



Ten years of building a movement for Digital Rights in Africa:

Impact of the African Declaration on Rights and Freedoms in Africa

By Koliwe Majama
December 2024

About the author:

Koliwe Majama is a Zimbabwean digital rights activist who was among the first coordinators of the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms (AfDec) Secretariat. She has a long history with the Association of Progressive Communication's (APC) work in digital rights and brings a wealth of knowledge on topical digital rights issues. With over 15 years of experience working with civil society across Africa, she has consistently advocated for media and internet freedom globally.



Editor:

Zoé Titus

Proofreader:

Lis Jordan

Layout & production:

Naua Web Trading

Cover picture:

pixelwrap.com

Published and distributed by:

Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
133, 2nd Avenue, Melville 2092,
Johannesburg, South Africa

NMT Media Foundation
13 Adler Street,
Windhoek,
Namibia

Funded by:

Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa
1st Floor, President Place
1 Hood Ave. / 148 Jan Smuts Ave.
Rosebank, Johannesburg,
South Africa

Correspondence can be sent to:

NMT Media Foundation
info@nmt.africa

This discussion document is produced under 'The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms: Fostering a human rights centred approach to privacy, data protection and access to the internet in Southern Africa' project.

Acronyms

ACHPR	African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
AfDec	African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms
AFIC	Africa Freedom of Information Centre
AfIGF	Africa Internet Governance Forum
AfriSIG	African School on Internet Governance
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AIIRF	African Index of Internet Rights and Freedoms
AIRA	African Internet Rights Alliance
AUC	African Union Commission
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIPESA	Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa
DRIF	Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FIFAFRICA	Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa
IGF	Internet Governance Forum
IMS	International Media Support
IRFI	Internet Rights and Freedoms Index
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual
LocNet	Local Access Networks
PIN	Paradigm Initiative
MISA	Media Institute of Southern Africa
MMA	Media Monitoring Africa
MRA	Media Rights Agenda
SERAP	Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project
SIDA	Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency
SRD	Social Relief of Distress
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Table of Content

1. Introduction	5
2. Context and Relevance of the Declaration	5
3. Principles of the Declaration	6
4. The Role of the Declaration in Strengthening Digital Rights	9
5. Digital Rights Challenges in Africa	10
6. A Growing Digital Rights Movement in Africa	11
6.1 Lessons on Solidarity	13
6.2 Awareness, Uptake, and Use of the Declaration Across the Region	15
6.3 Responding to Modern-Day Issues: The COVID-19 Pandemic	16
6.4 Advocacy at the Continental Level	16
7. Recommendations for Strengthening the Declaration and Coalition	17
7.1 Membership Engagement Strategy	18
7.2 Ownership and Resource Mobilization	18
7.3 Strategic Direction of the Coalition	18
7.4 Updating the Declaration	19
8. Conclusion	19

1. Introduction

The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms (AfDec)¹, adopted in 2014, emerged as a critical response to the growing challenges and opportunities presented by the digital age. As the internet rapidly transformed societies across the African continent, concerns about privacy, security, censorship, and digital inequality became increasingly prominent. This declaration, crafted by a coalition of civil society organisations, seeks to establish a framework for ensuring that the internet is used as a tool for social justice, economic development, and human rights.

This paper will examine the impact of the African Declaration on shaping digital rights discourse and policy in Africa, focusing on its role in promoting access, privacy, and freedom of expression. By analysing the Declaration's principles, civil society advocacy efforts, and Africa's evolving digital landscape, this research evaluates the Declaration's impact on policy decisions, public discourse, and the broader digital rights ecosystem on the continent.

2. Context and Relevance of the Declaration

The Declaration was conceived at the 2013 African Internet Governance Forum (AfIGF) in Nairobi, Kenya, and officially launched during the 2014 IGF in Istanbul, Turkey. At the time, global events such as Egypt's internet shutdown during the 2011 Arab Spring and Edward Snowden's revelations on U.S. surveillance heightened awareness of the internet's role in enabling human rights and mobilising citizens (Snowden, 2013). Simultaneously, governments intensified surveillance and restrictions to suppress dissent.² By the end of 2014, seven governments had made requests for data from Meta, with the Egyptian government making five of those requests.³

In Africa, the digital landscape was marked by a growing mobile penetration rate. By 2014, Africa's mobile penetration stood at 38%, with 85% of the population covered by 2G or 3G networks, though over 4 billion people remained unconnected (GSMA, 2014). Connectivity was then and still remains a prominent feature of the agenda of the national and regional IGFs. Today, more than 50% of the continent accesses 4G connections, but progress toward 5G remains slow (Pham, 2024). The Declaration emerged as a critical response to the increasing demand for accessible, affordable, and open internet in the face of rising threats, including surveillance, censorship, and shutdowns (APC, 2020).

1 AfDec Declaration: <https://africaninternetrights.org/>

2 CIPESA (2014) [State of internet freedoms in East Africa 2014](#)

3 Stats for African government requests obtained from the [Meta Transparency center website](#). Countries Include South Africa (2), Sudan (2), Senegal (1), Tunisia (2), Kenya (2), Algeria (1) and Egypt (5)

The launch of the Declaration therefore came at a critical time when citizens across the continent were increasingly using the internet as a platform to mobilise, organise, and amplify their voices against poor governance, state repression, and socio-political injustices. Online platforms became powerful tools for civic participation, enabling individuals and communities to advocate for change, hold governments accountable, and challenge systemic inequalities. However, this growing digital activism fueled concerns among governments, who viewed it as a threat to their authority. As a result, many began adopting new strategies to suppress dissent online, including surveillance, censorship, and targeted internet shutdowns.

The Declaration recognises the importance of the internet as a critical enabler of human rights and as a space for fostering civic engagement. It reaffirms the rights enshrined in international human rights law, including the right to hold opinions without interference, the right to freedom of expression and information, the right to freedom of assembly and association, and the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It also emphasises the rights to be free from discrimination, to embrace ethnic, religious, or linguistic diversity, and to enjoy economic, social, and cultural rights.

In its introduction, the Declaration aptly captures this tension between citizens and governments by stating:

“Although there is a legitimate desire by governments to curb criminal activities online, particularly financial crimes and terrorist activities, there are also clear instances where the pursuit of these apparently legitimate objectives has been used as a pretext to introduce provisions to curtail criticism of governments.”

This statement underscores the delicate balance required to address legitimate security concerns while ensuring that governments do not exploit these measures to silence dissent or undermine citizens’ rights. It highlights the importance of holding states accountable for upholding democratic principles and human rights in their internet governance practices.

3. Principles of the Declaration

The Declaration outlines 13⁴ interconnected principles, which collectively aim to safeguard and promote internet access, openness, and human rights across Africa. These principles provide a robust foundation for addressing the continent’s digital rights challenges by setting clear standards for governments, civil society organisations, and private sector actors to uphold human rights in internet governance and digital spaces.

The principles begin with **Internet Access and Affordability**, emphasising the need for equitable, universal, and affordable access to the internet. This principle is critical for bridging Africa’s digital divide, which disproportionately affects rural areas, marginalised communities, and low-income populations.

4 13 Principles: <https://africaninternetrights.org/en/declaration>

African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms

A fundamental challenge in need of urgent resolution in the digital age is how to protect human rights and freedoms on the Internet, and the African continent is no exception. The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms was developed in response to this challenge.

13 PRINCIPLES:



1. Openness



2. Internet Access and Affordability



3. Freedom of Expression



4. Right to Information



5. Freedom of Assembly and Association and the Internet



6. Cultural and Linguistic Diversity



7. Right to Development and Access to Knowledge



8. Privacy and Personal Data Protection



9. Security, Stability and Resilience of the Internet



10. Marginalised Groups and Groups at Risk



11. Right to Due Process



12. Democratic Multistakeholder Internet Governance



13. Gender Equality

The Declaration highlights that affordable and high-quality internet is essential for exercising fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, education, and access to information. Projects like the APC's Local Access Networks (LocNet) demonstrate the practical application of this principle by empowering communities to develop their own infrastructure and improve connectivity (APC, 2020).

AfDec Coalition member feature: APC's LocNet project in Africa

In 2019 Coalition member the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) launched the [Local Access Networks](#) (LocNet) project to promote local, community owned internet infrastructure. LocNet has worked on building the capacity of communities to set up and manage their initiatives, so supports them to become familiar with respective policy and regulatory obstacles. On the continent, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa and Uganda, are some of the countries that have launched community networks.

The principle of **Freedom of Expression** ensures that individuals can express themselves online without fear of censorship or reprisals. This right includes the ability to share information, voice dissent, and hold governments accountable. In countries where restrictive laws or surveillance measures curtail freedom of speech, the Declaration serves as a benchmark for advocacy and legal reform. This principle is particularly relevant during elections, when governments have used internet shutdowns and disinformation to stifle opposition voices and restrict citizens' access to credible information (MMA, 2022).

Privacy and Data Protection is another foundational principle, addressing the growing concerns about surveillance and misuse of personal data by governments and corporations. The Declaration underscores the importance of strong data protection frameworks and safeguards against arbitrary surveillance. This principle remains increasingly relevant as digital technologies evolve, particularly with the rise of artificial intelligence (HerInternet, 2023). Privacy protections are essential for maintaining trust in digital systems and ensuring that marginalised groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, can safely engage online without fear of discrimination or harassment.

The principle of **Security, Stability, and Resilience of the Internet** highlights the need for robust and ethical approaches to cybersecurity. While governments may invoke national security to justify internet restrictions, the Declaration calls for measures that promote stability and resilience without infringing on citizens' rights. This principle is particularly important in light of increasing cyber threats and the misuse of technology for surveillance and repression.

Inclusivity is central to the principles of **Cultural and Linguistic Diversity** and **Marginalised Groups and Groups at Risk**, which advocate for an internet that is accessible and relevant to all people, regardless of language, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status. These principles address the barriers faced by women, rural communities, and minority groups, ensuring that internet governance frameworks reflect diverse needs and realities.

Additionally, the principle of **Democratic Multistakeholder Internet Governance** calls for collaborative approaches that involve governments, civil society, technical communities, and the private sector in decision-making processes. This inclusive model ensures that policies governing the internet are transparent, participatory, and accountable to the people they serve. In its entirety, the Declaration provides a comprehensive framework for promoting digital rights in Africa. By articulating clear standards and principles, it empowers stakeholders to challenge restrictive policies, advocate for human rights, and create an internet environment that fosters democratic participation, innovation, and inclusivity. The principles are not just aspirational but have been applied in various contexts, from community-led connectivity projects to legal challenges against internet shutdowns and privacy violations.

4. The Role of the Declaration in Strengthening Digital Rights

One of the Declaration's primary contributions has been in promoting equitable internet access, particularly in underserved areas. Initiatives such as the APC's LocNet project have demonstrated the value of community-owned infrastructure in closing connectivity gaps (APC, 2020). At the same time, investments by major tech companies, including Google and Meta through subsea cables, and the introduction of Starlink in Africa, have contributed to expanding access. However, economic disparities and regulatory challenges continue to affect the ability of vulnerable populations to benefit from these advancements (World Bank, 2021).

Another critical area where the Declaration has made an impact is in combating internet shutdowns. Between 2018 and 2020, 37% of global internet shutdowns occurred in Africa, typically during elections or protests (Nyarko & Ilori, 2022). In 2023 alone, 283 shutdowns were recorded globally, with 17 African countries among those affected (Rosson et al., 2024). For example, during Mozambique's 2024 elections, the government imposed an internet disruption to suppress post-election protests (Mozambique: Post-Election Internet Restrictions Hinder Rights, 2024). The Declaration takes a firm stance against such measures, stating that shutting down or throttling internet access, even under the guise of national security, is a violation of human rights (Nyarko & Ilori, 2022).

The Declaration also underscores the importance of privacy and data protection in a context where governments increasingly use surveillance technologies to monitor citizens. While 36 African countries have adopted data protection laws, enforcement remains inconsistent. Civil society organisations such as Alt Advisory and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) have played key roles in holding governments accountable and advocating for stronger safeguards against surveillance.

AfDec Coalition member feature: Data Protection Africa

According to statistics available on Coalition member, Alt advisory's [Data Protection Africa portal](#), 36 African countries have adopted Data protection legislation, while three are still in the drafting phase. The portal, which was set up in January 2020, is a resource that assists states to adopt clear legal, regulatory and policy frameworks on privacy and personal data protection. Over the years, the portal has through [its analysis section](#) been useful to civil societies advocates; intermediaries in the crafting of internal privacy and data protection policies; academic, research and training institutions in the generation of evidence-based research and courses on the theoretical and practical aspects of data protection.

5. Digital Rights Challenges in Africa

Despite the progress facilitated by the Declaration, significant challenges persist across the continent. The digital divide remains one of the most pressing issues, with infrastructure gaps, particularly in rural areas, limiting internet access for millions (World Bank, 2021). Economic barriers, including the high cost of devices and data, exacerbate exclusion for vulnerable groups such as women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and rural communities. Algorithmic discrimination further compounds these inequalities, as systems designed without consideration for diverse identities often reinforce biases (HerInternet, 2023).

The rise of artificial intelligence has introduced additional challenges, particularly concerning algorithmic bias. Research by Ugandan digital rights group HerInternet has revealed that social media algorithms often reinforce gender and LGBTQ+ bias, limiting visibility and access for marginalised groups. Transgender individuals, for instance, face unique barriers in identifying with their gender identity online (HerInternet, 2023).

Disinformation and hate speech are critical challenges, particularly during electoral periods. For example, research conducted during Kenya's 2022 elections identified over 130 TikTok videos containing hate speech and incitement. Content moderation efforts remain inadequate due to a lack of understanding of local contexts, leaving harmful content unchecked (MMA, 2022). Initiatives like Media Monitoring Africa's (MMA) Real411 platform have been instrumental in addressing this issue by providing mechanisms for reporting and addressing disinformation (MMA, 2022).

AfDec Coalition member feature: Countering disinformation

In order to act on disinformation, South African Coalition member, the [Media Monitoring Africa](#) (MMA) developed the Real411 platform. Owing to its uptake, the organisation, the Electoral Commission of South Africa officially uses the platform as part of its Digital Disinformation Complaints process governed by the Electoral Code of Conduct: Measures to Address Disinformation Intended to Cause Harm During the Election Period. This year, the electoral commission also partnered with Google, Meta and TikTok, as well as to curb combat disinformation ahead of the 2024 general country's election through content removal, advisory warnings and delisting.

6. A Growing Digital Rights Movement in Africa

The increasing adoption of repressive internet laws and the alarming rise of digital authoritarianism have necessitated a coordinated movement to safeguard online human rights across Africa. In response to this urgent need, a coalition of 23 civil society organisations launched the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms in 2014. The Declaration, described by Orrell (2015) as a "*continuation of a rich heritage of African civil society leadership in standard-setting and advocacy*," sought to create a guiding framework for an inclusive, open, and rights-respecting internet environment across the continent.

As Anriette Esterhuysen, a member of the drafting committee, highlighted during a session marking the 10th anniversary of the Declaration at the 20th African Investigative Journalism Conference held at the University of the Witwatersrand:

“The drafting of the Declaration was yet another demonstration of the strength of African civil society of coming together to collectively agree on the ideals for the promotion of democratic and participatory governance overall, but the internet in particular. As a result, you will find that the Declaration is rooted in and references other seminal African human rights documents in its preamble.”⁵

5 These include the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights of 1981, Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press of 1991, African Charter on Broadcasting of 2001, Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa of 2002 and the African Platform on Access to Information Declaration of 2011.

Rooted in internationally recognised human rights standards, the Declaration addresses critical digital issues, including access to the internet, privacy, and freedom of expression. It serves as both a policy framework and a call to action, promoting a vision of the internet as a tool for empowerment, participation, and progress.

Since its inception, the Declaration has grown into a foundational document for digital rights advocacy across the continent. Experts and stakeholders widely acknowledge its role in shaping policy conversations and discourse. By centering practical implementation, the Declaration bridges the gap between aspirational goals and actionable outcomes.

Avani Singh, a constitutional law expert specialising in digital rights, highlights the Declaration's proactive stance:

“The declaration is framed in a way that touches on core issues. The drafters of the Declaration had foresight in terms of getting to the crux of the key issues and based the positioning of the principles on the key international human rights standards.”

To advance the Declaration's objectives, the coalition established a dedicated secretariat tasked with streamlining efforts and coordinating collaborative initiatives. The secretariat has been instrumental in facilitating capacity-building programmes that empower grassroots organisations, launching advocacy campaigns that challenge oppressive digital policies, and mobilising the resources necessary to support coalition members. Through these efforts, the coalition has not only strengthened collective advocacy but also reinforced the role of civil society as a critical watchdog for digital freedoms in Africa.

AfDec Coalition member feature: Members in Charge

In 2023, Protege QV coordinated a project for a US\$30,000 grant funded by the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency. The project assessed the level of respect of the internet rights and freedoms in Africa in six French-speaking countries, namely Burundi, Congo, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Senegal and Chad. This work was grounded in the [Internet Rights and Freedoms Index \(IRFI\)](#) that the organisation developed in 2017. The project developed an approach for assessing the level of respect for human rights online by their governments. This work has led to the development and evaluation of the African Index of Internet Rights and Freedoms (AIIRF).

The NMT Media Foundation currently coordinates the activities of a US\$200,000 grant for the project [Fostering a human rights-centred approach to privacy, data protection and access to the internet in Southern Africa](#) aimed at strengthening digital rights interventions in the Southern African region. Activities include the production and distribution of a digital rights digest, engagements with civil society organisations and human rights defenders or policy makers and office/duty bearers and participation of members in local, regional or international internet governance processes. The digital rights digests that were published focused on [data online and privacy under attack](#), [biometric and digital identity systems](#), [privacy and challenges to data and online security](#) and a call to action to various stakeholders. The project is supported by the Open Society Foundations.

Today the Coalition and its Declaration are a constant feature in the agenda of the annual [African School on Internet Governance](#) that has a standing session dedicated to human rights and internet governance. Coalition members have also been instrumental in the formation of and continue to participate meaningfully in, especially the Multistakeholder Advisory Groups of national and regional IGFs.

6.1 Lessons on Solidarity

The increasing complexity of digital rights issues has also given rise to specialised networks and coalitions across Africa that complement the work initiated under the Declaration. The emergence of initiatives like the #KeepItOn Coalition, which focuses on combating internet shutdowns, the NetRights Coalition, which champions internet governance and policy advocacy, and the Africa Internet Rights Alliance (AIRA), which prioritises research and capacity-building, underscores the growing importance of solidarity and collaboration. Together, these networks demonstrate a collective commitment to addressing critical digital rights issues across the continent.

As Angela Minayo of Article 19 observes:

“Collective action is essential to address the challenges posed by digital authoritarianism and ensure a future where the internet is a force for good.”

By leveraging their collective strengths and expertise, these networks amplify the impact of digital rights advocacy, push for meaningful policy change, and fortify efforts to safeguard human rights online.

In its analysis of how coalitions and networks have transformed the media environment, the International Media Support (IMS) highlights the importance of solidarity between networks. Its research study titled *‘Coalitions and networks transforming media in Africa’*⁶ emphasises that the emergence of new digital rights-focused networks necessitates cooperation between established and emerging organisations to promote inter-coalition and inter-network coordination, thereby mitigating parallel efforts and duplication.

While some funders have expressed concerns about potential overlaps in activities and strategies among multiple networks addressing similar issues, network coordinators view this as a positive development. They argue that a diverse network ecosystem creates multiple platforms to advocate for human rights online. Over time, members have demonstrated the ability to leverage each other’s expertise and collaborate with external organisations to bring critical issues to the forefront in various spheres of influence. The Secretariat frequently contributes to and signs onto statements issued by member organisations and other coalitions.

6 International Media Support (2024) [Coalitions and networks as the bedrock of media transformation in Africa: a case for continued global solidarity](#)

Additionally, members with observer status at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) regularly submit statements that collate concerns about online human rights violations across the region. This collaborative approach has been instrumental in amplifying efforts and exerting pressure on governments.

Members' feature: Collaboration for victory

In January 2019, the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights and Coalition member, MISA Zimbabwe Chapter filed an application challenging the internet shutdown in the country. The interruption was imposed in response to Zimbabwe's Congress of Trade Unions [national protests](#), which resulted in the arrest of several citizens who heeded the trade union's call. Social media platforms including WhatsApp and Facebook, were interrupted. The Zimbabwean High Court ordered mobile operators in the country to immediately and unconditionally resume the provision of internet services and ensure unrestricted access to the internet for all subscribers. The following year in February, the Media Rights Agenda (MRA) received a Strategic advocacy grant to contribute to a joint [complaint to the ACHPR against internet shutdowns](#) in 26 countries across the region. Other Coalition members who were part of the consortium included the Africa Freedom of Information Centre, MISA, Media Foundation for West Africa and Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA). In filing the complaint, the consortium sought a declaration that states had violated human rights by interrupting internet connectivity, and that the issue be brought to the attention of the African Union Assembly of Heads of States and Governments so that appropriate action could be taken. The Commission dismissed the complaint on technicalities, and is yet to decide on any internet shutdown brought before it.⁷

Three years later, the Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) declared a seven-month ban on Twitter (now X) in Nigeria unlawful. Nigeria's government ordered an indefinite cut off of access to the social media platform, by ordering telecommunications companies and Internet Service Providers to cut access to the platform two days after it removed a post from then president, Muhammadu Buhari threatening to punish secessionists.⁸ The Court declared the ban a violation of the right to freedom of expression of the citizens. Despite the ban being lifted six months prior to the ruling, it has been recorded a win for advocates who had in their case noted that the shutdown was a violation to citizens' "fundamental right to speak, using any platform of their choice" and a targeted "clamp down on dissenting voices".⁹ The complaint was filed by a number of Nigerian civil society organisations, including the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) and Coalition member, Paradigm Initiative in collaboration with the #KeepItOn coalition.¹⁰

7 Internews (2022). [Litigating Internet Shutdowns in Africa](#) : A Guide on Approaching the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights

8 The Guardian (June 4, 2021) [Nigeria suspends Twitter access after president's tweet was deleted](#)

9 Sesan, G (2021) [#TwitterBanInNigeria: The Third Party and the Third Sector](#)

10 <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/ecowas-court-nigeria-unlawful-twitter-ban/>

The Declaration remains a landmark initiative, showcasing the power of African civil society to set standards, mobilise action, and defend online freedoms. Its enduring relevance and influence serve as a foundation for continued collaboration across digital rights networks. By addressing its existing challenges and encouraging greater unity, the coalition and its partners can amplify their efforts to protect digital rights, ensuring that the internet remains a platform for empowerment, inclusion, and justice across Africa.

6.2 Awareness, Uptake, and Use of the Declaration Across the Region

As a standard-setting tool, the Declaration has demonstrated enduring relevance and adaptability in the rapidly changing technological and internet landscape. Over the past decade, coalition members have drawn both directly and indirectly from its principles to guide their respective portfolios. The principles are frequently referenced in lobbying and advocacy work, as well as in the development, implementation, and monitoring of policies and regulations, research activities, and capacity-building initiatives targeting diverse stakeholders.

To date, the Coalition has documented 201 practical use cases of the application, reference, or citation of the Declaration’s 13 principles on its official website. These cases reflect the principles’ application by coalition members and partners in responding to emerging developments within the dynamic digital environment.

Principle	# of cases	Regional focus
Openness	11	East Africa
Internet access and affordability	28	West Africa
Freedom of expression	21	Southern Africa
Right to information	19	East and Southern Africa
Freedom of assembly and association and the internet	17	West and Central Africa
Cultural and linguistic diversity	4	West and Central Africa
Right to Development and Access to Knowledge	16	East Africa
Privacy and Personal Data Protection	24	Southern Africa
Security, Stability and Resilience of The Internet	7	Southern Africa
Marginalised Groups and Groups at Risk	16	East Africa and Central Africa
Right to due process	10	East Africa
Democratic Multistakeholder Internet Governance	20	East and Southern Africa
Gender equality	8	East Africa

Fig. 1: Application of the Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms

While coalition members may not always explicitly reference the Declaration in their initiatives, there remains a clear and consistent acknowledgment of its benchmarks for promoting human rights on the internet. Prominent coalition members such as CIPESA and Paradigm Initiative (PIN) produce annual reports on the state of digital rights across Africa and convene flagship conferences - namely the Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa and the Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum - to advance awareness and capacity-building on key digital rights issues.

6.3 Responding to Modern-Day Issues: The COVID-19 Pandemic

The Coalition's response to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the Declaration's flexibility and strength in addressing contemporary challenges. During the imposition of lockdowns across the region, the Coalition underscored the internet's critical role in achieving social and economic rights. Leveraging its principles alongside UNESCO's Internet Universality Indicators, the Secretariat developed a framework to assess and monitor key digital rights issues within the African COVID-19 context.

At the end of 2020, the Coalition released a comprehensive report titled "*The Impact of COVID-19 on Digital Rights in Africa*."¹¹ The report compiled 19 reflective analyses of responses to the pandemic across the region. It provided targeted recommendations to governments, policymakers, and the tech community on upholding fundamental rights, such as privacy and personal data protection, gender equality, freedom of expression, internet access and affordability, **as well as** development and access to knowledge during crises.

6.4 Advocacy at the Continental Level

The Coalition's greatest impact has arguably been its sustained advocacy work with continental bodies, particularly the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and the African Union Commission (AUC). This engagement has resulted in significant references to the Declaration in resolutions, soft law instruments, and policy discussions at high-level convenings. The Coalition's effectiveness in this regard can be attributed to the deep expertise of its early members, many of whom had longstanding relationships with these institutions. Notably, the University of Pretoria's Centre for Human Rights, a Coalition member, has served as a technical partner to the ACHPR for several years.

¹¹ Download report here: <https://africaninternetrights.org/en/updates/impact-covid-19-digital-rights-africa>

In 2016, the ACHPR passed the *Resolution on the Right to Freedom of Information and Expression on the Internet in Africa*¹², explicitly referencing the principles outlined in the Declaration. The resolution states:

“Taking note of the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms, which was developed by African civil society organisations and adopted during the 9th Internet Governance Forum in Istanbul, Turkey, in September 2014, which elaborates on the principles necessary to uphold human and people’s rights on the internet, and to cultivate an internet environment that can best meet Africa’s social and economic development needs and goals;”

Two years later, in 2018, the African Union Commission (AUC) incorporated the importance of human rights in its *Declaration on Internet Governance and Development of Africa’s Digital Economy*.¹³ The AUC emphasized its commitment by stating:

“Recalling the commitment of member states to promote and protect fundamental freedoms, especially the right to freedom of expression and access to information (on and offline), and human and peoples’ rights enunciated in instruments of the African Union and of the United Nations, and recognising that these rights must be upheld online as well as offline;”

In 2020, the ACHPR revised its *2002 Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information*¹⁴ to address evolving challenges, particularly focusing on the intersection of internet access, security, and fundamental rights under Article 9. The Secretariat played an instrumental role in facilitating coalition members’ participation in consultative meetings, including one held and hosted by the Namibia Media Trust (now the NMT Media Foundation) in Windhoek, Namibia, in September 2019.

7. Recommendations for Strengthening the Declaration and Coalition

Despite its notable achievements, the Coalition continues to face challenges. Inconsistencies in regional coordination, for instance, have limited outreach and effectiveness. Furthermore, the Declaration’s principles lack sufficient visibility in certain regions, undermining its potential for broader influence. There is also a pressing need for a renewed strategic focus to address evolving digital threats and harness emerging technologies for advocacy. Yet, despite these hurdles, the Coalition’s contributions to the digital rights landscape remain substantial. By fostering greater awareness and mobilising action, it has set a clear blueprint for advocacy, policy-making, and the protection of online freedoms.

¹² [Resolution on the Right to Freedom of Information and Expression on the Internet in Africa](#)

¹³ Download here: <https://archives.au.int/handle/123456789/8149>

¹⁴ [Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information \(2002\)](#)

7.1 Membership Engagement Strategy

A clear membership engagement strategy is essential to address member motivation and perceptions of Coalition “dormancy.” Members should be encouraged to periodically document their use of the Declaration on the Coalition’s website, aligning this with their organisational strategies. Verification and publication can then be handled by the Secretariat or designated fact-checkers where necessary.

Regular touchpoints will enhance intra-country and regional collaboration, allowing members to share trends, developments, successes, and challenges while improving their responsiveness to local contexts. Increasing the value of membership through recognition of outstanding contributions and effective collaboration will further motivate members and elevate the Coalition’s profile.

7.2 Ownership and Resource Mobilisation

The current top-down approach to resource mobilisation needs to shift to a more participatory model. While some members have acted as fiscal partners, the Coalition can better leverage its collective expertise and partnerships. Activating members through committees and working groups will foster ownership and accountability, encouraging active contributions to the Declaration’s relevance.

A clear and transparent fundraising strategy will build trust and promote ownership. Introducing an annual membership fee could further support sustainability, as many members are already familiar with this practice through other networks.

7.3 Strategic Direction of the Coalition

To validate this analysis, the Secretariat should convene national or regional reviews of the 2019–2022 strategy to identify priorities for the next five years. The strategy must recognise that contextual differences will influence how members prioritise and resource actions.

Key strategic priorities include ongoing assessment of trends in internet and telecommunication infrastructure, AI, and emerging technologies. For example, understanding *Openness* within contexts of socio-political unrest is critical. The Coalition must also address internet access and affordability to tackle the digital divide in alignment with Africa’s digital transformation agenda.

Further, building the capacity of media and legal sectors to monitor data protection laws and collaborating with regulators and human rights commissions will strengthen online rights protections. The Coalition should also engage the growing tech and startup community to ensure ethical, rights-based approaches to AI and emerging technologies.

7.4 Updating the Declaration

While the Declaration's principles remain relevant, a consultative update will enhance its effectiveness in today's digital environment. The revision should address:

- ▶ **Artificial Intelligence (AI):** Transparency in AI systems, ethical design, and accountability throughout development and deployment.
- ▶ **Gender Equality:** New challenges, including gendered disinformation, algorithmic bias, and access to AI-driven public services.
- ▶ **Privacy and Data Protection:** Clear roles for data regulators, tech developers' responsibilities, and consent for sensitive data use.
- ▶ **Right to Development and Access to Knowledge:** Themes such as responsible computing, AI's environmental impact, and human rights in tertiary education curricula.
- ▶ **Cultural and Linguistic Diversity:** Prioritising voice technology and local language data to improve accessibility for digitally marginalised groups.

8. Conclusion

The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms has served as a foundational tool for digital rights advocacy in Africa. As Nnenna Nwakanma aptly remarks:

“This Declaration is more than a document - it is a movement that continues to grow, adapt, and inspire. Its principles will guide us as we navigate the challenges of the digital age while staying true to our commitment to human rights.”

Its principles remain robust, but updates are necessary to address emerging technologies and threats. By enhancing member collaboration, updating the Declaration, and deepening stakeholder engagement, AfDec can continue to play a pivotal role in shaping a digital future that respects and protects human rights across Africa.

The Declaration's enduring relevance and adaptability position it as a cornerstone of digital rights advocacy for years to come. As the digital landscape evolves, the Declaration must remain a living document, capable of responding to new challenges and opportunities while staying true to its core mission of promoting human rights online.

References

- Association for Progressive Communications. (2020). *Local Access Networks: Bridging the Digital Divide*. APC Publications.
- GSMA. (2014). *The Mobile Economy Sub-Saharan Africa 2014*.
<https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/public-policy/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/The-Mobile-Economy-Sub-Saharan-Africa-2014-1-pager-FINAL.pdf>
- HerInternet. (2023). *The Impact of Social Media Algorithms on LGBTQ+ Advocacy in Uganda*. Kampala: HerInternet.
- Media Monitoring Africa. (2022). *Real411: Combating Disinformation in South Africa*. Johannesburg: MMA.
- Mozambique: Post-Election Internet Restrictions Hinder Rights. (2024, November 22). *Human Rights Watch*.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/11/06/mozambique-post-election-internet-restrictions-hinder-rights>
- Nyarko, M. G., & Ilori, T. (2022). Litigating Internet Shutdowns in Africa: A Guide on Approaching the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. In *Litigating Internet Shutdowns in Africa: A Guide on Approaching the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights*.
<https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Guide-on-Litigating-Internet-Shutdowns-in-Africa.pdf>
- Nyokabi, D., Diallo, N., Ntesang, N. W., White, T., & Ilori, T. (2019). *The right to development and internet shutdowns: Assessing the role of information and communications technology in democratic development in Africa*.
- Orrell, T. (2015). *The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms: A Positive Agenda For Human Rights Online* (Global Partners Digital, Ed.). Global Partners Digital.
<https://www.gp-digital.org/wp-content/uploads/pubs/african-declaration-a-positive-agenda-for-rights-online.pdf>
- Pham, M. (2024, October 23). *GSA: A snapshot of Africa's telecoms landscape*. Developing Telecoms.
<https://developingtelecoms.com/telecom-business/operator-news/17508-gsa-a-snapshot-of-africa-s-telecoms-landscape.html>
- Rosson, Z., Antonio, F., & Tackett, C. (2024, June 4). *The most violent year: internet shutdowns in 2023*. Access Now.
<https://www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdowns-2023/>
- Snowden, E. (2013). *Permanent Record*. London: Macmillan.
- World Bank. (2021). *Bridging the Digital Divide in Africa*. Washington, DC: World Bank Publications.

