Comments of the Non-Commercial Stakeholder Group on the Proposed New Fellowship Program Approach[1]

The Non-Commercial Stakeholders Group (NCSG) has carefully reviewed the draft Proposal of the New Fellowship Program Approach, and we are pleased to largely endorse the new vision for the future of the Fellowship Program. We thank ICANN org for taking our Stakeholder Group's earlier feedback into account in developing this proposal.

In particular, we welcome the positive changes offered to the Fellowship Program by including pre-meeting preparatory work, a more transparent selection process for the evaluation of fellowship applications, the emphasis on boosting participation from genuinely under-represented communities, and the further development of the coaching system that will allow for more tailored outreach to newer community members. We also believe that having established community leaders serve as mentors will better aid newcomers into becoming active community participants.

Outreach and Recruitment

The proposal about outreach and recruitment is acceptable, however, it might be ineffective as it does not take into account the implied purpose of the Fellowship Program. There are typically two purposes recognised for the existence of the Fellowship Program:

1. To increase ICANN's global reach and to have a local presence; a focal point or an advocate who understands their local Internet governance landscape and its broader global impact and who can help ICANN to increase awareness about Internet governance issues and specifically ICANN's mission and mandate in their country and in their region. This purpose is implied in the promotional materials for the Fellowship Program.[2]

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[1] https://www.icann.org/public-comments/fellowship-proposal-2018-06-11-en

[2] The Fellowship Program does not specifically state that it intends to do such capacity building, but from the description of the fellows' program, and their examples of successful fellows we can conclude that engagement with broader Internet governance issues is considered by ICANN to be a purpose. As stated on the ICANN website's 'About the Fellowship' page: "The ICANN Fellowship Program seeks to help create a broader base of knowledgeable constituents to engage in the ICANN multistakeholder process and become the new voice of experience in their regions and on the global stage." (Emphasis added.) It also considers the engagement of these individuals in their region with Internet governance in general as a sign of success of the program: "Since its creation in 2007, the Fellowship Program has built a strong group of individuals who actively participate in the ICANN community and other parts of the Internet ecosystem. Their engagement ranges from writing articles and blogs, providing online or in-person public comments in regard to bottom-up policy building, engaging in Internet conferences and panel discussions, participating in working groups, mentoring newcomers, assisting our

2. To get the fellows engaged with internal ICANN policy development processes and to help the Supporting Organisations and Advisory Committees (SO/ACs) recruit the fellows to join their SO/ACs.

While both of these purposes can be justified, the risk for SO/ACs that have a more open membership structure is to recruit fellows who do not have the time, expertise, nor the dedication to get engaged with the community entity that they have joined, but they become a member regardless. While this leads to an increase in membership of these community groups, the fellows will not be active volunteers, nor care about that group's values and mission. They will, however, gain membership so that they can apply for another fellowship and the membership rights to participate and take part in elections. Since they are uninterested in internal community work, their participation, especially in elections, is not based on merits and advancing the values of the community group, but is instead based on geopolitical reasons or supporting the individuals they have befriended. This has an even bigger risk in that those who are uninterested in the community work can be elected to offices merely because they have been part of the fellowship program and have made friends, and not because they have the knowledge, interest, or capacity to contribute to the community. To prevent such behavior, ICANN could potentially make a distinction between capacity building efforts and educational efforts in Internet governance issues in various regions and a program that is in charge of helping the ICANN community to find the volunteers and the next generation of leaders in ICANN community. In this fashion, we will be able to recruit those who are really interested in DNS policy and getting involved with policy making, while ICANN can continue its capacity building efforts.

If ICANN sees the need to just train a diverse group of individuals about ICANN without the involvement of the community or with no need for integration, then as it was suggested, this should be clearly stated in the objectives of the program, and those who are interested in broader issues should be given different "educational" training and those who want to be involved with policy at ICANN should have a different program (as the current program seems to be designed for the latter). At the moment, the post-meeting expectation is that first time fellows identify a community group they want to engage with, without being able to measure their actual interest in getting involved.

Application

Taking ICANN Learn courses might be a solution, but we suggest that ICANN Learn first be updated with new materials. Some of us in the NCSG have recently taken the course and found it outdated. As to the role for the Global Stakeholder Engagement (GSE) team, it might be better that GSE be involved in targeted outreach as well as the Development and Public Responsibility Department. GSE usually understands ICANN's mandate and mission and is

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regional leaders and becoming leaders themselves." (Emphasis added.).
https://www.icann.org/fellowshipprogram

in charge of carrying out events and outreach. Hence it might have a better opportunity to present the Fellowship Program to those interested and have an active role in raising awareness about the expertise needed.

Selection Committee

While it will be an improvement to have a selection committee consisting of SO/AC appointees, from a cursory review of the current selection committee, except one person, the selection committee is in fact from the community. This makes us doubt what new improvement the direct appointment of SO/AC reps brings about. SO/ACs directly appointing the selection committee might be a good idea, but ICANN staff in charge of the vetting process should also be more coordinated and work together. This is assuming that the vetting process will remain in place after the changes been made to the Fellowship Program. If ICANN org is involved with the process, the GNSO policy, GSE, and the Public Responsibility teams should all coordinate. It would be advisable to us to have a selection committee comprised of those who are actively engaged with DNS policy issues at ICANN.

Pre-Meeting Preparations

This recommendation also relies on the ICANN Learn platform. We reiterate that these courses need to be updated and should perhaps have evergreen material that does not become outdated quickly (for instance, by naming the leader of a community group which can be fixed by linking directly to groups pages instead). Having mentors from within the community is a great idea, but also the fellows should engage with the capacity building programs of the community, at least those who are members of a community group. For instance, within the NCSG, the NCUC has a mentor-buddy program as well as a good onboarding program with well-developed materials that the fellows can use.

Onsite During an ICANN Meeting

Onsite recommendations are brief and do not solve the problems we have been facing in integrating fellows into our community (if that is the only purpose of the program). While the Development and Public Responsibility Department support on page 3 mentions more engagement with the Policy Support team and the GSE team, we still feel the need for more improvement. As we have mentioned in our previous comment, fellows work in silos and are not at all integrated into the community. This is in part because the program's design does not give enough time for the fellows to interact with the community members. This is not a criticism solely directed at the Fellowship Program. While we note this public comment proceeding is not about the NextGen Program, we note that in the Panama City meeting a mandatory NextGen session was conflicting with our outreach session that was specifically designed for community newcomers. This is not the first time that this has happened. The community does not develop the schedule; ICANN org does, so we would encourage you to

work internally to prevent scheduling issues like this happening in the future. Moreover, when we asked what the agenda for the Fellowship Alumni session was and whether we could know who the invitees were, our Chair was told that "a group of experts" had been invited, without being given their names. The agenda of the fellowship sessions are not public on the ICANN website and, from summaries that fellows have shared with us at times, there have been "representatives" of the NCSG who are not even NCSG members and whom we do not ourselves know. More transparency and better coordination of all our efforts are needed.

Development and Public Responsibility Department Responsibilities

From the proposed changes, we understand that the Development and Public Responsibility Department will not be organising the fellows sessions anymore during ICANN meetings, but it will organise the Newcomers Day. In any case, if any fellows sessions (including Newcomers Day) is going to be designed and held by the the Development and Public Responsibility Department, it should be in coordination with GSE and Policy Support, the agenda should be complete and made public well in advance of the meeting, and it should be clear who has been invited to talk in these events.

Metrics

We have concerns regarding the proposed metrics. As we mentioned earlier this year, we strongly support ICANN implementing clear engagement metrics to evaluate the program's success and to track the subsequent participation of fellows in policy work. The proposed metrics, however, strike us as not useful. There is no real value in measuring the number of applications for a fellowship. If ICANN did not have a large number of applications for an all-expenses-paid week-long trip to a foreign country, something would be astray. Similarly, there is no real value in knowing that a fellow has subsequently participated in a regional event if it is not related to ICANN remit. Within the NCSG, we exist to create Domain Name System policy, and that is what fellows who are affiliated with the NCSG should be working to contribute to as well. Any metrics that do not measure how successful our fellows are at shaping policy are of no practical value. We support measuring the number of contributions that fellows are making to policy work, noting that some contributions are more valuable than others and valuing quality over quantity. A '+1' on a mailing list is not equal to a 550-word expert analysis.

We also believe there should be some kind of benchmarking of mentors, noting of course that their ability to successfully mentor someone is dependent on the mentee they are assigned and mentor time commitment, but not every policy expert will make for a good mentor, and this must be recognised. We suggest that the Fellowship Program create a mentor evaluation form to be shared with all Fellows after the meeting. This form should be independent of the final report which fellows submit, and go directly to the program director.

We also request that ICANN Fellowship make public a timetable for when these metrics will be posted. We would suggest they be published on either a quarterly basis, or three times per year, roughly eight weeks after a public ICANN meeting concludes. Whatever time period is chosen, the publication timetable should be consistent and strictly adhered to.

We understand that in the past the fellowship program has published reports which include the gender distribution of fellows. While we welcome this, we would also suggest that there be a third option, a voluntary text field for other genders which would allow for more gender diversity data.

Post-Meeting Expectations

Finally, while we applaud the proposed post-meeting expectations on fellows, in order for this to be successful in reaching the program's goals, we suggest making it a straightforward process to opt out of further engagement with ICANN should one wish to. We would like to think that no one would take this option, but if after participating in a face-to-face meeting one realises they are not interested in adhering to these tasks, they should be able to opt-out with the understanding that they will no longer be contacted and subsequently ineligible for fellowship funding. We would also suggest that all fellows should be provided with clear information on how exactly their progress will be followed, where their information will be stored, how long the follow-up process is as well as its purpose.

Thank you again for considering our feedback.