
Who Sets ICANN's Priorities? Notes from Cross Community Session ICANN 59 Johannesburg 28 June 2017

Background

This was a cross community session proposed by the ccNSO. The Adobe Connect recording of the session (and, in due course, transcript) can be found [here](#).

The session was chaired by Thomas Schneider (GAC). Moderators were Jordan Carter (ccNSO) and Chuck Gomes (GNSO). There were two panels: one dealing with who sets ICANN priorities (Alan Greenberg ALAC; Katrina Sataki ccNSO; Xavier Calvez ICANN Chief Finance Officer) and dealing with possible improvements (Patrik Falstrom SSAC; Cherine Chalaby ICANN Board; James Bladel GNSO).

A summary of the cross-community session at ICANN 56 (Helsinki) on ICANN workload scheduling and management (published on the GAC website at the time) is attached.

Who sets ICANN's priorities?

Formal processes for setting ICANN priorities are the Five-Year [Strategic Plan](#) and [Five-Year Operating Plan](#), supported by the Annual Operating Plan and Budget. These do have some transparency and accountability through the public comment process and the Empowered Community structure. However, the 5-year plans are set at a very high level and do not seem to influence (or be influenced by) workload realities at the SO/AC and individual volunteer levels.

The published list of [ICANN Projects](#) was noted (as it was at relevant sessions at ICANN 56) but this does not seem to have any priority-setting role.¹

SOs and ACs currently set their own priorities in a variety of ways. Several noted that the cross-community nature of nearly all ICANN work means that their workload is affected by initiatives from elsewhere in the community (including ICANN Org) over which they may have little control. There is no coordination mechanism for priority-setting or workload adjustment across different parts of the community. It was noted that a semi-formal consultation among heads of SOs/ACs immediately before ICANN meetings had been done previously but not recently.

Several participants noted that "not all stakeholders are equal" and the work of ACs tends to be driven by SOs. For example, the decision of the GNSO to pursue a PDP on new gTLD policies and procedures (with a view to further release of TLDs as soon as possible) impacts workloads and priorities for nearly all other parts of the community. A related point is that the interests of the GAC and ALAC tend to be community-wide.

There was agreement that genuinely urgent matters do get dealt with (for example, the IANA transition) but this has not helped individual groups set their own priorities.

It was noted that the problems are multiplied for participants from developing countries with limited resources and capacity.

¹ The projects listed here are under the Strategic Plan reflect the work of ICANN Org, not that of SOs and ACs.

The net result has been multiple parallel processes, work overload, a volunteer base that is not renewing, barriers to participation in ICANN processes and a feeling in many parts of the community that they have no means of prioritising work to address these problems.

How can priority-setting be improved?

The following suggestions were raised in discussion:

- The ICANN CEO will look at options for some form of SO/AC coordination group and will report back to SO/AC leaders. He also noted that work has started on a new long-term financial planning process that may well affect priorities.
- There was a range of views on a possible role for the ICANN Board. Some felt it was the Board's responsibility to address a common problem across the community. Others argued that an active role for the Board in setting community priorities would be inconsistent with the Board's responsibilities as custodian of broader community interests.
- PDPs could seek input from the rest of the community on a more targeted basis rather than put a wide range of questions out for comment as a single process.
- Longer deadlines for comment on issues would help.
- The GNSO will be considering its first strategic plan in early 2018 and there may be opportunities for community input on this.
- A new approach would be to try to allocate the 16 days per year of community face-to-face time to specific areas of agreed common interest (such as the approach taken to geographic names for ICANN 59) rather than trying to deal with multiple issues at once.
- "Learning to say 'No, not right now' " should not be in conflict with any ICANN values or processes.
- SOs and ACs could look at ways of getting out of the cycle of responding to draft ICANN budgets and strategic plans and become more pro-actively involved in their formulation.
- A cross-community session at ICANN 60 on lowering barriers to meaningful engagement in ICANN processes should be considered.

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ATTACHMENT: NOTES OF HELSINKI SESSION (ICANN 56) ON ICANN WORKLOAD SCHEDULING AND MANAGEMENT

Background

ICANN 56 hosted a series of cross community sessions in the afternoons. These notes are from the GAC Led session on Workload Scheduling and Management. The meeting was chaired by the GAC Chair Thomas Schneider and attended by people from across the ICANN community.

Discussion

A slide indicated that there may be a possibility for the community to prioritise their workload better. A speaker commented that this was very unlikely given that particular issues were of higher priority to one community than to another and that one community was unlikely to surrender its higher priority issues in the model to the benefit of another.

A common issue across all communities is the challenge of getting new volunteers to take on the work. It is often the same people, PDP after PDP generating the work. It was noted that this may be partly due to the anachronistic language used by the ICANN community. So many acronyms mean that when new work is introduced it is in a language that is alien to many people. Unless you are already on the "inside" it is hard to relate to the language and the issue and hard to see why the issue matters to you or your constituency. It is felt that the lack of clear language in the community, or conversely the continued use of a highly specialised set of language rules, is a barrier to entry for new members and works against diversity. It therefore also reinforces the habit of overwork for the regular contributors.

One contributor noted that in any team sport, the team is only as good as its slowest player or contributor. It was suggested that there would be less work and in particular less rework if the more agile parts of the community exercised more patience and worked at the pace of their slower team mates (slower parts of the community). The idea is that it would be better to socialise ideas with those slower parts of the community (ie the GAC) first and early to get them familiar with the idea and working as part of the team early. This would be better than "racing off" down a path with an idea and then having to be frustrated by returning to rework it when others will not come on board.

The meeting was reminded that some time ago a team in ICANN was tasked to do a cross community activity map. It is not certain whether or not this ever was developed, but if it did, it was not maintained. There was a view that this sort of effort should be continuously maintained and updated every time a new activity is progressed by one of the many PDP WG's or CCWG's or advice provided on a subject by one of the AC's. A map needs to be continuously maintained and available to all of the community via the front page of icann.org. It was asked whether the various liaison roles between constituencies could contribute to the development and ongoing maintenance of this map, once ICANN developed it.

There was a comment that the ICANN regional offices need to move beyond their 'general' level of expertise in engagement and become expert in the more particular. Those on the ground in region need to be active in explaining to constituents in that region (Registries and Registrars, the local community, the governments, business) the nature and impact of particular PDP discussions for their region. What will this or that PDP mean to them? How will it impact each constituent? The local offices need to bring governments, businesses, ccTLDs, end users and registries together in

regular forums in the region to discuss relevant topics in the local language. Policy development and ideas need to be driven from the local presence up into the multistakeholder model.

It was suggested that ICANN increase the use of independent rapporteurs to facilitate conversation between the various parties at genuine cross community meetings. It was felt that this may bring different parties along and decrease the work that is currently undertaken debating within a single constituency, only to come to a position and find that when it is released to a different constituency you need to start again. Instead, genuine cross community facilitation where the leaders are not from a constituency but are independent without vested interest in the outcome. This increases trust and the likelihood of genuine open dialogue.

A ‘speed dating’ concept was floated with regard to learning about differing views on differing topics. It was noted that there are always plenty of social events at an ICANN meeting. Perhaps re-purposing those with a specific outcome in mind around a particular PDP or discussion topic into this ‘speed dating’ type model would be a better use of that available time.

It was noted that it is difficult to know who in ICANN staff to contact for particular activities. It was suggested that staff roles and responsibilities be listed on the website along with their names to make it easier for the community to make contact with whom they need.

All delegates to ICANN meetings need to get out of their own meetings and attend the meetings of others more often. They would learn what the drivers and concerns of others at the meeting are likely to be for any particular topic of interest. Understanding these will make the process of policy development much smoother as concerns can be built into the process early and save unnecessary rework and reformulation at a later date.