

# The Role of Internet Policies in Shaping Sustainable Development, Democracy, and Social Justice in Cameroon

Sikod Bridget Bisona Sydney 

Faculty of Laws and Political Science, University of Yaoundé II Soa, Yaoundé, Cameroon  
Email: sydneybisona@gmail.com

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## Abstract

A dynamic interplay among government policies, digital rights, and the socio-political environment characterizes Cameroon's digital landscape. This interaction has a significant impact on the country's sustainable development, democracy, and social justice. As cyberspace becomes increasingly integral to global communication, commerce, and defense, applying international law, including human rights law, to this domain is both necessary and challenging. Human rights in the Internet age extend to critical information infrastructures and, hence, impact democracy, social justice, political stability, and individual freedoms. In an increasingly digital age, internet access has become a foundational pillar for personal empowerment, economic progress, and civic engagement. However, Cameroon's internet governance often prioritizes national security and governmental control over citizens' rights, resulting in frequent internet shutdowns, censorship, and violations of digital freedoms. Most policies lack democratic accountability mechanisms, leaving digital rights vulnerable in a grey area between national security and privacy. Hence, the twin claims of digital equality and national security pose a significant issue in this era of computer technologies. This article argues that developing digital rights and internet policies that incorporate human rights considerations is crucial for ensuring sustainable development, fostering democracy, and promoting social justice in Cameroon.

## Keywords

Cyberspace, Digital Rights, Democracy, Sustainable Development, Social Justice, Internet Policies

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Structure

**Introduction:** This paper opens with an introduction that describes how internet policies and the protection of digital rights have evolved in Cameroon over the years.

**Research Problem:** The article then continues by presenting the problem statement, which highlights how the twin claims of digital rights protection and national security pose a significant issue for sustainable development, democracy, and social justice in this era of computer technologies.

**Research Question:** It is from the problem statement that the research question seeks to know to what extent Internet governance policies in Cameroon guarantee the protection of Internet rights.

**Literature Review:** Immediately after the research question, this research then reviews relevant literature that attempts to shed light on the effects of Internet policies on rights, development, and democracy.

**Research Methodology:** After a review of the literature, this paper indicates the methodology used to collect data. For this research, which investigates the intersection of Internet regulation and digital rights in Cameroon, an integrated approach was adopted, combining empirical methods with document review. Questionnaire surveys were distributed to the public, particularly in the Southwest and Northwest Regions of Cameroon, which have experienced prolonged Internet disruptions due to socio-political tensions. Semi-structured interviews (n = 35) and structured questionnaire surveys (n = 168) were administered across four strategic regions in Cameroon: the North West Region (Bamenda), the South West Region (Buea), Douala, and Yaoundé. Complementing the interviews, structured surveys were administered to ICT users, students, journalists, lawyers, and civic actors across the four regions: Yaoundé (n = 62), Douala (n = 55), Buea (n = 45), and Bamenda (n = 38).

The data collected were then analyzed through content analysis, quantitative and qualitative interpretation, which identifies normative inconsistencies, legal ambiguities, and enforcement challenges in regulating the internet and protecting digital rights for a democratic and sustainable Cameroon.

### 1.2. Background to the Research

The Internet has become an essential public good, and its regulation significantly affects most, if not all, Cameroonians, as it has become a key part of everyday life for people, organizations, and the country.

It has dramatically improved communication and allowed countries to govern online (Njiepue Nouffeussie et al., 2024). The protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Cameroon gained momentum in the 1990s, with the creation of the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms (the Cameroon Human Rights Commission) and the Directorate within the Ministry of Justice responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights (Amabo, 2019).

The signing and ratification of international human rights instruments further demonstrated this recognition (Ngange & Elonge, 2019). There has, however, been an unrealistic correlation between human rights commitments and their actual protection (Ponomarev, 2012). Various independent international and domestic human rights organizations have documented Cameroon's poor human rights record, particularly in civil and political rights (Freedom House, 2019). If not cumbersome enough, the advent of the internet has not made matters any better, as this article seeks to demonstrate that violations of human rights on the internet in recent years and in the future will not be limited to individual rights such as privacy, data protection, and freedom of expression. Online rights violations can adversely affect sustainability, democracy, social justice, and welfare (US Department of State, 2018).

The rapid growth of the internet and the widespread use of digital technologies have presented new challenges for upholding human rights globally (Lifafe, 2023). Governments worldwide, including Cameroon, are grappling with how to regulate state conduct in cyberspace without infringing on citizens' rights. Cyberspace has revolutionized the way we communicate, work, and access information. However, this growth also presents significant challenges in regulating state activities in cyberspace. Cameroon's digital rights landscape indicates that closures of online civic space and government actions to restrict it negatively affect citizens' digital rights, hindering inclusive governance and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (Ndongmo, 2021).

## 2. The State of Internet Policies and Digital Rights in Cameroon

Internet adoption and use in Cameroon have evolved, with factors such as education, age, and social network use still influencing these patterns. However, diverse access methods have widened the digital divide (Bakehe et al., 2017b). Over the last 10 years, Internet penetration in Cameroon has expanded across nearly all domains of activity, making Cameroon one of the African nations with the highest rates of Internet access (Murrey, 2022). A range of public institutions underpin ICT development, including the Telecommunications Regulatory Board (TRB) under the auspices of MINPOSTEL, the National Agency for ICT (ANTIC), and the computer departments of government institutions (ANTIC, 2025). The extent to which these agencies are independent of government control in performing their Internet governance roles is significant for ensuring that the rights of Cameroonians on these digital platforms are protected (Radu, Meyer, Liu, & Levinson, 2023). Human rights have been classified as negative or positive rights, with the state either owing its citizens the duty of protection against violations or making provision for such rights (Thumfart, 2024).

In Cameroon, Internet policies and user rights have changed significantly in recent years. There has been progress and challenges in providing Internet access and protecting user rights. Through initiatives such as the National Broadband

Network (NBN) project, the government of Cameroon has improved Internet infrastructure across the country (Ayuketah et al., 2024). This project aims to increase Internet service providers' access to high-speed services.

Cameroon has enacted laws to combat cybercrime and protect critical information infrastructure through the National Agency for Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which is responsible for monitoring and ensuring cybersecurity nationwide (Kimah, 2020).

The Constitution of Cameroon guarantees freedom of expression and the protection of personal data, even on the Internet (Ngangum, 2020). While efforts have been made to expand Internet access, a significant digital divide persists in Cameroon (Endong, 2022). There have been instances of Internet shutdowns and social media blockages during periods of political unrest, and villages and communities sometimes lack affordable, stable Internet access.

Cameroon and many African countries face difficulties in realizing the opportunities for democracy and human rights that Internet technologies offer. Access to the Internet is crucial to promoting democracy and human rights; however, there is a significant gap between those with adequate Internet access and those without, particularly in villages and small communities (Ngoh, 2021).

Online platforms and social media are essential tools for citizens to express themselves, organize, and receive information (Ndangam, 2008). Countries worldwide are increasingly using digital surveillance technologies, posing a threat to citizens' right to privacy.

In recent years, digital technologies have expanded how Cameroonian citizens can engage in activism and mobilize against the suppression of free speech, thereby enabling them to advocate for human rights and raise awareness of social issues (Siewe Fodjo et al., 2021).

The findings of this study reveal a pervasive and multifaceted challenge in Cameroon's digital rights landscape, underscoring the critical need for immediate reforms and policy interventions. Responses from a diverse group of over 200 participants provide a comprehensive perspective on the prevalence, impacts, and potential solutions to Internet shutdowns and digital rights violations. This discussion interprets the data within the context of broader governance, human rights, and socio-economic development.

The high percentage (86%) of participants reporting digital rights violations demonstrates that these issues are not isolated but rather systemic and recurrent, particularly during politically sensitive periods. This aligns with global reports highlighting Cameroon as a hotspot for Internet shutdowns, censorship, and surveillance. The frequent use of such tactics during elections and protests indicates an authoritarian approach to digital governance, which fundamentally undermines citizens' freedoms.

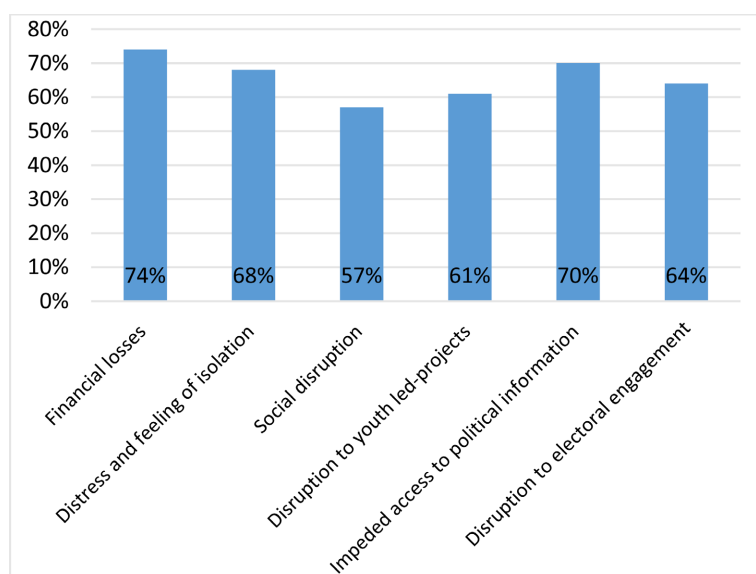
The study highlighted the significant economic consequences of Internet shutdowns, with 74% of respondents reporting financial losses. Small-scale entrepreneurs and informal sector workers were disproportionately affected, as these

groups rely heavily on digital platforms for transactions, marketing, and customer engagement. This disruption not only jeopardizes individual livelihoods but also constrains broader economic growth. The findings align with international analyses that estimate substantial GDP losses for countries that implement Internet shutdowns, reinforcing the argument that such actions are economically counter-productive.

The psychological toll of Internet shutdowns was evident, with 68% of participants reporting distress and feelings of isolation. This aligns with global studies that highlight the mental health implications of restricted communication and access to information. Additionally, 57% of respondents reported social disruptions, underscoring the Internet's role in maintaining relationships and fostering community bonds. The findings suggest these shutdowns erode social trust and cohesion, particularly during tense political climates.

Internet shutdowns also significantly hindered community and youth engagement, with 61% reporting disruptions to local initiatives and youth-led projects. This reflects the broader impact of digital restrictions on social development efforts, as community-based organizations often rely on digital tools for coordination, mobilization, and advocacy. These shutdowns risk alienating a critical demographic essential for innovation and long-term development by stifling youth participation.

The data underscore the chilling effect of Internet restrictions on civil and democratic participation. With 70% of respondents reporting that shutdowns impeded access to political information and 64% reporting disruptions to electoral engagement, it is clear that these actions undermine democratic principles, as shown in **Figure 1** and **Table 1** below. This is particularly concerning given that access to information and freedom of expression are fundamental to informed decision-making and active citizenship.



**Figure 1.** Impact of internet shutdowns in Cameroon.

**Table 1.** Impacts of internet shutdown.

Impact of Internet shutdown	Impact percentage (%)
Financial losses	74%
Distress and feelings of isolation	68%
Social disruption	57%
Disruption to youth-led projects	61%
Impeded access to political information	70%
Disruption of electoral engagement	64%

### 3. Transforming Internet Policies: Rethinking the Ineffectiveness of the Status Quo in Cameroon

State-initiated internet shutdowns in Cameroon during protest movements are a form of infrastructural harm, facilitated by colonial-corporate digital structures and exacerbated by the advent of modern technologies and the Internet of Things<sup>1</sup>. The realities of cyberspace and its safety rules do not align with traditional human rights principles, which necessitate their regulation. The rapid integration of digital technologies in Cameroon has compelled Cameroonian lawmakers to protect this virtual space. To meet this need, the Cameroonian legislature has adopted measures to protect the Internet and other information and communication technology systems from threats. However, most of these policies lack democratic accountability mechanisms, leaving digital rights vulnerable in a grey area between national security and privacy. Hence, the twin claims of digital equality protection and national security pose a significant issue in this era of computer technologies.

The debate over whether online rights constitute human rights is frequently raised; however, there is general agreement that the Internet serves as an instrument for exercising other human rights. Currently, an Internet shutdown would halt most 21st-century activities, posing a barrier to progress and democracy. In Cameroon, the Internet has become key infrastructure for both companies and citizens, making online security a top regulatory priority (Boojihawon & Ngoasong, 2018). No country can claim to have proper democracy, a stable government, justice for every citizen, or care for its people if it is constantly shutting down the Internet or censoring what people can see online (Nam, 2017). Without clear democratic rules, government accountability, and checks and balances, it is easy for those in power to abuse their authority when no one monitors them.

Efforts to enhance online safety have inadvertently restricted free expression. These measures have either directly censored individuals or instilled fear, discouraging open discourse (Siagian, Siahaan, & Hamzah, 2023). Such constraints

<sup>1</sup>Definitions from Oxford Languages: the interconnection via the Internet of computing devices embedded in everyday objects, enabling them to send and receive data.

can hinder a nation's progress and development. At the same time, limitations on free speech can lead to broader human rights violations, particularly for journalists and activists who depend on digital platforms to share critical information (Kiritchenko, Nejadgholi, & Fraser, 2020). Additionally, internet shutdowns obstruct access to essential information, curtailing individuals' ability to express themselves, work, learn, and access vital services (Pénard et al., 2015).

If the government of Cameroon is not adequately held accountable for its actions, it could invoke claims of cyber and national security to exert undue control over the Internet and further restrict people's rights (Opoku, Nketsia, & Oginni, 2020). In light of this situation, this research aims to assess the effectiveness of Internet regulations in Cameroon in protecting the digital rights of Cameroonians. The online space in Africa is often closed by digital surveillance, disinformation, internet shutdowns, legislation, and arrests, hindering inclusive governance and requiring new evidence, awareness, and capacity-building (Roberts & Mohamed Ali, 2021).

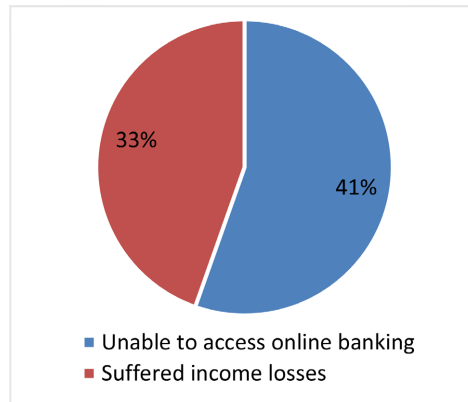
### 3.1. Internet Policies and Sustainable Development

Digital platforms can significantly contribute to development by facilitating interactions among users, fostering innovation, and promoting modernization, technological dependence, and human development (Nicholson, Nielsen, & Saebo, 2021). The restrictions on digital rights in Cameroon, including internet shutdowns and digital surveillance, pose significant challenges to achieving inclusive governance as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Bas, Gagnon, Gagnon, & Contreras, 2022). When the government closes online civic spaces, it limits citizens' ability to participate in governance and hinders efforts toward sustainable development (Ndongmo, 2021). Efforts to bridge this divide, such as the Multipurpose Community Telecentres, have not yet had the intended impact, underscoring the need for more effective digital policies (Bakehe et al., 2017a).

Economically, 74% of respondents in this study reported significant losses due to Internet shutdowns. Specifically, 41% were unable to access online banking or other financial services, while 33% experienced income losses, particularly among small-scale entrepreneurs who rely on digital platforms for transactions and marketing. This economic impact was a recurring theme across responses, underscoring the Internet's critical role in livelihoods. See **Table 2** and **Figure 2** below.

**Table 2.** Loss incurred.

Total losses caused by the Internet shutdown	74%
Unable to access online banking	41%
Suffered income losses	33%



**Figure 2.** Internet access proportion.

Psychologically and socially, 68% of participants reported experiencing distress, including isolation, anxiety, and frustration due to the shutdowns. Furthermore, 57% indicated that the shutdowns disrupted their social relationships, limiting communication with friends and family. Many respondents reported that this isolation compounded feelings of exclusion, particularly during politically tense periods.

Community and youth engagement were also significantly affected, with 61% reporting that Internet shutdowns disrupted community-driven initiatives and youth-led projects. Local organizations faced challenges in mobilizing and coordinating activities, resulting in delays or cancellations of projects supporting social development. These disruptions also hindered efforts to engage young people in meaningful social and political roles. See **Table 3** below:

**Table 3.** Distress.

Psychological distress	68%
Social distress	57%
Economical	61%

### 3.2. Internet Policies and Democracy

The internet in Cameroon provides a platform for political engagement and communication, allowing political parties to mobilize support and set agendas. It offers essential opportunities for interactions between candidates and voters as well as new arenas for voter-to-voter discussions and interaction before, during, and even after an election (Ngange & Elonge, 2019).

Findings reveal that as Internet-mediated political communication grows in the country, political participation is increasing: 77% of party supporters report participating in online political discussions. This provides strong evidence that political parties use the Internet to mobilize support and set political agendas (Ngange & Elonge, 2019).

However, the use of the internet for political propaganda, along with the government's efforts to close online spaces, can undermine democratic processes. The growth of internet-mediated political communication has increased political par-

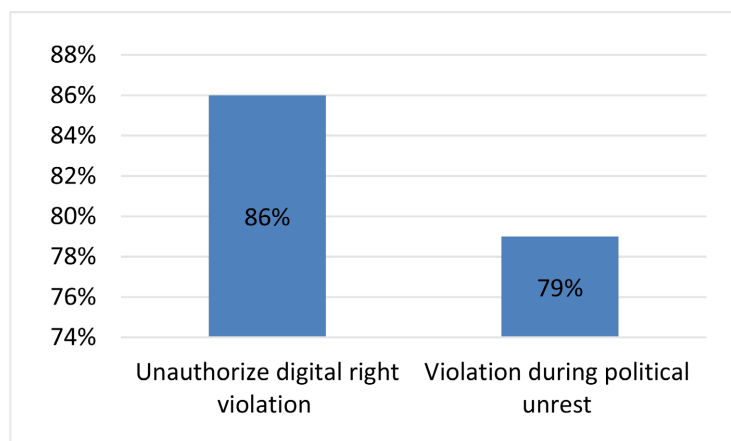
ticipation, but it also necessitates the development of ICT policies to manage the potential for misinformation and propaganda (Ngange & Elonge, 2019). The government's closure of online civic spaces further threatens democratic engagement and the exercise of digital rights (Roberts (Ed.), 2021).

This study analyzed responses from 200 participants, comprising government institutions responsible for communication, civil society organizations, and randomly selected victims in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. The survey results provided compelling evidence of the prevalence and impact of Internet and digital rights violations in Cameroon, highlighting the urgent need for reforms.

The findings revealed that 86% of participants reported experiencing or witnessing digital rights violations, including Internet shutdowns, unauthorized surveillance, and censorship. Of these, 79% noted that such violations occurred frequently, particularly during periods of political unrest. Testimonies highlighted widespread Internet shutdowns during elections and protests, affecting both rural and urban populations. See the demonstration in **Table 4** and **Figure 3** below:

**Table 4.** Violation patent.

Unauthorized digital rights violation	86%
Violations during political unrest	79%



**Figure 3.** Digital rights violation.

Regarding civil participation and democratic engagement, 70% of participants reported that Internet shutdowns impeded access to critical information about political processes, protests, and civic events. 64% stated that their ability to participate in democratic processes, including elections, was negatively affected. This reflects how digital restrictions undermine the foundational principles of democracy by limiting citizens' access to information and platforms for expression.

### 3.3. Internet Policies and Social Justice Considerations

Digital rights are integral to social justice as they enable citizens to access infor-

mation, express opinions, and participate in civic life. The erosion of digital rights through government actions, such as digital surveillance and arrests for online speech, limits these freedoms and can lead to social injustice (Roberts (Ed.), 2021). Furthermore, addressing the digital divide is essential for ensuring equitable access to digital resources and opportunities for all citizens, particularly in rural areas (Ebongue, 2015).

One key Internet principle influencing social welfare is the guarantee of universal access to the Internet and digital technologies (Fitzpatrick, 2000). In Cameroon, Internet access remains uneven, with significant disparities between urban and rural areas. Without affordable broadband, residents in these areas struggle to access essential services, including online education and telehealth consultations (Novice, Fambeu, & Piaptie, 2017).

In Yaoundé, Cameroon's capital, the government has launched several e-government platforms, including an e-filing system for tax payments and birth registration services. While these platforms are convenient for urban residents, rural communities face challenges due to limited Internet access and low digital literacy.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, WhatsApp groups became critical tools for community organizing and support, particularly in Cameroon's Northwest and Southwest regions, where the anglophone separatist crisis compounded the pandemic's difficulties. These platforms were used to distribute information, coordinate relief efforts, and offer emotional support. Internet policies should support the development and accessibility of social networking platforms that promote community-building (Mpabe Bodjongo, 2021).

Internet policies and digital rights are integral to enhancing social welfare. By ensuring universal Internet access, protecting personal information, promoting net neutrality, supporting digital literacy, and fostering digital inclusion, policy-makers can harness the Internet's potential to improve the lives of individuals and communities (Wagg, Cooke, & Simeonova, 2019).

#### **4. Recommended Solutions**

Despite these challenges, there was a strong consensus on measures to improve the protection of digital rights. Eighty-three percent of respondents called for legal reforms to strengthen digital rights frameworks. In comparison, 76% advocated for public awareness campaigns on digital rights and online safety, and 69% recommended greater collaboration between the government and civil society organizations to promote accountability. Lastly, 64% urged the government to adhere to international digital rights regulations and adopt more transparent governance practices.

The findings underscore the pervasive nature of digital rights violations in Cameroon and their severe economic, psychological, and social consequences. The low alignment with international standards (12%) highlights the urgent need for reforms. Encouragingly, the strong demand for legal reforms (83%) and for public awareness (76%) indicates a readiness among stakeholders for transform-

ative change.

These findings emphasize the need for stronger accountability mechanisms and transparent governance practices. A lack of public awareness exacerbates the challenges, as many citizens remain unaware of their digital rights and how to protect them.

Encouragingly, there was a strong consensus on actionable solutions. A high percentage (83%) of respondents advocated for legal reforms, underscoring the urgency of establishing robust frameworks to safeguard digital rights. Public awareness campaigns (76%) and increased government-civil society collaboration (69%) were also identified as critical steps toward creating a rights-respecting digital environment. These findings suggest that stakeholders are ready for transformative change, provided there is political will and commitment to implementing these solutions. See **Table 5** below.

**Table 5.** Recommended solutions from survey.

<b>Solutions to improve digital rights</b>	<b>%</b>
Legal reforms to strengthen digital rights	83%
Advocacy for public awareness	76%
Recommended greater collaboration	69%
Adhere to international digital property regulation	64%

### **Evidence-Informed Decision-Making (EIDM) for Policies in Cameroon**

Evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) is essential for improving Internet policies and promoting digital rights, democracy, social justice, and sustainable development in Cameroon. The research demonstrates that Cameroon has faced persistent challenges in formulating effective digital policies due to inadequate reliance on evidence-based approaches. By utilizing EIDM, Cameroon can address these challenges, ensuring that policies are data-driven, inclusive, and responsive to emerging issues. This involves utilizing reliable data and research to identify gaps in digital access, social inequality, and disparities.

This research identifies several critical gaps in digital access, particularly between urban and rural regions, as documented by previous research. These disparities affect not only Internet access but also other crucial dimensions of digital rights, such as access to online education, economic participation, and social inclusion. Data from the study reveal that rural areas experience far lower Internet penetration than urban areas, thereby exacerbating inequalities and reinforcing inadequate infrastructure, weak regulatory frameworks, and limited investment in rural connectivity.

### **Adapt Policies to Evolving Evidence and Changing Realities**

Cameroon's policy landscape has been characterized by reactive approaches rather than proactive, evidence-based strategies. This research reveals that outdated policies, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence and Internet govern-

ance, have failed to address emerging challenges, including cybercrime, online privacy, and digital security. [United Nations Economic Commission for Africa \(2017\)](#) shows that regulatory frameworks in many African countries, including Cameroon, have struggled to keep pace with technological advancements.

This project, therefore, highlights the need for Cameroon to adopt a dynamic approach to policy-making, regularly updating laws and regulations to reflect the evolving digital landscape. For instance, the Data Protection Law of 2024 is a significant step, but its limited enforcement and vague provisions might hinder its effectiveness. This research underlines that a more proactive EIDM approach can help policymakers respond to emerging issues in real time, ensuring that regulations remain relevant and practical ([Zavyalova, Krykanov, & Patrunina, 2020](#)).

The dynamic nature of the digital landscape necessitates adaptable policies to address emerging challenges. In Cameroon, rigid, outdated laws often fail to address emerging issues, such as evolving cybersecurity threats and technological advances. This rigidity discourages compliance, as stakeholders perceive the policies as irrelevant or impractical. Rwanda's approach to digital governance offers valuable lessons in policy adaptability. By establishing mechanisms for the regular review and revision of digital policies, Rwanda ensures that its laws remain relevant and practical. Cameroon can benefit from institutionalizing similar review processes, incorporating stakeholder feedback, and adapting to technological changes.

#### **A Regulatory Sandbox**

A regulatory sandbox is a controlled environment that allows policymakers to test internet policies and digital rights protections before full implementation ([Zavyalova, Krykanov, & Patrunina, 2020](#)).

In Cameroon, adopting this approach can yield flexible regulations that balance security, innovation, and freedom of expression while upholding citizens' digital rights.

Implementing a regulatory sandbox can drive sustainable development by fostering digital innovation, enhancing access to essential online services, and improving cybersecurity resilience. It also strengthens democracy by protecting free speech, preventing arbitrary internet restrictions, and ensuring transparency in digital governance. Additionally, it promotes social justice by bridging the digital divide, protecting user privacy, and enabling marginalized communities to participate in internet policymaking.

Across Africa, countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa have already implemented regulatory sandboxes in sectors such as fintech, blockchain, and cybersecurity, demonstrating the effectiveness of flexible regulatory approaches ([McCallum & Aziakpono, 2023](#)). These regional efforts highlight the shift away from outdated internet regulations toward dynamic, test-based policymaking.

A regulatory sandbox for internet governance and digital rights in Cameroon would operate as an administrative and policy-testing mechanism embedded within existing laws, rather than requiring an immediate overhaul of the legal sys-

tem. Cameroon already possesses a fragmented but functional digital governance architecture anchored in Law No. 2010/012 on Cybersecurity and Cybercrime, Law No. 2010/013 on Electronic Communications, and the mandates of institutions such as the National Agency for Information and Communication Technologies (ANTIC), the Telecommunications Regulatory Board (TRB), and the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MINPOSTEL). A sandbox would allow these institutions to experiment with regulatory approaches while remaining within their statutory competencies.

ANTIC is well-positioned to serve as the technical and administrative host of an internet and digital rights regulatory sandbox. Its legal mandate already includes cybersecurity oversight, protection of electronic communications, and advisory functions to government bodies. Within a sandbox framework, ANTIC could:

- Issue temporary regulatory waivers or guidance notes, approved by MINPOSTEL, allowing selected digital platforms, ISPs, civil society groups, or startups to test rights-respecting policies (e.g., content moderation standards, data protection safeguards, or cybersecurity reporting mechanisms).
- Coordinate multi-stakeholder participation, including civil society organizations, journalists' associations, digital rights advocates, and private-sector actors—an approach currently absent from internet governance in Cameroon.
- Collect and analyze empirical data on how proposed internet policies affect freedom of expression, privacy, access, and national security before nationwide implementation.

This would shift ANTIC's role from primarily enforcement-oriented to a learning-based regulatory authority, aligned with international best practices.

Cameroon's existing laws grant regulators broad discretionary powers, particularly in cybersecurity and telecommunications. A regulatory sandbox would not suspend these laws but would operate as a controlled derogation mechanism, allowing regulators to test:

- Proportional responses to cyber threats are preferable to blanket internet shutdowns.
- Alternative content regulation models that avoid the criminalization of online speech while addressing disinformation and hate speech.
- Privacy-by-design approaches in digital public services, including e-government platforms and electronic health records.

The sandbox could be formalized through a ministerial order or regulatory directive, avoiding the delays associated with parliamentary amendments while remaining legally valid. To prevent abuse, the sandbox would require clear governance rules, including:

- Defined timelines for experiments.
- Public reporting obligations by ANTIC and participating entities.
- Human rights impact assessments align with constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and privacy.

The sandbox could also function as a bridge between regulators and the judiciary. Findings from sandbox trials could inform judicial interpretation of cyber-crime provisions, helping courts distinguish between legitimate expression and unlawful conduct. This evidence-based approach would reduce arbitrary enforcement and strengthen legal certainty.

A regulatory sandbox within ANTIC and Cameroon's existing legal framework would be of strategic value for Cameroon.

- Transition from reactive, security-driven internet regulation to adaptive, rights-based policymaking.
- Align national practices with regional leaders such as Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa without copying models unsuited to Cameroon's political and legal realities.
- Build regulatory credibility, attract responsible tech investment, and reinforce democratic governance in the digital sphere.

Ultimately, a Cameroon-specific regulatory sandbox would function not as a theoretical policy experiment, but as a practical governance tool—one that modernizes internet regulation while safeguarding digital rights, innovation, and social inclusion. Cameroon can benefit from more informed, adaptable internet policies, attract tech investments, and strengthen its role in Africa's digital transformation. Embracing a regulatory sandbox would position the country as a leader in digital rights protection while fostering innovation, economic growth, and democratic governance.

### **Policy Compliance**

This research reveals that weak compliance mechanisms have undermined the effectiveness of digital rights policies in Cameroon. Policy compliance is a cornerstone of effective governance, particularly in the implementation of frameworks designed to uphold digital rights and social justice. In Cameroon, ensuring compliance with digital policies has been challenging, yet it is critical for fostering trust, accountability, and equitable digital access. This paper highlights several dimensions of policy compliance that require attention, providing examples from both the Cameroonian context and international best practices.

Strengthening policy compliance in Cameroon requires a multifaceted approach that combines clear, transparent frameworks, stakeholder engagement, robust monitoring, public education, adaptive policies, and accountability mechanisms. Drawing on international best practices, Cameroon can address its current challenges and build a foundation for effective governance in the digital era.

Policy compliance is essential to ensuring that rules and laws work effectively to improve governance, protect digital rights, and promote fairness in society. It simply means that individuals, businesses, and government bodies must comply with the rules set out in local laws and international agreements.

Publishing easy-to-read versions of laws would help citizens know their rights and obligations. Strengthening monitoring systems and providing better tools for agencies such as ANTIC would also make a significant difference. Public educa-

tion campaigns could teach people about these policies, empowering them to hold leaders accountable. Finally, policies should be sufficiently flexible to address emerging challenges, such as those posed by artificial intelligence and data privacy.

The survey findings provide clear empirical evidence that policy compliance mechanisms for digital rights in Cameroon are weak and ineffective, primarily due to low legal awareness, limited transparency, and weak institutional trust. Across the four study sites—Yaoundé (n = 62), Douala (n = 55), Buea (n = 45), and Bamenda (n = 38)—respondents consistently reported gaps between the existence of digital laws and their practical implementation.

The survey shows that 66% of respondents were unaware of existing data protection or cybersecurity laws, indicating that a majority of ICT users, journalists, students, lawyers, and civic actors do not possess sufficient knowledge to comply with or invoke these legal protections. Several qualitative responses emphasized that digital regulations are “too technical,” “poorly communicated,” or “unknown outside government circles,” underscoring the absence of effective dissemination and public education mechanisms.

Quantitative data reveal that 59% of respondents expressed concern about opaque state surveillance practices, while qualitative feedback frequently described enforcement as “selective” and “unpredictable.” This perception discourages good-faith compliance and instead promotes risk-avoidance behavior, as individuals are unable to anticipate how laws will be applied.

The survey documents a pronounced chilling effect on lawful online behavior, further illustrating weak compliance safeguards. Fifty-two percent (52%) of respondents reported avoiding the online expression of political opinions due to fear of surveillance or reprisal, suggesting that compliance is driven by fear rather than respect for legal norms. Such defensive self-censorship indicates the absence of clear accountability and oversight mechanisms that would otherwise reassure users that compliance protects, rather than endangers, their rights.

Respondents aged 18 - 35, 74% reported low trust in government-managed digital platforms and services, signaling that regulatory institutions are not viewed as neutral or protective actors. Qualitative responses linked this distrust to “lack of feedback channels,” “no clear remedies,” and “no consequences for abuse of power,” all of which weaken compliance incentives.

Finally, the survey highlights unequal compliance outcomes, particularly for women. Sixty-four percent (64%) of female respondents reported feeling unsafe in digital spaces, citing harassment, targeted abuse, and misinformation. Respondents noted the absence of effective reporting and redress mechanisms, demonstrating that while relevant policies exist, their enforcement fails to protect vulnerable users, thereby undermining the social justice objectives of digital governance.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Cameroon’s compliance challenge is structural rather than normative: laws exist, but compliance mechanisms—awareness-raising, transparent enforcement, institutional accountability,

and accessible remedies—are insufficient. Without addressing these weaknesses, digital rights policies are unlikely to achieve their intended governance, democratic, and social inclusion outcomes.

### **Effective Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks**

Monitoring and evaluation are critical for ensuring that policies achieve their intended goals. Countries such as South Africa have implemented frameworks that regularly assess the effectiveness of digital policies. These frameworks assess compliance, identify areas for improvement, and ensure that policies remain relevant as technology evolves (Naude, Zani, & Ongolo-Zogo, 2015).

For example, South Africa uses data-driven evaluations to assess compliance with its Protection of Personal Information Act (Staunton, Tschigg, & Sherman, 2021). Cameroon could replicate this by integrating digital tools to collect real-time feedback on policy implementation, thereby enabling rapid adjustments to address emerging issues (Naude, Zani, & Ongolo-Zogo, 2015).

Applying best practices from other countries can help Cameroon develop stronger and more effective digital rights policies. By identifying and adapting successful policies, collaborating with experienced nations, involving citizens in policy-making, and implementing robust monitoring frameworks, Cameroon can create a more inclusive and secure digital environment. These efforts will not only protect digital rights but also foster greater trust between citizens and the government, contributing to the country's overall social and economic development.

### **Cross-Country Collaborations and Partnerships**

Collaborating with countries that have advanced digital policies offers Cameroon opportunities to learn from their successes and avoid common pitfalls (Matshe, 2009). South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) provides a strong model, emphasizing inter-agency coordination, a dedicated regulatory body, and clear compliance guidelines (Kanwar, Carr, Ortlieb, & Mohee, 2018). Cameroon can adopt similar strategies to enhance data protection and ensure that policy enforcement aligns with international standards. Additionally, regulatory sandboxes—controlled environments for testing AI and digital policies—have proven effective in Kenya, Rwanda, and Mauritius. Establishing a sandbox in Cameroon would allow policymakers and tech innovators to experiment with AI-driven solutions while refining regulatory frameworks.

Additionally, partnerships with regional organizations, such as the African Union, and international bodies, such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), can provide Cameroon with access to funding, technical expertise, and training programs. Such collaborations would be particularly useful in addressing cybersecurity threats and expanding digital literacy programs.

At the continental level, Cameroon can benefit from aligning with the African Union's Continental AI Strategy, which promotes ethical AI governance, data sovereignty, and cross-country collaboration. Engaging in regional AI partnerships will enable Cameroon to leverage shared expertise and harmonize AI policies with other African nations. By strengthening cross-country collaborations, adopting

regulatory sandboxes, and integrating with the AU's AI initiatives, Cameroon can position itself as a leader in Africa's digital transformation, ensuring a balance between innovation, security, and digital rights.

Participating in regional and international forums can facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration on Internet governance issues. Cameroon can learn from best practices and implement effective policies tailored to its context by engaging with other countries and organizations. Participation in the African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy provides Cameroon with insights into successful initiatives in other African nations. Collaborative projects focused on cybersecurity, data protection, and the digital economy can enhance the effectiveness of Cameroon's Internet policies.

#### **Capacity Building and Digital Literacy Programs**

Investing in capacity building and digital literacy initiatives can empower citizens to navigate the digital landscape effectively. Citizens will engage more meaningfully with internet services and participate in democratic processes when digital skills are enhanced. Organizations such as the Cameroon Youth and Students Forum for Peace (CAMYOSFOP) have implemented digital literacy programs that train young people in essential digital skills, including online safety and information verification. These programs foster a more informed and engaged citizenry.

## **5. Conclusion**

Digital surveillance, disinformation, internet shutdowns, legislation, and arrests for online speech are common tactics used to close the online civic space in Africa, hindering inclusive governance and requiring new evidence, awareness, and capacity-building.

As cyberspace continues to grow, efforts must be made to ensure that human rights protections also evolve to keep pace with technology. The case of Cameroon highlights the challenges of regulating state conduct in cyberspace under international human rights law. To address these issues effectively, we need to encourage domestic legislation, strengthen international cooperation, empower civil society, and enhance capacity-building initiatives. Only by forming a multifaceted approach can we work toward protecting and upholding digital rights in Cameroon and beyond.

International human rights law is an essential component in regulating state conduct in cyberspace, but its current form is inadequate to address the challenges posed by the digital realm. Through collaborative efforts at the international and national levels, the adoption of comprehensive legal frameworks, and public awareness-raising, we can strive toward a more reliable and effective system that protects and promotes human rights in cyberspace, even in challenging contexts such as Cameroon.

## **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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