

WTPF: Shades of WCIT at Next Big Internet Governance Conference

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Although [the WCIT](#) [2] is over, international debate about Internet governance and policy continue, full speed ahead. December's treaty conference closed with a complex set of [national positions](#) [3] and [reservations](#) [4], with 55 countries opting not to sign the new draft of the [International Telecommunication Regulations](#) [5].

[Many](#) [6] have attempted to [piece together](#) [7] a [coherent story](#) [8] of what happened during the WCIT. The not-so-subtle subtext running through all these accounts is that many of the policy issues and concerns raised at that conference will be on the agenda for the ITU's next big meeting, the [World Telecommunication Policy Forum \(WTPF\)](#) [9].

WTPF, scheduled for 14-16 May in Geneva, is a forum for ITU Member States and Sector Members to discuss emerging telecommunication policy and regulatory issues from a global perspective. Unlike WCIT, however, WTPF will not produce treaties or other prescriptive regulatory outcomes. Instead, it will adopt non-binding opinions by consensus – that is, consensus of Member States and ITU Sector Members, since members of the public can only apply for [“observer” status](#) [10] and may not have the ability to speak up during meetings.

Despite the non-binding nature of the WTPF opinions, these core documents will help to shape the direction of future work in ITU meetings, including the Plenipotentiary meeting in 2014, where Member States will meet and potentially redefine the role of the ITU within the Internet governance universe. We already know that the developing agenda for WTPF is broad, encompassing a range of [Internet governance and policy topics](#) [11]. Discussions around WTPF provide important opportunities for human rights advocates and technical experts to engage with stakeholders from around the world and share their insights and approaches to Internet policy challenges, particularly in the wake of the often-contentious WCIT process.

Discussion topics for WTPF are set well in advance of the meeting and are based on the Secretary General's report. This document incorporates [contributions](#) [12] of ITU Member States and Sector Members and serves as the sole official working document of the conference. The report and draft opinions come together through a series of meetings of an Informal Experts Group (IEG) that convened periodically to plan for the WTPF. CDT's Matthew Shears joined several other members of civil society in participating in the group's third and final meeting last week. (See Access Now's run-down of the meeting [here](#) [13].)

Setting the Agenda

At the three-day meeting, participants focused on reconciling stakeholders' revisions to draft opinions on infrastructure and routing topics, including the IPv6 transition and deployment of Internet Exchange Points (IXPs), as well as multistakeholder governance questions. Stakeholders largely echoed positions taken at the WCIT on these and other issues in their comments to the Secretary General's WTPF report and in the draft opinions. A number of Member State and industry stakeholders emphasized the importance of civil society involvement in these debates, and Shears took the floor to make a statement underscoring the importance of independent civil society participation:

While the WTPF is designed to foster debate and build multi-stakeholder consensus, the mechanisms for participation in the forum itself do not allow for true “multi-stakeholder consensus” or inclusive debate as civil society does not have the ability to participate in its own right as a distinct stakeholder grouping.

We appreciated the multi-stakeholder nature of many of the delegations at the WCIT and look forward to being able to contribute further in that manner, but it is important that in these and future discussions civil society also has the ability to contribute as an independent voice.

Civil society brings incredibly valuable technical, human rights and policy insights and expertise to deliberations such as these. CDT believes that civil society should be able to bring this expertise to the WTPF in May and make its views heard and included in a meaningful way.”¹

The IEG meeting produced [six draft opinions](#) [14], which will guide discussion at the WTP; two of these will likely provoke serious debate. The first, “Supporting Multi-Stakeholderism in Internet Governance” concerns the nature and role of multi-stakeholder processes. The second, “On Supporting Operationalizing the Enhanced Cooperation Process,” invokes the perennial debate over the definition of “enhanced cooperation”, a term of art that, depending on who you talk to, can mean facilitating cooperation on Internet governance matters either among 1) governments at inter-governmental bodies or 2) all stakeholders through a variety of decentralized fora. CDT will be taking an in-depth look at the report and opinions in the coming weeks.

On the participation front, there are both positive signs and open questions coming out of last week’s IEG meeting. We were encouraged to see that the ITU provided opportunities for several civil society representatives to join the IEG meeting remotely, demonstrating efforts towards transparency and greater access. The Secretary General, Dr. Hamadoun Touré, has announced that he will be inviting all IEG participants who are not ITU members to attend the WTPF as his personal guests. It is unclear at this point, however, what level of participation these personal guests will be granted. Regardless, participation privileges bestowed on a few members of civil society would not address the limitations faced by civil society generally in being relegated to “observer” status.

One issue is very clear after last week’s IEG meeting: It is critically important that civil society remain vocal and engaged before, during, and after the forum. Civil society must not only push for transparency and participation in the WTPF, we must also take advantage where these opportunities already exist.

As conversations about fundamental Internet policy questions take place among governments and industry from around the world, the best defense of the multistakeholder model is a clear demonstration of the value that civil society brings to the table.

1. ¹ CDT’s full statement at the IEG meeting is available [here](#). [15]

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