

Youth Participation in the Internet Governance Forum: reflections

IGF09 Sharm El Sheik was Practical Participation's first experience of IGF. We were involved in supporting young people from Egypt, and fellows of Diplo Foundation to use social media to record and report on aspects of IGF09, and supporting young people involved in creating the 'Youth Corner' newsletter.

We welcome the increasing involvement of youth in the Internet Governance Forum's meetings and activities – and the strong statements made at IGF09 recognizing the role of young people. The following reflections are offered to support the continued involvement of youth in IGF. Our reflections are offered both IGF MAG, and to the wider IGF community.

A clear case for youth participation

The argument for youth involvement in IGF is clear. Youth make up an increasing share of the world population, and form a majority of Internet users in many countries and contexts. Yet youth can end up excluded from national and international decision-making structures that affect the Internet. The right of under 18s to be listened to and taken seriously by decision makers is set out in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The Internet does not belong to either youth or adults, but is a shared responsibility – requiring youth and adults to bring together their complementary skills, experiences, ideas and insights to safeguard the present and potential value of the Internet.

Recognize the diversity of children, young people and adults impacted by Internet Governance decisions, and to be engaged in IGF.

'Youth' are not a homogenous group. Children (0 – 14), Youth (15 – 24), and young adults (25+) have diverse experiences of the Internet, and are affected by Internet governance issues in many ways.

Whilst youth are often labeled 'digital natives', the technical skills and digital experiences of youth are as wide-ranging as those of adults. Whilst some youth are making use of the Internet to advance their careers and important causes, other youth lack opportunities to develop the practical and critical skills needed to benefit from the opportunities the Internet can offer.

It is vital that IGF is equipped to listen to the real and varied experiences of a diverse range of children, young people and young adults – and to take into account the specific needs of particular groups when engaged in dialogue on Internet Governance.

It should be recognized that youth contributing to IGF are not 'representatives of all youth', but they are experts in their own experiences – able to offer specific insights and ideas that can lead to better Internet Governance.

Increasing involvement

We encourage IGF to continue to accept the participation of self-motivated young participants, but to also continue to reach out to include a wider range of young people – including those who may not have existing experience of Internet Governance, and paying attention to the involvement of all three youth age ranges:

- Children (0 – 14)
 - Young People (15 – 24)
- and
- Young adults (25+)

Youth involvement in IGF should not be limited to involvement in those issues seen to particularly affect youth (e.g. child safety), but should enable youth to play a full role across all areas of IGF that impact upon their present and future experiences of the Internet.

We encourage IGF to pay particular attention to ensuring the voices of young women, and young people from minority groups are present at IGF.

Meaningful & inclusive dialogue

We encourage IGF to explore different formats for workshop sessions in order to enable deeper dialogue and to make a number of IGF sessions more accessible to children, young people and young adults.

- **For example:**
In a long session, consider including a short break (Approx. 10 minutes) in the middle to allow small-group discussions amongst people sitting near one-another.

This can give time for those who may be struggling to keep up with all the discussions to ask questions of other participants – and can help to build person-to-person dialogue between participants.

- **For example:**
Rather than inviting workshop participants to ask questions of a panel, allow delegates (youth and adults) to share the story of a particular experience of an Internet issue. The panel and floor can then consider the implications of these experiences.

For children and young people who may not have a *'policy position'*, or an organizational agenda on specific Internet Governance issues that affect them, this form of conversation based on grounded experience can help ensure the inclusion of younger voices and insights in key debates.

- **For example:**
Increase the links between Remote Participation and Workshop sessions, and allow people in the workshop room to also type their questions into the Remote Participation space, for them to be asked by a chair watching the Remote Participation channel.

For some children and young people (and adults too) who may not feel as confident in forming and asking their question verbally, this can support their contributions.

We also encourage the continuation of other activities around IGF for youth-adult interaction and dialogue.

- **For example:**
The ‘Digital Diving’ activity in the youth corner at IGF09 involved short (20 minute) conversations between one young person, and one adult participant at IGF. In these conversations, each person was invited to talk about their day-to-day experience of the Internet. We found these sessions provided important opportunities for young people and adults to gain better understandings of each others online experience. Activities and opportunities like this could be extended to support young people and adult IGF participants to reflect on the different Internet Governance issues that affect them.

Capacity Building

We welcome the creation of a Dynamic Coalition on Youth to act as a network for many youth participants in IGF. We welcome investment from the IGF community in capacity building for youth to participate in IGF.

We encourage IGF, and other Internet Governance institutions to also reflect on developing their own capacity for engaging with youth. From our experience working with the ‘Hear by Right’ standards for the participation of children and young people in organizations (<http://hbr.nya.org.uk/>), we know there are many ways in which organizations and institutions can make small adaptations to their practice to become far more inclusive of the voices of children and young people.

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14th January 2010

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