13ᵀᴴ WEST AFRICAN INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUM

THEME: "DIGITAL INCLUSION AND ACCESS FOR A RESILIENT WEST AFRICA"

ONLINE
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COMMUNIQUE
[ORIGINAL VERSION: ENGLISH]

We, the participants of the 13ᵗʰ West African Internet Governance Forum (WAIGF), meeting online, from 28 to 30 July 2021, representing the Internet governance initiatives of the following fifteen (15) countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo;

With the participation and support of the following partners: ECOWAS Commission, African Union, AFRINIC, ICANN, IGF Secretariat, IGFSA, ISOC, and World Wide Web Foundation.

- Recalling the results of the previous editions of the West African Internet Governance Forum which were held respectively in Accra, Dakar, Lagos, Freetown, Abidjan, Abuja, Niamey, Cotonou, Ouagadougou, Banjul and Online;
- Considering the critical importance of the Internet to the economy of countries and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which has proven the need for resilience through greater access to affordable Internet;
- Recognising the need to ensure user and market confidence to sustainably own the benefits of the Internet at the community level;
- Desirous, on one hand, to build an innovative, dynamic, prosperous, and united sub-regional Internet community and, on the other, a stable and secure Internet ecosystem;
- Taking into account the need to build the capacity of youths through the West Africa School on Internet Governance (WASIG) to increase participation by youth, women and marginalised groups in public policy issues that Internet Governance focusses on;
- Recognising the need to continue the WASIG to facilitate youth participation in the WAIGF.

1) Report that:

a) The 14ᵗʰ Forum shall be held in Ghana in 2022.
b) The WASIG shall be organised as a pre-event of the WAIGF.
c) Towards the facilitation of a more secure ECOWAS cyber space, two regional instruments - the ECOWAS Cybersecurity and Cybercrime Strategy and ECOWAS Critical Infrastructure Protection Policy have been adopted by the ECOWAS Council of Ministers.

2) Observe:

a) Increasing rates of Internet access and connectivity in the sub-region. ECOWAS Member States now have direct access to 25 submarine cable landing stations as advanced by the

ECOWAS Regional Infrastructure Master Plan. There is currently over 77,500 kilometres of cable fibre in operation in the sub-region with 432,000 kilometres of fibre under construction. There is an additional 35,000 kilometres planned and over 16,000 kilometres of fibre proposed. This will result in over 150,000 kilometres of fibre connection in the sub-region when completed.

b) Note the recorded successes in digital transformation of some Member States and the need to implement digital strategies and policies across the region to increase Internet access and connectivity. Examples of best practices in the sub-region include Senegal's Digital 2025 Strategy, affordable Internet measures implemented in Ghana and reduced Right of Way (RoW) costs in Nigeria.

c) Growing number of community networks (CN) allowing for connectivity in previously underserved areas. However, ownership of CNs varies across countries – some privately owned, others community owned.

3) Recommend:

a) On Digital Inclusion and Access
Recognising the need to address the digital divide exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and to include vulnerable and marginalised groups in efforts to provide reliable and affordable Internet access.
   i. Call on Member States to improve on measures taken to make Internet access more affordable and to improve on demand-side issues required to increase digital inclusion of marginalised and unconnected populations.
   ii. Encourage Member States to expand connectivity to reach the underserved and underrepresented populations as the digital inequality during the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified structural inequalities.
   iii. Call on Member States to further facilitate increased intra-regional connectivity and Internet traffic exchange.
   iv. Encourage Member States to improve on technical awareness, education and capacity building on the Internet's infrastructure and its ecosystem.
   v. Engage in multistakeholder processes to improve awareness of technical issues and the ability to negotiate for solutions.

b) On Digital Economy
Recognising the improvements in digital infrastructure and increased Internet penetration rates across the region, there is further need to enhance digital and financial inclusion by leveraging on stakeholder collaboration and human-centric data protection regulation.
   i. Call on Member States to accelerate the implementation of legal frameworks and digitalisation policies to hasten development of digital and e-commerce services.
   ii. Encourage public trust in e-commerce and buy-in of emerging technologies and inclusive digital identity systems by adopting consumer protection legislation and holding public consultative processes.

iii. Urge Member States to invest in improving digital literacy, skills and cyber security awareness of the citizenry.

iv. Encourage the use of local content and language to increase interest, innovation and knowledge sharing in the digital economy.

v. Call on Member States to implement policies to support and stimulate investment in the digital economy.

vi. Call on Member States to increase active participation, sharing of knowledge and resources in multistakeholder Internet governance processes locally, regionally and globally.

vii. Encourage Member States to make ICT a compulsory subject in tertiary education to increase digital literacy, skills and capabilities of their citizenry.

viii. Call on Member States to invest in local innovation to address diverse socio-economic issues including assisted technology research for peoples with disabilities.

ix. Call on Member States to put in place regulatory and policy frameworks to ensure Community Networks (CN) are community centred and comply with sustainability requirements.

c) On Emerging Technology

Recognising the challenges and opportunities presented by rapidly evolving and emerging technologies such as the power of the cloud, social media, Internet of Things (IoT), 5G, Artificial Intelligence (AI) etc.

i. Call on Member States to identify context specific areas where more action is required to ensure readiness to address challenges of data infrastructure as emerging threats are evident in areas such as election interference, adoption of block chain technologies and data ownership.

ii. Encourage Member States to put in place legal frameworks and protocols to promote digital sovereignty and data ownership.

iii. Call on Member States to invest in human capacity and the future of work especially among marginalised groups such as the youth and women.

iv. Call on Member States to harness the opportunities provided by data centres to digitise information on climate change, the environment and its sustainability.

v. Encourage Member States to support the development of a regional digital currency such as the proposed African digital currency through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as this will facilitate production of African e-wallets which conform to regional economic realities and standards.