

Digital Policy Symposium

The Role of Parliamentarians in Shaping Our Common Digital Future: An African Perspective | 18–19 July 2022, Lilongwe

Key takeaways

On 18–19 July 2022, 30 parliamentarians from 20 African countries got together in a dedicated digital policy symposium to discuss challenges and opportunities related to the digital economy and society and explore their role in shaping an inclusive and human-centric digital future. The two-day event was held in the context of the annual meeting of the Africa Internet Governance Forum (AfIGF) and was co-organised by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), the Secretariat of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), the African Union Commission (AUC), the Policy and Regulation Initiative for Digital Africa (PRIDA), the AfIGF Secretariat, and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ).

This document outlines key takeaways resulting from the discussions. It should be read in conjunction with the Communique issued by the [African Parliamentary Network on Internet Governance \(APNIG\)](#), an initiative formally launched at the end of the event.

The launch of APNIG also witnessed the selection of the network's leadership:

- *Hon. Neema Lugangira, MP from Tanzania as the APNIG Founder and Chairperson*
- *Hon. Alhagie Mbow, MP from The Gambia as the APNIG Deputy Chairperson*
- *Hon. Sam George, MP from Ghana as the APNIG Secretary*

Digital (and) geopolitics

- There is no more cyberspace. It is now blending with the “real” world in all segments of our lives (personal, business, government, critical sectors, elections, etc.).
- Digital challenges know no borders, so cross-border cooperation is a must. A sustainable pan-African partnership is needed to drive the harmonisation of legal frameworks, define common positions, and influence other powerful players (states, but also big tech companies).
- The pan-African partnership should be driven by the “3 Ms” of Internet governance: multidisciplinary (taking a holistic approach of issues), multistakeholder (using all the knowledge and skills available in the society, including civil society, technical society, and the private sector), and multilevel (harmonising local, regional and continental policies and engaging in global dialogues).
- Diversifying digital portfolios is a must, and it can be achieved by combining the “whole of government” approach (dispersing digital portfolios across various ministries/agencies/other public institutions) and the “whole of society” approach

(ensuring a meaningful involvement of all sectors and stakeholders, in both the shaping and the implementation of policies, regulation and legislation).

- The digital world does not wait for us to deal with it. In developing national, regional and global mechanisms, we need to consider emerging technologies, while being aware of the technology hype.

Legislation for an open and unfragmented Internet

- When developing legislation related to the Internet, parliaments should be cautious about being reactive. There is a need to be mindful of how such legislation might impact critical properties of this network of networks: accessible infrastructure with a common protocol, open architecture and interoperable and reusable building blocks, decentralized management and distributed routing system, common global identifiers, and technological neutrality and general purpose.
- Parliamentarians from across Africa would benefit from tailored capacity development programmes enabling them to acquire a solid understanding of how the Internet works and the associated governance processes. This will empower them to ensure that regulatory and legislative frameworks aimed to tackle risks that come with the use of the Internet do not threaten its open and unfragmented nature.
- More needs to be done across Africa to encourage the use of local Internet resources, including country code top-level domains and the .africa generic top-level domain. Doing this can contribute to the growth of local economies, while also promoting national/regional identities. Parliamentarians can support such goals by engaging in awareness raising efforts.
- Parliamentarians could also contribute to ensuring that there is adequate participation from their countries in key organisations managing critical Internet resources.
- Promoting multilingualism and local content on the Internet and encouraging the expansion of infrastructures to connect the unconnected should be among parliamentarians' properties.

Achieving sustainable digital development: continental and global perspectives

- Human, technical and financial resources are necessary in the planning and implementation of harmonised policies and standards that can drive Africa's sustainable digital transformation. Living up to political commitments is also essential.
- More effective and efficient policies are needed to drive digital inclusion and equality. Digital transformation cannot be realised if citizens are left behind because of challenges such as lack of infrastructure or affordability. Human-centered connectivity that is focused on education and capacity development should also be prioritised to empower individuals to embrace technologies and derive socio-economic value.

- Legislation is a way to address problems, but it is not a solution to everything. To encourage digital development, enabling environments (policies, institutions, resources) need to be put in place.
- Actions that parliamentarians could undertake to support digital transformation efforts include: engaging with executive institutions to identify bottlenecks and look into how to address them; convening hearings with various stakeholders to help reveal challenges and potential solutions; calling on governments to ensure more policy continuity and implement existing strategies before developing new ones.
- Africa needs to develop its own vision for the digital environment. Actors from across the continent need to define their own priorities and then coordinate efforts towards advancing these priorities both locally and in international processes.

Data governance frameworks: maximising the benefits of data-driven societies

- Without addressing digital inequalities across the continent, Africa will not be able to realise the benefits of the data-driven economy.
- A trustworthy data environment that is safe, secure, accountable, and ethical by design requires a strong legal system for data protection and cybersecurity, proper enforcement capabilities, and an enabling environment that fosters the re-use of data for value creation and economic growth.
- The AU Data Policy Framework is a significant milestone towards more harmonised policies that address data protection needs and foster cross-border data flows essential for the growth of a continental digital economy. Parliamentarians can help raise awareness at the national level about the Framework and encourage its implementation.
- Parliamentarians can contribute to addressing data protection challenges through:
 - Ensuring that all countries have data protection laws in place and dedicated data protection agencies (with adequate resources) to coordinate the implementation/enforcement of such laws.
 - Engaging non-state actors in developing data-related policies and regulations and fostering consensus among state and non-state actors.
 - Promoting more awareness raising and capacity development for end-users so they are empowered to protect their own data and privacy in the digital space.
 - Devising mechanisms for holding private and public actors accountable for how they process data.
 - Encouraging the ratification and implementation of international instruments (such as the Malabo Convention).

Legislative approaches for a safe and secure digital space

- To be effective and efficient, policies and regulatory frameworks related to cybersecurity and cybercrime need to both reflect local realities and be aligned with international standards, principles and frameworks.
- Encouraging a more widespread domestication of the Budapest and Malabo Conventions can foster the continental harmonisation of laws and regulations, ensure adherence to global standards, and enable more effective and efficient cross-border cooperation in tackling cyberthreats and cybercrime.
- Having laws in place is not enough. Dedicated agencies need to be empowered to enforce such laws. Moreover, cooperation with civil society, businesses and the technical community is key in ensuring a proper implementation of existing frameworks.
- The growth of the cybersecurity industry within the continent should be encouraged, as a way to both strengthen cybersecurity and generate jobs and revenues.
- Africa needs to build the capacity of a new generation of cyber-diplomats to be equipped with skills and knowledge to meaningfully engage in international processes focused on cybersecurity-related issues. Increasing the participation of African countries in such processes should be a priority.

Strengthening Africa's digital economy

- The digital divide – in access to infrastructure and devices, affordability, skills – is the first challenge that needs to be addressed in order to support the growth of an inclusive and sustainable African digital economy.
- African countries need to put in place policies to encourage the use of the Internet and digital technology, to support local/regional digital innovation, and to attract foreign investments. Such policies are essential in supporting the growth of regional, continental and global value chains.
- Policies and regulations for the digital economy should be anchored into local realities and respond to local needs. They should also be balanced, so as not to place barriers for end-users, nor overburden innovators and entrepreneurs (especially start-ups and SMEs).
- Cross-border digital trade needs to be encouraged as an engine of growth. In addition to ensuring adequate policies and regulations are in place (in areas such as e-commerce, consumer protection, electronic transactions, cybercrime), parliamentarians should also advocate for a more active engagement of African countries in global trade-related processes.
- Simplifying customs procedures and facilitating cross-border payments and cash flows across the continent (for instance through reducing transaction costs) should also be prioritised as steps towards strengthening Africa's cross-border digital economy.
- Parliamentarians should encourage long-term investments into the digital economy. They can also act as ambassadors of the African economy at the international level.

In addition to exchanging experiences among themselves, Parliamentarians also engaged with representatives of a series of entities, including the African Network Information Centre (AFRINIC), African Union Commission (AUC), AUC Cyber Security Experts Group, Association for Progressive Communications (APC), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ), DiploFoundation, Ecommerce Forum Africa, European Commission, IGF Secretariat, Internet and Jurisdiction Policy Network, Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), Internet Society, Microsoft, Policy and Regulation Initiative for Digital Africa (PRIDA), Research ICT Africa, United Nations Economic, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and World Wide Web Foundation.



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