Evolving Internet Governance – A Key Requirement for Bridging the Digital Divide

Abdullah Al Darrab

Deputy Governor of Technical Affairs, Communications and Information Technology Commission, Saudi Arabia

The Internet has become a global facility and an essential element of the Information Society. Its use impacts on all aspects of daily life, including on commerce, learning, health and social life.

Increasing access to the Internet for people in developing countries would significantly contribute toward bridging the digital divide. Internet governance mechanisms need to evolve in a manner that would facilitate participation of developing countries in decision-making on Internet-related issues, so that bridging the digital divide remains a priority on the global Internet governance agenda.

World leaders at the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva recognized the importance of bridging the digital divide and the central role which access to the Internet plays in this regard. The WSIS also defined the principles for international management of the Internet, and recognized the roles of the various stakeholders in Internet governance.

During the preparatory meetings for the first phase of the WSIS, several developing countries made clear two key points:

1. Reduction of the digital divide will require effective cooperation between the countries of the North and South to establish appropriate financing mechanisms.

2. The majority of the programs to be implemented by 2015 will, to a large extent, depend on more intensive use of the Internet. This in turn requires a review of the

processes and mechanisms of Internet governance, in a manner that would give governments an appropriate role that would guarantee protection of their investments, continuity of services and protection of the interests of users.

To address these issues, it was agreed at the Summit to direct the Secretary-General of the United Nations to create two working groups, one to study the issue of funding and the other to study the issue of international governance of the Internet. The two working groups were since created, and the Task Force on Financial Mechanisms has already completed its work. The Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) is expected to complete its report by early July.

The need to review Internet governance mechanisms

Governance of the Internet's logical infrastructure today is carried out through a decentralised structure consisting mainly of private sector and non-governmental institutions, with oversight by the United States Department of Commerce.

The distributed, private sector-driven governance structure is geared to making the technical and operational decisions necessary for efficient structural and logical Internet development. However, it is by its very nature not ideally positioned to address overarching public policy concerns.

While the existing Internet governance arrangement allows governments to provide advice on Internet resource management issues, governments are not participating in public policy decision-making or in establishment of regulations for Internet governance; including in making price decisions on the sale of Internet addresses and domain names, structuring of the institutions involved in Internet governance and contracting or licensing companies to undertake specific functions such as managing Top Level Domains (TLDs) and so on. The role of governments in this regard is currently limited to providing advice.

Given the critical role of the Internet, it is appropriate at this time to review the Internet governance structure, with a view to determining whether this structure is adequate for addressing the many international public policy issues that arise, including those that relate to bridging the digital divide.

The scope of Internet governance

Aside from the question of managing the logical infrastructure and the scarce resources of the Internet such as the root server system, the Domain Name System and IP addresses, in

its broader sense, Internet governance involves addressing a whole multitude of other issues, mostly relating to the "use" of the internet such as:

- User privacy

- Data protection and security

- Security and survivability of network

- Right of access

- Content regulation and unlawful use

- Spam

- Law enforcement harmonization

- Intellectual property protection, etc.

These issues have arisen with ubiquity of the Internet and with the increasing sophistication of its users, including those who would use it in a harmful manner or even threaten its stability. These issues are currently being addressed by a variety of national and international institutions. Coordination of all the various aspects of Internet governance is another challenge that is difficult to deal with through a decentralised structure.

There are also several issues of key concern to developing countries which, if pushed forward, will help them in their efforts to provide access to the Internet for all.

Among the key issues to achieve are:

- Development of actionable capacity-building policies and plans

- Multilingualism

- Reducing the cost of access, and

- Equitable resource allocation practices.

Internet governance and the digital divide

Internet governance mechanisms and bridging the digital divide are closely interwoven. Public policy direction is required to address issues of concern to developing countries. In order for developing countries to participate in policy-making, there must be a forum to allow them to do so.

The institutional and geographical diversity of the existing international governance structures add to the difficulties that developing countries encounter in participating. Centralizing policy discussions in global and regional forums with full involvement of all stakeholders, in line with the roles defined by the WSIS, would help to overcome some of the barriers developing countries are facing. It would also facilitate exchange of information and technology transfer between the countries involved.

Furthermore, the capability of the private sector and civil society in these countries needs to be developed to the point where they can contribute and push their own agendas. Until this happens, the role of defining the interests of many of the developing countries will fall on their governments. These governments will need to consult their constituencies while developing their positions on policy issues, as well as to muster available resources from the stakeholders to represent the countries' interests in the international arena.

Another obstacle that developing countries face is the underdeveloped Internet infrastructure. As has been pointed out through the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa's discussion list, "the un-preparedness of most African countries as far as Internet governance is concerned is mainly due to lack of access to the Internet itself…"

The opportunity to participate in decision-making on international Internet governance will in itself increase awareness of ways to tackle the issues and derive the benefits of the Internet, and stimulate action within the countries concerned to develop capability and policies to increase access.

Another key element in bridging the digital divide is multilingualism. This has an impact in two ways. One is the capacity of developing countries to participate in Internet governance where the institutions do not use the United Nations languages in their communications. The other is the need to make the Internet more accessible to those who are not familiar with English. The existing domain name system presents a significant barrier to non-English speaking people for accessing and benefiting from the internet.

The current Internet governance mechanisms are not able to deal efficiently with the international policy-making and coordination needed for international programming and

implementation of multilingual domain naming systems. Governments are generally the custodians of their countries' cultural and linguistic heritage. Development of global policies for a multilingual system and agreement on a top-level global design and deployment plan (with the support of the private sector such as PC software vendors), must, therefore, involve the commitment of governments.

The way forward

Some fundamental steps must be taken in evolving Internet governance to break the current impasse in bridging the digital divide. The following are some views on how Internet governance should evolve to meet the WSIS principles and definition of roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders, and to lay the groundwork for bridging the digital divide.

In the interests of maintaining the stability and security of the Internet, the existing institutions involved in management of technical and operational aspects should continue, subject to acquiring international legitimacy and to implementation of evolutionary reforms consistent with the WSIS principles.

The Internet management structure should remain relatively decentralised and the different stakeholders should have lead roles as appropriate for the different functions and levels, with full opportunity for inputs from other stakeholders.

There is a need to create a new body, preferably under the United Nations framework, which will enable governments, with input from the private sector and civil society, to exercise their responsibility to approve international public policies and to provide legitimacy, accountability and oversight to existing and future institutions where required. This body should have the objective of bridging the digital divide as one of its central mandates.

The involvement of governments in the overall governance process through such a body should make it easier to bring national decision-making in line with international Internet governance arrangements. This should also facilitate overcoming many of the obstacles faced by development programs in developing countries, and will help with pushing forward the infrastructure building, capacity-building and multilingualism agendas.

Apart from decision-making on issues impacting public policy, there is a need for a forum to ensure coordination between all involved institutions of all the complex and interrelated issues which are part of Internet governance. A new multi-stakeholder coordination body could also be created to undertake these functions.

In such a multi-stakeholder environment, the question of who represents the stakeholders arises. For example, should all private sector players be allowed to participate? How would civil society representatives be selected? In such an arrangement, developing countries could be at a disadvantage, especially those whose ICT private sector is not sufficiently developed. The greater representation from developed countries would overwhelm that of the developing countries. A voting mechanism for decision-making will need to be devised that would give equal weight to all countries involved.

In summary:

- Evolving the overall mechanism of Internet governance is a necessity and will facilitate bridging of the digital divide.

- Governance changes must be based on the principles of the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action.

- Governments from both developed and developing countries must assume a leadership role in the future arrangements for international public policy-making relating to Internet governance, while ensuring the full involvement of all other stakeholders. Areas where international public policy is needed to help bridge the digital divide include: capacity building, multilingualism, reduced cost of access and equitable resource allocation practices.

- Establishment of global and regional policymaking and coordination forums would facilitate participation of developing countries and foster knowledge transfer and implementation of Internet development policies locally.

Conclusion

Bridging the digital divide is a major challenge facing the global community. To meet this challenge, the future evolution of Internet governance mechanisms must be designed to take into account the need to increase participation of developing countries in the international policy-making and coordination of Internet development. The creation of a policymaking forum with involvement of stakeholders, in line with the roles defined by the WSIS, will increase awareness and enable developing countries to push forward their agendas. It will also facilitate the coordination of local development policies with the international direction.