

# Workshop on reforming the international ICT standardization system

*Centre for Internet and Society* | 2008-12-08

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*On Day 4, the last day, of the Internet Governance Forum, a workshop was conducted by the Dynamic Coalition on Open Standards on the reforming the international ICT standardisation system. The panellists were Bob Jolliffe of Freedom to Innovate South Africa, Sunil Abraham of the Centre for Internet and Society, Ashish Gautam of IBM India, and Aslam Raffee, Chairperson of the Government IT Officers' Council, OSS Working Group, Republic of South Africa, who moderated the session.*

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Mr. Raffee, after introducing the panellists, laid out the parameters of the discussion. He noted that the discussion was not about "open standards" per se, but about the standardisation process.

Mr. Jolliffe noted that the main problems revolved around the question of legitimacy of the Standard Setting Organizations, which often arises from "standardisation by corporations" (a phrase coined by Martin Bryan), as shown by the representatives of the individual countries to the international bodies. For the international standardization process to acquire legitimacy, the national bodies need to do so first. A start can be made, Mr. Jolliffe noted, through simple steps like increase in stakeholder participation beyond vendors, full disclosure of institutional affiliations at the standardisation bodies, better streamlining of processes such as the fast-track system, and full and clear disclosures with regard to IP licensing terms would help in increasing accountability and legitimacy of standard setting organizations.

He also indicated that financial transparency, modernisation of processes (including remote participation), regulation of proportional influence of private interests, a code of best practices and innovation in patent searches, full interest disclosures, and clear display of IPR policies of committees would help in increasing the openness of standards.

Mr. Abraham chose to focus on the national standardization processes, and the lessons that can be learnt from those. He highlighted that the discussions around open standards were really discussions about standards followed by public institutions. He analogized the situation to private houses vs. the public road infrastructure, noting how the road infrastructure cannot be private. Ensuring that the public infrastructure was open to all, he said, was the important role played by the standardisation process. He went on to highlight

the importance of open standards as a lever in the hands of governments which can be used to fix monopoly situations, as it was in the case of SCOSTA smart card standard, where the use of an open standard led to a drop in price from Rs.600 to Rs.30 and increased the number of vendors from 3 to 12. He then narrated a number of "stories" from India, Pakistan and Malaysia to show the various forms of weaknesses within the national standard setting processes. He further concluded that countries with weak institutions are the ones less likely to support open standards.

Mr. Abraham added the need to adopt common definitions of "open standards" and transparency of processes and encouragement of remote participation as suggestions for the standardization system.

Mr. Gautam from IBM India chose to talk about the standards principles that the company follows, and the need for reform of the standardization processes.