
ICANN84 | AGM – ICANN Grant Program
Monday, October 27, 2025 – 13:15 to 14:30 IST

MADELEINE WERBELOW

Hello, and welcome to the ICANN84 Grant Program session on Monday, 27 October 2025, 13:15 UTC. My name is Madeleine Werbelow. Daniela Chomikova and myself are the participation managers for this session. Please note that this session is being recorded and is governed by the ICANN Expected Standards of Behavior and ICANN Community Anti Harassment Policy.

During this session, questions or comments will only be read aloud if submitted within the Q&A pod. Interpretation for this session will include English, French, and Spanish. Transcript will be provided in all languages. If you would like to speak during the session, please raise your hand in Zoom. When called upon, unmute your microphone to speak. Please state your name for the record, the language you will speak in if speaking a language other than English, and speak at a reasonable pace. I will now hand the floor over to Giovanni Seppia, vice president, Implementation Operations. Thank you, Giovanni.

GIOVANNI SEPPIA

Thank you Madeleine, and thank you, Daniela, for moderating the session and for supporting all the technicalities, together with the ICANN's Meeting Team. Today's session is going to be divided in two parts. The first is an update and overview of the Grant Program,

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and that is going to be followed by the second part, which is a session that we would like to be as interactive and participative as possible, hearing from you about the Grant Program and possible input that will inform the next steps of the Grant Program. And with that said, I like to leave the floor to Shayna Robinson, the Grant Program director. Shayna, the floor is yours.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you so much, Giovanni. Welcome to everyone. Thanks for being here and joining us in this session. As Giovanni said, my name is Shayna Robinson, and I am the Grant Program director. And today we wanted to share just a brief update of where we are with the program, but the bulk of the time today we want to have a bit of a consultation to hear from you, the community, to provide feedback and input about what you've experienced with the Grant Program so far in the first cycle of funding, but also what you hope to see as we move forward and as the program continues to evolve. If we go to the next slide.

Of course, the Grant Program comes after many, many years of work from members of the community, from the Board, and also from staff members in the Org, to really bring this program to life. Here on the screen, it starts in 2015, but obviously there was lots of work that happened prior to that in order to secure Auction Proceeds and all of those things. But as you sort of go through this timeline, you'll see all the major milestones and steps that we took,

or that the Org took, or the community took to bring this program to life.

Just this past January, at the bottom here at the screen, was our last big milestone where we were able to secure the resolution from the Board to award the final slate of successful applicants to our first cycle of funding. So I won't spend a lot of time going through the history of the program, but just to share with you so that you know that this is certainly been a long time coming, and we are certainly proud of all of the work that has happened up to this point. If we go to the next slide.

These are just some sort of major elements of the first cycle. And again, this first cycle was a bit of a pilot cycle. This really was ICANN's first foray into this type of program, and so we wanted to be sure that we were being good stewards of the proceeds. And so we wanted to ensure that this first cycle was really a test to see and understand how we could deliver this type of program. It started with \$10 million available in funds for the cycle. The overall Auction Proceeds is much more, but \$10 million was available for the first cycle. Awards were made between \$50,000 and \$500,000, and projects that were awarded had a maximum duration of 24 months. We also had an element that limited the number of grants that could be awarded to a particular applicant to one. And we also had an application window that launched back in March of 2024 that was open for 60 days.

Once we received or closed the window and received applications, we had a four-step assessment or evaluation process. That process included an internal review of admissibility and eligibility requirements. It also included an Independent Panel that was outside of ICANN to assess and evaluate all of the applications based on specific criteria that were outlined in the Applicant Guide. And then we had a final review to sort of ensure that additional or validate that all admissibility and eligibility requirements were met before we were able to award funds. If we go to the next slide.

This just shows a bit of a scope of sort of where we started. At the end of the application window, we received 247 applications with a total request for funding over \$83 million. Certainly that says to me that there was lots of interest, and applicants around the world were definitely interested in accessing the funding. And so we're really proud to see the representation there and to see how much funding, in fact, was requested.

After we received those 247 applications, we went through again and assessed admissibility and eligibility, and from that 133 applications were moved to the Independent Review Panel. Our partner who supported us in that, we developed criteria and a Panel Guide in collaboration with them, so they were clear on what they would be evaluating and how they would be scoring those applications. And from there, they returned to us a rank order list. That list included 112 applications that were ranked from 1 to 112, and from there, we shortlisted the top 32. Those 32 applications then were again reassessed to ensure and validate admissibility

and eligibility. And from there, we narrowed that field down to the top 23.

Those 23 applications that were finally awarded represent very, very close to \$10 million which was the initial funding amount that was allocated for this funding cycle. This also represents a 9.3% acceptance rate. So the 23 applications versus the 247 that were submitted, again, shows that this was a competitive program. We had lots of interest, and because we had capped the cycle at \$10 million, we weren't able to fund everyone, but we were very happy that we were able to achieve the \$10 million.

So I'll stop there for a moment as we go to the next slide, just to see if there are any questions or comments related to sort of how we arrived here and where we are now. Yes? Please just be sure to state your name, and you can feel free to use the mic.

JUDITH HELLERSTEIN

Hi. Judith Hellerstein, At-Large. I'm wondering the 21 that failed, did they not understand the requirements, or what was it about them that failed that we could do better next time and maybe explaining better what they need to do? Or is there a reason behind them that we could help? Because that's a significant number. So that was my question. Thank you so much.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you so much, Judith, for the question. Those 21 applications actually received either a 0 or a 1 in the criteria and the scoring from

the panel. A 0 or 1 represented either information was missing completely, they didn't answer the question, or the answer was really irrelevant to the question, or it was not adequately addressed. So any application that received a score of 0 or 1 was automatically removed from further consideration. Again, I think there's certainly ways that we can help build applicant capacity to be better able to respond to questions to meet more success, but that was really why they were excluded. Thanks. Xavier? No? Yes, Steve?

STEVE CROCKER

Steve Crocker, former Board chair. Similar question Judith asked, but with respect to the first column, 111 were inadmissible or ineligible. Can you say more about what that process is and what the issues were?

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you. Yes, we did receive quite a bit of applications that were really out of the scope of the objectives of the program. I think because this was the first time that we had done this, there were no previous grants to sort of reference for applicants that we received quite a few that really just were not really aligned to the mission of ICANN or certainly not aligned to the objectives of the program. So, many of those, that 111, fell into that category.

STEVE CROCKER

What's the distinction between inadmissible and ineligible?

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Inadmissible would be those that either didn't submit all of the necessary paperwork or application materials. If they were submitted in languages other than English, there were certain criteria that we had for admissibility that you had to also be meeting in terms of your eligibility or your admissibility for us to review your application. So if documentation was missing, if things weren't submitted on time, if the request was for outside of the threshold of the \$50,000 to \$500,000, it would be inadmissible.

STEVE CROCKER

What about ineligible?

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Ineligibility, there were several criteria somewhere around conflicts of interest. Some were related to duplication of ICANN activities. There were certain activities that maybe were proposed or certain applicants who had previous relationships with ICANN that were outlined in the Applicant Guide that would make them ineligible to participate.

STEVE CROCKER

How easy would it have been? This is not a criticism at all, but just thinking about these 111 applications that have been turned down. How easy would it have been for them to have gotten somebody to

look at it and say, “Look, this is ain’t going to work. You just failed on these so don’t even bother to submit it”?

SHAYNA ROBINSON

That’s a good question. And this is one of the things that we’ve been sort of debating—not debating, but thinking about is a different process, sort of two-step process perhaps in the future, where applicants could submit a shorter, sort of Statement of Interest to kind of just say, “Here’s who we are,” without having to do a full application so that we avoid this in the future. So there’s definitely some things that we can do.

STEVE CROCKER

The 9.3% acceptance rate is interesting, but perhaps more interesting is what the ratio is of the ones that were eligible and we’re admissible. So you get 23 out of 133, which is give or take, around 20%.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Yes, yes. That is a significant difference, indeed.

STEVE CROCKER

Thank you.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you. Sorry. I think you’re next, yes.

ANRIETTE ESTERHUYSEN

Thanks a lot. Anriette Esterhuysen, African School on Internet Governance and the Association for Progressive Communications. It's kind of a question, but also sharing my experience. We looked very closely at the call, because the African School on Internet Governance, we get a small donation from ICANN, but there's no previous relationship, and we decided we weren't eligible because we interpreted the call as looking for applications that were very narrowly focused on the DNS industry. But yet, when I look at the successful applications, there were several that actually are dealing with the WSIS process, for example. So my question is, did we misread and misinterpret the call, or did you find that you didn't receive sufficient narrowly focused, DNS-oriented applications, and therefore you went broader with the successful grants?

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you so much for that question. I think, again, because this was the first time of ICANN doing this, there was real curiosity of what we would receive. I think certainly the eligibility criteria and things that we were looking for needed to align to the objectives of the program, but how we articulate that in our Applicant Guide perhaps needs to be more refined so that we can capture all of those elements and projects that do touch on the work we want to support, and then to also eliminate the ones that we found were really out of scope.

So that's really helpful feedback. I think we've also been thinking about that. How do we articulate and clarify, really, the types of work that we want to be supporting, and to be sure that if someone's particular project is out of scope, that it's clear that this is not the opportunity for them. Thank you. Sorry. I just want to go to this side. Yes?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE

Yes. Hello everybody. [Inaudible] here. I'm asking, did applicants have to declare if they're using consultants? Did applicants had to declare if they're using consultants for the application or they're fulfilling the application independently? And if so, do you track which consultants?

SHAYNA ROBINSON

No, there was not a declaration of use of consultants, though, in the applications we did require that lead organizations outline any partnerships or folks that they were working with to deliver the project. But maybe Giovanni has something.

GIOVANNI SEPPIA

Just to complement what Shayna said, what you said is typical of some global grant organization like European Union, World Bank, they're asking the applicant to state if the application was supported by a consulting firm. In our case, no, we didn't ask that. Thank you.

LANCE HINES

Thank you. Lance Hines, LACRALO. In a previous conversation with you, I think you had mentioned that there is an option of a previous applicant having a direct interaction with you to look at the proposal and see where the corrections can be made. So the first question is, one, if that's still available? And two, now that you've got a body of work in, based on the last call, in the next call, would a sample of that work be available so people can get guidance when they're doing their second submission? Thank you.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

To answer your first question, yes, we do. We are still available to address any questions or concerns for applicants. If they want additional specific feedback, we're happy to provide that. Please reach out to us and we can provide that for you. In terms of next cycles and future cycles, and how we are able to communicate or to build capacity for applicants, and how to submit a successful application, absolutely I think that's something that we can work to do and an activity that we can take to sort of ensure that applicants have the best information they have in order to be successful in the program.

LANCE HINES

Sorry. Again, and that would include success stories that people can see at some level?

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Yes. I will say also the 23 projects that were awarded on our website, they have been published. Summaries of those projects are also available. So if you want to go there and look at those, that's a great place to start. No problem.

MAUREEN HILYARD

Thank you. Maureen Hilyard from At-Large for the record. I just wanted to know, with 247 original applications and nearly half of those were rejected through the process, do you consider that a success of the program? First question.

But the second one is that it seems to be pretty clear that there was perhaps the lack of guidance perhaps in ensuring that the applications were a success. I mean, really, the purpose was to actually have people applying for things. And so perhaps we should be looking at an Applicant Support Guidebook similar to what we've got. We're attempting for the Next Round. I just sort of feel that it's not particularly good look that so many actually failed for things like that they missed out on a whole lot of information that should have been there because I didn't know it was supposed to be there. Thank you.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you for that comment. I think it does highlight, and for me, personally, brings to the forefront that we can do better with articulating and clarifying exactly the types of projects that we want to be funding. And part of the reason why we're here today—

and what we'll sort of get into in the next bit of our session—is to get a bit more specific about that. I think there's been maybe some assumptions or just sort of thinking about, “Well, maybe I'm eligible, maybe I'm not, and let me just kind of throw my hat in.” But I think, certainly, as the program continues to develop and evolve, we'll get better at being able to say this is exactly in line with the types of things that we want to fund and also this is maybe not so much the things. We'll do better with that. So thank you. Yes?

PAULO MILLIET ROQUE

Paulo Roque from the Brazilian Software Association. I would like to know if the previous run, if you allow the competitor to complement information. You said that some information was not good enough or too small. Is it possible for you will orient them for making a better paragraph or a better proposal in an interactive way, or once they send it, it's done?

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you for that. I have heard this comment a few times from applicants who were not successful to say, “Can we receive feedback, and then adjust or edit our application to be a better fit?” Unfortunately, not in this round. We don't have the capacity to sort of co-develop applications with applicants. However, if you want the feedback, we're happy to share that with you. And in future rounds, we haven't made the decision yet of what that looks like or who will be eligible. But certainly you can use that feedback from

this round to help with applications in any future rounds. Maybe Xavier also wants to respond to that.

XAVIER CALVEZ

Just to add on that topic, something that we want to try to maintain throughout all the rules of the programs is that there's fairness across the applicants. So, a specific interaction with a specific applicant can create an advantage to that applicant because that applicant has an interaction with us receives advice that other applicants may not receive because they're not soliciting it. We don't want to create unfairness among the applicants. Sometimes it may come across as a lack of interaction, but it's also in order to maintain fairness across the applicant. So that's a "tricky balance" between wanting to help applicants do the best job possible, but also not favoring anyone across the pool of applicants.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you, Xavier. I'm just going to really quickly take a few questions that have come in on the Zoom call. The first one, "On the low acceptance rate, with only 23 applications approved out of 247, and 111 deemed inadmissible or ineligible, what were the most common reasons for inadmissibility? Could clear guidance or pre-submission support have helped applicants, especially those from underserved regions?"

Thank you for that question. I think this is similar to one that Mr. Crocker also offered. Yes. I think there were several reasons why an

applicant or application was deemed inadmissible or ineligible. And again, I'll refer you back to our Applicant Guide to see all of those criteria. But to say, yes, there can be clear guidance, and certainly opportunities to improve capacity building for applicants to share ahead of the application windows so that they have better ability to respond to the questions and to ensure that they're completing the application in the way that they should.

One more question online, "On the funding gap, applicants requested \$83 million, but only \$9.9 million was awarded. Was this due to limited available funds, or did most projects score too low? If funds remain, will they roll into future cycles?"

Yes. To answer that question, this cycle was capped at \$10 million, so even though we received requests for funding over \$83 million, we would only be able to allocate \$10 million. Yes, all the remaining Auction Proceeds will be available for future grant making and for future cycles. Yes?

PARI ESFANDIARI

Pari Esfandiari, ALAC EURALO. My understanding is one of the key criteria was that the project should be one of not a continued project. And that actually surprises me, and I want to understand what's the wisdom behind such a criteria. Because a project that is ongoing would be more beneficial to the community. So I want to understand what is the wisdom for that. Thank you.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you. I think in our CCWG AP recommendations, most of them speak to specific time-bound projects being awarded. I think there is discussion, and again, I'm glad we're here to talk with you and to receive these questions. What about ongoing activities that are in support of the DNS or other identifier systems, how do we perhaps support those? And how we have constructed the program and the parameters around that, does that maybe limit us in our ability to do that? So I think that's a great question. I don't have an answer for that, other than to say we were following recommendations from the CCWG, which was specific about specific project-based funding.

GIOVANNI SEPPIA

Thank you, Shayna. Just to say that we are going to collect the last two questions from the floor and answering the remaining question in the Q&A pod, and then we'll move forward, because we really like to hear from you on what are the questions that we are going to ask and start this discussion. So thanks a lot for the feedback and the input so far. So we'll take the first few. Judith and then Steve, and then we'll complete the answers to the questions in the Q&A pod. Thank you.

JUDITH HELLERSTEIN

Thanks again. It's Judith Hellerstein from At-Large. Looking at what also has Steve had asked earlier and some of the other questions, is there a way that applicants who were missing information, or something like that, can be notified before they submit, "Oh, you

missed this,” so that the applicant may not realize that they are missing information, that would declare them ineligible. So I’m looking at the high number that were declared and maybe they were not realizing, and that could be a thing on the application form that it could say, “You’re missing X,” or “You’re missing Y,” or something like that, and that would help us next time with decreasing the number that were declared ineligible in the very beginning.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you, Judith. Yes, I think there are many improvements that we can look at in terms of our system submittable. While it did a good job of allowing everyone to access, there’s definitely some ways that we can sort of toggle some buttons to make sure that if things are missing, if things aren’t available or not correct, that we can do that. We’re also looking at, again, opportunities to have a sort of staggered assessment process so that we can flag some of these issues earlier on in the process, as opposed to waiting to the very end.

JUDITH HELLERSTEIN

Thanks. And then that also—hold on—what Maureen was saying is if we had an Applicant Guidebook coming up, we could answer these questions like, “These are what came up in the last one. And this is what was declared. This is what was forgotten.” Like, “Oh, we need to put this in. Oh, you should put this in,” and then that helps the guidebook. It leaves it open to what Xavier was saying is that

we'll want to make it transparent and accountable, and this will tell people, "Oh, if you didn't do this field, that you're going to get declared ineligible," and that would, I think, help the future ones and reduce the amount of the 111, which is a shocking percentage.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you. That point is well taken. Thank you. Yes?

STEVE CROCKER

Following up on earlier discussion about the amount of money available versus the amount of requested funds. Another way to look at this is out of the 247 applications, if I understand what you said there, if you had unlimited amount of money, nonetheless, out of those 247, only 32 on an individual would have made the cut in terms of being ones that you'd be willing to fund, irrespective of the availability of funds, because a whole bunch eliminated because they're ineligible, and then failed to reach the threshold, and so forth. And it looks like you set a threshold 15 above as each of those has merit enough to be funded. And maybe I'm overinterpreting and maybe that 15 is related to the amount of money available, but taking that as a criterion. So then the question is, how much money would it have taken to fund all 32 of those as opposed to 23? Wouldn't have taken \$83 million, and if I just sort of extrapolate from 23 to 32, that's another nine only. So maybe it would take \$15 million, instead of \$10 million, to have funded all of those that met the threshold on an individual basis, as opposed to competitive.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Yes. And your math is very good. I'm pretty sure that our 32 shortlisted applicants were right around that \$15 million number. That was a discussion, again, with the Board and with Xavier, who's our sponsor. The cycle was capped at \$10 million, and so we really wanted to be sure that we respected that. But I don't know if Xavier maybe wants to jump in.

XAVIER CALVEZ

I'm happy to do that. By design, we kept this first cycle at \$10 million to ensure that we have a relatively "small" program to start with as a first experience. Because it had been set that way for all the applicants and the public to know, we didn't want to change that in the middle of the program, and therefore we decided to not proceed with expanding at the last minute the pool.

And to Steve's point, it's about \$15 million that it would have taken for the 32 applicants. I want to come back on the notion that there was a big issue with this program because there was 111 inadmissible applicants. It's not an issue. Most programs will have a similar rate of rejection. Why? Because there are many applicants who will just try out to see if they're going to get money, even if they know that their program may not be in the scope of the eligible programs. We had applicants who asked funding for computers, for example. Of course, we would not do that. It doesn't matter how

many we're going to receive, they're all going to be rejected at the end.

So the percentage of 9.3% that Shayna indicated is fairly typical in grant programs, and if you look at it from this perspective, with \$10 million and a maximum of \$500k of highest possible application, we would have received and funded about 20 applicants anyway. So I think that it's important to recognize that, because from our perspective, having received 247 applicants shows that the program was known across the world, and we've received that from all regions of the world, and from that perspective, we are very happy with the audience that the program received.

The rate of eligibility, ultimately, at the end, is very typical with grant programs across the world, and is not, in our opinion, a reflection of an issue. That doesn't mean, as Shayna and Giovanni have been indicating, that we can continue to leverage a better understanding of the program, better explanation of what is looked for, so that more applicants can be able to apply and have higher chances of success. But if we limit a cycle at a certain amount, there's not going to be more money distributed anyway.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you. I'm just going to go back to our Q&A pod just to respond to a few more questions here. "On the five assessment criteria: What were the five assessment criteria, and which one proved most

challenging for applicants to meet the threshold? Were criteria weighted equally?”

To answer that question, I would redirect you to our Applicant Guide. We don’t have all of the slides with all of the assessment criteria here, but it will outline everything that our Independent Panel assessed each application against, and what that scoring looked like.

The next question was on geographic distribution. “Of the 23 approved applications, how many are from Africa or focused on African Internet Governance challenges? Given the low success rate, what support will be provided to help African applicants in the future?”

To see the final list with countries included, that information is posted on ICANN’s website for the Grant Program, where you can see there was quite good participation of applications submitted from Africa, and also applications that were awarded. So you can visit our site to see what those are.

All right, so now we’re going to move on to the next sort of portion. One more? Yes, ma’am.

MAUREEN HILYARD

Thank you. Maureen Hilyard for the record, from At-Large. I just wanted to just have a look at the 23 that were finally selected out of the 32 that were actually recommended. The CCWG, well, from my assumption, as a member of that team, was that the external

group would select the final applicants. So, with the top 23 of the 32, I just wanted to get that clarified within the context of the \$10 million because I just wondered if there'd been a separate selection made after that. Okay. Fine. Thank you.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

There was one exception in that list. We had an applicant who had submitted two applications that both were in that top list, and so because we weren't able to award multiple applications to one applicant, we removed one.

Thank you so much already for all of the great questions and feedback. And now we have a few questions for you, because as we have sort of finished the first grant cycle and we look towards the future and future cycles, we just wanted to hear from you about your impression of how it's gone and what you hope for the future. So this is really just an opportunity. These are questions that we have that we would love if you would respond to, or if they invoke other questions, fantastic, but we wanted to start with what types of needs or activities should ICANN prioritize through its grant making? Yes?

STEVE CROCKER

Full disclosure, as I said, I was former chair, and I was chair when this program was being put together at the beginning, and so I spent some time thinking hard about this. And what became clear to me was that there was a very tight set of constraints. Obviously,

it had to be within ICANN's remit. But the other side of it is that it should not be a substitute for the budgeting process inside ICANN. It should not be like hamburger helper to get something done that was chosen not to be done because of the budgeting process, that would destroy the budget discipline. How to translate that into which projects fit into those two constraints? No exact formula, but it would be helpful, I think, to have a retrospective analysis of how each of those grants met the two criteria of being within the remit and being outside of what was considered but not necessarily included in the budget.

XAVIER CALVEZ

Just very quickly, Steve, that was one, because exactly what you just said, this was a check that we had to do for this program to make sure that the topics of the projects supplied for are not duplicative of ICANN activities being carried out exactly for the point that you made, and therefore we had a check with that. And if a program would have been duplicative of those activities, it would have become ineligible, as Shayna was explaining earlier,

STEVE CROCKER

One point of clarification. The criterion that I suggested for the second one is not only that it's not duplicative of what's actually going on, but also that it was not something that would have been within the budget, had the budget been chosen, so that it would not be a substitute for expanding the budget. And that's a little

more subtle because you have to ask what wasn't being done but was chosen not to be done.

XAVIER CALVEZ

Agree. And we applied it in the manner that you just described. Thank you.

ANRIETTE ESTERHUYSEN

Thank you. Anriette Esterhuysen, APC, African School on Internet Governance, and NCSG member. I think it's a really interesting question. I followed the process very closely, and I think that, on the one hand, it's a bit of an existential question for ICANN, which you have to deal with at so many levels. On the one hand, ICANN is quite a narrow scope. There's concern about mission creep which constantly preoccupies the Board. But then there's also ICANN as part of the broader ecosystem, and I think I know you took that on the first time around. I think you have to take that on again. It's a little bit, you know, to use a telecoms framework, demand supply. Do you want to invest in supply so in the kind of narrow DNS capacity building and expansion, or do you also want to invest in the demand side? What creates more capacity? What grows the Internet? What grows Internet governance and multistakeholder Internet governance, and therefore DNS, ultimately?

I think you've done that before, but for example, the other topic that we looked at the grant application, we do a lot of work with ISOC on community connectivity and local Internet access

provision, and we felt it didn't qualify at all. But maybe it should qualify. Maybe expanding access in rural areas will expand demand for domains. So I don't have answers for you. I think you had the right questions before. I think you need to ask those same questions again, but maybe look at them in a post WSIS+20 context as well. Something else, such as, for example, support for national and regional IGFs, which you already do in some way, but in a very limited way, is that perhaps something that should become eligible?

So, I don't have answers for you. I just do think as somebody who crosses over between Internet governance and digital and telecoms policy and domain name space, I do think that that support for that sort of demand side is important. I think that is a role that ICANN Org doesn't play, and I think it is possibly a role that the Grant Program can play. Because, let's face it, if you look at funding for Internet and development in developing countries compared to funding for small and medium business development, for example, it's minute. Even access for connectivity and expanding connectivity, there's not a lot of money around for that. So I do think it's worth thinking of your role in the ecosystem, as you have done, and I wish you lots of luck with it.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you very much. I just want to go online and see that there's a hand from Barrack.

BARRACK OTIENO

Thank you very much, Shayna. My name is Barrack Otieno from Africa Top-Level Domains Organization. Firstly, congratulations. With what I have listened to, I must admit that this is a good start. I wasn't very clear initially how to rate the start to this, but with the explanation that has been given and with the discussions, it's a good start.

In terms of proposals, again, I think Anriette has picked some of the words that I wanted to share. But while ICANN's remit is on names and numbers and focuses on infrastructure, there is a lot of need on the demand side. And by this, I mean the registrants. I mentioned this yesterday during a session that we were having for TLD Ops at the ccNSO, in which we were discussing how to strengthen security and stability of the Internet, but focused on registries and registrars. Yet an important vector or an important weak point is actually the registrants. So, if at all, we could consider ways in which the registrant, who is a critical part the Internet, can actually be... we are working on, then it would be really important.

Then lastly, I think there's room for improvement for the feedback mechanism, especially to the applicants, so that in future, I view each applicant as an important ally to the work that ICANN is actually doing. So it behooves us to actually look at giving them proper feedback that will help improve the process and help make them part of the process. I believe that in future, some of the

applicants, if the process moves on well, can also contribute to its sustainability. Thank you very much.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you. Is there any other comments on this? Yes?

ANUPAM GAUTAM

It's Anupam Gautam, NextGen, for the record, from Nepal. Based on the recent developments in my country, Nepal, you must be aware about the Gen Z protest and the social media ban. I don't know if all of you are aware about it, but something like that had happened. So that sparked a concern that Nepal should have something like Internet Steering Committee. Because after that happened, I went and looked if something like that was in place, and I found the cgi.br, the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee.

To bring something like this, to have government stakeholders or the experts into the table, it needs to have some kind of income source. The Brazil, I think it's selling domains and having the revenue source, and it's using that money for the development in other sectors. But in Nepal, something like this happened and we cannot just have a revenue source built up. So if ICANN can, like the Grant Program, can focus on things like this, because one of the main pillars of ICANN is One World, One Internet. So I think that can be one of the things that we can look into the future. Thank you.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you so much. Maybe if we can—oh, sorry. There in the corner.

PAULO MILLIET ROQUE

For the record, Paulo Roque from the Brazilian Software Association. One sector that we would recommend is DNS abuse initiative that has creative ways to help fight DNS abuse or any kind of cyber crimes. We have 2000 companies in our association. This is by far number one worry that we have. It was stated that the projects cannot duplicate ICANN ongoing initiatives. We need to have these initiatives listed so we can see if we can apply for that or not. Just complementing. I know that DNS abuse is one of the initiatives of ICANN, but we think we can use the grant or any other company to supplement that because it's a very big activity we have. Thank you.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you.

GIOVANNI SEPPIA

Thank you. Thank you, Paulo. Indeed, that's an area that, as you said, where are those activities are listed. This is an area we have already received a lot of input, and we're going to make sure that next time that element that is currently in the ICANN Grant Program Applicant Guide is further clarified. So it's a very good point. Thank you so much.

I'd like to give the floor to Judith. Sorry. Maureen. And then afterwards, we're going to have a couple of questions from the Q&A pod, and then we move to the next question in the interest of time. Thank you. Thank you, Maureen.

MAUREEN HILYARD

Thank you. Maureen Hilyard from At-Large for the record. One of the difficulties that many of the applicants may have had which may have contributed to their rejection, of course, very well relate to ensuring that they were within scope, within ICANN's remit. And if they were ever reading ICANN's Strategic Plan as it is at the moment, it can be quite vague and it's very difficult for people who aren't part of the ICANN system, for example, to really identify what is in scope. However, having recently been introduced to the new Strategic Plan where strategic initiatives are a little bit more specific, I think that is going to have a much better effect on people, especially if we're going to be looking at initiatives that can not only benefit communities, but also ICANN and its generation for community support as well. So I just wanted to commend the new Strategic Plan, Xavier.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Yes. Now I will second and give a shout out to our Planning Team who's also been working really hard on that.

ANRIETTE ESTERHUYSEN

Thanks very much. Just a quick one. To pick up on what Barrack said about registrant support. For example, something that is very different but I think could have impact, would be supporting content creation in minority languages, and in a way that would then also increase IDN uptake, that would be very different from what you're doing now, but it could actually have quite focused impact. So I would say consider that as well.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Yes. There's a few more questions in the Q&A pod. The first, "Out of 247 applications, how many were led by women or women-led organizations?"

We did not specifically collect that information when we accepted applications. We did not have specific determinants around gender that we were collecting, though we could retroactively go back and survey and get a sense of that, but we don't have that information at hand today.

Another question, "Can you clarify how the 23 approved applications in this round were selected in relation to the budget cap? Specifically, was the number 23 determined by the \$10 million funding limit? And if the available budget had been \$12 million, would you have approved more than 23 projects of similar quality? Also looking ahead to the next round, do you plan to set both a total funding cap and a cap on the number of projects you will fund? For

example, stating in advance that you will fund up to 20 projects with awards falling between \$50,000 and \$500,000.”

To answer the first question, yes, the \$10 million cap did limit us in how many awards we could make. Looking ahead, what that looks like and how we discuss that and come to a decision around that is all up for discussion at the moment. Xavier, do you want to—

XAVIER CALVEZ

Yeah, just to add to that. Completely true what Shayna just said. But just to add to that, let’s assume for a second that we had received those 247 applications, and the amount of money we make available is not capped at \$10 million. There’s simply no cap. Let’s assume that for a second. Only a handful more projects would have been funded on the basis of the rating from the panel. What we also looked at is first we looked at the ranking from the panel that rated the applications and we choose from the top. That was Judith and Maureen’s question earlier. We choose from the top and we went down the list. We would not have gone down the list much further because the rating from the panel at some point rated projects that we would not necessarily want to fund even if we would have had the money.

So there was not an infinite list of projects that we were going to be funding because the rating, the evaluation of those projects, was considered too low. So there is a limit of quality as well as quantity that we have applied to the selection of the projects. And maybe

30, 32, 35 projects could have been funded, but not much more, even if we would have had an infinite amount of money available.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you. And just in the interest of time, I know because we're coming to the end, one other question that we can get to today is "What risk or concerns should ICANN consider as it designs future cycles?"

Yes, I think we have heard a lot already, but this is really a question to get at what we should avoid, or strategies or ways of thinking or considerations that perhaps would not further the success of the program. Yes, Judith?

JUDITH HELLERSTEIN

I did have a question for you. For the independent group who's evaluating it, I know I've been on evaluation things, it's not just rating. There's another idea that after you get all the ratings, you then ask in the independent group, is there someone that had a low rating that you thought should be in the next group, and to explain why you thought that and why you did it, and then that sometimes gives the Independent Panel an idea to like, "Oh, I understand that now from that perspective." And sometimes they change the rating. Because in another organization that was funded, we took that practice, and sometimes we changed our thoughts and minds because we were viewing an application under a different lens, and then when it was explained, we were like, "Oh, okay, I like that

idea.” So you can bring items up a level and say, “Oh no, I think these are eligible, and these would be higher, and I want to discuss them,” as opposed to just discussing the fours and fives. Thanks.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Yes. So for each individual application, there were three panelists that reviewed. Once they all individually scored that application, they did come together to have a consensus meeting, and sometimes those scores would change. Once there was a formal score for that application that those three panelists had consensus on, there was another round of consensus to integrate those into the final sort of ranked list score. So yes, there were lots of opportunities to change minds and hearts about things or to have better understanding or clarification if the panelists needed that. Thank you.

RON ANDRUFF

Good afternoon. Ron Andruff, DNS AXE. I think that the question is how could we make this better? I come back to the reviewers themselves. I've been in ICANN now for 25, 26 years, and it just appears to me that whenever I've spoken about ICANN, it's almost impossible for me to define what it is, even with 25 years. I often use the example, we're like a platypus. A platypus is an Australian animal with a duck bill and a beaver tail and it's got claws. It's this creature that is like no other. So how can we have panelists evaluate a creature like no other unless those panelists have been around for 25 years and have an understanding of the evolution of

ICANN, where we came from, how we work, what are those very thin lines that define whether we're just coming over the edge of content or we're staying in our lane as technical?

We're at a point in our world right now where we've built this amazing thing when all of us started, Dr. Crocker being right at the front of it, so long ago, when none of us had any idea what this thing, the Internet, would be, and none of us could imagine a world today without an Internet. Point being is the evolution has been so extraordinary, but at the same time, with that have come so many ills. We've got CSAM, we've got a theft of our identities, we've got all of these things, and the list is long as we well know. So we need to make sure that the panelists understand. We need to bring some garbage collectors in. We need to clean this up. We've built something wonderful, but we cannot stand on our loyal saying it's such a wonderful thing, but yet we don't go back and take out the trash. And when I say take out trash, what I'm talking about is taking down those domains that are horrific, they harm human life. So I think it's really, really, really important that the panelists are not just three people who will review documentation and check this and that.

I know that we applied, and one of the comments that came back, we talked about a framework for mitigating harm to human life. And the comment from the reviewer was, "The applicant keeps talking about this framework, but I don't know what they're talking about." Well, it was uploaded into the system so that sounds like a

failure on the reviewer's side because they don't know the platypus.

So I think it's really, really, really important. Can't stress it enough that ICANN at some form are in these panels and having these discussions or clarifying for panelists what this actually means, what that means, because otherwise, we missed the mark. Yes, we do a lot. We'll do some capacity building, we'll do other things, but we're certainly not cleaning up the Internet. And that's really our responsibility because we built it. Thank you.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you so much. I know that we're at time... Sorry. One more.

PAULO MILLIET ROQUE

Paulo Roque again from the Brazilian Software Association. What amount of money will be for round two? How much is ICANN going to invest in the round two? The round one was \$10 million. Round two will be how much and what is the cap per project?

SHAYNA ROBINSON

That has yet to be decided, but maybe Xavier wants to—

XAVIER CALVEZ

No. I was going to say the same thing. This session was also there to be able to collect your feedback so that then we can make those

determination forward. So it's not been answered, and we wanted to be able to continue collecting feedback about the program.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Okay. There are a few more comments in the Q&A pod, or questions. "Are we accepting these projects in line with the ICANN 2023 strategic objectives? Strengthen and stability and security of the Internet." Are we accepting these projects in line with the ICANN 2023 strategic objectives? For example, strengthen and stability and security of the Internet.

XAVIER CALVEZ

I think it should be 2030, the current ICANN Strategic Plan goes 2026 to 2030. Yeah, that is a discussion that we have been having currently. In the first cycle, projects should have been aligned with ICANN mission and the objectives of the Grant Program, as they were stated within the CCWG Auction Proceeds recommendations. So we have been considering also to make sure that they are also aligned with the strategic objectives that are currently in the Strategy Plan for 2026 to 2030. So that is part of the, let's say, discussions that we are having. And thanks a lot for this input because it's helping us to inform the design of the next cycle. I see Steve, and then I've seen Barrack and another person in the Zoom. Steve, please.

STEVE CROCKER

Well, before me, the woman next to me has been raising her hand. Why don't you go?

ELONNAI HICKOK

There you go. Thank you. Hello. My name is Elonnai Hickok, and I'm with the Global Network Initiative. And in full disclosure, GNI did receive a grant from ICANN to focus on WSIS, and a question that I had was just if ICANN has established criteria and published those for evaluating the success and the impact of existing or this round of grants, and then maybe just something to be thinking about as ICANN work to design the next iteration of the program is just how it will consider integrating existing grantees or if it will consider integrating existing grantees and how, and I think that ties into questions around impact and continuation on certain threads of focus areas. Just some considerations.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you so much. Yes, we are considering and looking at how to evaluate impact and ongoing effects of the funding. Currently, we are in the process of doing an internal review of sort of our administrative and operational deliveries and deliverables. So we're in the process of doing that. After a certain number of cycles, there will be a more comprehensive review, strategic review, of the impact of those projects that have been funded and what that looks like. But certainly, at this time, and this sort of activity that we're carrying out right now will inform how we do that. Yes?

STEVE CROCKER

Two quick things, just to stimulate some thought on the point that was made before about looking at the Strategic Plan and alignment. If you make a grant that is in line with the strategic plan, doesn't that raise the question of why wasn't that funded as part of the budget? That's related to the comment I was making about budget discipline. A different thought is the question of how much money would it have taken to fund things? In the back and forth, we had suggested that if \$10 million was sufficient to fund the 23, on the order of 15, just as a guess, would have been sufficient. How would everybody have felt if the budget had been \$20 million and you found that you could only fund 32 of these, and that would only consume \$15 million and you had \$5 million left over? Would we have been comfortable with that? Or would we have felt that, boy, that was a waste, and why didn't we fund some more?

My answer would be the discipline of choosing things above a certain threshold is important, and if there weren't a sufficient number above threshold, then don't spend the money. But I can easily imagine a bunch of people saying, "Wait a minute, we put in this application and you've got money left over. How come you didn't fund us?" So, anticipating that is, in a sense, asking about risk going forward, and that's a kind of management risk.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you for that. Yes, I think we have a few hands on the Zoom. Khaled?

KHALED KOUBAA

Hi. This is Khaled Koubaa, former ICANN Board member, CEO of AT Worthy Technology. Thank you for answering my question, and thank you also, Xavier, for complementing the answer to my question.

Two quick answers to your questions, one about the activities that I would recommend ICANN to prioritize for the next round would be certainly AI and emerging technology. Those are probably a subject that are way far from the mission of ICANN, so it should be prioritized as something that we need to fund research and activities around those.

The same subject also applies to your second question, which is, what are the risks and concerns? I think we should also talk about what are the risks about using AI in terms of applications and submitting application, but also the opportunity of ICANN to use AI to review those applications alongside maybe the panel or as a support mechanism to the panel. So those are my recommendations. And thank you for this great session.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you very much. Barrack?

BARRACK OTIENO

Thank you, Shayna. Mine is a contribution to the risks and concerns. Just to note that the future cycles should be based on a process that is anchored on an evidence-based needs assessment approach that is based on stakeholder engagement across the regions. As someone opined earlier, the names and numbering space is fairly specialized, and in some cases, opening it up to stakeholders that may not understand the intricate nuances of the work that we do may make us fall short of some of the objectives that we are trying to attain. So it would be useful. There's a lot of evidence right now that can be used out there to make decisions on areas that we could target with specific interventions, and that will help the panels that are actually judging or that are actually making the decisions on who should receive the grant. Thank you very much.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you. Judith, did you have a—or Maureen?

MAUREEN HILYARD

Thank you. Maureen Hilyard from At-Large. I was just referring back to Steve's comment that I raised about using the new strategic initiatives that are in the new plan, which I think are fantastic. But we all know there's no way that ICANN would say, if a region decided to put forward a plan of action for a regional concern, there's just no funding available at that level. However, this would provide an opportunity, especially for regionally coordinated activities, because what we're trying to do is to get regions or

organizations within regions to cooperate and to build on things that are actually going to enhance, not only just the messaging and that ALSes have always been assigned as a role, but there's a lot of capacity building, there's a lot of knowledge-building activities that they can be doing, and this is one of the things that they're trying to coordinate, and being done by probably a collective of the ALSes within a particular region. But I just like to see that whatever is being done is a mutual advantage, not only to the communities, as I said, but also to ICANN. Thank you.

SHAYNA ROBINSON

Thank you very much. And just here we have the last question, "What would success look like for the ICANN Grant Program five years from now?" This is really an aspirational question. We have just a few minutes to do this, and I already see a hand. Yes?

ENERST MAFUTA KATOKA

Hello, everyone. Enerst Mafuta here, ICANN Fellow, for the record. Well, the first round has given us an indication or, let's just say, it has given us an idea what worked well and what has failed, and we have an opportunity to at least work on the second round with the feedback which we have been given in this room.

With the question, what would success look like? Well, we know what ICANN is, secure and stable Internet. But the question that I would ask in this room is that 2.6 billion people worldwide remain offline. That's a gap in connectivity and in opportunity. So, for me,

as a Fellow, success for this program, I would say, let us also look at the underrepresented regions. Let us look at application that talk to innovation that solves these issues of connectivity and access. Because those people that are remaining behind, if we put them online, in one way or another, this program is a success, because also ICANN, we are putting them on the DNS and also their domains and stuff like that. So let's just work on that, and perhaps we connect and unite.

ANRIETTE ESTERHUYSEN

Thank you for that. Enerst, I think that's a good entry point. I think that it's a really good question to ask. I think, having worked with many other grant programs, maybe a two-prong strategy. One where you have a niche, where you actually want to show long-term impact and where you're identified. The ICANN Grant Program is identified. We're trying to achieve impact in expanding connectivity, for example, where it doesn't exist.

And then the other prong could be the more open, innovative, broader DNS and related program. And I think you kind of want both, because if you niche too quickly or too much, you'll lose that opportunity to create more awareness, awareness and break down silos that exists so much in the whole Internet governance sector. But on the other hand, if you don't have some kind of niche, it becomes very difficult to demonstrate impact over time. And also to develop more excellence in how you work in that particular program. So that's kind of, I think, what I would suggest you think

about. What is the topic? What's the subject area you want to stay in for the duration, but don't overcommit to that. Do keep that openness to still be able to receive applications that are sort of more broad-based in growing the DNS.

GIOVANNI SEPPIA

Thank you so much. Thank you all those who have participated in today's session. We need to wrap up the session as it's now—time is over. But thank you so much to those who have participated today in person and remotely. We have collected a lot of input, and it's just the start of a journey that will inform the next steps of the Grant Program. We collected a lot of input about the Applicant Support, which we already heard a lot; the assessment of the applications, how to improve the clarity around the assessment; the funding, those thresholds that we have set for applicants, but also the funding cap that we have set with the \$10 million for the initial cycle, as well as the subject, as you just said, and the objectives of the Grant Program.

So thanks a lot for the input that you have provided today. Thanks a lot to the interpreters, to Madeleine and Daniela for the remote participation manager, to Sarah. Thanks a lot to Shayna for managing all today's presentation. To Xavier for supporting the Grant Program team across all this journey, as well as to Grant Program, Board Caucus and the ICANN Board.

I'm now drawing this session to a close, so thank you so much. We'll continue to stay in touch. Please continue to stay updated on the

Grant Program webpage under icann.org where we have posted, as Shayna said, the list of the 23 successful projects with project duration, the funding that has been given to each of them, and where we will continue to provide updates. So thanks a lot to everybody. We'll remain in touch. Bye.

[END OF TRANSCRIPTION]