacity building; and the interplay of the different levels of engagement. This article seeks to map a sample of approaches towards Internet governance in Latin America by examining the inter-play of these three attributes in the regional stakeholder ecosystem, particularly States; in the last section it examines the institutional configurations that have surfaced in recent years with the National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs).

A regional stakeholder characterization of approaches towards Internet governance and the role of states

The multistakeholder approach to Internet governance has been for the last three decades one of its defining attributes. From a political perspective, stakeholderism is a perspective for channeling participation and shaping decisions. This is a model that promotes an alternative to electoral politics as a way to achieve democratic representation beyond the nation state (Scholte, 2017). Although it is not a new phenomenon, since the decade of the 1970's there have emerged private-sector lead initiatives of governance which have shifted regulatory capacity from governments to other stakeholders, in particular to industry-led parties (Abbot and Snidal, 2008). Although there is not a single definition for multistakeholder mechanisms and it is still considered an "inchoate institution" (Raymond and DeNardis 2015), the underlying principle is that it is based on the stakes of the players concerned with an issue. Depending on the process and institutional setting, it provides voting and decision-making power to all the parties, and in many cases on an equal footing. The multistakeholder approach mainly contests multilateral mechanisms, where only state actors have decision making authority, but multistakeholder Internet governance is still an imperfect solution, as it holds accountability and representation deficits with respect to previously marginalized

players where polycentric Internet governance is being exercised (Scholte, 2017). Yet, in terms of democratic governance it is by far the predominant mode to address Internet issues.

This section provides a general overview on the different stakeholder approaches to Internet governance in Latin America, with a particular focus on the role of states. Although there are multiple levels of problems that are currently shaping the Internet policy and governance space, driven by different players and stakeholder groups in the region with instruments ranging from public policies, to national regulations, from corporate decisions to civil society campaigns, the Internet is shaping national communities and states, inasmuch as the state is forcing the Internet to conform to the instruments of states (Kohl and Fox, 2017; Sassen 2006). When assessing a national community, this implies taking into consideration the frontiers of a state's boundaries and functions, as well as the network of relationships between the different players involved in a policy arena. But it poses serious challenges to address conceptually and empirically a contour around a Latin American perspective on Internet governance that has undergone some high level mechanisms of regional integration at a political level, for example through the Organization of the American States (OAS) or that of eLAC of the Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean, while at the same time it lacks mechanisms for economic integration (such as that of the European Union).

To start with, WSIS again played an essential role in fostering an active engagement from governments in the region to participate and help steer the national conversation around the use and development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). It was an essential point of inflection for governments to foster not only adequate regulation for the deployment of infrastructure, interconnection and attractive business environments in this industry, but also because it raised awareness about their role, which had been dominated by the scientific community, the business sector and civil society in the early days of the Internet in this part of the world.

From a national perspective, Latin American states are now engaged in different regulatory and public policy activities related with Internet governance. From the development of infrastructure and its regulation, to legislative approaches to the content layer, the Internet of 2020 as a multi-purpose technology is highly regulated when compared to the beginning of the WSIS process. Within their national frontiers, governments in Latin America have played a significant role in the last decade in shaping, legislating and intervening in the national environment. Yet, with few exceptions, they have had a very limited influence in shaping the international environment and the institutional regime (Aguerre, 2015).

Different strategies are pursued by States in their efforts to participate and shape Internet governance, but not all have the same degree of influence in this matter. States can participate in Internet governance by: (i) shaping the contours of a regime, as is the case of ICANN and the role of the US Government, but other as attempts such as NETMundial and the Global Commission on the Stability of Cyberpeace to name a few are part of this efforts; (ii) seek to become global leaders through regulatory measures, as is the case of Europe with GDPR; (iii) employ discourses concerning the securitization of the Internet (5G, CLOUD Act, as examples of the US and other Western governments, as well as Russia and China); and (iv) distort the original architecture of an open unique Internet and generate fragmented national spaces (China, Russia) (Lomonaco, 2019). The role of States is complementary to that of the business sector, technical community and civil society in most of the layers of Internet governance, except for the content layer where in the intermediation of information and the enforcement of rights, it has non-delegable responsibilities. Yet, with the exception of Brazil, the role of Latin American states in systemic approaches to global Internet governance has remained marginal, as it will be soon developed.

The World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS) of 2003-2005 was responsible for the broadening scope of issues in the agenda of Internet governance. This expansion was mainly motivated by the developing world, who rebelled against the notion that the rules of Internet governance had been already set and predefined if it remained only focused on a narrow perspective about critical resource management (Drake, 2004). A narrow agenda of Internet governance, as was promoted in its origins addressing mostly the protocol layer, excluded mostly all other governments other than the United States. After WSIS, this agenda was broadened to include, among others, infrastructure development, human rights, economic welfare and cybersecurity, particularly critical issues for Latin America for whom the adoption of this technology was strongly linked to a development agenda. Paradoxically, the inclusion of an agenda that covers more issues around the use, expansion and development of the Internet has not directly implied more influence of Latin America and the developing regions in the international spaces. Achieving relevance and influence in the international regime in this issue is costly and needs a strong national policy orientation. Brazil, as mentioned, is a notable outlier in the regional context. Three examples are its national Internet multistakeholder steering - CGI.br - which has been analyzed globally and has even been partially adapted to the contexts in other countries across the world; its role in shaping alternate views to the IANA functions governance during the WSIS process (2003-2005); and the NETMundial meeting in 2014, which served to underscore multistakeholder values for Internet governance, as well as to highlight the need to respect human rights and privacy after the Snowden revelations (Afonso, 2014). While this influence could be partially explained by its geopolitical status and the role of its highly professional foreign service, the generation of an effective national multistakeholder body of governance with CGI.br should be considered its most critical variable for achieving its legitimacy.

National governments in the region have used different institutional venues to work on a regional agenda for Internet governance. Their regional efforts have been mostly centered around the eLAC mechanism, that has a broad program encompassing different layers of issues around Internet governance. Although the mechanism is centered around governments, it has developed a methodology of multistakeholder working groups with the aim of increasing its legitimacy and scope. The LACIGF, which has been organized annually since 2008 has sought to organize its meetings back-to-back with eLAC in an effort to attract more governments to the multistakeholder forum. This is a case in point of how power, and even sometimes legitimacy, is still conceived in the region as emanating primarily from this stakeholder group.

The complexity of a multilayered technology and its businesses models, now mostly centered around the platform approach, has claimed for new types of interventions from governments to address these challenges. One of these has been the development of national strategies, with varying degrees of multistakeholder consultations and openness. Since 2013, cybersecurity strategies at the national level have been developed in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Mexico and Uruguay, setting up novel policy communities that include public and private institutions charged with securing cyberspace. Similar processes have surfaced for AI national strategies, which have been drafted in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Uruguay from 2017 (Aguerre, 2019). Others, are approaches at platform regulation from national bodies (Puppis and Winseck, 2019), still incipient and fragmented in most of the region, but with an increasing interest in its regulation from an economic and taxation approach, but also addressing freedom of expression issues².

² The Freedom on the Net Report of 2019, which includes Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela, marks a trend in line with an increased appetite by most States to curb some forms of online speech in platforms.

The institutional processes that address the management of resources and infrastructure around organizations such as LACNIC, LACTLD, or LAC-IX are run by the technical community, a self-defined group of actors and organizations that aim to preserve the original architectural principles of this technology. These institutions have the longest trajectory in performing specific tasks that are related with the logical and infrastructure layer, articulating regional interests with the global agenda, as well as with national players (states, businesses, ccTLDs, ISPs etc.), which rely on coordination and promote self-regulatory approaches, many of which are legitimized by their performance and accountability measures. From a historical perspective, it was the first stakeholder group in the region that became aware of the need to develop an ecosystem to address Internet issues already during the early 1990's. The definition of a regional institutional ecosystem around the Internet and its governance can be traced to the origins of LACNIC and LACTLD. LACNIC was the first organization from the technical community to emerge at a regional level, formalized in 2002, but with a previous decade of regional work focused on the formation of a regional registry to manage IP address allocation for Latin America and the Caribbean. These regional organizations mostly address issues related with protocol layer, but due to the interconnectedness of themes and the pivotal role of this layer, the technical community in the region is usually present in most of the other processes and with a strong involvement with the international governance regime, as well as with the NRIs in the region to be addressed in the next section.

From civil society, there is a growing network of organizations that aim to promote a digital human rights agenda in the region. The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and its network based in the Latin America and the Caribbean played a pivotal role to promote the Internet and its adoption to address development issues, as well as the enhancement of access to information and freedom of expression in the 1990's. In the last years, it has become commonplace for many NGO's in different countries to embrace regional projects and create specific ad-hoc networks for different issues, ranging from copyright in the digital age, to observatories addressing legislation on online freedom of expression, surveillance and AI and online discrimination. Most countries, except for a few in Central America and the Caribbean, now have NGOs that interact at a regional and international level on these matters. In most cases, this regional approach allows for greater advocacy efforts and engagement, as well as future funding opportunities. The human rights agenda still provides the foundations for the issues that frame the work of these organizations³.

The business stakeholder group presents more heterogeneity than the others. It represents different industries depending on the Internet layer and these are more diversified in terms of their involvement with specific issues. At the national level, they are mostly organized collectively in associations and chambers of commerce around issues of interconnection and infrastructure (ISPs and IXPs), e-commerce, telecommunications, software and the like. Most of these national trade associations have a traditional agenda that works in the defense of their members' interests and to ease the possible impact of State regulation. There are very few examples of engagement of the local Internet industry, mostly SMEs, with regional or global processes. A handful of those who become involved in other layers of Internet governance come from associations from Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, or through the involvement in regional representation groups which will be shortly addressed.

³ One such example comes from Observacom who published in 2019 a proposal for regulating Internet platforms from a regional perspective and which sought public comments during the second semester of that year. More information at: <https://www.observacom.org/regulacion-2/>

Another feature of the business stakeholder group is the presence of transnational corporations that predominate in the industry and that have even larger room for maneuver to shape and mold Internet technology and the institutions than many states. Most of the US companies comprised in the so-called GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft) have increased their regional presence over the last decade. The creation of the Latin American Internet Association (ALAI) in 2015 was a significant milestone in the collective action surrounding what some players from the industry have labelled as “pure” Internet companies. Yet, ALAI comprises Internet companies that are heavily oriented at the platform-based model. Many of these are international firms, that aim at the regional/global market, mostly in the e-commerce and digital economy sectors. The issues around the agenda of platforms is largely different from that of companies providing Internet connectivity and their presence in the region has been increasing in different policy fora.

The sector connected with the traditional telecommunications sector had been historically grouped around what is now ASIET (Spanish acronym for *Asociación Iberoamericana de Empresas de Telecomunicaciones*, formerly AHCIET). GSMA (GSM Association) opened its regional office in the region in 2010 and has become another group which is looking to exercise its influence in Internet policy in Latin America with its focus in mobile connectivity.

While this is not a comprehensive approach to the different issues and levels of involvement of the stakeholders, it has broadly mapped the ecosystem, its agenda and the inter-relation among the different jurisdictional and institutional levels from a regional perspective⁴. A greater emphasis was placed in the role of the state as the regional stakeholder that holds *per se* the greatest capacity to thwart the current model of Internet governance, but also since it holds the functions of regulation, collection, auditing, law enforcement, etcetera, and which holds more capacity to change the Internet in the absence of a strong presence of a local player from another stakeholder group.

The next section will address the processes around the national IGFs in the region (NRIs), as a proxy of how Internet governance is being regionally enacted and approaching the interplay among the three inter-related dimensions of Internet governance explored earlier, multistakeholder, multi-issue and multi-level.

National Internet governance forums

Several scholars with an institutionalist and a socio-technical perspective (Kleinwächter 2009; Van Eeten and Mueller, 2012; De Nardis, 2014) have pointed that Internet governance is not only what is discussed in formal processes and institutions, but what players actually do with the technologies and policies comprising the Internet. This over representation of the role of institutions in Internet governance is not an exclusive problem of this issue, but is one of the theoretical challenges in the studies about governance in more general terms (van Kersbergen and Van Waarden, 2004). Mapping a comprehensive map of the interplays Internet governance in the region is a conceptual and empirical challenge.

The legacy of WSIS for Latin America went beyond the expansion of the Internet governance agenda: it also triggered the conversations about the need to integrate Internet governance discussions at the regional and the national level, following a subsidiarity principle. Fifteen years ago, there were very few spaces where the discussions around Internet governance within a country had a mission, a focal point or even a community of stakeholders. Back in

⁴ The categorization has not addressed the academic community as such. Academia in the region is involved in all the stakeholder categories mentioned previously. There are questionings as to whether academia represents a stakeholder group as such, even though it has its own categorization under the IGF, but it is not considered as a group in regional processes such as the LACIGF.

2004 as part of the Working Group in Internet Governance (WGIG), there were strong arguments that called for the creation of more effective national IG mechanisms that would help to coordinate the different parties, as well as create awareness about these issues. Since the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG), the inclusion of developing countries in Internet governance mechanisms has been pointed as of vital importance to generate legitimacy and new inputs (Siganga, 2005; Afonso, 2005; Drake, 2004). The creation of national participation mechanisms as a key precondition for relevant action in international forums was called upon then and the proposal to strengthen national organizations and processes involved in this issue is particularly relevant for developing countries, not only from a subsidiarity perspective, but since these also have fewer possibilities of participating in international forums and hence of shaping global policies.

Although the notion of addressing Internet governance at the national level is in its second decade, widespread development of national IG initiatives has only begun relatively recently (Aguerre et al, 2018). Currently they are recognized as mechanisms that “serve as a link between local discussions and regional and global instances” (NETmundial, 2014, 2.I.4).

Though not an exclusive regional feature, since 2011 - when Brazil organized the first national IGF in the region - these spaces have taken off in 16 countries in Latin American countries and five in the Caribbean⁵. One of the reasons for this global expansion could be explained by the consolidation of a the NRI working group in the IGF, which since 2015 has provided a focal point of coordination at a global level and increased visibility. In addition, the urgent responses to scandals such as Snowden’s revelations on mass surveillance helped to disseminate the agenda of Internet governance more broadly, with a particular impact in Latin America with the organization of NETMundial in 2014 and the participation of new actors that had not been previously involved in any Internet governance event.

Although they have become a feature of the larger global Internet governance ecosystem, a third of the NRIs in the region have only organized two editions, so it is still an immature process in many national contexts. In 2018 the project “Mapping Internet Governance in LAC” (MIGLAC)⁶ was launched with the aim of mapping the different national IGF initiatives in the region and its defining features. The research’s first phase (2017-2018) relied on in-depth interviews to the organizers and they were surveyed in a second phase of research. A second data- access point was undertaken in 2019 with a new round of surveys was produced to address the evolution of these initiatives. Some trends emerge from a comparative and cross-case analysis of these initiatives that will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

As framed by the MIGLAC report of 2018, “National IG Initiatives” are those processes that take place within the domestic level of specific countries and follow the overall characteristics defined for the Global IGF in paragraphs 72 and 73 of the Tunis Agenda:

meet periodically; provide a space for the discussion of public policy issues related to key elements of Internet governance (included but not restricted to critical Internet resources); facilitate discourse between bodies dealing with different cross-cutting (national and international) public policies regarding the Internet; identify emerging issues (including

⁵ As of January 2020, these countries in Latin America are: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela. In the Caribbean: Barbados, Dominican Republic, Haiti, St Vincent and the Granadines and Trinidad and Tobago.

⁶ MIGLAC is a project oriented at mapping the evolution of Internet governance initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean from researchers and partner institutions in the region. The author of this article is a principal researcher of this project. More information is available at: <https://miglac.org/>

those arising from the use and misuse of the Internet), bring them to the attention of the relevant bodies and the general public, and, where appropriate, make recommendations; interface with appropriate organizations on matters related to Internet governance at-large; facilitate the exchange of information and best practices among all stakeholder groups; and, among other endeavors contribute to capacity building for Internet governance and both strengthen and enhance the engagement of stakeholders in the IG governance ecosystem.

Although none of initiatives in the region specifically adopts such a definition, it is useful as a reference.

Most of these initiatives are led by ISOC chapters or ccTLDs, that is they are originally motivated by players that could be defined as belonging to the technical community stakeholder group. Two thirds of the surveyed NRIs highlight that their work is intersessional, but the main focus remains on the organization of the annual event. The existence of a secretariat or organizing body is a defining feature of most. More than 80% have a body that leads the strategy, the calendar, the organization of the agenda and the event logistics. Three that did not have a secretariat in place during 2019 did not manage to organize a national IGF during that year, pointing at the need for a stable organizing committee as a critical success factor of these initiatives. All but the Brazilian NRI have a multi-organization body, but a few also have a multistakeholder organizing committee (that is, covering the full range of the stakeholder spectrum).

Whereas in 2018 the main mission of most initiatives was to promote a national space for Internet governance discussions, following the international experience of generating a focal institutional space, in 2019 the development of multistakeholder practices emerged as the most important mission in all the surveyed initiatives. There are many connotations on multistakeholderism for the organizers of these initiatives, ranging from *consensus*, to *participation*, *openness*, *diversity* and *impact on public policy* that emerge from this study and which address the liminal state of this “inchoate global institution” (Raymond and De Nardis, 2015). In particular, the perceptions of openness and inclusion in these spaces are contemplated as identity features that contrast with other forums.

The research considers the multistakeholder dimension in the composition of the governance structure of the initiative, the stakeholder origin of participants attending the event and that of the session leaders / speakers. In all cases, except for the governance structure (secretariat or organizing committee), stakeholder diversity is present. But, as already pointed out, diversity of stakeholders does not necessarily entail different viewpoints with regards to an issue (Belli, 2015). Another problem that emerges from this study is that most initiatives tend to aim at stakeholder diversity without assessing their relevance and actual empowerment with respect to an issue, a problem that is critical for the legitimacy of these initiatives (Malcom, 2015).

There is not a great variation in terms of the topics covered in most of the NRIs. While some tend to emphasize certain issues during their annual forums, these are balanced when analyzed in the different editions for each national case. By and large, the agenda tends to favor diversity, a multi-issue approach, over deep dives into specific subject matters. At a minimum three topics are addressed in each edition covering different Internet layers. This diversity promotes greater dialogue and exchange among participants, including networking opportunities. The preference for this agenda format is also in line with most of the processes that are framed for exchange and debate, rather than capacity building or negotiation.

From a multi-level perspective, although few initiatives have formal partnerships or agreements with other regional or international mechanisms, most of them tend to invite international speakers, materializing the different stakeholder networks involved in the

organization of these initiatives. A few have created the IGF around other national initiatives, such as the Internet Day or technical community activities oriented at capacity-building, strengthening the ties among local stakeholders.

The multi-level dimension is also present in the financial support of these initiatives, where nearly all have funding from the IGFSA (IGF Support Association) and two thirds from ISOC, which shows the international backing as well as the relationship between national and international stakeholders. Only one quarter of initiatives received support from both local and international businesses for the 2019 edition, but a third have assistance from national and international NGO's and only two had governmental support.

Finally, from a multi-level lens, NRIs have a relation with the homonymous sector within the IGF Secretariat, since there is a tacit commitment to adhere to the principles, working practices and sessions in a joint manner convened centrally by the IGF. The 2019 survey shows that approximately 90% of initiatives in the region are participating in the NRI process of the IGF. Yet, over half of these only cooperate during the actual IGF and do not engage with the regular online meetings.

Having sketched some of the basic features of the NRIs regarding their approaches to multistakeholderism, the issues in the Internet governance agenda and the links between national, regional and international policy making layers, it is time to evaluate their relevance for Internet governance. The organizers of these initiatives have a marked ambivalence about their effectiveness. Most of them feel the space is necessary so that open, bottom-up participation on equal footing is accomplished. But two thirds state that the impact on policies (both from the government and the private sector) is either limited or null. Although some of the literature considers that the measurement of success is not only evaluated by the degree to which they have achieved their objectives, they also must:

show that they have integrated safeguards into their structures and procedures that are at least functional equivalents of those present in the common governance environment in which they operate. These safeguards include ensuring inclusiveness, transparency, accountability and legitimacy, all of which go beyond mere effectiveness (Gasser, Budish, Meyers, 2015: 17).

The perception that emerges from the MIGLAC study is that that there is still a long way to go to achieve greater legitimacy of the space as a relevant one for Internet policymaking. In most cases it is premature to assess this solely from the characteristics of each NRI and how they have introduced these safeguards, but relevance is a relational attribute, especially guaranteed by the meaningfulness attributed by stakeholders. If more relevant policy discussions will take place in other venues, even if they are not national, nor even multistakeholder and with the open and bottom-up approach that characterizes most NRIs, these will be at risk. This claim becomes a real possibility as three initiatives decided to postpone 2019's edition and in one case to reduce the duration and scope of its work.

The weaknesses related with the lack of relevance of a majority of national IGFs in making impact or meaningful contributions in Internet policy making is also being perceived by the stakeholders involved in the organization of the LACIGF, the regional forum, one of the longest standing initiatives in the region since 2008. This mechanism is at present under a period of review, including its mission, organizational structure and working approach. While it is impossible to consider one single cause for this perception, there is a need to rethink the value of claiming for these spaces if they only serve a discussion purpose, a claim that has been echoed for the IGF (Malcolm, 2015). The lack of impact in terms of influencing Internet policy should be clearly demarcated from the principles that orient its governance and maintaining open, inclusive and accountable processes.

Revise, reframe and strengthen

The Internet of today would be unimaginable to the pioneers who were developing the foundations of this technology half a century ago. It has expanded and developed in the region and the institutional and technological ecosystem of the Internet has many differences with that of its origins. With the consolidation around the governance of critical Internet functions and the stabilization of organizations as ICANN, new issues around cybersecurity, protection of human rights, surveillance, asymmetric opportunities in an increasingly digitalized world, the platform business model and the emergence of new technologies that disrupt the traditional approach have not only changed the agenda, but also the stakeholder composition and the different institutions at the national, regional and global levels. In an extremely asymmetrical digital context, where “tech giants” have increasing power to shape the rules, technical standards and principles of the Internet, it becomes even more critical and challenging for Latin American communities of stakeholders to understand and act upon the spaces where this governance is taking place. In light of these new issues and of the trajectories of existing mechanisms and institutional formats which have shown their promises as well as their weaknesses, there is a need to assess some of the models and approaches to its governance.

The NRIs require revision, seeing the difficulty to achieve greater levels of legitimacy and efficacy in many contexts. Despite this, their expansion to 16 national contexts in the region has not only made visible issues about the Internet to the local community, but has also helped to develop and frame a self-awareness of those communities. These spaces are also playing a vital role to frame and materialize stakeholder interests within sectors that face many challenges to participate and engage meaningfully in international processes, where sometimes crucial definitions about the Internet are shaped. NRIs have addressed the subsidiarity principle, but there is yet a path to tread before they can have an impact at the national policy level. The multistakeholder approach to these spaces is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to achieve relevance and legitimacy. The stakeholder ecosystem around Internet governance is shifting to a broader agenda around digital governance issue. These changes are not only shaking the traditional agenda of Internet governance, but they are also shifting the stakeholder composition.

The lack of attendance of relevant players from government and the private sector is a major drawback for some NRIs in Latin America. While this might not initially seem problematic, since these are places where Internet governance and policy is discussed, regional NRIs are prone to suffer in the short term from lack of relevance and the fatigue that has become installed at the global IGF if these difficulties are not timely addressed. The NRIs in the region, including the LACIGF, could be strengthened by providing greater interaction with other regional mechanisms, including, but not only, with eLAC. In order to achieve this, one of the starting points is to refine the mission and purpose of Internet governance mechanisms at the national level. It is essential to conceptualize the national Internet governance forums as spaces that allow to consolidate open ecosystems for a multistakeholder dialogue with the main purpose of agenda setting and discussion of policy proposals or current implementations and not only as a space for capacity building or discussion that is not framed to attending a national, regional or global policy proposal.

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