

Google's support for the Internet Governance Forum (IGF): The IGF's role in the global online ecosystem

Under the auspices of the [World Summit of Information Society \(WSIS\)](#) four years ago, the [Internet Governance Forum](#) (IGF) was launched as an ambitious experiment aimed at facilitating Internet governance discussions among governments, academia, civil society, and the private sector.

The IGF was designed to deal with global and transnational issues that demand coordination across political boundaries and sectors. Google has participated in all three previous Annual Meetings of the IGF, and we have found them both meaningful and valuable. We are also delighted to be participating at the meeting from November 15th-18th 2009 in Sharm El Sheik, Egypt.

In light of our experiences with the IGF to date, we at Google would like to make the following observations:

- the IGF is an incredible platform for bringing together people who care deeply and are passionate about finding reasonable and effective solutions to organize the globally shared online sphere. This multi-stakeholder community replicates the pluralistic nature of the net, with the IGF secretariat as lightweight but smart institutional center, self-organized workshops and most of the organizational and thematic intelligence with the participants.
- Companies such as Google benefit from engagement with, and feedback from different stakeholders on a great variety of issues including privacy, freedom of expression, and online safety.

In terms of the format of the IGF:

- it allows for outspoken exchange of ideas and views, and discussion across a wide range of issues, with the aim of understanding the various positions of the different sectors. This is possible because the IGF forum allows every sector an equal level of access and room to be heard; civil society and academia have the same voice as governments or private sector. Rather than being focused on end reports and statements, the very aim of the forum is issue-surfacing and issue-mapping, and the analysis of potential joint actions to resolve issues and challenges faced.
- experts from the whole spectrum of Internet-related interest groups are enabled and encouraged to share knowledge and have the IGF be a powerful and rich introduction to issues and to build individual and institutional capacity; thereby building our collective contributions to the economic and socio-technological online ecosystems. With the internet and its spin-off projects developing at such a pace with all the complexities that this can encompass for policy-making around the world, such dialogue is all the more vital.
- the Internet is a global system and hence the global IGF is an important [agora](#) for stakeholders to debate the international (legal and technical) and intercultural interfaces needed. Additionally, we especially want to point out the importance of the national and regional IGFs as essential complements that allow for localization of global debates and development of local positions.

So what about the future?

The Internet was invented to provide users with as much freedom as possible. Its founders followed the concept of always looking for and implementing the least invasive mechanism to accomplish a particular goal.

The IGF has taken this concept and extended it to the Internet governance world by using three mechanisms for helping to establish reasonable online governance practices:

- **Ethical Principles** -- Ethical principles are the most fundamental way to influence online conduct. A continuous transcultural dialog among users and developers allows for agreement on shared principles -- or, at least, a clear understanding of differences -- and constructive exchange.
- **Prevention** -- When values and aims are agreed they can become part of systemic technological architectures that prevent abuse or foster good conduct (e.g., [values by design](#)).
- **Detection & Resolution** -- The most difficult task of course is detection and punishment of harmful conduct. In order to develop reasonable solutions for this mechanism it is advisable to detect the issue as soon as possible and have all stakeholders collaborate to find the most effective and least harmful solution for a dynamic and healthy Internet environment.

The IGF plays a role in ensuring that all three mechanisms are used. But it is best understood as an early warning system that allows stakeholders to identify issues and frame them in a way that more formal and specialized institutions can work them through and develop appropriate standards, self-regulation, codes of conduct, regulations, and laws (see illustration below).

Given this overall positive assessment, Google believes that the IGF should continue and evolve based on the current multistakeholder format. The IGF should be the place where we identify issues, make first deliberations, and highlight emergent challenges and opportunities. We believe that the IGF can serve as a platform for initial discussion and direction, and that other more specialized bodies can then negotiate and codify concrete and detailed solutions.