APC's reflections on the 2022 Internet Governance Forum and suggestions for 2023

Introduction

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) values the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) as a convening space to substantively engage in and contribute to internet policy discussions at various levels with a broad range of stakeholders, not only during the global session, but also throughout the intersessional work and the regional and national IGFs.

APC sees the IGF as a critical piece in internet governance and global digital cooperation ecosystems, with a role in bringing together key stakeholders for policy dialogue, collaboration, coordination, capacity building and networking, and as a platform to raise human rights concerns and contribute to shaping internet policies worldwide.

We want to express our appreciation to all who made the IGF 2022 possible: the Secretariat, the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG), the MAG chair, the government of Ethiopia and the diligent team of volunteers, providers of financial support to the IGF, and all those who contributed to intersessional work, national and regional IGF initiatives (NRIs), and the annual global event itself.

The 2022 edition continues to explore creative ways to bring to practice the hybrid format and to address challenges related to inclusion and participation, particularly of stakeholders from the global South.

What worked well

Preparatory process

The IGF has systematically continued to strengthen the preparatory process towards increasing the levels of meaningful engagement of the various stakeholders in the discussions around the issue areas and to contribute to a more outcome-oriented meet. By following the Global Digital Compact's thematic tracks as pillars for the agenda of the global conversation, IGF 2022 established concrete ways to build synergies between key policy and global digital cooperation processes.

The positive developments in this regard should be used as a basis to make the orientation process for newcomers more effective.

The continuation of the work in the form of past and new Policy Networks contributed to a deeper understanding of persistent and emerging challenges around key issues and to discuss responses by various stakeholders on the understanding that there are different roles but shared responsibilities for building an open, secure, free and inclusive digital future.

Venue

The proximity of various hotels to the venue was practical and contributed to optimise the time for mobilisation. The security process was smooth, and the warmth and efficiency of the team of young volunteers were extremely helpful to find rooms, access to relevant information, and directions to transportation facilities to the social events and activities, among others.

Settings in the main building in general were very conducive to networking and the quality of connectivity was good.

Social activities

The gala dinner and party as well as the other social activities were excellent and made the participants feel welcome.

What did not work so well

Overall programme

As in previous years, and despite the efforts to reduce the number of sessions, there was significant overlapping of sessions. The general feeling was that there was too much happening at the same time. Overall, reduction in the number of sessions is recommended to foster a more focused and easy-to-follow agenda.

In relation to sessions, there was an evident gap in voices and experiences of LGBTIQA+ groups and communities on the ground. Inclusion of more diverse voices continues to be a challenge for the IGF and it should be addressed *vis-á-vis* efforts to make its relevance more meaningful.

Hybrid format

Several challenges were experienced with the hybrid format. Links for accessing the sessions were not working at times and, in some cases, did not match the respective sessions. The email invitations did not always include the links. There were various issues with audio that marred the clarity of remote participants' inputs. Translation services in the rooms were not sufficiently available. In order to be a useful tool, the IGF mobile app should be further developed.

Venue

Sessions held in the basement of the conference grounds were not sufficiently geared to allow participants to easily join them. Having the IGF Village separate and outside the main building resulted in connectivity issues. The room where the official inaugural ceremony was held could not accommodate all those who wished to take part. The IGF Village was not accessible for persons with disabilities.

Registration and visa process

Once registration forms were submitted, it took a considerable time to receive both approval/confirmation of registration and the documents for obtaining the e-visa. In some cases, the e-visa application process was not followed by the payment receipt.

Logistics

As it happened in 2021, preparation for onsite participation (including preparation for sessions, coordination of side and concurrent meetings, among other activities) was difficult, particularly because of the lack of information about who was going to be participating onsite. It is important to find ways to balance the security concerns in relation to disclosing information of confirmed onsite participants and the need to have timely information to facilitate planning in this regard.

The IGF 2022 happened during a phase of transition between pandemic-related restrictions and flexibility of security measures. Clear indication of the COVID-19 protocols, including face mask use, would have been appreciated.

Inclusion, diversity and safety

APC believes African voices were underrepresented in the opening session. When happening in the global South, the IGF should take the opportunity to give more prominence to voices that are systematically underrepresented in global policy discussions and processes. The IGF should push for keeping diverse perspectives that contribute to the global conversation. In that regard, there should be more effort to include LGBTIQA+ groups and communities on the ground as speakers.

Suggestions for the IGF 2023

Preparatory processes and the hybrid model

Because of the proven value of the expanded preparatory process adopted in 2021 and 2022, it would

be important to maintain and strengthen it in 2023. We recommend that the process start earlier than it was in 2022 to allow more time between the various activities and avoid concentrating them in the weeks prior to the annual event. APC would like to reiterate the recommendation made in 2021 that the virtual modality component of the hybrid model be adopted as the primary parameter for IGF 2023. With new COVID variants appearing and unleashing waves of the contagion, the organisers should privilege the remote modality until the pandemic is under control in all parts of the world.

We also recommend that measures be taken to effectively tackle the issue of time zones and connectivity costs.

We also reiterate the recommendation that measures be adopted to ensure access to a data support scheme, in addition to the usual travel support offered, to ensure that participation is affordable to all, especially people from countries where broadband connectivity is not the default and data packages are expensive.

The MAG should intentionally systematise lessons and experiences learned from the 2021 and 2022 hybrid IGFs. We urge the advisory group to consider proposing a vision of a hybrid model for global policy processes and events – designed intentionally in this new context – working with the experience and learnings from the 2021 and 2022 editions, in collaboration with stakeholders in the IGF community with relevant experience, expertise and resources to contribute to that end. APC remains fully committed to participating in the discussion and implementation of ideas, structures, methodologies and technologies to ensure a meaningful hybrid event and contribute to reinforcing participation during all phases of the IGF process in 2023 towards making it a more open, inclusive and globally relevant process.

Overall programme

Building on the experience of designing, the IGF global agenda around thematic tracks should result in a more focused and easy-to-follow programme. The selection process and curating of workshop proposals, and the process of organising the sessions should take into account the need to listen more to communities that are affected by the concomitant issues. The IGF should use as many opportunities as possible to bring voices from the ground and LGBTIQA+ groups and find alternative ways to use translation to ensure that the lack of it does not become a factor of exclusion.

Inclusion, diversity and safety

Some sessions confronted difficult situations provoked by Zoom "bombings", even resulting in cancellation. The IGF could consider a security guide for the sessions.

Meanwhile, due to the unpredictable developments due to the pandemic, there is a real possibility that visa and mobility restrictions will be even more rampant in 2023. All necessary consideration should be given to people from the global South to facilitate their meaningful participation and engagement with the face-to-face component of the IGF. The host country should be chosen carefully, assuming it will provide the necessary assistance in a timely and transparent manner to all participants. The IGF Secretariat should start sending out names of participants of who need visas to relevant diplomatic representations as early as possible, and better and more effective support for visa applications should be provided, ensuring the fewest possible administrative hurdles to justify the need for travel.

Strengthening the IGF

APC would like to suggest that the IGF 2023 process start with a message from the new Leadership Panel addressing aspects oriented toward improved coordination and cooperation in global internet governance and global digital cooperation, as well as the vision of the panel of the IGF as a platform for identifying viable ways to shape, sustain and strengthen global digital cooperation. We would also like to hear the panel's plans to raise IGF's profile within the UN system in a year that will be crucial, marked by the run-up to the Global Digital Compact and other processes, including preparations for the Summit of the Future, the SDGs Summit and the WSIS+20 review.

Other key considerations

Although several organisations raised concerns about the fact that the IGF was happening in Ethiopia even as its Tigray region was isolated with no electricity and connectivity, the issue was not given the necessary prominence. APC firmly believes that the IGF is the most suitable space to incentivise constructive conversations about the situation with the host country.