Enhancing Business Engagement at the Internet Governance Forum

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Introduction

Over the past years, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) community noted the underrepresentation of the private sector and repeatedly called for a more pronounced business participation in IGF annual meetings. This paper presents findings of a survey run by the International Chamber of Commerce Business Action to Support the Information Society (ICC BASIS), aimed at identifying the enablers and blockers of business participation at the IGF. Based on these findings we offer a few suggestions for improvement that we believe would incentivise more pronounced industry participation in the IGF.

The document is divided into three sections:

1. What motivates business participation at IGF
2. What are the barriers to enhancing business participation at IGF
3. Strategic recommendations

Executive summary

The IGF offers a unique opportunity for a wide range of representatives from the Internet governance landscape to come together to exchange information on existing challenges, share best practices, discover mutual priorities, and continue to inspire policymaking that takes into consideration the needs of the multistakeholder community. However, over the years, the level of representation across stakeholder groups has not been proportional, with the community noticing the underrepresentation of the private sector.

This paper synthesises the motivators that shape and enhance business participation at IGF and offers recommendations on how to address existing obstacles.

Overall, businesses are motivated by the prospect of meaningful dialogues with government and non-government stakeholders, as well as the opportunity to get active involvement in Internet governance discussions, and shape global digital policies. However, there are several obstacles to their participation at the annual meeting. These include visibility issues, lack of clarity on the benefits derived from their participation, the complexity of the agenda, and unpredictability in the planning process ahead of the Forum.

To address these challenges comprehensively, this document offers a number of suggestions, including:

- strengthened communication campaign aimed to amplify the visibility of the IGF;
- restructuring of the agenda to enhance coherence and interconnectedness of sessions across the programme, facilitating more focused discussions;
- specific recommendations on addressing the barriers to business participation, such as including business representatives in the majority public-facing sessions of the Forum, moderated Ask-Me-Anything (AMA) sessions, morning briefings, and tailored outreach.
By addressing the specific needs and concerns of businesses, and the IGF community more broadly, this proposal envisions a more impactful, and inclusive IGF over the next decade. We also offer recommendations looking ahead to the WSIS+20 review in support of the renewal of the mandate of the IGF.

**What motivates business participation at IGF**

There are three main factors that drive business participation at IGF: (1) engagement with government representatives, (2) engagement with non-governmental stakeholders, (3) active contribution to policy discussions.

**Engagement with government representatives**

Businesses place significant attention on fostering direct dialogues with government representatives, while at IGF, with the primary goal of contributing substantively to policy discussions. By actively participating in these conversations, businesses seek to not only articulate their perspectives but also to foster a collaborative environment that facilitates the development of effective, inclusive policies. ICC BASIS, as the main interlocutor and coordinator of business engagement at IGF since its inception, has been facilitating such discussions through the form of public-facing sessions (workshops), as part of the IGF programme, or closed, bilateral meetings.

The IGF should offer a more defined opportunity for businesses to engage in workshops and meetings with government interlocutors. At the same time, more time and space should be allocated to enable informal and bilateral exchanges.

**Engagement with non-governmental stakeholders**

Dialogues with civil society, the technical community and academia provides an important value-add of perspectives, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Internet governance issues and priorities across the entire digital value chain. Such a diversity of insights offers a holistic view and allows businesses to round out their own perspectives, find synergies and amplify shared messages in interactions with decision-makers. In that regard, the IGF Secretariat and the MAG can play a pivotal role in ensuring that IGF sessions are truly multistakeholder, aiming for the presence of all stakeholder groups among speakers wherever possible and striving to include business representatives in the majority of sessions.

**Active contribution to policy discussions**

Businesses already part of the IGF ecosystem consider it as an influential venue, allowing them to discuss and shape global public policy issues related to the governance of the Internet. Participating in the IGF, as well as the intersessional work, enables business to meaningfully contribute to global policy discussions and offer their expertise to help develop and co-create these policies, reflective of the bottom-up, multistakeholder approach the IGF represents.

Businesses recognise that the IGF has evolved over the years, growing into a venue that addresses issues that extend beyond Internet governance. This development was consequential to the evolution of the Internet and the digital world. Businesses see this growth as an opportunity to share their insight and expertise on a broader set of issues.
This being said, it is important to underline that businesses value taking part at the IGF as a venue where they can exchange with the broader Internet governance community. The IGF’s unique strengths lie specifically in fostering diverse dialogues on global Internet governance, and more broadly, digital governance issues, distinct from forums that are dedicated to business-to-business exchanges. Businesses choose and prefer these forums specifically for such peer-to-peer interactions and do not seek that at the IGF. To that end, the IGF should continue to build on its unique role and strength as the open, bottom-up convener for open exchanges within the multistakeholder community, rather than replicating or competing with other forums that focus on business-to-business interactions.

**What are the barriers to enhancing business participation at IGF**

Businesses face barriers in their participation at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), including challenges related to (1) visibility, (2) clarity on the benefits of participation, (3) convoluted agenda, and, (4) unpredictability of the planning process.

**Lack of corporate visibility**

Corporate visibility is a crucial component of successful participation in events like the IGF as it directly impacts their ability to build relationships and promote their products or services. While the opportunity to shape policy conversations is a strong driver for the participation of policy experts, decisions on more pronounced participation are taken based on a number of factors including opportunities for networking, brand promotion and targeted outreach. Without proper visibility, businesses may find it challenging to communicate their value proposition to the right audience, resulting in a reduced impact of their participation and therefore disengagement.

In an effort to attract business interest, the IGF should consider ways to expand opportunities for visibility, beyond exploring traditional sponsorship benefits. We offer suggestions on how to do so in the next section.

**Lack of clarity on the benefits of participation**

The IGF provides unique occasions for businesses to network, showcase expertise, and stay informed about policy trends. However, if unaware of these benefits, businesses may underestimate the potential opportunities they could miss out on by not participating.

Clear communication of the benefits of participation is essential to incentivise businesses to engage in events like the IGF. Businesses participate in events that align with their strategic goals and objectives. If the benefits of participation are not clearly communicated, businesses may struggle to assess whether their participation will contribute meaningfully to their overall strategy, leading to hesitancy in getting involved.

Businesses carefully allocate their resources, including budget, time, and personnel, to activities that offer clear and tangible returns. Without a clear understanding of the potential return on investment, businesses may hesitate to allocate resources to participate.

Addressing this involves implementing targeted outreach efforts, conducting more pronounced communication campaigns, and developing tailored explanatory materials. Such a systematic approach in communication activities can stimulate business interest, and increase awareness.
towards newcomers and/or maintain the interest of more “seasoned” business participants. Further details on this issue are provided in the proposal segment of the document.

**Overly broad and complex agenda**

The breadth and complexity of the annual meeting agenda represents a major barrier to business engagement. The multitude of tracks, sessions, and various agenda items often lack coherence and interconnectedness, making the navigation of the agenda challenging, even for long-standing IGF participants. It overpowers potential participants, particularly businesses, who are seeking more focused discussions. The lack of prioritization in agenda topics can lead to a perception that the event may not provide targeted insights. Businesses are disincentivised from participating when they believe that the event’s structure may contribute to information overload, making it difficult to extract meaningful and actionable take-aways.

Furthermore, the complexity of the agenda presents significant barriers in marketing and advertising the event, especially to newcomers that may find it overwhelming.

Last, but not least, an overcrowded agenda can make it challenging for participants to find time and space to engage in meaningful conversations and establish connections with others. Businesses may be deterred if they believe the crowded schedule hampers their ability to network effectively.

ICC BASIS has contributed concrete proposals over the years through the IGF taking stock exercises, on how to structure the IGF programme in a way that it does not bring confusion or overwhelm participants, including business. Below, we offer our concrete contributions on tackling this issue.

**Unpredictability of the planning process**

Business representatives also find the unpredictability of the planning process challenging when making decisions on their own participation, and especially when advocating internally for resources to enhance their participation or secure the attendance of their high-level representatives.

While the process works well to those aware of it based on their long history of participation, new and especially high-level audiences need more clarity, plenty of notice and systematic follow-up to capture their attention and secure their participation.

Many high-level participants are unable to attend the IGF in person, due to the unpredictability of the planning process and lack of follow-up beyond a generic invitation shared with prospective high-level participants.

We advise that invitations to high-level attendees are sent in advance, including a clear engagement proposal shared before their RSVPs, especially if the targeted teams and their executives have never engaged with the IGF in the past. Furthermore, efforts should be strengthened to encourage high-level participants to engage with other IGF sessions and events aside from the panel they speak on.
Strategic recommendations

This section offers a non-exhaustive list of recommendations, for the consideration of the 19th annual IGF meeting, and in some aspects more broadly, for the next ten years of IGF. Our recommendations start with (1) ways to tackle the barriers that hinder the visibility, impact, and participation of business at the annual meeting, then continue with (2) long-term suggestions for the IGF ahead of the WSIS+20 process.

How to incentivise business participation at IGF

As described in the paragraphs above, businesses prioritise engaging into dialogues with government and non-government representatives at IGF, rather than other businesses, as they aim at receiving and offering holistic contributions that effectively shape Internet governance, and more broadly, global digital policies.

To that end, more time should be allocated for public-facing sessions and meetings between business and government interlocutors. A similar approach should also be facilitated between business and non-government representatives. The IGF Secretariat and the MAG have a crucial role to play in striking the right balance of participants for for public-facing meetings and sessions, that should ensure business representation alongside the other stakeholder groups.

In addition, engaging session formats should also be considered, to ensure that both the participants and attendees make the most of their exchanges into the discussions. Moderated Ask-Me-Anything (AMA) sessions with business and government participants could be a new and interesting space to bring in more participants from the IGF’s more underrepresented stakeholder groups and could allow for a more candid format of discussions. Such engagement should be carefully curated, to ensure a fruitful and meaningful discussion for participants and the audience alike.

Efforts to enhance business participation also necessitate strategic and streamlined communications and outreach activities, which for the past years of annual IGF meetings, have not been sufficiently prioritised. Targeted outreach efforts, directly engaging with businesses through public-facing communication channels (newsletters, interviews, success stories) can help to address their specific concerns and highlight the unique advantages the IGF offers. Conducting more pronounced communication campaigns can support amplifying the visibility of these benefits through various platforms, including social media, publications, and other relevant platforms. Lastly, developing tailored explanatory materials will play a unique role in creating informative resources that articulate the tangible gains businesses can expect, catering to diverse audiences and ensuring clarity in the value proposition of IGF participation. Such material can also be further socialised by IGF supporters within their respective networks. Adopting such a multifaceted strategy can help bridge the gap in the understanding of the benefits of business participation at the IGF, thus encouraging their increased engagement.

The IGF should also seek to collaborate with corporate communications teams, in order to amplify the impact and appeal of their participation at the IGF. Such an approach can also be multiplied through collaboration with international media, either through direct contact from the IGF Secretariat, or through the support of companies who have established contacts within the global media space.
After establishing an adequate level of awareness around the annual meeting, aiming at securing business participation, establishing morning briefings for private sector members could add significant value to their participation at IGF. These briefings could serve as informative sessions, providing insights into key discussions, themes, and opportunities for engagement throughout the Forum. ICC BASIS has been providing such briefings for the past 18 years at IGF. Building on our experience of running such meetings, we are keen to work closely with the IGF Secretariat and the MAG in order to coordinate such an engagement more broadly, open to all private sector participants.

ICC BASIS strongly supports the streamlining of the agenda of the IGF annual meeting and structuring the IGF programme in a manner that avoids confusion and overwhelming participants. This does not mean limiting the array of issues that the IGF tackles, rather a rotation and prioritization of issues year after year. Drawing from successful approaches in previous years, we recommend concentrating the programme into a few thematic tracks, keeping it clear and manageable. Acknowledging the potential for information overload, we suggest a condensed selection of thematic tracks, limited to three, with easily understandable themes. This streamlined approach aims to enhance communication and outreach, catering to both seasoned participants and newcomers.

We also recommend a more organised and hands-on planning process, specifically when targeting high-level business representatives. More concretely, strengthening the planning process of the IGF would require a mix of solutions that effectively address the challenges faced by prospective business, and high-level participants. With regards to facilitating the decision-making process of business representatives, it will be advised to bolster the clarity and follow-up process, including communications around the event and the opportunities it offers, or personalised invites, in a systematic and consistent manner. Securing the attention of the business audience, especially new and high-level targets, also require advanced notice, and clear engagement proposals.

Furthermore, we recommend thinking of shifting the focus towards regional participation, specifically targeting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The current emphasis on securing C-level participation from Fortune 500 companies may be challenging, particularly without comprehensive engagement opportunities. There is ample ground to broaden and diversify participation by strategically mobilising regional offices within the host country of the Forum.

**Ahead of the WSIS+20 review and IGF mandate renewal**

Looking ahead of the WSIS+20 review, and the renewal of the IGF mandate, the upcoming IGF meeting in Riyadh comes at a key juncture, offering the opportunity for the IGF to demonstrate not just readiness and preparedness for the next phase of its mandate, but also a forward-looking vision.

The IGF community plays a pivotal role in advocating key messages, best practices, insights, and expert views on Internet governance. However, the key messages generated by the IGF often face challenges in their dissemination. Continuing to showcase the various IGF outputs promptly on the IGF website is key to demonstrate the value IGF discussions bring to the community. Capturing
and promoting them successfully, as described above, to business and beyond, also helps increase the reach of these conversations beyond the IGF session participants.

The Internet We Want (IWW) paper¹, launched by the IGF Leadership Panel is consolidating the key messages shared from the IGF community over the years, and elevates the messages as a shared vision for the Internet and the digital world, defined by a set of characteristics and principles. As the paper transitions into more concrete discussions with the IGF community, it serves as a foundation for assessing challenges and overcoming barriers to realising this vision through measurable goals and targets.

The IWW vision, describing in five themes the general characteristics and principles of the Internet, can be presented as a roadmap for the IGF, during its next prospective mandate. More concretely, each thematic area, which will be complemented this year with measurable goals and targets, can be used as the yearly themes, in rotation, of the upcoming annual meetings. This baseline approach of the IWW as the roadmap of the IGF, will give the yearly process and meeting a clear direction, purpose and mission towards reaching the vision, in the same vein that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a roadmap for the annual High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and related local and regional efforts. This will needle the international community to come together, every year, to discuss in a clear and consistent manner, the progress made towards reaching the IWW vision, while focusing on a specific theme, and exchanging knowledge expertise and best practices on how to address existing barriers, that hinder the attainment of the IWW goals and targets.

Agreeing and establishing such a strategic approach for the IGF ahead of the WSIS+20 review will make a strong case for the renewal of its mandate. To develop and implement this approach a few other considerations should be put in place, as described in the recommendations above. In particular, this will require solutions for effective communication prior to the annual meeting and clarity in describing the engagement opportunities for seasoned and new audiences alike. At the same time, paying careful consideration to the structure of the annual meeting programme and agenda will be crucial, as it will set the tone of the discussions.

In anticipation of the WSIS+20 review and the assuming role of the 19th IGF meeting, it is crucial to strengthen the case for the IGF’s mandate renewal. The IWW vision offers an opportunity to set a roadmap for the IGF, providing it with a clear direction that has the potential of driving progress and engagement. Moving forward the proposed considerations and recommendations aim to enhance not only business engagement, but also the IGF’s footprint, fostering meaningful discussions in the multistakeholder governance of the Internet.

¹IGF Leadership Panel, The Internet We Want (2023).