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Outline

1. What is accountability?

Accountability is about the mechanisms, structures and processes that, taken together, ensure RIPE adheres to its core values. It's about how RIPE maintains checks and balances that ensure the community can correct itself when it errs.

Accountability is also about having fundamental agreement on the nature of RIPE processes that ensure the community's decisions can be justified on the basis of this agreement.

Accountability also refers to expert technical information and ability; decisions being made according to predictable, sound and established processes and structures; the community being able to defend its structure and role to outside entities.

1.1. Contributions of documentation to accountability

1.2. List of usefulness and risks of over documentation

Documentation is an important part of how RIPE demonstrates accountability – both to itself as a community, and to external observers. It helps newcomers to engage within RIPE, by describing current processes and recording previous decisions and how they were taken. Being able to see the history of the community helps to preserve norms over time.

Respected and trusted community members fill critical positions within RIPE. They follow unwritten processes in a way that everyone feels comfortable with and that preserves the legitimacy of the community. There is a concern that newer community members may come to fill these roles without having an understanding of the spirit behind the RIPE community's procedures. This could erode the community's trust in its procedures over time.

Traditionally, RIPE participants from comparable backgrounds would gather in an informal manner to make technical decisions with shared goals in mind. Over time, people from different backgrounds and with other interests have also come to participate within the community. It is a principle of RIPE to accommodate everyone with an interest in Internet infrastructure. However, the values, aims and approach of these newcomers may be at odds with the traditions of RIPE. If RIPE's structures are not sufficiently established/fortified and accountable enough to accommodate these changing demographics, there could be outcomes that weaken the predictability, trust and legitimacy of the community's processes in the future.

Documenting not only processes, but also core values, could help the community to protect against this, by having some kind of an agreed-upon affirmation to refer back to.

For people who have worked within RIPE for a long time, documentation also clarifies the intent behind past decisions and ensures alignment of values and purpose. It supports continuity in the community's discussions.

However, while documentation can provide certainty and continuity, *over-documentation* can disempower newcomers by raising the barrier for participation. It can also weaken underlying community values of flexibility and trust – by introducing inflexibility and rules.

Over-documentation could also empower those who might use quirks of process in an attempt to game decision-making in RIPE.

RIPE has consciously resisted becoming overly bureaucratic and avoids documentation for documentation's sake. It remains flexible by avoiding rules wherever norms will do. The RIPE accountability respects and endorses this tradition.

Note for community/possible recommendation: consider adding a reason why a RIPE document has been obsoleted when there is no replacement document that it refers to.

1.3. Benefits of Accountability

Accountability enhances trust:

- Externally, in terms of demonstrating legitimacy and authority as a community that makes important decisions concerning Internet infrastructure
- Internally, in terms of trust that the system works and is predictable/not arbitrary. This supports participation in RIPE

-Supports effective engagement within RIPE processes? (i.e. your contribution is heard and recorded, objections addressed on a firm basis, etc.)

-Makes it more likely that the community is making quality decisions?

1.3.1. Resistance to Capture, including insider capture.

RIPE has always been aware that there are risks associated with the capture of decision-making processes. This is why structures have been developed that are transparent with a separation of powers between different entities.

Capture is an important concern because much of the legitimacy of RIPE rests on its ability to fairly address the concerns of many different groups. If one group were able to capture RIPE (or part of RIPE) this would disempower other groups.

1.4. What is the subject of accountability

1.4.1. Processes

WG Chair Selection
RIPE Chair Selection
Policy Development
Emerging “N/A” Issues
Creation of new TF/WG
Closing down of TF/WG
BoFs
Agreement/adoption of ad hoc community statements
Removal of chairs
NRO NC elections
PC elections
Plenary programme selection

1.4.2. Structures

1.4.2.1. Plenary

The plenary makes decisions about and on behalf of the RIPE community. It can approve new working groups or task forces, choose to adopt their recommendations, be appealed to in arbitration cases, issue recommendations or statements, and decide on extraordinary issues raised by the RIPE Chair.

The plenary is comprised of RIPE Meeting participants (including remote participants). Plenary sessions are not officially minuted. The role of the plenary is not documented and therefore it is not predictable whether decisions can be made on the spot by the plenary or whether they need to be forwarded to the wider RIPE community.

At the same time, there is an element of trust in the plenary acting as a kind of representative sample of the wider RIPE community. However, we can only count on the participants that happen to be present at the time of the discussion.

There may be risks that the plenary could become less of a representative sample over time. There may also be risks that interested parties with a stake in the outcome of a plenary decision are not aware of the discussion.

1.4.2.2. WGs

1.4.2.3. TFs

1.4.2.4. BoFs

1.4.3. People

1.4.3.1. RIPE Chair

1.4.3.2. Working Group Chairs

1.4.3.3. PC

1.4.3.4. TF/Chairs

1.4.3.5. NRO NC

1.4.4. RIPE NCC

The RIPE NCC was established in response to RIPE's need to have a legal organisation to perform a set of tasks on its behalf:

- Secretariat to the RIPE community, including organising RIPE Meetings, maintaining the RIPE Document store
- Act as Regional Internet Registry (RIR)
- Provide other services as determined by the membership and community
- Implement RIPE Policies and support the RIPE PDP

Although the RIPE NCC's annual report describes the role that it performs, there is no legal requirement or statement by the RIPE NCC that confirms its commitment or obligation to perform this role.

The RIPE Policy Development Process (PDP) defines rules governing Internet number resources and the RIPE NCC implements these rules to its members only. The RIPE community advises the RIPE NCC on its activities. However, the RIPE NCC makes decisions itself as an organisation – guided by an executive board and membership votes at General Meetings (GMs).

There is an intentional overlap between RIPE NCC members and the RIPE community.

There is the potential for conflict between what the RIPE community would like to do and what the RIPE NCC is legally able to do. An attempt to reduce this risk resulted in the establishment of an impact analysis that assesses a policy's impact on the RIPE NCC into the policy development process. This is included as a formal part of the PDP.

1.5. How are the subjects held accountable?

1.5.1. Appears to be held to agreed processes

The community has a set of written or unwritten procedures around processes. When there are no written procedures, norms apply.

1.5.2. Applying a standard or value or norm

Those that appear to have a prominent role within RIPE community structures (chairs, et al) have been appointed by RIPE community participants through procedures. During their term, they are acting in accordance with these procedures. And according to unwritten rules or expectations. If they don't act in accordance with these rules and norms, they will be removed.

There is an expectation that all voices that want to be heard will be heard. There is an expectation that chairs will coordinate with other WGs/as appropriate.

It is expected that the chair will address certain issues – how the group will reach the appropriate level of transparency for a specific set of work, how it will they achieve a set of tasks, how the group will avoid being captured.

While the chairs will address these points by bringing them up for discussion, the decision is actually made by the group, and expressed by the chair when summing up consensus. The chair is responsible for a) setting the agenda, b) coordinating the discussion c) communicating the outcome.

If a chair doesn't act in accordance with these expectations – it is expected that the group will doubt their capacity and while there may not be specific procedures in every case, there is trust in the self-regulatory system and the appropriate balance will be reached (either by requiring the chair to modify their approach, or by removing them from their role).

1.6. To Whom are the subjects held accountable?

Subjects are accountable to participants within the RIPE community. RIPE is made up of individuals, which means it is able to take into account new views without needing to create new constituencies.

RIPE is not accountable for the outcome of its decisions. By having accountable processes and structures, RIPE produces accountable outcomes – but there is no independent audit function that examines the outcome of PDP policy implementations – that is experienced by network operators in the wild. If an outcome is not to their liking, they can change the policy in the future.

1.6.1. Who is the RIPE community?

The RIPE community is comprised of individuals who have an interest in wide area IP networks, primarily in the Europe, Middle East and Central Asian regions, but also beyond.

People participate within RIPE as individuals, acting on their own behalf. You cannot participate within RIPE as a government or as a representative from a company, for example, though as an individual you may highlight issues of concern from your government/employer.

1.6.2. Broader Internet Community

2. Standards and Values (standards? Properties)

2.1. Standards

2.1.1. Consensus

2.1.1.1. What is consensus?

The role of the Chair in determining consensus

Typically, in any policy discussion, input can be sorted into a number of separate categories, such as:

Positive input for a proposal:

- A supporting statement with an explanation
- A statement of support without an explanation (+1)
- A statement of support with modifications

Negative input against a proposal:

- Objections with explanation (both valid and invalid)
- Objections with no explanation (-1)

It is the Chair that makes a determination of which statements can be included in the discussion and which can be discarded for one of a number of reasons (such as out of scope, or lack of good faith) that will be discussed elsewhere in this document.

“Silence as Consensus” and “Rational Ignorance”

The amount of community participation can vary greatly between discussions. Generally speaking, the more critical an issue or the more people it impacts, the more people provide input to the decision-making process.

Minor proposals will sometimes proceed with a relatively small level of community input. This is not necessarily a bad thing. It may be that the wider community noticed the discussion was taking place, but made a rational decision that:

- Based on the expected impact, it was not worth their time and energy to learn about the issue and engage with it
- They did not know as much as others involved in the discussion
- They trusted that those community members who were involved in the discussion would produce an acceptable outcome.

While vocal and active support is always preferred, it may be that the silence of the community can sometimes be interpreted as “we have no strong objections.” It is therefore not a failure of

the process to demonstrate that consensus on a certain proposal was reached with a relatively small amount of community input.

It is up to the chair to determine whether the input received on a proposal is sufficient and that the wider community has been adequately informed of ongoing discussions. If a policy proposal in a relatively small WG would have a large impact, it is common for the WG Chair to notify other WGs of the discussion and invite others to participate.

This model relies on the good faith of the Chair and the WG participants. A concern could be around a group of people acting in bad faith and attempting to “forum shop” for a WG that would allow them to pass a self-serving proposal without the wider community being aware.

Possible recommendation: The community could ensure that a formal process exists – where all WGs are informed of a substantial change to ensure that nothing “sneaks” through without the wider community having an opportunity to comment. This would also ensure that if a chair is acting in bad faith, they would not be successful.

Self-interest vs collective interest

Individuals participate within RIPE because they have a shared interest in the successful operation of the Internet. At the same time, participants come to discussions with a range of different and often conflicting interests (private, political, commercial, etc.). RIPE has long understood that the best way to address this contradiction is by using consensus-based decision-making processes.

When the community takes a decision, it frequently balances the need and self-interest of some against the impact the decision would have on the wider community. Decisions are favoured that lead to the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Input can be categorized as “self-serving” (and thus set aside) if it focuses too heavily on the self-interest of an individual or group at the expense of the wider community. However, it is likely that an issue that affects one network is shared by others, so this is only done with careful consideration.

Capture

Capture is usually understood in terms of a certain group dominating the decision-making processes within RIPE to produce outcomes that benefit itself at the expense of the wider community.

However, a broader understanding of the term is also worth considering. The openness of RIPE and its processes could allow certain groups to find ways to game the system and advance their agenda. This is not a problem if the community supports their agenda, but if it runs counter to

the interests of the community, it could be an issue. This could conceivably take place if the RIPE Chair and WG Chairs and other participants have not been captured and are acting in good faith.

Possible recommendation: RIPE community to consider alternative forms of capture.

2.2. Values

2.2.1. Process

- 2.2.1.1. Transparent**
- 2.2.1.2. Accessible**
- 2.2.1.3. Open Participation**
- 2.2.1.4. Bottom-up self-regulatory structure**
- 2.2.1.5. Consensus-Based decision making**

2.2.2. Substantive

- 2.2.2.1. Everyone can use the Internet**
- 2.2.2.2. Inter-connected Networks (core network value)**
- 2.2.2.3. Stable and Reliable Internet**
- 2.2.2.4. RIPE has a defined scope**

3. Review of existing accountability mechanisms

3.1. Structures

3.2. Processes

4. Recommendations

5. Conclusions

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7. References and supporting documentations