IGF 2019- Response to Call for Input

Taking stock of the 2019 work program and 14th IGF and suggestions for the way forward

The following note is a response to the "Call for Input" by the IGF Secretariat to take stock of the IGF meeting held in November in Berlin at Estrel Congress Center and forward looking to the future of the IGF.

These reflections do not represent an official position of the European Commission, but simply an informal input to the work carried out by the MAG and by the hosting country.

1.   Introduction

The European Commission actively participated in the 14th IGF held in Berlin (25-29 November 2019), as a sign of its continued commitment and support to the multistakeholder approach to Internet governance embodied by the IGF. The European Commission coordinated with Members of the European Parliament and EU Member States both before and during the IGF.

A significant European presence at the 14th IGF was ensured by:

- The participation of high-ranking officials from the Commission and a delegation of four Members of the European Parliament;
- An Open Forum on the Future Internet Governance Strategy for the European Union organised by the European Commission;
- A Next-Generation Internet booth in the IGF village, displaying innovative European projects organized by the European Commission.

2.   Taking Stock of 2019 programming, preparatory process, community intersessional activities and the 14th annual IGF: What worked well? What worked not so well?

We would like to thank the German Government, organiser of the IGF 2019, Estrel Congress Center, the IGF Secretariat and the MAG for the work carried out for the organisation of the event.

The overarching theme of the IGF 2019 **"One World. One Net. One Vision."** highlighted the need for collaboration across borders to ensure internet interoperability.

Its subthemes (1) Data Governance, (2) Digital Inclusion and (3) Security, Safety, Stability and Resilience enabled multidisciplinary discussions on the most pressing internet issues of our time. Some of the most prominent technological trends have been discussed this year: from the developments of 5G networks and the extension of techno-nationalism to the protection of minors in online video games, to the need of personal data spaces for making the data economy work.

The **high-level presence** of Chancellor Merkel, UN Secretary General Guterres and Federal Economy Minister Altmaier, as well as the organisation of high-level ministerial meetings on the "day 0" of the event, considerably raised the visibility and the political impact of the event.

The hosting country has undoubtedly followed an inclusive approach. It is worth noticing that the participation from the global south, as well as the level of global south leaders that intervened in panels were higher compared to previous years, and this is mainly due to the financial support from the German Government. This could be further developed and systematised in the future as a fellowship program, giving people from developing countries, especially tech innovators, the possibility to apply for travel reimbursement and accommodation.

Another important innovative element has been the organisation of sessions specifically dedicated to lawmakers during day 4. For the future it would be worth considering the organisation of such events during the first days of the IGF and not on the last day, since this did not allow Parliamentarians coming from different countries to fully participate in the event.

As for the IGF 2017 and 2018, the organisers alongside the IGF Secretariat have produced a set of "Berlin messages", divided by Day 1 Opening Sessions and each of the three subthemes. While the latter are concise and to the point, the one devoted to the opening sessions only contains high-level input. This raises the old issue of finding the right balance between a participatory, bottom-up and multistakeholder process with the need for more curated outcome of the IGF.

As for the programme, the European Commission appreciated the attempt of having a more focused, **thematic agenda** and, in general, a more focused IGF. For the future, the

MAG and the organisers could try to reduce the length of the overall event and dedicate, for example, one day to each sub-theme, leading to thematic conclusions.

3. Suggestions for improvements in 2019 (and beyond)

A number of incremental improvements have been successfully introduced over the last decade, but now, looking ahead, the IGF community has to make a resolute effort to follow up on the UN High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation report and ensure that the IGF will foster concrete outcomes over the next years.

The European Commission, together with other stakeholders, is actively participating in the follow-up of recommendations 5A and 5B of the report that provides detailed suggestions and possible different scenarios to improve global digital cooperation.

Considering the increasing complexity of the digital sphere and the fragmentation of its actors, the rising tensions between global actors in online environments, the ambitious goal of reaching an inclusive Internet before 2030, the IGF now needs to have more meaningful and tangible outputs.

This means more efficiency in using the knowledge and know-how collectively built and retained by the MAG members and the broader IGF community over the course of the years and the ability to turn it into guidance that will concretely shape the development of the internet. Undoubtedly, one of the most successful session format is the Best Practice Forum, which allows the gathering of different stakeholders with different background and challenges to face, to share their experiences and best practice in managing concrete issues, which can concretely inspire internet developments in different regions of the world.

The IGF has the potentiality to become one of the main fora to shape the future of our digital society. In order to make the discussion more effective and deliver more to build the future Internet in the way we envision it, the IGF will have to undergo some changes.

Areas where we should focus our efforts are, in our view, the following:

- increase the role of the National and Regional Initiatives as fora to collect ideas coming from local communities and convey them on the global scene; and conversely use them as an instrument to spread the IGF messages to the local communities;

- develop strategies to make the best use of the information and knowledge built at national and regional level;

- make the IGF a platform that provides also practical solutions to the different issues at stake, through the organisation of concrete projects such as hackatons and prizes, and involving more industry representatives, innovators and tech-developers;

- increase the level of participation of certain stakeholders, in particular governments and the private sector, including in terms of vertical sectors involved (e.g. energy, health, education), as well as start-up and SMEs; and ensure continuous renewal of the IGF community, to bring fresh ideas and perspectives;

- improve the operational processes to set-up the annual programme, giving the MAG a content curating role;

- strengthen the relations and interactions between the IGF and other bodies addressing Internet governance issues from different perspectives; and develop a shared long-term view of the role and activities of the IGF, aligning the discussion to a shared vision for the Internet of the future.

The European Commission believes that the extended mandate of the IGF offers the opportunity for **strategic multi-annual planning**. Each IGF meeting should not be seen in isolation, but rather be part of a broader reflection spanning inter-sessional work and cycles of 2-3 years. This will allow the definition of more challenging goals and processes, which span over several meetings. A carefully designed multi-annual strategy can provide a broad framework into which topics and issues can be addressed, making the workshop selection process more transparent and less time-consuming.

This requires in turn consistent and predictable commitment by host countries and by donors (who ensure the existence of the IGF itself). The financial sustainability of the IGF is a challenge that needs to be properly addressed. As one of the most stable donor to the IGF, the European Commission invites others to join in this effort.

While it is widely recognised that the IGF brings added-value as a venue for all the relevant stakeholders to meet once a year, as well as a platform to scout new technological trends and their impact, its added value in terms of outputs can be improved. It is now time to shift the focus from improving the IGF processes to improving its actual outcomes, and build up an IGF concretely shaping the development of the internet, in line with the WSIS mandate.

This will require changes in the way the IGF works. It is important to show that the change comes from within the IGF, that the IGF has the maturity to identify its shortcomings and improve itself.

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