



WS5: Capacity Building as a fundamental human right and requirement

Dr. Muhammad Shabbir Interventions

#IGF2025

26 June 2025

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Internet Governance Forum 2025 – Workshop 5 Capacity Building as a Fundamental Human Right and Requirement

26 June 2025 – Lillestrøm, Norway (Hybrid)

Speaker: Dr. Muhammad Shabbir, Co-Coordinator, Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability (DCAD)

Summary

Session Context

Workshop 5 was convened under the WSIS+20 and Global Digital Compact (GDC) frameworks to examine *capacity building as both a human right and a prerequisite* for equitable participation in digital governance. Dr. Muhammad Shabbir contributed five detailed interventions representing the perspective of the **Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability (DCAD)**. His remarks collectively formed a sustained argument that accessibility is not a secondary concern but a **core component of capacity building**, necessary for the realization of digital inclusion, democratic participation, and sustainable Internet governance.

He emphasized that **capacity building is not unidirectional**—it must be developed simultaneously on three fronts:

1. Among **users and participants**, to enable their effective participation.
 2. Among **organizers and institutions**, to ensure their systems, platforms, and events are inclusive.
 3. Among **knowledge producers**, to guarantee that the content being generated is accessible and usable by all.
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Intervention 1 – Expanding the Definition of Capacity Building

Dr. Shabbir opened with an observation that persons with disabilities constitute **the largest minority on Earth**, yet their presence in global Internet governance remains negligible. He illustrated this by noting that after twenty years of IGF meetings, the number of participants with disabilities “can still be counted on one hand.”

He then posed a critical question:

“Are we truly building capacity in the right way, or have we misunderstood what capacity means?”

Key Points

- **Dual dimensions of capacity building:** It is not limited to enabling users or participants to engage; it must also encompass the **capacity of organizers and educators** to make environments accessible.
- **Knowledge creation and accessibility:** Those producing or disseminating knowledge must ask themselves whether their materials are accessible to people with disabilities. Capacity building that ignores accessible communication or learning design is inherently incomplete.
- **Universality of disability:** Disability cuts across gender, geography, race, and class—it is a “transnational, trans-geographic, and trans-gender” issue that could affect anyone unexpectedly. Therefore, inclusive design is in everyone’s long-term self-interest.
- **Moral and practical imperative:** Accessibility is not charity but foresight—today’s designer may be tomorrow’s disabled user.

He concluded that every actor involved in digital governance—whether in policy, education, or technical infrastructure—must integrate accessibility from the outset rather than treating it as an optional afterthought.

Intervention 2 – Implementation, Advocacy, and Institutional Responsibility

Responding to **Gunela Astbrink's** question about capacity building in education and accessibility of digital platforms, Dr. Shabbir drew a parallel between the **implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** and the **Global Digital Compact (GDC)**.

Out of 193 UN member states, more than 180 have ratified the CRPD, yet **the degree of real implementation varies widely**. The difference, he argued, depends on two interrelated factors:

1. **Strong institutional systems** that enforce commitments once ratified.
2. **Persistent domestic advocacy**, where persons with disabilities themselves mobilize to hold governments accountable.

Application to the GDC

- For the GDC to succeed, **advocacy must be embedded** in its operationalization. Governments need constant engagement from civil society, especially organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), to ensure promises translate into measurable outcomes.
- Shabbir warned that symbolic inclusion without empowerment produces “token participation,” not meaningful change.

On Platform Accessibility

- Accessibility should be integrated at **national, regional, and global IGFs**, as well as **Schools on Internet Governance (SIGs)**, where grassroots training can have long-term impact.
- Since 2023, DCAD has brought several fellows with disabilities to the IGF, but “two or three participants among six thousand” remain a fraction of what true inclusion demands.
- **Funding gaps** severely limit the ability to scale these programs. Capacity building for persons with disabilities is cost-effective compared to the overall IGF budget, yet still chronically under-supported.
- Accessibility barriers in IGF websites and event platforms persist after two decades, demonstrating not ignorance but **a lack of institutional will**. He stopped short of calling it unwillingness, but stated candidly, “I don’t have a softer word for it.”

Shabbir's remarks reframed accessibility as a governance problem, not a technical glitch: institutions themselves must undergo **capacity building** to internalize inclusion.

Intervention 3 – Readiness for the Next Phase of Internet Governance

In a brief but pointed interjection, Dr. Shabbir urged participants to consider whether the Internet governance community is **ready for the future** as the WSIS+20 Review reshapes the digital policy landscape.

Central Question

“Have we built the capacities to prepare ourselves for what is coming next?”

He emphasized that future frameworks—whether emerging from WSIS+20, the GDC, or evolving IGF modalities—will require **a new kind of literacy** among policymakers and advocates, one that unites accessibility, digital rights, and multistakeholder governance. Without that preparation, he warned, communities with disabilities could once again be left behind in the next policy cycle.

Intervention 4 – Individual Needs and the Accessibility of Online Learning

Dr. Shabbir illustrated DCAD's **fellowship model** as an example of how inclusive capacity building can operate in practice:

- DCAD's approach is **person-centered** rather than program-centered.
- There is **no fixed formula**—each fellow's support is tailored to individual circumstances, within reasonable limits.
- Assistance may include **interpreters, accessible materials, companion support, or technology tools**.

He contrasted this with most capacity-building programs, which apply uniform templates and overlook accessibility testing.

“If you audit many of the online Internet governance courses,” he noted, “you will find very few—if any—that are fully accessible.”

Barriers

- Courses often lack compatibility with **screen readers**, have inaccessible PDF materials, or fail to provide **captioning or transcripts**.
- This excludes those who could most benefit from distance learning, which should have been the most inclusive medium available.

Positive Model

He cited the **Internet Society's Disability Leadership in Internet Governance** program as a model initiative that:

- Meets **WCAG accessibility standards**;
- Offers a fully online curriculum adaptable to different needs; and
- Includes follow-up mentorship for sustained engagement.

However, he stressed that even the best course fails if potential learners are unaware of it. Thus, **outreach and marketing** must accompany accessible design—capacity building is pointless if those it intends to reach never find it.

Intervention 5 – From Capacity Building to Decision-Making

In his closing intervention, Dr. Shabbir summarized DCAD's twin mandate: to strengthen **both the individuals** who participate in the IGF and **the IGF ecosystem itself**.

Key Mechanisms

1. **Training and Mentorship Pipeline** – DCAD trains fellows through an online preparatory program and assigns mentors during the IGF to ensure practical engagement rather than symbolic attendance.
2. **Accessibility Guidelines (2024 Update)** – DCAD produced updated IGF Accessibility Guidelines used by the Secretariat to improve events. Shabbir cautioned, however, that the Secretariat sometimes “picks and chooses what is convenient,” undermining comprehensive implementation.
3. **Collaborative Prioritization** – If financial constraints exist, DCAD advocates for an open, consultative process to decide which accessibility measures should be prioritized, instead of unilateral decisions by organizers.

He also connected the session to his previous day's panel, **"Beyond Tokenism: Disability-Inclusive Leadership in Internet Governance,"** reiterating that inclusion must evolve from participation to power:

"People with disabilities should not just be participants; they should be among those who make the decisions."

He closed by restating DCAD's guiding principle:
"Nothing about us, without us."

TRANSCRIPT

Intervention #1

Dr. Muhammad Shabbir: Thank you very much, Rajendra, and thank you very much to my colleagues who have spoken before me. I thank them for making my job a little bit more easier, but, I take a little bit of a different view from the perspective of DCAD in terms of capacity building. Persons with disabilities are considered to be the largest minority on Earth, and unfortunately, they, when it comes to their participation in IG discussions, their number can be counted on fingers, and we still have some fingers left. If we start doing that.

What does this mean? This means that, in 20 years of IGF discussions, though you would find that every IGF has had sessions and discussions on persons with disabilities, about persons with disabilities. I myself have participated in about five of... this is my fifth IGF out of 20, so 25% of the IGF I participated in, but there are very few who participate.

And then, this raises a question, are we building the capacities in the right manner, or do we need to do something else? Is it the question of just capacity? Or, there is something else which is required?

In my understanding, capacity building is not just required from the user side, or the participant sides, to enable them to participate in the IGF discussions, but it is also required on the organizer's side, as well as, one of my earlier colleagues talked about, knowledge creation. So, on the side of the person who is creating and producing the knowledge, in a way where it is made accessible for people who access the knowledge in a different manner.

So, the question that those knowledge producers need to ask themselves is, whether that knowledge would be accessible, those persons with disabilities or not.

And lastly, the point I want to make in my initial intervention is that the disability is a transnational, transgender, transgeographic, transracial subject. It can catch anyone and everyone at a time when we least expect it, and it's not by choice, it's by design.

So, everyone working in the places of decision making, be that knowledge production, be that capacity building, or website production, or whatever else, they need to think whether can I make this accessible?

If not, then sometimes, someday, you yourself might need it, and may find it inaccessible for yourself.

I stop there. Thank you.

Intervention #2

Dr. Muhammad Shabbir: Thank you very much, Gunela, for this question, and from your question I take two key points. One is the capacity building in education, and the second is accessibility of the platforms.

With regards to capacity building of persons with disabilities, and what is written in the GDC and other instruments, we have discussed this. The only example I would give here, and I would relate that with the implementation of GDC and my earlier comments, is the CRPD that Jutta just mentioned. United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I don't know the exact number, but what I'm sure of is that, out of a 193 UN member states, over 180 have signed and ratified this convention.

But, in some states its implementation is wonderful, while others lack in its implementation. The states where it is wonderful, is of because of two reasons. One, because there was strong advocacy, and two, they had strong systems. Because, once you commit to something, you have to implement it.

And, on the other hand, on the second stage, they had very strong advocacy from within, where the people with disabilities, they themselves came forward and have their governments implement the CRPD.

Similarly, coming to the GDC and accessibility of the platforms and capacity building, perhaps we can start by bringing more people with disabilities into IGF discussions. DCAD is doing both things, building capacity and bringing persons with disabilities, but it is working at the global level.

We need people coming from the grassroots travels, which would be national and regional Internet Governance Forums, and Schools on Internet Governance, and perhaps our fellow DC could contribute in that aspect.

There are a couple, I can give examples, but for the fear of taking more time, I would just. Illustrate that DCAD, since 2023, has been able to bring at least a couple of fellows to these discussions, and have them participate in the IGF at the global level. But, having two or three persons with disabilities. Where thousands or three, four, or at least 6,000 participants are participating in person or online, is not just the peanuts. It's even less than that. So, as someone earlier said, we need more finances if we want more voices of persons with disabilities.

With regards to accessibility of platforms, this is the second theme, and it can come with low costs as well. But there, I would have to say, unfortunately, also, as I said in the beginning, we need the capacity building of the institution and organizations.

In 20 years of IGF as existence, still, we find certain inaccessibilities with the IGF platforms and its websites. So, it does not just mean that there is lack of capacity amongst those who do not know about accessibility, but there is something else which I don't want to name the lack of willingness, because that would be too much a strong word, but I don't have any other expression to use for that, and I stop there.

Intervention #3

Dr. Muhammad Shabbir: Well, the question that I have from my fellow DC representatives is the... well, we can discuss this tomorrow, but certainly this comes in the way of capacity building as well. We... this is very important here. We all know, with all the WSIS+20 Review, and all of those things, feature of IGF. So, have we had the capacities build to prepare ourselves of what is coming next?

Intervention #4

Dr. Muhammad Shabbir: Yes, so I would just echo the statements that my colleagues made, and I would substantiate with the examples from in the disability field, and what is the motto of DCAD fellowship program is, that we do not set any limitations on the fellowship. Of course, we cannot provide moon, or business class tickets if they are required, but certainly within reasonable limits we try to meet the individual's needs.

So, each individual as human have different requirements and needs. We can apply the case study, as with the person with disabilities, since they have different needs. So, those needs have to be met, when you want to make the system or policy or platform accessible.

Same is the case with the with the capacity building. You cannot have set check boxes or if you want to make a list, it would be a long one, that would give you some indicators that who, when, and where, to target.

For instance, there are a number of capacity building online courses that train people with regards to different aspects of the Internet governance. Many of the organizations run those courses. But, if you do an accessibility audit of those online courses from the perspective of people with disabilities, there are very few, and I am using the word very because I don't have any other word to use that, where you would find no accessibility issues.

So, it would mean, in other way, that those courses, online courses, capacity building, which could have been easier, less costly, and less cumbersome for people with disabilities to follow, and to learn from their places of their convenience, you made them inaccessible for them.

So, platforms need to be made accessible.

Internet Society's one course, Disability Leadership in Internet Governance is one example, and that organization is trying to meet the needs and make the course accessible for people with disabilities.

The next question comes then how do you market that product? That there is this course available, that people with disabilities need to take? And, it's not just that you have the capacity building course, and if you do not have the right learners learning that course, doing capacity building, who would you build that capacity for?

Intervention #5

Dr. Muhammad Shabbir: Thank you very much. I would just say that the Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability is trying to build capacity of people with disabilities, and not just people with disabilities, but also the IGF system, to make those systems accessible and inclusive for all, so that people with disabilities can also contribute in the system meaningfully.

Now, changing the mindset is one thing, but we start from the low hanging fruit, where we try to bring people with disabilities to the discussions through capacity building training program. We just do not bring them here and leave them, throw them in the pond to swim by themselves, we provide them with a mentor, along with an online training program first.

We also have, for the system, guidelines, which were updated back in 2024, to make the meetings accessible for people with disabilities. The IGF Secretariat benefits from those guidelines, but it does picks and chooses, or the guidelines of convenience sometimes, as I am fond of saying. Those guidelines are there to make the event accessible, so it should not be pick and choose that what is convenient.

If it has to be that, and if there are any financial constraints on implementing all of those guidelines, then there should be a discussion that what should be prioritized in the case of making the event accessible for people with disabilities. Without asking them first, making the decision, is not the right approach.

Lastly, I would say yesterday we had a session on the Beyond Tokenism. That was something where we talked about having persons with disabilities in the future leadership spaces. And, this is where the takeaways of that sessions comes in. People with disabilities should not just be participating, but they should be making the decisions because, nothing about us, without us.

Thank you.