
ICANN85 Mumbai | CF – 2026 Round: 2026 Round Internationalized Domain Name and Variant Applicant Journeys with Q & A
Sunday, March 8, 2026 – 16:30 to 17:30 IST

PITINAN KOOARMORNPATANA Hello and welcome to the 2026 round, IDN and Variant Applicant. My name is Pitinan Kooarmornpatana, and I am a Participation Manager for this session. Please note that this session is being recorded and is governed by the ICANN Community Participant Code of Conduct, ICANN Expected Standard of Behavior, and the ICANN Community Anti-Harassment Policy.

Please observe the following guidelines to participate in this session. I will also post them in the chat for your reference. Only questions posted in the Q&A pod will be read aloud during this session as time permits and as directed by the chair of this session. If you wish to speak, please raise your hand in Zoom or otherwise as directed. When speaking, please state your name for the record and speak clearly at a moderate pace. With that, I will now hand it over to Sarmad. Sarmad, over to you.

SARMAD HUSSAIN Thank you, Pitinan, and good afternoon everyone in the room and hello to everyone online as well. In this session, what we will do is give you an overall introduction on how to apply and the steps involved in the application of internationalized domain names and their variant top-level domains.

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What we will do is take you through some relevant parts of the Applicant Guidebook, but of course, the Applicant Guidebook remains the main source of reference for more details. We try to cover just a high level and go through this information quickly so that we can leave more time for question and answers for all of you. Let me hand it over to Kristy Buckley, who will take us through some of the introductory slides, and then I will continue with the remaining portion. Kristy, please.

KRISTY BUCKLEY

Thanks very much, Sarmad. This is Kristy Buckley for the record, and I serve as the lead for the readiness work, which is helping everyone prepare for the next round, whether they are applicants, community members, staff, or vendors. We wanted to orient folks to the sort of readiness content that we are providing here at ICANN85.

Actually, if you can go to the previous slide, we have a brief disclaimer that we want to alert people to, which is just noting that the authoritative source for all information about the New gTLD Program 2026 round rules, evaluations, restrictions, processes, and systems is the English version of the New gTLD Program 2026 Applicant Guidebook. The readiness and training content that we are providing here at ICANN85, and that is available on the website or via webinars we have provided, is intended to be supplementary content to the Applicant Guidebook and is really developed to help

prospective applicants and the broader ICANN community prepare for the roles and opportunities that are coming up.

We note that if there is ever any discrepancy between the content presented here or on the website, the Applicant Guidebook or the AGB is always the one that prevails. With that, we will just go through some of the sessions that we have here this week. If you are new to the program, we are encouraging folks to look at the webinars that were produced in January. Many of you might have attended those live, but there are recordings and the presentations available on the New gTLD Program website. There was an introduction to the 2026 round as well as an applicant journey overview. Again, those are both available on the website.

The next slide shows the number of presentations on the 2026 round that we have prepared here for ICANN85. We have eight sessions in total covering a range of topics as you can see here, and as Sarmad mentioned, this is the one on IDNs and variant application journeys with questions and answers. We encourage folks to attend those sessions whether you can do it live, hybrid, or listen to the recordings. There is a lot of valuable information provided there, and we welcome you to this session. With that, I will turn it back to you, Sarmad, to go through the presentation. Thank you.

SARMAD HUSSAIN

Thank you, Kristy. In this particular presentation or session, we will take you through an introduction on IDNs, how to apply, and the

steps involved in IDN applications and variant TLD applications. We will also point to some resources.

The main objective is to understand the requirements for applying for an internationalized domain name or a variant TLD. Let me take a minute to explain what these are. Internationalized domain names are domain names which can represent a local language in a local script. We will have a more formal definition later, but these are basically domain names which allow for better access to a multilingual internet. In many of these cases, in different script communities, what has been shared is that there are some variations in the way these domain names are written, and those variations are considered the same as far as end users are concerned.

Those are now reasonably well-defined by the community and are referred to as variant top-level domains of a primary domain name. We will be talking about how to apply for both IDNs as well as variant top-level domains. You will be able to identify and prepare application question responses specific to IDNs and variant TLDs. The Applicant Guidebook remains the source of reference for more details for this material.

There are different types of applications in the 2026 round. There are obviously general applications, but there are then some specific applications like brands or community applications, geographic names, and reserved names. Then we have internationalized domain names as well as their variant labels. In

this particular session, we will specifically be talking about the last two categories: internationalized domain names and variants. As Kristy just shared, there are additional sessions at ICANN85 which may focus on some of these other types, so please do consider attending those as well.

How do we identify internationalized domains or IDNs? These are basically domain names, specifically strings being applied for at the top level, which contain at least one character outside what is normally called the ASCII space. For top-level domains, this means it contains at least one letter which is outside letters A through Z used in English. It could be in Latin, Chinese, Arabic, or any of these different scripts which are used globally. Currently, IDNs are supported in 27 different scripts which are integrated into the Root Zone label generation rules.

As far as variants are concerned, these are labels or strings which are considered the same as the primary string being applied for by the relevant script community. This has been discussed and encoded into what we call the Root Zone label generation rules. Through the Root Zone label generation rules, one can put in a string and identify what the variant strings are. The Root Zone LGR is the only authoritative source to determine variants. Variants cannot be defined by the applicants or users outside the scope of the Root Zone LGR.

We can apply for variants of new gTLDs or also variants of an existing gTLD. When applying for new gTLDs, the primary string is

identified, and then using the Root Zone LGR, which indicates possible allocatable variant strings, an applicant can choose one or more variant strings to add in the same application. In the case of existing gTLDs, the applicant would identify that they are applying for a variant of an existing gTLD, identify that gTLD, and then, based on that gTLD, also identify any allocatable variant strings they want to apply for. The application system would allow for both options for the applicants.

When an applicant is putting in this information during the application window, they will put in the relevant strings for IDNs and for the variants. There are some checks which are done during that period before the submission of the application. Those checks are normally to make sure that the strings meet the technical requirements for IDNs. For example, the IDNs must comply with the IDNA 2008 standard, which includes RFCs 5890 to 5893 developed by the Internet Engineering Task Force. They must also comply with the Root Zone label generation rules as I have discussed earlier. When the application is submitted, this is automatically checked and feedback is provided to the applicant.

In addition, the applicant for IDNs has to respond to additional questions 116 to 121. These questions cover technical and additional aspects. You can see the details of the questions in the AGB, but examples include the exact A-label of the string which is being applied for as an IDN. This is the form which starts with xn-- and then the remaining part of the string. The actual string in local script needs to be added in UTF-8 format. Finally, if the string has

three characters, then each of those characters must be input into a text box where each character has to be represented in its Unicode code point in the form U+0000. If you have a string with three code points, you will have three codes against each of those letters in your string.

As far as requirements for variant strings are concerned, the technical criteria remain the same as IDNs. For example, variants will also need to comply with RFCs 5890 to 5893. The strings which are variants must also be valid and allocatable variants of the primary string as per the Root Zone label generation rules. There are some additional requirements for variants. One is that the variant of a string can only be applied for by the same legal entity as the existing gTLD. If it is a variant of a primary new gTLD, it needs to be the same applicant as well. Variants must also have the same registry service provider as the existing gTLD.

For each of the variants, the applicant will need to answer additional questions 122 to 130. There is a justification needed for the variant string being applied for. You would need to include the A-label form, U-label form, and code points, same as IDNs. You would need to identify the script and the meaning or definition of the variant and explain how the primary string and the variant string are considered the same by the relevant user communities. This is important because sometimes the Root Zone LGR may actually over-generate strings and variants. The aim is that the applied-for variant strings are actually serving the same purpose as the primary string. This explanation clarifies how that variant is still

relevant and identifies benefits for the community from the variant string.

Finally, there are technical and policy details asked for because each variant at the top level and each variant at the second level adds complexity. The number of domain names which can then be registered can grow reasonably large. If you have three variants at the top level and each of them has three variants at the second level, that creates complexity for registrars and registrants. There needs to be a clear policy by the applicant on how this complexity will be managed for the relevant stakeholders. Answers to these questions are then reviewed by an independent panel to determine whether the variant is okay to proceed.

As far as fees are concerned, existing registry operators can apply for variant labels without any extra fee. For new applicants, the gTLD evaluation fee covers one application for the primary gTLD and up to four variant strings. If an applicant decides to apply for more than four variant strings, then each additional variant string would have to pay the same fee as other applications, which is \$227,000. There is a whole section on fees which discusses these details.

As far as prioritization is concerned, the first set of strings which will go through processing are the variants of the new gTLDs from the 2012 round. Following that, IDN applications and their variants will be processed with some priority. If there are a large amount of applications for IDNs, then for every draw there will be 125 IDN

applications and then the remaining applications from the rest for each set of 500 applications being processed.

There will be a panel which will independently assess the meaning of the applied-for variant string and whether it is consistent with the primary string. They will check if the variant string is recognized as equivalent by the intended user community and if there are clear benefits for that community. Finally, they look for clear steps to minimize operational and management complexities of variant gTLDs and resulting variant domains that impact registrars, resellers, and registrants. If the answers provide reasonable support for each of the four questions, then that particular variant is going to be evaluated successfully.

If for any one question the panel finds the answer is not reasonable, then that particular variant cannot move forward, and the applicant will be asked to remove it from the application. The remaining variants and the primary can still proceed. This particular evaluation is eligible for extended evaluation but is not eligible for challenge. Once the variants and IDN applications are successfully evaluated, the next step is the contracting process. For the primary string, the regular contracting process follows, but if somebody is applying for variants of an IDN, then Specification 14 is going to be included. This outlines contractual obligations for the management of variant TLDs.

Here are some resources which can help you. These list specific sections of the AGB where details are discussed. Please review

these sections if you are applying for an IDN or a variant. For general questions, reach out to us at globalsupport@icann.org. After a gTLD application has been submitted, applicants may use the Create Inquiry button in the TAMS system. It is important to note that ICANN staff members have been directed not to field questions from individual applicants, whether by email, social media, or in person, in the interest of fairness and transparency. We will respond to your queries through Global Support or the TAMS system.

Please let us know if you have any additional questions. We can take questions now as well. Let me hand it back to Pitinan and Kristy to see if there are any questions in the room. Thank you.

PITINAN KOOARMORNPATANA Thank you so much. No questions in the Q&A at the moment. Let us see. No hands so far and nothing in the chat.

KRISTY BUCKLEY For those in the room, please feel free to come join us at the table and grab a microphone if you have any questions as well.

PITINAN KOOARMORNPATANA Yes, please go ahead. Please state your name for the record. Thank you.

SHIVAM

Hi, I am Shivam. My question is that since it has been a long time since the last round of applications, how different can the applicants expect this round to be?

SARMAD HUSSAIN

That seems to be a very general question. I am not sure if anybody from the table can take that to respond. If you have anything specific about IDNs, I am happy to answer it.

MARIKA KONINGS

Yeah, thanks. This is Marika. I am the lead for the New gTLD Program. I think it is probably a really good question for those who were involved in the 2012 round and have been closely involved here. I do know that there have been a lot of improvements made based on the lessons learned from 2012. For example, the community worked very closely on the application questions that are being asked to make sure that these are clear and understood by applicants.

Obviously, the system being used is different from 2012, so I hope as well that that will be a better experience. This is the first time that variants can be applied for, so I think that is a major change as well. There are some features that are the same, such as some of the questions being asked and information that needs to be provided. I think there is a lot of familiarity, hopefully, at least with the process and what an applicant needs to provide, but there are also some improvements that were made.

One other difference is that for this round, the technical evaluation part, the registry service provider evaluations, is separate from the evaluation of the gTLD application. In the 2012 round, that was all done together. So again, it is another improvement that was made based on feedback and experience. I do not know if there are others, and I am also looking at the audience because I know there are a lot of community members who have experience as well who want to provide their perspective on what is different.

SARMAD HUSSAIN

Thank you, Marika. Justin, do you want to come in?

JUSTIN HO

Yeah, sorry, this is Justin. Marika covered it very well. I know you mentioned RSPs being pulled out of the application process. The ASP is a lot more robust with the level of support being provided to these supported applicants. One other difference is the evaluations. In the 2012 round, it was all string-level evaluations and applicant-level evaluations done in one chunk.

In this round, we are splitting it out. We are doing the string first, and after the string is evaluated, there is a fork in the road. If there are other people contending for the same string, those applicants will go to contention resolution. If no one else is applying for your particular string, you can go straight to the remaining evaluations. It is just trying to make things a little more efficient for those who

do not have to deal with contention so they are not necessarily waiting.

PITINAN KOOARMORNPATANA Thank you. Then we have a question in the chat from Shweta Asher. For an existing gTLD registry operator, is there a way to use the LGR tool or some other tool to generate the entire set of allocatable versus blocked variants?

For that one, I can take this, and Sarmad, you can add anything as well. Basically, we already have the tool available at lgrtool.icann.org. I will paste the link in the chat, along with the user guide. This is the LGR tool that you can use to check your string. You can put in the string that you would like to check and select the script which is available in the Root Zone LGR. There is a dropdown list of the scripts.

Then you just click Generate. It will do two things: it will validate your string, and if that string can have variants, it will generate allocatable variants and blocked variants. In some cases, the blocked variants can be very large, so if it exceeds the limit, it will just say it is too large. But in general, it can generate quite a bit, and you can download the set. Any additions from anyone? Okay, then I will call to you after.

We have another question from Jan Jensen: "Can existing registries request variants, and if so, when will they be evaluated or assigned?" Sarmad, please go ahead.

SARMAD HUSSAIN

Existing registries can apply for their variants during the application round. They will go through the regular application review process and the same timelines. One thing I noted earlier is that they will actually be prioritized first in evaluation, so they will go through the pipeline first. I hope that answers your question.

JUSTIN HO

The only thing I would add from the application system perspective is that you are going to be prompted if you are an existing registry wanting to apply for an allocatable variant of your current string. I just want to note that we are going to ask you to type in your registry name, and you need to type it in exactly as it is listed on your registry agreement.

SARMAD HUSSAIN

There is a follow-up comment by Shweta saying that on their attempts, the variants are getting one hundred percent blocked. To quickly respond to that, it would really depend on the string. Normally, the Root Zone LGR has been designed that it maximizes the blocked variants and minimizes the allocatable variants. In many cases, you will just get a list of blocked variants.

In a few cases, you will get some allocatable variants, and the number will also vary from script to script. For example, in the Han script, there may be more likelihood of a variant than in Latin script. It depends on the string and the script. If you think there is a

potential issue with the software calculating these variants, please do send us a query at Global Support and we can look at that as well. Thank you.

PITINAN KOOARMORNPATANA Thank you so much. We have a question in the room.

UTKARSH SHARMA Hi everyone, this is Utkarsh Sharma for the record. I am a NIXI Fellow. Given that the New gTLD Program 2026 round encourages IDNs to support linguistic diversity, how will ICANN ensure meaningful participation from small-scale organizations which still have financial and technical barriers in applying for IDN gTLDs?

KRISTY BUCKLEY Sorry, I was catching up with the chat. The question was about the Applicant Support Program and whether a small business would qualify. We have five eligible entity types, including small businesses. The small business can be either located in a developing economy or be a small business that is operating as a social enterprise. The window for applying to the Applicant Support Program closed on the 19th of December, but I am happy to share the ASP handbook in the chat so you can take a look at the details. Does that answer your question? Thank you.

PITINAN KOOARMORNPATANA Thank you, Kristy. We have a question in the chat. Sarmad, could you further clarify prioritization consideration for IDNs and variants? In other words, do IDNs and variants have priority by default even without participating in the prioritization draw?

SARMAD HUSSAIN Can we move back to the prioritization slide, number twenty-one? Thank you for the question, Bob. Just to reiterate, IDN applications for allocatable strings of 2012 IDN gTLDs will be processed ahead of other new gTLD applications. Once those are processed, remaining IDN applications and their variants will be drawn first if they are less than 125.

If they are more than 125, then 125 will be selected randomly along with other applications through the mechanism for the draw for the first set of 500, and then this will repeat. I hope that is clear. Thank you.

PITINAN KOOARMORNPATANA Any more questions in the room? Okay, Marika.

MARIKA KONINGS Yeah, thanks, Pitinan. Maybe just to add that the prioritization number comes into play once an applicant gets to application evaluations, because for the string evaluation part, all strings are evaluated at the same time. Just to make that clear.

SARMAD HUSSAIN

Thank you, Marika.

PITINAN KOOARMORNPATANA

We do not have anything for now. Renata, can you go to the last slide?

KRISTY BUCKLEY

If there are no further questions, there are just a couple more slides in terms of resources. In addition to the IDN resources that Sarmad covered earlier, these are broader gTLD applicant resources. These have been included on every slide deck that we are presenting here at ICANN85. It is a bit of a one-stop shop showing the resources available. Obviously, the authoritative document is the Applicant Guidebook.

We also point people to the website for news, announcements, and recordings, and the Applicant Readiness Pathway. As Sarmad mentioned, if there are questions that come up between these sessions regarding a specific scenario, the best place to direct those is to ICANN Global Support. We are also encouraging people to use ICANNLearn to build knowledge of ICANN and the DNS industry. The questions you submit can also help inform the evolution of the 2026 round FAQs on the website.

We have a request of you in the room. We would love to hear feedback from you on how the session was and if the materials were helpful. If you have a camera, please open the QR code and take a few minutes to complete the survey. We would greatly

appreciate that. Sarmad, is there anything else that you want to say by way of closing?

SARMAD HUSSAIN

No, I think we have had a round of questions. Happy to answer any others. We are there on the ground in case you want to approach us, but please send next round specific questions to globalsupport@icann.org. Thank you. If there are no more questions, we can probably just close the session.

PITINAN KOOARMORNPATANA

Okay, last call. Any last question or comment from the room? All righty, then I think we can close. Thank you everyone for joining, and I hope to see you in other next round sessions during the week. Thank you so much. We can stop the recording.

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