Internet Governance Forum 2024

Stocktaking IGF-D

The 19th Internet Governance Forum (IGF), held from December 15-19 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, brought together a vibrant community of stakeholders under the theme "Building our Multistakeholder Digital Future". The conference showcased remarkable efforts by the hosts in creating an engaging forum for dialogue on the future of internet governance.

Highlights

- **Catering and Hospitality:** The lunch provided at the IGF 2024 was widely appreciated, contributing to a welcoming and comfortable experience for participants. This small but meaningful detail fostered networking opportunities and encouraged informal discussions among attendees.
- **Content Quality:** The sessions at IGF 2024 were of great quality, offering deep insights and diverse perspectives on critical issues, from digital inclusion to AI and cybersecurity. Participants appreciated the breadth of expertise and the relevance of discussions.

Areas for Improvement

- **Overemphasis on Artificial Intelligence:** While AI remains a crucial topic in digital governance, its prominence in the agenda felt disproportionate. Multiple sessions on AI, often scheduled concurrently, created thematic redundancies and limited participants' ability to engage with other pressing issues (e.g. internet shutdowns). A more balanced representation of topics is recommended for future IGFs.
- **Limited Opportunities for Social Exchange and Networking:** While the IGF provided a platform for substantive discussions, participants noted the lack of opportunities for informal social exchange and networking. Events such as a reception hosted by the host country or dedicated networking sessions were missed. These types of activities are vital for fostering connections between stakeholders, encouraging collaboration, and building relationships beyond formal sessions. Including such opportunities in future IGFs would greatly enhance the overall experience and strengthen the multistakeholder community.

- **High-Level Session:** The high-level sessions could have been more engaging. Many participants felt the discussions were hindered by an overabundance of panelists, making it difficult to foster dynamic dialogue. Limiting the number of speakers and incorporating more interactive elements could enhance the impact of these sessions.
- **Leadership Panel and IGF Messages:** The "IGF Messages" serve as the main output document of the IGF. However, it appears that policymakers, businesses, the technical community, and academia rarely reference these messages after the meeting or draw actionable inspiration from them. To address this, it is essential for the Leadership Panel to actively promote the IGF Messages and ensure they are brought to the attention of a diverse range of stakeholders across sectors, encouraging their integration into decision-making processes.
- **Session Scheduling:** Overlapping session times posed challenges for participants. Improved coordination in scheduling to reduce conflicts and ensure better attendance for key sessions would significantly enhance the participant experience.
- **Technical Challenges:** Technical issues with headphones and Zoom sessions occasionally disrupted discussions. Addressing these challenges with improved technical support and testing could ensure smoother participation for both in-person and online attendees.
- **Facilities:** The on-site facilities, particularly bathrooms, were insufficient for the number of attendees. Increasing the availability of essential infrastructure would be critical for accommodating large crowds comfortably.
- **Youth Inclusion:** While youth participation continues to grow, their inclusion in main sessions and across all tracks remains limited. Actively integrating youth representatives into high-level discussions and decision-making forums would be essential to ensure that their voices are heard and valued.
- **Ensuring Open and Inclusive Dialogue:** Concerns were raised regarding the perception of restricted dialogue during the event, including instances where participants were reportedly removed from Zoom sessions or session recordings and transcripts addressing sensitive topics were unavailable in the archives. Such actions may discourage open participation, particularly from remote attendees, including activists who fear potential repercussions. To uphold the IGF's commitment to fostering open, transparent, and inclusive discussions, the IGF Secretariat, in collaboration with the MAG, could consider establishing clear minimum standards for host countries and implementing a more transparent and inclusive host selection process in the future.

Looking Ahead

The IGF 2024 reaffirmed the distinct value of the multistakeholder approach in addressing complex challenges of the digital era. By refining its approach to agenda-setting, technical coordination, and inclusivity, the IGF can continue to build a truly collaborative digital future. These lessons provide a strong foundation for the IGF 2025 in Norway, the WSIS+20 Review, and beyond.