APC's reflections on the 2019 IGF and suggestions for 2020

Introduction

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) sees the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) –both as an annual global event and national, regional and intersessional processes and events– as critical for bringing together key stakeholders for policy dialogue, collaboration, coordination, capacity building, networking, and as a platform to raise human rights concerns.[1] We want to express our appreciation to all who made the IGF 2019 possible: the Secretariat, the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG), the MAG chair, the government of Germany, providers of financial support to the IGF, and all those who contributed to intersessional work, national and regional IGF initiatives and the annual event.

What worked well?

Content, agenda and sessions

The 2019 IGF demonstrated that it continues to be a relevant place to discuss the most pressing internet governance issues among key stakeholders, both through its formal agenda and its convening power. When emerging issues were not included in the IGF's programme, participants were able to improvise, for example, by organising bilateral meetings and a town hall around the sale of the Public Interest Registry/.ORG domain.

APC was pleased to see that the 2019 IGF served as a platform to inform other UN processes. For example, there was a main session dedicated to consulting the IGF community on the recommendations of the UN High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation and an open forum to discuss the two UN processes on cybersecurity (the Open Ended Working Group and Group of Governmental Experts), which were meeting the following week in NY.

As in previous years, the IGF served as a valuable space for different stakeholders working towards common goals, for example the constellation of actors working on community networks, to take stock, share experiences, and coordinate for future activities. This year's edition was also a valuable opportunity to meet with a range of relevant actors such as representatives from companies, governments, international organizations, and the tech community. We note that newly appointed human rights representatives at social media companies attended the IGF and

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[1] https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/apc-priorities-14th-internet-governance-forum

met with civil society participants.

After an abbreviated three-day IGF in 2018, the IGF was back to its typical format of four official days plus a Day 0, which allowed for more opportunities for interaction and organising events on the margins. There were fewer workshops this year, and the MAG took a streamlined approach with "Introductory" and "Concluding" sessions for each of this year's themes. This helped participants to follow the different tracks. These sessions were useful since they set the scene and provided opportunities for different stakeholders to put specific concerns and perspectives on the table and then debrief.

Logistics

The set up of the conference venue allowed for networking. Private bilateral rooms that were easy to book and there were several open spaces for ad hoc meeting. We very much appreciate that food and coffee were readily available, free of charge, and that there was a wide selection of vegetarian and vegan food. The venue's accessibility has been improved considerably since last year.

The conference facilities were well equipped to assist with both routine and exceptional requests. For instance, we appreciated the ability to print at the information desk and found the staff at the lost and found booth extremely helpful. When an APC member had a medical emergency, medical assistance was available, and the information desk gave essential guidance on renewing a visa a result of the medical emergency. The organisers were also extremely helpful in assisting getting boxes containing an APC publication out of customs in time for its launch.

What worked not so well?

Content, agenda and sessions

Critical topics were missing from the 2019 IGF's agenda, such as the environmental impact of ICTs and gender, forcing civil society was able to create our own spaces, to compensate. For example, APC organised the ninth edition of Disco-tech, focused on the environmental impact of digital technologies on the margins of the IGF, as well as a feminist pop-up organised to share visions, practices, challenges and hack to make a feminist internet.

We observed some of areas for improvement in the agenda and session formats.
- There were some high level sessions on Day 0 that were not well organised or attended. At least one of those sessions extended 30 mins after its time, not even acknowledging that people were waiting for the next session.
- Two Dynamic Coalition (DC) sessions on related topics (the DC3 on Community Connectivity and the DC on Public Access in Libraries) were scheduled at the very same time, not allowing synergies and interested participants to attend both.

- Sessions such as the "Pre-Event #53 Electricity, Community Networks and Digital Inclusion": was poorly run, with 16 speakers, disconnected from one another, and only one coming from community networks.
- Speaker diversity in panels is still an issue that needs to be improved in future editions.

Logistics

A number session rooms were filled up making it impossible for all interested participants to attend. The IGF village area worked very well and with spacious booths, however because the village was split between two areas, it was difficult to find the 'other' IGF village area.

Inclusion, diversity and safety

2019 was the third year in a row the IGF was held in Western Europe. As we've noted in previous years, this makes participation, especially from civil society from countries in the global South, difficult for a number of reasons, including cost and visas. APC members in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Indonesia were denied visa because IGF registration was not accepted as an official invitation for visa purposes. Emails were sent to host country team responsible for assisting with visa but only one case received response and, in all cases, there was no follow up or direct contact with the embassy on behalf of those participants. Additionally, Taiwan passport holders were excluded from registering for the IGF at all. There was a difference in the experiences of obtaining visas and cost of.visa depending which stakeholder group one belongs to. This is something that the next host government should be mindful of.

The real name policy for registration can pose a threat to participants of diverse genders and sexualities. Alternatives approaches to identity verification should be explored in consultation with affected individuals and communities, including the DC on Gender and Internet Governance.

APC was disturbed to learn of participants experiencing arbitrary, discriminatory or even intimidating treatment by conference staff. Some participants expressed concern that security personnel were inconsistent in how they screened people entering the conference venue, with agents demonstrating personal biases in who they required additional scrutiny. Additionally, civil society participants from Brazil reported being followed by a security officer after making an intervention during a session, which they understood as an effort to intimidate them.

What are your suggestions for improvements for IGF 2020?

Content, agenda and sessions

- Inputs coming from the "Introductory" and "Concluding" for each theme should be used in an effective way to reflect on the evolution of the internet governance agenda and approaches to specific themes and issues. The MAG should discuss ways to optimise the

use of these types of inputs;

- The format for DC reports should be improved, not for the sake of uniformity, but for there to be a criteria that attendees use to assess impact;
- The open mic session needs to be organised better so participants do not have the same issues repeatedly raised at the expense of other topics. By the end, there were a number of people still awaiting the opportunity to speak. Having a stocktaking just ahead of the session could help to address this.

Logistics

- To address the issue of session rooms being at capacity, the organisers for IGF 2020 should consider creating overflow rooms with web streaming to enable all interested participants to follow the discussion.
- This was the first paperless IGF. We strongly encourage this to continue and be improved in future editions -the welcome bag this year included printed materials that could be replaced by digital versions in IGF 2020.
- For future editions, there should be a single IGF village, or in a contiguous space to make it easier to navigate.

Inclusion, diversity and safety

- To address the difficulty of obtaining visas for some participants, communication between the responsible agency of the host government and the consular officers dealing with visa requests should be reinforced. The IGF Secretariat should consider dedicating human resources to visa assistance.
- Inclusive and diverse participation at IGF, requires safety that starts at the registration. As noted above, alternatives approaches of identity verification to real name policies should be explored in consultation with affected individuals and communities, including the DC on Gender and Internet Governance.
- Safety also includes a rights based approach for personal data management while registering online and offline;
- IGF 2020 should work towards providing a respectful, anti discriminatory and harassment-free experience for everyone. In line with the the Secretary-General's "zero tolerance" vision, and priority agenda to address sexual harassment in the UN system, we recommend that the IGF Secretariat and MAG Chair initiate a process to develop a harassment prevention policy for the IGF. This effort should draw on the model code of conduct to prevent harassment, including sexual harassment at UN events[2] as well as experiences in this exercise elsewhere in the internet governance community and in particular the dynamic coalition on gender Security personnel should be trained and sensitised on anti-discrimination .

2 https://www.un.org/management/sites/www.un.org.management/files/un-system-model-code-conduct.pdf

About APC

APC is an international network of civil society organisations founded in 1990 dedicated to empowering and supporting people working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). We work to build a world in which all people have easy, equal and affordable access to the creative potential of ICTs to improve their lives and create more democratic and egalitarian societies.