

Forum Ouest Africain sur la Gouvernance de l'Internet 2024

Formulaire pour Rapporteurs/ Rapporteurs Template

22 -23 May 2025
Abuja, Nigeria

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la forme narrative est exigée/Please avoid reporting using “bullet points”;
narrative form is required)**

Session: Think Global, Build Local: DPI for West Africa

Date: 22 May 2025.

Heure/ Duration: 9:00 to 10:00am

Modérateur/Moderator: Osei Kagyah

Nom des panélistes/ Panelists: Hon. Lydia Lamisi Akanvariba, Obaloluwa Ajiboye, Emmanuel Kwesi Gadasu, Bukola Adesokan, Taylor Roan

Résumé de chaque exposé/ Summary of each session:

The session commenced at 10:00 AM with the moderator, Osei Kejah, engaging the audience by inquiring about their understanding of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI). Following this, the esteemed panelists were invited to the stage and introduced Hon Lydia Lamisi Akanvariba, member of parliament from Ghana and minister for Public Sector reforms, Mr Obaloluwa Ajiboye, innovation manager and a tech-forward policy fellow, Mr Emmanuel Kwesi Gadasu, the CEO of Gitplus limited, Mrs Bukola Adesokan, Mrs Adesokan is a tech-forward policy professional and fellow at the African Center for Digital Transformation, and Mr Taylor Roan, a strategic advisor for the Africa Center for Digital Transformation. Mr. Kagyah provided a concise synopsis of DPI and the session's objectives, highlighting that the discussion was held under the auspices of the African Center for Digital Transformation (ACDT). The ACDT was introduced as an African-led organization committed to providing a platform for dialogue, assessment, and initiation of digital development projects. Its vision is a digitally empowered Africa, led by Africans, where research and innovation drive sustainable development and inclusive prosperity. The ACDT's mission is to drive digital transformation in Africa through advocacy, capacity building, and partnerships, empowering communities, businesses, and governments for inclusive prosperity. A flagship initiative of the ACDT is the "Tech Forward Fellowship," which brings together experts and fellows to explore DPI and its contextualization in various countries with a global lens, forming the impetus for this session.

West Africa's Digital Future: A Pivotal Moment

The moderator opened the core discussion by emphasizing West Africa's critical juncture in shaping its digital future. He noted that as governments in the region invest in Digital ID, digital payment systems, and other digital infrastructure, they have a unique opportunity to achieve inclusivity, sovereignty, and interoperability. However, realizing this vision necessitates a careful balancing between crafting context-specific solutions and adopting sovereign global standards, drawing parallels with countries like Kenya, South Africa, Estonia, Brazil, and Singapore. Mr. Kagyah

suggested that instead of "reinventing the wheel," West African countries, through ECOWAS, could adapt and localize existing frameworks to reflect the region's unique values.

Rationale and Contextualization of DPI for West Africa

The first question was directed to **Mr. Taylor**, who was asked to explain why Africans should "think global, build local" and what the rationale for DPI in West Africa is. Mr. Taylor emphasized the super importance of DPI in unlocking opportunities across Africa, highlighting the continent as the only growing market globally. He stated that the current era presents an unprecedented ease for starting companies and generating income online, with AI and DPI serving as fundamental building blocks to access these opportunities. He specifically cited the benefits of Digital ID, such as secure access to loans and banking, reduced costs, and immunity to loss or theft, concluding that these tools are essential for building scalable societies.

Mr. Gadasu was then posed the same question, focusing on the meaning of DPI within a West African context. He drew an analogy to road infrastructure, like the Lagos-Abuja road connecting people and enabling travel. Similarly, DPI involves building digital systems that connect West African nations, providing a common ground for participation in digital systems such as payments and digital identity. This harmonization of digital ecosystems, specifically tailored to address regional challenges, is crucial for user-friendliness and accessibility for West African citizens.

Mr. Ajiboye answered the same question, also contributing by stating that DPI provides the foundational layer for governments, stakeholders, and citizens to interact digitally. He simplified DPI as the bedrock for all digital endeavors, illustrating with Artificial Intelligence (AI) that requires meaningful information, and DPI provides the necessary structure for AI to function effectively.

Ms. Adesokan, acknowledging the preceding speakers, simply defined DPI as digital systems that enable the efficient and effective delivery of public services, encompassing digital ID, payments, and other related systems.

Challenges to DPI Implementation in West Africa

The moderator followed up with a critical question regarding the biggest challenges to DPI implementation in the West African region (e.g., Ghana, Gambia, Nigeria). Ms. Adesokan identified three primary challenges:

- **Lack of Organized Laws:** Unlike regions such as the EU with unified laws (e.g., GDPR), African countries often have disparate national laws. While crucial for national sovereignty, there's a significant gap in connecting these laws, hindering scalability and implementation.
- **Lack of Reliable Internet Facility:** This fundamental issue impedes the scalability and usability of digital systems, as internet access is a prerequisite for their operation.
- **Need for Capacity Building:** A significant portion of the population intended to benefit from DPI lacks the digital literacy to utilize these systems. Therefore, grassroots capacity building is essential to empower citizens to navigate digital environments.

Ms. Bukola Adesokan stressed that addressing these three challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach and would significantly advance DPI implementation.

Mr. Gadasu was then asked about the biggest challenges or threats in rolling out DPI in Africa from the perspective of data protection and data governance. He highlighted **surveillance** as a major concern. While DPI is designed for comfort and freedom in digital transactions, he warned that without careful consideration, it could be misused as a surveillance tool, suppressing digital freedom. He emphasized the importance of designing systems with robust security measures to ensure that daily life activities remain secure, preventing unauthorized access by individuals or undue government control. The design of these systems must meet stringent standards, as they will fundamentally shape citizens' identities.

Mr. Taylor, from his business perspective in the private sector, discussed challenges to DPI enrollment in West Africa. He stressed the importance of setting up systems correctly to ensure scalability and safety while yielding substantial benefits, including increased access to finance, improved movement, and enhanced learning opportunities. He specifically pointed out the challenge of **public access to the internet**, noting the high cost of internet in West Africa compared to European countries, where government agencies provide public Wi-Fi. **Access to data**, he reiterated, is fundamental to any digital transaction. He commended African governments for their proactive steps in adopting digital systems, citing the widespread adoption of mobile money and digital payments even among less educated populations. He concluded by reiterating that **infrastructures are crucial** for the realization of DPI.

Mr. Ajiboye, drawing on his experience in Nigeria, highlighted **trust** as a significant challenge. He noted the rare occurrence of local people trusting government-built digital initiatives, citing the National Identity Number (NIN), where only 170 million out of over 200 million Nigerians have enrolled. He stressed that people often do not understand that these IDs form the foundation of everything. Therefore, continuous awareness programs are critical to building trust for DPI implementation. He also reiterated the need for **capacity building**, particularly within the public sector, where many officials lack the digital skills for day-to-day digital activities. The moderator underscored the criticality of addressing trust for the successful flow of DPI in the region.

Government's Role in DPI Governance and Implementation

The Honourable Lydia Lamisi Akanvariba was asked about the government's role in governing DPI. She acknowledged that this question elicits diverse answers across different African countries. She emphasized the existence of significant **gaps in current digital laws**, necessitating their review to align with contemporary realities and changes. She gave an example of a remote job. She stressed the importance of formulating **deliberate policies** and adopting a **holistic approach** to DPI.

The moderator further probed the Honourable about the gap between **policy formulation** and actionable **implementation** in West African countries. Wearing two hats as a Member of Parliament and a member of the executive, she explained that Parliament is responsible for DPI policies and laws, while the executive branch is tasked with implementation. She acknowledged challenges in implementation and financial independence. She posed the question of why the executive often falls short in implementation, answering that **deliberate collaboration** among different agencies, governments, civil society, and telecommunication companies is essential to bring policies to life. She cited Ghana's cybersecurity and data protection law, noting that despite its existence, its impact isn't fully felt by the populace, underscoring the need for sustained dialogue to ensure widespread stakeholder engagement in policy implementation. The moderator reiterated the importance of a concerted, multi-stakeholder approach and respect for all humanity in policy-making.

Designing Privacy-Respecting DPI

Mr. Gadasu was asked how to design DPI systems that respect privacy. He outlined that there are several elements we can develop DPI with, number one is :

Privacy by Design: This principle involves minimizing the collection of personal information, establishing explicit consent mechanisms, limiting data usage purposes, and ensuring user control over digital infrastructure. Secondly, **Legal and Institutional Safeguards:** While efforts are underway at the African Union, West Africa needs robust legal and institutional frameworks to protect the vast amounts of data involved in DPI, especially given the large populations, citing that Nigeria alone is a huge data. He added that **Security Standards** must be followed, systems must incorporate multi-factor authentication and end-to-end security, protecting data at all stages of collection, usage, and storage. These security measures are paramount for safeguarding citizens' digital identities. **Community Trust and Education:** Building trust from the grassroots level is crucial. **Investment in Digital Literacy Programs:** As many intended users of DPI may lack digital literacy, investment in education is vital to prevent exploitation, even with robust technical controls. **Privacy Board Oversight:** A multi-stakeholder body should monitor DPI deployment, proposing course corrections and ensuring continuous improvement, technical adherence, and national organizational security.

The moderator highlighted digital literacy and oversight as critical takeaways from Mr. Gadasu's response.

Harmonization of Laws and Policies: Lessons from Other Countries

Ms. Bukola Adesokan was asked about lessons West Africa could learn from other countries regarding the harmonization of laws and policies, as she alluded to previously. While acknowledging the success of regions like the EU, she asserted that Africa is making commendable progress at regional, national, and continental levels, citing the African Union Digital Transformation Strategy 2020-2030 as a blueprint. This strategy, she noted, is built on data exchange, digital identity, and payment systems that should work across the board. She lamented the inability to use a single payment system across Africa, unlike the EU's single digital payment system that significantly scales their economy. She emphasized the need to leverage existing continental frameworks and, crucially, to have **track records** to measure the implementation of strategy documents, allowing for easy identification and resolution of challenges. She stressed that the problem isn't a lack of policies or strategy documents but rather a deficit in implementation and an over-reliance on Western infrastructures instead of developing homegrown continental approaches. The moderator reinforced the need for harmonization, sharing his personal experience of being unable to use his Visa card for POS transactions in Nigeria.

Role of the Private Sector in Driving DPI

The moderator asked Mr. Taylor to discuss the role of the private sector in driving DPI, as they are an important component of the economy. Mr. Taylor, from the private sector perspective, articulated the crucial role of businesses in driving DPI. He likened the private sector to the "vehicle" that operates on the "road" laid out by government regulations. While government regulation is necessary for safety and to prevent exploitation, he argued that governments should provide minimal regulation to ensure safety and maximize freedom for the private sector to foster prosperity and rapid innovation.

Principaux points soulevés/ Keys Takeaways:

- ❖ **DPI as an Enabler:** DPI is crucial for unlocking opportunities, fostering economic growth, and building scalable societies in West Africa.
- ❖ **Think Global, Build Local:** West African countries should adapt and localize existing global frameworks and standards to reflect regional values and address specific challenges, rather than simply adopting "plug-and-play" solutions.
- ❖ **Harmonization of Laws:** A major challenge is the lack of unified legal frameworks across West African countries, hindering seamless DPI implementation and scalability. Regional bodies like ECOWAS can play a significant role in fostering common legal grounds.
- ❖ **Infrastructure Deficiencies:** Inadequate internet penetration and unreliable access are significant impediments to DPI adoption and effectiveness, especially in rural areas.
- ❖ **Capacity Building:** There is a critical need for digital literacy and capacity-building programs, particularly at the grassroots level and within the public sector, to enable citizens and government officials to utilize DPI effectively.
- ❖ **Trust Deficit:** A lack of public trust in government-led digital initiatives (e.g., Digital ID) is a significant barrier to enrollment and adoption, necessitating sustained awareness and engagement efforts.
- ❖ **Privacy and Security:** Designing DPI with "privacy by design," robust legal and institutional safeguards, strong security standards (e.g., multi-factor authentication), and continuous oversight is essential to prevent surveillance and protect citizens' data.
- ❖ **Implementation Gap:** There's a noticeable gap between well-intended policies and their effective implementation, largely due to a lack of deliberate collaboration and financial independence.
- ❖ **Multi-Stakeholder Approach:** Successful DPI deployment requires concerted efforts and partnerships among governments, civil society, telecommunications companies, and the private sector.
- ❖ **Private Sector's Role:** The private sector is a key driver of DPI adoption and innovation, requiring government regulation that balances safety with freedom for rapid development.

Actions recommandées/ Recommended actions:

(Identifier les personnes/institutions chargées de la mise en œuvre et le calendrier/ Identify people/institutions responsible for implementation and timetable)

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- ECOWAS, in collaboration with national legal bodies, should establish a framework for harmonizing digital laws across member states, drawing lessons from successful regional integrations like the EU's GDPR. This framework should focus on interoperability, data protection, and cross-border digital service delivery, ensuring that national laws connect rather than create gaps.
- Governments should prioritize investment in expanding reliable and affordable internet infrastructure, particularly in underserved rural areas. This includes incentivizing private sector participation in infrastructure development (e.g., fiber optic cables) and exploring models like public Wi-Fi access in strategic locations.

- Develop and implement comprehensive digital literacy and skills-building programs targeting all levels of society, from grassroots communities to public sector employees. These programs should focus on basic digital navigation, safe online practices, and the utility of DPI tools.
- Governments must initiate sustained, transparent public awareness campaigns to explain the benefits and security measures of DPI, directly addressing public concerns and building trust. This requires clear communication strategies and community engagement initiatives.
- Enforce "privacy by design" principles in all DPI development. Establish strong legal and institutional safeguards for data protection, alongside stringent security standards (e.g., multi-factor authentication, end-to-end encryption). Implement independent privacy board oversight with multi-stakeholder representation to monitor DPI deployment and ensure accountability.
- Create formal platforms and mechanisms for deliberate collaboration among all stakeholders (government agencies, parliament, private sector, civil society, telecommunications) to ensure policies are effectively translated into actionable implementation plans and to bridge the gap between policy formulation and execution.

Autres points de discussions/ Other Discussions Points:

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Questions and answers with closing remarks

Dr. Jameson (Nigeria): Proposed adopting a "sandbox mechanism" for multi-stakeholder testing of DPI at national and sub-regional levels, referencing the Netmundial+10 discussions on meaningful multi-stakeholder approaches. He cited the Central Bank of Nigeria's (CBN) ongoing sandbox initiatives as an example.

Mr James from Ghana asked a question, stating, Usually when we talk about DPI, we are talking about online applications like e-governance. In Africa, where internet penetration is a problem or even mobile penetration, the question is whether there is any practical implementation of DPI offline? The Honorable addressed the question by saying thank you very much for the question, she stated when you look at Ghana there are still accessibility issues and she is sure that is the situation in other countries as well but that is why we are having such gathering to discuss on the challenges and propose solution through the multistakeholder approach.

The moderator asked the panelists to give their closing statements in 30 seconds, starting with Mr. Gadasu. Mr. Gadasu, speaking to sum it all up, stated that DPI is a great initiative that will help the West African sub-region to connect and conduct commerce in a very secure manner. However, he noted it can either liberate or surveil us; the difference will lie in our choices regarding governance, accountability, and inclusion. For West Africa, the opportunity is to build sovereign, inclusive, and very secure systems that not only offer quality data but are also dignifying to the citizenry of West Africa.

To Mr. Taylor, he emphasized that in many ways, the world does not know what has been happening in Western Africa and Africa in general. In ways that we have leapfrogged to technology, coming up

with solutions that work, jumping straight to wireless data, distributed electrical systems, there are so many opportunities here. How we collectively choose to do DPI would make a huge difference, and the opportunities are going to be enormous. He declared that the one real market that is going to matter is Africa, that the future is African, and that we get to design and decide what the future will look like for Africa. He expressed being super excited about everything we are going to do together.

To the Honourable Lydia she said, "Thank you very much for listening. DPI is the new Gold of the world, and as Africans, if we really need to harness it, we need to build trust, protection of data, and be inclusive and people-centered."

To Ms. Bokolah, she summed up with the question asked about how DPI can reach those without internet: "Brick by brick, we are building. If you check the numbers every year, it is increasing, and I believe that in the years to come, all the problems we have highlighted will be solved. I believe little by little we will get to where we want to."

To Mr. Ajiboye, he stated that everything goes down to partnership. DPI is not just for one stakeholder; partnership is the driving force of DPI, not just consultation. He also addresses the question raised as to how to get DPI to those without internet. He gave an example of partners working together in Nigeria to get the fiber cable to connect the unconnected and improve internet connectivity. He concluded that it's not just a magic word; it's "brick by brick," just like Adesokan said, and as the African proverb states, "If you want to go fast, you go alone, but if you want to go far, go together."

"Thank you very much, my distinguished panelists. It's been a very insightful discussion, and my key takeaway is that, just like the major theme of this discussion, we should think global and build local. This means the local contextualization of DPI in West Africa, not the plug-and-play policies from the Western world. Local context matters. It's been a very exciting session. Just like Mr. Ajiboye and Ms. Adesokan mentioned, 'brick by brick we are doing well,' even though there is a lot to be done."

"Thank you very much, everyone, for joining this conversation, and also let's keep reaching out on digital literacy through advocacy and keep the conversation going. Finally, thank you very much to ACDT. You can check out the amazing work they are doing on LinkedIn, X, Facebook, and Instagram. Thank you all so much for the amazing work you are doing. I have been your able moderator, Osei Kejah.