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Empowering the Global South? Legitimacy in Regional Internet Registries

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This article examines levels and patterns of legitimacy for three Regional Internet Registries (RIRs) centered in the global south. These organizations in Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America-Caribbean are unique in that they govern a key global resource in a south-led, regional, and nongovernmental manner. How far does such a distinctive approach to internet governance attract foundational confidence and approval from affected constituencies? The article first introduces the African Network Information Centre (AFRINIC), the Asia-Pacific Network Information Centre (APNIC), and the Latin American and Caribbean Network Information Centre (LACNIC)—and discusses how legitimacy is important for their work. Data analysis of some 400 mixed-methods interviews then reveals that average legitimacy beliefs for LACNIC and APNIC are among the highest of all internet governance institutions. In contrast, AFRINIC attracts considerably mixed legitimacy perceptions. Furthermore, participants in these RIRs strongly endorse the principle of a south-centered, regional, and nongovernmental approach to internet governance, even if their assessments of actual practice are more mixed. Overall, then, we conclude that south-centered, regional, nongovernmental arrangements for internet governance can acquire solid approval, thereby pointing toward a possible alternative approach for handling other crucial global resources.

Este artículo examina los niveles y los patrones en materia de legitimidad de tres Registros Regionales de Internet (RIR, por sus siglas en inglés), centrados en el sur global. Estas organizaciones en África, la zona Asia-Pacífico, América Latina y el Caribe son únicas en el sentido de que gobernan un recurso global fundamental de una manera regional y no gubernamental liderada por el sur. ¿Hasta qué punto este enfoque tan distintivo de la gobernanza de internet atrae confianza y aprobación de carácter fundamental por parte de las comunidades afectadas? En primer lugar, el artículo presenta el Centro de Información de Redes de África (AFRINIC, por sus siglas en inglés), el Centro de Información de Redes de Asia-Pacífico (APNIC, por sus siglas en inglés) y el Centro de Información de Redes de América Latina y el Caribe (LACNIC, por sus siglas en inglés), y analiza de qué manera la legitimidad es importante para su trabajo. Realizamos un análisis de datos de unas 400 entrevistas de métodos mixtos. Este análisis revela que, de media, las creencias con respecto a la legitimidad de LACNIC y APNIC se encuentran entre las más altas de todas las instituciones de gobernanza de Internet. Por el contrario, AFRINIC provoca percepciones considerablemente variadas en materia de legitimidad. Además, los participantes en estos RIR apoyan firmemente la creencia de un enfoque regional y no gubernamental centrado en el sur para la gobernanza de Internet, incluso si sus evaluaciones con relación a la práctica real son más variadas. En general, podemos concluir que los arreglos a nivel regional no gubernamentales centrados en el sur para la gobernanza de Internet pueden obtener una sólida aprobación, lo que apunta hacia un posible enfoque alternativo para gestionar otros recursos globales fundamentales.

Cet article examine des niveaux et des schémas de légitimité pour trois registres Internet régionaux (RIR) centrés sur les pays du Sud. Situées en Afrique, en Asie-Pacifique et en Amérique latine et aux Caraïbes, ces organisations se distinguent par leur gouvernance d'une ressource mondiale essentielle de façon non gouvernementale, régionale et menée par le Sud. Dans quelle mesure cette approche unique de la gouvernance Internet inspire-t-elle la confiance et l'approbation, des éléments déterminants, des électorats concernés ? L'article présente d'abord les registres régionaux d'adresses IP desservant l'Afrique (AFRINIC), l'Asie-Pacifique (APNIC) et l'Amérique latine et les Caraïbes (LACNIC), avant d'aborder l'importance de la légitimité dans leur travail. Une analyse des données de quelque 400 entretiens aux méthodes mixtes révèle ensuite que les sentiments de légitimité moyens pour LACNIC et APNIC comptent parmi les plus élevés de toutes les institutions de gouvernance Internet. Par opposition, les perceptions sont bien plus mitigées quant à la légitimité d'AFRINIC. En outre, les participants à ces RIR soutiennent fortement le principe d'une approche non gouvernementale, régionale et centrée

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sur le Sud de la gouvernance Internet, même si leur évaluation de la pratique réelle est plus mitigée. Nous concluons alors que, dans l'ensemble, les arrangements non gouvernementaux, régionaux et centrés sur le Sud en matière de gouvernance Internet peuvent recueillir une forte approbation, ce qui indique la possibilité d'une approche alternative pour la gestion d'autres ressources mondiales déterminantes.

Introduction

Traditionally, governance of planetary challenges (e.g., ecology, finance, health, and war) has transpired through organizations that are worldwide, intergovernmental, and centered in the global north (i.e., Europe and North America). In a striking deviation from this historical pattern, most regulation of the Internet's planetary technical infrastructure has occurred through nongovernmental channels. Prominent examples include the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), and the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). Yet while states have generally had little if any say in these venues, the arrangements have still followed conventional patterns with their worldwide remits and with their fulcrums in the global north.

A greater break from traditional frameworks for governing planetary interdependence has arisen around the regulation of Internet numbers. The key institutions in this field are not only nongovernmental, but also regional in scope rather than global.¹ Internet numbers governance is spread regionally across the African Network Information Centre (AFRINIC), the American Registry for Internet Numbers (ARIN), the Asia-Pacific Network Information Centre (APNIC), the Latin American and Caribbean Network Information Centre (LACNIC), and the Réseaux IP Européens Network Coordination Centre (RIPE NCC). Note moreover that three of these Regional Internet Registries (RIRs) cover the global south. Indeed, AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC are unique in the governance of crucial planetary resources for being at one and the same time *regional, nongovernmental, and south-led*.

AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC thereby raise an intriguing precedent. Can this strikingly alternative institutional design for governing global challenges obtain legitimacy—and in so doing contribute to effective and just policy? More precisely, can south-centered nonstate regional institutions provide for (more) effective governance of the Internet—and possibly also other global resources? Can devolution from the global to the regional level, coupled with a transfer of initiative from the northern minority to the southern majority, and from public to private sector, generate (more) democratic and equitable governance of the Internet and other planetary concerns? And do these features (i.e., being regional, nongovernmental, and south-centered) lead to (greater) approval of these governing bodies? The question of legitimacy in AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC could hold important lessons for not only Internet regulation, but also for global governance more broadly.

With these concerns in mind, this article examines to what extent AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC have attracted legitimacy. For regional nongovernmental south-centered governance to work, it needs to have solid approval from

affected people. To the extent that AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC have secured legitimacy among their constituents, we might expect these regimes to thrive—and possibly to set an example for other policy fields. To the extent that the three organizations lack such legitimacy, then south-led regional nongovernmental governance of the Internet could be in trouble—and not offer inspiration for other global challenges.

To explore these matters, this article draws on evidence drawn from mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) interviews conducted in 2022–2024 with 391 participants in AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC. The respondents include a wide sample of board, staff, member organizations, and other stakeholders of the three RIRs. The survey results reveal that, on average, APNIC and LACNIC attract some of the highest legitimacy among all Internet governance institutions. Albeit with some variation, this bedrock of approval for APNIC and LACNIC holds fairly consistently across different constituencies. In contrast, legitimacy beliefs toward AFRINIC are more mixed, encompassing many strongly positive views as well as many deeply negative evaluations. This evidence shows that south-centered regional nongovernmental governance of the Internet can attract high legitimacy, but also that this outcome is not inherent in the institutional design. In particular, the case of AFRINIC indicates that various operational problems can undermine legitimacy beliefs toward a south-centered regional nongovernmental regime.

To elaborate on this argument, the rest of this article proceeds as follows. The next section describes the RIR system in greater detail, with particular attention to the history and workings of AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC. The subsequent conceptual section develops the notion of legitimacy and its importance for governance beyond the state. The fourth section then discusses methods and data, before the fifth section details the empirical findings. The conclusion reflects on this study's implications for empowering the south in global affairs, as well as for regional nongovernmental governance of planetary resources. The article makes important original contributions: conceptually with ideas about south-centered regional nongovernmental governance; methodologically with more refined ways to measure legitimacy; empirically with unique evidence regarding AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC; and politically with suggestions for future policy and politics in governance of the Internet and other global issues.

The RIRs

AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC are the south-centered components of a transplanetary RIR system. In chronological order of establishment, the current five RIRs are

¹Regionalism also figures in the organization of country code top-level domains, IXPs, and network operator groups (NOGs). However, in contrast to the RIRs, these other regional bodies play a minor governance (i.e., rule-making) role for the Internet.

- RIPE NCC, launched in 1992, which covers Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and Central Asia.
- APNIC, launched in 1993, which covers East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia, and the Pacific Islands.

- ARIN, launched in 1997, which covers North America, parts of the Caribbean, and Antarctica.
- LACNIC, launched in 2002, which covers Latin America and most of the Caribbean.
- AFRINIC, launched in 2005, which covers Africa.

The RIRs operate with considerable autonomy from each other, with every registry having its own policies and procedures. That said, the five regional organizations also work closely together—including through the global Number Resource Organization (NRO), formed in 2003—to ensure that key practices are consistent and coordinated. Continual contact among the RIRs also occurs inasmuch as each meeting of one RIR attracts some staff and members from the other four. The RIRs are moreover nested in a wider Internet governance regime, where they regularly interact with organizations such as ICANN, IETF, IXP associations, and NOGs.

The RIRs fulfil a vital role in the technical functioning of the global Internet. They allocate and manage Internet Protocol (IP) addresses and Autonomous System (AS) numbers, in order that all connected users have distinct locations on a single worldwide Internet (Rooney and Dooley 2021). Previously, the main numbers standard was IP version four (IPv4), but the supply of these addresses (4.3 billion) is now mostly depleted (Richter et al. 2015). Recent years have therefore seen a transition to the much larger address space (340 undecillion) of IP version six (IPv6) (Mueller et al. 2013; Kuerbis and Mueller 2019). IPv6 is crucial to expand the population of Internet users worldwide, as well as to enable the development of the Internet of Things, Smart Cities, Smart Homes, and the digital transformation of manufacturing with so-called Industry 4.0 (Robles 2023). The RIRs allocate both IPv4 and IPv6 to Internet Service Providers (ISPs), Internet Exchange Points (IXPs), and other organizations within the respective regions. The RIRs also maintain Internet registries: i.e., the address books that record which entities have obtained which IP numbers. Registry data make it possible, particularly with IPv6, to track who has done what on the Internet. In short, without the work of the RIRs, the Internet as we know it would not operate. Alternative digital address systems are in principle conceivable (Angieri et al. 2020; Hoffmann et al. 2020), but entrenched economic, political, and technical interests make the IPv4/IPv6 standard in practice immovable.

The RIRs also do far more than supply Internet number services (Swift 2023). Their training activities have reached tens of thousands of Internet engineers worldwide. Hundreds of grants from the RIRs have encouraged technical innovations, assisted start-ups, and promoted Internet development in less served areas. RIR measurement exercises have provided extensive statistical information on Internet use and performance. On cybersecurity, the RIRs report incidents, maintain relevant statistics, offer related training, and develop remedial responses. RIR meetings and policy forums have contributed significantly since the 1990s to the emergence and consolidation of a global community of Internet managers. RIR policy development processes have furthered the construction of a so-called “multistakeholder” approach to governing critical Internet resources, bringing together academic, business, civil society, engineering, and user circles, with no formal decision-making role for government. Alongside technically focused registry matters, deliberations at the RIRs regularly consider broader issues such as Internet access, data protection, surveillance, cybersecurity, and Internet shutdowns. These deliberations can have stark political implications, as exemplified by a request from

the Ukrainian government that RIPE NCC discontinue Russian members' right to use IPv4 and IPv6 addresses following the outbreak of full-scale war in February 2022. RIPE NCC rejected this request (Broeders and Sukumar 2024).

Given their highly important role for global Internet infrastructure as well as their innovative policymaking processes, it is surprising and unfortunate that the RIRs have received very limited academic research attention, particularly in respect of their governance arrangements. To date, the literature encompasses only an occasional article or chapter (Mueller 2010, 2013; Santoso et al. 2012; Aguerre 2019) and two unpublished doctoral dissertations (Ashwin 2014; Sowell 2015). Overviews of Internet governance have barely mentioned the RIRs (Bygrave and Bing 2009; Brousseau et al. 2012; Brown 2013; Radu et al. 2014; Radu 2019). Similar oversight marks studies of multistakeholderism in Internet governance (Antonova 2008; Malcolm 2008; Flyverbom 2011; Hofmann 2016; Strickling and Hill 2017; Jongen and Scholte 2021). Meanwhile, earlier research on regionalism in the global south has only examined intergovernmental arrangements, neglecting the nongovernmental (Söderbaum 2016; Engel et al. 2017).

The present article therefore fills notable gaps in knowledge of Internet governance as well as regionalism by highlighting the three RIRs centered in the global south. APNIC, the oldest of the three, currently has 10,000 members in 56 economies² throughout Asia and Oceania (Skarda 2024). LACNIC was established a decade later and today covers more than 12,500 network operators spread across 33 territories (Aguerre 2019; LACNIC 2025). AFRINIC was formally established in 2005, after a decade of discussion, and currently has 2,403 members in over 50 countries (AFRINIC 2025a). Previously, LACNIC and AFRINIC territories fell under ARIN, RIPE NCC, and (in a few cases, such as Madagascar) APNIC.

As underlined earlier, these organizations are especially interesting as unique instances where a key aspect of Internet infrastructure governance is centered not in the global north (as with ICANN, IEEE, IETF, and W3C), but is placed firmly under a southern lead. AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC could therefore have particular relevance for efforts to counter the so-called “digital divide” between the global north and the global south (James 2003; Pick and Azari 2008), as well as concerns about “digital colonialism” (Hill 2014; Holden and Van Klyton 2016; Coleman 2019; Ayodele 2020; Schoon et al. 2020; Dinika 2022). While access to the Internet is not sufficient by itself to overcome the global digital divide, having IP addresses and AS numbers is a necessary first step to participate in the global digital society. To promote Internet expansion in the global south, these RIRs also pursue initiatives such as AFRINIC’s Fund for Internet Research and Development (FIRE Africa), the APNIC Foundation, and LACNIC’s FRIDA program.

The governance frameworks of AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC exhibit many similarities. Each has a seven-member Board of Directors (in APNIC called the Executive Council), which is directly elected by the members. Member organizations receive IP address space and/or AS numbers from the respective RIRs³ and pay subscription fees that give them voting power. Other individuals and organizations par-

²APNIC speaks of “economies” rather than “countries” in order to circumvent contentions around the status of Taiwan. APNIC also treats Hong Kong and Macau as “economies” separate from larger China.

³Members can receive these resources directly from the RIRs or indirectly through so-called Network Information Centers (NICs) at the national level, which is the case for member organizations in Brazil, China, Japan, and Mexico, amongst others.

ticipate in the policymaking activities of the RIRs as stakeholders in the extended community, without voting rights. Each RIR is supported by a Secretariat, respectively based in Ebene, Mauritius (AFRINIC), Brisbane, Australia (APNIC), and Montevideo, Uruguay (LACNIC).

Legitimacy

Having more fully described the special features and role of AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC, we now elaborate on the conceptual aspects of the analysis, in particular the issue of legitimacy in global and regional governance. The following paragraphs address the notion of legitimacy and why it is important for (understanding) the workings of governance beyond the state, including in the present context of the south-led RIRs.

Legitimacy refers here to the belief and perception that a governing power has a right to rule and exercises that right in an appropriate manner (Weber 1922; Suchman 1995). When people regard a regulatory arrangement to be legitimate, they accord it underlying confidence: i.e., a foundational, diffuse, and usually stable approval. Legitimacy thereby goes deeper than contingent support, which relates to certain officeholders or policies (Easton 1975). Hence, many a citizen might be unhappy with a particular election result or a certain piece of legislation, yet would still regard the governance setup as such to be legitimate.

As the foregoing remarks intimate, this study is mainly concerned with *sociological* legitimacy (i.e., as empirically observed in the attitudes and behaviors of the governed) rather than *normative* legitimacy (i.e., as developed in philosophical arguments) or *legal* legitimacy (where the right to govern derives from the law). Hence, this article does not apply moral theory to assess whether people *should* regard the south-centered RIRs as legitimate. Nor do we undertake juridical analysis to determine whether AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC act in accordance with established constitutions and statutes. Rather, we explore how far people related to AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC believe, through their own perceptions, that these south-centered regional nongovernmental governors have a right to rule and exercise it properly.

This question is unconventional. Modern political theory has primarily related legitimacy to the state and the national level in so-called “western” contexts (Barker 1990; Beetham 2013). Fifty years ago, few scholars or practitioners would have imagined that legitimacy could be a relevant issue for nongovernmental governance at a regional level in the global south. Yet the existence of AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC makes this matter pertinent today.

Legitimacy has become a prominent concern in contemporary research on global and regional governance (Tallberg et al. 2018; Dellmuth et al. 2022). As more and more regulation in contemporary society takes place beyond the state, so proliferating studies seek to understand levels, sources, and consequences of legitimacy in global and regional governance, as well as processes of legitimization and delegitimation that operate in these spheres. In addition, an emergent, as-yet small subsection of this research examines legitimacy beliefs toward nonstate regimes (Bäckstrand 2006; Brem-Wilson 2018; Nasiritousi and Verhaegen 2019; Jongen and Scholte 2021, 2024). Hence, the present study is not only relevant for the RIRs, but also for a larger accumulation of knowledge about legitimacy beyond the state.

We study legitimacy because it matters. To the extent that such foundational approval prevails, a governing arrangement (such as AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC) tends to

have greater stability and power. Legitimacy (or its absence) can significantly affect a governor’s ability to secure mandate, acquire resources, attract participation, develop policies, obtain compliance, reach goals, and solve problems (Mayntz 2010; Sommerer and Agné 2018). Conversely, to the extent that legitimacy is missing, a governance apparatus (like the RIRs) tends to face greater volatility and dysfunction—or relies more heavily on manipulation and coercion in order to retain power. In addition, a governance institution with weak legitimacy might attract competition from other organizations, of which there are plenty in the Internet field.

Of course, legitimacy is not the only force that shapes how governors (fail to) rule. A full analysis of governance also needs to consider other organizational conditions, the individuals who govern and are governed, and the broader societal and historical context. Nor are the consequences of legitimacy necessarily straightforward. For example, a ruler with high legitimacy might become complacent and let performance slide, while a ruler facing a legitimacy crisis might move to become more democratic and effective (Sommerer et al. 2022). Sometimes the theoretically expected impacts of (lack of) legitimacy may transpire only weakly in practice (Bes et al. 2019). Yet acknowledging this complexity does not negate that legitimacy is a key ingredient in the dynamics of governance (in this case, through the RIRs).

Legitimacy beliefs are held by what the literature variously terms “the governed,” “subjects,” “constituencies,” or “audiences” (Bexell and Jönsson 2018). It is important to distinguish different groups of the governed. After all, different types of subjects can have different relationships with a regime. These varying positions can, in turn, correspond with stronger or weaker legitimacy perceptions. An important question is always about legitimacy *in whose eyes*. For instance, senior officers of an RIR might tend to evaluate the regime differently than a struggling ISP.

Earlier research on legitimacy in world politics tended to assume that states and general public opinion are the only relevant audiences (Symons 2011). Nowadays, with growing (acknowledgment of) transnational alongside international relations, research on legitimacy in global and regional affairs increasingly examines additional constituencies, such as international bureaucracies, business, and civil society. Certainly, with respect to private and multistakeholder regimes—where states generally play a marginal role—a wider concept of audiences beyond national governments is required.

The present study examines three types of constituencies for AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC: namely, members of their respective Boards of Directors/Executive Council; staff members in the respective secretariats; and participants in the respective communities. We further subdivide the community into individuals from member organizations and wider participants, a distinction that is further explained in the next section.

With this range of constituencies, we limit our scope to *insiders* from the three RIRs and do not examine the views of elites at large and the general public. We adopt this narrower focus for three main reasons. First, as other research has shown, broader audiences are mostly unaware of new forms of global governance and so hold no (il)legitimacy beliefs towards these regimes (Scholte et al. 2021). Hence, a public opinion survey would (at great cost and energy) presumably only confirm that citizens at large have *a-legitimacy* (i.e., no views, positive or negative) toward regional nongovernmental south-centered governance (Steffek 2007). In contrast, insider constituencies are sufficiently cognizant of

the RIRs to form substantive opinions regarding their legitimacy. Second, close-up experience of the RIRs makes insiders better placed to identify regime strengths and shortcomings that could shape legitimacy beliefs. Third, the legitimacy beliefs of direct participants have the most immediate impact on the operations of the governance organizations. Indeed, a regime's executive, staff, and members must hold substantial levels of legitimacy toward their regulatory arrangement in order to operate it. To be sure, insiders by their very involvement in AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC likely accord these regimes at least some degree of legitimacy. Yet, as our findings below indicate, especially regarding AFRINIC, insiders are not necessarily positive about the organizations in which they participate.

While the present article is primarily concerned with establishing *levels* of legitimacy perceptions toward the three south-led RIRs, associated questions of course arise regarding the *sources* of these beliefs. Typically, theorists distinguish between organizational, individual, and societal explanations of legitimacy (Tallberg et al. 2018; Scholte 2019). *Organizational* explanations relate legitimacy beliefs to the institutional features of the regime in question, such as its purpose, procedure (or inputs), and performance (or outputs) (Scholte and Tallberg 2018). *Individual* explanations locate legitimacy beliefs in qualities of the person who holds those beliefs, such as their emotions, identity constructions, ideological positions, interest calculations, and (lack of) social trust (Dellmuth 2018). *Societal* explanations of legitimacy focus on forces related to the social order, such as prevailing norms, practices, and deeper structures like class, gender, and race (Scholte 2018). Earlier research has amply demonstrated that multiple circumstances in all three spheres can shape legitimacy beliefs in global and regional governance (Tallberg et al. 2018). Indeed, a more encompassing analysis (not yet accomplished empirically) would combine organizational, individual, and societal sources in a single, more holistic explanation of legitimacy.

Given these intricate, multifaceted dynamics, it lies beyond the scope of the present paper to offer a systematic, comprehensive explanation of legitimacy beliefs toward regional nongovernmental south-centered governance. That said, our data analysis below does identify certain patterns of variation in legitimacy beliefs toward the three south-led RIRs, *inter alia* by region, by stakeholder group, by social category (e.g., age and gender), and by role in the regime (e.g., board, staff, member, and wider community). We also examine how far participants' legitimacy beliefs toward these three RIRs derive from support of the underlying principle of regional nongovernmental south-led governance. The suggestion is that such differences in institutional operation and individual position can shape levels of legitimacy *vis-à-vis* AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC. However, we defer a fuller explanation of these legitimacy perceptions to another occasion.

Methods and Data

Having established a conceptual framework, now arises the question of how, methodologically, to determine levels of legitimacy beliefs among various insider constituencies *vis-à-vis* the south-centered RIRs. For this purpose, we use mixed-methods survey interviews, which include closed as well as open-ended questions. The closed questions (with answers quantified on a five-point scale) provide statistical data on the strength of legitimacy perceptions held by various participants in the RIRs. The open-ended questions allow respondents to elaborate and motivate why they hold certain views

regarding the legitimacy of AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC. We developed the survey questionnaire first in English and then translated it into French, Portuguese, and Spanish. All four language versions were pretested through cognitive interviews with participants in the three RIRs. The precise formulation of the different survey items can be found in Annex 1.

We establish levels of legitimacy by looking at three dimensions. First, how important respondents regard legitimacy to be for the RIRs. Second, how much respondents personally care about the work done by "their" RIR (i.e., AFRINIC, APNIC, or LACNIC). Third, how much confidence respondents have in the current workings of "their" RIR.

Regarding the first dimension, the survey asks respondents to what extent and for what reasons they regard legitimacy to be important for the RIRs. This question explores whether and how participants in AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC share the academic-theoretical postulate that legitimacy is significant for governing beyond the state. This item appears later in the survey than the next two questions, in order not to prompt the respondents' answers about confidence and investment.

Regarding the second dimension, the survey asks respondents how much they personally care about the work of the relevant RIR. This indicator crucially supplements the confidence measure (discussed below), which is a commonly used proxy indicator of legitimacy. The confidence measure well conveys the *extent* of approval in a given governance apparatus, but it misses the *depth* of a person's connection to that regime. However, legitimacy is stronger (or weaker) to the degree that an approving attitude is combined with greater (or lesser) investment in the governance arrangement in question. For example, earlier research suggests that people can, on average, have similar extents of confidence in national government and international organizations (Dellmuth et al. 2022); however, a person's opinions about their state might weigh more heavily than their views of suprastate regimes. Hence, as a supplement to previous legitimacy research, we study respondents' attachment to the RIR regime.

Regarding the third dimension, as mentioned above, political science research commonly uses "confidence" in the workings of a regime as a proxy for legitimacy beliefs. "Confidence" brings out legitimacy's quality of an underlying faith in a governance arrangement, beyond support for certain persons and policies. "Confidence" also avoids absorbing into the indicator possible sources of legitimacy (such as democracy) or possible consequences of legitimacy (such as compliance) (Dellmuth et al. 2022, 26–29). While some scholars have criticized the confidence measure in legitimacy research (Kaina 2008; Schnaudt 2019), these detractors also recognize its broad relevance and do not suggest any better alternative (as we do here with the investment measure).

Finally, we explore the significance of respondents' assessment of a south-centered, regional, and non-governmental approach in shaping their legitimacy beliefs *vis-à-vis* the RIRs. To this end, we ask respondents what they think about a south-led, regional, and nongovernmental approach to governing the Internet. How far are insiders to AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC—who have the greatest direct experience of this mode of governance—convinced of its virtues (or not)? Through six items, the survey asked respondents to assess the approach both in principle (is it a good idea) and in practice (has it realized its promise in the case of the south-centered RIRs).

Table 1. Survey respondents

	AFRINIC	APNIC	LACNIC
<i>Total number of interviews:</i>	120	126	145
<i>Role of involvement:</i>			
(Former) board/executive council	7	9	10
Staff	26	26	26
Member organization/resource member	28	52	43
Other stakeholder/member of the extended community	59	39	66
<i>Stakeholder group:</i>			
Academia	13	13	11
Business	17	17	40
Civil society/Internet users	27	9	6
Government/intergovernmental organization	5	15	7
Technical	27	44	55
Other/prefer not to say	4	2	0
<i>Gender</i>			
Female	15	35	41
Male	102	85	103
Other/prefer not to say	2	2	0
<i>Age</i>			
<30 years	11	18	9
31–40	41	35	45
41–50	46	35	59
51–60	16	28	24
>60 years	5	6	7

Concerning sampling strategy, for each RIR we, invited all current and past board members (since 2016) to take the survey. We also invited staff members in a variety of roles at the three RIRs. Community members in the RIRs were approached at random during in-person and online meetings of the three RIRs, which yielded suitable diversity of countries, stakeholder groups, and social categories (such as age, gender, and language). Interviews were conducted between May 2022 and June 2024.

In total, we conducted 391 interviews: 120 concerning AFRINIC, 126 concerning APNIC, and 145 concerning LACNIC. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at three meetings of LACNIC, two meetings of APNIC, two meetings of the global Internet Governance Forum (IGF), and one meeting of ICANN. Since AFRINIC meetings were suspended during the time of fieldwork, we pursued relevant interviews at the African Peering and Interconnection Forum (AfPIF), the Africa Internet Summit (AIS), and AFRINIC headquarters in Mauritius. Numerous further interviews for all three RIRs were done online. Regarding language, 237 interviews were held in English, 97 in Spanish, 40 in Portuguese, and 17 in French. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the respondents.

Given our concern to measure levels and patterns of legitimacy beliefs, the data analysis below consists mainly of descriptive statistics. To determine whether subgroups of the sample hold significantly different extents of legitimacy perceptions, we run independent samples *t*-tests, unless stated otherwise. We present the results of the *t*-tests in Annex 2.

Findings

We now analyze our empirical results, taking the four above aspects of legitimacy in turn. Regarding the significance of legitimacy, our evidence shows that respondents overwhelmingly perceive this matter to be highly important for the south-centered RIRs. Regarding attachment to and invest-

ment in the RIRs, respondents generally report to care a lot about the three RIRs, so that their beliefs about the legitimacy of these regimes have depth and intensity. Regarding confidence, the data indicate strikingly high average levels of legitimacy for APNIC and LACNIC, in contrast to a very mixed picture for AFRINIC. Certain variations aside, these averages are fairly consistent across most institutional roles, stakeholder groups and social categories, suggesting that, in the cases of APNIC and LACNIC, south-centered regional nongovernmental governance attracts a broad base of firmly rooted legitimacy. Yet, shaky confidence in AFRINIC shows that legitimacy for south-centered regional nongovernmental governance cannot be taken for granted. The next subsections elaborate on these findings.

Importance of Legitimacy for the RIRs

Let's start with the significance of legitimacy for these three organizations. Figure 1 reveals that an overwhelming majority of survey respondents (84 percent) find legitimacy extremely important for the south-centered RIRs. An additional 14 percent of respondents indicate to find legitimacy "quite important" for the RIRs. Moreover, the importance of legitimacy is widely recognized across stakeholder groups, across social categories, and across the different institutional layers of the RIR regimes (Annexes 3–5). These findings mirror the results of an earlier study, where respondents attributed similarly high importance to legitimacy *vis-à-vis* ICANN (Jongen and Scholten 2021).

However, notable variation does arise on this issue between the three RIRs. While no less than 94 percent of surveyed AFRINIC participants consider legitimacy to be extremely important, "only" 74 percent of surveyed APNIC participants express this view, with surveyed LACNIC participants falling in between at 86 percent. These differences between the three RIRs are statistically significant, with mean

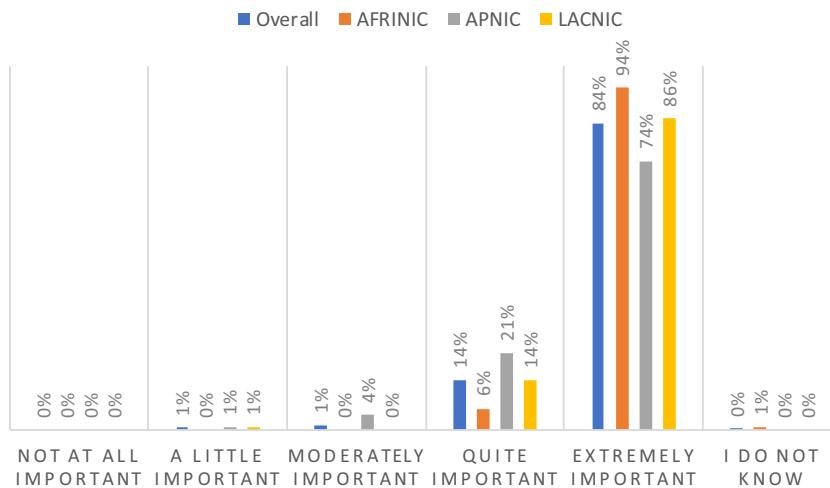


Figure 1. Importance of legitimacy for the RIRs in percent, $N = 384$

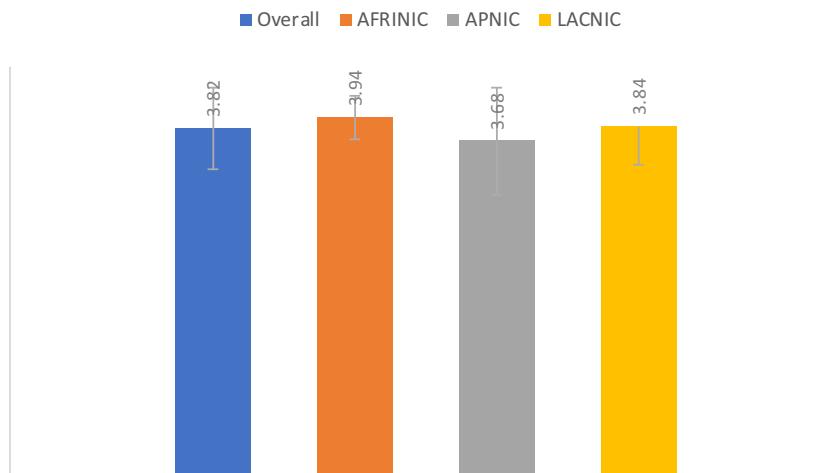


Figure 2. Importance of legitimacy for the RIRs, mean scores, and standard deviations (SDs), 0–4 scale. SDs are 0.24 for AFRINIC, 0.59 for APNIC, 0.42 for LACNIC, and 0.45 for the three RIRs overall.

averages on a 0–4 scale of 3.94 for AFRINIC, 3.84 for LACNIC, and 3.68 for APNIC (figure 2).

The high score for AFRINIC probably reflects long-running vigorous legitimacy debates regarding that organization. Indeed, in recent years, intense litigation and the lack of a quorate board have prevented AFRINIC from developing policy (AFRINIC 2025b). Some critics have even suggested to wind up AFRINIC and establish a new Internet numbers regime for the African region. In September 2023, the Supreme Court of Mauritius appointed an Official Receiver for AFRINIC with the tasks to protect its assets, organize elections to the board, and recruit a new CEO. Board elections were first attempted in June 2025, but the results were annulled amidst concerns about irregularities (Dabee 2025; Lindqvist 2025). A second attempt in September 2025 was more successful and resulted in the election of a new board.

Reactions to developments around AFRINIC suggest that respondents are not only concerned about the legitimacy of the RIR that they primarily engage with, but also about the legitimacy of other RIRs and the RIR system as a whole. Several respondents assert that if the legitimacy of one RIR is challenged, it could negatively affect wider Internet num-

bers governance. In their responses to the open-ended survey questions, many respondents additionally mention that, if the RIRs were to lose legitimacy, it would negatively impact these institutions' capacity to govern effectively, threaten the survival of the organizations, and cause general chaos around the Internet.

Overall, then, these results strongly support the theoretical proposition that legitimacy matters for governance beyond the state, in this case, regional nongovernmental regulatory arrangements. Moreover, these data show that legitimacy is not merely a "western" concern for governance institutions based in the global north, but also highly important in the global south, although somewhat less in the Asia-Pacific region. Likewise, legitimacy for south-centered regional nongovernmental governance is accorded high importance across stakeholder groups and social categories. Given this evidence, then, the issue merits academic and political attention.

Investment in the RIRs

Moving on to the second dimension, how much do participants care about the south-centered RIRs? A large majority

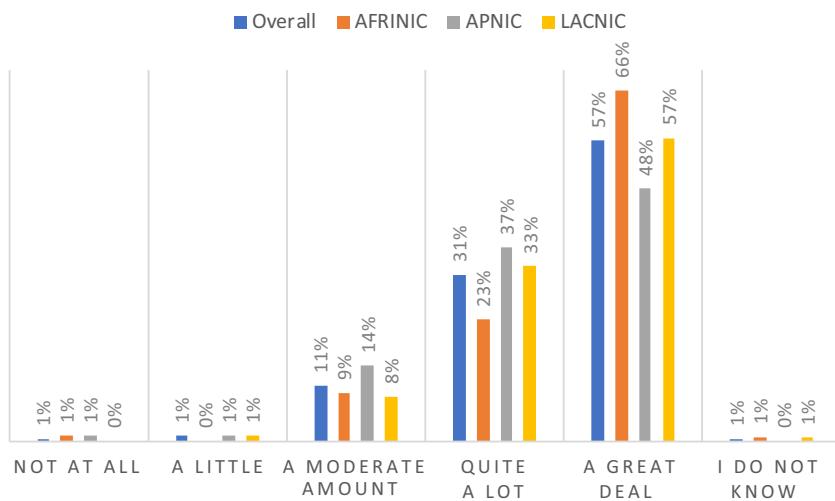


Figure 3. Personal investment in the RIRs in percent, $N = 391$

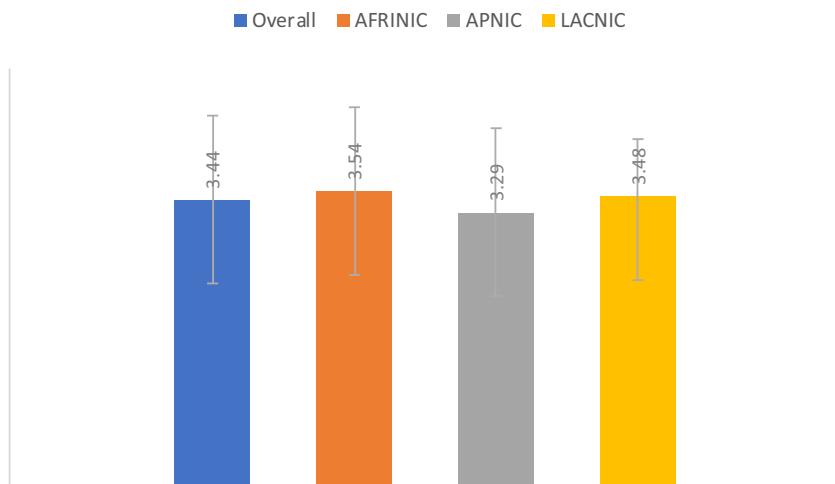


Figure 4. Personal investment in the RIRs, mean scores, and SDs, 0–4 scale. SDs are 0.73 for AFRINIC, 0.80 for APNIC, 0.68 for LACNIC, and 0.74 for the three RIRs overall.

of respondents indicate to care “a great deal” (57 percent) or “quite a lot” (31 percent) about these regimes (figure 3). Only 1 percent report to care only “a little” and “not at all.” Hence, participants in this regional nongovernmental governance do not regard the organizations to be of marginal interest and disposable.

That said, we do see variation in degrees of investment across the three south-centered RIRs. While two-thirds of interviewed AFRINIC participants (66 percent) indicate to care a great deal about the organization, this figure drops to 57 percent for LACNIC participants and 48 percent for APNIC participants. The relevant means are 3.54 for AFRINIC and 3.48 for LACNIC, which are significantly above the mean of 3.29 for APNIC (figure 4). Hence, although a significant share of respondents are critical of AFRINIC (as detailed below), many of them do care about the organization and want it to survive.

Some variation in degrees of investment also arises across stakeholder groups and the different layers of the RIRs (Annexes 6–7). While all stakeholders report to care between “quite a lot” and “a great deal” about the RIR in which they are mainly involved, some groups are especially invested. On

average, participants from business report to care the least about the RIRs (mean of 3.22), while participants from the technical sector indicate to care the most (mean of 3.47). The particularly high score for the technical sector probably relates to the crucial role of the RIRs in the operational functions of the Internet, though IP address allocation is also vital to the commercial interests of ISPs and other Internet companies.

In addition, we see that degree of investment tends to link with closeness to the governance apparatus. Thus, overall, board members care the most about the RIRs (mean of 3.73). This very high average might be expected, given the time and energy that boards devote to supervising the organizations. Staff members—who commit their working lives to the RIRs—follow closely behind (mean of 3.68). In contrast, average care about the RIRs drops by nine percent among member organizations (mean of 3.37) and the extended community (mean of 3.33). Yet these figures, too, are notably high on the 0–4 scale.

As for social category (Annex 8), close to no variation in degree of investment in the south-centered RIRs arises between respondents who identify as female (mean of 3.47)

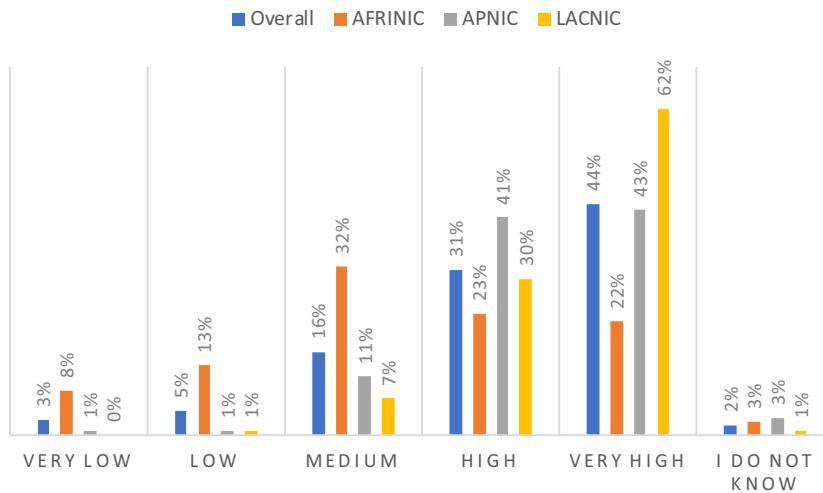


Figure 5. Confidence in the RIRs in percent, $N = 391$

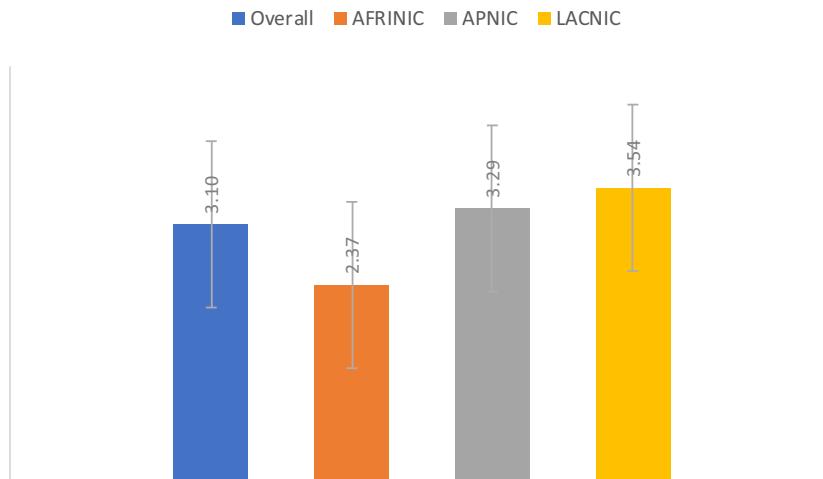


Figure 6. Confidence in the RIRs, mean scores, and SDs, 0–4 scale. SDs are 1.21 for AFRINIC, 0.77 for APNIC, 0.66 for LACNIC, and 1.02 for the three RIRs overall.

and those who identify as male (mean of 3.42). So, although many more men than women participate in these three RIRs, the two genders care roughly equally about these regimes. Larger, statistically significant differences appear in relation to respondents' age. Taking the three organizations together, participants under 30 years indicate to care the least about the RIRs (mean average of 3.11), while respondents aged 51–60 years care the most (3.66). This significant age gap may reflect differences in average length of involvement, where older participants tend to have built longer and deeper relationships with the RIRs, often dating back to their establishment.

Overall, the preceding evidence shows that, in the case of the south-centered RIRs, participants care deeply about regional nongovernmental governance. Hence, their perceptions about these modes of governance are not an idle matter. To be sure, one can reasonably expect that insiders in the three RIRs (the subject pool of our study) would care more than people who do not engage with these regimes. Still, these results do show that insider commitment to AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC runs deep.

Confidence in the RIRs

Moving to our third dimension of legitimacy, how much confidence do participants express in the workings of the south-centered RIRs (figure 5)? Taking the three organizations together, three quarters of respondents indicate to have "high" or "very high" confidence in them (75 percent). Just one in six (i.e., 16 percent) indicate to have only "medium" confidence, and less than one in ten (8 percent) report to have "low" or "very low" confidence in the RIRs. The overall report card therefore shows strong approval levels for south-centered regional nongovernmental governance through the RIRs, at an overall average of 3.10 on a 0–4 scale.

In particular, approval ratings for LACNIC and APNIC come out strikingly high, with mean confidence levels of 3.54 for LACNIC and 3.29 for APNIC (figure 6). In the case of LACNIC, just under two-thirds of respondents (62 percent) indicate to have "very high" confidence in the current workings of this RIR, and another 30 percent express "high" confidence. Regarding APNIC, about two-fifths of respondents express "very high" confidence (43 percent), and an-

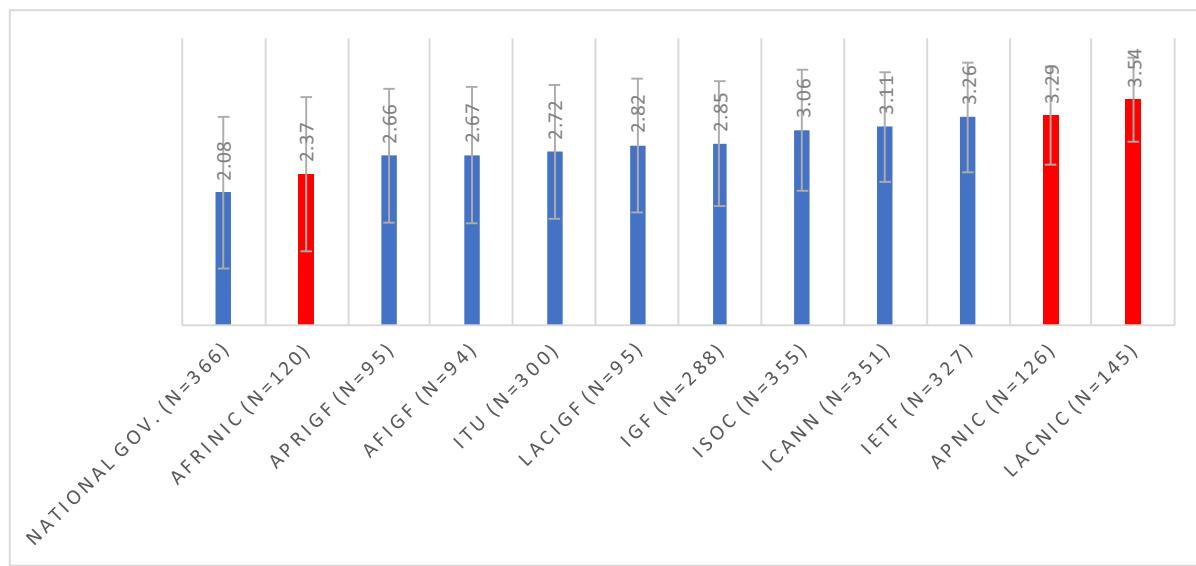


Figure 7. Confidence in other Internet governance organizations, mean scores, and SDs, 0–4 scale. • The question about confidence in AFRINIC and AFIGF was only posed to participants in AFRINIC, the question about confidence in APNIC and APrIGF was only posed to participants in APNIC, and the question about confidence in LACNIC and LACIGF only to participants in LACNIC. • SDs are 0.86 for the IETF, 0.86 for ICANN, 0.95 for ISOC, 1.05 for the IGF, 1.05 for LACIGF, 1.05 for the ITU, 1.07 for AFIGF, 1.05 APrIGF, and 1.19 for national governments.

other two-fifths indicate “high” confidence (41 percent) in that organization. Reacting to the higher figures for LACNIC, several APNIC participants quipped to us that “Latin Americans are more enthusiastic than us sober Asians.”

These figures for LACNIC and APNIC indicate that south-centered regional nongovernmental governance can attain very solid legitimacy indeed. In fact, participants in LACNIC and APNIC rate these regional bodies the highest among all Internet governance institutions (figure 7). Survey respondents (from all three RIRs) have comparably lower—but still high!—confidence in global nongovernmental organizations, with mean scores of 3.26 for the IETF, 3.11 for ICANN, and 3.06 for the Internet Society (ISOC). The multistakeholder IGF attracts a lower average of 2.85, while the intergovernmental International Telecommunication Union (ITU) comes in even lower at 2.72. National government handling of Internet matters occupies the lowest position, with an average confidence of 2.08. On this evidence, regional nongovernmental institutions might seem to offer an optimal formula for Internet governance.

Importantly, it is also not only RIR insiders who rate these organizations highly. Another study of legitimacy beliefs in Internet governance (undertaken among ICANN participants in 2018–2019) found high approval of the RIRs (in this case, all five collectively), with a mean confidence score of 2.99 on a comparable 0–4 scale (Jongen and Scholte 2021). While this figure is a little lower than the average confidence among insiders in the south-centered RIRs in 2022–2024, it shows that solid legitimacy beliefs for regional nongovernmental arrangements extend beyond insiders to other parts of the Internet governance ecosystem. Indeed, ICANN participants rated the RIRs higher than ICANN itself (with a mean confidence of 2.54).

Turning to AFRINIC, data on confidence present quite a different picture, with mean confidence of just 2.37. Opinions among AFRINIC insiders are considerably dispersed,

with around one in five respondents reporting to have “very low” or “low” confidence in the regime (21 percent), about a third holding “medium” confidence (32 percent), and a bit under half expressing “high” or “very high” confidence in this RIR (45 percent). As indicated earlier, AFRINIC has faced acute operational challenges in recent years. The stark contrast between lower confidence toward AFRINIC and higher confidence for APNIC and LACNIC shows that strong legitimacy is not inherent in south-led regional non-governmental governance.

Moving on to the different institutional roles (Annex 9) and stakeholder groups (Annex 10), we find minimal variation in confidence levels between the four categories of board members, staff, member organizations, and the extended community. In addition, all five stakeholder sectors addressed in our study (i.e., academia, business, civil society, government, and technical) hold fairly high levels of confidence in the south-centered RIRs, albeit with some variation. Respondents from technical circles indicate to have the most confidence (mean of 3.36), followed by academics (mean of 3.17) and government officials (mean of 3.04). Average confidence in the south-centered RIRs in the business sector comes out a bit lower (mean of 2.88), while civil society (perhaps healthily for its watchdog function) shows the lowest sectoral average (mean of 2.71). In spite of some significant variation, then, all stakeholder groups hold quite solid legitimacy beliefs *vis-à-vis* south-led regional nongovernmental governance through the RIRs.

Among the different stakeholder groups and institutional roles too, average confidence is consistently higher for LACNIC and APNIC than for AFRINIC. Thus, it is not that one or two sectors pull AFRINIC down. Skepticism regarding AFRINIC is particularly notable from the sides of government (mean 1.60), business (mean 1.76), and (former) members of the Board of Directors (mean 1.86). However, the confidence means for AFRINIC are also comparatively

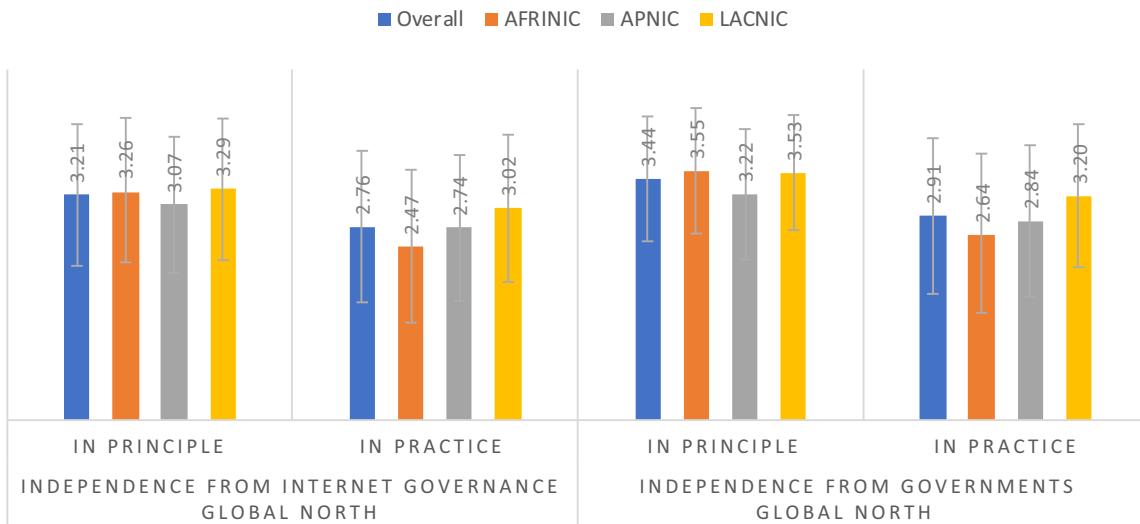


Figure 8. Perceptions of regional self-determination. • Regarding independence from Internet governance in the global north: SDs are 1.05 for AFRINIC, 0.97 for APNIC, 1.01 for LACNIC, and 1.01 for the three RIRs overall (in principle) and 1.10 for AFRINIC, 1.04 for APNIC, 1.05 for LACNIC, and 1.08 for the three RIRs overall (in practice). • Regarding independence from governments in the global north: SDs are 0.90 for AFRINIC, 0.93 for APNIC, 0.82 for LACNIC, and 0.89 for the three RIRs overall (in principle) and 1.16 for AFRINIC, 1.08 for APNIC, 1.02 for LACNIC, and 1.11 for the three RIRs overall (in practice).

lower than for LACNIC and APNIC among academics, civil society actors, and technical professionals, as well as among staff members, member organizations, and the extended community. To one degree or another, then, all stakeholder groups hesitate to accord AFRINIC the right to govern.

Evidence for other social categories tells a similar story: namely, of some variation amidst generally high confidence for LACNIC and APNIC, as against lower average confidence for AFRINIC (Annex 11). In respect of gender, women (with a mean of 3.31) hold slightly more confidence in the south-centered RIRs relative to men (with a mean of 3.05). Yet this gender difference mainly arises in relation to AFRINIC (where the number of women interviewed was moreover small), and it is more or less absent in relation to LACNIC and APNIC. In respect of age, we see little variation in confidence levels across age groups in APNIC and LACNIC, with a slight exception for young persons in respect of APNIC. Interestingly, regarding AFRINIC participants 50 years and younger have decidedly higher confidence in the regime (mean score of 2.49) than participants older than 50 (mean score of 1.71). Hence, the veterans seem especially unhappy with AFRINIC's current predicament.

In sum, then, legitimacy beliefs as measured by confidence are impressively high toward APNIC and LACNIC among insiders to those two regimes. Albeit with some significant variations, this positive approval holds across stakeholder groups, across institutional roles, and across social categories of age and gender. To this degree, south-led regional nongovernmental governance of the Internet has got buy-in from all quarters. Yet the counterexample of AFRINIC shows more fragile legitimacy, with many respondents across stakeholder groups and other social categories expressing low and very low levels of confidence in this regime. Thus, legitimacy for south-centered regional nongovernmental Internet governance cannot be taken for granted.

A Promising Model?

As we have underlined throughout, AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC stand out for offering a *south-centered, regional, and nongovernmental* approach to governing planetary challenges. Yet how much approval do these three distinguishing features attract among participants in the three organizations? The survey results indicate that participants in the RIRs rate all three features to be between “quite” and “extremely” important in principle. In addition, participants in LACNIC and, to a lesser extent, APNIC are fairly positive about the degree to which the RIRs realize these potentials in practice, whereas respondents from AFRINIC are more skeptical.

Regarding their *south-led* quality, the survey asked how far respondents find it important that AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC can act independently of Internet governance institutions and governments based in Europe and the United States (figure 8). On average, participants in all three RIRs find it between “quite” and “extremely” important that these organizations can act independently of governments in the global north (mean of 3.44) as well as Internet governance institutions in the global north (mean of 3.21). Autonomy from Internet governance in the global north is considered slightly less important than independence from governments. Many interviewees remarked that the RIRs do need to collaborate with global institutions such as ICANN, which, through its Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA), allocates blocks of IP and AS numbers to the RIRs. As for the situation in practice, participants in LACNIC perceive that organization to act largely independently of actors in the global north (mean of 3.02 for Internet governance institutions and mean of 3.20 for governments). In contrast, participants in APNIC and (even more so) AFRINIC assess that these RIRs achieve such independence between a medium and a large extent. Interestingly, a significant correlation exists between perceptions of independence from

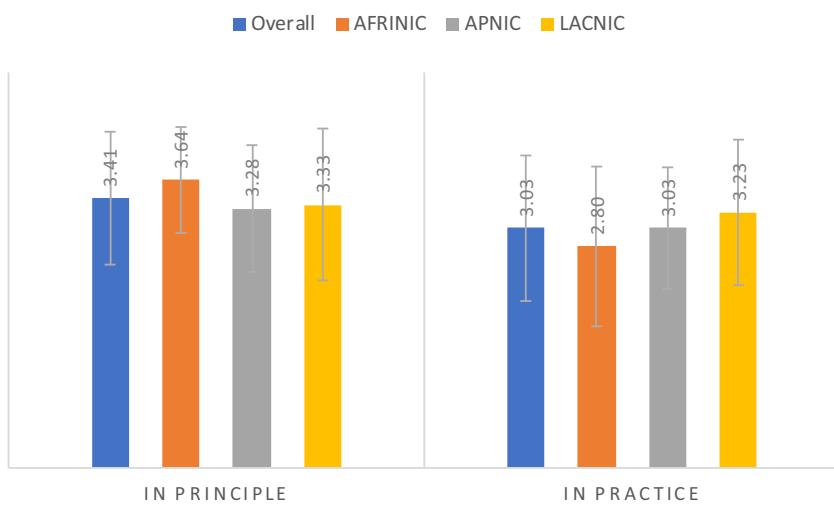


Figure 9. Perceptions of regional self-governance. SDs are 0.67 for AFRINIC, 0.80 for APNIC, 0.96 for LACNIC, and 0.84 for the three RIRs overall (regarding the situation in principle) and 1.01 for AFRINIC, 0.77 for APNIC, 0.92 for LACNIC, and 0.92 for the three RIRs overall (for the situation in practice).

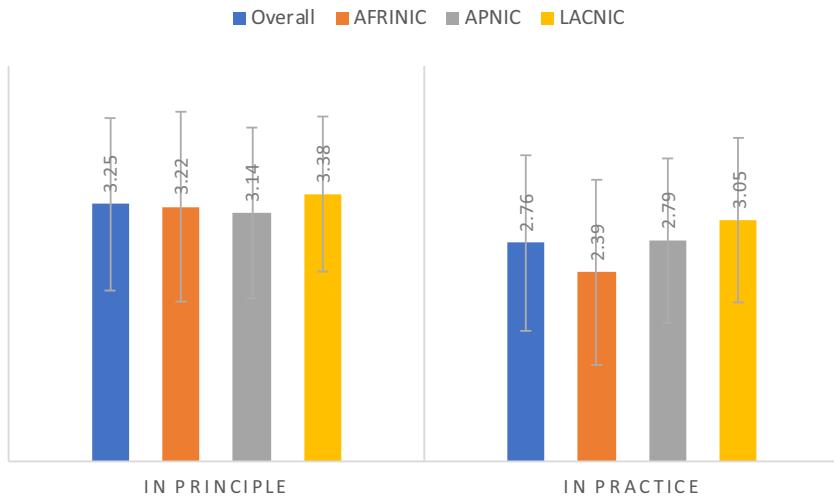


Figure 10. Perceptions of nongovernmental governance. SDs are 1.20 for AFRINIC, 1.08 for APNIC, 0.98 for LACNIC, and 1.09 for the three RIRs overall (regarding the situation in principle) and 1.17 for AFRINIC, 1.04 for APNIC, 1.04 for LACNIC, and 1.11 for the three RIRs overall (for the situation in practice).

the global north and confidence in the RIRs, intimating that south-based autonomy could be an important source of legitimacy for these regimes.⁴

Respondents moreover consider it between “quite” and “extremely” important that the RIRs promote *regional* self-governance of key technical functions of the Internet (figure 9). With a mean of 3.64, participants in AFRINIC find this point even more important than participants in LACNIC (mean of 3.33) and APNIC (mean of 3.28). That said, respondents from AFRINIC are significantly less positive about the extent to which their RIR realizes regional self-governance in practice (mean of 2.80), as compared with a mean score for APNIC of 3.03, and a mean score of

3.23 for LACNIC. Again, we find a positive correlation between this variable and the confidence score.⁵

Finally, we turn to respondents’ views on the *nongovernmental* character of the RIRs. As shown in figure 10, participants in all three RIRs find it important that the RIRs can act independently of governments, with an overall mean of 3.25. While participants in LACNIC believe that their RIR achieves this independence in practice to a large extent (mean score of 3.05), participants in APNIC (mean score of 2.79) and even more so AFRINIC (mean score of 2.39) are significantly less positive. It is noteworthy in this regard that, even though the RIRs are formally independent from governments, they are subject to the jurisdiction of the countries in which their offices are located. The implications become especially evident in the case of AFRINIC, which has faced intense litigation in Mauritian courts. Again, we find a

⁴R = 0.272 ($p < 0.001$) for independence of Internet governance institutions in the global north and confidence in the RIR. R = 0.238 ($p < 0.001$) for independence of governments in the global north and confidence in the RIR.

⁵R = 0.329, $p < 0.001$.

positive correlation between the perceived degree of private governance and confidence in the RIRs, suggesting that the non-governmental nature of the RIRs might positively influence their legitimacy.⁶

All in all, then, we find that the south-centered, regional, nongovernmental nature of the RIRs is appreciated strongly in principle and to varying degrees in practice. Moreover, a significant correlation exists between positive assessments of the three features and confidence in the respective RIRs. The RIR that attracts the highest legitimacy beliefs (i.e., LACNIC) is also perceived to be most capable of obtaining a regional approach, independence from the global north, and autonomy from governments. While we cannot statistically confirm a causal relationship between these variables, the significant correlations are highly suggestive.

Conclusion

Historically, international cooperation to address planetary problems has mostly worked through global intergovernmental organizations based in the north. This article has pioneeringly addressed a notable deviation from this prevailing pattern: the regional, nongovernmental, south-centered RIRs. Can this strikingly alternative institutional design for governing global challenges obtain legitimacy—and thereby secure a vital ingredient for effective and just policy?

To explore this issue, we conducted nearly 400 survey interviews with participants in AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC. Respondents were asked how important they regard legitimacy; how much they care about the RIRs; how much confidence they have in these regimes; and how they evaluate the principle and practice of south-led, regional, non-governmental governance. This fourfold approach enabled us to arrive at more refined measurements of legitimacy than sole reliance on the confidence indicator, as other empirical research on legitimacy beyond the state has tended to do.

Taking survey responses to these four questions together, we find that, all in all, the regional, nongovernmental, south-led approach to governing global resources has indeed obtained substantial legitimacy in the case of the RIRs. Moreover, this foundational approval of AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC holds quite steadily across persons in multiple institutional roles (board, staff, and member), a variety of stakeholder groups (business, civil society, government, and technical), and different social categories (age, gender). To this extent, the alternative governance framework shows major promise.

Yet the situation also varies between the three south-centered RIRs: LACNIC and APNIC score high on all dimensions of legitimacy examined, while AFRINIC shows decidedly more mixed results. Participants in AFRINIC report to find legitimacy extremely important and to care a lot about the organization, but they remain divided on their confidence in AFRINIC, as well as its abilities to realize a regional approach and to achieve independence from governments and the global north. This significant difference between the three RIRs shows that the legitimacy of south-centered regional nongovernmental governance cannot be taken as given. The case of AFRINIC reveals that legitimacy relates not merely to institutional design as such, but also to operational conditions. Thus, on the question of empowering the global majority, much seems to depend on how regional, nongovernmental, south-centered governance is im-

plemented in practice. Further research (beyond the scope of the present paper) is wanted to identify more precisely which organizational circumstances are significant in this regard (as well as possible individual and societal sources of legitimacy beliefs).

Given this variability among the RIRs, we must take care in drawing broader conclusions from these findings. Indeed, our study has only examined three organizations (AFRINIC, APNIC, and LACNIC) in one issue-area (Internet governance). Moreover, although our focus on regime participants is well-justified, the perspectives of insiders may differ from the views of certain outsiders. For example, some critics continue to advocate a global-multilateral approach to IP address allocation through the ITU (Esayas 2014). In addition, some software engineers have proffered an alternative blockchain system of digital addresses, where governance would rest on informal peer-to-peer accountability (Angieri et al. 2020). While such models currently have little prospect—technically or politically—of displacing the RIR regime, they can be addressed in further research and remind us that the findings of our study cannot automatically be generalized beyond the insider populations that we highlighted.

One must also exercise caution in pondering whether the framework of regional, nongovernmental, south-centered governance could attain a similar breadth and depth of legitimacy in other policy arenas besides Internet infrastructure. Indeed, skeptics might suggest that legitimacy for the south-led RIRs derives from conditions that are specific to the field of IPs, such as distinctive technical expertise, tight transnational peer communities, and relatively low levels of politicization. Yet, other research has shown that levels of legitimacy in Internet governance are broadly comparable with those in a wide range of other issue-areas, both technical and more explicitly political (Jongen and Scholte 2021; Scholte et al. 2021). Skeptics might also note that the non-governmental RIRs arose during a high tide of neoliberalism around the turn of the millennium, which contrasts substantially with the more mercantilist 2020s. Yet, present times could also encourage south-centered nongovernmental regionalism, given current retreats from globalism and multilateralism, coupled with increased assertiveness of the south in world politics and decreased leadership and funding in global governance from the north. Hence, with due heed of *mutatis mutandis*, further research and policy work can productively probe possibilities for regional, nongovernmental, south-centered governance in other problem areas. Candidate issues might include wider digitalization, biodiversity conservation, energy transition, disaster relief, disease control, and waste management.

Thus, this study contributes both as the first systematic exploration of legitimacy in south-centered regional non-governmental governance and for its potential wider implications regarding the regulation of planetary resources. The case of south-led RIRs demonstrates that solid (sociological) legitimacy in global governance can be attained without the state, without traditional multilateralism, and without direction by the global minority. This option opens up significant new possibilities in a world that suffers major shortfalls in the regulation of planetary challenges.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the Global Studies Quarterly data archive.

⁶ $R = 0.264$, $p < 0.001$.

Acknowledgments

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