Internet governance during the COVID-19 pandemic

Co-authored by Bill Woodcock, PCH Executive Director, Gael Hernandez, PCH Senior Manager of Interconnection Policy and Regulatory Affairs and Sara Hassan, PCH System Administrator.

The Internet has become an integral part of our lives. Its growth is dependent upon the interaction of engineers, researchers, and network operators to advance networking technologies, policies, governance mechanisms, and deployment. In this undertaking, the Internet's multi-stakeholder governance has relied heavily upon regular face-to-face meetings and conferences to gather individuals and organizations from numerous participating communities. As the COVID-19 pandemic has closed borders and shut down countries, the Internet community has had to adapt its own mechanisms to address this unexpected challenge.

A busy Internet governance calendar

More than two hundred Internet governance events were organized during 2019 in more than twenty-five countries by the different communities shaping the future of the net. The Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), for instance, a large international community of network designers, operators, vendors, and researchers concerned with the evolution of the Internet architecture and the smooth operation of the Internet, met in Prague (Czech Republic), Montreal (Canada), and Singapore, with about one thousand onsite attendees and eight hundred remote attendees in each meeting. ICANN, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, which coordinates unique identifiers (protocols, domain names and numbers), organizes three events per year with a regional rotation. Last year, ICANN meetings took place in Kobe (Japan), Marrakech (Morocco), and Montreal (Canada). Similarly, the five regional Internet registries (ARIN, LACNIC, RIPE, AfriNIC, and APNIC) each organizes one or two events per year. The Internet governance forum, regional peering forums, security forums, network operators' group (NOG)

events, and IXP events are also exaemples of the bottom-up and multi-stakeholder governance approach to decision making and policy development in the Internet.
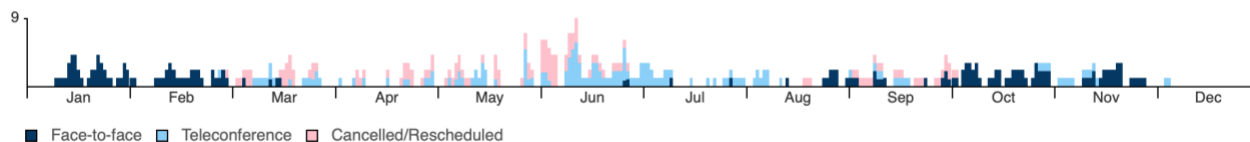
Common to all these events is the gathering of many constituents in a single locale for several days, with conference and work meetings during the day and social activities in the evenings. Many governance events do include aspects of remote participation, such as discussion on mailing lists, but physical interaction and face-to-face discussion can accelerate consensus building, a key decision-making process in Internet governance.

No more face-to-face gatherings, everyone stay at home

The COVID-19 pandemic has led health officials to declare a global health emergency. Most governments have issued strict social distancing measures including banning gatherings to reduce the risk of contagion. <u>Well over 100 countries worldwide had instituted either a full or partial lockdown by the end of March 2020</u>, affecting billions of people. Gradually, many countries decided to close their national borders, resulting in an unprecedented global lockdown.

These restrictions have had an impact on the meetings and conferences that make up the Internet governance calendar, with events being cancelled, limited to teleconference-only, and rescheduled. Significant effort has been invested by event organizers to adapt programs and event dynamics to online-only formats.

Packet Clearing House (PCH), a global non-profit that provides operational support and security to critical Internet infrastructure, maintains a public calendar of Internet governance events that <u>anyone can view or subscribe to</u>.

■ Face-to-face ☐ Teleconference ☐ Cancelled/Rescheduled

Source: PCH Internet governance meetings calendar, https://www.internetmeetings.org

As we can observe in the histogram, all 103 events planned for March, April, May, June, and July 2020 have been either cancelled, rescheduled, or limited to tele-conferencing. The 2020 African Internet Summit, which had been planned to take place in Kinshasa in June, was cancelled outright and then rescheduled to take place online in September. The African Peering and Interconnection Forum was rescheduled to next year. Only a few face-to-face events in August and September have not been cancelled or postponed. Most events planned for October, November, and December have not yet being cancelled, but some such as RIPE 81 will be conducted online-only.

Overall, 17.2% of the events have been cancelled and 7.8% have been rescheduled (coded in pink) for 2021. Of the remaining 75% active events, more than half (54.8%) will take place by teleconference (coded with light blue in the histogram).

Virtual conferences: a successful experiment so far

The COVID-19 outbreak has forced the Internet community to turn to online-only virtual events in order to continue advancing work. Almost half of the scheduled meetings in 2020 are now set to be online. The first organization to do this was ICANN, which was quick to move its 67th public meeting to an online format, on March 7 of this year.

Another side effect of restrictions on travel is a surge in a new type of event addressing the global Internet governance community. Webinars, seminars conducted via videoconference, now account for 31.85% of the year's total, and that portion continues to increase as more webinars are scheduled and

remaining face-to-face meetings continue to be canceled. Organizations are increasingly finding ways of doing outreach and garnering participation in the absence of face-to-face meetings.

Although virtual conferences fail to provide some of the opportunities that physical gatherings do, virtualization has allowed total participation numbers to increase. The RIPE 80 meeting, originally scheduled to take place in Berlin over four days in May, was shortened to two days. About 2,000 attendees registered, and 1,148 actually participated, 691 via a dedicated teleconferencing tool and 457 via video streaming on the web. In contrast, the second largest RIPE conference by number of participants (RIPE 78 in Reykjavík) had 742 attendees. The RIPE Network Coordination Centre had to make changes to the traditional meeting agenda to fit the shortened schedule and reconceive the means of interaction among the session chairs, presenters, and audience. Feedback and discussions on RIPE's mailing lists suggest that the experiment was considered a success, and this positive experience probably helped RIPE decide to hold the upcoming October meeting online as well.

Reducing barriers to participation

COVID-19 restrictions have created a great deal of turmoil, but they have simultaneously increased accessibility and reduced barriers to participation in ways that may help to mend the rift of the "digital divide" and increase equity for developing nations. Teleconferences enable anyone with a working Internet connection and a computer or smartphone to participate in events on an equal basis. Although the amount of bandwidth available to people in developing countries may still pose an obstacle in some cases, and fluency in the language in which the meeting is held is still necessary for full real-time interaction, many of the greatest impediments have been relieved: often-unavailable visas are no longer required, scarce hotel rooms and expensive and time-consuming air travel need no longer be arranged. Perhaps even more important, although virtualized meetings may require participation at odd hours of the night, they no longer require participants to spend days or weeks away from their jobs and families. Because the vast majority of Internet governance meetings have historically been held in developed

countries, and air travel between developed countries is more available and less expensive than air travel to or from developing countries, the burden of participation has been much heavier for those from developing countries.

Internet governance events held in developing countries

Source: PCH Internet governance meetings calendar, https://www.internetmeetings.org
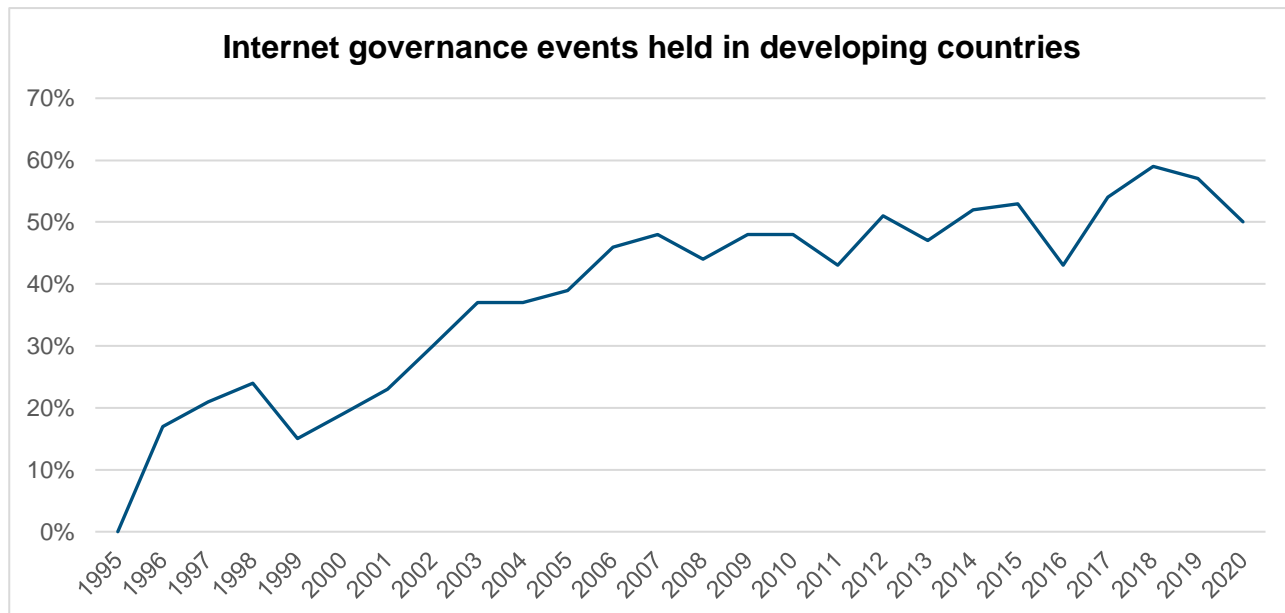
Because resources are scarcer in developing countries and their currencies often fluctuate relative to those of the countries in which meetings have more often been held, each trip poses a greater financial burden and risk for those traveling from developing countries. And visa restrictions, where they exist, are usually imposed upon developing countries by developed ones.

In these circumstances, we see the increasing prevalence of online meetings as a path to more equitable participation in Internet governance and development. Reducing the artificial barriers to entry, we believe, will broaden participation, yielding broader dispersion of knowledge, better decision making, and better outcomes.

Although this "new normal" may not be desirable in all ways, the Internet using the Internet to govern the Internet is a change for the better, one we fervently hope can be made permanent. An Internet designed by all is an Internet that will better serve all.