Civil Society Speaks Out on WCIT – Will Governments Listen?

by Matthew Shears
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Civil society advocates from around the world are weighing in on proposals to the upcoming World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT), but there's no guarantee that governments are listening.

Last July, the International Telecommunication Union set up a web portal [1] where anyone could submit comments about the WCIT, scheduled to start December 3rd in Dubai. While the ITU Secretariat provided the webpage as a gesture towards multistakeholder participation, the submissions will not be formally submitted to the conference or included in the official record. Member States won't see these important views unless they go out of their way to find the portal and read individual comments.

Along with CDT [2], organisations such as the Internet Society [3], the Association for Progressive Communications [4], the IEEE [5], EuroIX [6], a coalition of Indian civil society organizations [7], the Number Resource Organization [8], Article 19 [9], JPNIC [10], AfICTA [11] and many others contributed substantive and well-articulated comments on the revisions to the ITRs and the WCIT more generally. The majority of the submissions echo and reinforce concerns about the WCIT process and proposed revisions to the ITRs that have been raised by many stakeholders for months.

In particular, there is considerable opposition to expanding the ITRs into Internet-related territory for reasons ranging from technical to governance-related, to the impact on innovation and the digital divide. Many commenters called for the ITRs to remain high-level and for specific issues such as cybersecurity, spam, and naming and numbering resources to be dealt with by existing organisations or mechanisms. Others question the need and rationale for extending the scope of the ITRs through changing the definitions of key terms. And, concerns about the potential impact of the proposed revisions on human rights are widely shared.

The WCIT is now three weeks away and public concern over the risks ITR revisions could pose to the Internet is not abating. Some governments have opened their WCIT delegations to other non-government stakeholders and we commend them for this. But many, particularly from civil society, are without representation. Some will travel to Dubai in the hope that the WCIT plenary sessions will be opened to the public. Those government delegations that value transparency and inclusive processes must encourage the utmost openness at the WCIT by:

- Including civil society and other stakeholders on their delegations;
- Considering the comments submitted to the ITU's site, and
- Agreeing to open as much of the WCIT as possible to participation by the press and the public.

Discussing these issues behind closed doors is contrary to the very principles that underpin the Internet and the interests of all those who work so hard to keep it open and free.

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- WCIT
- ITU

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