



ECOSOCC
Economic Social & Cultural Council

The Voice of the
African Citizenry

OUTCOME DOCUMENT

ANNUAL CITIZENS' FORUM 2023

on Democracy and Digital Governance






An Organ of the
African Union




10 – 11 July 2023
Nairobi, Kenya

Supported by



ecosocc.au.int   

Economic Social & Cultural Council
8658 Kudu Road, Kabulonga, Lusaka, Zambia

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS	2
BACKGROUND	3
The African Union on Democracy and Digital Technology	4
The Opportunities for Democracy Presented by Digital Technology	5
The Threats to Democracy Posed by Digital Technology	6
The ACDEG and Digital Technology	7
CONTEXT	9
THE FORUM	12
COMMITTS TO	14
CALLS TO ACTION	17
Member States	18
AU ECOSOCC and Civil Society Actors	19
Strategic Partners	20

ABBREVIATIONS

ACDEG	African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance
ACF	Annual Citizens' Forum
AfCFTA	Africa Continental Free Trade Area
AGA	African Governance Architecture
AU	African Union
CCSPDP	Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ECOSOCC	African Union Economic, Social and Cultural Council
FBO	Faith-Based Organisation



BACKGROUND

Democracy and digital governance have emerged as critical components in shaping the political landscape of Africa, offering new opportunities for citizen participation, transparency, and accountability. In today's world, digital technologies offer unprecedented opportunities and challenges. They have the potential for positive transformation, however, when improperly or maliciously used, they can fuel divisions within and between countries, increase insecurity, undermine human rights, and exacerbate inequality.



● ●

THE AFRICAN UNION ON DEMOCRACY AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

According to the Democracy Index 2020 by the Economist Intelligence Unit, Africa's overall democracy scores have shown slight improvements in recent years. However, challenges persist, including political instability, limited respect for human rights, corruption, and weak institutions. The Afrobarometer surveys, which measure public opinion on democracy and governance, reveal a mixed picture, with variations across countries. While citizens in some African countries express satisfaction with democratic progress and institutions, others remain sceptical about the effectiveness and fairness of their political systems. The continent continues to grapple with issues such as unequal access to political participation, limited civic space, and a need for stronger democratic institutions and electoral processes.

Efforts to strengthen democracy in Africa are ongoing and the African Union (AU) plays a significant role in advocating for democratic governance, promoting human rights, and addressing governance challenges. The AU achieves this through the development of legal and policy instruments which stipulate the standards that Member States must adhere to. The primary democracy-related legal document in the AU is the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), which came into force in 2012 and has been ratified by 38 AU Member States. The ACDEG identifies and addresses some of the continent's main governance challenges, such as civil participation, inclusion and representation of women and minority groups, free and fair elections, and unconstitutional changes of government.¹

Civil participation and open access to government is often restricted due to limited platforms for engagement between citizens and governments. The advent of innovative communication through digital technology has deeply changed how societies and their governments interact, affecting both democratic processes and the ways citizens engage on political issues.² Given their growing global importance, it is essential to explore the potential of digital technologies to contribute to the advancement of democracy and identify how they can be harnessed to

¹ N Abdulmelik and T Belay T. ['Advancing Women's Political Rights in Africa: The Promise and Potential of ACDEG'](#). (2019).

² E Domingo and LT Shiferaw ['Digitalisation and democracy: Is Africa's governance charter fit for the digital era?'](#) (2022).

facilitate inclusive and participatory development. This exploration must also take into consideration the threats that digital technologies pose to democracy and identify the safeguards that must be put in place to ensure that digital technologies are not used to the detriment of democracy across the African continent.



THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEMOCRACY PRESENTED BY DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Digital technology has massive potential to contribute to the advancement of democracy in Africa. It can be used to enhance Africa's democratic culture through the "revitalization of open and public debate, establishing open government, enhancing interactions between those who govern and those being governed, promoting equity, and strengthening the capacity of public officials."³

Digital technologies have significantly expanded access to information, which is crucial for an informed citizenry. The internet provides a vast repository of knowledge, enabling citizens to easily research and access a wide range of perspectives on political issues. This allows individuals to make more informed decisions and engage in meaningful discussions. Moreover, social media platforms and online news outlets provide real-time updates on political events, enabling citizens to stay informed and participate actively in the democratic process.

Digital technology-enabled participatory decision-making processes empower citizens to contribute directly to policy formulation and implementation. E-participation platforms provide opportunities for citizens to provide feedback, propose ideas, and participate in online consultations and surveys. Governments can leverage these platforms to gather public input on various issues, ensuring that policies reflect the needs and aspirations of the people. By involving citizens in decision-making, digital technologies foster a sense of ownership and strengthen democratic legitimacy.

Digital technology contributes to the advancement of democracy by promoting transparency and accountability in governance. Online portals for freedom of information requests enable citizens to access government-held information, ensuring transparency. Governments can leverage digital platforms to share public data, budgets, and policies, allowing citizens to monitor and scrutinize the decision-making process. The creation of online platforms allows citizens to

³ O Adesida 'Governance in Africa: The Role for Information and Communication Technology' (2001).

report corruption, hold officials accountable, and contribute to building a culture of integrity in public institutions.

Digital technologies have also revolutionized civic engagement by providing platforms for individuals to voice their opinions and participate in public discourse. Social media platforms and online forums enable citizens to engage with political leaders, express their concerns, and advocate for change. Digital tools such as online petitions and crowdsourcing platforms empower citizens to organize and collaborate on various issues, amplifying their collective voice and fostering grassroots movements.

THE THREATS TO DEMOCRACY POSED BY DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

While digital technology does indeed have the potential to contribute to the advancement of democracy, it also poses significant threats. One of the challenges of digital technologies is the rapid spread of dis- and misinformation. Social media platforms and online news outlets have become breeding grounds for the dissemination of false information, propaganda, and conspiracy theories. The viral nature of misinformation on digital platforms can hinder informed decision-making and lead to polarised societies.

Digital technology capabilities, such as deploying social media bots, employing troll armies, and creating fake news websites spread disinformation and propaganda, influencing public opinion and distorting democratic discourse. Governments can utilise these technologies to manipulate online narratives, and shape public perception to serve their political agendas. This undermines the democratic process and erodes trust in democratic institutions.

Governments can also leverage digital technologies to control and censor online content, limiting the free flow of information. Internet shutdowns and filtering, content blocking, and takedown requests can be used to restrict access to websites, social media platforms, and online news outlets that criticise or challenge government policies. For example, in 2021, the governments of 12 African countries shut down the internet at least 19 times; while in 2020 this happened in 9 countries.⁴ By controlling the digital information landscape, governments can manipulate public opinion, silence opposition by suppressing dissenting voices, and impede the exchange of diverse ideas necessary for a vibrant democracy.

⁴ E Domingo and LT Shiferaw 'Digitalisation and democracy: Is Africa's governance charter fit for the digital era?' (2022).

The reliance on digital technologies in democratic processes introduces cybersecurity risks that can undermine the integrity of elections, compromise sensitive data, and disrupt critical infrastructure. Cyberattacks, hacking, and data breaches pose significant threats to democratic institutions, including electoral systems, government databases, and political campaigns. These attacks can erode public trust in the security and reliability of digital systems, raising concerns about the legitimacy of democratic processes.

Reliance on digital technologies in democratic processes also provides governments with opportunities to manipulate electoral processes, potentially undermining the integrity and fairness of elections. Tactics such as voter suppression, gerrymandering, and manipulation of social media algorithms can sway public opinion, limit access to voting, and distort electoral outcomes. Governments can also exploit vulnerabilities in digital voting systems to tamper with results or create a perception of fraud, further eroding public trust in the democratic process.

The digital divide, characterised by unequal access to digital technologies, exacerbates existing social and economic inequalities and undermines democratic participation. Marginalised communities, such as low-income individuals, rural populations, and elderly and other vulnerable citizens, may face barriers to accessing the internet, digital devices, and the necessary digital literacy skills. This exclusion limits their ability to engage in online political discussions, access government services, and participate fully in the democratic process, further deepening social inequalities.

THE ACDEG AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

While the ACDEG is a progressive legal document, when it was adopted in 2007, the opportunities and risks to democracy posed by digital technology could not have been fully anticipated. At that time, internet and mobile phone penetration was very low in Africa, with only 5% of the continent's population being online. The situation has changed significantly. Although the continent lags in terms of global mobile coverage, social media platforms have become popular.

Therefore, to address the role of digital technology in advancing democracy, the ACDEG should be read together with more recent AU legal and policy documents. Thus, while a document such as the AU Digital Transformation Strategy,⁵ highlights the importance of leveraging digital technologies to enhance governance, increase citizen participation, and promote socio-economic development, and emphasises the need for policies and infrastructure that ensure the digital inclusion for all African citizens, the ACDEG provides much-needed guidance on the principles that must underpin Africa's efforts to uphold and advance democracy. These principles can and must be applied to the use of digital technology.

⁵ African Union, [Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa](#) (2020-2030).

A guiding principle of the ACDEG is effective citizen participation in democratic processes and in building democratic institutions.⁶ By opening up additional avenues for the involvement of the populace in public institutions, digital technologies allow governments to enhance, expand, and facilitate citizen participation in the democratic processes in the country. For example, in Ethiopia, the National Election Board created a Twitter/X profile and used the platform to conduct online question-and-answer sessions to inform voters about the electoral process ahead of the 2020 national elections.⁷

Promotion of gender equality is another principle critical to democracy that is contained in the ACDEG.⁸ Digital technologies can enable women to increase their participation in politics. It must be noted, however, that women remain disenfranchised because of the digital divide, and those that publicly participate on digital platforms are often subjected to harassment.

The importance of digital governance for democracy will only grow. There is a need for African civil society organisations (CSOs) and citizens to engage in constructive dialogue with decision-makers within the AU on how digital technology can best be managed. Such management is critical to ensuring that digital technology is used to advance democracy and that safeguards are put in place to prevent its use in activities aimed at undermining democracy and the will of Africans across the continent.

⁶ [African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance](#), article 3.

⁷ E Domingo and LT Shiferaw 'Digitalisation and democracy: Is Africa's governance charter fit for the digital era?' (2022).

⁸ [African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance](#), article 3(6).



CONTEXT

The African Union Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) convened the second Annual Citizens' Forum (ACF) on Democracy and Digital Governance in Africa from 10 to 11 July 2023 in Nairobi, Kenya. The hybrid event was held on the sidelines of the fifth Mid-Year Coordination Meeting of the AU and the Regional Economic Communities (RECS).

The ACF was attended by over 80 participants including African leaders and representatives from the AU Commission and other organs, Member States, UN agencies, African CSOs, development partners, the media, academia and faith-based organisations (FBOs).

The Forum provided a platform for highlighting efficient and effective means for robust citizen engagement and inclusive participation to enhance democracy and digital governance in Africa. Reflections and deliberations focused on democracy and digital governance in Africa. Participants underscored and acknowledged the importance of the ACDEG, and affirmed that

// THE REALISATION OF THE ACDEG IDEALS AND VALUES IS ONLY POSSIBLE WHERE GOVERNMENTS ARE OPEN, ACCOUNTABLE, AND CAN EASILY BE ACCESSED BY THE CITIZENS.

The Forum was structured into seven sessions (1) Existing Normative frameworks: Democracy & Digital Governance (2) Misinformation, disinformation, and the propaganda machines on democratic processes (3) The impact of illicit financial flows & Governance in Africa (4) The nexus between the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and digital governance (5) Bridging the digital divide for inclusive digital citizenship (6) Democracy, digital spaces and youth participation and (7) Launch of the young Africans writing and Citizen Education: Nurturing Informed Participation in the Digital Era.

THE FORUM OBJECTIVES WERE TO:



a. Amplify and raise awareness of the existing continental and international norms, frameworks, and institutions to promote democracy and digital governance.



b. Create an inclusive space and platform for African civil society, including FBOs, to unpack and speak out on trends, gaps, and opportunities to strengthen democracy and digital governance.



c. Review the state of play on issues of democracy and digital governance.



d. Mobilise and build strategic partnerships and support among stakeholders - including UN agencies, AU departments and agencies, CSOs, FBOs, the media, and academia - to foster collaborative efforts towards achieving the AU's Agenda 2063 goals.



e. Identify and recommend policy inputs, guidance, and platforms for capacity- and experience-sharing among stakeholders for joint continental action on democracy and digital governance.



f. Establish a roadmap for civil society actors to promote, advance, and entrench democratic values and the role and place of digital governance across the continent.



THE FORUM



Guided by Articles 5 and 22 of the AU's Constitutive Act, which established ECOSOCC as an advisory organ made up of various social and professional groups from AU Member States;



Further guided by the ECOSOCC Statutes, which include objectives such as promoting and defending best practices and expertise, a culture of good governance, democratic principles, the rule of law, human rights and freedoms, and social justice;



Recalling the AU's Agenda 2063, in particular Aspirations 1, 3, and 6 that envision an Africa built on good governance, democracy, skills revolution underpinned by science, technology and innovation, justice and the rule of law; and engaged and empowered youth and children. Additionally, an Africa where development is people driven, especially by women and youth;



Being aware of the important norms and standards adopted by the AU to promote democracy, peace and security, citizen engagement, and, in particular, the ACDEG;



Recognising the AU Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (CCSPDP), which came into force in June 2023 and contains important safeguards and norms to protect citizens from abuse and misuse of personal data and criminality;



Acknowledging that while AU Member States have made significant efforts and progress to promote democracy and enhance universal digital access, challenges remain to bridge the digital divide and consolidate democracy;



Reaffirming the role of citizens in promoting, tracking, and implementing the AU Shared Values on democratic governance, human rights, and digital governance;



Acknowledging the agency of African citizens to inform, shape, and guide deliberations that complement ongoing efforts by the AU and its Member States to consolidate democracy, and enhance civic engagement, participation and inclusion in decision-making on matters that affect them;



Reaffirming digital rights as key to the realisation and enforcement of human rights on the African continent.



COMMITTS TO



1. Leverage the expertise of the African citizenry to support democracy, human rights, and rule of law initiatives.
2. Uphold and promote democratic and human rights values as enshrined in the ACDEG, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and other related instruments that provide guidance on constitutionalism and the rule of law.
3. Collaborate with AU human rights mechanisms, especially the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in addressing gaps in the AU Convention on CCSPDP, including protection for human rights in the use of artificial intelligence, measures to ensure effective funding for domestic data protection frameworks, and the establishment of a regional monitoring mechanism.
4. Address existing gaps in availability, universal access, and the utilisation of digital governance and technology to allow citizens' self-expression on issues of governance and democratic processes in Member States.
5. Promote initiatives that advance dialogue on the use of technology to further democracy and good governance.
6. Engage and support democracy and digital governance as critical components in shaping the political landscape of Member States in offering innovative opportunities for citizen participation, transparency, and accountability.
7. Identify gaps, challenges, opportunities, and the safeguards that must be put in place to ensure that digital technologies promote democracy and address the abuse and constraints that shrink citizens' inclusive participation and accountability.
8. Encourage adoption of digital technologies to promote the rule of law, good governance, democratic processes, and increase civic space for engagement and decision-making.
9. Scale up digital platforms that promote accountability and transparency, and civic engagement with political leaders and policymakers on democratic processes.
10. Digitise democratic processes to ensure empowerment and inclusivity, giving voice to the excluded and marginalised. Additionally, supporting people to make informed decisions, creating a collective agenda, and improving information sharing.

-
11. Contribute to strengthening the capacities and capabilities of Member States to adopt digital technologies to expand and facilitate citizen participation and involve them in policy- and decision making.

 12. Track, monitor, and report the misuse and abuse of technology and promote the responsible use of digital platforms.

 13. Support digital literacy to enable people to become responsible digital citizens and avoid issues such as cyberbullying.

 14. Provide technical support to Member States to develop guidelines and regulatory frameworks and processes to ensure responsible digital citizenry including a comprehensive appreciation and awareness of the costs and benefits of digital governance.

 15. Enhance and broaden engagement of marginalised groups – especially women, youth, and persons with disabilities – in the deployment of technology to promote civic engagement and participation and track implementation of AU norms and instruments on democracy and digital governance.

 16. Develop and promote strategies and action plans in partnership with other key actors on the use of technology to prevent and address illicit financial flows, including legal and social frameworks on citizen engagement.

 17. Sensitise citizens to the criminal dimensions of digital technology and data use, including how to address cyber security, money laundering and cyber-criminal activities.

 18. Promote and establish the CCSPDP as a key cyber security framework that incorporates a monitoring mechanism by the AU Commission.

 19. Champion global accountability for multinational companies and institutions that harvest, invest, and share public data including ensuring clarity of policies and regulations to reduce risks for fake news, propaganda, hate speech, and cybercrimes.

 20. Develop and promote tools and actions that advance real time fact checking and utilisation of digital spaces.

 21. Adopt use of digital technologies to foster regional integration and cross-border trading especially through the African Continental Free Trade Area.

 22. Explore and engage the AU and its Member States and the RECs to promote African oriented digital platforms that will make digital space accessible for all.
-



CALLS TO ACTION



MEMBER STATES

1. Leverage digital technologies to improve public service delivery and economic growth.
2. Ensure universal access to technology and digital tools, thereby enhancing citizens' access to services.
3. Enhance digital connectivity to empower African participation on global platforms and increase the potential for becoming global leaders of the digital age.
4. Develop requisite infrastructures to overcome the rural-urban divide as well as gender-based disparities that have characterised current access gaps to the internet as well as internet-enabled devices such as smart phones. Promote digital access by subsidising the cost of digital gadgets to increase ownership.
5. Negotiate and partner with telecommunication companies to make the internet less expensive.
6. Coordinate efforts and collaborate with other Member States to promote digital governance and data protection.
7. Promote, adopt, and strengthen national laws and policies that address abuse and misuse, including on cyber security and data protection.
8. Invest in research and development and foster collaboration between academia, the private sector, and industries to promote democracy and digital governance.
9. Develop and strengthen accountability and regulatory mechanisms for entities and individuals that own, mine, and use digital platforms and public data at the national level.
10. Strengthen digital privacy policies to address gaps and vulnerabilities which can be taken advantage of by criminal syndicates.
11. Adopt regulations on the use of technology in electoral spaces, elections, as well as guidelines on the resolution of technology-related disputes in elections.
12. Bolster the fight against illicit financial flows by strengthening existing laws and institutions and protecting whistle-blowers. Additionally, strengthen the capacities of recovery institutions; preserve the assets recovered, with visibility and transparency on all recovered funds; and work as a region rather than individual countries.
13. Protect data leaving African countries by supporting African businesses engaging in cloud-based storage.

-
14. Commit to preserving civic space both online and offline, based on Africa's shared values of human and peoples' rights, the rule of law, and democratic governance.

 15. Support the adoption of continental guidelines on appropriate accountability mechanisms for actors engaging in online civic spaces and for social media platforms, especially given the concerns on hate speech, mis- and disinformation.

 16. Ratify and domesticate the ACDEG and the CCSPDP to address gaps in digital governance and democracy, while also augmenting them with guidelines or regulations to inform the use of digital technologies in electoral processes.

 17. Strengthen the role of FBOs and their contribution to ensuring peace, tranquillity, political and economic stability in Africa.

 18. Digitise health and social security systems to increase access to health and social services through digital platforms to contribute to the achievement of universal health and social coverage.
-

AU ECOSOCC AND CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

-
1. Institutionalise, facilitate, and convene annual regional and continental dialogues on harnessing the potential benefits and mitigating the costs of digital governance to enhance democracy in AU Member States.

 2. Support citizens' activism, through the national chapters, by mapping and documenting good practices as well as existing gaps in order to share them with CSOs and member associations.

 3. Develop guidelines for Member states on how to avoid the digital divide as they embrace the advantages of digitalisation and address abuse and misuse of digital technology and its impact on democracy.

 4. Promote deeper understanding of the AU normative frameworks that address democracy and digital governance, with a view to identifying opportunities and overcoming challenges to effective citizen participation while also empowering civil society to identify and align their advocacy initiatives with the available spaces for engagement within the AU system.

 5. Promote ratification, domestication, and implementation the ACDEG and the CCSPDP and support the AU Commission to establish a monitoring mechanism.

 6. Map and identify gaps, challenges, and opportunities including sharing lessons learnt on promoting democracy and digital governance in Africa.

 7. Support Member States, including through regional protection mechanisms and instruments, to address issues related to cyber security and protection of personal data to include emerging technology assets like artificial intelligence and robotics.
-

-
8. Support other AU organs and policymakers to effectively finance national mechanisms that protect African data.

 9. Develop a common African position on asset recovery through creation of a policy advocacy tool for negotiating the return of African assets consigned in foreign jurisdictions.

 10. Encourage RECs to equally engage with young people by providing them with digital platforms and capacity to enable them to be a part of digital governance.

 11. Facilitate dialogues between civil society and policymakers at the level of the ECOSOCC national chapters as well as at the level of AU citizen engagement spaces.

 12. Partner with civil society, including FBOs on capacity building for various stakeholders, including the public, to increase digital literacy through a focus on key themes such as privacy rights, the identification of misinformation or “fake news”, data protection, cybersecurity, inclusion of marginalised groups, and digital advocacy on matters of governance.

 13. Incorporate civic technology and digital engagement as a thematic focus area within ECOSOCC’s cluster committee and as the subject of some of its advisories to member states and the AU.

 14. Collaborate and undertake joint initiatives with other AU organs under the framework of the African Governance Architecture (AGA) to promote the creation of an enabling environment for digital democracy and advocacy. This includes access to a joint open data portal with information on the availability and accessibility of democratic digital governance platforms.

 15. Increase the use of civic technology and digital engagement within ECOSOCC’s engagement strategy, and through citizen mobilisation and member subscription to learning, use and knowledge management.
-

.....

● ●

STRATEGIC PARTNERS

-
1. Support ECOSOCC and the wider AGA platform to incorporate digital technology and digital literacy within their citizenship engagement strategies.

 2. Support the strengthening of international accountability mechanisms that regulate the multinational corporations that own online platforms as well as the corporations that hold or transact in metadata.

 3. Engage with strategic partners that support ideas such as virtual resource centres to increase citizen participation.
-



ECOSOCC
Economic Social & Cultural Council

**The voice of the
African Citizenry**



An Organ of the



ECOSOCC Secretariat

8658 Kudu Road, Kabulonga,

Lusaka, Zambia

Email: ecosocc@africa-union.org

Phone: (206) 211429405

ecosocc.au.int 