

Advancing Digital Inclusion for Persons with Disabilities in Africa

November 2021





Introduction

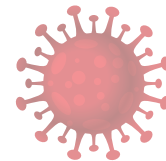
Persons with disabilities have unique needs and have for long been disadvantaged. Yet the more some African countries get digitally connected, the deeper the digital divide for this community seems to grow. Despite growth in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) penetration, a large section of persons with disabilities faces digital exclusion due to lack of access and affordability of the requisite ICT tools and equipment, and failure by telecommunication operators to provide information and services in disability-friendly formats.

Persons With Disabilities Excluded From Accessing Information on Covid-19

While millions turned to technology and traditional media for information in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, critical messages about the disease that health authorities, telecom companies, and broadcasters disseminated did not and still do not reach persons with visual and hearing impairments.

In turn, the digital exclusion of persons with disabilities worsened with the Covid-19 pandemic yet the coronavirus crisis rendered technology key to working, learning, political participation and the enjoyment of other rights. Notably, few organisations, within and outside the digital rights movement, are pushing for greater ICT accessibility.

These gaps in access to information gaps are growing despite the International Disability Alliance (IDA) issuing key *recommendations* towards a disability-inclusive Covid-19 response, including the requirement that persons with disabilities must receive information about infection mitigating tips, public restriction plans, and the services offered, in a diversity of accessible formats.





CIPESA's Interventions

The Collaboration for International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa CIPESA, is working to raise availability of information on ICT and disability in Africa by producing relevant evidence-based research; mainstreaming disability rights issues in conversations about technology access and digital rights; growing the capacity of diverse actors to research on and advocate for meaningful connectivity and digital accessibility; and engaging key actors such as telecom companies and regional bodies.

1. Raising Visibility of Digital Rights for Disabilities

Disability rights remain a marginal issue in many regional and international debates and convenings related to technology access, affordability and usage. To raise visibility of disability rights among new constituencies, including those that advocate for great ICT access and digital rights, CIPESA has hosted sessions at regional and global convenings, such as RightsCon2020, Internet Governance Forum - IGF - 2020, RightsCon2021, FIFAfrica20, FIFAfrica21 to bring into focus the key issue of tech and accessibility.

In 2019, CIPESA conducted a series of engagements including in *Kenya* at the Kenya Internet Governance Forum (KIGF) and during a *multi-stakeholder workshop*. (Watch *video highlights* from the meeting).

A similar workshop was held in *Tanzania* during which participants pointed out how the majority of people living with disabilities in Tanzania had been left out of the digital society. Participants observed that, in their quest to optimise profits, equipment suppliers, content producers and mobile communication service providers skipped the needs and rights of persons with disabilities who wished to access such services.

At FIFAfrica19 in Ethiopia, which assembled actors from across the continent, a *session* dedicated to understanding the dynamics of technology and persons with disabilities saw the Forum *urge governments and donors to do more to advance*

ICT access for persons with disabilities. During the session, a digital campaign tool for persons with visual impairment, *heartheblindspot.org*, was *launched by Together!*, in partnership with *Small Media* and *Data4Change*.

During the IGF 2020, CIPESA together with partners, including the German Corporation for International Cooperation GmbH (GIZ) and UNESCO, co-organised a *session* that discussed accessibility and Universal Design, which are directly linked to the amplification of inequality and disadvantage of persons with disabilities. The session attracted speakers from GIZ, CIPESA, UNESCO, AfriLabs, InAble, the GSMA, and the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

During FIFAfrica20, we organised a *session on assistive technologies*, which addressed the mobile disability gap and highlighted the characteristics of the digital inclusion of women with disabilities. In addition, as part of the FIFAfrica20 in-country hubs, CIPESA conducted an interactive dialogue on internet accessibility for persons with disability during Covid-19 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, in association with Action et Humanisme. This day-long Ivorian engagement promoted initiatives that make the internet accessible for people with disabilities in times of crisis. Recommendations were developed for submission to government officials and telecom companies.



2. Growing Capacity for Disability Rights Advocacy

CIPESA developed indicators to assess if countries and companies are complying with their ICT and disability rights obligations as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 9c on increasing access to ICT and providing universal and affordable internet access, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU)'s Model Accessibility Policy 2014, alongside national law and policies. The indicators primarily cover visual and hearing impairment but can also be used to gauge overall policies, regulations and practices of governments on digital accessibility.

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What CIPESA is doing is quite powerful and empowering. The tool is excellent, it needs to be worked on as we've given our input in the meeting. Once that is done, reaching out and creating awareness about the tool will be more powerful, engaging such stakeholders such as government and other key stakeholders. Once it is out this is going to be a game-changer because for persons with disabilities, ICT makes the world go round ... This has been one of the first meetings on ICT and disabilities, so it is an excellent move. -

Erick Ngondi, United Disabled Persons of Kenya.

A total of 270 individuals attended the national workshops in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique and Tanzania.



3. Improving Availability of Information on ICT and Disability in Africa

Over the last few years, CIPESA has produced a series of articles and research reports on several issues affecting the digital rights of persons with disabilities.

Some of our Blogs on Disability and Digital Rights:

1. *Why Access to Information on Covid-19 is Crucial to Persons with Disabilities in Africa*
2. *Placing ICT Access for Persons with Disabilities at the Centre of Internet Rights Debate in Kenya*
3. *CIPESA Submits Comments to Uganda Communications Commission on Improving Access to ICT for Persons With Disabilities*
4. *Calling Out the African Union and Telecoms Associations to Prioritize ICT Access for Persons with Disabilities*
5. *Vodacom Outshines MTN in Efforts to Serve Persons With Disabilities in South Africa*
6. *People With Disabilities Left Out in ICT Jamboree*
7. *Governments and Donors Urged to Advance ICT Access for Persons with Disabilities*
8. *Telcos in Nigeria and Kenya Should Address Exclusion of Persons With Disabilities*
9. *CIPESA Endorses GSMA Principles to Drive Digital Inclusion of Persons With Disabilities*
10. *Fighting for plight of persons with disabilities*

Research Reports

1. *Assessing the Barriers to Accessing ICT by People with Disability in Tanzania*
2. *Assessing the Barriers to Accessing ICT by People with Disability in Uganda*
3. *Assessing the Barriers to Accessing ICT by People with Disability in Kenya*
4. *Removing Barriers to ICT Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda* which identified needed actions by government, regulators and communication companies.
5. *Access Denied: How Telecom Operators in Africa Are Failing Persons With Disabilities.* CIPESA assessed 10 telecom companies in five countries (Botswana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda). Most of them – despite being long-established operators with majority market share in their respective countries – were found to have failed to meet their obligations to provide information and services to persons with disabilities, in contravention of the companies' obligations under national laws and the CRPD.

Why Assess Telecom Companies?

There is limited information about what telecom companies are doing to promote digital accessibility. This research, ***Access Denied: How Telecom Operators in Africa Are Failing Persons With Disabilities***, contributes to addressing this knowledge and development gap. It sets a groundbreaking understanding of the state of digital accessibility of telecom companies' services, and its results can power advocacy and inform further research in this hugely under-studied area. Moreover, the findings provide telecom companies, regulators, Disability Rights Organisations (DPOs), and governments with information necessary to take decisive steps to improve the digital accessibility of telecom products and services.

4. Advocacy With Telecom Companies, Regional Bodies and Governments

The telecom industry, regulators, regional bodies and national governments need to be held to account to fulfil their digital accessibility obligations. African governments are obligated under both the *CRPD* and the *Protocol* to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa to provide equal opportunities, accessibility and inclusion of persons with disabilities.

On the International Day for Persons with Disabilities (IDPWD) 2020, CIPESA shone the spotlight on the African Union Commission (AUC), the African Telecommunications Union (ATU), and the East African Communications Organisation (EACO) as critical regional bodies with mandates to promote inclusive, affordable, accessible and sustainable ICT for persons with disabilities.

CIPESA made *submissions to the AUC, the ATU and EACO*, drawing attention to these organisations' obligation to protect and advance the rights of persons with disabilities in line with the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights; the CRPD; the Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired or Otherwise Print Disabled (the Marrakesh Treaty); the SDGs; and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa.

On IDPWD 2019 our focus was *on governments* and communication services providers in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, whom we called upon to take decisive steps to enable meaningful usage of ICT for persons with disabilities.

In 2018, CIPESA made *submissions* to Uganda's communications regulator following a study to establish the status of access and usage of ICT by persons with disabilities.

In December 2020, CIPESA supported and *endorsed* at their launch, the GSMA 'Principles for Driving the Digital Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities', which aim to inspire the mobile industry to help close the mobile disability gap.

As part of the United Nations Universal Periodic Review for Mozambique, CIPESA, *Small Media*, Fórum das Associações Moçambicanas das Pessoas com Deficiência (FAMOD) and the Associação de Cegos e Amblíopes de Moçambique made a joint stakeholder submission on digital rights. The submission emphasised the need to promote inclusive access for marginalised and vulnerable groups including persons with disabilities.

Looking Ahead

- Build stronger partnerships and collaborations. Our research, advocacy training, regional and international convenings have and will continue to draw in stakeholders from government, international development groups, DPOs, civil society and academia.
- Research is key, as is creating awareness, advocacy capacity, and linkages. There is limited evidence on the state of play on disability rights as they intersect with tech access and use, and limited advocacy for accessibility. DPOs tend to be detached from networks advocating for improved affordability and accessibility of ICT, and are rarely active players in advocating for digital rights.
- Nothing About Us Without Us. Our inclusion work will continue to be guided by the spirit of “Nothing About Us Without Us”. Throughout implementation, we have worked and will continue to work with DPOs and persons with disabilities on research, policy analysis, advocacy, capacity building and stakeholder engagements.
- Ramp up efforts to mainstream disability rights issues in conversations about tech access and digital rights including through engagements with regional and international ICT/digital rights events and processes.
- Conduct compliance assessments and capacity development trainings including in conducting assessments and advocacy.
- Engage more with duty bearers e.g. telecom operators, regulators, and regional bodies.

About CIPESA

The Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa CIPESA (www.cipesa.org) promotes inclusive and effective Information and Communications Technology (ICT) policy in Africa for improved governance and livelihoods. CIPESA's establishment in 2004 was in response to the findings of the Louder Voices Report for DFID, which cited the lack of easy, affordable and timely access to information about ICT-related issues and processes as a key barrier to effective and inclusive ICT policy-making in Africa. As such, our work responds to the shortage of information, resources and actors consistently working at the nexus of technology, human rights and society.



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☎ +256 414 289 502

✉ programmes@cipesa.org

🐦 [@cipesaug](https://twitter.com/cipesaug) 📘 facebook.com/cipesaug 🔗 [Linkedin/cipesa](https://linkedin.com/cipesa)

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