

Moving beyond regulation centred on individual behaviour: Regulatory responses adopted in the region have mainly focused on user behaviour, through criminal provisions targeting the spread of false information, hate speech or certain uses of digital platforms⁴. While such measures can respond to legitimate public-order concerns, they often struggle to address the root causes of digital dynamics. By focusing attention on individuals, they tend to overlook the role of platforms, recommendation systems and the economic incentives that drive the spread of polarizing content. They also raise concerns about striking the right balance between protecting fundamental rights, freedom of expression and the enforcement of legal frameworks in sometimes politically sensitive contexts.

Moving toward human-centred digital governance: The Sahelian context highlights the need to broaden responses to digital challenges beyond corrective measures alone. A more human-centred approach seeks to better account for the social, cultural and linguistic realities of populations, as well as issues of social cohesion, civic participation and the protection of vulnerable groups. It calls for digital governance to be conceived as a lever for prevention, resilience and inclusion, capable of accompanying technological change while strengthening trust within societies.

“Digital challenges are no longer just about content and users, but also about the platforms, algorithms and incentives that structure the information space. Governing them requires a multi-stakeholder approach.”

Head of a bloggers’ association in Mali, Consultative Forum on Information Integrity, September 2025.

LEVERS FOR INCLUSIVE DIGITAL GOVERNANCE IN THE SAHEL

While debates on digital issues in the Sahel are often dominated by the risks of disinformation, hate speech and artificial intelligence, several recent developments also point to the gradual emergence of levers capable of supporting more inclusive, more sustainable and more human-centred digital governance. These developments reflect a gradual shift in focus: from largely reactive, content-centred responses toward approaches that pay closer attention to the structures, actors and mechanisms that shape the digital space.

The emergence of a shared regional normative framework: One of the most significant developments in recent years has been the gradual construction of an African policy framework dedicated to information integrity and the governance of digital platforms. The adoption of the [Strategic Framework](#) for Information Integrity in West Africa and the Sahel⁵ and its [2025 Praia Action Plan](#) marks an important step in this process. These texts establish an approach grounded in human rights, civic participation, transparency and shared responsibility among states, digital platforms, media and civil society. They also reflect a notable shift in regional thinking: digital governance is no longer seen solely as a tool for controlling content, but as a set of mechanisms aimed at preserving social cohesion, protecting fundamental freedoms and strengthening societies’ resilience to information-related risks. In addition, the Abidjan Declaration and the [Practical Guide for Regulatory Bodies](#) follow the same trajectory, offering operational tools suited to African realities⁶.

Consolidation of spaces for dialogue and regional cooperation: Another lever lies in the growing number of forums dedicated to digital issues. The [Bamako Forum on Digital Technology and Social Cohesion](#), the regional consultations held as part of the [Praia process](#), the [Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum \(DRIF\)](#) and the [Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa \(FIFAfrica\)](#) are all contributing to the gradual formation of a regional community of practice. These spaces foster interaction among regulators, researchers, civil society organizations, journalists and tech-sector actors. They help circulate knowledge, identify shared concerns and spread approaches better suited to African realities. This dynamic reflects a paradigm shift: digital governance is increasingly being built through dialogue and consultation rather than through purely top-down interventions.

The growing maturity of digital civil-society actors: Civil society organizations now occupy an increasingly visible place in debates on digital governance. Bloggers’ associations, digital rights organizations, fact-checking initiatives,

⁴ Ilo Allaye Diall et al, Régulation du numérique au Sahel : État des lieux et perspectives pour un modèle centré sur l’humain, March 2025, <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Regulation-du-numerique-au-Sahel-Etat-des-lieux-et-perspectives-pour-un-modele-centre-sur-lhumain.pdf>
⁵ UNESCO, Cadre stratégique type pour l’intégrité de l’information en Afrique de l’ouest et au Sahel, September 2025, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000396488_fre
⁶ Michel Kenmoe, Guide pratique pour les organismes réglementaires, UNESCO, May 2026, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000398599_fre

independent media and tech communities are playing a growing role in producing expertise, monitoring platforms and advocating for more inclusive public policy⁷. In several Sahelian countries, this trend is also reflected in the emergence of self-regulatory mechanisms, through the adoption of charters or codes of conduct developed by the actors themselves⁸. This capacity to produce norms, structure spaces for dialogue and contribute to public debate reflects civil society's gradual rise as a governance actor in its own right.

The Sahel's place within a global digital-governance dynamic: Sahelian debates on digital issues also form part of an international context marked by a growing convergence of expectations regarding the governance of the digital space⁹. From United Nations initiatives on information integrity to European standards on the accountability of digital actors, and developments seen in Brazil and several Asian countries, the same questions are emerging around algorithmic transparency, the protection of fundamental rights, platform accountability and the regulation of artificial intelligence. This convergence helps strengthen the legitimacy of African initiatives while offering Sahelian actors opportunities for mutual learning and cooperation. It also shows that the concerns raised in the region are now part of a shared global agenda rather than an isolated trajectory.

Taken together, these various levers point to a gradual evolution in approaches to digital governance in the Sahel. Regulators, researchers and civil society organizations are increasingly shifting their attention from problematic content alone to the structural factors that shape digital ecosystems. This shift is fostering the emergence of governance that is more preventive, more multi-stakeholder and more human-centred, one in which social cohesion, inclusion and shared responsibility are becoming central to thinking about the region's digital future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the main findings of this analysis, the following recommendations identify priority actions for consolidating responsible, collaborative and sustainable digital governance in Sahelian countries.

- **Place the multi-stakeholder approach at the heart of digital governance.** The challenges of digital governance in the Sahel cannot be resolved by states or regulatory authorities alone. The complexity of digital ecosystems calls for a multi-stakeholder approach bringing together governments, regional institutions, regulatory authorities, digital platforms, media, universities, civil society organizations, the private sector and local communities. Establishing permanent frameworks for dialogue and consultation would help improve the coordination of responses to digital threats, build trust among actors and foster public policies better suited to local realities. Such an approach would also help strengthen the legitimacy of decisions taken and promote more transparent and effective digital governance. These frameworks could also take the form of a multi-stakeholder observatory on the digital experience, making it possible to document risks, track platform commitments and measure progress over time.
- **Make new regional frameworks the reference standards for digital governance:** National regulatory authorities, working notably with the African Communication Regulation Authorities Network (ACRAN) and Réseau Francophone des Régulateurs des Médias (REFRAM) and the Francophone Network of Media Regulators (REFRAM) can play a driving role in operationalizing the new African frameworks. The Strategic Framework and the Praia Action Plan, the Abidjan Declaration and Protocol, together with the *Practical Guide for Regulatory Bodies (Practical Guide)* now offer a basis for going beyond content moderation alone. The Practical Guide's provisions on *safety-by-design*, particularly section 3.10, offer a concrete entry point for integrating the assessment of platform-design risks into regulatory practice. Adopting them would help better account for recommendation systems, algorithmic amplification, new features and the risks associated with artificial intelligence. These requirements should also cover generative AI, notably through the labelling and traceability of generated content and proportionate friction mechanisms for high-risk uses, such as the automated or mass distribution of content.
- **Articulate voluntary commitments with regulatory obligations:** National digital and media regulatory authorities, in coordination with regional regulator networks, should ensure that the voluntary commitments made by platforms are measurable and verifiable. Where these mechanisms fail to deliver the expected results,

⁷ For illustration: Doniblog, a community of bloggers in Mali (<https://doniblog.org/>), the Benbere platform (<https://benbere.org/>); the Association des Blogueurs du Mali (Mali Bloggers Association); the Tuwindi Foundation; Fasocheck (<https://fasocheck.org/>)
⁸ Ilo Allaye Diall et al, *op. cit.*
⁹ Schirch, Lisa. "Blueprint on Prosocial Tech Design Governance." Council on Technology and Social Cohesion with University of Notre Dame and Toda Peace Institute. May 2025, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/68ba1281b6406dbd18597dab/68c31612d1d0dd45ea02d046_Blueprint-on-Prosocial-Tech-Design-Governance-May-2025.pdf

they could consider appropriate and proportionate regulatory measures, accompanied by monitoring and accountability mechanisms, while respecting fundamental rights.

- **Ensure the inclusion and participation of all stakeholders:** Digital policies must be designed to take into account the needs and realities of the groups most exposed to digital risks, including women, young people, rural populations, displaced persons and marginalized communities. Inclusive governance requires their effective participation in decision-making, consultation and public-policy evaluation processes. Initiatives aimed at strengthening the representation of these groups in digital governance spaces should be encouraged, to ensure that digital transformation helps reduce inequalities rather than deepen them.
- **Strengthen regional and international partnerships.** Sahelian countries should draw on African and international digital-governance networks to share good practices, coordinate responses to digital risks, mobilize funding and promote a Sahelian vision of digital governance in global debates.
- **Institutionalize spaces for dialogue and regional communities of practice:** States, regional organizations and their partners should strengthen permanent frameworks for dialogue on digital governance, building on initiatives such as the Bamako Forum on Digital Technology and Social Cohesion, the Praia process, DRIF and FIFAfrica. Strengthening these spaces would foster cooperation among regulators, researchers, civil society, media and the tech sector, the production of contextualized knowledge, and the development of shared regional positions — contributing to digital governance grounded in dialogue, mutual learning and consultation.

This paper was made possible in part by a grant from the Andrew Carnegie Foundation. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.