

Civil Society Unites in Defence of Digital Rights and Youth Expression

A recap of the ECOSOC Civil Society Organisations session on freedom of expression and digital rights

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On November 7th, the ECOSOC Civil Society Organisations Committee convened to discuss the protection of digital rights and freedom of expression for youth across the African continent.

The session convened at 6:15 pm, opening with introductory remarks from committee chair Dan Eltayeb on the topic at hand, followed by a brief ice-breaker in which delegates shared what they intended to do upon returning to their respective organisations. A roll call was conducted by the deputy chair, with all Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) voting present and voting, and the agenda was automatically set.

The evening got underway with an opening press briefing from BBC and Africanews, each allocated two minutes to set the scene. This was followed by a series of opening speeches, in which delegates wasted no time in making their positions known.

The African Centre for Information and Freedom of Expression (AFIC) opened with a strong call for cooperation and collaboration among African states, centring its speech on the condemnation of censorship and the reinforcement of freedom of expression, particularly for youth. The African Centre for Youth Development, Education and Advocacy Initiative positioned itself as a vocal champion of transparency and whistleblowing, rejecting silence in the face of corruption and celebrating youth-led movements that expose abuse.

The African Digital Rights Network (ADRN) warned that state-led repression of movements undermines both democratic participation and civic trust, proposing three structural responses: the establishment of a Digital Rights Protocol, the creation of an independent observatory to monitor state abuses, and the translation of monitoring into tangible institutional accountability. The African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX), meanwhile, called on ECOSOC to promote measures aimed at reducing data costs, ensuring equitable access to digital spaces for young Africans.

The African Internet Rights Alliance (AIRA) denounced the silencing of voices through abductions, violence, and internet shutdowns, advocating for greater transparency and the unification of CSOs as a means of actively combating these threats. AfricTivistes concluded its opening remarks with a striking call to action: “From Cape to Cairo, let every repost go viral,” a declaration that

encapsulated its vision of media as a continental tool against repression and its commitment to amplifying youth voices across borders. Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) rounded out the opening speeches by emphasising the role of evidence-based ICT policy advocacy in countering digital oppression, calling for an inclusive and transparent internet ecosystem grounded in government accountability.

With the floor open for motions, three moderated caucus proposals were put forward. The first, proposed by AFEX, centred on protecting young women and marginalised groups online. The second, proposed by the Internet Society (ISOC) African Chapters, focused on strengthening civil society mechanisms to protect youth from censorship threats, and was the motion ultimately selected by vote. A third proposal from Paradigm Initiative (PIN) addressed the importance of telecommunications independence in achieving digital equity.

The moderated caucus that followed featured six speakers and generated some of the session's most substantive exchanges. ISOC African Chapters opened the discussion, followed by ADRN. AFIC engaged actively with the debate, pursuing clarification through the Points of Information process until a satisfactory response was obtained. The African Centre for Youth Development, Education and Advocacy Initiative delivered a well-received contribution, fielding questions from both the Media Rights Agenda (MRA) and the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) with clarity and confidence.

CIPESA offered a particularly notable set of proposals, suggesting that nations which threaten freedom of expression be publicly named and shamed, and that partnerships with CSOs be established to develop the skills of digital rights lawyers. These proposals prompted pointed follow-up questions from AfricTivistes and AFEX on what tangible collaboration would look like in practice, and on the long-term sustainability of public shaming as a strategy. PIN and AFIC also took the floor before the moderated caucus concluded.

The remaining CSOs delivered their opening speeches at 7:25 pm, each reiterating concern over governmental suppression of media and the persecution of those who seek to expose corruption. A second press briefing from BBC and Africanews followed, in which the journalists summarised the key threads of the debate thus far.

After a short break, the session moved into its first unmoderated caucus, with all blocks tasked with producing a complete draft resolution by its conclusion. Two groups formed. The first, a large coalition including MFWA, DRAA, CIPESA, PIN, ADRN, AFEX, MRA, FoE Hub, and ISOC African Chapters, was the most active bloc of the evening. The second, a smaller group comprising AIRA, AfricTivistes, the African Centre for Youth Development, the Digital Rights Lawyers Initiative (DRLI), and AFIC, distinguished itself by deliberately selecting organisations with differing objectives and missions, in the belief that diversity of perspective would yield more comprehensive solutions. This group referred to itself as the "Five Pillars."

A press conference at 8:05 pm brought further scrutiny to bear on several delegations. Africanews directed questions to DRLI on how it ensures legal defence for youth activists who cannot afford representation, to MRA on its strategy for advancing policy in the absence of government cooperation, and to DRAA on how its research translates into meaningful policy influence at the AU level. BBC, meanwhile, pressed the African Centre for Youth Development on the risk of external funding dependency in any proposed African-led independent structure, and on whether precedents for such initiatives already exist on the continent. AIRA was questioned on how it intends to implement its ambitious goal of unifying CSOs given practical coordination challenges, and the Freedom of Expression Hub was asked how its bloc plans to enforce sanctions on nations that continue to employ violence as a form of oppression.

The session then moved to the introduction of draft resolutions. Resolution 007 prompted a question from AFIC regarding its seventh operative clause, while the African Centre for Youth Development raised doubts about the effectiveness of international bodies more broadly. Resolution 006 sparked a pointed exchange when PIN questioned whether Africa currently has the financial capacity to establish a proposed fund. AFIC responded by drawing a parallel with education funding, arguing that resources allocated to education could equally be directed towards freedom of expression, given that both are of equal importance. The resolution's signatories clarified that content moderation under the proposal would not rest with government but with a collective of CSOs and independent actors. ADRN noted that expecting governments to provide sensitive documents to CSOs was an ambitious ask.

Following author's rights speeches, amendments, and voting procedures, both Resolution 006 and Resolution 007 were passed by majority vote, with Resolution 006 receiving a notably stronger mandate. The session drew to a close at 9:30 pm with a final procedural debate, two delegates speaking in favour of suspending the session and two against, before the motion to close carried by a two-thirds majority.