

# Annual Report

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## 2023



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# Introductory Message

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The state of digital democracy in Africa is worrying. The regression in democracy and adoption by citizens of digital technologies as a means to challenge nepotism, authoritarianism, and corruption continues to be matched by governments' stranglehold on technology's liberating power. Repression in the offline world has continued to spread to the digital sphere, with surveillance, censorship, network disruptions, disinformation, infrastructure and access control being prominent methods of repression. This undermines the state of democracy and complicates the work of internet freedom and digital democracy advocates.

Nonetheless, there were some wins in 2023. There were fewer internet disruptions (including in countries with elections, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), Nigeria, and Sierra Leone). However, others, such as Uganda, saw the ban imposed on Facebook and Virtual Private Networks (VPN) clock three years. Tanzania continued to improve on digital rights, with continuing legal reforms and the government supporting CIPESA's annual Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa (FIFAfrica). However, the country banned the use of VPN without a permit. Still, holding FIFAfrica in Tanzania (not long ago a top internet freedom predator), in partnership with the government, was a win for civil society. That FIFAfrica had ministers of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) from the region pledging to #KeepItOn and promote digital rights, and had active participation of Members of Parliament from several African countries, alongside private sector actors and civil society organisations (CSO), was a win for advocacy and movement building for digital democracy.

Elsewhere, in January 2023, Uganda's Constitutional Court *declared* null and void section 25 of the Computer Misuse Act of 2011, which penalised "offensive communication". This provision had severally been used by state authorities to silence dissent, and CIPESA and other rights groups had for long supported efforts to expunge it from the country's key internet law. On the downside, while that troublesome provision was nullified, in October 2022 Uganda enacted the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act, 2022, which has equally obnoxious provisions, and rights groups, including CIPESA, are challenging it in the Constitutional Court. Still on litigation, the High Court of Uganda ruled to allow experts from CIPESA, Access Now, and ARTICLE 19 to offer their opinions on the human rights red flags around the country's digital identification (ID) system.

At an institutional level, 2023 was a good year for CIPESA. We marked 10 years of FIFAfrica, the largest gathering on digital rights on the continent. We had more than 450 physical attendees and numerous valuable partners. Our State of Internet Freedom in Africa report also marked 10 years and took the occasion to look back at how the digital freedom landscape has evolved over time - from our eyes and those of other changemakers at the forefront of advancing an open and safe internet in Africa.

We maintained a healthy financial position, earning our highest-ever annual income. In a shifting funding landscape characterised by competing interests and, in some cases, shrinking donor envelopes, we are profoundly grateful to those that contributed resources to our work. We continued to enjoy generous support from long-standing partners such as the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), Global Partners Digital (GPD), the Open Technology Fund (OTF), The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Internews, the Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, Small Media, East West Management Institute (EWMI), and the Sigrid Rausing Trust. We also attracted new funding, including from the Mott Foundation, Skoll Foundation, Niyel, Bertelsmann Foundation, the EU-D4D Hub, Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). We strengthened our Board operations, completed a new Strategic Plan, adopted several policies, and instituted various systems to strengthen institutional functioning. We grew our staff numbers by five, bringing on board a great set of competencies that will help us to soar to greater heights.

As we march into 2024, the Year of Democracy, during which up to 16 African countries will hold elections, CIPESA will, in partnership with Digital Action, launch the Tech Accountability Fund to support work around monitoring how social media platforms moderate harmful content related to elections. Much of our work will centre around elections as they intersect with digital rights and digital democracy. Consequently, we will take a keen interest in disinformation enabled by artificial intelligence (AI), data protection in electoral processes, press freedom, and digital repression in the face of elections. But we shall also work on digital health, Business and Human Rights, including Labour and Tech (Future of Work), while also maintaining a lens on digital inclusion (gender, persons with disabilities, migrants, rural versus urban and other marginalised communities). We look forward to another busy but productive year.

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## **The CIPESA Team**

# Our Work

CIPESA works to defend and expand the digital civic space to enable the protection and promotion of human rights and to enhance innovation and sustainable development.

CIPESA's work aims to engender a free, open and secure internet that advances rights, livelihoods, and democratic governance. Our work responds to shortage of information, research, resources and actors consistently working at the nexus of technology, human rights and society.

With a focus on disparate actors including government, the private sector, civil society, media, policy makers and multinational institutions, our work is accomplished through six key strategic actions:

- Knowledge and skills development
- Generating research-based evidence
- Policy engagement
- Convenings
- Movement building
- Strategic litigation



## Vision

To be Africa's leading ICT policy and governance think tank



## Mission

To promote inclusive and effective use of ICT in Africa for improved governance and livelihoods



## Thematic Areas

- Civic Participation
- Internet Freedom and Governance
- Digital Inclusion
- Data Governance
- Digital Resilience
- Digital Economy

## 2023 in Numbers

USD  
**70,000**  
The value of  
Africa Digital Rights Fund (ADRF)  
sub-grants issued in **2023**

USD  
**700,000**  
Total amount  
**Africa Digital Rights Fund (ADRF)**  
has issued since formation

 **39**  
Countries where  
ADRF grantee have  
**worked**

 **450+** In-person attendees at  
**FIFAfrica23**

**210**  
Individuals who received  
**Travel grants** to attend  
FIFAfrica23

**39**  
**sessions** at  
FIFAfrica

 **609**  
Individuals trained

 **157+**

**CSOs** in Uganda assessed  
for their digital security  
readiness

**68**  
Participants in workshop on digital rights  
protection and cryptocurrency in Uganda

**1857**   
Individuals at **CIPESA** events

**200+**  
CSOs mentored in countering  
**digital security threats**

**7**   
stakeholder  
engagements  
on countering  
disinformation



**21**  
Journalists, bloggers, and  
activists trained on boosting  
the fight against online  
harms in **Ethiopia**

**40**  
Journalists, fact-checkers,  
activists trained on countering  
electoral disinformation and  
hate speech in **Rwanda** and the  
**DR Congo**

 **38**  
staff at the Ethiopia Human  
Rights Commission trained on  
digital rights, Artificial  
Intelligence (AI), Surveillance,  
and Access to Information

Capacity building  
workshops for

 **3**  
National Human Rights  
Institutions (NHRIs) -  
**Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya**

**30**   
Beneficiaries from **six** countries  
participated in a Regional Digital  
Rights Research Communication  
and Advocacy Training workshop

**1** Digital Rights Hub of African Civil  
Society Organisations established

**40** Beneficiaries at a  
Labour and Tech workshop

# Capacity Development to Advance Digital Democracy

During the year, CIPESA continued with its mission to build the capacity of disparate actors to advance digital rights and digital democracy. This is informed by our conviction that the more actors there are that defend digital democracy, the more likely that such efforts will succeed. However, not only are the actors currently engaged few, many of them lack the requisite skills to effectively defend and promote digital democracy.



## Tackling Disinformation

Countering disinformation was a primary intervention for CIPESA during 2023. Disinformation undermines the resilience and safety of human rights defenders and journalists, and hampers free expression, public participation, and access to information. It has also been known to undermine electoral integrity. We tracked trends in disinformation in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and Kenya, supported *fact checking* in South Sudan and the *push-back against gender disinformation* in Uganda. Moreover, over the course of the year we also held various engagements as detailed below.

## Regional Convening for Disinformation Fighters

CIPESA partnered with Bertelsmann Foundation to host in Nairobi, Kenya a *regional workshop on countering disinformation* in Africa. It brought together 25 participants from over 15 countries.

The convening created a *space for exchange* amongst experts and mutual learning of each other's contexts to jointly explore the landscape of counter-disinformation initiatives, pro-democracy mobilisation efforts, and highlighted particularly promising examples and good practices. In addition, as our Bertelsmann partners *noted*, networking with and among the respective actors aimed to foster strong collaborations, alliances, and knowledge transfer, including assessing ideas for their potential to successfully strengthen counter-disinformation efforts in Europe.

Following the workshop, we embarked on research in four countries to generate evidence on the successes and pitfalls of initiatives that are combating disinformation. The research focused on the different stages of the disinformation disorder, including production, detection, dissemination, and amplification. Insights from the *discussion* in Nairobi also fed into FIFAfrica23, where a collaborative panel discussion titled "*Guardians of Truth: Media, Technology, and the Fight Against Disinformation*" was hosted by Bertelsmann, CIPESA, and the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA).

## Disinformation Training for Ethiopian Journalists and Activists

Like many African countries, Ethiopia is grappling with an alarming rise in hate speech and disinformation that is undermining social cohesion, *promoting conflict*, and leading to a concerning number of threats against journalists and human rights defenders.

Accordingly, we teamed up with Ethiopian civil society partners to conduct a training that equipped 21 journalists, bloggers, and activists with knowledge to navigate the country's law on hate speech and disinformation and skills to call out and fight disinformation and hate speech. The efforts of the trained journalists could boost the fight against online harms and contribute to the advancement of digital rights in Ethiopia.

The proliferation of disinformation is detrimental to citizens' fundamental rights, as many Ethiopians feel their right to freedom of expression is compromised. The prevalence of disinformation also means that many Ethiopians lack access to impartial and diverse information. Moreover, disinformation has been directly fueling conflict in several regions of Ethiopia. According to workshop participants and reports, both pro-government and anti-government actors have perpetuated this vice, whose real-world consequences are severe, including the loss of life and large-scale violent events.



CIPESA brought together some fifteen journalists, human rights defenders and civil society players from Goma, Bukavu, Gisenyi and Kigali

## Growing the Capacity of Journalists and Advocates to Tackle Electoral Disinformation in DR Congo

Disinformation dogged the lead-up to the December 2023 elections in the DR Congo, a country already torn apart by years of armed conflict. Accordingly, in July 2023, CIPESA *gathered* journalists, fact-checkers, Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), and civil society players from DR Congo and Rwanda in the border town of Rubavu to grow their capacity and draw up efforts to counter electoral disinformation and hate speech.

As media consultant Pascal Chirhalwirwa stated at the meeting, while it required commitment to combat the spread of disinformation, journalists and social media influencers had a primary role to fact-check news and create awareness about disinformation. Unless digital literacy was created among community members by trusted actors such as independent journalists, efforts to fight disinformation would register limited results.

Back in 2022, CIPESA convened Congolese and Rwandan journalists and digital rights activists to discuss how they could play a more effective role in countering disinformation amidst the conflict between the two countries. However, in the earlier part of 2023, CIPESA and partners conducted interviews among journalists and HRDs in eastern Congo and border areas in Rwanda, including those involved in earlier capacity development engagements. From their accounts, it was apparent that conflict-related disinformation had grown exponentially as armed conflict intensified and relations between Congo and Rwanda further deteriorated. On the other hand, as elections drew closer, electoral disinformation bloomed too. Worryingly, journalists and government officials were among the main instigators and agents of disinformation.

The training we conducted armed key actors with vital skills in fighting the double evils of hate speech and disinformation in a fragile country headed to highly contentious elections. While the results of the elections were highly contested, DR Congo avoided the outbreak of elections-related violence that many had feared.



## Effects of Disinformation Under the Spotlight at the African Commission

The effects of disinformation on the digital civic space were put in the spotlight at the 77th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights held in Arusha, Tanzania in October 2023. CIPESA and partners *Global Partners Digital*, *ARTICLE 19 Senegal/West Africa*, *PROTEGE QV* of Cameroon, and the *Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria* put together the session as part of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) Forum.

The session explored how disinformation affects online rights and freedoms including freedom of expression, access to information, freedom of assembly and association and participation especially in electoral democracy. The various partners have been jointly running a project on disinformation, which includes the *LEXOTA disinformation tracker*.



## Empowering National Human Rights Institutions on Digital Rights

It is crucial to grow the capacity of African National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) who are not always well versed with the opportunities and challenges which technology presents, which creates a need for capacity development and developing partnerships with stakeholders such as civil society. CIPESA has been actively engaged in this regard.

### Digital Rights Training for Ethiopian Human Rights Commission Staff

CIPESA conducted a digital rights training for staff of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in a programme that benefitted 22 members of staff from various departments of the statutory entity. Conducted in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa in October 2023, the programme aimed to build the EHRC staff's understanding of digital rights issues and the link with traditional rights.

At the end of the training, the EHRC staff identified key actions the commission could integrate in its annual work plans, such as digital rights monitoring, advocacy for enabling laws to be enacted, and developing tools for follow up on implementation of recommendations on digital rights by treaty bodies and the Human Rights Council. Others were collaborations with local and regional actors including media, fact-checkers, civil society organisations, and platforms; working with law enforcement agencies and other national mechanisms to tackle hate speech and disinformation while protecting human rights; and conducting digital literacy capacity building.

A follow-up training of the EHRC supported by International Media Support (IMS) during December 2023, centred on Artificial Intelligence (AI), Surveillance, and Access to Information and benefitted up to 16 commission staff.

### Discussing Access to Information with Uganda's NHRI

In Uganda during the 26th Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) Annual Report Consultative Meeting, we delivered a presentation on 'Perspectives on Access to Information in Uganda-Progress, Challenges and Recommendations'. The UHRC is mandated by Uganda's Constitution to monitor the human rights situation in the country and publish periodic findings as well as submit an annual report on the State of Human Rights to parliament. This meeting aimed to verify and gather further information from stakeholders to enrich the Commission's report.

### Assessing the Human Rights Impacts of Public Sector Digitalisation with Kenya's NHRI

Engagements with the Kenya National Human Rights Commission (KNHRC) focused on technology and human rights impact assessments, with the commission featuring at FIFAfrica23 in a session on human rights implications of digital ID for vulnerable and marginalised groups.

The engagements with the EHRC, KNHRC and UHRC build on 2022 peer learning and technology and human rights training for NHRIs in east and southern Africa by CIPESA in partnership with the Danish Human Institute for Human Rights.

**22** 

members of staff  
benefitted digital  
rights training

# Expanding the Community of Internet Freedom Advocates Across Africa

## The Africa Digital Rights Fund (ADRF) Hits USD 700,000 in Awards

During 2023, the Africa Digital Rights Fund (ADRF) continued to grow the pool of engaged digital rights actors across Africa. In *Round Seven*, USD 70,000 was awarded to seven organisations for projects on digital inclusion, women's safety online, cyber security and digital resilience. Since establishment in April 2019, the ADRF has disbursed USD 700,000 to 55 beneficiaries across 39 African countries. Supported initiatives *commend* the ADRF as a unique funding initiative that has broken ranks with traditional funders' structures, and to considerable effect.

Grantees during 2023 included Omuka Hub that is raising the online visibility of women politicians in Tanzania and pushing for reforms related to online violence against women through the Political Parties Act and Election Act. In South Africa, Alt Advisory is leveraging the endgbv.africa portal to increase the availability of resources on the harm resulting from online violence against women, and supporting survivors.

USD   
**70,000**  
to  
**55**  
beneficiaries across  
 **39**  
African countries

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The Institute for Public Policy Research is developing primers and podcasts to spark discussions on national security, social media regulation and content moderation, and multi-stakeholder participation in Namibia's cyber security law and policy making processes. The Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR) is conducting knowledge and skills building exercises in digital security, developing reference materials and resources and convening stakeholder meetings on the data protection bill. In Kenya, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, the Mozambican Forum of Disabled Persons' Organizations (FAMOD), Signs of Hope Trust, and the Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTANet), respectively are utilising CIPESA's *Disability and ICT Accessibility Framework Indicators* to advance digital accessibility for persons with disabilities.

## FIFAfrica23 Statistics

Over **450**  in-person attendees



**210**

Travel support  
beneficiaries



**117**

Speakers



**39**

Sessions  
(panel discussions,  
workshops and  
presentations)

**12**

pre-events (alliance  
meetings, training  
academies and workshops)

**15**

Exhibitors



**4** languages programming  
(English, French, Swahili and Sign)



**3** countries

(Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) traversed in the  
“Roadtrip to FIFAfrica23” covering over **2,000** km

**2** Day

Multilingual digital security help desk hosted by  
**CIPEA** in partnership with **Access Now**, the **Tor  
Project**, **Encrypt** Uganda, **Defenders Protection  
Initiative** (DPI), and **Greenhost**

## The Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa (FIFAfrica) Marks 10 Years

The 10th edition of the Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa (FIFAfrica) was held in Tanzania and provided a platform to create partnerships and expand the community of actors that advance digital freedoms in Africa. Initially held in 2014 in Uganda, FIFAfrica has become the largest and most impactful gathering that annually places digital rights on the agenda of policymakers, the private sector, and civil society. The 2023 edition, which was organised in partnership with Tanzania’s Ministry for Information and ICT, attracted more than 450 physical attendees, besides hundreds more online.

More than 350 session proposals were received for FIFAfrica, and the registration surpassed 1,300 individuals, showing the keen interest that different stakeholders across the continent and beyond have in supporting and participating in FIFAfrica. The *FIFAfrica23 agenda* featured 10 tracks including on trends in *online violence against women*, *disinformation*, *platform accountability* and *content moderation* and *expanding digital civic space*, among others.

Notably, FIFAfrica attracted the support and participation of various technology and democracy actors, including bilateral organisations, foundations, technologists and media development organisations, platforms and international NGOs.

More than  
**350**  
session proposals

  
**1,300+**  
Individuals registered



## Developing Research and Advocacy Capacity Among Stakeholders

We remained alert to the challenges shackling digital rights advocacy which are aggravated by rapid policy change and an ever-evolving technology sector in Africa. These include *siloed approaches*, *limited avenues for stakeholder participation*, a *lack of requisite knowledge, skills, and resources* for meaningful and sustained engagement, as well as *inadequate digital* resilience capacity among the most at-risk groups. Our work addresses these challenges.

In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania during March 2023, We convened a regional Digital Rights Research Communication and Advocacy Training targeting 30 beneficiaries from six African countries - Lesotho, Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The engagement helped to grow participants' thematic understanding of key digital rights trends, including disinformation, online gender-based violence, legal and policy frameworks, surveillance, the digital economy, access and affordability, digital safety and security, privacy and data protection, digital inclusion and network disruptions. There were also practical skills development in digital rights research methodologies, data-driven advocacy, activism and impact communications.

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A post-training evaluation *indicated* a strong appreciation of the relevance of the capacity building, the opportunity to expand networks, retention and application of acquired skills and knowledge. Notably, beneficiaries have become infomediaries within their communities and organisations, through awareness raising exercises, and conducting onward training.

Participants at a Digital Rights Research Communication and Advocacy Training, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania during March 2023

Meanwhile, on the sidelines of the 2023 Africa Media Convention in Lusaka, Zambia, we hosted institutional capacity building sessions for select partners from Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Zambia, Ghana and Senegal on impact harvesting; gender mainstreaming; diversity, equity and inclusion; and risk assessment.



On data governance, a capacity building workshop on the sidelines of DataFest targeted civil society and data protection authorities from Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda on data justice (particularly the six pillars of power, equity, access, knowledge, participation, and identity) and how they can be applied to activism, policy-making, and technology design to ensure equitable and rights-based data collection, governance, and use in increasingly dynamic data and innovation ecosystems. Another workshop on data governance, also held in Nairobi, Kenya, brought together participants from 15 countries (Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritius, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda and Zambia), who included Members of Parliament, public interest lawyers, digital rights activists, innovators and media practitioners.



# Galvanising Advocacy

## Advocating for a Safe Internet for Women

Across Africa, the digital gender gap has remained a constant concern. This impacts the potential of women and girls to be active digital citizens. Moreover, there is growing online violence against women, most of it targeting women politicians, women HRDs and women journalists. In many countries, insufficient attention is being paid to this problem by law enforcement agencies, who are often ill-equipped to comprehend the problem and investigate/ prosecute perpetrators. The inadequacy of laws on technology-assisted violence against women, and paucity of data on the nature and prevalence of the vice, present additional roadblocks to addressing it.

In commemoration of International Women's Day 2023, we conducted an online webinar *themed Tech4Equality* where speakers included a Ugandan Member of Parliament and a shadow minister, a Tanzanian MP, a Namibian university lecturer and a Zambian digital rights activist. The *webinar focused* on Advocating for Gender-Inclusive ICT Policy and Governance.

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**we conducted an online webinar themed Tech4Equality where speakers included a Ugandan Member of Parliament and a shadow minister, a Tanzanian MP, a Namibian university lecturer and a Zambian digital rights activist.**

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In Uganda, we supported the inaugural *Women in Media Symposium* and awards organised by the Uganda Media Women's Association (UMWA). The event featured over 150 female media and communications practitioners, and culminated in the recognition of distinguished women in the industry. In Cameroon, we partnered with DefyHateNow to organise a workshop on the safety of female journalists. Meanwhile, skills and knowledge building engagements included digital safety and resilience training for *journalists in the Anglophone region of Cameroon*; and women journalists in Uganda *following on from the Women and Media Symposium*.

Separately, CIPESA and UNESCO *embarked* on a multi-country project to improve the digital safety of female journalists. The project implements some of the recommendations of the 2022 report on the *State of Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists in Africa*, which found that online attacks against women journalists were *increasing exponentially*.

## Assessing the Universality of the Internet

In 2015, the 38th General Conference of UNESCO endorsed a new definition on the universality of the internet. It was based upon four principles - Rights, Openness, Accessibility to all and Multi-stakeholder participation, the Rights, Openness, Access and Multi-stakeholder governance (ROAM) principles. UNESCO recognised that these Internet Universality Indicators (IUI) were central to the growth and evolution of the Internet, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. As such, since then CIPESA has contributed to advocacy efforts aimed at improving the use of the indicators in more African countries.

In March CIPESA participated at a *ClubHouse* discussion hosted by Namibia House on Ensuring Digital Inclusion using the UNESCO ROAM-X Framework. Other speakers were from the Internet Society of Namibia, UNESCO, the Namibia Ministry of ICT, and KICTANet. There was consensus that the cross-cutting nature of the ROAM-X framework could help to improve gender mainstreaming in policy development and decision making.

At FIFAfrica23, the advancement of the IUIs was reiterated and *highlighted* as a tool to enable the realisation of guidelines aimed at regulating digital platforms and safeguarding freedom of expression and access to information.

## Capacitating Policy Makers to Defend Digital Democracy

At the regional level, we hosted a workshop on the role of policy makers in advocacy for digital rights through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in Nairobi, Kenya. The workshop attracted participants from 15 countries (Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritius, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda and Zambia). They included Members of Parliament (MPs), public interest lawyers, digital rights activists, innovators and media practitioners.

Meanwhile, we signed a partnership agreement with the African Parliamentary Network on Internet Governance (APNIG) and Small Media to enhance the role of Members of Parliament in advancing progressive internet policy and protecting digital rights. Indeed, at FIFAfrica23, up to 13 MPs were in attendance, in furtherance of the cooperation framework. Separately, we co-organised with the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), the online "Africa workshop with policy makers on cybersecurity and gender".

CIPESA joined hands with the American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative on Promoting Freedom of Expression, Rule of Law, and Access to Justice in East Africa in *capacity building of more than 15 Ugandan parliamentarians* on limitations to freedom of expression and access to information. The training targeted Ugandan MPs from Parliament's Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Committee, ICT Committee, and Human Rights Committee.



We convened a second engagement with Ugandan MPs, telecommunications companies, academia, the media and CSOs to strengthen stakeholder dialogue for digital rights protection in October 2023. The engagement had 68 participants, including seven MPs.



## Making the Business and Human Rights Case

Digital technologies have become central to business and innovation. The digital age thus presents new challenges and ways of working that necessitate a review of how the United Nations Guiding Principles (UNGPs) on Business and Human Rights can be applied in the technology sector and indeed in other businesses.

In March 2023, CIPESA was part of the panel of experts at a UN Human Rights convening to devise strategies to create awareness among African stakeholders on implementing the UNGPs, at an event in Cape Town, South Africa. We were part of yet another engagement in October 2023, on applying the UNGPs to digital trade practices in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). We explored policy gaps for regional digital trade and the role of civil society in maximising the UNGPs in Africa, and discussed the role of critical stakeholders in the application of the UNGPs to regional digital trade practices in Africa.

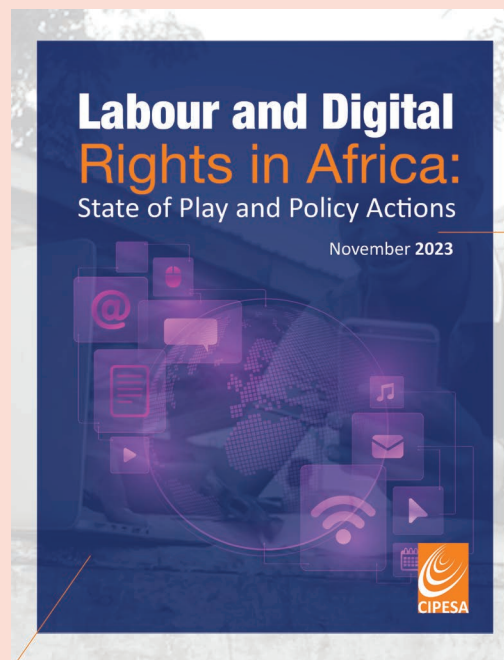
We went on to publish a pivotal policy brief on Labour and Digital Rights in Africa, which provides an overview of the emerging uses of frontier data-driven technologies and their impact on labour and digital rights in Africa, and offers policy recommendations.

In Uganda during November 2023, CIPESA supported the 5th Annual Symposium on Business and Human Rights in Uganda, where our work in this area was exhibited and we ran a digital security clinic. Earlier in January, CIPESA participated at a roundtable hosted by the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), the Swedish Embassy in Pretoria, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), themed “A business case for internet freedom: Enabling an inclusive, open and secure online democratic space in Africa in polarised contexts”.

Our current work on business and human rights has strong foundations, including a submission to telecom provider MTN on how the group can improve its role in the protection of human rights; a brief on how telecom companies, internet service providers (ISPs) and platforms can do more to protect the rights of users in view of increasing incidents of internet shutdowns; submissions to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on how businesses in the technology sector can improve the observance of human rights; and assessments of telecom performance in promoting digital accessibility for persons with disability in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa.

## Promoting Journalists’ Safety in the Digital Age

The digital era has also seen an exponential increase in online harassment of journalists, criminalisation of aspects of journalism, surveillance of journalists, and the orchestration of disinformation campaigns. These threats have translated into offline risks of physical violence, thereby undermining the safety and independence of journalists, while also eroding freedom of expression. Further to the interventions targeting women journalists in advocating for safe internet for women as outlined above, we supported efforts in mitigating online abuse against women journalists in Ghana and Nigeria and in Zambia, during the second Africa Media Convention, CIPESA convened a session that explored threats to media freedom and journalists’ safety in the digital age and comprehensive measures to tackle them. The session brought together over 40 stakeholders from across Africa.



Other efforts on media freedom included support to the Uganda National Journalism Awards (UNJA) organised by the African Centre for Media Excellence (ACME), which promote media professionalism and excellence; and support to the Uganda Media Week hosted by Media Focus on Africa, which explored the role of effective reporting in strengthening democratic accountability, creating an inclusive internet environment for women in media, deciphering the implications of AI in the realm of journalism, and confronting online gender-based violence.

## The Digital Rights Hub of African Civil Society Organisations

At the September *Forum on internet Freedoms in Africa*, CIPESA and the ICNL convened a digital rights hub aimed at promoting the digital civic space in Africa. The hub brought together CSOs representatives from 10 African countries. The hub held discussions on the relationship between digital civic space and its importance to CSOs and internet infrastructure governance. Further insights were drawn from developments on artificial intelligence, surveillance, privacy rights, network disruptions, online content moderation, and the burgeoning concerns on disinformation and its impact on the digital society.

The hub concluded by defining the role of CSOs in protecting the digital civic space through effective advocacy strategies such as litigation, legal analysis and the law making process, capacity building of key stakeholders including parliamentarians and making use of regional human rights monitoring mechanisms such as the United Nations Human Rights Council mechanisms like Universal Periodic Review and Special Rapporteurs and the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights monitoring mechanisms. The emerging statement from the convening can be accessed [here](#).



## KeptItOn: Support to Efforts Against Network Disruptions

Internet shutdowns (also known as network disruptions) have increasingly become a part of governments' information control measures in Africa and around the globe. Between January 2016 and June 2023, the #KeptItOn coalition had documented at least 146 incidents of shutdowns in 37 countries in Africa. Network disruptions violate a wide range of human rights while frustrating efforts to close the digital divide.

Between January 2016 and June 2023

**146**

Documented incidents  
of internet shutdowns

**37**

countries  
in Africa.

Accordingly, CIPESA has for long advocated against these disruptions, through producing research evidence, conducting awareness and advocacy. In 2023, as DR Congo headed to national elections, CIPESA urged the government to refrain from disrupting access to the internet, as the move would hurt the economy, undermine electoral integrity, deny citizens their rights to information and to free expression, and possibly fuel violence. While DR Congo has in the past been among the countries with the largest number of internet disruptions, for the latest elections it kept the internet on.

We provided an analysis showing how the ongoing armed conflict in Sudan was affecting digital communications and critical service delivery. Over the last four years, Sudan has severely disrupted the internet. During 2023, CIPESA also spoke at many events and panels on the foolhardiness of network disruptions, and joined various partners, including the #KeptItOn coalition, in urging governments to desist from disrupting the internet.

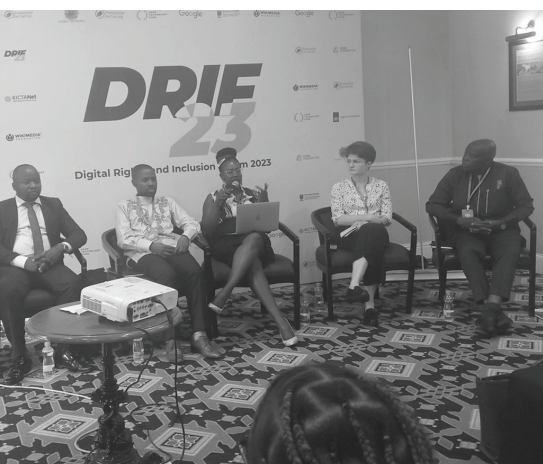
## Participation in Regional and Global Processes on Digital Rights and Democracy

There is increased recognition of CIPESA as a thought leader, with invitations to provide inputs to various proposed national laws and policies, as well as to guidelines, such as UNESCO global guidelines for regulating digital platforms, the African Union (AU) draft policy on business and human rights, the disinformation strategy of the African Centre for Strategic Studies of the United States Department of Defense, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) business and technology Africa Strategy, the AU/ African electoral bodies' association Guidelines on Social Media Use in Elections in Africa, and the *Association of World Election Bodies (AWEB)* capacity-building programme.

In February, we joined hundreds of stakeholders from around the world for the UNESCO *InternetForTrust* conference, which discussed technology governance/ platform accountability regulation. At two consultative meetings, CIPESA shared views on our work in this area, including on contributions we made that helped inform the African perspective in the lead-up to the conference. CIPESA also participated in the side event by the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) focusing on Regulating Digital Platforms for Information as a Global Public Good.

Others included consultations on data sharing and reuse regulation in Uganda, implementation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in Africa, developing the AI and Media Charter led by Reporters Without Borders, the UN Special Rapporteur consultations on the uses of technology for the facilitation of peaceful assemblies and the implementation of the African Union international election observation working group.

Convenings also continue to provide an opportunity for stakeholder engagement and deliberations. CIPESA supported the East African Internet Governance Forum (EAIGF), which took place in Arusha, Tanzania. At the MozFest conference, we spoke at a virtual session on "Encryption in Africa - Human Right or Criminal Offence?" The session was informed by CIPESA's policy brief *How African States Are Undermining the Use of Encryption*. At #RightsCon, we participated in-person and online, in various sessions including on internet shutdowns, *press freedom* and the role of *free and open source software* for digital resilience of civil society. We also participated at the Global Conference on Cyber Capacity Building (GC3B) which took place in Accra, Ghana.



CIPESA at the Digital Rights Forum 2023 (DRIF23) in Nairobi, Kenya

At the *Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum (DRIF)* an annual convening hosted by our longstanding partner, the Nigeria-based Paradigm Initiative, CIPESA *hosted* and *participated* in a range of discussions alongside various regional and international partners. Three CIPESA staff and one fellow attended the Stockholm Internet Forum (SIF) organised by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). CIPESA's delegation facilitated the pre-SIF Africa regional dialogue and also spoke on a panel on human rights safeguards in digital spaces in times of crisis.

## African Perspectives on Operationalising UNESCO's Guidelines for Regulating Digital Platforms

The UNESCO Guidelines for regulating digital platforms aim to safeguard freedom of expression, access to information, and other human rights in the context of the development and implementation of digital platform regulatory processes. On September 28, 2023, UNESCO held a high-level panel discussion on unpacking African perspectives on the operationalisation of UNESCO's Guidelines for regulating digital platforms. The session was among the discussions at FIFAfrica, which assembled organisations from across Africa and beyond to deliberate on reigning concerns in the internet governance and digital rights landscape. See more [here](#).

A related conversation featured the *Social Media 4 Peace* (SM4P) project that was established to strengthen the resilience of societies to potentially harmful content spread online, in particular hate speech inciting violence, while protecting freedom of expression and enhancing the promotion of peace through digital technologies, notably social media. The project was piloted in four countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Indonesia, and Kenya. More [here](#).

## Engaging Uganda's Courts and Parliament on Bad Laws

In our engagements with Uganda's legislative and judicial systems, there were some wins and some setbacks. In January, we welcomed the ruling by Uganda's Constitutional Court that section 25 of the Computer Misuse Act of 2011, which penalises "offensive communication", is null and void. We celebrated, because that provision had for long been utilised to silence dissent. But our celebration was cautious. As we *noted*, the Computer Misuse Act will likely remain a key impediment to free expression and the enjoyment of digital rights, because of *amendments* made to the law in late 2022. Those amendments ambiguously prohibit the "misuse of social media," sending or sharing of unsolicited information through a computer, and sending, sharing or transmission of malicious information about or relating to any person. CIPESA and other rights groups are challenging these provisions in the Constitutional Court.

In a separate case, in March 2023, the High Court of Uganda ruled to allow experts from Access Now, ARTICLE 19, and CIPESA to offer their opinions on the human rights red flags around the country's digital ID system.

The *ruling* followed an application by the three organisations for admission as "Friends of Court" in a case which challenges the use of the National Identification Register as the sole data source and primary means of identification prior to accessing various social services. Uganda's national digital ID, also known as Ndaga Muntu, is a mandatory scheme for accessing various socio-economic services. The court noted the significance of the arguments raised by the trio, particularly on data protection, digital inclusion, surveillance, and the sufficiency of protection measures and their impact on the right to privacy of citizens in the country. Meanwhile, we made a submission to the Uganda Parliament's Committee on Finance on the implications of Uganda's Income Tax (Amendment) Bill, 2023.



# Enhanced Safety and Digital Resilience of Social Justice Actors

Besides the efforts focused on a safer internet for women and safety of journalists, we also enhanced the safety and resilience of various CSOs and individual human rights defenders and activists.

## Road Campaign on Digital Security

For the second year running, in the lead up to the 2023 edition of FIFAfrica, we took the campaign for enhanced digital security practices to various towns and cities beyond the usual circuits. This year, CIPESA partnered with DigiSec Initiative and Defenders Protection Initiative (DPI) for a *road campaign on digital security knowledge, resources and skills across Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania*. The Roadtrip served as a mobile digital security/resilience surgery for frontline HRDs to discuss needs, challenges and emerging trends and strategies on collaboratively addressing prevalent and emerging digital security and internet freedom challenges; and offered support and tools to communities located along the route between the three countries.



On the Road to #FIFAfrica 23

## Multilingual Digital Security Clinics at Events

At FIFAfrica23, a multilingual digital security help desk offered attendees access to expertise, tools and resources for organisational and individual safety and security online. The clinic and help desk were run by expert trainers including from CIPESA, Defenders Protection Initiative (DPI), Greenhost, DigSec Initiative, Frontline Defenders and AccessNow. Building on its success at previous editions of FIFAfrica, the Global Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in 2022 and two national convenings in Uganda, the digital security helpdesk model was replicated at RightsCon, which was held in June 2023, in Costa Rica. Similarly, at the 5th Annual Symposium on Business and Human Rights in Uganda, we provided digital security support to attendees to help enhance their online communications and information security.

## Compiling the CSO Compliance Index in Uganda

Digital resilience institutional support to media practitioners, CSOs and HRDS in Uganda continued throughout the year with CIPESA developing and administering a Cybersecurity Index. The index evaluates organisational cybersecurity preparedness and aims to inform strategic planning and safeguarding of digital assets and data. Up to 157 organisations including media houses, environmentalists, transparency and accountability advocates were evaluated, with results indicating the majority as high risk. Ongoing mentoring and technical support is tailored to each organisation's needs. The findings are also informing stakeholder advocacy and awareness raising on the importance of cybersecurity within Uganda's civil society sector. The activities are co-supported by the USAID Civil Society Strengthening Activity.

## Regional Resilience Hub for CSOs

CIPESA's Technology Officer participated in the launch in Nairobi, Kenya, of The @TatuaDigital Resilience Centre of which he is a Board of Advisors member. The centre, whose mission is to "Promote an enabling environment in the ICT sector that is robust, open, accessible, and rights-based," is hosted by the Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTANet), and brings together seven entities from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, including CIPESA.



Participant at a Digital Resilience Training Empowering Human Rights Defenders in East Africa

# Research

CIPESA has consistently produced thought-evoking research on various facets of technology for public good, which inform policy and practice around internet/ ICT regulation and use. It was a busy year, as is usually the case, for our research efforts. Below, we highlight some of the research work.

## The State of Internet Freedom in Africa 2023 Report

Through a series of essays, authors in this special issue of the report reflect on the past 10 years on the state of Internet freedom in Africa, exploring various thematic issues around digital rights, including surveillance, privacy, censorship, disinformation, infrastructure, access, advocacy, online safety, internet shutdowns, among others.

Over the years, this report has been instrumental in complementing the work of state and non-state actors including by providing contextual information and generating evidence to inform ICT policy-making and practice; creating awareness on internet freedom issues on the continent; and shaping digital rights conversations.

## Compelled Service Provider Assistance for State Surveillance in Africa: Challenges and Policy Options

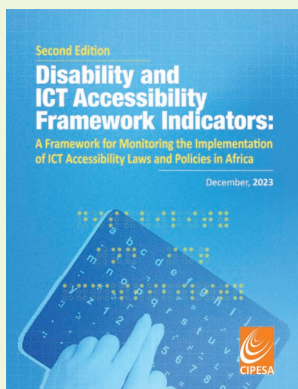
This policy brief examines how mandatory obligations on telecom intermediaries to facilitate state surveillance undermines their ability to comply with international standards including the UNGPs, and hamper users' rights. It draws on experiences from around Sub-Saharan Africa to illustrate how service providers are compelled through retrogressive policies and practices, to comply with state surveillance instructions.

A related think piece explored *how legal and regulatory frameworks impact digital democracy on the continent* while another brief examined *trends in state surveillance and how it impacts rights online*.

## A Framework to Advance Accessibility of ICT for Persons with Disabilities

We produced the second edition of the Disability and ICT Accessibility Framework indicators, which is used for Monitoring the Implementation of ICT Accessibility Laws and Policies in Africa.

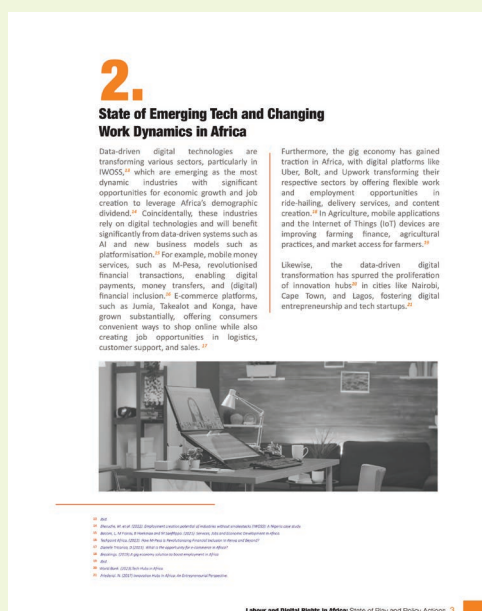
As part of activities to mark the International Day for Persons with Disabilities (IDPD), CIPESA convened a high-level *dialogue* on the progress made towards realising the rights of persons with disabilities, particularly online, and existing opportunities and challenges towards achieving greater success. Panellists encouraged Disability Rights Organisations, policymakers, mobile network operators, researchers, and academia interested in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities to utilise the framework as a key pillar in their digital accessibility and inclusion efforts. A number of ADRF grantees also worked on accessibility issues using the framework.



## Labour and Digital Rights in Africa: State of Play and Policy Actions

This *brief* reviews the emerging uses of technology and their impact on workers' rights in Africa. The brief highlights the need for a collaborative approach amongst policymakers, civil society, industry, and academia that balances trade-offs between digital skills development, just data value creation (JDVC), and fair labour practices, with digital innovation and entrepreneurship, that can be realised in industries without smokestacks (IWOS). It unpacks the emerging uses of frontier data-driven technologies and their impact on labour and digital rights in Africa and offers policy recommendations.

In line with CIPESA's efforts on the Future of Work, we partnered with the Ford Foundation, Siasa Place, and Solidarity Center to convene more than 40 participants for a Labour and Tech workshop in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. It discussed the State of Play in the World of Labor and Tech; When an Algorithm is Your Boss; Opportunities for Building Workers Power in the Platform Economy and Within Digital Supply Chains; Worker Health and Safety; Strategic Litigation & Advocacy Opportunities and Challenges at the National, Regional, and Global Level.



## Interrogating and Informing Health Data Regulation

As global interest in the regulation of health data gains traction, it is instructive to revisit how health data has been handled in some African countries in exercises involving the collection of large amounts of data. This examination is crucial to appreciate the key challenges faced in safeguarding the privacy and security of health-related data. In turn, this can provide pointers to the areas that require regulation and strengthening of practices. Our research included a think piece on Patient Data Privacy in the Age of Telemedicine: Case Studies from Ghana, Rwanda and Uganda; a brief on data regulation lessons from *COVID-19 surveillance* in Kenya and Uganda; and an *examination* of How Technology is Impacting Health Data Governance in Africa: The Case of Uganda. As part of our work in this area, notably as partners in a consortium led by the University of Warwick that is undertaking work on health data regulation, two CIPESA staff attended the Health Data Summer School at Warwick University and a planning meeting at the University of Nairobi.

## Researching and Networking on Data Governance

From the Data Governance Fund for Africa programme implemented by NIYEL, we secured a grant for research and advocacy involving partner organisations in Kenya, Cameroon, Ghana, Uganda on data governance, particularly around the African Union Data Policy Framework.

The promotion of learning and knowledge exchange in data governance included at *DataFest Africa 2023*, an *exploratory think tank on data governance during public health emergencies in Uganda*, the *West African Privacy Regional Engagement*, and the *Africa Law and Tech Festival 2023*.



# Institutional Strengthening

## Board of Directors Operations

Our very supportive Board of Directors sat consistently, virtually and physically, and Board Committees were active too. The Board revised or passed 10 policies including the following: 1) The Finance Manual 2) The Strategic Plan 2023-2027 3) Board Policy 4) Safeguarding Policy 5) Human Resource Manual 6) Data Recovery and Backup Policy 7) Reserve Funds Policy 8) Travel and Fleet Management Policy 9) Grants Manual 10) Procurement Policy.



Some of the CIPESA Board Directors from Left to right; Ayeta Anne Wangusa, Dr. Wanjiru Mburu, Dr. Marjorie Kyomuhendo, Dr. Wakabi Wairagala, Dr. Abdul Busuulwa

### Five New Staff Recruited

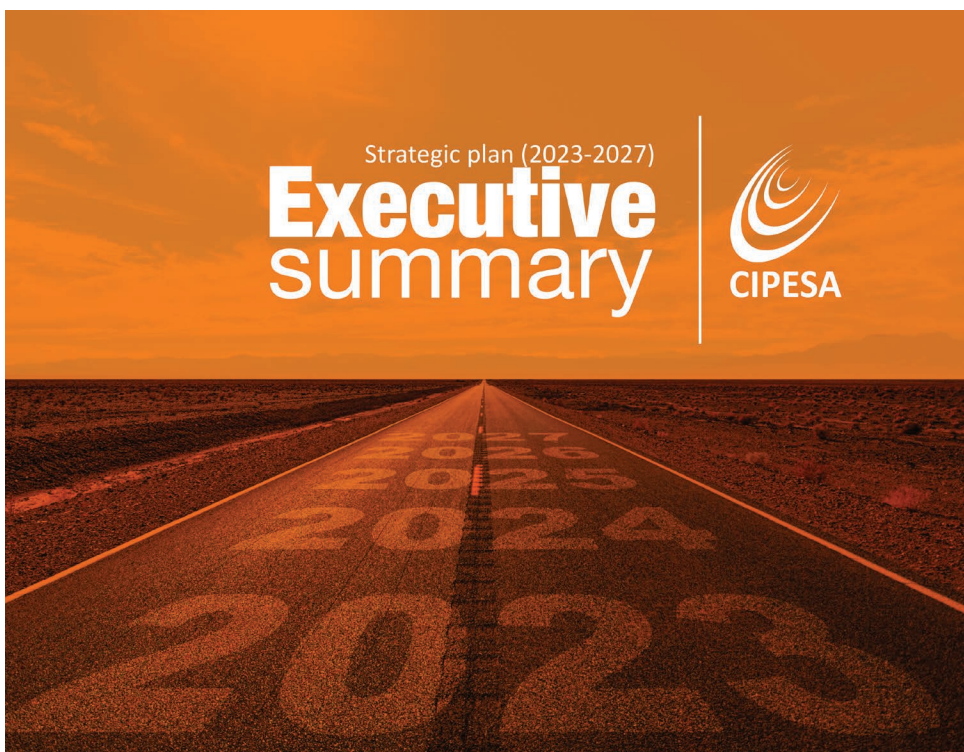
In 2023, the CIPESA expanded and became the most fathomable it has ever been. Dr. Peter Mwesige was appointed as the Chief of Party for Your Rights Activity, Dr. Hannah Muzee was engaged as the Technical Advisor, Doreen Namuyanja joined as the Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, Sharlon Atukunda was recruited as the Procurement Officer, and Gerald Muhanguzi as the Finance and Grants Manager.



From left to right; Dr. Peter Mwesige, Dr. Hannah Muzee, Doreen Namuyanja, Sharlon Atukunda, Gerald Muhanguzi

### New Strategic Plan Comes Into Play

We completed a new Strategic Plan for 2023-2027 and straight away got down to implementing it. Here is a *summary of the Strategic Plan*.



## **Staff Training**

The year had considerable activity in the area of developing staff knowledge and skills. This started at the staff retreat which, besides discussing the Strategic Plan, reviewing the 2022 work, and drawing up the 2023 work plan, featured training staff in Monitoring and Evaluation and in digital resilience.

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**Over the course of the year, staff had comprehensive training sessions in Fire Management; Procurement Best Practices; and Subgranting Principles.**

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CIPESA Staff at  
2023 Retreat

## **Lest We Forget...**

- CIPESA was granted Observer status at the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR). The status is a recognition of the work we do, but more importantly it gives CIPESA the ability to engage and do advocacy at the ACHPR.
- We strengthened our Information Technology and Financial Management Systems, and embarked on building M&E and Procurement units.
- We *partnered* with The Engine Room to provide intensive support to CIPESA's team to promote responsible data practices and organisational data management. The partnership is among the benefits of CIPESA's membership of the Global Network for Social Justice and Digital Resilience through which we have also had the opportunity to contribute to the network's workstreams - which has served as an opportunity for *cross-regional learning and exchange*.

# Looking Ahead to 2024

Threats to digital freedoms and the free and safe use of technology for public good continue to evolve, as they are directly correlated to the current democratic regression in the region. The declining respect for human rights, flawed elections, enactment of repressive cyber laws, and the shrinking civic space, imply that digital rights and the digital civic space are steadily coming under the crosshairs of governments keen on curtailing citizens' voices and critical organising.

In the same vein, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data-driven technologies are presenting new challenges for social justice and electoral democracy. For instance, AI has enabled the generation of large volumes of disinformation that is often harder-to-detect, and the amplification of digital harms on social media platforms. This undermines access to impartial and pluralistic information, affects electoral integrity and could fuel election-related violence. Yet evidence of how this is playing out remains thin. Researching the nature and effects of AI-supported election disinfo is crucial.

Meanwhile, the convergence of data-driven digital technologies and AI, combined with new business models such as location-based platformisation and gig-work, presents opportunities for *employment* and *economic growth*. However, the convergence also poses significant challenges, such as job displacement, data privacy violations, worker exploitation, algorithmic bias, and perpetuating multidimensional structural injustices. These challenges have significant implications for both labour and digital rights in Africa, and inform CIPESA's approach to the Future of Work area.

In this context, CIPESA's work in 2024 will build on current successes: The ADRF funding has expanded the pool of engaged digital rights actors across Africa. The knowledge and capacity development and technical support have enabled disparate social justice actors to more effectively defend rights and built a digital rights community of practice. The research contributes to field building and powers awareness raising and advocacy by multiple actors across the region. Convenings such as FIFAfrica shape conversations on different ICT topics in Africa where state and non-state actors are able to develop evidence-based interventions which can guide policy and practice.



Accordingly, CIPESA intends to continue conducting evidence-based research, to document rights violations, and to illuminate key emerging issues, with such evidence feeding into awareness-raising and advocacy. We will chart closer links to the wider governance and social justice issues, and build more partnerships with actors that work on various facets of governance and human rights including regional institutions, academia, the private sector and public officials. More effort will be dedicated to areas where we have not done much, such as supporting strategic litigation, the Future of Work, and AI. We will conduct capacity building of lawyers, hold case surgeries, and support strategic litigation in the interest of digital rights. This is because, per CIPESA's experience, public interest litigation can be a pivotal tool for addressing restrictions on freedom of expression, free flow of information and countering privacy infringements in countries where digital rights are repressed.

Furthermore, we will build the capacity of civil society, media, HRDs and activists to conduct advocacy and public communications in response to threats to digital rights, and to effectively engage with policy makers and legislators for progressive reforms towards greater respect and protection for fundamental human rights. We will conduct ICT policy and advocacy training, including for "traditional human rights organisations", many of which are grassroots-based, have wide networks and considerable advocacy experience but are not sufficiently engaged on digital rights nor do they maximally use digital technologies to promote rights and democratic governance.

We remain alive to changing priorities of the donor landscape, the global economic downturn and humanitarian crises. Our fundraising strategy and donor relations are being adapted accordingly and we are actively cultivating new or seeking renewed relations with various funders and implementing partners. In tandem, we will continue to pursue priorities to strengthen organisation structures, governance and resilience, including review of internal policies, staff professional development and welfare support, implementing the new Strategic Plan, devising and effectuating a resource mobilisation plan, and ramping up our public communications and research communications.

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# Supporters

Our work is supported by a wide, globally-distributed network of organisations. We extend our gratitude to these supporters for their continued commitment to our work, and to the work of our network of collaborators.

In 2023, our work was supported by the following:



The CIPESA income for 2023 was **USD 2,753,340**. Our books of accounts are independently audited annually in accordance with the International Financial Reporting Standards.





**Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)**

☎ +256 414 289 502

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