

Unpacking human rights and safety challenges and concerns in Ethiopia in the context of the 2022 global IGF

Summary of the session held in the framework of FIFAfrica 2022

September 2022

The Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) collaborated to provide an opportunity for the internet governance community to learn about and discuss the human rights and media freedom situation in Ethiopia. They created a platform for people who would like to participate in this year's global Internet Governance Forum – to be held in Addis Ababa from 28 November to 2 December 2022 – to ask questions about safety concerns in the context of the recent conflict in the northern parts of the country.

The session's purpose was to enable interaction between civil society organisations who plan to participate in the IGF with the IGF Secretariat and the Ethiopian IGF Committee. It also aimed to facilitate interaction between civil society, digital rights activists and members of the technical community in Africa and globally with those working in Ethiopia.

The session began with a short historical overview of the last few decades in Ethiopia and how they have led to the current situation, and outlined the human rights context in the country. Inputs from the Ethiopian IGF organising committee and the IGF Secretariat, included an update on preparations for the event and a briefing on safety and security.

This document summarises the key points that emerged from the conversation.

Overview of the preparation for the IGF 2022

The session began with inputs on the preparations for the IGF 2022. This was led by the Head of the IGF Secretariat and a government representative from the host country who is a part of the Ethiopian Ministry of Innovation and Technology's Digital Transformation Program.

Guiding principles and the programmatic content of the IGF

The head of the IGF Secretariat outlined the principles that have governed the planning of the IGF meeting. He indicated that the aim of the preparation was to create a discursive environment that would allow the IGF to live into its values of

openness, transparency, inclusivity, and being non-commercial as well as bottom up. He noted that there are over 155 national, regional and sub-regional IGFs – therefore a wide range of stakeholders and global voices will be represented. He emphasised that these multistakeholder discussions are intended to be solution-oriented and expected to [adhere to the UN Code of Conduct](#). He also indicated that the programme was formulated to cover the following themes: connecting people, safeguarding human rights, avoiding segmentation, safety and artificial Intelligence. The programme will also include best practice forums on security, gender, digital rights, internet fragmentation and meaningful internet access.

The head of the IGF Secretariat also highlighted the importance of a youth-oriented focus in the discussions – particularly on the African continent where a large part of the population falls into this category. Within the context of Ethiopia, he noted that approximately 10 million citizens fall within the segment of youth.

For the choice of the host country, he stated that Addis Ababa is the headquarters of the African Union and the base of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and is the third largest diplomatic hub in the world – following on the heels of New York City and Brussels. He noted that physical arrangements for the IGF are on schedule. The UN IGF Secretariat conducted a planning mission last year in November, and another will take place in October.

The structure of the planning committee

The country representative was asked how the planning committee was constituted, about his work as a committee member, and to give a more detailed overview of the role of the Ethiopian government in the IGF – particularly the Ministry of Innovation and Technology.

He indicated that the Ethiopian national planning committee is organised so that all sectors of the government participate. The national planning committee is led by the Minister of Innovation and Technology and has members from most major sectors, including the Ministry of Finance and the National Bank, Ministry of National Security, Ministry of Education and National Planning Commissions. There is a steering committee led by the Minister of Innovation and Technology. This committee manages the day-to-day activities and meets every two weeks. The Secretariat is the main point of contact and parallel to that there is a local advisory committee that includes the private sector, academia, civil society and other stakeholders and influential individuals. There are also sub-committees to take care of various aspects of the IGF.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) Conference Centre is the venue for the IGF. He noted that the IGF has a fully hybrid structure, which allows participation on the premises or online. Parallel cultural activities and arrangements have been made. There is an [international website for the IGF](#) managed by the IGF Secretariat and [a local website](#) that provides information about the weather and transport options to ensure accessibility.

Historical overview of Ethiopia's political context

A speaker from Addis Ababa University representing the academic sector was tasked with providing a short historical overview of recent history in Ethiopia and how this led to the current political context in the country. He foregrounded Ethiopia's long history of independence and self-governance, stating that this influences some of the political structures currently in place. He noted that another aspect of Ethiopia's history is religious tolerance and argued that this is not highlighted enough. He claimed that Muslims and Christians have been living side by side for centuries and this coexistence has been nurtured throughout history.

The speaker explored what he termed "the dark side of Ethiopia's history", which is the political history of repression. In the 70s there was a transition from monarchic rule to a republic, which led to a military dictatorship until 1987 that damaged the political trajectory of the state in developing a democratic system. This led to the massacre of hundreds of thousands of people. He contended that there is an ongoing hangover of that political history of military dictatorship.

In 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took over political power. According to the speaker, there was huge optimism for political change in Ethiopia. In 1995, a new constitution was adopted that had good intentions in terms of respect for human rights. Despite this, there were major criticisms because it led to Ethiopia becoming essentially an ethnic federation, which continues to haunt Ethiopia's political structures.

The EPRDF was in power for over 30 years and this regime was highly authoritarian. The majority of EPRDF leaders were from Tigray, the region where the current conflict is concentrated. In the speaker's view, there was a pivotal moment in 2005 – a major possibility for democratic change. The political group Unity for Justice contested the election and there was widespread belief that this group had won, but the regime at the time was believed to have stolen the election. Post-election, political opponents were imprisoned and this also fundamentally damaged Ethiopia's political trajectory.

In 2005, repressive laws were passed, such as the anti-terrorism proclamation and the media proclamation. This was under the rubric of what the regime called "revolutionary democracy" and was accompanied by the idea of the developmental state. There were large-scale protests and people were demanding political change.

In 2018 there was an election and Abiy Ahmed Ali became Prime Minister of Ethiopia. According to the speaker, the political transition during this year brought both hope and challenges. On a positive note, a number of political prisoners were released and there were also progressive legislative policies instituted. The speaker noted that he was a part of the legal committee responsible for drafting these legislative changes. Some of these legal changes had implications for internet freedom and media freedom. He believed the pace of instituting these changes has been adversely impacted by the conflict that broke out in parts of Ethiopia in November 2020. However, he believed that the gravity of the situation in Ethiopia with regard to

human rights abuses and instability has been overstated. The conflict in Tigray should be understood, at least in part, as having been initiated by the leaders of the previous regime who lost power during the 2018 election.

The speaker ended his contribution by expressing his hopes for the IGF. He hoped that this forum will create a better understanding of the situation in Ethiopia and that this platform will generate much-needed support during this challenging period. He also hoped that this forum will support the privatisation of the telecommunications sector and increased internet access in the country, which is a process that began but remains unfinished.

Overview of the state of human rights and internet access in Ethiopia

In her role as a human rights and media professional from Ethiopia, the next speaker gave an overview of the foremost human rights challenges that are being faced by Ethiopians. She contended that Ethiopians are living through a period of grave and escalated human rights violations. She indicated that although the conflict in Tigray has been widely reported, there are also other areas of conflict that have not gotten as much media attention – in particular in Welega, Oromia and in the Southern part of the country. She noted that Amnesty International and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) have called out all parties involved in these conflicts of human rights violations, including war crimes and crimes against humanity. She indicated that egregious human rights violations have affected the most vulnerable communities and minority groups. She believed the government and the parties opposing the government are all fully complicit in committing these violations.

The speaker indicated that Tigray and some parts of the Amhara region have been politically and digitally isolated since the conflict started in November 2020. This means that six million people are not getting access to financial services like banking and government services, including electricity and telecommunications services. These populations are also cut off from receiving humanitarian assistance and medical services. People outside of these regions are disconnected from family, which is particularly distressing when loved ones are living in a conflict zone. She stated that ethnic Tigrayans have also been targeted in Addis Ababa. In general, ethnic minorities across the country are living with the fear of being attacked, and Amharas across the country are bearing the brunt of this too. Mass arrests of citizens in Ethiopia have also happened.

Moving on to the IGF and the digital space in Ethiopia, the speaker stated that internet shutdowns are rampant in the country as are extrajudicial surveillance, censorship and website blocking. Journalists and activists being arrested is also a common reality in the country. In terms of access, of the almost 120 million people in Ethiopia, around 25% have some form of internet access. Only approximately 1% have fixed internet, with mobile internet coverage being available to around 40% of the country. Connectivity is concentrated in urban areas and people in rural areas

have difficulty accessing the internet. Mobile penetration is high but access to the internet is still challenging. The telecoms sector has been recently liberalised. One of Kenya's providers, Safaricom, has launched their services in Ethiopia. Previously, 100% of the telecoms sector was government-owned. There is hope that having more providers entering the market will provide greater connectivity.

In the past two to three years, social media's influence and its financial power have grown. This has also come with a rise in hate speech and the incitement of violence online. It is now argued that digital platforms are fueling the conflict.

The speaker posed some important questions for the session: If the IGF takes place in Ethiopia, what can be done for people that feel silenced by the government? How can those participating collectively advocate for those that are disconnected and not present at the IGF?

Monitoring internet shutdowns in Ethiopia and beyond

The manager at Access Now's #KeepItOn campaign explained that this campaign connects over 280 organisations around the world to fight internet shutdowns. In 2021, Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition documented 182 internet shutdowns across 34 countries – 12 countries in Africa responsible for 19 of the shutdowns documented. The major cause of shutdowns in Africa were elections, protests and, most recently, conflict.

According to Access Now's shutdown tracker optimisation database, Ethiopia is a major perpetrator of internet shutdowns in sub-Saharan Africa, logging at least 22 incidents of internet shutdowns between 2015 and 2021. Over the last two years, people of Tigray have been denied access to the internet.

Internet shutdowns have major impacts on human rights. Through their impact stories project, Access Now has solicited and documented the personal experiences of people affected by shutdowns. The research shows that internet shutdowns exacerbate violence, leaving people in fear and confusion. They also allow authorities to cover up heinous crimes against people, including murder and sexual assault.

In Ethiopia, people have been denied communication with loved ones. Businesses, schools and other institutions are heavily impacted by internet shutdowns. It has amplified the humanitarian crisis, making it difficult for people to access basic, life-saving services including emergency support. Internet shutdowns have also made it extremely challenging for journalists, human rights defenders and civil society actors to provide information, monitor the situation in conflict zones and document what is happening.

Government's response to the access gap in Ethiopia

In response to the preceding statements, the government representative agreed that people have been affected by the war but questioned who is to blame for these

adverse impacts. He stated that one cannot talk about internet shutdowns in Tigray without speaking about the destruction of infrastructure. He contended that the government is working on rehabilitating infrastructure that has been destroyed throughout the course of the conflict. He argued that ethnic-based policies mainstreamed by the previous regime have had a devastating impact on Ethiopia and that the current political regime has learned a lot in recent years, as seen in the Digital Transformation Program.

According to the speaker, the government has made strides in recent years through policy changes – in particular the liberalisation and privatisation proclamation of the communication authority. It is hoped that these changes will result in the market responding positively in expanding internet access. The government has also developed a universal access policy and strategy, and a national broadband plan to include rural regions. Despite Safaricom entering the market, he stated that Ethio Telecom has managed to reach 64 million people for mobile access, which is almost 100% mobile coverage of the country. He contended that there has been a vast improvement in terms of infrastructure.

He highlighted the national illiteracy rate as the greatest challenge to internet access in Ethiopia, stating it affects people's ability to use the internet and their mobile devices effectively.

Should the IGF be hosted in Ethiopia? Concerns and questions about who should host the IGF

In light of the human rights violations noted by some of the panellists, concerns were raised about Ethiopia hosting the IGF. APC's moderator began the discussion component by contextualising the previous hosts of the IGF. She stated that the forum has to make room for global diversity and complexity. She contended that there haven't been many IGF host countries that have not experienced human rights challenges. She argued that part of the aim of the IGF is to expose the access inequity and human rights challenges faced by particular regions in the world and shine a light on them.

She stated that there is not much value in only having the IGF in countries without these challenges. Part of the value of the IGF is that it provides an opportunity for the voices of people experiencing those challenges to have and shape these discussions. In her view, there have been difficulties with people participating in the IGF who wanted to challenge and criticise the government to do so in a way consistent with UN guidelines and UN Code of Conduct. However, it is important for state actors to recognise, especially for host countries, that if people are using this forum to raise questions, to challenge, that is a vote of confidence, and a way of engaging constructively and building trust.

She admitted that the condition of human rights defenders in countries that have hosted the IGF did not necessarily improve after the IGF took place. Still it is

important to let the voices of people in that country really drive these discussions. It is about creating space for people living in that context to engage openly and frankly, even if they have different views and come from different sectors.

Is the IGF a space for dissenting voices?

The moderator asked the head of the IGF Secretariat to reflect on what has worked well and what might not work well when the IGF is taking place in a context where there are dissenting voices who are using the IGF to raise their concerns.

He acknowledged the difficulty and complexity of speaking through the issues at hand in a contested space. As an example, he spotlighted some of the main themes of the IGF: avoiding internet fragmentation, connecting more people and safeguarding human rights. He asserted that discussing these issues creates the opportunity for an informed conversation among all stakeholders. There is room for the various participants to air their views without taking a defensive or antagonistic stance. He reasserted that the UN Code of Conduct governs how participants discuss issues at IGF meetings and that it can be hard for some participants to adjust to this. He argued that adherence to the Code of Conduct allows "opposing parties" to meet at the discussion table and focus on the objectives of ensuring that people worldwide can have safe, secure and affordable internet.

Will human rights defenders be given a platform to speak out about national agendas at the IGF? Will the Code of Conduct affect their ability to do so?

A consultant on internet governance and member of the European IGF and the working group on strategy for the IGF asked whether human rights organisations truly have the opportunity to promote their national agendas for Ethiopia from booths in the Village. Will they get to present their cases and are there restraints on that? Does the Code of Conduct cover this? What is permitted in the Village in the "margins" of the IGF, rather than in the main rooms?

The head of the IGF Secretariat explained that the Code of Conduct is applicable to all discussions in the blue zone (the UN perimeter). He encouraged participants not to single out one entity, individual or company and called for discussion that aggregates the issues because this is a global meeting. He discouraged participants from focusing on single country case studies.

In response, the moderator encouraged civil society activists to be cautious in their approach. She stated that very frank conversations about internet shutdowns at the IGF have happened before, where there were specific countries named. However, she echoed the IGF Secretariat's call to approach these issues from a more global perspective and work within UN guidelines by showcasing how these issues affect multiple countries. She also noted that in some countries where the IGF has taken place, people have chosen to have meetings outside of the blue zone. She argued that it is still possible to have these parallel meetings on national issues in a way that

invites a multistakeholder approach and even invites government representatives to the table.

Is there space to discuss single case studies at the IGF?

The Access Now's #KeepItOn campaign manager asked if there is space for her organisation's work in the IGF context and found it hard to situate it in a context where naming specific countries and governments is discouraged. The nature of their work uses specific case studies as a jumping-off point for reporting and research.

The moderator asserted that using case studies and facts or figures is still possible at the IGF. The head of the IGF Secretariat explained that there is no firm line against discussing case studies. However, it is more suitable for the IGF space to give multiple examples rather than hone in on one specific example.

The IGF can be a learning curve for governments

For the moderator, the IGF is still a space where civil society can openly confront state actors on human rights concerns. She encouraged government actors to prepare for this possibility and respond in a manner that does not escalate conflict. She believed that the same applies for civil society actors in order to keep the discussion constructive. In her experience, the IGF has been a forum where governments learned how to make their cases without being defensive. These modifications in engagement have allowed for subtlety and nuance to be a foundation of the discourse at the IGF.

In the online chat, the consultant on internet governance wrote the following significant contribution: *"It's important for more governments to participate constructively and collaboratively in the IGF ecosystem. That inevitably means there will be points of contention raised in open forums about specific national policies. All governments and not just the host need to recognise the value of open, multistakeholder discourse when considering whether to participate in the UN IGF and the regional and national IGFs."*

Are there safety and security concerns for participants attending the IGF?

A member of Rudi International and former IGF Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) member asked what would happen to participants that speak up against violations in Ethiopia. He wondered if participants should be concerned for their physical safety and security if they challenge the Ethiopian government.

The government representative stated that Addis Ababa is one of the safest cities in Africa and has a low crime rate. It is also a city with a large diplomatic community and has hosted many international conferences. The local IGF has already been conducted in Ethiopia and from this forum came noteworthy reflections from the participants. He stated that local civil society actors had been encouraged to engage

in the local forum and question the status quo. He also indicated that he would raise the concerns about security and safety with the steering committee.

The moderator asked a follow-up question about the safety of journalists during the IGF, noting that there is a history of journalists being arrested in Ethiopia. The government representative responded that journalists will not be in danger of arrest during the IGF.

The moderator also brought forward a question about the safety of LGBTIQ participants, which interrogated if the legislative context in Ethiopia would make members of the LGBTIQ community feel unsafe. The head of the IGF Secretariat responded that he is not aware of any concerns in this regard. The government representative responded that Ethiopia is a religious country and that people might not be comfortable hearing about LGBTIQ issues. Otherwise, he contended that there is no open discrimination or threat of any kind.

Is the IGF inclusive of different regional voices on the African continent? How will the IGF ensure that marginalised voices are included?

A Zimbabwean civil society leader and media and information literacy advocate asked how the collective can make spaces like the IGF accessible to those at the bottom of the pyramid. He contended that the multistakeholder approach is a noble one but a quick national, continental and global survey will indicate that these spaces remain captured by the elite with little or no participation from grassroots communities that are affected by the decisions made in these spaces.

The Chair of the African task force for the UN Economic Commission for Africa responded that 80 young people from across the world will be brought to Addis Ababa for the IGF, and 30 of these young people are coming from Ethiopia and around the African continent to support the IGF process in different formats.

One of the coordinators of the national and regional initiative of Uganda and the East African region commented that the African IGF platforms created spaces for diverse voices from the continent. The National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs) raised particular issues in the national and regional meetings that will be carried forward to sessions in the global IGF. She stated that in this upcoming IGF, there is a particular session that is focusing on digital democracy. Voices from Africa can share experiences and lessons with global actors and global forums. There is a bottom-up approach because there is sharing from national and regional forums.

A call for collaborative action

In a closing remark, the human rights and media consultant called for civil society actors to collaboratively organise and share strategies on how to communicate and present their issues. She called on organisations to show up for the people that cannot show up to the IGF space. She extended an open invitation to civil society

organisations to come together and share their experiences, and coordinate with local Ethiopian civil society organisations on their shared struggles.

The moderator closed the session and thanked all the participants for the open and frank discussion of difficult and sensitive topics. She expressed the hope that all the participants will join the IGF in Ethiopia and continue these discussions in that context, finding a way to be respectful when raising concerns around the failure of states and others to uphold human rights, while also making use of the IGF as an open and inclusive multistakeholder platform for dialogue and debate on internet-related matters.