Characteristics of the Internet governance ecosystem relevant to discussions of accountability

1. **Internet governance is a network of governance networks.**
   The networks are very varied in composition. Some of the networks are temporary (e.g. working groups at ICANN and CSTD); others are permanent (e.g. ICANN). Some have formal membership structures (e.g. RIRs); others are open to participation by anyone (e.g. IGF). Some are hierarchical or ordered (e.g. ICANN GNSO and its constituencies); others are peer-based (e.g. Root Server operators).

2. **Internet governance stakeholders often participate in multiple roles.**
   Stakeholders may be direct decision-makers in one area of Internet governance while playing more advisory, supporting roles other areas. For example, the secretariat of an I* organization may play a facilitation and implementation role when their community is developing policy but play an advocacy role when participating in venues such as ITU or CSTD. While funded by their employer to participate in activities such as those of the IETF, members of that same secretariat may be viewed as participants in an individual capacity when contributing to the development of Internet Drafts.

3. **Internet governance involves a mixture of direct participation and representational participation.**
   Many technical governance networks, such as the IETF and RIRs, have prided themselves on direct participation of individuals with expertise. Corporations also directly participate in events such as IGF. Alongside this direct participation, however, is an increasing use of representational participation. This representational participation can take the forms such as an industry group representing multiple companies or a member of an I* secretariat or I* board representing the views of their community.

4. **As the Internet continues to grow, so does interest in participating in Internet governance mechanisms**
   The more stakeholders that begin to participate, the more diverse the opinions that are expressed and the more difficult it can be for governance processes to take into account all the needs and views of the increasing range of stakeholders.

**Two quotes from accountability literature**

In any accountability relationship, we should be able to specify at least six important things:

- **who** is liable or accountable to **whom**;
- **what** they are liable to be called to account for;
- **through what processes** accountability is to be assured;
- **by what standards** the putatively accountable behaviour is to be judged;
- and what the potential **effects** are of finding that those standards have been breached.¹

1. Governance networks can possess a variety of different network structures [...] and carry out a variety of network functions.
2. Governance networks may involve individual network actors from different sectors and levels.
3. The traditional accountability frameworks ascribed to governments are not sufficient to account for inter-organizational governance networks.
4. Individual network actors will possess their own accountability structures that are characterized by a certain combination of explicit and implicit standards [...] and constituencies.
5. Network actors interact through some combination of vertically and horizontally arranged relationships. Much more needs to be understood regarding the manner in which the accountability structures of individual network actors comingle, compete or complement one another within governance networks, and the extent to which “hybrid accountability regimes” form.2

Challenges that Internet governance poses for the accountability of its participants

Traditional forms of accountability—political, administrative, legal, and market accountability—do not always apply to all participants in an Internet governance network. Board members of I* and similar organizations can be replaced (political accountability via elections), secretariat staff members can be disciplined (administrative or bureaucratic accountability). Legal accountability still applies when people fail to comply with legal obligations, but given the cross-boundary nature of Internet governance, jurisdiction can be an issue. In some parts of the Internet ecosystem there are natural monopolies, such as the RIRs, that mean that disaffected parties cannot invoke market-based accountability mechanisms by taking their “business” elsewhere.

A “softer” form of accountability—social accountability—may be part of the part of the answer, with the ability to socially discipline or expel members of a network who don’t conform to agreed standards. But there still remain a number of questions:

- In open Internet governance processes, where anyone can participate at any time, how do you hold participants accountable?
- Given accountability is measured against group-agreed standards, how do you manage accountability when new participants enter the process and may have or want different standards to be used?
- Is an Internet governance process only truly open when it also allows its accountability mechanisms to be open for negotiation as well?
- How do you manage accountability when participants in Internet governance play multiple roles in multiple networks?
- Can you hold individuals, organizations, and representatives of collections of individuals and organizations accountable to the same standards?
- Do accountability mechanisms encourage conformance to standards generated by Internet governance participants from developed countries or those who were there in the early days? Does this make it more or less difficult for new actors to Internet governance, particularly from developing countries, to enter processes as participants and to hold other participants accountable to potentially differing views of accountability?