NOG Evolution post COVID-19 Pandemic

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Africa Internet Summit'22

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Talking Points

- What did NOGs do in 2021?
  - Hibernation ?
  - Fully Online ?
  - Hybrid ?

- How is this looking for 2022?
  - Are we back to in-person events?

- What about the future?
  - Back to "normal"
  - Or something else?

Hibernation

- Some NOGs opted to go into hibernation
  - Online presence in social media and/or mailing lists maintained
  - But no attempt at any events, fully online or hybrid
  - Local pandemic regulations included lockdowns and restricted movements
  - Local volunteers had bigger priorities in their own lives

Fully Online

- Many NOGs already streamed their conferences
  - And/or made recordings available after the event
- The pandemic forced everything online
  - NOGs with experience of streaming took it in their stride
  - Others had to learn quickly, using video conference tools popular in their community
  - And begged many questions:
    - Audience engagement?
    - Obtaining presentations?
    - Registration – and should there be a fee for participation?
    - Sponsorship – was it still appealing?
    - Training – how to offer this?

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Fully Online

- NOGs made use of online platforms
  - Zoom the most commonly used
    - But also GotoMeeting, MeetEcho, ZohoMeeting,…
  - Zoom Webinar 😬 versus Zoom Meeting 😃
  - Managing delegate access ("Zoom-bombers" in early events)
- Lower costs
  - Smaller sponsorship packages – but sponsors still very keen to support
  - No registration fee – but still needed to register to get Zoom access
- Similar preparation time
  - But more concentrated – everything closer to the event (i.e. last minute)
  - Mistaken perception that a fully online event is "easy" to organise

Fully Online

- Reduced ambitions for training
  - Limited to tutorials
    - Finding/developing new/up-to-date content rather than "same old"
  - Hands-on workshops with distributed class participation very challenging
    - Were participants actually there (or just auto-login??)
    - How to do collaborative lab work?

- Social activities?
  - Humankind socialises in-person
  - Online social activity for conferences was challenging
  - Games, quizzes, etc proved to be the most popular
  - Replicating conference exhibitions and social event spaces in "virtual reality" looked "cool" but proved unpopular
  - Delegate chat system – popularity varies (Slack, LINE, WhatsApp)

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Fully Online

- Reduced conference agenda
  - 60 minute conference sessions with shorter (succinct) presentations
  - Fewer conference sessions (focus on quality and key messages)
  - Fewer presentations offered (all online & recorded anyway!)
  - More challenging to find content (time differences were off-putting)
- Conference days:
  - Panel discussions proved very popular!
    - Natural disasters, network infrastructure scaling during pandemic,…
  - Speaker challenges with:
    - Video/audio, slide sharing, home Internet bandwidth/reliability
    - Background distractions (cats, traffic, children, construction)
    - Time-zones!!
    - Contact (even with chat groups, mobile numbers, social media)

Hybrid Events

- Late 2021 saw a few attempts at holding in-person components
  - But generally too early given new variants of COVID
    - No NOG organiser wants their event to be a super-spreader!
  - Venue
    - Room occupancy
    - Catering restrictions
    - Social distancing
  - Domestic travel usually discouraged
    - Remote participation by the majority
  - International travel risks
    - Regulations, vaccination & quarantine requirements
    - Greatly reduced flight options & schedules

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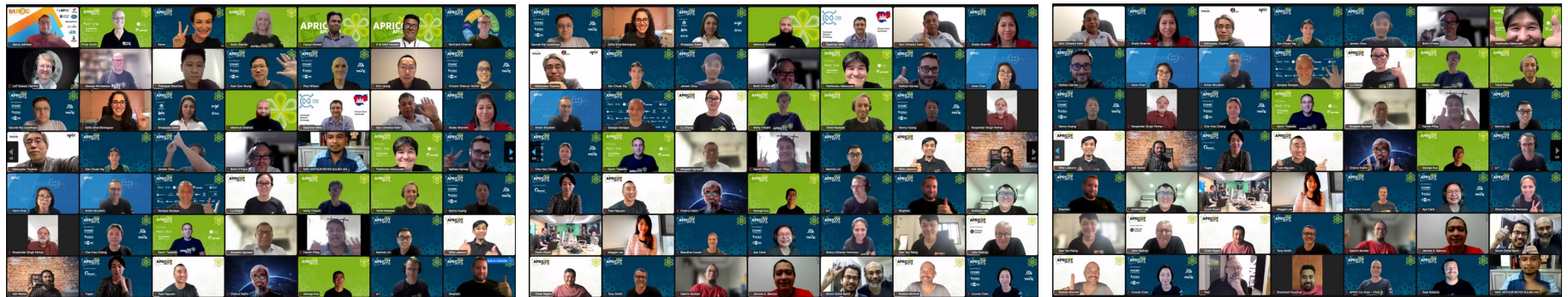Network Startup Resource Center

2021: Virtual Events

- What we all learned:
  - We have to keep our NOG visible in our community!
    - Modern world has too many distractions as it is, plus now the pandemic
  - Running technical training with supervised lab component is very tough!
    - Zoom with Discord helped improve collaboration within lab groups
    - New tools like Engageli merge the best of what we need, and show great promise for the future
  - Less stressful learning option is to offer tutorial style training
    - Optional labs can be done in own time, unsupervised, with instructors contactable via dedicated chat group
  - Shorter conference sessions, and shorter presentations improved participant experience
  - Everyone has become much more proficient at using Zoom! 😁

Examples

- APRICOT 2021 & 2022
  - Virtual event, 5 days of tutorials, 4 days of twin track conference, online socials & quizzes
  - Goal to provide continuity, focus on most relevant content, Panel Discussions, Peering…
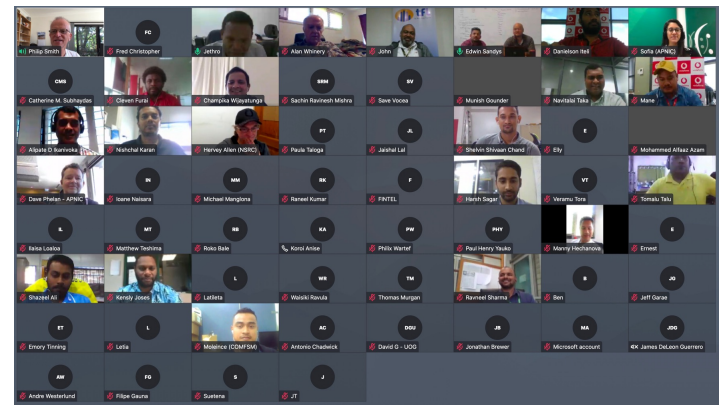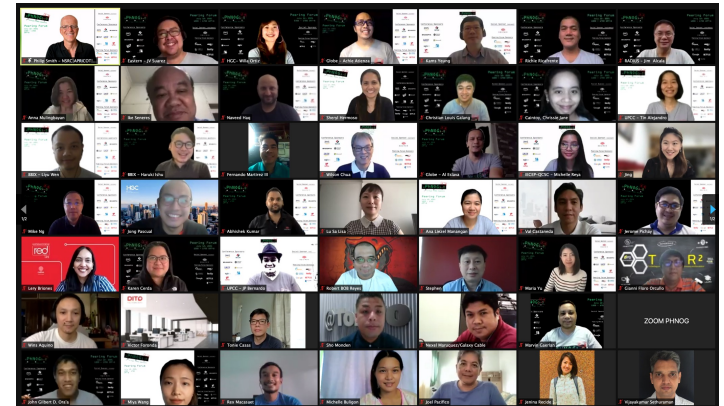 - All about keeping the momentum going…

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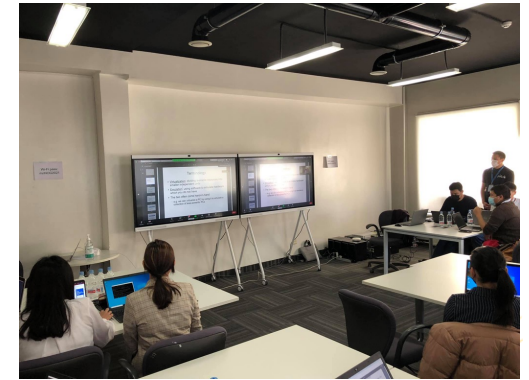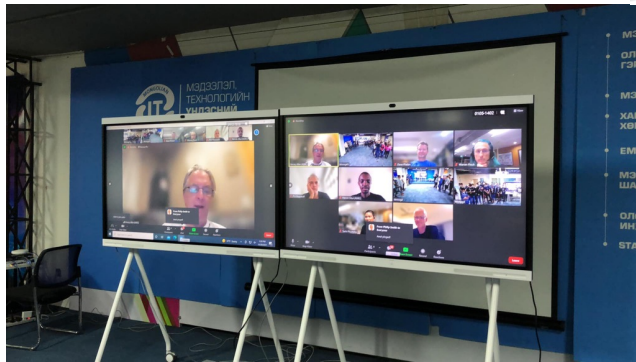
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Examples

- ## PhNOG 2021
  - Fully online, one day event mixing presentations, online games, peering personals, etc
    - Entertaining as well as engaging!

- ## PacNOG
  - Fully online, half day conference; 4 days training split over two weeks in tutorial format (with optional lab work)

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The full experience!

- Mongolia's NOG kept the momentum going in 2021
  - Working within pandemic restrictions
  - In-person training (socially distanced) with local and remote instructor team
  - Fully virtual conference – TV studio

Panel Discussion: IPv6 Implementation issues in Mongolia

APRICOT's NOG Organisers BoF

- For a few years now, APRICOT has hosted a NOG Organisers BoF
  - Facilitated by APNOG's Yoshinobu Matsuzaki
  - Goal is to enable NOG organisers to share their experiences, to help each other
    - Particularly relevant during the last two years!
  - Follows on from the NOG Reports session:
    - https://2022.apricot.net/program/schedule-conference/#/day/10/apricot-nog-reports
    - Many NOGs reported
  - Discussion in the BoF was lively!
    - https://2022.apricot.net/program/schedule-conference/#/day/10/apricot-nog-organisers-bof
  - Much of what is shared here was discussed in this BoF

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Going forwards

- In-person meetings!!
  - Mid-2022 seeing a return to in-person NOG events
  - Better for peering community & business interaction
  - Better for training (hands-on workshop & tutorials)
  - "COVID-safe" – consider venue layouts

- Must stream, record and have remote participation for all events now
  - YouTube (but that's only one way, and may not work for all countries)
  - Zoom (or whatever works locally)
  - Instructor lab-based workshops have to be in-person only
    - Hybrid is not productive
    - Fully online more feasible with Engageli (or Zoom/Discord)

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Going forwards

- Presenting
  - Mix of on-site and remote presenters has to be supported
  - Time-zone coordination!
  - AV & home bandwidth issues for remote presenters
- Conference & Tutorial sessions
  - Do we return to traditional four 90 minute sessions per day?
  - Or stay with the 60 minute format, and do five or six per day?
    - Or something else?
- Social events
  - Important component, but pandemic regulations (health considerations) matter now

Challenges going forwards

- Venues are now "COVID-safe"
  - Every location and venue has different rules!
  - Some require Rapid Antigen Testing, others do temperature checks
  - Mask rules, delegate separation, etc
- Venue planning
  - How to size for participation?
  - Is there pent up demand, or is community still reluctant to risk travel?
  - Can a venue be obtained?
    - Internet industry not the only one trying to make up for lost "conference time" 😩
  - Event insurance? Pandemic insurance?
- Changing circumstances
  - What happens when local pandemic restrictions tighten?
    - Affects venue booking & capacities, participant travel,…

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Challenges going forwards

- Travel for participants
  - Permission: Not all employers are allowing travel yet (risk assessment)
  - Budget: will this return to pre-pandemic levels?
    - Some organisations have greatly reduced travel budgets
    - But what is the long-term cost to the business if not restored?
- Covering venue/event costs
  - Will sponsor budgets return to pre-pandemic levels?
  - Can registration fees go back to pre-pandemic levels?
    - What if fewer in-person participants, and more on-line?
- Remote presentations
  - Supporting audio/video, Q&A
  - Time-zones!
  - Remote presenters don't need travel permission so leave everything to the last minute 😰

Conclusion

- It has been a bumpy ride for the last two years
- The NOGs have kept their communities involved
- The coming years:
  - Components of the "previous" era
  - A "new" era which includes lessons learned in the last two years
- We need to be creative, flexible, adaptable…
- We need to be patient!
  - With our industry friends and colleagues
  - With "getting back to normal"

Questions & Discussion