



APC's reflections on the 2020 IGF and suggestions for 2021

Introduction

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) sees the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) not merely as a conference, but as a complex and critical process that links multiple events - global, national and regional, and intersessional work. The spaces created by the IGF bring together key stakeholders for policy dialogue, collaboration, coordination, capacity building, networking, and serve as a platform to raise multiple concerns, including human rights related ones.

The 15th edition of the IGF was especially challenging given it was held, for the first time, in fully virtual mode. We want to express our appreciation to all who made the IGF 2020 possible, despite all the difficulties imposed by a context of health crisis and related limitations: the Secretariat, the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG), the MAG chair, providers of financial support to the IGF, and all those who contributed to intersessional work, national and regional IGF initiatives and the annual event.

The IGF 2020 was also held in a moment of crucial importance for the reconfiguration of internet governance: the recommendations from the UN Secretary General's roadmap on global digital cooperation. 2020 was a turning point in looking at concrete possible ways to reinvigorate the IGF.

APC believes the IGF should be recognised as a key piece of the UN system, the internet governance and digital cooperation ecosystems and a 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.

Although reforms are needed, we believe they should be taken with the goal of strengthening the IGF and maintaining its bottom-up nature, while at the same time improving impact and effectiveness. We expect 2021 to be a year of significant progress in the direction of a strengthened IGF.

It is in that spirit that we provide the comments below.

Preparatory Process

Clearly a lot of thought and planning was dedicated to make the global event happen in October - November 2020. APC considers the organization of the conference in two phases, throughout two weeks, was an important strategy to facilitate participation of diverse stakeholders in different timezones. The overall theme for the year - Internet for human resilience and solidarity - responded to the challenging 2020 context. For APC, key messages arising from the event discussions point out to the need for global responses and coordinated efforts to deal with the various crisis that are felt and translated to the online space as a continuum of the offline determinants, including the pandemic, which has made even more evident the structural inequalities and disparities in access to the internet.

Innovations introduced to the agenda, such as the high-level leader sessions, should be celebrated. This innovation is also reflected in the constant development and evolution of the IGF's thematic agenda, this year expanded in the inclusion of 'Environment' as one of the thematic tracks around which the programme was developed. The introduction of a 'call for inputs' on thematic tracks was also a welcomed novelty, which contributed to an improved agenda that reflected the most pressing internet governance issues of the moment.

We were also happy to see the development of discussions under the environment track leading to the subsequent launching of the pilot policy network as a timely and promising initiative by the MAG and the Swiss government. We also strongly support the discussions that took place during the IGF about the creation of a Best Practice Forum on Governance of Environmental Data.

Intersessional work

The intersessional work carried out was very timely and relevant, but the IGF should strengthen mechanisms for cooperation between the global IGF and the NRIs, while ensuring the latter remain autonomous and independent entities that reflect the priorities and particularities of the realities in their different countries and regions.

Evidence-based research could lead to a renovation of the important intersessional work already underway, in order to make it more coordinated and linked to other processes and decision-making spaces, both at the global and national levels. The Dynamic Coalitions and Best Practice Forums already produce recommendations on and best practice proposals and could serve as the foundations for a 'policy incubator' (as proposed in the [Options for the Future of Global Digital](#) Cooperation Paper) or similar initiative.

Dynamic Coalitions and Best Practice Forums have the enormous potential to be transformed into policy incubators and nurture debates, agendas and policy developments happening in other fora.

Overall programme structure and flow and programme content

APC was pleased to see that the 2020 IGF served as a platform to inform other UN processes. For example, there was a main session dedicated to discussing the implementation of the UN SG Roadmap on Digital Cooperation with the IGF community. The IGF 2020 also offered the opportunity to critically look at the recommendations from the Roadmap towards reinvigorating the IGF as a key piece of the UN system.

Sessions were also organized to discuss the two UN processes on cybersecurity (the Open Ended Working Group and Group of Governmental Experts). Influential initiatives such as the Freedom Online Coalition, Christchurch Call and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism all organized sessions to discuss their activities with the IGF community.

APC welcomes the continued organization of a parliamentary track and considers it serves as an inspiration for further ideas on how to follow up on the IGF discussions with national level institutions; from this experience, other initiatives could continue to be matured.

We also consider that the adoption of key forum messages at the end of each annual session should be maintained; a solid process of consultation with the community on their language should take place with adequate time and spaces for inputs and discussions.

APC considers that the overall agenda for the IGF should be more focused. Attention should also be given to avoid duplication, especially in the workshops. One possibility would be to have a more restricted number of topics covered, prioritized according to consultations with the IGF community. This would allow for the organization of a main stream of strongly inter-connected sessions, of different formats, allowing for a more robust discussion of the selected themes. Other more informal and parallel spaces could be opened on the margins in order to accommodate other topics, allowing space for innovation and attention to emerging and context specific concerns to be debated and highlighted.

In relation to the modalities for participation, we recognize IGF's organizers' efforts aimed at seeking tools and agenda arrangements to attend a large number of online participants, across time zones. We observed, however, some areas for improvement in this regard. Possibility to follow the main sessions either via the Zoom or YouTube platforms contributed to offer possibilities for more people to connect and follow the sessions. However, this led to very little room for interaction, questions and debate with speakers.

While the online modality offered the opportunity to bring diverse voices to the table, for the future - irrespective if it happens virtually, face-to-face, or in a hybrid manner, deliberate efforts should continue towards improving and strengthening diversity in the panels and sessions.

As for the workshops, most were well organised and organisers made efforts to respond to comments and questions from the participants. Session organizers did receive important support aimed at assisting them in the preparation of their program and session dynamics.

Participation - including diversity across stakeholder groups, gender, regional groups, etc.

It would be important for the IGF to share and build on lessons learnt in relation to how safe the online spaces of the virtual IGF were felt by participants. The 'real name policy' for registration can pose a threat to participants of diverse genders and sexualities. Alternative approaches to identity verification should be explored in consultation with affected individuals and communities, including the DC on Gender and Internet Governance.

If the IGF will continue to happen in virtual modality, or through an hybrid approach, it would be important for it to disclose clearly the approach to personal data management and safety and make sure that approach is consistent with relevant human rights standards.

We commend the work done by the MAG Strategy working group on digital cooperation. Proposals and analysis coming out of the work the group is doing is substantive; it builds on practical lessons and deep knowledge of the IGF dynamics and a clear view of the possibilities ahead. It would be important to see the group keep playing a key role in that regard and also positioning itself as a key actor that can contribute to operationalising digital cooperation and establishing linkages not only with the UN SG led process but also with the upcoming preparatory process towards the WSIS+20.

In the long run, increased research efforts should be dedicated to better document pluralism and diversity in participation in order to provide data that could allow for a clearer picture of where additional measures are needed to ensure incremental inclusivity each year.

APC considers the IGF village as an interesting space for open exchange and networking. In 2020, however, we feel the village did not work quite well. Attendance was certainly a challenge. Important efforts went to organising the time slots for the booths for optimal use and interaction, but the level of participation was poor. Other ways to promote and use the virtual booths should be explored in future editions.

In relation to communications, outreach and outputs, APC observed that it was very positive to have the summaries of the different phases, as well as key messages and summaries per thematic track provided to participants and organizers. We commend the

organizers on this effort and encourage the IGF Secretariat and MAG to continue doing so.

Key recommendations for 2021:

- Future events' agendas should be more focused and streamlined, creating a body of better-connected and reduced sessions. Complementarily, space should be created at the margins for covering other issues. Ensuring a more focused agenda, structured around priority issues and linked to the intersessional work, would allow the IGF to be more impactful.
- The overall agenda should provide additional opportunities for interaction and the organisation of parallel and follow up events. Reducing the number of workshops could be an effective way to avoid overlaps and duplication.
- Future editions should consider the establishment of a hybrid IGF that provides equally important and valued modalities of participation, for those present in the host country and those following activities online.
- The IGF would also greatly benefit from a more structured and intentional mapping and documentation of activities and impact that could allow for evidence-based decision making in key areas such as efforts to increase diversity and the design of more impactful outcomes.
- Improved documentation of ongoing activities would also provide relevant material for the preparation of a robust communication strategy that would allow increased public recognition of the role played by the IGF in global digital cooperation.
- Decisive support should be provided for the creation of a Best Practice Forum on Governance of Environmental Data and the continuation of the Environment Track to allow the discussion on the issue to evolve and mature.
- Key messages for each track should continue to be published and organizers should ensure, as was done in 2020, that they are open to comments from the community. Further attention could be given to the dissemination of these messages in relevant international processes and fora.

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.