

RIPE NCC Response to the Consultation: Taking Stock of IGF 2020 and Suggesting Improvements for IGF 2021

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We preface this input by noting that the MAG and the IGF Secretariat have facilitated a number of opportunities for feedback on the IGF 2020 event, and that the RIPE NCC has already provided much of its input via those channels. We strongly commend the MAG and Secretariat for their proactive approach to seeking input and feedback.

The COVID-19-related constraints which necessitated a virtual-only IGF in 2020 will likely ease, if not completely in 2021, then in 2022 and going forward. However, this has been an important opportunity for the IGF (and many other Internet governance venues) to more fully commit to providing a remote participation experience that places virtual attendees on an equal footing with those who can travel to a physical event. That the IGF in 2020 was able to adapt so quickly and completely to the situation, and ensure that planning, preparation and execution of the event was able to happen with relatively few hitches is a testament to the work done by the MAG, the Secretariat, and the session organisers.

All Internet governance communities, including the RIPE community, have learned a great deal in the past year about how best to facilitate virtual discussions. It is clear that it is vital to find ways to maintain interactivity, and that this should not only extend to planned speakers, or even to those who decide to take a virtual microphone during the session, but to all participants. An open chat channel is a commonly employed means of facilitating active participation, but it cannot be regarded in isolation - details like allowing participants to see who else is in the “room” are key to realising the potential of this kind of interaction.

For the 2020 events, many sessions used the “webinar” mode in Zoom, which intentionally creates a more one-way interaction (speakers can interact, but most participants were not able to easily take the microphone or see the full list of participants). While using the more fully interactive option on Zoom (or other remote meeting platforms) often creates additional risk in terms of security and privacy, trading off general participation for a more secure meeting space does not achieve the aims of remote participation. While it may be necessary to hold some sessions in a “webinar” format, we would strongly encourage that most sessions be held in a more open manner. Those sessions held in “webinar” format should be prepared in a way that recognises the different engagement requirements of a “broadcast”-style format (tighter agenda management, strong speakers, etc.).

We would also strongly encourage the MAG and Secretariat to further investigate options for virtual social activities and venues during the event - the RIPE NCC has received very positive feedback about the use of SpatialChat (<https://spatial.chat>) during RIPE Meetings in 2020, while ICANN have also experimented with “fika” (coffee) sessions during their meetings. There is no perfect solution to this challenge, but going some way to recreating the social aspect of IGF meetings should be made a priority.

We feel these points of consideration are especially important given the exceptionally full agenda of the virtual IGF in 2020. Nearly two full weeks of sessions, while offering a wealth of opportunity to cover a broad range of topics and to be as accessible as possible across different time zones, was somewhat overwhelming — even for those familiar with the IGF.

Finally, as we move toward an eventual relaxation of travel restrictions and a return to physical events, we would like to reiterate that this should not detract from the need to place remote participants on an equal footing with physical attendees. There is important work to do in thinking about how to ensure that a return to physical events (or “hybrid” meetings) is not simply a return to privileging those who are able to attend physically. Again, this is a dilemma that many Internet governance venues are wrestling with, and maintaining open communication to learn from the experiences of others will be key. The RIPE NCC (and members of the RIPE community) look forward to sharing our experience and contributing to the IGF discussions around this topic in the coming months and years.