

Policy Brief

Recommendations on Strengthening Digital Rights in West Africa and the Sahel region

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Introduction

Digital transformation is an essential factor in strengthening human rights and democratic governance as it can provide tools that enhance transparency, accountability and effective public participation. Alongside the standards established in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter) and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), the [African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa \(2020-2030\)](#), envisages an integrated and inclusive digital society as a key pillar for the continent's sustainable development and prosperity. However, while Africa's digital transformation is progressing, the digital divide is still major. As measured by [Afrobarometer](#), still 46% of the population in Africa never uses the Internet.

In the face of a shrinking civic space and [increased crack down on civil society](#), the online space is a refuge for activists. Digital tools and networks allow them to organise themselves, raise awareness and mobilise citizens, as seen in Togo, in June 2025, where the Internet was used to [call for mobilisation](#). However, authoritarian regimes are striking back and [doubling down on surveillance](#), making it even more difficult and risky to engage safely online. At worst, countries even resorted to bandwidth lowering or internet shutdowns, as seen during the September 2025 Referendum in Guinea and the October 2025 elections in Cameroon. The Sahel and West Africa region is also facing a [massive disinformation campaign](#) led by external actors and spread by populations lacking a strong media environment and digital literacy.

Given this context, the [Youth Democracy Cohort](#) has developed this set of Policy Recommendations for consideration by the African Union Commission, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights and to Regional institutions (ECOWAS, ECCAS), in order to influence the adoption of regulations or guidelines which: ensure that digital rights are protected; advance the monitoring of state compliance with digital rights obligations; encourage investment in funding for digital rights and digitalisation; support capacity enhancement of State representatives and civil society on digital governance and digital rights; and ensure regional harmonisation and coordination.

In particular, in the following paragraphs, we suggest to:

1. **Develop a General Comment on digital transformation, democracy and human rights that interprets the African Charter and the ACDEG in the digital age and provides legislative standards for states**
2. **Advance the ratification of the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection**
3. **Develop a monitoring and reporting framework for AU member states and stakeholders with due attention to elections and working with election observer missions.**
4. **Develop holistic funding for rights-based digital transformation and open governance**

Our policy recommendations

Regulation

1. Develop a General Comment on Digital Transformation, Democracy and Human Rights in Africa

The aim of this general comment would be to interpret the African Charter and the ACDEG (African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance) in this digital age and ensure that rights are safeguarded online just as they are offline. This is necessary due to the earlier highlighted trends of undue digital surveillance, unwarranted internet shutdowns and weaponising of cyber security-related legal provisions.

The general comment would provide state and non-state actors with practical information on how to promote and protect human rights and democratic governance as a pillar of the digital transformation agenda. Importantly, this general comment would also provide Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and member states with legislative standards that can be domesticated into national laws related to digital governance.

Key components of this general comment would include: rights and freedoms in the digital space; digital public participation and the use of digital tools in governance processes; ethical and rights-based approaches to using artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies; advancing inclusion and equity in digital transformation; addressing democratic threats presented by digital technologies; outlining the roles of state and non-state actors; and establishing benchmarks for assessing state compliance.

2. Advance ratification of the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (Malabo Convention)

The Malabo Convention is Africa's flagship normative instrument on cyber security and personal data protection, which can enable a harmonised approach by African states seeking to develop laws and policies on these issues. However, aspiring to this level of harmonisation requires universal ratification of the Malabo Convention and currently, only 16 out of 55 states have ratified this important instrument.

The AU should spearhead a ratification campaign that enlists the support of civil society in order to raise awareness of the Convention's provisions and present its value proposition to policy makers at the national level. A key aspect of this campaign should include collaborating with the Pan-African Parliament to develop a model law for domestication of the Malabo Convention.

Monitoring

3. Develop a monitoring and reporting framework for AU member states and stakeholders, with due attention to elections

A key aspect of ensuring that states maintain compliance with digital rights is developing a process that enables oversight mechanisms within the AU to assess state conduct, highlight violations when they occur and propose corrective actions that violating states can undertake. Furthermore, there is also a need to highlight instances of positive actions taken by states to enforce digital rights, since highlighting such positive examples could foster similar good practices in other neighbouring states.

A reporting and monitoring framework that is derived from the proposed general comment on digital transformation would fit this purpose, by regularly assessing countries' situation in terms of essential factors such as inclusive digital transformation, data protection, freedom of expression online, addressing online harm and access to information. Most importantly, such a framework could help identify states that weaponise their laws to wrongly criminalise the digital work of democracy activists and human rights defenders. Being able to identify and highlight such cases provides a needed layer of protection for democracy and rights advocates and also establishes a bridge of dialogue with the state to achieve necessary reforms.

AU expert missions are a useful tool to monitor human rights. They should be extended to digital rights, measuring the state of connectivity during the election period and digital rights compliance in general. This is particularly important during electoral periods, when reports of violations such as internet shutdowns, mass disinformation, hate speech and mass surveillance have been prevalent.

Therefore, continental and regional election observation missions should recognise the role of the online sphere for election campaigns and as a potential tool for fraud. They should systematically include monitoring of the connectivity, social media platform bandwidth, use of polarising content and attempts of information manipulation. The recommendations emerging from such observation efforts would be a valuable resource for reforming electoral laws and processes, as well as laws and processes related to digital rights more broadly.

Funding

4. Holistic funding for rights-based digital transformation and open governance

Digital transformation and open governance are linked to major societal issues such as public participation and equitable development. As explained in the preamble, the digital divide across the African continent is still major. Despite this divide, public service delivery and the engagement with citizens in policy-making processes continues to move online as governments embrace [e-governance](#). Member states should invest sufficiently in digital technologies that ensure their country's development and inclusive, non-discriminatory, transparent and accountable governance processes. Key elements of such investment include

building infrastructure that provides universal internet access, making internet access affordable, establishing accessible and user-friendly e-governance platforms, supporting innovative civic technology platforms and facilitating media and digital literacy for citizens.

The African Union should transform the existing civic tech fund into a holistic digital transformation fund, broadened to address all of these topics in addition to civic tech innovation. Moreover, regional institutions should support Member States with financial and technical resources to strengthen their institutional and regulatory capacities.

The [Youth Democracy Cohort](#), under the initiative of the [European Partnership for Democracy](#) collected recommendations from its national partners in 8 West African countries: Cameroon, Chad, Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Togo. These organisations are youth organisations advocating for digital rights in their own country.

The [Digitalise Youth Project](#) is part of the [Digital Democracy Initiative](#) launched as a Team Europe Initiative, by Denmark, the EU Commission and Norway. The Digitalise Youth project supports young activists to address shrinking civic space, rampant disinformation, and increasing digital surveillance in the Sahel and neighbouring regions and to promote a democratic digital transformation.

Digitalise Youth national partners:

United Youth Organisation - Cameroon

Heart of Hope - Cameroon

Chad Innovation Association - Chad

Association des blogueurs du Bénin - Benin

Association des blogueurs du Burkina - Burkina Faso

ABLOGUI - Guinea

AJSAD - Mali

ASBAD - Senegal

CEJUS - Togo

Digitalise Youth consortium members:



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