Report from the Best Practice Forum on "Public participation in Internet governance: Emerging issues, good practices and proposed solutions" to the IGF Plenary on Wednesday, 14 November 2007 at 10 am

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Mr Chairman, I had the honour of moderating the best practice forum on "Public participation in Internet governance: Emerging issues, good practices and proposed solutions". The event took place on Monday late afternoon. It was co-organised by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the Council of Europe and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC).

The best practice Forum heard a message from the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe and discussed with Hans Armfelt Hansell of UNECE as well as with Anriette Esterhuysen, Executive Director of APC and Pavel Antonov of APC.

The main proposal coming from the best practice forum is the development of a self-regulatory mechanism to foster participation, access to information and transparency in Internet governance. Such a framework would not replace any existing institutional configuration, policies or regulations, but would underpin other processes and support them.

A model for such a mechanism could be the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (the "Aarhus Convention"). The Aarhus Convention firmly establishes access to information, transparency, accountability and participation in governance processes as a shared value, and supports institutions in implementing the convention.

The proposed mechanism should ensure that all the institutions which play a role in some aspect of governing the internet commit themselves in their activities to transparency, public participation (to enable all stakeholders to participate) and access to information. The new proposal reflects the Council of Europe's commitment to the concept of public service value of the Internet.

The view was held that for Internet governance to satisfy democratic needs, the part to be played by users should be recognised and strengthened.

The forum also explored which tools, online and offline, should be available for public participation in Internet governance. In this context, the Council of Europe informed the best practice forum that it is preparing a set of e-democracy tools based on existing applications in its member states.

In the debate, it was clearly recognised that there is a wide variety of actors in Internet governance, a complexity that is to be taken into account in any agreed mechanism on public participation.

The participation of stakeholders, and particularly of Internet users in Internet governance should be enabled at several levels. One participant suggested that citizens should engage at national level, and why not by means of national IGFs. The importance of participation at the level of ICANN and the IGF was also stressed.

In conclusion, yesterday's debate was a comprehensive, but at the same time a tentative assessment of what it is required for a self-regulatory code for public participation in Internet governance. In order to take this proposal forward, the organisers of the best practice forum envisage to commission some initial research the results of which would be brought back to the IGF.

Thank you very much for your attention.