APC's reflections on the 2021 Internet Governance Forum and suggestions for 2022

Introduction

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) continues to see the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) – both as an annual global event and national, regional and intersessional processes and events – as the most significant multistakeholder platform for discussing internet governance and a critical piece in the internet governance and global digital cooperation ecosystems for 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 2021 possible: the Secretariat, the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG), the MAG chair, the government of Poland, 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.

The 2021 edition was the first one held in a hybrid format in the history of the IGF and offered the opportunity to identify high-level and practical challenges related to inclusion and participation, particularly of stakeholders from the global South.

What worked well?

Preparatory process

The various efforts made to expand and strengthen the preparatory and engagement phase contributed substantially to improve the levels of familiarity with the overall theme and the issue areas as well as to produce high-quality analytical views of the topics. The possibility to keep making progress towards a more outcome-oriented IGF was enriched with the variety of activities, spaces to engage with and discussions which were part of the 2021 preparatory process. It also contributed to diversifying the views and perspectives by offering multiple opportunities for input into the process both at the content and procedural levels.

The creation of the Policy Networks contributed to building greater awareness and understanding of the issues and approaches to key topics, but also represented a step forward in the crystallisation of the multistakeholder model. By focusing on the policy-related challenges, the Policy Networks offered valuable perspectives on responses and action steps needed at the global level by the different stakeholders in their respective roles, from an internet governance and internet policies point of view.

What worked not so well?

Overall programme

Despite the efforts to reduce the number of sessions, there was significant overlapping of sessions within the same track. A more concise and focused agenda would have contributed to avoiding overlaps and facilitated an effective follow-up of the treatment of issues within the various tracks. Overall, the reduction of the number of sessions should be aimed at fostering a more focused and easy-to-follow agenda.

In relation to sessions, there was an evident gap in voices and experiences of communities on the ground. As for the participation of big tech corporations, it is important to analyse whether their representation is spread across the different themes or concentrated in specific ones. It is also important for the IGF to analyse the implications of this in terms of the relevance for the IGF and the evolution of multistakeholder conversations and dynamics in order to avoid an echo chamber effect.

Hybrid format

Several challenges were experienced with the hybrid format. Greater consideration of the need to ensure that people in "marginal" time zones were able to participate remotely would have been useful not only to enrich the conversations but to ensure diversity of participation.

Logistics

Preparation for on-site participation (including preparation for sessions, coordination of side and parallel meetings, among other activities) was difficult particularly because of the lack of information about who was going to be in Poland. It would have been important to find ways to balance the security concerns in relation to disclosing information of confirmed on-site participants and the need to

have timely information to facilitate planning aspects of on-site participation. This negatively impacted on taking advantage of the networking potential of the IGF and introduced uncertainty as a factor during the process. There were sessions that had all organisers and speakers participating through the online modality and, in those cases, there was a real disconnect with people in the room in Poland. Hybrid events require that session organisers have mechanisms to coordinate with staff on the ground, to welcome participants to the sessions and establish the link with those attending remotely, to ensure effective interaction between the virtual and on-site dynamics. Participants facing technical difficulties on-site (including basic demands such as needing power to charge batteries of devices and other difficulties) did not have timely or any technical support.

The fact that the Poland time zone was used as the default time zone in the agenda of the IGF created confusion for attendance. Attendance was also impacted by the complexities of the registration mechanism adopted and the impossibility to share links to access the sessions. Having the IGF main website down for certain periods, particularly during the first day of the event, also resulted in further complications for participation and influenced the level of participation.

The processes for online registration and access to the sessions were demanding and involved too many steps, causing confusion among some participants and – given the various technical problems with the website during the first days of the convening – rendering participants unable to join sessions because they could not complete the final step that provided access to sessions Zoom links.

Inclusion, diversity and safety

While we acknowledge all the efforts made by the MAG, particularly the MAG working group created to discuss and prepare the hybrid agenda, the adoption of a hybrid model for the event showed how persistent the inequalities in access to and participation in policy processes are. There were concrete cases of arbitrary denials of visas to participants, including APC staff. The treatment reported by many in their dealings with consulate personnel in various countries was not in line with the commitments assumed publicly in this regard by the Polish authorities.

The pandemic developments triggered by the appearance of the Omicron COVID-19 variant a few days before the start of the IGF in Poland and the subsequent restrictions to mobility of participants coming from certain countries resulted in last-minute cancellation of on-site participation, including participation of APC staff. In conjunction, these factors obviously had an impact on the meaningful engagement of stakeholders from the global South.

Suggestions for the IGF 2022

Preparatory processes and the hybrid model

Because of the proven value of the expanded preparatory process adopted in 2021, it would be important to maintain it in 2022. We recommend that the preparatory process start earlier this year to allow more time between the various activities and avoid concentrating them in the weeks prior to the

annual event. Greater attention to the diverse possible connections with NRIs and with the intersessional processes would be welcome.

The design of the hybrid agenda and event should also start as early as possible in 2022, addressing the challenges experienced in 2021 and allocating time for a testing period aimed at finding the most suitable solutions for them.

APC considers that the IGF is a key platform for identifying viable ways to shape, sustain and strengthen global digital cooperation, not only for universalising digital inclusion, but to mobilise collective intelligence and the potential of multistakeholder collaboration and action to respond to the persistent and emerging challenges in the digital age, including the environmental crisis. In that sense, the IGF continues to be the only multistakeholder process that can establish more accountable, inclusive, participatory and effective global digital cooperation among all stakeholders, building on its historical strengths and achievements, such as gender balance, multistakeholderism and decentralised structure, with the organisation of national/regional IGFs (NRIs). The hybrid model should be designed and implemented in a way that contributes to strengthening the IGF as a process and strengthens inclusiveness and balanced participation, particularly of stakeholders from the global South.

In that sense, we strongly recommend that in 2022, the virtual modality component of the hybrid model should be adopted as the primary parameter for the design of the IGF and in that way to increase possibilities to capture and build on last year's experience. The IGF organisers should privilege the remote modality until the pandemic is under control in all parts of the world. The MAG should also keep open the mechanisms for working in collaboration with civil society organisations who have been systematising approaches, experiences and guidelines for designing and planning online and hybrid events, aimed at ensuring successful, inclusive and balanced meetings.

We also recommend that measures be taken to effectively tackle the issue of time zones and connectivity costs. Adopting the host country time as the single standard will again significantly limit participation of those based in incompatible time zones. We recommend that measures also be adopted to ensure access to a data support scheme, in addition to the usual travel support offered, to ensure participation is affordable to all, especially people from countries where broadband connectivity is not the default and data packages are expensive.

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 2022 towards making it a more open, inclusive and globally relevant process.

Despite the challenges, it was crucial to have the MAG working group on hybrid event thinking ahead of the annual meeting. We suggest that it continue to convene and to build on lessons learned from the 2021 edition, and to work towards inserting an improved hybrid component into the future edition of the IGF in a more consistent way.

We urge the MAG 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 learning from the 2021 edition, in collaboration with stakeholders in the IGF community with relevant experience,

expertise and resources to contribute to that end. The IGF could make a much needed contribution to the policy process ecosystem by offering a resource of that type.

Overall programme

Limiting the number of sessions/workshops accepted to be part of the agenda of the annual event should be accompanied by actions aimed at improving the flow of the sessions within thematic tracks. Having a daily broad issue guiding the conversations and connecting the discussions would be an option to consider.

The selection process and curation of workshop proposals and the process of organising sessions should take into account the imperative need to listen more to communities that are affected by the issues. The IGF should use as many opportunities as possible to bring voices from the ground 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". The IGF could consider producing a security guide for IGF sessions. It could also consider improving communications and ways to offer information about how to optimise the use of other mechanisms to follow and participate in the sessions, including YouTube and other platforms.

We also felt there was a lack of adequate communication with organisers of sessions. While technical support worked well during the sessions, there was no information provided to organisers that would help them in prior planning for their sessions. We would recommend considering how to more effectively engage organisers in order to make the hybrid model work better.

Meanwhile, due to the unpredictable developments of the pandemic, there is a real possibility that visa and mobility restrictions will be even more rampant in 2022. All the 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 that they will provide the necessary assistance in a timely and transparent manner to all participants. The IGF Secretariat should start sending out names of participants 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 of the IGF

It is expected that 2022 will be a critical year to set the tone for the development of both digital cooperation and internet governance for the next decade. The IGF should be strengthened as a platform conducive to improving coordination and cooperation in global internet governance and global digital cooperation, building on its achievements. We expect that the new Leadership Panel of the 2022 and 2023 IGF cycles will contribute to consolidating the IGF as a platform for identifying viable ways to shape, sustain and strengthen global digital cooperation by reinforcing and raising the profile of the IGF within the UN system, working hand in hand with the MAG, to complement its efforts. The IGF Leadership Panel should build on the lessons learned from years of MAG operations.

For this objective to be achieved, it is essential to ensure diversity in the composition of the panel, including representation of global South perspectives, and implementation of the process related to the mandate of the Panel in an open and participatory fashion. Genuinely effective and democratic global digital governance can only be sustained through high standards of transparency.

Other key considerations

APC is concerned about the situation in Ethiopia, the host country for the next IGF. Our concerns are related to the accusations of human rights abuses, and the huge humanitarian crisis resulting from the war. The preparatory process of the IGF is the most suitable space to incentivise conversations about the situation with the host country.