



Digital Democracy
Initiative

Strengthening Support Ecosystems for Digital Democracy in Uganda

A Case Study Assessment Report

March 2025

Acknowledgments

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DESIGN AND LAYOUT

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We would like to acknowledge and thank all the representatives from civil society organisations and Human Rights Defenders who participated in the surveys and interviews for this research.



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. For more information visit digitaldemocracyinitiative.net



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Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AFIC	Africa Freedom of Information Centre
APC	Association for Progressive Communications
APMON	African Parliamentary Monitoring Organisations Network
AU	African Union
CEPA	Center for Policy Analysis
CIPESA	Collaboration On International ICT Policy For East And Southern Africa
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
DPI	Defenders Protection Initiative
EACSO	East African Civil Society Organisations
EAPMON	East African Parliamentary Monitoring Organisations Network
ES	Expectation State
EU	The European Union
GCIC	Government Citizens Interactions Centre
HRDs	Human Right Defenders
HRNJ-Uganda	Human Rights Network For Journalists–Uganda
MCI	Media Challenge Initiative
MPs	Member of Parliament
NITA	National Information Technology Authority
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
ICT	Information & Communication Technology
ISP	Internet Service Providers
OSFU	Online Safety Foundation Uganda
UCC	Uganda Communications Commission
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UNCDF	United Nations Capital Development Fund
VoIP	Voice over Internet Protocol
VPNs	Virtual Private Networks
WACC	World Association Of Christian Communication
WOUGNET	Women Of Uganda Network

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● 1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

Digital technologies have fundamentally transformed the landscape of democracy, (Lungu, P.C., 2024). The Internet and associated tools are potent platforms that foster civic engagement, promote transparency, and advocate for human rights. Civil society organisations (CSOs) have emerged as key players in this digital democracy movement, utilising technology to empower citizens, holding governments accountable, and building stronger civic communities, (Poisson M, 2024). However, not everyone experiences the promise of digital democracy equally.

In countries with limited democratic space, where governments restrict civil liberties and political participation, CSOs working on digital democracy encounter significant challenges. These could be described broadly in three categories:

- **Legal and Regulatory Obstacles:** Governments often implement restrictive laws and regulations that hinder CSOs' ability to operate freely in the digital space. Governments in countries with limited democratic space may enact laws and regulations targeting digital activism. These laws can criminalise online dissent, restrict access to encrypted communication platforms, and impose heavy burdens on CSOs utilising technology for advocacy work. The threat of legal action can create a climate of fear and self-censorship, hindering the effectiveness of digital democracy efforts.
- **Technical and Infrastructure Barriers:** Limited internet access, poor digital infrastructure, and lack of technical expertise can impede CSOs' effective leveraging of digital tools.
- **Security and Privacy Concerns:** CSOs and their members may face surveillance, cyber-attacks, and other digital threats that compromise the safety and security of their data.

These challenges impact CSOs' work promoting digital democracy, particularly in countries with authoritarian tendencies or limited democratic freedoms. Despite these obstacles, many organisations continue to innovate and adapt, finding creative ways to use technology to advance their mission and protect civic spaces in the digital realm.

- **Restricted Operational Environment:** The CIVICUS Monitor framework categorizes civic space along a continuum of obstructed, repressed, and closed societies within which fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and assembly are frequently curtailed. This restrictive operational environment can significantly impede CSOs in their ability to function autonomously, secure legal registration, and mobilize financial resources. Furthermore, governmental limitations on internet access and the implementation of censorship measures can undermine CSOs' capacity to leverage digital technologies for their activities.
- **Limited Resources and Capacity:** Despite limited resources, CSOs working on digital democracy in Uganda demonstrate remarkable resilience. These organisations face scarce funding for digital rights and advocacy work and struggle with restricted access to essential technologies and technical expertise by state actors. Nevertheless, they effectively utilise digital tools for secure communication, data analysis, and online campaigning. Their determination and resourcefulness inspire others as they overcome these challenges.

- **Hostile Legal and Regulatory Framework:** Governments in countries with limited democratic space may enact laws and regulations targeting digital activism. These laws can criminalise online dissent, restrict access to encrypted communication platforms, and impose heavy burdens on CSOs utilising technology for advocacy work. The threat of legal action can create a climate of fear and self-censorship, hindering the effectiveness of digital democracy efforts.

1.2 Overview of Case Study Assessment

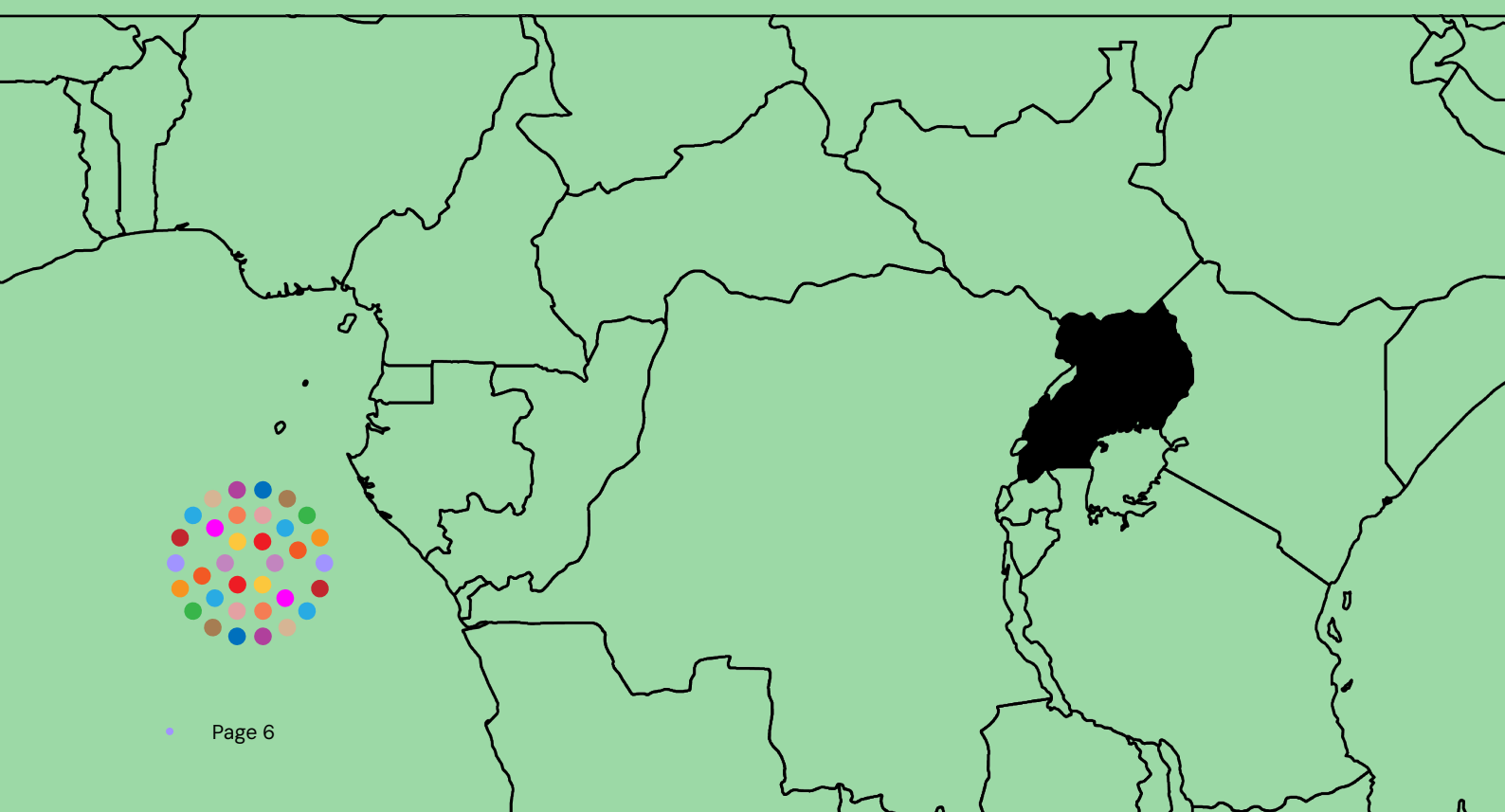
Digital technologies are reshaping the global democratic landscape. The internet and social media have become indispensable tools for civic engagement, empowering citizens to access information, voice their opinions, and organise political action. However, the influence of these technologies on democracy is complex and varies across contexts.

The digital democracy landscape is particularly challenging in countries where democratic freedoms are restricted, and civic participation is limited. It offers both opportunities and obstacles for pro-democracy movements and civil society organisations.

This country's case study documents the support systems available to CSOs in Uganda. The study focused on how these organisations champion digital democracy in an environment where civic freedoms face significant curtailment. The country case study identifies the challenges faced by CSOs and presents their mitigation strategies and successes. The findings of the country report were translated into practical recommendations that can enhance support mechanisms for digital democracy on a global scale.

The case study assessment involved a comprehensive literature review, data collection through interviews, online surveys, and document analysis. The case studies analysed the challenges CSOs face working on digital democracy in Uganda, assessed existing support mechanisms, highlighted successful strategies, and provided tailored recommendations.

These recommendations have the potential to significantly strengthen the support ecosystems for digital democracy in Uganda, offering hope for the country's future.



2.0 Methodology

2.1 Technical Approach

The Case Study Assessment applied aspects of co-design approaches, systems thinking, and human-centred design practice. The methodological approach ensured a thorough, rigorous, and context-sensitive assessment of the challenges and opportunities facing CSOs working on digital democracy in repressed environments.

The technical approach combined qualitative and quantitative data collection methods (secondary data collection, key informant interviews and online surveys), robust analysis, and stakeholder engagement to produce actionable insights and recommendations to strengthen digital democracy efforts in Uganda.

2.2 Country Selection

The objective of the country selection process is to inform the identification of three (3) countries classified as 'Obstructed,' 'Repressed' and 'Closed' according to the CIVICUS Monitor data, a widely recognised source of information on civic space and civil society. This data is focused on countries within the same region to ensure a broader yet region-specific perspective. The selection of Uganda is based on the ongoing restrictions on online freedoms and civic space. Uganda's archetypal digital democracy environment is identified as being **Repressed** according to the Civicus Monitor (2024). The country's digital landscape showcases the resilience of online activism and the government's efforts to constrain civic space.

Digital activists and rights advocates carve out pockets of online engagement, leveraging technology to expand civic participation despite restrictions. However, the government increasingly employs digital technologies for surveillance and repression, targeting opposition voices and curtailing online freedoms.

Uganda operates as a hybrid regime, limiting political pluralism and civil liberties. The government has enacted restrictive laws, such as the 2011 Computer Misuse Act, to suppress online dissent and prosecute journalists and activists. Freedom House rates Uganda's internet freedom as "not free," reflecting the challenging environment for digital rights. The government frequently shuts down the internet during elections and political unrest, further restricting digital rights and access to information. These actions significantly impede the free flow of information and hinder citizens' ability to engage in civic discourse online.

Despite these challenges, Ugandan digital activists continue to innovate and adapt, using social media, blogs, and other online platforms to advocate for change and hold the government accountable. Their efforts demonstrate the potential of digital activism to foster social accountability and expand civic space, even in the face of significant obstacles.

This categorisation offers insights into the challenges and opportunities for promoting digital democracy in restrictive contexts. Beyond the identification of a suitable case country, a multi-tier approach was adopted, which involved a thorough review of data, close collaboration with CIVICUS, and consideration of various criteria to commence the case study assessment process:

- **Data Review:** Analysed CIVICUS Monitor data and other relevant global indices to shortlist potential countries.

- **Consultation with CIVICUS:** Collaborated closely with CIVICUS to select the final three countries, ensuring alignment with strategic priorities and regional focus.
- **Criteria Consideration:** consideration of digital repression, active CSOs, the political landscape, and data availability.

2.3 Desk Review Process

A literature review of available secondary data sources was conducted to establish an informed understanding of the current state of digital democracy, digital repression, and the support ecosystems for CSOs in the selected countries. The literature followed these steps:

- **Document Collection:** review of existing literature, including academic papers, reports from international organisations, policy documents, and country-specific case studies.
- **Thematic Analysis:** categorisation findings into central themes such as operational challenges, resource limitations, legal frameworks, and successful strategies.
- **Contextual Understanding:** identification of specific political and socio-economic factors influencing Uganda's digital landscape. The **annexes** include a list of reviewed documents.

2.4 Key Informant Interviews

Eleven (11) key interviews with various stakeholders in Uganda were conducted. The low response rate encountered in securing interviews and online survey responses highlight the prevailing concerns among human rights activists and journalists regarding their safety in telling their stories. The research team could only engage with these actors by navigating trusted networks and respondent referrals.

2.5 Data Analysis and Reporting

The data analysis identified key themes, challenges, and opportunities for strengthening support ecosystems for digital democracy in the selected countries. This mixed methods approach involved both mainly qualitative analysis methods in addition to employing the triangulation verification of multiple data sources highlighted below:

- **Qualitative Analysis:** thematic analysis to identify common patterns and insights from interviews and document reviews. Employed Perplexity AI to organise and analyse qualitative data, ensuring a rigorous and systematic analysis process.
- **Quantitative Analysis:** analysed collated online survey data using statistical tools like SPSS to identify trends and correlations in CSO engagement, challenges, and support needs.
- **Triangulation:** Cross-verified data from multiple sources (interviews, document reviews) to ensure validity and reliability of findings.

The case study assessment report identified existing support mechanisms for CSOs working on digital democracy, highlighting successful strategies and initiatives they have employed to overcome digital repression and strengthen the support ecosystem. The report also offers context-specific recommendations for improving the support ecosystem for digital democracy in Uganda.

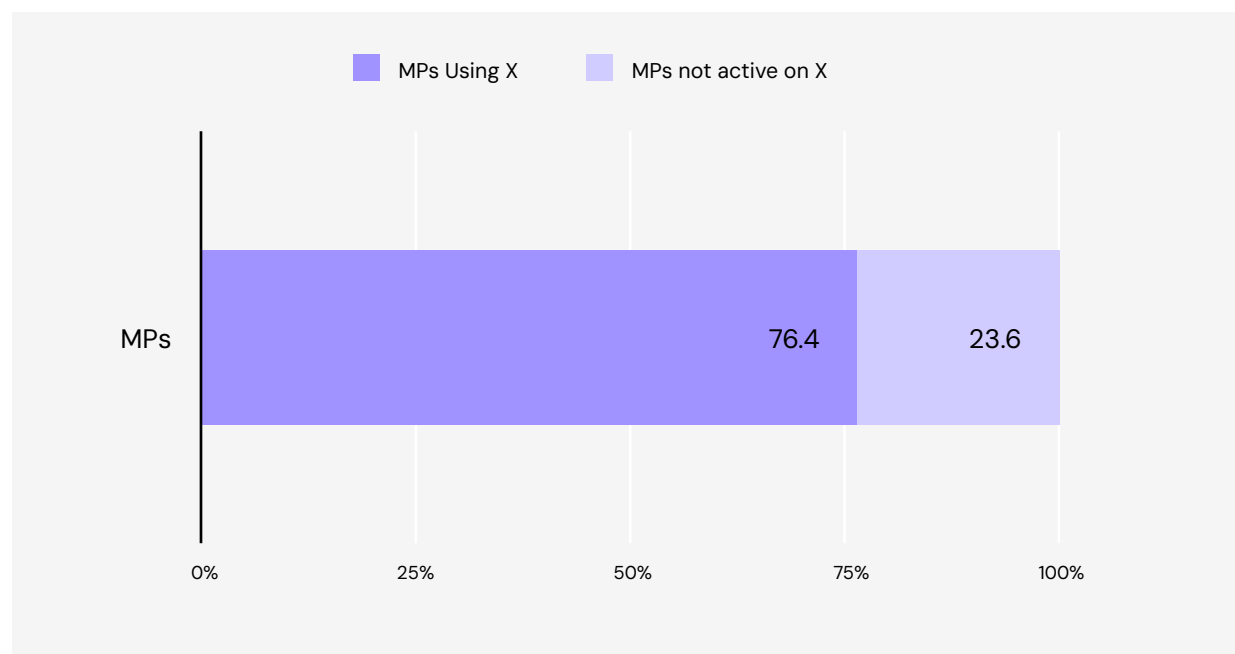
3.0 Digital Democracy in Uganda

3.1 Political and Digital Landscape for Civic Engagement

Uganda embraces technological advancements, creating a complex digital democracy ecosystem with opportunities and challenges. The country has experienced significant growth in internet penetration, 61%¹ in (2024) and mobile connectivity. However, various issues accompany this digital expansion, affecting CSOs, activists, and citizens. Uganda has witnessed notable progress in its digital landscape in recent years, with internet users increasing significantly. Recent political developments have negatively impacted digital rights and freedoms in Uganda. These include banning Facebook and proposing to tax internet usage (Solomon, W., Paul, O. and Makara, S., 2024). These restrictions have created challenges for CSOs and citizens seeking to use digital tools for advocacy and accountability.

According to the Centre for Policy Analysis, (n.d.,) there is a growing trend of citizens, activists, and even members of parliament (MPs) utilising social media platforms like X formerly Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to engage in public discourse and demand accountability. The Centre for Policy Analysis notes that in 2024 over 400 out of 527 MPs in Uganda are active on Twitter, reflecting a shift toward digital engagement among political leaders.

Figure 1: Members of Parliament using X, formerly Twitter in Uganda(2024)



Data Source: Centre for Policy Analysis, n.d.

Internet access and digital literacy remain limited among the rural population. The internet penetration in Uganda is recorded to be 61% according to the Uganda Communications

¹ <https://digital.ict.go.ug/chart?id=977>

Commission². "The density of ownership of smartphones is also very low due to, of course, social, economic factors", emphasised one interviewee.

A significant urban–rural divide exists in digital infrastructure and connectivity. Another respondent stated that, "While urban areas have relatively good connectivity, rural areas lag due to limited infrastructure and high costs of internet services."

A digital rights expert interviewed for this study added that,

"There is widespread fibre connectivity in different places in Kampala," highlighting the disparity and that the legal and regulatory environment for digital rights is increasingly restrictive. "Laws like the Computer Misuse Act and the Data Protection and Privacy Act, while having some positive aspects, have been used to stifle online expression and activism."

Hence, the legal and regulatory environment for digital rights remains restrictive.

The government occasionally clamps down on digital platforms and imposes regulations that hinder free expression. For example, Facebook's ban has forced users to rely on VPNs to access the platform, while proposed internet taxes could further limit access. Despite these challenges, there remains a growing awareness among government bodies of the importance of digital platforms for public relations and citizen engagement.

3.2 Examining the Shrinking Digital Civic Space in Uganda

The digital democracy space in Uganda is in flux, with both positive developments and concerning trends emerging in recent years. While internet penetration and mobile connectivity have increased, providing new avenues for civic engagement, there has also been a marked decline in digital rights and freedoms (Mutenyo, et al, 2022).

Since the 2021 general elections, Facebook has been blocked in Uganda, severely limiting citizens' access to a significant social media platform (George K, 2024). This restriction disproportionately affects those without the technical know-how to use VPNs, widening the digital divide.

The Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023, further restricts online expression in Uganda. It criminalises the 'promotion of homosexuality,' which includes online activities, and carries severe penalties, fostering a climate of fear that chills free speech (Human Rights Watch, 2024). This law particularly impacts CSOs, leading to increased self-censorship and limitations on their online activities, due to the threat of prosecution (Amnesty International, 2024). The passage of the Anti-Homosexuality Act triggered a sharp rise in online harassment and violence, primarily targeting LGBT individuals and women (Zalnieriute, M., 2025). Social media platforms became breeding grounds for disturbing content, with users spreading videos showing physical abuse based on perceived sexual orientation. This trend further marginalised vulnerable groups, exacerbating their already precarious situation.

The government also introduced new regulations and directives that further restrict online freedoms. The National Information Technology Authority–Uganda (NITA-U) has been granted increased powers to regulate online content and monitor internet traffic, raising concerns about

² <https://digital.ict.go.ug/chart?id=977>

potential abuse and overreach (NITA-U, 2023). Furthermore, there have been increased reports of arbitrary arrests and detentions of journalists and activists for their online activities, demonstrating the government's willingness to use legal and extra-legal means to suppress dissent (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2024).

3.3 Digital Rights and Freedom of Expression in Uganda

The digital rights landscape in Uganda paints a concerning picture, with several trends impacting freedom of expression and online civic space. This section presents the tactics used by Ugandan authorities to control information and suppress dissent and manipulate public opinion. The Ugandan government's approach to online spaces is characterised by a multi-pronged strategy encompassing legislative restrictions, technological interventions, and economic barriers. These pose a significant threat to the nation's digital democracy.

3.3.1 Legislative restrictions

The Computer Misuse Act of 2011, significantly amended in 2022, has become a pivotal instrument for digital control in Uganda, shifting its focus from combating traditional cybercrime to regulating online content and speech. While originally intended to address issues like hacking and data breaches (Human Rights Watch, 2022), the 2022 amendments broadened its scope, introducing vaguely worded provisions that grant authorities extensive discretionary powers (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022). These amendments, particularly those concerning the "misuse of social media" and the criminalisation of information deemed disruptive to peace, have transformed the Act into a tool for digital repression. The use of ambiguous terminology, such as "misuse of social media," creates a climate of uncertainty, allowing authorities to interpret the law broadly and making it difficult for individuals to discern permissible online activities. This has resulted in widespread self-censorship, as citizens fear the potential consequences of expressing dissenting opinions online, effectively transforming the Act from a measure against cybercrime to a mechanism for suppressing freedom of speech.

The practical effects of Uganda's restrictive regulatory landscape are evident in the lived experiences of individuals who dare to challenge the status quo. The ambiguous wording of laws like the Computer Misuse Act cultivates a pervasive climate of fear, inducing widespread self-censorship. Journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens hesitate to voice critical opinions online, apprehensive of potential prosecution. This stifling of public discourse directly hinders the ability to hold authorities accountable, undermining the foundations of democratic governance.

The case of Dr. Stella Nyanzi, an academic and activist, serves as a poignant illustration of this reality. Nyanzi's repeated arrests and prosecutions, particularly those related to her social media posts critical of President Museveni and the First Lady, demonstrate the weaponisation of the Computer Misuse Act to suppress dissenting voices. She faced charges under sections relating to cyber harassment and, initially, offensive communication, highlighting the broad and subjective nature of these provisions. The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) even issued an opinion that her detention was arbitrary, underscoring the violations of her rights to freedom of expression and a fair trial.

Similarly, the repeated arrests of author and activist Kakwenza Rukirabashaija, documented by Amnesty International (Amnesty International, n.d.), further underscore the use of repressive laws to silence critics. Rukirabashaija has faced charges related to "defamation and cyber-related crimes" for his critical social media posts. Furthermore, the Uganda Police Force has publicly reported arrests of bloggers under the Computer Misuse Act, with cases involving charges of "unauthorised modification of computer materials". These instances highlight the use of the Act to target individuals for their online activities, particularly those perceived as critical of the government.

Beyond the Computer Misuse Act, provisions of the Penal Code, such as those related to "sedition" and "defamation," continue to be used to suppress critical speech, often in conjunction with the former. The combined effect of these laws creates a chilling environment where freedom of expression is suppressed, vulnerable groups are targeted, and democratic processes are undermined.

3.3.2 Weaponisation of Information: AI and Disinformation

The digital landscape in Uganda is increasingly marred by the proliferation of manipulated content. The rise of AI-generated content introduces a new dimension to this challenge. As evidenced by instances of manipulated images used to harass journalists and activists (Freedom House, 2024), the potential for AI to be weaponised against critical voices is a serious concern. The deliberate spread of misinformation and disinformation further undermines the integrity of online discourse. A pivotal investigation by the BBC exposed networks of fake social media accounts, linked to the Government Citizens Interaction Center (GCIC), that are actively engaged in disseminating pro-government propaganda and issuing threats to critics (BBC News, 2021). This orchestrated disinformation campaign, utilising sophisticated tactics, highlights the government's growing capacity to manipulate online narratives and stifle authentic public discourse. This manipulation creates an environment where citizens struggle to access reliable information, impeding their ability to make informed decisions and participate meaningfully in democratic processes.

3.3.3 Digital Tax

The imposition of digital taxes in Uganda has had a cascading effect on digital democracy, beginning with the 2018 social media tax and evolving into broader internet and digital service taxes. Initially, the "social media tax," framed as a "sin tax" to curb "gossip," directly targeted online expression (Boxell, L. and Steinert-Threlkeld, Z., 2022). President Museveni's justification, penalising "opinions, prejudices, and insults," revealed an intent to control online discourse (Human Rights Watch, 2018). This immediately suppressed critical voices, as the financial burden disproportionately affected lower-income citizens, leading to a significant decline in social media engagement. The immediate consequence was a chilling effect on freedom of expression, hindering public debate and political mobilisation. Within the first three months of implementation, over 2.5 million users ceased internet usage, demonstrating the tax's prohibitive nature (CIPESA, 2018).

Subsequently, the social media tax transitioned into a 12% tax on internet data and, later, a 5% digital service tax on non-resident digital service providers. While presented as revenue-generating measures, these taxes perpetuate the digital divide. By increasing the cost of internet access, they limit the participation of marginalised communities in the digital sphere. This has a direct impact on digital activism. Increased costs impede the ability of activists and CSOs to utilise digital platforms for advocacy and accountability. The economic barrier created by these taxes restricts access to information, widening the gap between information "haves" and "have-nots" (CIPESA, 2023). This successive taxation undermines the foundations of digital democracy, restricting access to information and limiting the ability of citizens to engage in meaningful online participation.

The underlying motivations for these taxes reflect a broader trend of government efforts to control online information and suppress dissent. Uganda's classification as a "repressed" country is substantiated by these policies, which demonstrate a disregard for digital rights and freedom of expression. The taxes are perceived as tools to stifle opposition voices, particularly during politically sensitive periods. The government's revenue-generation claims are often questioned, with critics arguing that they prioritise control over economic development. The cumulative effect of these taxes is a gradual erosion of digital democracy, limiting the potential of digital platforms to foster open and inclusive civic engagement.

3.3.4 Internet Shutdowns and Platform Blocking

The Ugandan government's pattern of implementing internet shutdowns and platform blockings presents a significant threat to digital democracy. The 2021 general elections serve as a reminder

of this trend. Leading up to the polls, the government enacted a widespread internet shutdown, effectively severing communication for millions of citizens. This action, justified under the guise of maintaining security and curbing misinformation, was widely condemned by human rights organisations and digital rights advocates as a deliberate attempt to suppress dissent and manipulate the electoral process (Access Now, n.d.).

In addition to complete shutdowns, the Ugandan government has employed targeted platform blocking, particularly against social media platforms like Facebook. The prolonged restriction of Facebook access has significantly curtailed citizens' capacity to engage in online discussions, share information, and organise civic activities. However, despite this limitation, digital platforms such as TikTok and X, in particular, have emerged as key forums for opposition and criticism in Uganda (Muhindo, 2023).

With Facebook's ban, other social media platforms continue to play a crucial role in holding power to account. Notably, X (formerly Twitter), where Ugandan elites and the establishment maintain a strong presence, has become a vital space for public discourse. Hashtag campaigns like #UgandaNGOExhibition, #KampalaPotholeExhibition, #UgandaSecurityExhibition, and #UgandaHealthExhibition demonstrates how citizens utilise X to demand change from the government (Agabo, S., 2024). Furthermore, despite the relative absence of Ugandan leaders on TikTok, content originating there often migrates to X, where it undergoes further scrutiny and amplification. This cross-platform dissemination underscores the resilience of citizen-driven information sharing, even in the face of restrictions like the Facebook ban, highlighting the continued importance of social media in Uganda's public sphere.

Shutdowns and restrictions erode trust in digital spaces, discouraging citizens from using online platforms for political engagement. As highlighted by the Wilson Center, social media has played a vital role in expanding political participation and transparency in Uganda. However, government interventions threaten to reverse these gains, effectively silencing marginalised voices that found a platform online (The Wilson Center, 2025).

The Ugandan government's actions align with a broader global trend of authoritarian regimes utilising internet shutdowns and platform blockings as tools of control. These actions violate international human rights standards, including the right to freedom of expression and access to information. The economic and social costs of internet disruptions are substantial, impacting businesses, essential services, and citizens' livelihoods. The digital space in Uganda, once a place where marginalised people could have their voices heard, is being systematically eroded by these government interventions.

3.3.5 Surveillance and Erosion of Privacy and Trust

In Uganda, the intensification of digital surveillance and propaganda efforts has created a climate of fear and distrust, significantly eroding privacy and hindering the exercise of fundamental freedoms. The government's increasing reliance on sophisticated surveillance technologies and coordinated disinformation campaigns has had an impact on the digital public sphere and the trust citizens place in institutions.

One of the most prominent examples of this trend is the government's use of social media monitoring. According to Human Rights Watch (2021), the government has been accused of deploying sophisticated surveillance technologies to monitor and track citizens, particularly those critical of the regime. The use of spyware has also been alleged, potentially enabling the government to intercept communications, track locations, and access personal data.

The use of "cyber troops" and coordinated social media campaigns to spread pro-government propaganda and discredit opposition voices is well-documented (DFRLab, 2021). These campaigns often involve the use of fake accounts and bots to amplify specific narratives and manipulate public opinion. The BBC's exposure of a network of fake social media accounts linked to the GCIC, spreading pro-government messaging and issuing threats, reveals the government's sophisticated approach to manipulating online discourse (BBC News, 2021). This disinformation campaign creates

an environment where citizens are unsure of what information to trust, further eroding trust in media and institutions. For example, during the 2021 elections, numerous accounts were created to spread misinformation and discredit opposition candidates, creating confusion and distrust among voters.

The Civicus Monitor (2024) rates Uganda's civic space as "repressed," citing the government's restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly. The impact of this surveillance undermines the foundations of a vibrant digital public sphere, erodes trust in institutions, and limits citizens' ability to exercise their fundamental rights. The constant awareness of being monitored and manipulated leads to self-censorship and a reluctance to participate in public discourse.

3.3.6 Digital ID and Privacy Concerns

The implementation of digital ID systems in Uganda has sparked significant debate, particularly regarding privacy concerns and the potential implications for digital democracy. The expiration of Ugandan national ID cards was expected in 2024, and speculations are that the government would use the renewal process to consolidate control over citizens' data, potentially excluding marginalised groups from accessing essential services.

The introduction of digital ID systems in Uganda has been accompanied by fears of increased surveillance and data misuse. The centralised collection of biometric and personal data, including fingerprints, facial recognition, and demographic information, creates a comprehensive database that could be exploited for monitoring citizens. According to Privacy International (2020), centralised digital ID systems often lack robust safeguards, making them vulnerable to unauthorised access and misuse by state and non-state actors. In Uganda, where the government has previously been accused of using digital tools to suppress dissent, such as during the 2021 elections when internet shutdowns were reported (Human Rights Watch, 2021), the potential for abuse is particularly concerning.

The National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA) has faced criticism for inefficiencies and data breaches in the past. In 2018, a data leak exposed the personal information of millions of Ugandans, raising questions about the security of the digital ID system (Daily Monitor, 2018). Such incidents undermine public trust and highlight the risks of centralising sensitive data.

According to CIPESA, (2022), digital ID systems often fail to account for the challenges faced by marginalised communities, such as limited access to technology, illiteracy, and lack of documentation. For instance, refugees in Uganda, who rely on national IDs to access healthcare and education, may face difficulties renewing their cards due to bureaucratic hurdles or lack of awareness. In addition, the digital divide in Uganda remains significant and many rural areas lack the infrastructure needed to support digital ID systems. This disparity could lead to the exclusion of millions from essential services, further deepening inequality.

The government's track record of using digital tools to monitor and suppress dissent raises concerns about the potential misuse of digital ID data. If digital ID systems are used to track citizens' movements, transactions, and communications, it could further erode democratic freedoms and stifle political participation.

3.3.7 Online Violence and Harassment

The passage of Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act in 2023 has had devastating consequences for LGBTQ+ individuals, both offline and online. The law criminalises same-sex relationships and imposes severe penalties, including life imprisonment for certain acts. This legislation has emboldened both state and non-state actors to target LGBTQ+ individuals with impunity, leading to a significant increase in online harassment and violence.

According to one interviewee, *"Many individuals have reported lost jobs, facing family violence, and experiencing severe mental health issues as a result of online harassment stemming from this*

legislation". This statement underscores the far-reaching consequences of online abuse, which extends beyond the digital realm and infiltrates every aspect of victims' lives.

Social media platforms have become hotbeds for hate speech and violent content targeting LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, videos depicting violence against LGBTQ+ people have circulated widely on platforms like Twitter, often accompanied by derogatory comments and calls for further violence (Human Rights Watch, 2024). These videos not only perpetuate harm but also normalise violence against marginalised communities, creating a climate of fear and intimidation.

The Anti-Homosexuality Act has effectively sanctioned the targeting of LGBTQ+ individuals by both security forces and private citizens. Reports indicate that security forces have used social media to identify and arrest LGBTQ+ individuals, while private individuals have taken it upon themselves to harass and doxx (publicly share private information about) LGBTQ+ people online (Amnesty International, 2024). This collaboration between state and non-state actors has created an environment where LGBTQ+ individuals are constantly under threat, both online and offline.

In 2024, Amnesty International documented cases where LGBTQ+ activists in Uganda were arrested after their personal information was leaked on social media. These individuals faced not only legal repercussions but also severe online harassment, including death threats and public shaming. Such incidents highlight the dangerous intersection of state-sanctioned discrimination and online violence. In another example, in 2024, a report by Human Rights Watch highlighted the case of a Ugandan LGBTQ+ activist who was fired from their job after their employer discovered their sexual orientation through social media posts.

The Anti-Homosexuality Act has drawn widespread condemnation. Despite this criticism, the Ugandan Constitutional Court upheld the law in April 2024, further entrenching discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals.

An interviewee notes that:

"Many individuals have reported lost jobs, facing family violence, and experiencing severe mental health issues as a result of online harassment stemming from this legislation".

3.4 Challenges for CSOs in Uganda



Taxation and Its Implications: A 5% digital service tax on non-resident companies providing digital services in Uganda has raised concerns about potential price increases. While this tax aims to generate revenue, it inadvertently widens the digital divide by making internet services more expensive for end-users. The potential impact on affordability could slow down the progress in increasing internet penetration.



Hostile Legal Framework: CSOs operate within a challenging legal environment that often restricts their activities and limits their ability to advocate for digital rights effectively. These legal constraints hinder their capacity to engage in certain forms of activism or criticism of government policies.



Surveillance Threats: The constant threat of surveillance poses a significant risk to CSOs and their work. This environment of digital insecurity can lead to self-censorship and limit the scope of their activities, particularly in sensitive areas of digital rights advocacy.



Cost Barriers: The high cost of internet access remains a significant obstacle for many Ugandans. With 1GB of data priced at around 5,000 Ugandan shillings (approximately \$1.35), internet access remains prohibitively expensive for many people. This cost barrier

contributes to the digital divide, limiting access to information and online services for lower-income individuals and communities.

Capacity Gaps: Many CSOs lack the expertise to effectively use digital tools for advocacy and engagement, particularly in reaching younger demographics.



Resource Constraints: A primary obstacle Ugandan CSOs face is the limited availability of resources. This scarcity affects their ability to implement comprehensive programs, conduct extensive research, and maintain long-term initiatives.



Rural-Urban Divide: Despite overall growth in internet access, rural areas in Uganda continue to face significant connectivity challenges. This geographical disparity in access creates a stark digital divide between urban and rural populations, limiting economic and educational opportunities for those in remote areas.

3.5 Creative Civil Society Response and Adaptation

3.5.1 Digital Activism Gains Traction

In recent years, grassroots digital activism campaigns have gained significant momentum in Uganda, reshaping the landscape of civic engagement and political accountability. One prominent example is the Uganda Parliament Exhibition Movement, which has leveraged social media platforms to demand greater transparency and accountability from lawmakers. This movement exemplifies the transformative potential of digital tools in mobilising citizens and applying pressure on those in power. However, as these online movements grow in influence, authorities have increasingly sought to restrict their reach through censorship and surveillance, forcing activists to adapt their strategies continually.

One initiative is the Centre for Policy Analysis (CEPA) partnership with Agora Discourse, a group of young activists, to organise the Parliamentary Exhibition, a digital campaign that exposed corruption and abuse of power in parliament. This initiative gained significant traction and even led to international sanctions against some Ugandan leaders.

This campaign demonstrates how digital tools can amplify grassroots efforts, enabling citizens to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and directly engage with a global audience. The campaign gained significant traction, with hashtags such as #UgandaParliamentExhibition trending on social media, drawing attention from both local and international audiences (CEPA, 2023).

Social media has become a critical platform for digital activism in Uganda, enabling activists to disseminate information rapidly and organise collective action. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have been instrumental in mobilising citizens, particularly the youth, who constitute a significant portion of Uganda's population. For example, during the Parliament Exhibition campaign, activists used Twitter threads to break down complex issues, such as budget allocations and procurement scandals, making them accessible to a broader audience (Agora Discourse, 2023). This approach not only educated the public but also fostered a sense of collective outrage, driving more people to join the movement.

Activists have also adopted innovative strategies to circumvent censorship and surveillance. For example, some have turned to encrypted messaging apps like Signal and Telegram to coordinate their activities securely. Others have used virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass internet restrictions and access blocked platforms (Amnesty International, 2023). These adaptations highlight the resilience and creativity of digital activists in the face of growing repression.

3.5.2 Addressing Inequalities

Innovative initiatives are emerging to combat challenges associated with the digital divide. For instance, AccessPlus is a feminist-led community broadband connectivity project that addresses geographical and gender divides in internet access. Another initiative is a community network, BOSCO Uganda, which has established a collaborative network through an internal content management site (intranet), a voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) telephony system, and a collaborative Wiki for the communities in which it operates. Such projects highlight the importance of targeted interventions to ensure equitable digital access across all segments of society.

3.5.3 Coalition building

The Uganda Internet Governance Forum has proved to be a valuable platform for stakeholder collaboration on digital rights issues. CSOs have engaged policymakers through submissions to parliamentary committees and participation in public consultations on digital legislation. In addition, local coalitions such as the NGO Forum in Uganda established compliance clinics to bolster the resilience of CSOs amidst a restrictive political climate. These clinics offer technical and legal support, empowering CSOs to navigate complex regulations and maintain legal compliance. Through training, legal advice, resource development, and peer learning opportunities, the clinics enhance CSOs' capacity to operate effectively and legally. By ensuring compliance, CSOs can minimise their vulnerability to legal challenges and government interference, build trust with stakeholders, and focus on their core mission without fear of reprisal.

3.5.4 Countering Online Gender Backlash

WOUGNET for instance has focused on online gender-based violence and is currently implementing a project supported by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) called [Our Voices, Our Futures](https://www.apc.org/en/project/our-voices-our-futures),³ which aims to improve civic space online in Uganda for the women's human rights defenders and feminists. WOUGNET seeks to enhance its research on online gender-based violence and empower women to actively participate in shaping inclusive policies in the digital space, ensuring equal opportunities for access and utilisation of digital technologies.

3.5.5 Documentation and Monitoring

In Uganda, the Africa Freedom of Information Centre launched an election monitoring Platform. This digital platform tracks election-related violence and human rights violations, providing real-time data and analysis to stakeholders. This platform has been instrumental in documenting and raising awareness about electoral violence in Uganda, leading to increased calls for accountability and reforms.

3.5.6 Digital security Audits

Another creative response strategy is the Safetag, a digital security auditing tool created by Defend Defenders to help human rights defenders and organisations in Uganda assess and improve their digital security practices. The auditing process involves a thorough examination of the organisation's digital infrastructure, policies, and practices, including its website, social media presence, use of technology, and staff interviews. Based on the audit findings, Safetag provides a detailed report with recommendations for strengthening the organisation's digital security. This tool is crucial in the context of Uganda, where human rights defenders face increasing digital threats. By identifying vulnerabilities and providing tailored solutions, Safetag empowers these individuals and organisations to protect themselves and their sensitive information.

³ <https://www.apc.org/en/project/our-voices-our-futures>

3.5.7 Digital Security Initiatives

Defend Defenders have stepped up to protect activists and human rights defenders in the digital space. Their work is crucial and reassuring in building resilience among civil society actors operating in high-risk environments. These digital security initiatives are a beacon of hope, safeguarding democratic values and human rights in the digital age. Defend Defenders offers a range of essential services:

- **Digital Security Helpline:** Providing emergency assistance to activists and organisations under immediate threat.
- **Digital Security Audits:** Conduct thorough assessments to identify vulnerabilities in at-risk organisations' digital infrastructure and practices.
- **Tailored Training Programs:** Offering specialised training on digital safety, with initiatives like "Safe Sisters" focusing on empowering women in the digital space.

3.5.8 Community Broadband Connectivity

In partnership with the World Association Of Christian Communication (WACC) and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), WOUGNET is strengthening a rural broadband network in the Apac municipality of northern Uganda. This initiative benefits specific community institutions and groups, including schools, health centres, and women-led farmer groups. The project aims to provide sustainable, reliable, accessible, and affordable broadband connectivity to marginalised communities, focusing on bridging the digital gender gap.

3.5.9 Digital Documentation and Research

Organisations like CIPESA, CEPA and POLLICY play a crucial role in shedding light on the complex landscape of digital rights and their violations. Their work is essential in an increasingly sophisticated and widespread digital repression era. In the information warfare age, tracking the spread and impact of online disinformation has become crucial. This process involves analysing the sources and patterns of disinformation campaigns, assessing the effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives, and exploring how social media algorithms amplify false narratives. Such research is essential for developing strategies to combat the erosion of trust in digital spaces.

3.5.10 Policy Engagement

A growing trend shows that civil society groups and policymakers proactively engage in policy processes surrounding emerging technologies like AI and data governance. They are increasingly participating in discussions and consultations to ensure that human rights and democratic values shape the development and implementation of new technologies. This active engagement is crucial for creating rights-respecting technology frameworks that strengthen democratic values in digital societies.

3.6 Existing Support Mechanisms

3.6.1 Support Networks

Despite the documented digital landscape restrictions and challenges, several support mechanisms are available to CSOs in Uganda. International donors, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, fund digital democracy initiatives, although the amounts are often limited.

Interviewees mentioned support from organisations like USAID, the European Union (EU), the Open Society Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, though they did not name specific international donors. Respondents described capacity-building programs such as the Vote Women program, which trains women politicians in digital communication and security. The Digital Human Rights Lab provides training and resources to CSOs on digital security and online advocacy. DefendDefenders offers the Ttaala Digital Skills Workshop, which trains human rights organisations in Uganda on digital tools, data management, and online campaigns.

In the words of digital rights activists,

“Barefoot Law provides free legal support. And there's another organisation called Chapter Four, which doesn't offer free legal support. Tech company engagement with civil society on digital democracy issues appears limited.”

“Some tech companies have occasionally engaged with CSOs on issues like content moderation and online safety, but this engagement is often limited and inconsistent.”

“Organisations like Defend Defenders and CIPESA offer training on digital security and online advocacy for CSOs in Uganda and the wider East African region.”

Local and regional networks facilitating CSO collaboration include the Association for Progressive Communication ([APC](#)), Arise Network for Accountability, and the East African Civil Society Organisations Forum ([EACSO](#)). Legal aid mechanisms for CSOs facing digital threats include organisations like [Barefoot Law](#) and [Chapter Four](#).

3.6.2 Capacity Building Support

Capacity-building programs are also available, though they are often activity-based and rely on partnerships with other organisations. CEPA has partnered with various media houses, radio stations, and regional networks to amplify their work and reach a broader audience. Legal support is another critical area, with CSOs forming consortiums to create a buffer against state repression. For example, CEPA, a member of the Uganda Human Rights Network and the Uganda NGO Coalition provide social and legal support to member organisations.

Regional networks, such as the African Parliamentary Monitoring Organisations Network ([APMON](#)) and the East Africa Parliamentary Monitoring Organisations Network (EAPMON), facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing among CSOs on digital rights. These networks have been instrumental in convening conferences and workshops to discuss emerging issues in digital democracy, such as integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into advocacy work.

Another supportive network is the Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC), based in Uganda but works across the continent. The network provides a resource centre for promoting the right of access to information, transparency and accountability across Africa. It supports national advocacy with comparative research, capacity strengthening, and technical support by monitoring treaty compliance and implementation.

3.7 Successful Strategies

CSOs have effectively used digital influencers for advocacy. As one interviewee mentions,

"One of the things that we have done is to use what we have called digital space influencers, musicians, comedians that have a larger following to disseminate messages."

Another respondent also noted strengthening digital spaces for women, noting that

"CSOs in Uganda have built resilience among women politicians to continue engaging online despite the backlash".

Coalition building has also been crucial, noting the importance of "building alliances with government officials and collaborations with government entities."

Platforms such as the **Uganda Internet Governance** Forum are recorded as very valuable for bringing together various stakeholders to discuss Internet policy issues and advocate for digital rights. This forum has been both strategic and growing. Public awareness campaigns like **#KeepItOn** against internet shutdowns have gained significant traction in Uganda and Africa. CSOs in Uganda have also engaged policymakers through submissions to parliamentary committees and participation in public consultations on digital legislation.

Regarding security practices, CSOs have adopted measures like using VPNs, implementing two-factor authentication, and conducting regular digital security audits. They have also effectively used various digital tools for advocacy, including encrypted messaging apps for secure communication, VPNs to bypass Internet restrictions, and social media platforms for advocacy and public engagement.

Coalition building has been crucial, and the Uganda Internet Governance Forum is a valuable platform for stakeholder collaboration on digital rights issues. CSOs have engaged policymakers through submissions to parliamentary committees and participation in public consultations on digital legislation. They have adopted security practices such as using VPNs, implementing two-factor authentication, and conducting regular digital security audits.

The CEPA has successfully leveraged digital tools and platforms to enhance civic engagement and accountability in Uganda. Their Parliamentary Watch Program, a civic tech platform, monitors parliamentary activities and provides analytical information to the public. The program uses social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to disseminate information, reach a broad audience, and strengthen citizens' agency.

CEPA has also built coalitions with media houses, radio stations, and other CSOs to amplify its work. They have also established a multimedia studio to produce podcasts and short videos, catering to an audience that increasingly prefers visual content over written reports. It also partnered with Agora Discourse, a group of young activists, to organise the Parliamentary Exhibition, a digital campaign that exposed corruption and abuse of power in parliament. This initiative gained significant traction and even led to international sanctions against some Ugandan leaders.

Another successful initiative focusing on women worth mentioning is the WOUGNET. Established in 2000, WOUGNET uses ICTs to promote women's involvement, activities and efforts in the space. Their efforts include:

- **Countering Online Gender Backlash**, which empowers women and girls in the digital space with skills, ensuring equal opportunities for access and utilisation of digital technologies.
- **Community Broadband Connectivity**: In partnership with the World Association Of Christian Communication (WACC) and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), WOUGNET is strengthening a rural broadband network in the Apac municipality of northern Uganda. This initiative benefits specific community institutions and groups, including schools, health centres, and women-led farmer groups. The project provides sustainable, reliable, accessible, and affordable broadband connectivity to marginalised communities, focusing on bridging the digital gender gap.
- **Capacity Building**: focuses on enhancing the digital capabilities of women-led organisations by providing training in basic networking and troubleshooting community networks.

3.7.1 Other Initiatives

Other organisations contributing to digital empowerment in Uganda include;

- The Online Safety Foundation Uganda (OSFU) offers educational resources for online safety, privacy, and responsible digital citizenship.
- National Information Technology Authority (NITA) Uganda, the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), and Hive Colab have developed a toolkit to empower marginalised communities with digital literacy skills.

These collective efforts seek to bridge the digital divide, promote online safety, and ensure equitable distribution of the benefits from increased internet access across Uganda's population. However, they face significant obstacles, including funding constraints and an increasingly restrictive operating environment.

3.7.2 Existing Support Mechanisms in Uganda



Financial Support, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, fund digital democracy initiatives, although the amounts are often limited. USAID, the European Union (EU), the Open Society Foundation, and the Ford Foundation are some active international donors in the space



Digital Security & Technical Support, CIPESA provides training programs for CSOs on digital security and online advocacy, equipping them with the knowledge and tools to protect themselves and their data. Policy also builds digital tools for social impact and has provided technical support to CSOs in developing mobile apps for citizen engagement and data collection, further enhancing their digital security. Defend Defenders offers the Ttaala Digital Skills Workshop, which trains human rights organisations in Uganda on digital tools, data management, and online campaign strategies, strengthening their capacity to operate securely in the digital space.



Capacity Building Support, though they are often activity-based and rely on partnerships with other organisations. For instance CEPA has partnered with various media houses, radio stations, and regional networks to amplify their work and reach a broader audience. Legal support is another critical area, with CSOs forming consortiums to create a buffer against state repression. Vote Women program trains women politicians in digital communication and security. The Digital Human Rights Lab provides training and resources to CSOs on digital security and online advocacy. DefendDefenders offers the Ttaala Digital Skills Workshop, which trains human rights organisations in Uganda on digital tools, data management, and online campaign.



Networks & Coalitions, such as the African Parliamentary Monitoring Organisations Network (APMON) and the East Africa Parliamentary Monitoring Organisations Network (EAPMON), facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing among CSOs on digital rights. These networks have been instrumental in convening conferences and workshops to discuss emerging issues in digital democracy, such as integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into advocacy work. CSO collaborations include the APC, Arise Network for Accountability, and the East African Civil Society Organisations Forum (EACSOF). Legal aid mechanisms for CSOs facing digital threats include organisations like Barefoot Law and Chapter Four.

3.8 Key Players and Their Contributions

As Uganda approaches its next election cycle, scheduled for 2026, the need for robust support mechanisms for digital rights defenders and civil society organisations becomes more critical. This support should encompass funding, capacity building in digital security, and partnerships with tech hubs to develop innovative solutions for protecting online civic space. Some key players make contributions to strengthening the support ecosystems for digital democracy in Uganda, i.e.

- **WOUGNET** focuses on empowering women through ICTs. It conducts digital literacy workshops and trains women's groups to use social media for advocacy and fundraising.
- **CIPESA** provides vital capacity building for CSOs, building capacity on the safe use of digital tools and platforms, including encryption tools and secure communication platforms.
- **Media Challenge Initiative (MCI)** supports CSOs in producing impactful multimedia content, helping them amplify their messages through documentaries and video stories.
- **Human Rights Network for Journalists–Uganda (HRNJ–Uganda)** offers crucial legal aid and support to journalists facing harassment or persecution for their online reporting.
- **CEPA**, a think tank, is dedicated to advancing parliamentary democracy, governance, and public policy. Bringing together policy innovators to drive evidence-based research.
- **Defenders Protection Initiative (DPI)**, strengthening the capacity of human rights defenders (HRDs) to mainstream security, safety and protection management in their work.
- **POLLICY**, provides training and engagements with CSOs active in the digital democracy space. Also conducted research and analysis on the scale of online violence targeted at political candidates and high-profile individuals in Uganda
- **Africa Freedom of Information Centre**, promoting the right of access to information, transparency and accountability across Uganda and Africa. Supporting national advocacy with comparative research, capacity strengthening, and technical support and monitoring treaty compliance and implementation.
- **BOSCO**, provides complimentary internet connectivity to rural communities through an internal content management site (intranet), a voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) telephony
- **Uganda NGO Forum**, a network of 600 CSO members, focuses on influencing governance and civics space-related issues and engaging communities to participate in development and governance processes.
- **The Online Safety Foundation Uganda (OSFU)** offers educational resources for online safety, privacy, and responsible digital citizenship.
- **National Information Technology Authority (NITA)** Uganda, the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), and Hive Colab have developed a toolkit to empower marginalised communities with digital literacy skills.
- **AccessPlus**, a feminist-led community broadband connectivity project that addresses geographical and gender divides in internet access.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the political and digital landscape for civic engagement in Uganda, highlighting both opportunities and challenges in a complex digital democracy ecosystem. Uganda has experienced significant growth in internet penetration and mobile connectivity, but this digital expansion is accompanied by various issues affecting CSOs, activists, and citizens. Recent political developments have negatively impacted digital rights and freedoms, including banning Facebook and proposing internet taxes, which restrict digital tools for advocacy and accountability. Despite these obstacles, citizens, activists, and even members of parliament are increasingly utilising digital platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp for public discourse and demanding accountability.

The Ugandan government employs a multi-pronged strategy to control information, suppress dissent, and manipulate public opinion, posing a significant threat to digital democracy. This includes legislative restrictions like the Computer Misuse Act, which has become a tool for digital repression, inducing widespread self-censorship. The weaponisation of information through AI-generated content and disinformation campaigns further undermines online discourse, with evidence of government-linked networks spreading pro-government propaganda and threats.

Digital taxes in Uganda, including the social media tax and broader internet and digital service taxes, have a cascading effect on digital democracy, suppressing critical voices, perpetuating the digital divide, and limiting citizens' ability to engage in meaningful online participation. The government's pattern of implementing internet shutdowns and platform blockings, as seen during the 2021 general elections and the prolonged restriction of Facebook, presents a significant threat to digital democracy, eroding trust in digital spaces and silencing marginalised voices.

4.0 Conclusion

The case study assessment of Uganda's digital democracy landscape reveals a complex and challenging environment for CSOs and activists. Despite significant obstacles, these groups demonstrate remarkable resilience and innovation in promoting digital rights and democratic engagement.

Uganda's government has implemented increasingly restrictive policies that challenge the country's vibrant civil society. The Ugandan government has banned Facebook and proposed taxes on internet usage, severely impacting digital rights and freedoms. These restrictions create significant hurdles for CSOs and citizens seeking to use digital advocacy and accountability tools. The government's actions have forced many to resort to VPNs and alternative platforms, complicating their efforts to engage in online civic participation and digital activism.

Internet connectivity in Uganda is growing with a 61% internet penetration rate recorded in 2024. Urban areas enjoy relatively good connectivity, while rural regions lag due to limited infrastructure and high costs of internet services. This disparity exacerbates existing inequalities and limits the reach of digital democracy initiatives.

CSOs face various forms of digital repression, including surveillance, censorship, and threats of internet shutdowns. The government hinders CSOs' use of digital tools through burdensome registration requirements and threats of deregistration. Many organisations, significantly smaller grassroots groups, lack the technical skills and resources to effectively use digital advocacy tools or protect themselves from digital threats.

In the words of a digital rights expert,

“While digital tools have become increasingly crucial for civic engagement and accountability, CSOs face significant barriers, including restrictive government policies, limited funding, and capacity gaps. However, with the proper support and policy changes, Uganda's digital democracy ecosystem has the potential to grow and thrive, empowering citizens and strengthening democratic institutions.”

Despite these challenges, CSOs have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and innovation. Organisations like Defend Defenders and DPI offer critical support services, including digital security helplines, audits, and tailored training programs. CSOs have effectively used digital influencers for advocacy and built coalitions to amplify their impact. Public awareness campaigns, such as #KeepItOn against internet shutdowns, have gained significant traction in Uganda.

The legal landscape in Uganda poses significant challenges to digital rights. The Computer Misuse Act of 2011 has become a potent weapon against online dissent, leading many Ugandans to self-censor. However, CSOs continue to engage policymakers through submissions to parliamentary committees and participation in public consultations on digital legislation.

To strengthen the support ecosystem for digital democracy in Uganda, stakeholders must focus on enhancing digital security capacity, expanding legal support networks, fostering regional collaboration, increasing flexible long-term funding, promoting alternative technologies, strengthening international advocacy, and investing in digital literacy programs.

As Uganda approaches its next election cycle, the need for robust support mechanisms for digital rights defenders and civil society organisations becomes increasingly critical. This support should encompass funding, capacity building in digital security, and partnerships with tech hubs to develop innovative solutions for protecting online civic space.

5.0 Recommendations

This section outlines key recommendations to address CSOs' challenges in Uganda's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

The case study assessment findings highlight the need for several policy recommendations to create a more enabling environment for digital democracy in Uganda. The government should lift restrictions on social media platforms and avoid imposing taxes on internet usage, making digital tools more accessible to the population. Additionally, stronger legal protections for digital rights, including safeguards against surveillance and censorship, should be implemented.

Donor funding for digital democracy initiatives should be made more accessible and sustainable. CSOs would benefit from long-term funding commitments to invest in digital infrastructure and capacity-building programs. Capacity-building initiatives should focus on digital security, online advocacy, and integrating emerging technologies like AI into CSOs' work.

In the words of a human rights activist,

“Regional bodies like the East African Community should develop guidelines on digital rights and internet freedom to which member states can be held accountable.”

Cross-sector collaboration on digital rights should be strengthened, particularly between CSOs, media houses, and government bodies. Regional networks like APMON and EAPMON can play a key role in facilitating this collaboration and advocating for digital rights at the regional and international levels. Finally, international mechanisms like the United Nations and the African Union (AU) should support CSOs working on digital democracy, particularly in countries with shrinking civic spaces like Uganda.

A comprehensive set of recommendations has emerged from the analysis of interviews with key stakeholders to strengthen the support ecosystem for digital democracy in Uganda. These recommendations aim to address CSOs' challenges and promote a more robust digital democracy landscape in the country.

5.1 Digital Security Initiatives

Uganda's CSOs and digital activists are navigating a complex and challenging landscape as they leverage technology to advance social justice and democracy. Despite facing significant obstacles, these groups continue to innovate and adapt their strategies to make an impact. Organisations like Defend Defenders are at the forefront of protecting activists and human rights defenders in the digital space. They offer a range of critical support services, including:

- **Digital Security Helpline:** Providing emergency assistance to activists and organisations under immediate threat.

- **Digital Security Audits:** Conduct thorough assessments to identify vulnerabilities in at-risk organisations' digital infrastructure and practices.
- **Tailored Training Programs:** Offering specialised training on digital safety, with initiatives like "Safe Sisters" focusing on empowering women in the digital space.

These efforts are crucial in building resilience among civil society actors operating in high-risk environments. Critical digital security initiatives should focus on capacity building and could include the following:



Comprehensive Digital Security Training: Strengthening current programs to cover a wide range of topics, including threat assessment, secure communication, data protection, and incident response.



Decentralised Training Approach: Implementing a "Training of Trainers" model to create a network of digital security experts who can reach CSOs in Uganda's remote regions and rural areas.



Resilience Against Online Threats: Equip CSOs with tools and strategies to maintain operations during internet shutdowns or social media bans.



VPN Usage Education: capacity building for CSOs on how to use VPNs to bypass government-imposed restrictions.



Alternative Communication Methods: Equip CSOs with secure, offline communication tools to maintain operations during internet blackouts.



Cybersecurity Best Practices: Educate CSOs on the latest cybersecurity trends and techniques to protect against evolving threats.



Legal and Policy Advocacy: Train CSOs to advocate for digital rights and challenge restrictive government policies.



Incident Documentation: capacity building for CSOs on how to document and report digital rights violations securely.

These program areas could help CSOs in Uganda build their digital resilience and continue their essential work despite severe digital repression.

5.2 Expand Legal Support Networks

Uganda's legal landscape as highlighted in the case study significantly restricts digital rights. This obtaining situation calls for enhanced capacity building programs including specific programs for legal professionals as a way of building resilience to counter these challenges. This could include strengthening support for emergency legal support to individuals facing digital rights violations. Areas of legal support can include offering ongoing legal counsel to navigate complex digital laws and strategic litigation to challenge restrictive legislation. Other areas could include;

- Offering training and resources on digital rights laws and emerging technologies.
- Engage in strategic litigation to challenge repressive laws and set legal precedents.
- Collaborate with civil society organisations to advocate for policy reforms.
- Monitor and document digital rights violations to build evidence for advocacy efforts.
- Educate the public on their digital rights and how to protect them.
- Push for establishing a communication tribunal to arbitrate issues within the sector.
- Advocate for translating digital rights laws into local languages for better accessibility.

5.3 Foster Regional Collaboration

Given the shared challenges across East Africa, fostering regional collaboration among CSOs is essential. This collaboration can take several forms that include the following;



Regular regional conferences on digital rights.



Cross-border training and capacity-building programs.



Shared resources and tools for digital advocacy.



Joint campaigns on issues of regional importance.

One interviewee suggested that

"Creating national coalitions of human rights defenders to provide localised support and amplify their collective voice" is crucial. Extending this concept to the regional level can further strengthen these efforts."

5.4 Increase Flexible, Long-term Funding

All interviews reveal the need for sustained, flexible funding. For example, one interviewee emphasised that "There could be a mechanism to provide funding to support the work of CSOs already in space. In this case, funding initiatives should focus on the following:



Core support for CSOs to build long-term digital capacity.



Rapid response funds for emergencies like internet shutdowns.



Support for innovative digital democracy projects.



Grants for research and documentation of digital rights violations.

5.5 Promote Alternative Technologies

The government's control over mainstream digital platforms necessitates promoting alternative technologies. CSOs and digital rights advocates consider the following:



Supporting the development of decentralised social media platforms.



Promoting the use of encrypted messaging apps.



Developing offline tools for information sharing during internet shutdowns.



Creating community-owned Internet infrastructure.

5.6 Strengthen International Advocacy

International actors can significantly influence the promotion of digital rights in Uganda. An interviewee commented that, "Leverage international advocacy when domestic efforts fail is very crucial in raising awareness and increasing advocacy" This approach could involve:



Coordinated campaigns by international human rights organisations.



Engagement with UN mechanisms on digital rights.



Diplomatic pressure from foreign governments.



Collaboration with global tech companies to resist government restrictions.

5.7 Invest in Digital Literacy Programs

Expanding digital literacy, particularly in rural areas, is important for building a broader support base for digital democracy. One interviewee explained that "the increase in internet penetration needs to be accompanied by improved digital literacy programs, especially in rural areas" and could focus on:



Basic digital skills training for marginalised communities.



Education on digital rights and online safety.



Media literacy to combat misinformation and disinformation.



Training on using digital tools for civic engagement.



Annexes

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Defining Digital Democracy and Digital Repression

This section presents the theoretical definition of Digital democracy and digital repression. Digital democracy signifies using digital technologies to bolster and enhance democratic values and practices. It is a dynamic concept encompassing a range of activities and principles to foster citizen participation, transparency, and accountability in the digital age. The critical components of digital democracy include but are not limited to the following:

- **Online Participation:** Citizens can engage in political processes and decision-making through digital platforms, such as online voting, e-petitions, public consultations, and online forums for deliberation and debate. The "Digital Democracy" (2022) report highlights that digital media can facilitate dialogue between governments and citizens, improve institutional trust, and enable engagement between diverse groups.
- **Access to Information:** The availability and accessibility of information online enable citizens to make informed decisions and hold their governments accountable, which includes access to government data, public records, and independent media sources. The "Digital Authoritarianism and Democratic Participation in Africa (2022) policy brief emphasises the importance of access to information for meaningful citizen participation. In Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, the lack of a developed Access to Information law, as noted in the "Côte d'Ivoire – Media Landscape" report (2023), hinders the free flow of information and limits citizens' ability to make informed decisions.
- **Transparency:** Digital technologies enhance government transparency by enabling the publication of official data, live-streaming of parliamentary sessions, and disclosure of public expenditures. These technologies facilitate greater openness and visibility of government actions and decision-making processes. The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) 2024 Country Report on Côte d'Ivoire criticises Côte d'Ivoire's lack of transparency in budget planning and implementation, particularly regarding the military's economic enterprise.
- **Accountability:** Citizens' ability to hold their elected officials and government institutions accountable for their actions through digital means, such as online monitoring of government performance, reporting corruption, and demanding transparency. The "Digital Authoritarianism and Democratic Participation in Africa" (2022) notes that digital tools can be used for "naming and shaming" tactics, holding government actors accountable.
- **Digital repression** is "using information and communications technology to surveil, coerce, or manipulate individuals or groups to deter specific activities or beliefs that challenge the state" (Feldstein, 2021, p. 25). Regimes can use digital repression to maintain power and, more generally, to undermine democratic values and human rights worldwide. To counter this, rights-respecting technology frameworks are viewed as opportunities to strengthen democratic values in digital societies (Wainscott et al., 2021).

Snapshot Overview of the Political and Digital Landscape in Uganda

Uganda has seen increasing restrictions on civil liberties, especially during election periods. The government frequently shuts down the internet and enacts laws that stifle freedom of expression online, creating a challenging environment for digital democracy.

Challenges

- **Internet Shutdowns:** The Ugandan government has a history of shutting down the Internet during politically sensitive periods, severely impacting digital advocacy.
- **Harassment and Intimidation:** CSOs and activists face harassment, intimidation, and even arrest for their online activities, mainly when criticising the government.
- **Resource Limitations:** Many CSOs in Uganda operate with limited resources, affecting their ability to sustain digital democracy initiatives.

Existing Support Mechanisms

- **Regional Networks:** Some regional networks support CSOs in Uganda by providing funding, training, and collaboration platforms.
- **Legal Aid and Advocacy:** A few organisations offer legal aid to activists and CSOs persecuted for their digital activities.

Opportunities for Strengthening

- **Regional Collaboration:** Strengthening collaboration with regional and international networks can help amplify the voices of Ugandan CSOs.
- **Innovation in Digital Tools:** Encouraging the use of innovative digital tools and platforms less susceptible to government control could enhance the resilience of CSOs.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Building public awareness around the importance of digital rights and freedoms can help generate broader support for digital democracy initiatives.

Ecosystem Support to CSOs in Uganda

The case study assessment identified critical organisations in Uganda's ecosystem that support CSOs in various ways. These organisations play a crucial role in strengthening CSO capacity through training, technical assistance, and resource provision, ultimately enhancing their effectiveness in achieving social impact.

Name of Organization	Description	Areas of Support	Specific Support
Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) wougnnet.org	WOUGNET's mission is to promote and support the use of ICTs by women and women organisations in Uganda	It focuses on empowering women through ICTs. They have conducted numerous digital literacy workshops and training sessions for women's groups across Uganda.	WOUGNET has trained women's groups on using social media for advocacy and fundraising.
Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) https://cipesa.org	The organisation researches and advocates information and communication technology (ICT) policy issues.	Organise training programs for CSOs on digital security and online advocacy.	CIPESA regularly provides capacity building to CSOs using encryption tools and secure communication platforms.
Pollicy	A civic technology organisation that builds digital tools for social impact.	Develop platforms for citizen feedback and data collection that many CSOs use in their work.	Pollicy has provided technical support to CSOs in developing mobile apps for citizen engagement and data collection.
Media Challenge Initiative (MCI)	Trains journalists and media professionals in digital storytelling and investigative reporting.	Support CSOs in producing impactful multimedia content to amplify their messages.	MCI has helped CSOs produce documentaries and video stories highlighting their work and impact.
Outbox https://outbox.co.ug/	An incubator and accelerator for tech startups.	Mentorship and support to young entrepreneurs, some of whom are developing solutions to address social challenges	Outbox has incubated several tech startups working on solutions for social challenges, such as access to healthcare and education.
Uganda Law Reform Commission (ULRC) https://www.ulrc.go.ug	Responsible for reviewing and recommending reforms to laws.	Drafting legislation related to data protection and privacy.	
Chapter Four Uganda chapterfouruganda.org	A human rights organisation that focuses on legal advocacy and litigation.	Challenge laws and policies that restrict online freedoms and digital rights.	
Human Rights Network for Journalists-Uganda (HRNJ-Uganda)	Defends the rights of journalists and media workers by advocating for press freedom, ensuring protection against censorship, and promoting safe working conditions to uphold the integrity of the media and support the vital role of journalism in a democratic society.	Provide legal aid and support to journalists facing harassment or persecution for their online reporting.	
Unwanted Witness grassrootsjusticenetwork.org	An organisation focused on digital rights and privacy.	Conducted public awareness campaigns on data protection and online safety, mainly targeting CSOs.	
Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE)	ACODE is a leading think tank that conducts research and advocacy on governance and democracy issues.	Actively promote digital democracy and citizen participation through their programs.	
Center for Constitutional Governance (CCG)	The organisation works on constitutionalism and good governance.	Engage in public dialogues and consultations on digital rights and internet freedom.	
Uganda National NGO Forum	An umbrella organisation representing civil society organisations.	Advocate for a conducive policy environment for CSOs to operate digitally.	
Transparency International Uganda	Works to combat corruption and promote transparency.	Utilise digital platforms to expose corruption and advocate for accountability.	

Uganda Infographic

Case Study Snapshot of Strengthening Ecosystems for Digital Democracy in Uganda



Uganda Country Context Political Landscape Overview

The country has been ruled by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) and President Yoweri Museveni since 1986. Uganda's political and digital landscape presents significant challenges for civil society organizations (CSOs) promoting digital democracy. While there has been increased adoption of digital technologies across various sectors over the past decade, the government has increasingly restricted civic freedoms through internet shutdowns, surveillance, and laws that stifle online expression, especially around elections and political processes.



POPULATION

47,250,000

GLOBAL FREEDOM SCORE 34/100



Classified as **NOT FREE**

INTERNET FREEDOM SCORE 52/100



Classified as **NOT FREE**

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD STATUS

NOT FREE

Digital Democracy Status



NETWORKS RESTRICTED

NO



SOCIAL MEDIA BLOCKED

YES



WEBSITES BLOCKED

YES



PRO-GOVERNMENT COMMENTATORS

YES



USERS ARRESTED

YES

FREEDOM ON THE NET 2024

Uganda

53 /100

A. Obstacles to Access	14/25
B. Limits on Content	21/35
C. Violations of User Rights	18/40

Source: Freedom House



61%

Uganda Internet Penetration Rate

<https://digital.ict.go.ug/chart?id=977>



Source: Civicus Monitor (2024)



Digital Democracy
Initiative

