The importance of multistakeholderism in Internet governance

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Originally, the concept of Internet Governance referred to the processes of design and administration of the technologies needed to keep the Internet operational. Due to the evolution of the Internet and the gradual increase in both its number of users and social and economic importance, the concept of Internet Governance evolved to include, besides the set of material and logical means that constitute the Internet and its infrastructure, also the institutions that define the Internet and manage it, the stakeholders involved in those processes, as well as the policies and decisions derived from such arrangements, which have an impact in public interest.

More than a decade has passed since the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) took place between 2003 and 2005, when Internet Governance became a key issue on the global political agenda. The absence of a specific forum or formal mechanism at the international level for decision-making on issues related to the functioning of the Internet and the conflicts arising from its use can be understood as a gap in traditional power structures. Such vacuum has been filled by several actors (not just governments) in multiple processes, which have allowed the continued Internet operation and its expansion on a global scale.

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Currently, the Internet Governance is a set of multidisciplinary processes -- with the participation of governments, civil society and the private sector. Those processes not only discuss the technopolitical dimensions of the network, its technical, social, economic and social consequences, but also the development and implementation of shared principles, standards, rules, decision-making procedures and programs that outline the evolution and the use of the Internet.

There is no one-stop-shop for Internet Governance decision-making. It can be visualized as a complex ecosystem, in which multiple fora, actors and issues coexist. In a simplified way, we can tentatively classify those issues and processes in three groups: allocation of names and numbers; definition of open standards; and public policy making, including fora for multistakeholder discussion in local, regional, national or international level.

For allocation of names and numbers, the forum is the IANA (Internet Assigned Numbers Authority), which is the entity responsible for distributing IP addresses and autonomous systems numbers (ASN) to the regional and national registries (RIRs). The ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) is responsible for coordinating the domain names, maintaining the root server of the DNS (Domain Name System) and supporting the IANA activities.

T here is a specific group for defining open standards for the Internet, the IETF (Internet Engineering Task Force). There is also the W3C Consortium, an international community of companies, government bodies and other entities that work together with the public to develop specific standards for the Web. Those fora develop open standards that can be voluntarily adopted by the community of users and by technology companies.

The IGF (Internet Governance Forum) is a forum coordinated by the United Nations for discussing all the aspects related to the Internet Governance, and it is an example of the latter group: fora created to define public policy in wider debates, including for example aspects related to human rights. Among the national level fora, Brazil has adopted a model of Internet Governance praised by

many international experts as a good practice. The Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI.br) is a multistakeholder collegiate body composed by representatives of four sectors: government, companies, scientific and technologic community and the organized civil society (third sector). This way, government is not the central player in developing guidelines, because all the interested actors participate and help determining the best for the Internet in Brazil.

An important practice adopted by the Internet Governance ecosystem is multistakeholderism, that is, the setting of discussions in which all interested parties participate in equal footing. This aims to decision-making and public policy-making in a way that benefits the whole society. Such practice is a evolution of multilateralism, a practice used in many organs of the United Nations, in which originally only governments had voice in decision-making processes. The multistakeholder model was not originated in Internet Governance discussions, but in the environmental and sustainable development talks. Multistakeholderism became a key concept for Internet Governance between the two phases of the World Summit on the Information Society, introduced by the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) at some point between 2003 and 2005.

In spite of the wide usage of this concept in Internet Governance, there is still no clear and direct definition of what "multistakeholder" actually means. In the Geneva Declaration of Principles and in the Tunis Agenda -- the final documents of WSIS -- the concept appears but not defined but indirectly, through the definition of how should be the Internet Governance process.

There are many point in common among the various multistakeholder initiatives, but it is important to remember that there are many differences among the multistakeholder Internet Governance fora in relation to:

- Goals (for instance: policy-making, conflict management, decision-making, project or program development, resources management, economic development);
- Issues (for example: privacy, network neutrality, technical standards, human rights);
- Scale (local or global);
- Participants (governments, companies, civil society, technical community);
- Processes (long or short duration, different methods).

The adoption of the multistakeholder model is not a universal consensus and is subject to some criticism, about the inefficiency of those process, its costs or lack of celerity, the lack of definition of which are the stakeholders involved, their roles and responsibilities. Critics also have also been asking for "a greater formalization of Internet Governance" for about a decade. Another possible criticism involves the interpretation that the adoption of a multistakeholder model in global processes can ultimately favour developed democracies, because, in some parts of the world, the private sector and the civil society are not very articulate or do not dispose of resources to take part in such debates. Due to the difficulties that multistakeholder governance can face in attributing rights and responsibilities to each stakeholder, critics doubt it might be a model able to effectively manage the Internet.

Another important matter is transparency in the selection of representatives of each stakeholder group. One might hope that the multistakeholder model solve all the problems of representativity and legitimacy in the several fora of Internet Governance, but multistakeholderism per se can not guarantee that the stakeholders are adequately represented in the discussions.

Even with all the criticism, the multistakeholder model has been adopted as the preferred form of governance by the Internet community and it has been consolidating through the years. Since the nature of the Internet is decentralized, open and borderless, multistakeholderism is the best model to fit its complexity. After all, the multistakeholder model share the same nature: it is open to the participation of the various stakeholders, it is decentralized and borderless, and there is no only organization or group to rule it.

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This article is a result from the author's ascertainment and analysis, without compulsorily reflecting CEST's opinion.