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Last month the Internet Society (ISOC) announced that Ethos Capital intends to acquire all of the assets of the Public Interest Registry (PIR), including the .ORG top level domain (TLD). The .ORG TLD is a critical resource for non-profit organisations to be present and reachable on the internet. It facilitates the exercise of human rights, allowing civil society to communicate to the public, campaign, organise and fundraise. It also serves as an important identity for civil society organisations online.

The announced sale of PIR/.ORG to Ethos Capital, a private equity firm, reportedly amounts to over USD 1 billion. Many details of the terms of the sale are unknown, including how the cost of registering and maintaining a .ORG website will remain affordable to non-profits around the world, and how they will continue to foster and protect .ORG as a domain name used by civil society organisations who work in areas and countries where content may be subject to takedown requests as a result of political, cultural, social or gender-based discrimination.

It is unsurprising that there is an outpouring of criticism of the sale and, in particular, the manner in which the process has been managed and communicated. Not only does the sale of .ORG to a newly established private equity firm with no track record feel like a betrayal to the civil society organisations who rely on the domain in their work, but the decision was made without the input of the affected communities. When ISOC originally proposed transferring management of .ORG to PIR in 2002, ISOC's then president and CEO promised that .ORG would continue to "draw upon the resources of ISOC's extended global network to drive policy and management." The manner in which ISOC has approached this decision does not honour this commitment.

The lack of transparency, consultation and accountability around the proposed sale of .ORG is in stark contrast to the principles of multistakeholder governance that ISOC promotes in other areas of its work and operations.

APC recognises the internet as a global public good, which should be governed in an inclusive, transparent, democratic and accountable manner.

A private equity firm should not profit from the registration fees of non-profit organisations. Any profits from the sale of .ORG should be used for public interest purposes. We call on all parties involved to ensure transparent, inclusive and accountable decision making on the management of a domain name, which is important to civil society moving forward. It is critical that the considerable concerns raised by civil society, including calls for the sale of .ORG to be stopped, are heard.

We believe it is crucial to put in place concrete and enforceable commitments as criteria for the management of .ORG, specifically to ensure that the price of registering or renewing .ORG domain names remains affordable to non-profit entities. ICANN's decision to ask PIR and ISOC to provide additional information pertaining to "how the proposed new ownership structure would continue to adhere to the terms of ICANN's current agreement with PIR, and how they intend to act consistently with their promises to serve the .ORG community with more than 10 million domain name registrations," is a step in the right direction.

If Ethos Capital is unwilling or unable to provide these guarantees, ICANN should invoke article 7.5 of the .ORG Registry Agreement and withhold its approval for ISOC to assign its rights and obligations to Ethos Capital.

We welcome the forthcoming human rights impact assessment that ARTICLE 19 and the Danish Institute for Human Rights will be conducting on PIR to ensure that there are accountability and transparency mechanisms in place moving forward. We expect this process to be inclusive and transparent and look forward to the publishing of its outcomes.

Finally, APC has had long-standing partnerships with both ISOC and PIR and we urge the ISOC Board to consider the views of the communities that will be affected by the .ORG sale, including ISOC members who are asking for greater transparency and accountability from the ISOC leadership as well as to be consulted on decisions that impact on the long-term sustainability of the organisation.