**Draft Comments On ICANN’s Strategic Plan 2012-2015**

A strategic plan is a vital document for any organization as it articulates how it “sees the future” in the, often dynamically evolving, context it operates in. The plan recognizes both the environmental trends and the organizational capabilities required to fulfill its mission. In essence, the plan should be the blueprint for an organization’s efforts towards achieving its desired goals. The plan is used for communicating the organizational intent to its stakeholders, while serving as a guideline internally as a framework for requisite efforts.

With this definition, ALAC identifies the following areas where ICANN’s draft strategic plan 2012-2015 could be augmented to better serve its purpose. In particular the plan should (1) comprehensively consider environmental trends with potential impact on ICANN’s mission, (2) extend the plan content to further detail the scope of the identified strategic initiatives, the justifications and the overall priorities, and (3) factor the resources and constraints ICANN has, and how they will be optimized vis-à-vis different strategic projects and efforts during the plan period. To elaborate on the above points,

1. **The plan should recognize significant environmental trends that can potentially impact on ICANN’s mission.** As the Internet continues to expand to its global reach, ICANN’s value proposition as an international governance body faces constant threat from “capture efforts” from both government and the industry. Additionally, US Department of Commerce has released a request for bid for IANA’s operations that is due in March 2012. Although ICANN has expressed confidence in retaining the contract, there is no mention of such a disruptive event in the plan document. These two are just among many important trends in the space of Internet governance. ICANN’s strategic plan for 2012-15 seems to have taken an incremental approach by making revisions to its prior iteration— but net changes are clearly disproportionate to the magnitude of emerging trends. We recommend ICANN to further invest in efforts to comprehensively identify such trends as part of the “environment scan” it has included in the plan document, and align its strategic efforts to address them.
2. **The plan should address how ICANN intends to fulfill its desired goals.** The plan document includes definitions for the four focus areas, along with a sparse narrative on the environmental scan, the associated strategic objectives and the metrics for each of the four focus areas. Although such an introduction to a strategic plan is required to communicate the intent of ICANN for next three years, it falls short of achieving the true purpose of a strategic plan—serve as a blueprint for its organizational efforts. In line with prevalent practices with regard to the strategic planning, ICANN should augment its planning efforts to address the following in a detailed manner: (i) where is ICANN currently with regard to executing its mission, (ii) what does ICANN intend to achieve (projects and priorities), (iii) what will it require to achieve them (resources and costs), (iv) what will be the timeframe for different initiatives (timeline and metrics), and (v) who will be accountable. By incorporating these elements, the plan document that is currently useful for informational purpose could become a comprehensive blueprint for execution of its initiatives in an accountable and transparent manner. For example, an important (stated) strategic objective like “Strive to be an exemplary international stakeholder organization” is left undetailed in the document as to how ICANN plans to achieve it, what resources will be dedicated to attain this goal and who will be accountable for it. Without guidelines, it will be impossible for ICANN to provide stewardship to its various constituents and internal resources in achieving the necessary progress. Furthermore, the good intentions and the efforts of the volunteer constituents may be wasted, as there may be conflicts internally due to the ambiguity in the stated goal. Similarly, for another significant goal like risk management, the plan does not address details how it will be approached given the resources and limitations of ICANN.
3. **The strategic plan, operating plan and the budget needs to be in total alignment.** As the plan document is silent in terms of the scope of the identified strategic initiatives, the relative priorities, timeline and the resource requirements it is difficult to understand how ICANN intends to align the operating and the annual budget to the stated intent. As accountability and transparency is a greater goal ICANN endeavors to achieve, this and this intent alone requires the strategic planning exercise to be further enhanced to develop such a linkage. Such an effort is not only required for the external communication but also is vital for providing a direction to its various constituents and internal resources.

Often times, organizations run into troubled waters if they do not heed the emerging trends in the environment they operate in. Additionally, even organizations with sophisticated abilities to identify strategic goals and direction fail in execution as they ignore how best to optimize the resources and limitations they have in their operation. Our recommendations, above, are intended to avoid ICANN falling into these traps. Additionally, as an organization that is powered by volunteer efforts of multiple stakeholders, we recommend the ICANN Board to adopt a plan that is useful as a framework to align various efforts of the organization.