

# FINAL COMMUNIQUÉ

## 18th Edition of the West Africa Internet Governance Forum

*Digital Sovereignty and Economic Value in West Africa's Integrated Digital Market*

## Final Communiqué

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*Freetown, Sierra Leone | 11 to 15 May 2026*

#### PREAMBLE

We, the participants of the 18th edition of the West Africa Internet Governance Forum, meeting in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and online from 11 to 15 May 2026, representing Internet governance communities, national and regional Internet governance initiatives, institutions and stakeholders from across West Africa and partner communities associated with the regional Internet governance ecosystem, convened under the theme “Digital Sovereignty and Economic Value in West Africa’s Integrated Digital Market”;

With the participation and support of the Government of Sierra Leone; the Ministry of Communication, Technology and Innovation of Sierra Leone; the West Africa Internet Governance Forum; the Economic Community of West African States Commission; the Internet Society; the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers; the African Network Information Centre; the Smart Africa Alliance; the Internet Society Foundation; the Internet Governance Forum Support Association; Meta Platforms Inc.; the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs; Paradigm Initiative; Africell Sierra Leone; Afrimoney; Orange Sierra Leone; Sierra Leone Telecommunications Company Limited; the Universal Access Development Fund; the National Communications Authority of Sierra Leone; Africa Young Voices Media Empire; and RCBank Sierra Leone Limited;

Recalling the outcomes of previous editions of the West Africa Internet Governance Forum and the collective efforts made to promote open, secure, resilient, inclusive and rights-respecting digital spaces across the region;

Expressing appreciation to the Government and people of Sierra Leone for hosting the 18th edition of the Forum in Freetown and for their commitment to digital transformation, innovation, connectivity, public-sector modernisation and regional cooperation;

Recognising the strategic role of the Economic Community of West African States in advancing regional policy harmonisation, economic integration, trusted digital markets, cyber resilience and coordinated digital transformation across Member States;

Affirming that digital sovereignty in West Africa should not be understood as isolation from the global Internet, but as the capacity of peoples, institutions and Member States to make informed, accountable and development-oriented choices about data, infrastructure, platforms, technologies, markets, standards, security and rights, while preserving the openness, interoperability and global nature of the Internet;

Acknowledging that digital transformation in West Africa is entering a decisive phase marked by the rapid expansion of mobile connectivity, digital financial services, artificial intelligence, platform economies, public digital infrastructure, digital identity, data-driven services, youth entrepreneurship, creator economies and cross-border digital markets;

Recognising further that these opportunities are accompanied by significant governance challenges, including regulatory fragmentation, uneven institutional capacity, infrastructure vulnerability, cybersecurity risks, online harms, misinformation, uneven data protection enforcement, dependence on external technology platforms, limited digital literacy and unequal access for women, young people, rural communities, persons with disabilities and marginalised groups;

Reaffirming that Internet governance must remain multistakeholder, inclusive and anchored in the public interest, with governments, regional institutions, the technical community, civil society, academia, media, the private sector, youth, parliamentarians and development partners each contributing to a trusted, innovative and rights-based digital future for West Africa.

## REPORT THAT

The 2026 Forum convened high-level plenaries, policy dialogues, technical sessions, youth sessions, parliamentary discussions, capacity-development activities and multistakeholder consultations focused on digital sovereignty and economic value, platform accountability, data governance, artificial intelligence, emerging technologies, digital public infrastructure, cybersecurity, Universal Acceptance, online trust, child online protection, digital literacy, youth entrepreneurship, creator economies and regional digital market integration.

The West Africa School on Internet Governance 2026 was held as an integral part of the WAIGF 2026 process. More than 600 applications or expressions of interest were received, 177 participants were selected for the online phase, 150 successfully completed the online programme, and 30 fellows were selected for the residential workshop in Freetown, accompanied by 14 observers. The School produced policy outputs on platform accountability and fiscal justice, AI-enabled public services and redress, interoperable public digital infrastructure, and a 72-hour regional cyber resilience framework.

The West Africa Youth Internet Governance Forum 2026 provided a dedicated platform for young people to articulate priorities on digital sovereignty, economic opportunity, innovation, digital literacy, cybersecurity skills, online safety, youth entrepreneurship, local content creation and creator economies. The Forum recognised young people not only as beneficiaries of digital transformation, but also as innovators, entrepreneurs, policy actors and future leaders of the regional digital ecosystem.

The discussions across the Forum confirmed the need to move from general commitments to concrete implementation through stronger regional coordination, trusted institutions, interoperable systems, rights-based safeguards, public-interest innovation and measurable economic value for citizens, businesses and public institutions.

## RECOMMEND THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS

### On digital sovereignty and regional economic value

ECOWAS Member States should move from policy declarations to implementation by strengthening national and regional capacity in digital infrastructure, data governance, talent development, innovation, cybersecurity and platform governance. Digital sovereignty should be pursued through regional cooperation, shared standards, trusted institutions, open and interoperable systems, stronger bargaining power and measurable economic value for citizens, businesses and public institutions.

### On the regional digital single market and public digital infrastructure

West African countries should accelerate the development of interoperable frameworks for digital identity, payments, authentication, public-service data exchange, consumer protection and cross-border digital services. Regional harmonisation should focus on the trust layers necessary for interoperability, while preserving national authority over foundational registries, enrolment systems, local-language interfaces and implementation models.

### On infrastructure resilience and connectivity

Member States, regulators, network operators and development partners should invest in resilient broadband networks, local and regional data infrastructure, Internet exchange points, cable redundancy, cloud portability, rural connectivity and affordable access. The region should adopt practical mechanisms to ensure that no Member State remains structurally vulnerable to a single point of failure in connectivity or critical digital services.

### On artificial intelligence, data governance and emerging technologies

Member States should develop or update national AI strategies and data governance frameworks aligned with regional principles of transparency, accountability, fairness, human oversight, security, privacy, inclusion and access to remedy. Public procurement of AI systems should require impact assessments, bias testing, auditability, vendor accountability, data protection safeguards, human review and clear complaint mechanisms for persons affected by high-impact automated decisions.

### On cybersecurity and digital trust

ECOWAS and Member States should strengthen national Computer Emergency Response Teams and Security Operations Centres, establish trusted regional escalation channels, adopt shared incident-response playbooks, conduct regular cyber exercises and develop multilingual crisis communication protocols. Regional cyber cooperation should include harmonised rules for digital evidence, lawful access and information sharing, while fully respecting privacy, due process, human rights and national legal safeguards.

### On platform accountability and economic justice

Digital platforms operating across West Africa should contribute fairly to public revenue, provide transparent reporting, protect consumers, respect local laws and cooperate with regulators, telecom operators, fintech actors, civil society and regional institutions. Particular attention should be given to online betting, digital advertising, content moderation, youth exposure to harmful content, complaint mechanisms, creator monetisation and the fair distribution of value generated from West African users and data.

### On digital rights, online trust and content governance

Member States should develop rights-based and regionally coherent approaches to misinformation, harmful content, online safety and platform accountability. These approaches should protect freedom of expression, privacy, access to information, media freedom and democratic participation, while enabling effective responses to cyberbullying, harassment, hate speech, disinformation and other online harms. Consultations

on platform and content governance should remain inclusive and aligned with African human rights standards.

### **On child online protection**

Governments, platforms, schools, families, civil society and child-protection institutions should strengthen safeguards against harmful content, grooming, cyberbullying, exploitative data practices and unsafe online environments. Child online protection should be accompanied by digital literacy for parents, teachers and children, age-appropriate design, transparent safety tools, accessible reporting channels and a careful balance between protection and children's right to access education, information and digital opportunity.

### **On youth, education and human capital development**

Member States should integrate digital literacy, critical thinking, cybersecurity awareness, entrepreneurship, responsible AI use, coding, robotics and innovation skills into education systems from an early age. Governments, private-sector actors and development partners should expand support for innovation hubs, youth-led startups, digital creators, research institutions, mentorship programmes and financing mechanisms that enable young people to create local digital value and participate meaningfully in regional digital markets.

### **On Universal Acceptance and multilingual digital inclusion**

Governments, universities, developers, public administrations and private companies should strengthen compliance with Universal Acceptance standards, including support for Internationalised Domain Names and email addresses using non-Latin scripts and local-language characters. Universal Acceptance should be treated as a core element of equitable digital inclusion, linguistic diversity and participation in the global Internet.

### **On parliamentary engagement and legal frameworks**

National parliaments and the regional parliamentary network on Internet governance should be further strengthened to support informed legislation on AI, data protection, cybersecurity, digital public infrastructure, platform governance, fintech, digital identity and emerging technologies. Parliamentarians should receive sustained capacity-building to exercise democratic oversight, scrutinise technology-related legislation and support harmonised legal frameworks that are responsive to innovation and public interest.

### **On regional coordination and implementation**

The WAIGF Secretariat, ECOWAS Commission, national IGFs, national digital agencies, regulators, technical-community organisations and development partners should establish clearer mechanisms for translating WAIGF outcomes into policy follow-up. This should include regional policy labs, alumni networks, thematic working groups, parliamentary briefings, annual progress reviews and structured channels for feeding recommendations into ECOWAS and national policy processes.

### **On multistakeholder cooperation and global engagement**

West Africa should strengthen its collective voice in regional, continental and global Internet governance processes, including the global IGF, United Nations digital cooperation processes, ICANN, the Internet Society ecosystem, African Union processes and relevant technical standard-setting forums. The region should participate with coordinated positions that reflect its priorities on digital sovereignty, economic value, inclusion, rights, resilience, innovation and sustainable development.

## **CLOSING AND ADOPTION**

We reaffirm our collective responsibility to ensure that digital transformation in West Africa remains human-centred, inclusive, secure, open, interoperable, economically meaningful and grounded in cooperation, rights-based governance and shared prosperity.

We commit to sustaining the West Africa Internet Governance Forum as a regional platform for dialogue, capacity development, policy coordination and multistakeholder cooperation, and to ensuring that the outcomes of the 18th edition contribute to concrete action at national, regional and global levels.

**Adopted in Freetown, Sierra Leone, on 15 May 2026.**

**WAIGF 2026**