No. 91 Launch of an African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms
WORKSHOP REPORT - IGF 2014

The launch of the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms took place on Thursday 4 September 2014 at 5:00pm. The launch was well attended with around 80 participants in the room, and a further 30 to 40 remote participants. The panel was moderated by Stephanie Muchai (Legal Officer at Article 19) and speaking on the panel were: Edetean Ojo (Executive Director of Media Rights Agenda), Anriette Esterhuysen (Executive Director of the Association of Progressive Communications), Getachew Engida (Deputy Director General of UNESCO) and Towela Jere (Programmes Manager at NEPAD Agency). More information about the Declaration is available here: www.africaninternetrights.org

Summary of the workshop

Edetean Ojo began by introducing the Declaration initiative. The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms is a Pan-African initiative to promote human rights standards and principles of openness in internet policy formulation and implementation on the continent. The Declaration is intended to elaborate on the principles which are necessary to uphold human and people's rights on the internet, and to cultivate an internet environment that can best meet Africa's social and economic development needs and goals.

The Declaration builds on well-established African human rights documents including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights of 1981, the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press of 1991, the African Charter on Broadcasting of 2001, the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa of 2002, and the African Platform on Access to Information Declaration of 2011.

The idea for an African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms was agreed at the 2013 African Internet Governance Forum in Nairobi, Kenya. A broader meeting was subsequently convened in Johannesburg in February 2014 to commence drafting the Declaration[1]. A smaller Drafter's Group developed the text of the Declaration based on feedback from the wider group, from an online public consultation, and from many eminent individuals and organisations from a range of African and international actors and institutions. Drafts of the Declaration were also presented and discussed at a range of events including: the 2014 Africa IGF meeting in Abuja, an Alliance for Affordable Internet event in Lagos, a Frank La Rue event about access to the internet in South Africa, a Media Institute of Southern Africa event in Botswana, and the 2014 South Africa IGF.

Anriette Esterhuysen stressed the importance of following up the launch event with concerted advocacy efforts with different governments and intergovernmental institutions across Africa – emphasising that the mission is for the Declaration to be adopted in full (or in part) by governments and inter-governmental institutions. She described the state of internet policy-making in Africa

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[1] This meeting was attended by participants from the following organisations: Africa Centre for Open Governance, Article 19, Association for Progressive Communications, CIVICUS, Collaboration on Internet ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa, Commission on Human Rights and Good Governance, DotAfrica, Eduardo Mondlane University, Global Partners Digital, The Institute for Social Accountability, Internet Society Ghana, Kenya Human Rights Commission, Kictanet, Media Foundation for West Africa, Media Institute of Southern Africa, Media Rights Agenda, Paradigm Initiative, Protégé QV, South African Human Rights Commission, Support for Information Technology and Web We Want.

arguing that at present debates are driven by concern for globalising economies and infrastructure development, and inadequate attention is given to the importance of, and impact of, the internet on real people and communities. The Declaration fulfils a particular function for civil society groups in Africa as a central initiative around which to galvanise efforts. But it is important to engage other stakeholders including Internet Service Providers, other internet businesses, journalists, women's groups etc. Engaging these stakeholders should begin with a discussion about the type of internet access they need and the challenges that restrictions on the internet have on their work.

Getachew Engida congratulated the Declaration Drafting team for their excellent work, stating that UNESCO views the Declaration as a significant normative achievement for the African continent and possibly beyond. The Declaration mirrors UNESCOs belief in the importance of an that is rights-based, open, accessible and multi-stakeholder participative (summarised in the acronym R.O.A.M.). The Declaration can be incorporated in to UNESCOs work with the technical community, on gender equality, journalism and citizen journalism, media and education literacy, and assisting governments to revise laws and strengthen institutions. To implement the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms, it should be fed in to the UNESCO Internet study, the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the next phase of WSIS.

Towela Jere also commended the Declaration Drafting team, adding that the principles are universal. The Declaration echoes the aspirations of African stakeholders as reflected in submissions to Net Mundial and other processes. It translates ongoing conversations into something tangible and concrete that can be referenced. Governments can use the Declaration to understand the aspirations of their citizens, and to evaluate their laws, policies and practices. Towela stated that African governments have already demonstrated an interest in the Declaration by including it on the agenda of the African Union Meeting of ICT and Information Ministers occurring during the first quarter of 2015. She advised being constructive in approaches to governments stating that "the language you use determines the reaction you get". She predicted that some elements of the Declaration would be immediately appealing to governments, while other elements would require more convincing.

Among the workshop participants there was a great deal of support for the Declaration as an African initiative, led by Africans. One speaker highlighted that Africa had played a leadership role in other areas – such the Windhoek Declaration that initiated World Press Freedom Day – and called for Africa to take a similar strong stance on internet rights.

Participants drew attention to the myriad challenges facing internet rights in Africa today – from bloggers being imprisoned for political speech, to the African Union Convention on Cybersecurity and Data Protection, to the digital divide. Access is a particularly difficult in Africa, as an indication of the barriers - Ethiopia has 92 million people and among them there are 80 languages and 200 dialects.

One participant suggested that the Declaration be an evolving document and be updated regularly to take account of the changing internet environment.

Finally many workshop participants expressed their support for the initiative, appealing to governments to adopt the Declaration, and other stakeholders to include the Declaration – and the principles contained therein – in their discussions with governments. Participants also called for

support from outside the region, whilst also stressing that it is important that the initiative remains "owned" by Africans. The Freedom Online Coalition was identified as a potential source of support given the African members Ghana, Kenya and Tunisia.

Conclusions drawn from the workshop and possible follow up actions

The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms should be promoted in different institutions involved in the dispersed internet governance field – including Highway Africa, the African Union and UNESCO.

And ongoing advocacy effort is needed to secure endorsements and to build awareness of the Declaration. The Declaration should be used as a resource in the UNESCO Internet study, the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the WSIS +10 process.

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