



Digital Democracy Initiative



Advancing Digital Democracy

A POLICY AND ADVOCACY FRAMEWORK FOR GLOBAL ACTION

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Executive Summary

The integration of digital technologies into democratic processes represents a transformative opportunity to enhance governance, amplify citizen engagement, and uphold the principles of accountability and transparency. However, the global digital democracy landscape is marked by significant disparities. While some regions have successfully harnessed digital tools to foster participatory governance, others grapple with systemic challenges, including censorship, misinformation, digital divides, and insufficient regulatory frameworks.

This policy brief synthesizes findings from a comprehensive research initiative conducted across six diverse regions—East Asia, Eastern Europe & Central Asia, Latin America & the Caribbean, the Middle East & North Africa (MENA), South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa—under the CIVICUS Digital Democracy Initiative. It identifies critical challenges and proposes actionable recommendations to strengthen digital democracy worldwide, with an emphasis on empowering civil society organizations (CSOs) as pivotal actors in the digital public sphere.

Key challenges highlighted in the analysis include government surveillance and censorship, which stifle freedom of expression and civic engagement in countries such as China, Myanmar, and Russia. Disinformation campaigns—often state-sponsored—undermine trust in democratic institutions and polarize societies, particularly in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa (Golovachev, A. (2022). Simultaneously, infrastructure deficits and the digital divide exclude marginalized communities, such as rural populations and women, from meaningful participation in digital governance.

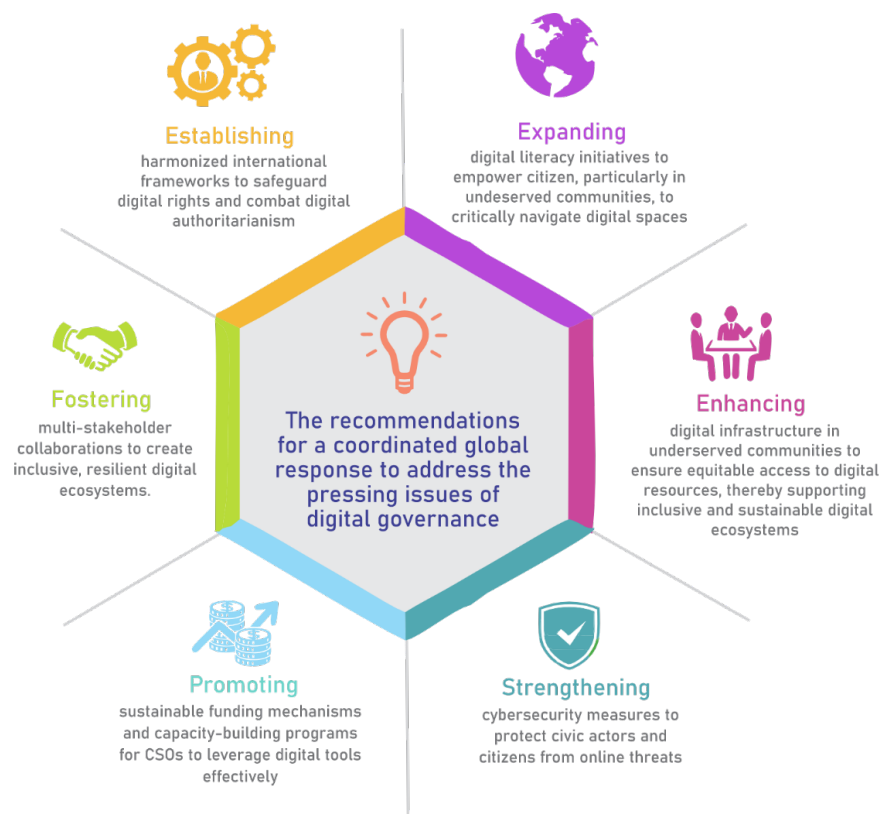
Despite these challenges, innovative practices in countries like Taiwan and South Korea showcase the transformative potential of digital democracy. Open-source platforms like vTaiwan and civic initiatives such as South Korea's e-People have successfully bridged gaps between citizens and policymakers, fostering transparency and trust. Similarly, Ukraine's e-Governance platform exemplifies how digital tools can enhance public accountability and citizen participation, even amidst geopolitical turmoil.

The recommendations outlined in this brief call for a coordinated global response led by the United Nations and its member states to address the pressing issues of digital governance. Specific actions include:

- Establishing harmonized international frameworks to safeguard digital rights and combat digital authoritarianism.
- Expanding digital literacy initiatives to empower citizens, particularly in underserved communities, to critically navigate digital spaces.



- Enhancing digital infrastructure in underserved communities to ensure equitable access to digital resources, thereby supporting inclusive and sustainable digital ecosystems.
- Strengthening cybersecurity measures to protect civic actors and citizens from online threats.
- Promoting sustainable funding mechanisms and capacity-building programs for CSOs to leverage digital tools effectively.
- Fostering multi-stakeholder collaborations to create inclusive, resilient digital ecosystems.



The urgency of these actions cannot be overstated. In an era where technology increasingly defines political participation and civic space, failing to address the challenges of digital democracy risks entrenching inequality and eroding democratic norms. This policy brief offers a strategic roadmap to ensure that digital technologies serve as catalysts for inclusion, equity, and democracy rather than instruments of control and division. By implementing these recommendations, the United Nations along with other key international organizations like the EU, OECD, World Bank, ITU, and the Council of Europe; bilateral agencies like USAID, DFID, GIZ; development corporations like The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Ford Foundation, and the Open Society Foundation; as well as regional partners like the African Union, ASEAN, ECOWAS, Arab League, and SAARC, can strengthen global digital democracy. This collective action will ensure that no voice is left unheard in the digital age.



1. Introduction

In the rapidly evolving digital era, democracy faces both unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges. Digital democracy, defined as the integration of digital technologies into democratic processes, has emerged as a transformative paradigm. It is capable of expanding civic participation, enhancing transparency, and fostering accountability in governance. Civil society organizations (CSOs), a cornerstone of democratic engagement, increasingly rely on digital tools to advocate for inclusive policies, amplify marginalized voices, and combat systemic inequalities. However, despite its potential, the digital democracy ecosystem is marred by growing disparities, ranging from inequitable access to technology to increasing state control over the virtual spaces (Couldry, N., & Meese, J. 2018) (World Bank. 2023).

The findings from the Digital Democracy Ecosystem Synthesis Report, developed by CIVICUS in partnership with regional stakeholders, underscore the complexity and diversity of digital democracy across six key regions: Innovation for Change from East Asia and the Middle East & North Africa (MENA), Paperlab from Eastern Europe & Central Asia, Wingu and Kubadili from Latin America & the Caribbean, Accountability Lab from South Asia, and OpenUp & CTIN from Sub-Saharan Africa. Each region presents unique opportunities for leveraging digital platforms for democratic engagement, as well as distinct challenges shaped by socio-political, technological, and cultural contexts. For instance, while countries like Taiwan have successfully implemented participatory platforms like vTaiwan, enabling citizens to directly engage in policymaking, authoritarian regimes in China and Myanmar suppress dissent through censorship and surveillance. Similarly, in Sub-Saharan Africa, digital innovation is driving civic participation, but infrastructural deficits and digital divides remain significant barriers.

These regional variations emphasize the need for tailored, context-specific interventions to support digital democracy. The challenges—ranging from disinformation campaigns and cybersecurity threats to limited digital literacy and state-imposed restrictions—underscore systemic gaps that hinder the potential of digital platforms to function as inclusive and democratic spaces. Our research further highlights the critical role of CSOs in navigating these challenges, yet many organizations face limited resources, restrictive legal environments, and inadequate support systems to fully harness digital tools.

This policy brief builds upon the evidence-based insights from the research synthesis to propose actionable strategies for strengthening digital democracy globally. Recognizing the pivotal role of the United Nations and international stakeholders detailed above, it provides a roadmap for fostering inclusive, resilient, and accountable digital ecosystems. It advocates for harmonized global policies, robust capacity-building initiatives, sustainable funding mechanisms, and strengthened multi-stakeholder collaboration.



By addressing structural inequalities and enabling civil society actors to thrive in digital spaces, this brief envisions a world where technology serves as a catalyst for democratic renewal rather than a tool for repression. The following sections delineate the current state of digital democracy, identify pressing challenges, and offer strategic recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and advocates to strengthen digital democracy at both global and regional levels.



2. Current Landscape of Digital Democracy

Digital democracy has emerged as a transformative force, reshaping how citizens engage with governance and civil society through digital tools and platforms. However, its application varies significantly across regions due to differences in political contexts, technological access, and civil society capacities. This section provides an overview of the digital democracy ecosystem, integrating insights from the six regions examined in the CIVICUS synthesis report—East Asia, Eastern Europe & Central Asia, Latin America & the Caribbean, the Middle East & North Africa (MENA), South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

2.1. Regional Variations and Trends

The landscape of digital democracy reflects a spectrum of practices, from robust participatory mechanisms to environments where digital tools are weaponized to suppress dissent. In democratic contexts, such as Taiwan, South Korea and Japan in East Asia, advanced civic technologies have enabled citizens to co-create policies and enhance governance transparency. Conversely, authoritarian regimes, such as those in China and Myanmar, leverage digital platforms to entrench control through censorship, surveillance, and internet shutdowns. This duality underscores the complexity of digital democracy, where the same tools can be used to empower or oppress. This duality of digital tools underscores the complexity of their impact across different governance systems, where they can be used to both empower and oppress.

Similarly, in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, countries like Estonia and Ukraine demonstrate the potential of digital platforms in fostering civic engagement through initiatives like e-governance and online anti-corruption campaigns. In contrast, nations such as Russia and Kazakhstan impose strict controls over digital spaces, curbing civil society's ability to mobilize or critique the government like extensive internet regulations in Russia, including the "Sovereign Internet" law that allows the government to disconnect from the global internet during crises and monitor traffic across Russian networks, and intermittent internet shutdowns and strong governmental control over digital content in Kazakhstan, especially during political unrest (Freedom House. 2023). This dichotomy highlights the influence of political will in shaping digital democracy outcomes.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, digital tools have become instrumental in social mobilization and advocacy, as seen in mass protests organized through social media. The 2013 protests in Brazil were widely coordinated through social media, challenged corruption and demanded better public services. Whereas 2015 demonstrations against gender violence in Argentina and subsequent years were significantly organized via social media platforms. However, the region grapples with challenges like cybersecurity vulnerabilities and misinformation, which undermine trust in democratic institutions. As we have seen, high levels of fake news during elections in Brazil found impacting public



perception and trust in democratic institutions. Likewise, cybersecurity issues in Mexico including data breaches affecting government and private sector databases, impacting trust in digital transactions. The MENA region similarly presents a mixed picture, while grassroots movements and CSOs increasingly use digital platforms to amplify marginalized voices, pervasive government surveillance and restrictions on online freedoms remain significant barriers like extensive monitoring of online activities in Egypt, with reports of activists being targeted based on their social media content and restrictive internet laws in Saudi Arabia that limit freedom of expression and assembly online.

South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa showcase both the promise and perils of digital democracy. In South Asia, initiatives such as India's Digital India campaign promote inclusive digital governance, yet significant disparities in internet access and digital literacy persist. Sub-Saharan Africa, with its growing mobile connectivity, has seen digital platforms empower citizens in elections and governance. However, infrastructural deficits and frequent internet shutdowns limit these advances. Notably, India has witnessed multiple instances of internet shutdowns, particularly in regions experiencing social unrest or political tensions, such as in Jammu and Kashmir.

Similarly, Pakistan has periodically implemented internet blackouts during national security incidents or in response to political events. It is more than a year to the blockade of X in Pakistan to curb restrictions on political dissent. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia has experienced significant internet shutdowns during periods of political instability, notably during election times and public protests. Likewise, internet services were disrupted during the 2019 fuel protests in Zimbabwe, which were marked by significant public unrest.

In South Asia, Nepal faces ongoing challenges related to digital infrastructure, particularly in rural and mountainous regions, which hampers equitable access to digital resources. Despite making strides in digital governance, Bangladesh also still grapples with infrastructural limitations, especially in terms of consistent electricity supply and reliable internet service in remote areas.

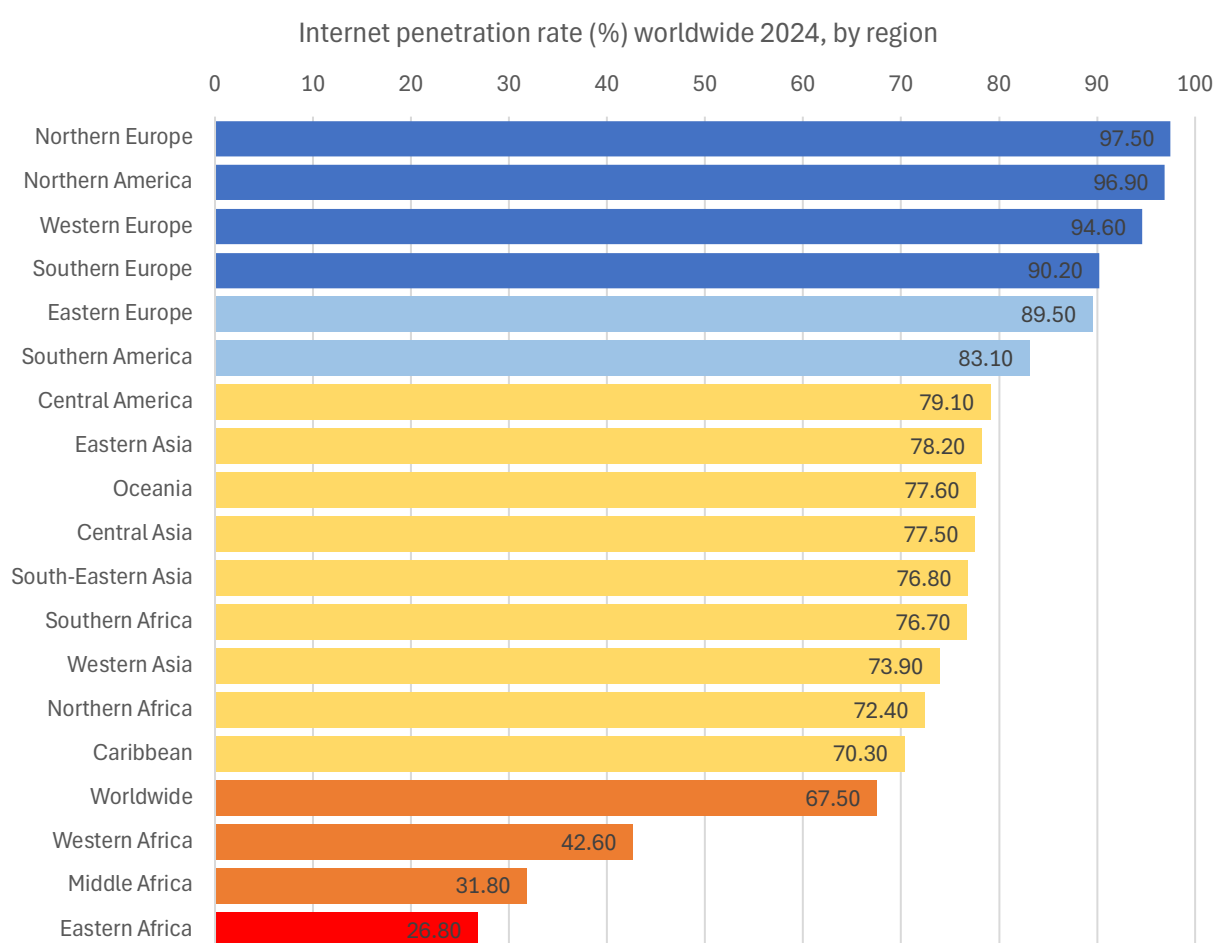
In Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria's digital growth is impeded by inadequate power supply, which affects internet reliability and digital service delivery, particularly in Northern and rural regions. Similarly, Mozambique struggles with limited digital infrastructure, affecting the penetration of digital services and hindering widespread access to digital platforms for civic engagement.

Internet penetration rates by region as of October 2024 are shown in the graph below, that illustrates significant disparities that underpin many of the challenges associated with digital democracy. For instance, Northern Europe and Northern America demonstrate exemplary internet penetration rates at 97.50% and 96.90% respectively, which facilitate

robust digital engagement and participatory governance. In stark contrast, regions like Eastern Africa, Middle Africa, and Western Africa report much lower rates of 26.80%, 31.80%, and 42.60% respectively. These figures underscore a critical barrier to the effective implementation of digital democracy initiatives in these regions, where infrastructural deficits severely limit access to digital resources and opportunities for civic engagement.

The moderate internet penetration in South-Eastern Asia at 76.80%, while relatively higher, still points to significant gaps that can impede initiatives aimed at enhancing digital governance, such as India's Digital India campaign. This disparity necessitates region-specific strategies to elevate internet access to a level that supports comprehensive digital inclusion and governance.

Moreover, the data presented allows for a clear visualization of the digital divides that must be addressed to ensure that regions with lower penetration rates are not left behind in the global move towards digital democracy. This is particularly relevant for Southern Africa, which, with a penetration rate of 76.70%, also reflects the urgent need for enhanced digital infrastructure and literacy programs.



Source: [ITC, Statista 2024](#): Global internet penetration rate as of October 2024, by region



2.2. Opportunities for Advancing Digital Democracy

Despite these challenges, there are promising developments and opportunities for strengthening digital democracy:

- **Civic Technology Innovations:** Platforms such as Taiwan's vTaiwan and South Korea's e-People demonstrate how digital tools can bridge the gap between citizens and governments, fostering transparency and accountability. Additionally, India's MyGov platform encourages direct citizen involvement in governance through crowdsourcing of ideas and feedback on policy initiatives. Similarly, Estonia's e-Residency program allows individuals worldwide to establish and manage a location-independent business online, providing access to Estonia's digital business environment (Schulze, E. 2019).
- **Collaborative Models:** Multi-stakeholder partnerships, as seen in initiatives like Ukraine's Transparent Cities, showcase the potential of aligning government, civil society, and private sector efforts to enhance governance and public engagement. In East Asia, Japan's collaboration between local governments and tech companies has led to the development of digital platforms that improve disaster response and public safety communication.
- **Grassroots Mobilization:** Social media has been pivotal in organizing protests and advocacy campaigns, empowering citizens to demand accountability, particularly in Latin America, MENA, and Africa. In Eastern Europe, digital platforms played a crucial role in the Belarusian democracy movement, facilitating organization and international awareness. A recent example of grassroots mobilization through social media is the role of K-pop fans during the 2020 U.S. political events. K-pop fan communities utilized platforms like Twitter and TikTok to organize large-scale social media campaigns, including reserving tickets to a political rally with no intention of attending, thereby impacting event attendance (Jenkins, H. 2020).
- **Growing Mobile Connectivity:** The expansion of mobile internet access in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa offers an opportunity to integrate underserved populations into digital democratic processes. In Latin America, mobile apps have been developed to connect indigenous communities with legal and educational resources, promoting social inclusion. Moreover, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the expansion of mobile internet access has enabled the development of mobile applications that connect underserved populations to essential services, such as healthcare and education, thereby promoting social inclusion.
- **International Support and Networks:** Global coalitions and funding mechanisms provide resources and expertise to CSOs operating in restrictive environments, enabling them to navigate challenges effectively. In MENA, international partnerships



have supported the development of encrypted communication tools for activists, enhancing their security and operational capacity.

2.3. Implications for Global Digital Democracy

The diversity in digital democracy practices underscores the need for tailored interventions that address regional contexts while fostering global principles of inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. While some regions excel in leveraging technology for civic engagement, others remain constrained by political and infrastructural barriers. Addressing these disparities requires a concerted effort to:

- Advocate for equitable digital policies that prioritize marginalized communities.
- Strengthen cybersecurity and digital literacy initiatives to safeguard democratic actors.
- Support cross-regional learning and collaboration to share best practices and innovate context-appropriate solutions.

As the digital democracy ecosystem continues to evolve, it is imperative for global actors, including the United Nations, to champion policies and initiatives that ensure digital tools serve as enablers of democracy, and not as instruments of control. This collective effort will be crucial in bridging gaps, mitigating risks, and realizing the transformative potential of digital democracy worldwide.



3. Key Challenges and Policy Gaps

The advancement of digital democracy is hindered by an array of systemic challenges and policy gaps that vary significantly across regions. These challenges not only limit the capacity of digital tools to enhance democratic engagement but also exacerbate existing social and political inequalities.

The challenges and gaps outlined below underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of advancing digital democracy globally. Addressing these systemic barriers requires coordinated, context-specific strategies that prioritize inclusivity, resilience, and collaboration. Governments, civil society actors, and international organizations must work collectively to bridge these gaps, ensuring that digital technologies fulfill their potential as enablers of democratic governance and civic empowerment.

1. **State Control and Authoritarian Practices:** Governments in restrictive regimes use digital technologies to monitor citizens, suppress dissent, and control the flow of information. For example, China's "Great Firewall" represents a sophisticated system of internet censorship and surveillance, severely limiting the information accessible to its citizens and stifling digital engagement. Similarly, Myanmar's targeted internet shutdowns during political unrest illustrate how state control can directly impede civil society's ability to communicate and organize. Beyond East Asia, in Eastern Europe, Belarus has employed internet blackouts and digital surveillance to quash protests and censor unfavorable views. In the Middle East, Iran's regime frequently throttles internet speeds during political demonstrations to disrupt communications and limit the spread of mobilization efforts. These diverse examples across different regions underscore the pervasive nature of digital authoritarianism globally, affecting a wide range of sociopolitical environments and illustrating a common pattern of suppressing digital freedoms to maintain regime control.
2. **Misinformation and Disinformation:** The rapid spread of false information undermines public trust in democratic processes and institutions. Disinformation is frequently weaponized by both state and non-state actors to polarize societies, delegitimize political opponents, and erode public confidence in democratic systems. For instance, during election cycles in the Philippines and Brazil, misinformation campaigns amplified on social media platforms created confusion among voters and weakened democratic processes (Mendoza, M. E. H. (2023) (Borges, L. (2022).

Though regions such as Latin America and Eastern Europe experience concerted disinformation campaigns, often orchestrated by state or political actors, to weaken opposition and civil society efforts (Lutz, C., & Riddell, J. (2019), it is important to recognize that this issue transcends geographical boundaries. For



example, Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced significant challenges with misinformation, particularly around election times, leading to social unrest and manipulated political discourse. In South Asia, and notably in India, misinformation has been strategically employed to stoke communal tensions and influence public opinion during electoral cycles. Furthermore, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has seen governments leveraging disinformation as a tool to suppress dissent and control narratives during periods of political upheaval, such as the Arab Spring.

The widespread impact of these challenges across various continents highlights the urgent need for a robust international approach. By acknowledging the multifaceted impacts of misinformation and disinformation, we can better devise strategies that ensure the resilience of democratic institutions against the disruptive effects of false information.

3. **Digital Inequalities and the Digital Divides:** Significant disparities in digital access, especially in rural and marginalized communities, hinder inclusive participation. This is particularly evident in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where limited infrastructure and high costs of connectivity exacerbate inequalities (World Bank. 2023). As of 2023, approximately 43% of Africa's population, equating to 602 million individuals, are internet users. This reflects a 13% year-over-year growth in internet usage (ITU's 2024 estimates). However, a substantial digital divide remains, with around 850 million people still lacking internet access. South Africa boasts the highest internet penetration on the continent, while East Africa lags behind. Efforts to enhance connectivity are ongoing, but challenges persist, especially in rural areas.

Similarly, as of June 2022, Pakistan's broadband subscriptions reached 118.8 million, with a penetration rate of 53.9%. Despite these advancements, significant disparities persist between urban and rural areas. Approximately 47.76% of urban households have internet access, compared to only 23.32% in rural areas, highlighting a substantial digital divide (Farooq, S. 2024).

4. **Barriers to Cybersecurity and Digital Safety:** Cybersecurity risks, including hacking, data breaches, and online harassment, pose significant threats to civil society actors and democratic institutions. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and activists often face targeted cyberattacks, exposing vulnerabilities in digital infrastructure. These threats are prevalent in regions like MENA and Eastern Europe, where governments or third parties exploit digital spaces to intimidate or disrupt democratic actors (ICNL. 2023).

In regions like Eastern Europe and South Asia, activists and journalists face targeted cyberattacks aimed at silencing dissent. These threats are exacerbated by the lack



of accessible digital security training and tools, leaving many vulnerable to surveillance and digital exploitation.

Inadequate legal protections for digital privacy further compound the problem. Activists in regions such as MENA and Central Asia operate in highly insecure digital environments, where state surveillance is pervasive, and legal recourse is minimal. This insecurity not only limits digital engagement but also discourages participation in online advocacy and civic activism.

5. Gaps in Digital Literacy and Public Awareness

Low levels of digital literacy remain a critical gap in regions such as South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Eastern Europe. Citizens often lack the skills to critically evaluate online content, making them susceptible to misinformation and reducing their ability to engage meaningfully in digital civic spaces. In countries with limited educational resources, digital literacy programs are either absent or insufficient, leaving large portions of the population ill-equipped to navigate the digital landscape.

Public awareness campaigns on digital rights and online safety are similarly lacking, particularly in areas with high digital penetration but limited regulatory oversight. The absence of these initiatives prevents citizens from understanding their rights and responsibilities in digital spaces, hindering broader democratic engagement.

6. Fragmentation in Civil Society Efforts

While CSOs play a critical role in fostering digital democracy, their efforts are often fragmented and underfunded. Lack of coordination among CSOs, both within and across regions, limits their collective impact. For example, in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, civil society initiatives addressing digital security and advocacy operate in silos, reducing their capacity to counter state repression effectively (ICNL, 2023). This fragmentation is further compounded by financial instability. Many CSOs rely on short-term, project-based funding models, which restrict their ability to invest in long-term digital tools, capacity building, and strategic advocacy. Across regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA, Eastern Europe, South Asia, and Latin America – where external funding is often constrained by restrictive regulatory environments, the sustainability of CSO-led digital democracy initiatives remains uncertain.

7. Insufficient Policy Frameworks

A significant policy gap lies in the absence of harmonized and inclusive digital rights frameworks. In many regions, existing policies fail to address key issues such as data privacy, cybersecurity, and equitable access. Countries in South Asia and



East Asia, for instance, lack comprehensive strategies to regulate digital platforms while safeguarding freedoms of expression and association. Similarly, in parts of Latin America, the absence of regulatory mechanisms to counter online harassment and hate speech discourages marginalized groups from participating in digital spaces. For instance, in Mexico, online harassment campaigns targeting women journalists and activists have been prevalent, particularly on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Reports indicate that these groups face coordinated attacks, including threats of violence and doxing, which discourage their participation in public discourse and advocacy efforts. Similarly, in Brazil, racial minorities and LGBTQ+ individuals are frequently subjected to hate speech online, with limited legal recourse available to hold perpetrators accountable. These gaps in regulation and enforcement create a hostile digital environment, further marginalizing already vulnerable groups and restricting their ability to engage in democratic spaces effectively. Internationally, the lack of coordination among states to address transboundary challenges such as cyberattacks, cross-border disinformation, and digital authoritarianism highlights a critical need for multilateral frameworks. Without a unified global approach, efforts to promote digital democracy remain piecemeal and insufficient to address systemic challenges.



4. Strategic Policy Recommendations

Addressing the complexities of digital democracy requires a multi-faceted approach that recognizes regional diversity while promoting universal principles of inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. Based on the synthesis of insights from six global regions—East Asia, Eastern Europe & Central Asia, Latin America & the Caribbean, the Middle East & North Africa (MENA), South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa—this section presents strategic recommendations that aim to strengthen digital democracy and empower civil society organizations (CSOs).

These recommendations focus on the following key areas: harmonizing policy frameworks, building digital literacy, fortifying cybersecurity, fostering inclusive governance, and developing sustainable funding mechanisms.

By implementing these strategic recommendations, the United Nations, alongside governments and civil society, can create an enabling environment for digital democracy to thrive. A coordinated approach that bridges global standards with local realities will ensure that digital tools continue to empower citizens and uphold democratic values in an increasingly interconnected world.

4.1 Harmonize Global and Regional Policy Frameworks

A cohesive policy framework is essential to uphold digital democracy across varying socio-political contexts. While global standards provide a guiding blueprint, regional adaptation ensures relevance and effectiveness.

The advocacy for UN-endorsed Global Digital Rights Charter would be led by a coalition of international and regional stakeholders, including CIVICUS, the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), and digital rights-focused civil society organizations (CSOs). These actors will collaborate to push for the formal recognition of digital rights at the UN level, ensuring that the charter is embedded within global governance frameworks.

Additionally, multilateral institutions such as UNESCO, the UNDP, and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) will play a critical role in facilitating dialogue, policy recommendations, and technical assistance for regional adaptation. National governments, in partnership with regional bodies such as the African Union, the European Union, ASEAN, and the Organization of American States (OAS), will be encouraged to integrate the charter's principles into local legal frameworks, ensuring enforceability and alignment with regional priorities.

By leveraging this multi-stakeholder approach, the initiative will ensure that digital democracy policies remain inclusive, adaptable, and responsive to evolving challenges in the digital sphere.



Key actions for advocacy engagement:

1. Anchor Advocacy Efforts in the Global Digital Compact (GDC): A strong and unified approach to digital advocacy begins with anchoring all efforts in the Global Digital Compact (GDC), which serves as the overarching international framework for digital governance. The GDC outlines key principles that should guide global, regional, and national advocacy initiatives, ensuring that digital policies remain aligned with universally recognized standards.

At its core, the GDC emphasizes the importance of an open, free, and secure internet, safeguarding digital spaces against undue restrictions while promoting access to information and online freedoms. Additionally, it underscores the need for equitable digital inclusion, advocating for policies that bridge the digital divide and ensure that marginalized communities are not left behind in the digital transformation process. Furthermore, the GDC promotes responsible digital practices, encouraging ethical governance of digital technologies, data protection, and accountability mechanisms to prevent misuse.

By aligning advocacy strategies with the GDC, stakeholders can enhance the legitimacy and impact of their efforts, creating a more cohesive global approach to digital democracy. This alignment not only ensures consistency in policy recommendations but also strengthens engagement with international institutions, reinforcing the need for collaborative action in shaping an inclusive and rights-based digital future.

2. Advocate for a Global Digital Rights Charter: Advocating for a Global Digital Rights Charter is essential to addressing contemporary challenges in digital democracy and strengthening existing digital rights frameworks. While the Charter of Human Rights and Principles for the Internet, developed by the Internet Rights and Principles Coalition (IRPC) under the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), provides a valuable foundation, it remains a civil society-led initiative without formal United Nations (UN) endorsement as a binding instrument. This gap underscores the need for a more institutionalized and enforceable global framework that ensures digital rights are recognized, protected, and upheld worldwide.

The proposed Global Digital Rights Charter aims to fill this gap by securing formal recognition from the UN, ensuring its integration into international governance frameworks, and establishing mechanisms for enforceability and accountability. By embedding core principles such as freedom of expression, protection against censorship, and equitable digital access, the charter will ensure that digital tools are used to support democratic governance rather than undermine it.

Furthermore, the charter will be designed to align with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and integrate directly with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This alignment will provide a universally applicable framework that reinforces global efforts to maintain digital spaces as open, inclusive, and democratic. Through this initiative, digital rights will be institutionalized at the highest level, offering a



comprehensive and legally recognized foundation for protecting digital freedoms across different regions and governance systems.

3. Strengthen Engagement in Global and Regional Advocacy Forums: To maximize advocacy impact, a strategic engagement plan must be implemented across key global and regional forums that influence digital governance and democracy. These forums serve as essential platforms for shaping policy discussions, fostering collaboration, and advocating for equitable digital transformation.

At the global level, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Forum provides an opportunity to shape international digital policies and advocate for an open and inclusive internet governance framework. Similarly, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) serves as a crucial space for promoting digital democracy through multistakeholder policy dialogues, ensuring that civil society voices are heard alongside those of governments and private sector actors.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, several regional forums present strategic advocacy entry points. The eLAC2026 initiative offers an avenue to influence regional digital transformation policies in alignment with the Global Digital Compact (GDC). Additionally, the Ninth Ministerial Conference on the Information Society, scheduled for November 2024, represents a key moment to push for stronger commitments to digital equity. The Digital Summit Latam 2025 will further serve as a high-level convening of policymakers, industry leaders, and regulators, offering opportunities to advocate for responsible digitalization strategies.

Broader regional advocacy efforts should also target GDC regional consultations, such as the Americas consultation hosted in Mexico in 2025, where civil society engagement is crucial for influencing the implementation of global digital governance standards at the regional level. Platforms like Iberoamérica en Democracia, an initiative by the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI), provide spaces for fostering dialogue on digital governance and democracy, ensuring that the region's unique digital policy challenges are addressed.

Beyond the Americas, advocacy initiatives should also be strengthened in Africa and Asia. The Smart Africa Initiative is instrumental in shaping African digital transformation policies, while the ASEAN Digital Masterplan offers a strategic framework for promoting digital inclusion and governance reforms across Southeast Asia.

To effectively engage with these global and regional advocacy spaces, targeted actions should include:

- Hosting side events, panel discussions, and consultations with key stakeholders, including policymakers, civil society organizations, and technology leaders, to elevate digital democracy issues.
- Submitting policy proposals and recommendations that support democratic digital governance and align with international human rights frameworks.



- Building coalitions with multilateral organizations, regional regulatory bodies, and industry players to drive collective efforts in advancing digital equity, inclusion, and governance reforms.
4. **Regional Cooperation for Digital Governance:** To foster a more inclusive and resilient digital ecosystem, it is essential to encourage the development of region-specific digital governance frameworks that address local priorities while aligning with global standards. Successful models already exist, providing valuable blueprints for strengthening digital innovation, security, and connectivity across different regions.

One such example is the Digital Agenda for the Eastern Partnership, which brings together Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine to enhance digital innovation and cybersecurity resilience. This initiative focuses on fostering digital transformation, improving infrastructure, and strengthening regulatory frameworks to ensure a secure and open digital environment. Similarly, the ASEAN ICT Masterplan serves as a strategic framework for enhancing digital connectivity and governance across Southeast Asia, aiming to bridge the digital divide and promote a robust digital economy.

Given the importance of regional alignment in digital governance, multilateral organizations such as the United Nations Economic Commissions (ECA, ECLAC, ESCAP), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the African Union (AU), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the European Commission should take the lead in harmonizing digital governance frameworks. Their role should include leveraging and expanding upon existing initiatives like the Digital Agenda for the Eastern Partnership and the ASEAN ICT Masterplan, facilitating greater cross-border collaboration, policy coordination, and digital resilience. Through multistakeholder engagement and policy integration, these organizations can ensure that regional digital policies align with global best practices while remaining adaptable to each region's unique challenges and opportunities.

5. **Establish Contextualized Regulations:** To effectively safeguard digital democracy, it is crucial to develop adaptive policies that address the unique challenges faced by different regions. A one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate in the face of varying socio-political landscapes, where issues such as state censorship, election misinformation, and digital privacy concerns require targeted regulatory responses.

A key priority in this effort is combating state censorship and misinformation by promoting regional best practices in digital governance. In authoritarian regimes, restrictions on online speech and access to information continue to undermine democratic participation. Meanwhile, in regions such as Latin America, disinformation campaigns during elections pose significant threats to political stability, eroding public trust in democratic institutions. Additionally, the growing influence of artificial intelligence (AI) in governance raises pressing concerns about data privacy and algorithmic accountability, requiring clear regulatory oversight.



To address these challenges, UNESCO, in collaboration with OHCHR, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and the G7/G20 Digital Economy Task Forces, should lead efforts to develop and implement region-specific digital governance frameworks. These efforts should focus on:

Tackling digital rights violations through enforceable regulations that protect freedom of expression and access to information.

Ensuring alignment with international human rights standards, embedding digital governance policies within globally recognized frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Promoting democratic digital governance, ensuring that emerging regulations on content moderation, AI governance, and data protection prioritize civic engagement, transparency, and accountability.

By fostering multilateral collaboration between global institutions and regional regulatory bodies, including the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA), national data protection agencies, and electoral commissions, this initiative will strengthen policy coherence across jurisdictions. Such an approach will help create resilient digital governance frameworks that balance security, openness, and fundamental rights in the digital sphere.

4.2 Build Digital Literacy and Civic Competence

Digital literacy is a foundational element of digital democracy, empowering individuals to engage critically and responsibly in online spaces. However, low literacy levels, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, remain a significant barrier.

Key actions for advocacy engagement:

1. **Targeted Educational Programs:** Develop and implement digital literacy programs tailored to specific demographics, such as rural populations, women, and youth. These programs should include modules on identifying misinformation, understanding digital rights, and leveraging online tools for civic engagement.
2. **Integration into Curricula:** Collaborate with educational institutions to embed digital literacy into national curricula, ensuring that future generations are equipped with the skills needed to navigate the digital landscape responsibly.
3. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launch region-wide public awareness initiatives, leveraging partnerships with media and technology companies to promote critical thinking and digital responsibility. These campaigns could counteract the pervasive effects of misinformation, particularly in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and the MENA countries.



To this end government agencies should integrate digital literacy into national and regional education policies by developing and enforcing policy frameworks that mandate digital literacy education in schools and public institutions, ensuring that such programs are comprehensive and accessible to all citizens. Educational institutions should embed digital literacy into curricula at all levels of education by developing specific modules that cover key aspects of digital literacy, such as identifying misinformation, understanding digital rights, and using online tools for civic engagement, ensuring that students from early education through to higher education are equipped with necessary digital skills. Likewise, civil society organizations should tailor digital literacy programs to the needs of local communities and marginalized groups by designing and delivering targeted training programs, especially in under-resourced or rural areas, focusing on the most vulnerable populations such as women and youth. They'll also provide hands-on support and resources to ensure these groups can effectively use digital tools for civic participation.

Media and technology companies should leverage their platforms and expertise to promote digital literacy and responsible online behavior by partnering with educational and civil society entities to create and distribute educational content. They can also run mass media campaigns that raise awareness about the importance of critical engagement with digital content and combat the effects of misinformation. On the other hand, international organizations and donors should provide funding, strategic guidance, and global networking opportunities for digital literacy initiatives. They can facilitate the sharing of best practices, offer financial support, and help connect local initiatives with global resources. They can also aid in scaling successful programs to broader contexts, ensuring that digital literacy efforts are sustainable and effective across different regions.

4.3 Fortify Cybersecurity and Protect Digital Rights

With increasing cyber threats and pervasive state surveillance, robust cybersecurity measures are indispensable for safeguarding digital democracy.

Key actions for advocacy engagement:

1. **Capacity Building for CSOs:** Provide technical training and resources to CSOs to enhance their cybersecurity practices. Workshops on secure communication, data encryption, and cyber hygiene should be prioritized in regions where activists and journalists face heightened risks, such as in Eastern Europe and MENA. This should be a collaborative effort involving a range of stakeholders. International organizations specializing in digital rights and cybersecurity, such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and Access Now, could lead these initiatives. Additionally, local and regional human rights groups with expertise in digital security should be involved to tailor training to specific regional needs and threats. The involvement of international funding bodies and coalitions, such as the Open Society Foundations and the Global



Network Initiative, can ensure sustained financial and structural support for these programs.

2. **Cybersecurity Infrastructure:** Advocate for investments in state-of-the-art cybersecurity infrastructure, ensuring secure online environments for civic participation. Partnerships with technology firms and ethical hackers can help governments identify vulnerabilities and preempt cyber threats. This should be spearheaded by both governmental bodies and international organizations that focus on digital governance and cybersecurity, like the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA). Additionally, private sector partners and industry leaders in cybersecurity should be engaged to provide expertise, resources, and advocacy power. Public-private partnerships are crucial in this realm to leverage both governmental oversight and the technological capabilities of the private sector.
3. **Transparency in Surveillance:** Push for transparency and accountability in government surveillance practices, ensuring they adhere to international human rights standards. This is particularly critical in regions like East and South Asia, where digital authoritarianism is on the rise. This should primarily be the responsibility of national governments and independent regulatory agencies. However, international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) should play a key oversight role. These institutions can monitor adherence to international human rights standards and apply pressure where non-compliance is evident. Civil society organizations and investigative journalists also play a crucial role in holding governments accountable and advocating for transparent surveillance practices.

4.4 Foster Inclusive Governance and Civic Participation

Inclusivity is the cornerstone of a resilient digital democracy. Ensuring that marginalized voices are represented in digital policy formulation is essential for equitable governance.

Key actions for advocacy engagement:

1. **Inclusive Policy Platforms:** Support the creation of platforms like Taiwan's vTaiwan that enable citizen participation in policy discussions, and Decidim (Spain) of Barcelona, an open-source participatory platform that allows residents to propose and deliberate on city governance initiatives, demonstrating its adaptability to European contexts. Estonia's e-Residency offers a government-issued digital identity, allowing global citizens to start and manage businesses online, fostering economic inclusion. Similarly, Bang the Table (Australia), utilized across various locales, including North America and the UK, facilitates community engagement by providing tools for discussion, surveys, and polls to gather public input on policy matters. Such models



can be adapted to culturally diverse regions like South Asia, fostering grassroots engagement.

2. **Empower Marginalized Communities:** Implement policies that address digital divides and promote the inclusion of women, ethnic minorities, and low-income populations in digital governance. For instance, multilingual interfaces and localized content can improve accessibility for diverse groups. For example, the "Digital India" campaign focuses on enhancing online infrastructure and increasing Internet connectivity across rural areas, aiming to bring digital services to the economically disadvantaged and bridge the urban-rural divide.
3. **Diverse Leadership in Decision-Making:** Advocate for gender-balanced and culturally diverse representation in decision-making bodies related to digital policy. This ensures that the perspectives of all stakeholders are incorporated into governance frameworks. In South Africa, efforts such as the "Smart Cape Access Project" aim to involve community members in decision-making processes regarding the implementation of ICT in underserved areas, ensuring that governance reflects the community's diverse needs and priorities.

4.5 Develop Sustainable Funding Mechanisms

Sustainable and long-term funding is crucial for the success of digital democracy initiatives, ensuring that civil society organizations (CSOs), civic tech innovations, and digital governance efforts remain impactful and resilient. However, current funding models are often short-term and project-based, limiting the ability of organizations to build institutional capacity and sustain their advocacy efforts. To address this challenge, multi-stakeholder collaborations, flexible core funding, and innovative financing mechanisms must be established. Governments, private sector actors, international organizations, and philanthropic foundations all have a role to play in ensuring that digital democracy initiatives receive the necessary financial support to scale and sustain their impact. This section outlines key strategies for creating sustainable funding mechanisms that will empower CSOs, support civic technology, and foster an inclusive digital governance ecosystem.

Key actions for advocacy engagement:

1. **Multi-Stakeholder Funding Coalitions:** The sustainability of digital democracy initiatives depends on robust, long-term funding models that support civil society organizations and digital innovation. To effectively drive and implement policies for developing sustainable funding mechanisms for digital democracy initiatives, a broad and inclusive coalition of stakeholders is essential. This coalition should include Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), which are not only the primary beneficiaries but also key implementers of funded projects. Governments at various levels play a crucial role in crafting favorable policies, providing regulatory support, and sometimes directly



contributing to funding pools. Private sector actors, particularly from the technology industry, are vital for their ability to inject capital, innovation, and technical expertise, especially within public-private partnerships. International organizations, such as the United Nations and regional development banks, bring global perspectives, policy guidance, and substantial funding capabilities. Additionally, philanthropic foundations and individual donors, known for their flexibility and focus on innovation, can significantly influence funding priorities and methodologies, promoting long-term sustainability and capacity building among CSOs.

2. **Core Funding for CSOs:** Shift funding priorities from short-term project-based grants to long-term, flexible core funding that enables CSOs to build institutional capacity. This is particularly important for regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where CSOs face chronic resource constraints. International donor agencies and development partners should shift from short-term project-based grants to long-term, flexible core funding for CSOs. These agencies, which include both bilateral and multilateral donors, are instrumental in setting global and regional funding priorities. They have the authority and resources to implement funding strategies that provide CSOs with the stability needed to plan and execute long-term initiatives. Additionally, large philanthropic foundations, renowned for their strategic focus on systemic change, are well-positioned to provide the necessary core funding. These foundations often seek to build institutional capacities within CSOs, enabling them to operate more effectively and sustainably.
3. **Public-Private Partnerships:** Encourage collaboration between governments, private sector actors, and international organizations to create sustainable funding pipelines. These partnerships could fund civic tech initiatives, cybersecurity programs, and digital literacy campaigns. Since, public-private partnerships are a collaborative funding mechanism that requires the active participation of multiple stakeholders, national governments are crucial in this arrangement, as they not only create the regulatory and fiscal environments conducive for such partnerships but often also participate as funding partners. Private sector companies, particularly those in the tech industry, provide necessary investments, innovative solutions, and expertise, making these partnerships highly effective. CSOs and NGOs play dual roles as both beneficiaries and active participants, ensuring that the partnerships align with societal goals and adhere to ethical standards.
4. **Digital Democracy Innovation Fund:** Establish a global Digital Democracy Innovation Fund to support the development and scaling of civic technologies. This fund could prioritize open-source projects that promote transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in governance. The creation of a global Digital Democracy Innovation Fund would best be facilitated by prominent international organizations, such as the United Nations or the World Economic Forum. These organizations have the global stature, operational capacity, and the necessary diplomatic channels to establish and manage a fund aimed at promoting digital democracy worldwide. Alternatively, a consortium



of donor countries could also establish this fund, providing it with robust financial support and a broad international mandate. Such a consortium would leverage collective resources and expertise to foster innovation and scale up digital democracy initiatives across the globe, ensuring a wide-reaching impact.

4.6 Advance Regional and Global Collaboration

Regional and global collaboration is critical for addressing transnational challenges like cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns.

Key actions for advocacy engagement:

1. **Regional Coalitions:** Foster the formation of regional coalitions to tackle shared challenges. For instance, an ASEAN digital democracy initiative could facilitate knowledge-sharing and joint efforts to counter cyber threats in East Asia.
2. **Global Advocacy Networks:** Strengthen global networks of CSOs to advocate for international digital democracy standards. Platforms like CIVICUS' Digital Democracy Initiative can serve as models for fostering cross-border solidarity and collaboration.
3. **UN-Led Forums:** Encourage the United Nations to host forums that bring together governments, CSOs, and technology leaders to discuss and address global digital democracy challenges. These forums could serve as incubators for innovative policy solutions and partnerships.



5. Model for Collaborative Action

Strengthening digital democracy requires a robust and inclusive model for collaboration that leverages the strengths of multiple stakeholders, addresses regional nuances, and promotes shared responsibility. This model builds upon the findings from the Digital Democracy Ecosystem synthesis report, emphasizing the need for multi-stakeholder engagement, cross-regional partnerships, and adaptive governance frameworks.

5.1 Multi-Stakeholder Engagement

A resilient digital democracy ecosystem necessitates the participation of diverse stakeholders, including governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), private sector actors, academia, and international organizations. Each of these stakeholders brings unique capabilities and perspectives that, when harmonized, can amplify the impact of digital democracy initiatives:

Governments:

- Enact inclusive digital policies that safeguard online freedoms and promote equitable access to digital tools.
- Facilitate dialogue between stakeholders through formal platforms, such as national digital democracy councils.
- Ensure accountability and transparency in public digital initiatives by integrating citizen feedback mechanisms.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs):

- Advocate for marginalized groups and act as intermediaries between governments and citizens.
- Develop localized, context-specific digital tools that promote civic participation and enhance community engagement.
- Monitor and report on policy implementation to ensure alignment with democratic values.
- Provide evidence-based research to guide policy development and evaluate the impact of digital democracy initiatives.
- Facilitate capacity-building programs to enhance digital literacy among citizens and policymakers.
- Develop frameworks for assessing the effectiveness of collaborative digital governance.
- Establish global standards for digital rights and democratic governance. While the establishment of global standards for digital rights and democratic governance is challenging, especially in authoritarian contexts, persistent and multifaceted strategies involving diplomatic, economic, and societal



approaches can foster greater acceptance and implementation of these principles.

- Provide technical and financial assistance to regions with limited digital resources.
- Foster transnational partnerships that address cross-border challenges such as cyber threats and misinformation.

Private Sector:

- Leverage technological expertise to develop and implement secure, accessible digital platforms that support democratic engagement.
- Partner with governments and CSOs to ensure that digital solutions are inclusive and meet the needs of diverse populations.
- Invest in digital literacy and cybersecurity initiatives that benefit the broader society.

Academia:

- Conduct independent research that analyzes the impact of digital technologies on democracy and civic engagement.
- Offer expert advice on the development of digital tools and governance frameworks.
- Provide training and resources to develop the next generation of digital democracy scholars and practitioners.

Media Organizations:

- Play a crucial role in educating the public about digital democracy and its implications.
- Ensure responsible reporting that combats misinformation and highlights the benefits and challenges of digital platforms.
- Serve as a watchdog, holding other stakeholders accountable for their role in shaping the digital landscape.

International Organizations:

- Facilitate international cooperation on digital democracy issues, including the development of standards and best practices.
- Provide platforms for knowledge exchange and capacity building across borders.
- Offer funding and support for pilot projects that explore innovative approaches to digital democracy.



5.2 Cross-Regional Partnerships

The research synthesis highlights significant regional disparities in the maturity of digital democracy. These disparities necessitate cross-regional partnerships to enable knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, and the replication of best practices. Collaborative action across regions should focus on:

Knowledge Exchange:

- Establish regional hubs for digital democracy, where stakeholders can share successful models, such as Taiwan's vTaiwan platform or South Africa's open government initiatives.
- Facilitate peer-learning workshops that enable stakeholders from different regions to exchange insights on addressing common challenges like misinformation and digital exclusion.

Capacity Building:

- Develop regional training programs focused on enhancing the digital literacy of marginalized communities.
- Support CSOs with technical skills, funding, and resources to strengthen their digital advocacy capabilities.
- Promote mentorship initiatives where regions with advanced digital democracy practices guide less-developed counterparts.

Joint Advocacy:

- Form coalitions of regional CSOs to advocate collectively for digital democracy policies at the global level, including at UN forums.
- Address cross-border challenges such as cyber threats and digital authoritarianism through coordinated campaigns.
- Advocate for inclusive governance by ensuring representation from underserved and marginalized communities in regional decision-making processes.

To ensure the effective implementation and leadership of the proposed actions under Cross-Regional Partnerships, specific roles can be assigned to various institutional stakeholders, each leveraging their unique capabilities and areas of influence like, United Nations agencies can facilitate and oversee the establishment of regional hubs for digital democracy. For example, UNDP (United Nations Development Program) could lead in setting up these hubs, ensuring they align with broader development goals and harness international support.



Regional intergovernmental organizations can lead the facilitation of peer-learning workshops and joint advocacy initiatives. Like, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), African Union, and the European Union could conduct these workshops, utilizing their regional influence to address specific local challenges such as misinformation and digital exclusion.

Moreover, local governments can support capacity-building efforts at the regional and local levels by integrating digital literacy programs into public education systems and support CSOs through funding and policy reforms that enhance digital advocacy capabilities.

The same way, well-established CSOs with robust digital platforms can mentor smaller, regional CSOs, sharing best practices and guiding them in effective digital democracy strategies.

Educational and research institutions can develop and implement regional training programs focused on digital literacy by collaborating with universities and think tanks to create curricula and conduct training sessions that are tailored to the needs of marginalized communities within their regions.

Private sector partners can also support with technical resources and innovation like, technology companies those can provide technical support and resources, enhancing the digital tools available to CSOs and governments, and participate in creating solutions to combat cyber threats and digital authoritarianism.

5.3 Adaptive Governance Framework

Digital democracy operates within a dynamic and rapidly evolving technological landscape. Adaptive governance is critical to responding effectively to emerging challenges and opportunities. This framework should include:

Flexible Policy Mechanisms:

- Adopt policies that can evolve in response to technological advancements, such as the rise of artificial intelligence and blockchain technologies.
- Introduce pilot projects to test innovative digital democracy tools, with mechanisms for scaling successful initiatives.

Inclusivity and Representation:

- Ensure that governance structures prioritize the voices of marginalized communities, women, and youth.
- Create participatory decision-making platforms that allow citizens to engage directly with policymakers on digital democracy issues.



Ethical Standards and Accountability:

- Develop global ethical guidelines for digital governance, ensuring data privacy, algorithmic fairness, and the prevention of digital manipulation.
- Hold all stakeholders accountable through transparent reporting mechanisms and independent audits.

The leadership of the Adaptive Governance Framework for digital democracy should be spearheaded by a coalition of global and regional institutions to ensure comprehensive and equitable implementation.

The United Nations, given its universal reach and mandate to uphold international cooperation on technological, social, and human rights issues, should play a central coordinating role. This global oversight ensures that the framework adheres to universally accepted principles of human rights, fairness, and inclusivity.

Furthermore, regional organizations like the African Union, ASEAN, and the European Union are crucial for contextualizing and enforcing these policies within their specific geopolitical and cultural landscapes. These bodies can adapt global guidelines to local contexts, addressing unique regional challenges and opportunities more effectively.

Civil society organizations, industry leaders in technology, and academic institutions should also be integral to this leadership structure. Their inclusion ensures that the framework remains agile and responsive to technological innovations and societal needs. These stakeholders bring practical insights, ground-level data, and technical expertise that are essential for the continuous evolution of governance mechanisms.

5.4 Role of the United Nations

The United Nations is uniquely positioned to facilitate and coordinate this model of collaborative action. Its role includes:

Convening Power:

- Organize global summits on digital democracy, bringing together stakeholders to set shared objectives and monitor progress. Given its extensive experience in development issues and its presence in many countries, UNDP is well-positioned to organize global summits on digital democracy and to foster regional and international cooperation on digital initiatives.
- Establish an international digital democracy task force to oversee collaborative initiatives and address transnational challenges. United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) could oversee the international



digital democracy task force, facilitating the integration of science, technology, and innovation into national and international development strategies.

Policy Guidance:

- Provide member states with policy templates and technical support for implementing digital democracy frameworks.
- Develop international agreements that codify digital rights as fundamental to democratic governance. While the Global Digital Compact provides a broad and influential platform for shaping digital policies, the specific agreements we propose would focus more narrowly on integrating digital rights within democratic governance frameworks. These agreements would ensure that digital rights—including freedom of expression, privacy, and the right to access information—are explicitly recognized as essential to the practice of democracy.

Furthermore, these targeted agreements would address gaps not fully covered by the Global Digital Compact, particularly regarding enforcement mechanisms, protections against digital authoritarianism, and inclusivity in digital participation. They would offer structured policy responses to state surveillance, misinformation, and the digital divide, ensuring that digital governance frameworks support democratic values rather than restrict them.

Given its mandate to promote international collaboration through education, science, and culture, UNESCO could play a leading role in providing member states with policy templates, technical support, and capacity-building initiatives. Leveraging its expertise in communication and information, UNESCO could help develop frameworks that enhance digital literacy, safeguard digital rights, and strengthen international cooperation on digital democracy.

Resource Mobilization:

- Facilitate funding mechanisms, such as global digital democracy funds, to support under-resourced regions, ensuring sustained financial support for civil society organizations (CSOs), digital rights initiatives, and capacity-building programs. While several grants, including the Digital Democracy Initiative (DDI), provide essential funding, existing mechanisms often operate on short-term cycles and are limited in scope, leaving significant gaps in long-term sustainability, scalability, and cross-regional collaboration. A more comprehensive and coordinated approach is needed to expand funding accessibility and ensure equitable resource distribution.
- Mobilize technical expertise through partnerships with leading technology companies and research institutions. As the specialized agency for information and communication technologies, ITU could contribute technical expertise and support the establishment of international standards for digital infrastructures, ensuring that digital democracy initiatives are built on secure and reliable platforms.



6. Call to Action

In an era defined by digital transformation, the United Nations, its member states, and global stakeholders such as international NGOs, technology companies, academic institutions, and civil society organizations must act decisively to ensure digital spaces serve as enablers of democracy, not tools for oppression. The urgency of this moment demands a unified global effort to address the systemic challenges and capitalize on the opportunities outlined in this brief. Stakeholders such as the World Bank, Google, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and Amnesty International play crucial roles in this landscape, providing financial resources, technological innovation, research, and advocacy to shape digital policies globally.

The following actions, tailored to the diverse digital democracy ecosystems identified across regions, provide a roadmap for immediate and impactful intervention:

6.1. Establish a Global Digital Democracy Fund

To sustain and scale digital democracy initiatives, the UN should spearhead the creation of a Global Digital Democracy Fund. This fund will:

- Provide flexible, multi-year grants to civil society organizations (CSOs) to strengthen their digital capacities.
- Support the development of open-source civic technology platforms that enhance transparency, citizen engagement, and participatory governance.
- Prioritize funding for initiatives targeting underrepresented groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and rural populations, to bridge the digital divide and foster inclusive democratic participation.

6.2. Advocate for Enhanced International Standards on Digital Rights

To ensure robust protection of freedoms of expression, privacy, and association in digital spaces, the United Nations must champion the development and adoption of universal digital rights frameworks.

This framework should build upon and extend beyond existing guidelines, such as those found in the [UN Habitat's Digital Cities Toolkit](#), to provide comprehensive, universally applicable standards that address the unique challenges of the digital age.

While the UN Habitat's Digital Cities Toolkit provides valuable guidance on urban digital transformation, smart governance, and the role of technology in city management, it does not comprehensively address broader digital rights issues such as state surveillance, algorithmic governance, and the protection of civic space in digital ecosystems.

The proposed framework builds upon and expands these existing guidelines to establish clear global standards for digital rights and democracy.



Key areas for enhancement include:

- Integrate digital rights explicitly into the global human rights framework, ensuring that digital freedoms are formally recognized as fundamental rights. This integration will strengthen legal protections against digital repression and enhance accountability mechanisms for violations.
- While the Digital Cities Toolkit discusses data-driven governance, it lacks clear mandates on data protection and safeguards against state surveillance. The proposed framework would require all UN member states to adopt stringent data protection laws that not only secure individuals' data but also restrict government overreach and unlawful digital surveillance that stifles civic engagement.
- Unlike the Digital Cities Toolkit, which primarily focuses on data management for urban governance, the proposed framework would enforce international regulations on transparency in algorithmic decision-making across both public and private sectors. These regulations will ensure that AI-driven governance systems do not reinforce biases, restrict freedoms, or disproportionately impact marginalized communities.
- The Digital Cities Toolkit mainly addresses urban digital divides but does not offer solutions for broader global inequalities in digital access. The proposed framework extends beyond urban areas to address structural digital inequalities affecting rural, displaced, and marginalized populations, ensuring that digital platforms are accessible and inclusive.

6.3. Promote Regional Collaboration on Digital Governance

Given the regional nuances of digital democracy, the UN should facilitate regional coalitions to address cross-border challenges such as misinformation, cyberattacks, and authoritarian control. These coalitions can:

- Share best practices in digital governance, cybersecurity, and civic technology.
- Develop regional mechanisms for countering misinformation through media literacy campaigns and independent fact-checking organizations.
- Establish regional task forces to monitor and mitigate state-sponsored internet censorship and shutdowns.

6.4. Strengthen Digital Literacy and Public Awareness

Digital literacy is foundational to enabling democratic engagement in the digital age. It is recommended that the UN should:

- Partner with governments and educational institutions to integrate digital literacy programs into national curricula.
- Launch global campaigns to educate citizens on identifying misinformation, safeguarding digital privacy, and exercising their rights in online spaces.



- Focus on marginalized and underserved populations to ensure equitable access to knowledge and tools for digital participation.

6.5. Bolster Cybersecurity Measures for Civil Society

Civil society actors face escalating threats from cyberattacks and surveillance. The UN must lead efforts to:

- Develop and disseminate toolkits for CSOs to enhance their cybersecurity practices, including encryption, secure communications, and data protection.
- Collaborate with technology providers to create affordable and accessible security solutions tailored to the needs of civil society actors.
- Advocate for international agreements that protect digital activists and organizations from targeted cyber harassment and attacks.

6.6. Convene a Global Summit on Digital Democracy

To galvanize action and foster international dialogue, the UN should organize a Global Summit on Digital Democracy. This summit would:

- Bring together governments, CSOs, academia, and private sector leaders to share insights, innovations, and challenges.
- Serve as a platform for launching new global initiatives, such as a charter on digital democracy or multilateral agreements on combating digital authoritarianism.
- Highlight successful regional models of digital democracy that can be adapted and scaled globally.

6.7. Monitor and Evaluate Progress Through a Global Observatory

Accountability is critical to sustaining momentum in digital democracy initiatives. The UN should establish a Global Digital Democracy Observatory to:

- Track the implementation of digital rights policies and identify areas requiring intervention.
- Regularly publish reports on global and regional trends in digital democracy, including best practices and emerging threats.
- Provide a centralized platform for stakeholders to access data, tools, and resources to support their efforts.

The actions outlined above are not merely aspirational; they are achievable steps that reflect the collective will to harness the potential of digital technologies for democratic renewal. By leading this effort, the United Nations can reaffirm its commitment to the principles of democracy, equity, and human rights in an increasingly digital world. This call to action invites all stakeholders—governments, civil society, private sector, and individuals—to join in building a future where digital spaces empower rather than oppress, where inclusion triumphs over exclusion, and where democracy flourishes, both online and offline. The time to act is now. Let us rise to the challenge and strengthen the foundations of digital democracy for generations to come.



7. Final Words

Strengthening digital democracy is no longer a peripheral concern but a global imperative that requires concerted and immediate action. As the digital transformation continues to redefine societal structures and governance processes, it is clear that the principles of democracy—transparency, inclusivity, accountability, and participation—must be safeguarded and promoted in digital spaces. This is not merely a technological challenge but a profound political, social, and ethical opportunity for the international community, led by the United Nations, to foster resilience and equity in digital ecosystems worldwide.

The synthesis of regional insights underscores the deeply interconnected nature of digital democracy challenges. In East Asia, innovative civic technologies coexist with authoritarian digital control, while in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, digital divides perpetuate exclusion and limit democratic engagement. The MENA region grapples with repression and censorship, and Latin America faces pervasive misinformation that threatens civic trust. These regional disparities demand a nuanced, multi-stakeholder response that is both globally coordinated and locally contextualized.

The United Nations, with its mandate to promote peace, development, and human rights, is uniquely positioned to lead this effort. By facilitating dialogue among governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), private sector actors, and technology developers, the UN can foster collaborative frameworks that protect digital freedoms, bridge digital divides, and enhance the capacity of CSOs to champion democratic values. Leveraging regional success stories, such as Taiwan's participatory governance platforms or Ukraine's e-Governance initiatives, can provide scalable models for other contexts, while acknowledging the need to tailor solutions to unique political and cultural landscapes.

At the core of this endeavor is the recognition that digital democracy must serve all people, particularly those who have been historically marginalized or excluded. Women, ethnic minorities, rural communities, and economically disadvantaged groups face disproportionate barriers to digital participation. Their inclusion is not only a matter of equity but also a prerequisite for the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic governance in the digital age.

This brief calls on the UN and its member states to act decisively. Establishing global standards for digital rights, investing in infrastructure and digital literacy, and supporting the resilience of civil society actors are essential steps toward a robust digital democracy. The challenges of cybersecurity threats, misinformation, and digital authoritarianism are formidable but surmountable with coordinated action and political will. The stakes are too high to delay: failing to act risks deepening inequalities, eroding trust in democratic institutions, and allowing authoritarian practices to dominate the digital realm.



In conclusion, the future of democracy depends on our collective ability to adapt to and harness the potential of digital technologies. The UN must lead the charge in building a global digital democracy ecosystem that is inclusive, secure, and sustainable. This vision requires commitment, innovation, and collaboration across borders and sectors. By prioritizing this agenda, the international community can ensure that the digital age becomes a beacon of empowerment and opportunity rather than a battleground of division and repression. The time to act is now.



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Digital Democracy Initiative

The Digital Democracy Initiative (DDI) is a programme to safeguard inclusive democracy and human rights in the digital age. It focuses on supporting local civil society in the Global South, particularly in countries undergoing democratic regression and where civic space is under pressure.

digitaldemocracyinitiative.net



CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organizations and activists working to strengthen citizen action and civil society throughout the world.

civicus.org



Accountability Lab is a global translocal network that makes governance work for people by supporting active citizens, responsible leaders and accountable institutions.

pakistan.accountabilitylab.org