The Origin and Evolution of Multistakeholder Models

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Various domains have adopted multistakeholder models (MSMs) to address and deal with global challenges, such as sustainability, environment, climate, and Internet governance. Here, the authors examine the use of MSMs and their historical evolution, fundamentals, and characteristics. They also present examples of how such models are used in the global Internet governance ecosystem. Finally, the article presents a series of research questions that can be tackled to improve the efficiency of multistakeholder processes.

Multi-stakeholder processes aim to bring together all major stakeholders in a new form of communication, decision-finding (and possibly decision-making) on a particular issue; are based on recognition of the importance of achieving equity and accountability in communication between stakeholders; involve equitable representation of three or more stakeholder groups and their views; are based on democratic principles of transparency and participation; and aim to develop partnerships and strengthened networks between and among stakeholders.[1]

The Internet has enabled politics, the economy, work, entertainment, and personal relationships to develop increasingly in cyberspace. No longer just a technology, the Internet now has a strong and broad social and economic impact on all countries. Cyberspace has become strategic for development in most nations. As a result, countries have been building local policies and frameworks for cybersecurity and Internet governance.

The next couple of years will be crucial in redrawing the map of global Internet governance. Edward Snowden's revelations of massive surveillance and the announcement from the US National Telecommunications & Information Administration (NTIA) that it will seek to withdraw its role as the administrator of the IANA contract could change the global Internet governance ecosystem.

The Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG), set up by the UN secretary-general in 2003, introduced the first working definition for the term: "the development and application by governments, the private sector, and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programs that shape the evolution and use of the Internet."[2] Since then, different countries have adopted different models. These vary from utopian self-governing models of individual liberty beyond the reach of government control, to models in which Internet-related activities are subject to regulation through governments and regulatory agencies. Many variations of Internet governance models rely on the concepts and ideas introduced by multistakeholder processes.[3,4]

The recent Global Multistakeholder Meeting on the Future of Internet Governance (NETmundial) in Brazil produced an outcome document recommending that *multistakeholder models* (MSMs) be the central axis for the evolution of Internet governance.[5] This document presents the Internet governance framework as a distributed and coordinated ecosystem involving various organizations and fora. Governance bodies must be inclusive, transparent, and accountable, and their

structures and operations must follow an approach that enables all stakeholders to participate to address the interests of all who use the Internet as well as those who aren't yet online. So, the reader might be wondering — what is the origin of the multistakeholder concept, and how has it been applied to practical matters?

Here, we present an overview of MSMs, their use, and their historical evolution, and examine their adoption in various domains, particularly the global Internet governance ecosystem.

The Origin and Fundamentals of MSMs

In 1992, the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro[6] alerted the world to several global environmental and developmental problems and placed sustainability on the agenda of the international community, national governments, and representatives from various sectors.[1] To achieve broad support for sustainable principles, various elements of society clearly had to learn how to listen to each other and integrate different views and interests to achieve practical solutions that would lead to a more sustainable world. These environmental discussions emphasized the roles of *stakeholders*: individuals or groups that have an interest in a particular decision because they can either influence or be affected by it.

The very first organization to recognize the relevant role of multiple stakeholders in the discussion of global issues was the International Labour Organization (ILO), which in 1919 created a model with representatives from governments, employers, and unions.[1]

More recently, multistakeholder discussions took place at the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CDS), which introduced the concept as an engagement model within the UN for sustainable development issues. "Agenda 21" for 1992's UN Conference on Environment and
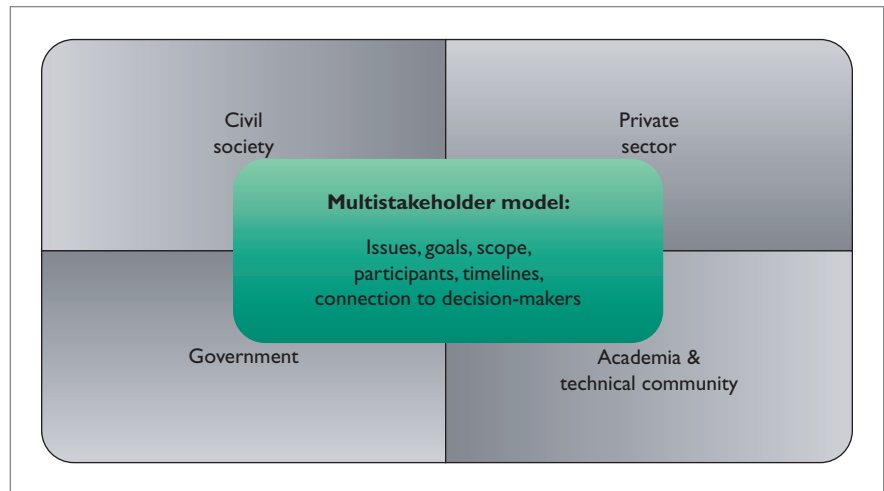

Figure 1. Main components of a multistakeholder model. We can see the different stakeholders that are typically involved in the operation of an MSM.

Development is the first UN document to include different stakeholders' roles in a global agreement.[6]

The adoption of multistakeholder processes has been slow because many governments and intergovernmental bodies don't feel comfortable with the growing influence of certain stakeholders, viewing them as unelected representatives who lack legitimacy.[1] But the benefits of MSMs surpass their difficulties and create mutual benefits for the whole of society. MSMs have the potential to promote better decisions through broader inputs.

Several features are common to existing MSMs. In general, MSMs vary with regard to the issues being addressed, which range from healthcare, poverty, and gender equity to Internet governance. Figure 1 shows a typical MSM composition, including stakeholders and the model's main components: goals, participants, scope, timelines, and connection to official decision makers.

Goals

MSMs can be designed to reach goals that would be unachievable if each stakeholder worked alone. For instance, the goal of preserving a unified Internet that's unfragmented, interconnected, interoperable, open,

inclusive, secure, stable, resilient, and trustworthy wouldn't be possible if only governments were involved in the agreement.

Participants

Commonly, MSMs involve representatives from different groups interested or affected by the issue under examination. Their composition should thus be highly diverse. For example, in the case of Internet governance, the main stakeholders are civil society, government, the private sector, and technical and academic communities.

Scope

MSMs can help address issues at national, regional, or international levels. For instance, ICANN is a multistakeholder body that operates at the international level. The five Regional Internet Registries (RIRs) manage the distribution of number identifiers allocated by IANA, and are multistakeholder bodies that operate regionally.

Timelines

MSMs can be constructed for single events or open-ended processes, depending on the issue under examination. For example, NETmundial was designed to be a one-time event organized by a multistakeholder committee.[5] The Internet Governance Forum

(IGF) has a mandate from the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) with regard to convening an annual forum for multistakeholder policy dialogue. ICANN is a permanent organization with a multistakeholder structure for coordinating the Internet's naming system.

Connection to Decision-Makers

Multistakeholder bodies can interact in different ways with official decision-making processes at the international, regional, or national levels. Some MSM bodies are purely informative. Others can develop best practices concerning a particular issue and present them to governments. Multistakeholder bodies can also conduct participatory monitoring of issues that affect society, such as a deforestion index or the quality of Internet access provided by telecommunications operators.

MultiStakeholder Bodies for Internet Governance

From a historical viewpoint, the opportunities for various stakeholders to participate in governance processes increased with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. The World Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, was one of the first multistakeholder conferences. Coincidentally, it was the first UN event to use the Internet, enabling the first opportunities for online participation. This was especially useful for civil society organizations that couldn't afford to be in Rio de Janeiro, and even for some South American governments that had no other adequate means of remote communication with their local bases. This was the beginning of a sequence of global conferences that now use multistakeholder presence in their discussion threads. Of special note was the second World Conference on Human Rights (WCHR) in Vienna (June 1993), which resulted in the Vienna Declaration on Human Rights approved by 171 countries and then adopted by the UN General Assembly (UNGA). The conference resulted in the creation of the High Commissioner for Human rights of the UN in December of the same year.

Multistakeholder participation has since been a feature of UN conferences and their agencies. One interesting question is, what are the limits of this participation? Pluralistic processes involve civil society, the private and public sectors, academic and technical communities, and other interest groups that join, conscious of their distinct roles and responsibilities, for a stated common goal. In the past decade, we can point to important participation from organized civil society with relevant interests in events such as campaigns for the right to communication in the information society, and the strong presence in the WSIS process, where for the first time the "Internet governance" concept appeared and was elaborated with significant depth.

In fact, the Internet governance domain offers several examples of multistakeholder processes. For instance, the IGF is a multistakeholder forum for policy dialogue on Internet governance issues.[2] It's open and inclusive, bringing all stakeholders together to exchange information and share best practices on Internet-related public policy issues. Another example is the NETmundial meeting, which was prepared as a multistakeholder conference to discuss Internet governance's future development.[7] The conference's importance stems from how it was organized and executed. The meeting's multistakeholder nature involved civil society segments, governments, private companies, and academic and technical communities worldwide. Representatives from more than 100 countries approved by rough consensus a document of principles and a roadmap for the evolution of the Internet governance ecosystem.[5]

Pluralistic Processes in Internet Resource Management

Pluralistic decision-making processes, with their specific limitations, are present in the structures of Internet resource management. Evolving Internet technologies are coordinated by organizations such as the IETF, which proposes standards and parameters through recommendations adopted by consensus after they're discussed in open forums. The global coordination of IP number distribution is executed in practice by all five RIRs. This group constitutes an organization that seeks consensus for its policies: the Number Resources Organization (NRO). These policies are developed in pluralistic dialogues at regular meetings, open to participation from all sectors. Even though the central stock of network numbering resources falls formally under ICANN through the IANA function and is under contract between ICANN and the NTIA, in practice, the number distribution mechanisms are governed by the RIRs.

ICANN's focus is coordinating mnemonics network addressing (domain names). Its multistakeholder participation structure is well organized through support organizations and committees in which governments (Government Advisory Committee), industry, registries, registrars (Generic Names Supporting Organization and Country Code Names Supporting Organization), and civil society (Non-Commercial Stakeholders Group and At-Large Advisory Committee) strongly participate and elect representatives to ICANN's board. A certain number of board members are nominated by committee.

Some cases reveal pluralist approaches' limitations — in particular, the decision-making processes aren't entirely derived from such participation. All stakeholders recognize that they play a more consultative and advisory role in the organization's decision-making processes. The board always makes the final decisions. This doesn't mean that different

stakeholders accept the status quo. The different sectors represented in ICANN seek ways to expand their influence on decisions in a context where imbalances are obvious – for example, due to economic power or political leverage that could favor some stakeholders.

Network Users as Stakeholders

Computer networks have existed with a wide variety of features and forms since the early 1970s. In contrast to this variety, the user community was, until the mid-80s, almost homogeneously composed of academics looking to remotely use computing resources. The popularization of PCs led ordinary people to use them in their own organizations and thus stimulated a growing individual involvement among communities with specific interests for exchanging data and ideas. The old bulletin board systems, which initially provided a way to exchange information in an isolated environment, demonstrated the yearning for direct communication between users on many issues. In the early 1980s, another platform generated yet more synergy: the deployment of USENET. Thousands of machines based on the UNIX standard protocol (UUCP) brought integration to user groups. The spread of many forums on various topics (USENET News) enabled open discussions and the creation of interest groups. The spread of electronic mail and mailing lists definitely brought the second wave of network users: individuals and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) quickly joined academics in taking advantage of the new media for a faster, cheaper, and more efficient way to communicate.

In Brazil, for example, academic networks arose in the late 1980s. In 1991, civil society became the second wave, and the wide diversity of protocols (Bitnet, UUCP, DECnet, X.28, X.25, X.400, and so on) quickly coalesced toward a single solution:

TCP/IP – the Internet. The creation of the World Wide Web 25 years ago shaped a new scenario in which users not only had access to information but also found efficient ways to be active in cyberspace, expressing their views and fully participating in the network. Interestingly, before the Web, little talk focused on security and privacy threats, or spying on data traffic. Even spam attacks and malicious code were rare at the time, in part because of the analog nature of communication in narrow bandwidth links, and in part because participants were academics and third sector. The Internet's expansion outside the limits of these initial adopters, together with its disruptive characteristics and ability to extend beyond national boundaries, changed the network scenario. Many countries perceived the Internet as something different from the traditional and highly regulated telecommunications world and began to work on ways to govern it.

An Early MSM

The need for permanent discussions about governance models for the Internet stems from its impressive growth, both in number of users and strategic importance. The creation of a multistakeholder body for Internet governance began initially within a country and then became a feasible and globally applicable model. By examining the Brazilian case, we can make this quite clear. The Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI.br) was created in 1995. It anticipated some of the features ICANN (established in 1998) exhibits, and also became a reference for the discussions introduced at WSIS 2005.

In 1995, the Brazilian government created CGI.br as a multistakeholder, nonregulatory governance body. Two years later, Brazilian telecommunications legislation defined the Internet as a "value-added service" that made it different from the telecommunications infrastructure that supports

it. This innovative approach let the Internet grow quickly in Brazil. The CGI board has 21 members: nine from government organizations, four from civil society, four from the private sector, and four from the academic and technical communities. The government members are appointed, and all other members are elected by their respective communities. Note that no single sector, even government, has a majority of votes on the board. Everything has to be negotiated among the participants. The CGI board's composition clearly reflects the Internet's multistakeholder nature. It works without public funds; the community supports CGI when registering under the .br domain (that is, the ccTLD). Any budget surplus is used in the harmonious development of the Internet in Brazil. The innovative MSM and its nongovernmental nature isn't always well understood by the public. The same observation applies to its "nonregulatory" behavior, which is always contrasted with the traditionally regulated environment in the telecommunications industry.

Internet Governance and Sustainable Development

Internet governance and sustainable development are processes that share some similarities. The concept of sustainable development refers to development that meets present needs without compromising the needs of future generations. The concept that underpins Internet governance also refers to the principles, norms, rules, and procedures that will shape tomorrow's Internet. So, the two processes work with values that are essential for future generations.

Both Internet governance and sustainable development require a process of dialogue and consensus building from all stakeholders to construct viable solutions, work to implement them, and monitor and assess the outcomes. MSMs are central to both processes, which face global

challenges with strong social and economic impacts.

Consensus Building

Consensus building is a key activity for multistakeholder governance bodies. Stakeholder representatives present their views and positions on a particular issue. Then, they engage in a dialogue to achieve mutual understanding of problems. Based on this improved understanding, the body's chair or mediator seeks a consensus. The quest for consensus in MSMs is almost never an organized or orderly process. Because all stakeholders participate on equal footing, discussions are usually messy, with unpredictable developments. This equal footing basis is an essential MSM characteristic that aims at reducing specific groups' traditional influence and power, such as economic and political influence. Every stakeholder has the right to be heard based only their perspective on the problem. In a consensus-building process, the different stakeholders work to design solutions that minimize their differences. Although participants might not be in accord with all aspects of the agreement, consensus is reached if all stakeholders are willing to accept the decision and participate in its implementation.

MSMs are always evolving. They are a new species in the biodiversity of structures for governing complex issues. Climate change, Internet governance, and water management are just some of the pressing global issues that have been experimenting with different forms of MSMs to find agreements that could lead to sustainable solutions.

However, MSMs aren't simple to implement. There are inherent difficulties in running a multistakeholder body. The implementation should tailor the process to multiple stakeholders' specificities, such as decision timing, representativeness, and language. These values are essential to achieve credibility and legitimacy within the different communities — a mandatory characteristic for making the multistakeholder decision processes viable and doable. Additionally, the decision process is sometimes too cumbersome and depends to great extent on the governing body's leadership. Clearly, a need exists for common learning on multistakeholder processes.

Many questions regarding the structure and dynamic of MSMs remain unanswered:

- How do we identify the most adequate set of stakeholders to work on a particular issue?
- How do we define the mechanisms for selecting representatives from different groups?
- How to we avoid letting influential NGOs and corporate power capture the multistakeholder process?
- How can crowdsourcing techniques be used to provide input into the dialogues of hard issues?
- What technologies could help stakeholder representatives "feel the pulse" of their constituencies?
- What technologies could allow multistakeholder governance bodies to monitor the results of their agreements?
- What kind of technological framework will facilitate dialogue in a multistakeholder body so that a minimum consensus can be achieved?
- What type of technology could be developed to accelerate the decision process in multistakeholder organizations?
- What kind of theoretical model will support consensus building and decision making in multistakeholder environments?

These questions represent an opportunity for the research and development of new technologies that bring more efficiency to this process. 🄶

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