Internet Society
Accessibility
Standing Group

Report on Mentorship of 2023 IGF DCAD Fellows

As a basis for an informal partnership between the ISOC Accessibility Standing Group and the IGF Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability, Gunela Astbrink offered to mentor DCAD Fellows traveling to participate at the IGF in Kyoto, Japan. Gunela self-funded her travel.

Why the need for mentorship
It can be an overwhelming experience for people participating at an IGF for the first time. An experienced person helping and guiding DCAD Fellows navigate the IGF can ensure that they get the maximum benefit from the experience. This in turn should mean they contribute to a strong disability voice in Internet governance.

Who
Vidhya Y (India), Grace Salanje (Malawi) and Nicodemus Nyakundi (Kenya) were the initial DCAD Fellows from outside Japan. Unfortunately, Grace Salanje was unable to obtain a visa in time and therefore could not travel. Lidia Best (UK) was able to take up the Fellowship at short notice.

How
DCAD Fellows were asked to read the Internet governance syllabus developed by the ISOC Accessibility Standing Group. This covers disability policy, Internet governance and advocating for Internet accessibility from a disability perspective. Fellows were also encouraged to navigate through the IGF website to better understand its many activities, initiatives, working groups and committees.

Gunela had a number of preliminary communications with Grace about her travel needs based on her physical disabilities. This would have been the first time she would have flown and been outside her country. Gunela also communicated with Horace Chipembere who is Grace's mentor in Malawi.

A preparatory call was held the week before the IGF, both to address logistics questions and the mentoring process. The mentoring process would include expectations of the DCAD Fellows to learn, get involved, network, speak up and prepare for future commitments.

The mentoring process at the IGF with Vidhya and Nicodemus involved daily get-togethers and WhatsApp messaging to support and encourage participation in the disability and general sessions.

The first day (Day 0) was the most intensive mentoring session with between two and three hours of discussion spread over the day. In fact, mentoring turned into coaching. Much time was spent giving advice on advocacy techniques, people networking and the importance of and methods of inserting the disability voice during question time at sessions.

As the days progressed, so did the Fellows. The time spent with Vidhya and Nicodemus in the last day reduced to one hour.

The structure of each coaching session was to do a 'temperature check' to ascertain any issues that needed working through, to discuss sessions attended and plans for the following day's sessions. Suggestions included participating in a mix of disability sessions, sessions based on their interest areas and general sessions for learning new concepts. Interspersed was coaching on the elevator pitch and different ways of getting the point across based on the person, topic or session.

The coaching was individualised based on each person's background, personality and skills set.

Results

It was clear that Vidhya and Nicodemus benefited from the support, coaching and attention given them during the IGF.

Vidhya got her points across about her work on developing STEM education for children with vision impairment in India during high-level meetings with Vint Cerf and with Tripti Sinha, ICANN Board Chair. Vidhya will follow-up.

Vidhya was the only on-site speaker at the DC Gender session on Disability, Gender and Digital Self-Determination. When technical issues prevented all the online speakers connecting via Zoom, Vidhya was flexible enough to speak engagingly at length while the moderator negotiated with the technical team.

Nicodemus used his social media skills to best effect. He wrote two blogs about the IGF during the week and followed up with a LinkedIn message about his involvement in the IGF.

Nicodemus made interventions in general sessions such as on AI referring back to the needs of persons with disability. He understood and demonstrated the importance of amplifying the disability voice in Internet governance fora.

Both Vidhya and Nicodemus have been invited to take on leadership roles in the ISOC Accessibility Standing Group.

Future suggestions

Future DCAD Fellows who are participating in the IGF for the first time will gain significant benefit from intense mentoring/coaching to encourage and support their active participation at the IGF.

The coaching needs to be face-to-face and at a level to meet the individual needs of each Fellow. Travel support for the mentor/coach should be part of the DCAD Fellowship Program.

Gunela Astbrink
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