



Independent Review of the ICANN Root Server System Advisory Committee (RSSAC)

**Executive Summary:
Assessment Report for Public Consultation**

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Executive Summary

Independent Organizational Review

This report presents the initial findings of an independent organizational review of the ICANN Root Server System Advisory Committee (RSSAC), which was undertaken in accordance with the ICANN Bylaws¹ in order to determine

- (i) whether [the RSSAC] has a continuing purpose in the ICANN structure;
- (ii) if so, whether any change in structure or operations is desirable to improve its effectiveness; and
- (iii) whether [the RSSAC] is accountable to its constituencies, stakeholder groups, organizations, and other stakeholders.

In fulfilling this mandate, the Independent Examiner has made every effort to produce results that are meaningful and useful to the RSSAC itself as well as informative and conclusive to ICANN and its community.

The Root Server System Advisory Committee

The RSSAC is an ICANN Advisory Committee, created “to advise the ICANN community and Board on matters relating to the operation, administration, security, and integrity of the Internet's Root Server System (RSS)”. By statute, its voting members are representatives of the Root Server Operators (RSOs)—the independent organizations that maintain and operate the worldwide server infrastructure that resolves domain names at the top level (the root) of the Domain Name System (DNS). It is important to recognize, however, that the RSSAC is not an “association” of the RSOs.

Assessment and Recommendations

The results of our review of the RSSAC will be presented in two phases:

- (i) our **findings** concerning the context, role and purpose, structure, operation, and outcomes of the RSSAC, which represent the raw data collected from all sources subjected to a formal qualitative analysis, appear in this Assessment Report; and
- (ii) our **recommendations** for changes to the structure or operation of the RSSAC, which follow from the findings augmented by public consultation, will appear in a subsequent Final Report.

The findings presented in this Assessment Report are the result of research and qualitative analysis, not judgement; as such they are the background for and input to the

¹ ICANN Bylaws, Article 4, Section 4.4 (<https://www.icann.org/resources/pages/governance/bylaws-en/#article4.4>)

recommendations that we will make in the Final Report but are not themselves definitive or conclusive. None of these findings should be interpreted as implying any particular recommendation; they state what we found, not what action—if any—should be taken in response.

This Assessment Report has been published to solicit feedback from the ICANN community during a public consultation period which will include a webinar, open calls, and a public participation mailing list. The public consultation period will begin on 23 February 2018.

Following the public consultation period, we will incorporate feedback into a Final Report, which will contain both an updated assessment of the RSSAC and our recommendations for improving its structure and operation. A draft Final Report will be published for public comment on 27 April 2018. The public comment period will be open for 40 days. After incorporating comments from the ICANN community, we will publish the Final Report on 2 July 2018.

It is important to emphasize that our approach to this assessment report, and to the final report, does not require perfect representation across the ICANN community from either those interviewed or those surveyed. We have not, for example, drawn conclusions based simply on the frequency with which we heard a particular opinion during our interviews and through the survey instrument. Similarly, our use of direct quotations is intended to illustrate findings that are based on multiple sources, not to give undue weight or significance to the opinion of one individual.

Principal findings

The principal findings of our review represent a high-level summary of our assessment focused on the three areas of **purpose**, **effectiveness**, and **accountability** identified in the Bylaws mandate for organizational reviews. All of the findings presented in this report are supported by the evidence compiled from extensive personal interviews, a public on-line survey, and the documentary record.

The ongoing RSSAC reformation that began in 2013—revised RSSAC charter, new operating procedures, and creation of the RSSAC Caucus—has substantially improved the structure and operation of the RSSAC.

Implementing changes recommended by the prior review has significantly improved the effectiveness of the RSSAC. The addition of staff support and travel funding has increased RSSAC and Caucus work quality and meeting participation.

The RSSAC has become more open, transparent, and accessible since the last review, but this has not been widely recognized by outside observers.

The RSSAC's focus on technical root server issues and deliberate non-participation in other ICANN activities have concentrated its impact on a small technical audience of DNS experts. It is still widely perceived to be closed and secretive, and less transparent than other ICANN ACs and SOs.

As the only visible interface between ICANN and the RSOs, the RSSAC is expected to deal with every root service issue that arises within ICANN, whether or not the issue is properly within its scope.

The RSSAC's scope is limited to providing information and advice about the root server system, but because it is the only visible point of contact between ICANN and the RSOs many in the ICANN community imagine that its role is (or should be) much broader. The RSSAC is expected to deal with every root service issue that arises within ICANN, whether or not the issue is properly within its scope, simply because it appears to be the only available interface between ICANN and the root server operators.

The RSSAC's ability to serve as a shared space for RSO–ICANN communication and cooperation is complicated by a persistent legacy of distrust of ICANN by some of its members.

The RSSAC is paradoxically both a statutory part of ICANN and a group with some members who persistently distrust ICANN, pushing back forcefully on its real or perceived infringement on their exclusive responsibility for all matters concerning root system operations. The tension between the RSSAC and some of its member organizations has the potential to interfere with the clarity and authority of RSSAC advice.

The current RSSAC membership model excludes non-RSO participants and their different skills and perspectives.

The RSSAC membership model excludes both serving-side root service participants (e.g., non-RSO anycast instance providers and public DNS resolvers) and provisioning-side interested parties (e.g., TLD registries and the ccNSO). It also denies the RSSAC

the benefit of skills and perspectives beyond those that can be provided by the root server operators.

The RSSAC's continuing purpose in the ICANN structure may include serving as the focal point for issues of mutual concern to ICANN and the RSOs, such as future operational and funding scenarios for serving the root.

The RSSAC is developing advice and recommendations concerning the future evolution of the root server system and how it might be supported, but this work is being conducted entirely by RSO representatives who will be directly affected by it. Many people outside of the RSSAC either don't know that it's working on root service evolution and other strategic policy issues or believe that its focus is misdirected.

Because RSSAC members do not agree on who its stakeholders should be, it is not clear for what and to whom it should be accountable.

Although its charter does not explicitly identify its stakeholders, its statement of RSSAC's role implies that they are the ICANN Board and community. Its members, however, do not agree on what this means in practice. The RSSAC has occasionally found it difficult to reach agreement on issues such as service level agreements and reporting for the root server system in the absence of a consensus accountability framework for itself and its members. A major stumbling block has been disagreement about ICANN's role in such a framework.

The relative roles and responsibilities of the RSSAC, the RSSAC Caucus, the RZERC, and the SSAC are unclear to both outsiders and insiders.

In many cases even members of one of these groups could not distinguish its responsibilities from those of the others.