The Internet as a Global Public Resource

Policy Research and Dialogue Project

Concept Note (4 May 2015)

Background

The view that the Internet is a global public resource[1] is shared by governments, business, and civil society worldwide. The Internet meets the main characteristics to qualify as a global public resource – being global in its architecture and use. Most of the Internet is non-excludable (no exclusion through property rights) and non-rivalrous (use by one person does not prevent others from using it).

The International Conference on Internet as a Global Public Resource (hosted by DiploFoundation and the Government of Malta, 29–30 April 2015 www.diplomacy.edu/maltaconference2015) initiated a policy dialogue and research aimed at further developing the concept of the Internet as a global public resource.

Implementation

Over the next 12 months, representatives of governments, business, academia, and civil society will gather for brainstorming sessions, policy roundtables, and international conferences on the Internet as a global public resource. The project will also feed into the wide range of policy processes, including the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the WSIS+10 review process, and ongoing discussions regarding the globalisation of ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers). The final report will be submitted in early 2016 (see timeline below).

The project will address three main questions:
- WHAT aspects of the Internet could be considered a global public resource?
- HOW can existing concepts (such as global public good and common heritage of mankind) be applied to the Internet?
- WHO are the main actors (governments, business, civil society) and how will they act in promoting and protecting the Internet as a global public resource?

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[1] 'Global public resource' is used as an umbrella term. The closest related concept is 'global public good' which is more specific. Other concepts include: common concern, common heritage of mankind, and global commons.

1. WHAT

The project on the scope of the Internet as a global public resource starts from the Internet 'as a whole' or a system narrowing down to its more specific aspects.

For example, there is wide consensus that the core Internet standards (TCP/IP and HTML) could be considered global public goods. These standards are non-excludable and non-rivalrous. When it comes to knowledge and information on the Internet, some services, such as Wikipedia, may also qualify for global public good status. The discussion is open about other information and knowledge developed through interaction and collective creativity online.
The division and interplay between global public resources and private economic resources on the Internet remain to be analysed and discussed.

The project will address more technical aspects of the Internet which could be considered as global public goods, including the root zone system, the pool of IP numbers, the telecommunication infrastructure, and aspects of Internet security, to name a few.

2. HOW

The 'How' question will be addressed around three sets of issues: a) the Internet and use of existing global public resource concepts; b) the impact of the Internet on other global public goods (development, peace, human rights); c) dealing with negative and positive effects and externalities.

2.1. The project will analyse the applicability of the following policy and legal concepts to the Internet:
- Common concern
- Global public goods
- *Res communis omnium*
- Common heritage of mankind

The applicability of these concepts will be addressed for both the Internet 'as a whole' and for specific aspects of the Internet (e.g. standards, knowledge, security/stability).

2.2. The Internet as a promoter and protector of other global public goods
The research will also address the Internet as an instrument in promoting and protecting other global public goods, including peace and security, development, and human rights. Particular focus will be on the use of the Internet for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2.3. Positive and negative effects and externalities
The Internet, as a global public resource, creates a wide range of spillover effects and externalities. The project will map out the effects and externalities, including, among others, externalities related to the existence (or lack) of Internet security and stability, externalities associated with affordable access to the Internet (or lack of it), and a single vs fragmented Internet.

3. WHO

The promotion and protection of the Internet as a global public resource requires the involvement of all actors, including governments, international institutions, the business sector, the academic and technical communities, and civil society. Some public goods, such as security, have been traditionally in the governments' remit. Other public goods related to economic growth are provided mainly by private companies, while civil society has traditionally provided public goods related to social equity and cohesion.

The role of main actors is being gradually shaped in Internet politics. For example, most Internet services provided by private companies (search engines, social media) can fulfill the main criteria for being considered as a global public good: being both non-excludable and non-rivalrous. At the same time, this new Internet economy opens up the debate on numerous spillover effects, including access (or lack of it) in developing countries, Internet stability and security, and management of data. What will be the role of governments, the private sector, and civil society in dealing with these effects?

In order to address this question in an effective and inclusive way, the project will involve a wide range of actors. This dialogue will be supported by comprehensive policy research aimed at exploring if and how the experience from other policy fields, such as environmental protection, could be used in Internet policy.

Next steps and timeline

The project will use an agile management approach by ensuring an interplay between policy dialogue and research through an iterative process. The project should be implemented along the following timeline.

	Policy research	Policy dialogue
May	Creating a policy consortium and ensuring project support.	
June	Establishing three research groups for the three main questions (what, who, and how) with identified deliverables. Preparing the first concept paper. Organising the first multidisciplinary consultation with climate change, security, trade, and other communities.	Two roundtables on 'the Internet as a global public resource', one in Brussels and another in Geneva, with the participation of all involved actors.
July	Holding an ideas workshop (Malta) involving core researchers (three groups), thought leaders (philosophers, lawyers, creative thinkers), and policy leaders.	

	Policy research	Policy dialogue
August	Preparing the first draft report which will be used for policy dialogue.	Regional consultations in Asia (Bangkok or Jakarta).
September	Initiating an online academic exchange.	Roundtable (New York): How can the concept of the Internet as a global public resource facilitate a positive digital policy agenda?
October		Regional consultations with African and European policymakers.
November	Preparing the second draft report.	High-level policy meeting on the occasion of the CHOGM Summit in Malta (November 2015). Possible input into the final communiqué for CHOGM. IGF – Brazil.
December		WSIS +10 (side event) in New York/Geneva.
January 2016	Preparing the final report.	Presentation of the report to business and policy communities at the WEF-Davos.
February–May	Disseminating the project results in policy and academic communities *in situ* (conferences, roundtables, policy briefings) and online (social media, webinars, etc.).	

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