15TH EDITION OF THE WEST AFRICAN INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUM

THEME: "Building Economic Resilience and Digital Sovereignty in West Africa"

HYBRID SESSION

Abidjan, 25 – 26 MAY 2023

COMMUNIQUE

[ORIGINAL VERSION: FRENCH]

We, the participants at the 15th edition of the West African Internet Governance Forum (WAIGF), meeting in Cote d'Ivoire and online, on 25 and 26 May 2023, on behalf of the Internet governance bodies of the following fifteen (15) member States: 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, UN IGF Secretariat, ICANN, UNESCO, Cote d'Ivoire Ministry of Communication and Digital Economy, Cote d'Ivoire Telecommunications/ICT Regulatory Authority (ARTCI);

- Recalling the outcomes of previous editions of the West African Internet Governance Forum, held respectively in Accra, Dakar, Lagos, Freetown, Abidjan, Abuja, Niamey, Cotonou, Ouagadougou, Banjul, as well as online;
- Recognising that digital sovereignty remains a challenge that can be overcome by investing in infrastructure;
- Considering the need to ensure access to better connectivity at an affordable cost, as well as increased participation and capacity building of youth, women and marginalised groups, including public policy issues on Internet governance, through, inter alia, the West African School on Internet Governance (WASIG);
- Recognising that the excessive use of social media by young people and population groups with a low level of digital literacy is becoming a growing concern;
- Considering the need to diversify the economy in order to contribute to job creation, innovation and access to funding;

- Recognising that the challenges linked to data security, including data localisation and harmonisation of the legal and regulatory framework for personal data, are a definite cause for concern;
- Acknowledging the important role played by legislators in regulations aimed at building a resilient Internet ecosystem;
- Considering that continuous change in the digital space is associated with new challenges and opportunities, including increased security risks;
- Recognising the existence of real human potential in West Africa to meet the challenges of the digital age;
- Recognising the urgency of bridging the persistent digital gap which remains a challenge to inclusion;
- Recognising that the empowerment of digital entrepreneurs and the development of a local workforce are catalysts for digital resilience;
- Acknowledging that Universal Acceptance (UA) is a good practice to ensure that all domain names and email addresses are accepted on the Internet regardless of their language, alphabet or length;
- Aware that all ECOWAS Member States are experiencing an increase in the use of ICTs and the need for media and information literacy;
- Noting that the challenges, risks and ethical concerns related to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, social media, the Internet of Things, blockchain, etc., should not inhibit innovation and the development of new opportunities with significant benefits;
- Recognising the improvements in digital infrastructure and the steady increase in internet penetration rate;

1) **Report that:**
   a) The 16th edition of the Forum will hold in May 2024 in Burkina Faso ;
   b) The WASIG and the West African Youth IGF will be organised in preparation for the WAIGF;

2) **Recommend:**
   a) **On Economic Resilience and Digital Sovereignty:**
      i. Call on Member States to bridge the digital gap by urgently working to promote digital literacy, and to guarantee cyberspace security and users' confidence;
      ii. Urge Member States to increase capacity building for the youth, people living in rural areas and other marginalised groups;
      iii. Create favourable environments for job and wealth creation, based on

emerging technologies;

iv. Promote data and work with legislators to develop an innovation-friendly legal framework;

v. Encourage Member States to increase multi-stakeholder participation in Internet governance meetings;

vi. Improve intra-regional connectivity and increase Internet traffic exchange (free roaming, free data).

vii. Call on Member States to implement programmes that focus on the Universal Acceptance of domain names and e-mail addresses to promote access to the Internet regardless of the user's language.

b) On Emerging Technologies

i. Urge Member States to establish legal frameworks and protocols to promote digital sovereignty and address the issue of data ownership resulting from these technologies;

ii. Call on Member States to make significant investments in human capacity and the "future work";

iii. Encourage Member States to involve all stakeholders to foster the development and adoption of emerging technologies, guided by quality scientific research, analysis and assessment of the local context;

iv. Urge Member States to establish a legal and regulatory framework that enables the adoption of best practices and the independent and effective verification of respect for human rights in the development, deployment and use of emerging technologies;

v. Encourage Member States to continue civic education and sensitisation efforts to ensure good digital hygiene in order to address the challenges associated with emerging technologies;

vi. Call on Member States to improve and harmonise data-related regulations, especially regulations on data protection and privacy;

vii. Urge Member States to develop public policies that include good governance and transparency through e-government and open data;

viii. Call on Member States to ratify and implement the African Union Malabo Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection.

c) On Digital Inclusion

i. Call on Member States to establish new players, including community companies that target remote areas and local start-ups;

ii.   Encourage Member States to promote local investment and the distribution of spectrum for community networks, and develop a regulatory framework governing these networks and their operation;

iii. Urge Member States to bridge the digital gap through sensitisation, education and capacity-building on the Internet and its ecosystem;

iv.   Encourage Member States to create alongside local entrepreneurs, systems that are interoperable with government platforms in order to make data management processes more reliable;

v.   Call on Member States to establish universal service funds and, where these are not available, promote the use of systems and ensure accountability for the use;

vi.   Urge Member States to create a strong economic base that boosts innovation, job creation and foreign investment in technology industries;

vii. Encourage Member States to shape the digital future through an enabling and inclusive environment.

Côte d'Ivoire, Abidjan - Hybrid. May 26, 2023
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