The Freedom Online Coalition

The Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) is an intergovernmental coalition that was established at the inaugural Freedom Online Conference in The Hague, the Netherlands, 8-9 December 2011. As indicated in its founding declaration, the FOC is committed to advancing internet freedom – free expression, association, assembly, and privacy online – worldwide. FOC member states are committed to work together diplomatically to voice concern over measures to restrict internet freedom and support those individuals whose human rights online are curtailed. Since 2011, the Coalition has grown from 15 initial members to 30 today[1].

On 16 May 2017, at the FOC Strategy and Coordination Meeting held adjacent to the Stockholm Internet Forum 2017, the FOC officially adopted its new Terms of Reference (TOR). The new TOR - known as the 'Stockholm Terms of Reference' - contains, *inter alia*, updates to the Coalition's membership criteria, the future of multistakeholder engagement in the Coalition, and provides clarification of FOC's working methods. The revision of the TOR represents a key outcome of the FOC Strategic Review which culminated at the 6th Annual Freedom Online Conference in Costa Rica in October 2016 with the adoption of the San José Statement.

Since its inception, members of the Coalition have gathered informally as governments and in consultation with other stakeholders at numerous conferences and intergovernmental meetings relevant to internet freedom as well as in specific countries, to coordinate viewpoints, share relevant information, and discuss strategies to advance an open internet in each context. FOC Diplomatic Networks facilitate coordination of representatives in Paris, Geneva and New York. FOC meetings have taken place in forums ranging from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), to the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Internet Governance Forum, and the Stockholm Internet Forum. Notable examples of joint coordination include submission of coordinated FOC input into UNESCO's Internet Study (March 2015), the Joint Statement presented at the Human Rights Council (June 2015) and Joint Statements on restrictive data localization laws (September 2015), cross-border attacks on freedom of expression online (March 2016), Human Rights and the UN GGE (February 2017), Joint Statement and Accompanying Good Practices for Government on State-Sponsored Network Disruptions (March 2017) and the Joint Statement on Internet Censorship (2018). All statements are available online.

In addition to these activities, the FOC hosts annual multi-stakeholder conferences that aim to deepen the discussions on how freedom of expression on the internet is helping to promote social, cultural and economic development. After the inaugural Conference in The Hague, subsequent annual Freedom Online Conferences were held in Kenya in September 2012, in Tunisia in June 2013, in Estonia in April 2014, Mongolia in May 2015 and, most recently, in Costa Rica in October 2016. At the Freedom Online Conference in Tallinn, the FOC Members adopted Recommendations for Freedom Online that were drafted through a multi-stakeholder process with the involvement of NGOs, the private sector, international organisations, and FOC governments.

The Freedom Online Conferences bring together stakeholders from governments, regional organisations, international institutions, civil society and the private sector, and provide a platform to discuss and promote online freedoms. They also have a capacity building element and act as springboard for other valuable initiatives. In Tunis, the FOC conference was complemented by a two-day training workshop for bloggers, technologists, human rights defenders, activists, and government officials. At the FOC conference in Nairobi, the Coalition launched the Digital Defenders Partnership – an initiative to support innovative solutions to the protection of bloggers and online activists in danger, and to provide quick support in response to a range of emerging threats to internet freedom. The Partnership is managed by Hivos and funded through financial support of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Australia, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Canada and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

To further strengthen continuous cooperation towards practical outcomes in between annual conferences, the FOC established three multi-stakeholder working groups: 'An Internet Free and Secure', and 'Digital Development and Openness' and 'Privacy and Transparency Online'. These Groups were established in 2014 and their mandates came to an end at the annual FO Conference in Costa Rica, 2017 once the Stockholm Terms of Reference were finalized. Within the Stockholm Terms of Reference, the FOC identified as a priority the need to create a strong mechanism for ongoing multistakeholder engagement. Consequently, the FOC Advisory Network has been established to interact with and advise on the activities of the Freedom Online Coalition.

At a time when internet policy issues have become one of the most intensely discussed issues on the international agenda, the Coalition has a vital role to play in promoting the values of democracy and human rights online.

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[1] Currently, the FOC consists of Argentina, Australia, Austria, Canada, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Ireland, Japan, Kenya, Latvia, Lithuania, the Republic of Maldives, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Tunisia, the United Kingdom and the United States.