

When the Net Goes Dark: What Internet Shutdowns Mean for Democracy in Africa

Reflections from Zaina Foundation's RightsCon Continues Summit Session in collaboration with Access Now.

What happens to democracy when people can no longer communicate, access information, report what is happening around them, or make their voices heard?

This was the question at the heart of Zaina Foundation's session at the RightsCon Continues Summit, held online on 22–23 September 2026. This session held on 23 September 2026

Under the theme “When the Net Goes Dark: How Internet Shutdowns Undermine Democracy in Africa,” the session brought together voices from across the digital rights community to examine one of the most urgent challenges facing Africa's digital and civic space.

The discussion was not simply about internet connectivity.

It was about people.

It was about information, participation, accountability and human rights.

And it was about what happens when a tool that millions of people depend on every day is suddenly restricted or switched off.

RightsCon Continues was created as a 24-hour global online gathering following the cancellation of the planned 2026 RightsCon in Zambia. Rather than allowing the disruption to stop the community from meeting, the RightsCon team created a new space centred on resilience, solidarity, movement-building and collective action. More than 50 sessions were included in the programme. ([RightsCon Summit Series](#))

For Zaina Foundation, it was important that internet shutdowns remained part of this conversation.

Because across Africa, digital rights are increasingly inseparable from civic rights.

When connectivity becomes a democratic issue

An internet shutdown can initially sound like a technical problem.

A connection is interrupted. A website does not load. A messaging application stops working. Mobile data becomes unavailable.

But behind every disconnected device is a person.

A journalist trying to send a story to an editor.

A human rights defender documenting an incident.

A woman activist trying to contact colleagues.

A voter looking for information.

A small business owner trying to receive a digital payment.

A family trying to contact someone in another part of the country.

A community trying to understand what is happening around them.

This is why the impact of internet shutdowns cannot be measured only by the number of people who lose connectivity.

The more important question is:

What were those people trying to do when they lost access?

When a shutdown occurs during an election, protest, political crisis or other major public event, the consequences can become even more significant.

People may lose access to independent information. Journalists may struggle to report events in real time. Civil society organisations may lose communication with communities. Election observers may face difficulties sharing information. Human rights defenders may be unable to document or respond to incidents quickly.

Recent experiences elsewhere on the continent demonstrate why this matters. During Uganda's January 2026 elections, for example, a nationwide internet shutdown disrupted communication and reporting around the electoral period, with civil society and media organisations documenting its effects on civic participation and access to information.

These experiences remind us that connectivity has become part of the infrastructure through which modern societies participate in public life.

Beyond the blackout: what is lost?

During our session, we explored an important idea: when the internet goes dark, the loss is much bigger than connectivity.

The loss can include access to information.

It can include communication.

It can include economic opportunities.

It can include access to support networks.

And it can include the ability to participate in public life.

This is particularly important at a time when civic space in many parts of Africa is under pressure. Recent Afrobarometer findings indicate that citizens across the continent continue to express strong demand for civic and political freedoms even as the space available for exercising those freedoms remains constrained.

The digital environment has become one of the places where people exercise those freedoms.

Citizens debate public issues online.

Journalists publish investigations.

Women activists organise campaigns.

Human rights defenders document violations.

Young people engage with public institutions.

Communities mobilise around issues affecting their lives.

When that space is disrupted, participation is disrupted too.

This is why internet shutdowns should be understood within the broader conversation about shrinking civic space.

The gendered impact of going offline

At Zaina Foundation, we also believe that the conversation about internet shutdowns must include a gender perspective.

Women are not affected by digital restrictions in exactly the same way as everyone else.

Women journalists, women human rights defenders, women activists and women participating in public life already face particular forms of online abuse, gendered disinformation, harassment and technology-facilitated violence.

Digital platforms can provide important channels for communication, solidarity, reporting and access to support.

When those channels disappear, existing vulnerabilities can become more difficult to manage.

For a woman human rights defender working in a high-risk environment, losing connectivity may mean losing contact with colleagues or support networks.

For a woman journalist, it may mean being unable to communicate with sources or editors.

For women in rural or marginalised communities, where alternative communication channels may already be limited, the consequences can be even greater.

This is why gender cannot be treated as an additional consideration after a shutdown occurs.

It needs to be part of how we understand, document and respond to digital restrictions from the beginning.

Evidence matters

One of the strongest messages from the session was the importance of evidence.

We need to know what happened.

When did the disruption begin?

Which networks were affected?

Which platforms became inaccessible?

Where did the disruption occur?

How long did it last?

What did people experience?

And what were the social, economic and human rights consequences?

Technical network measurement is an important part of answering these questions.

But technical evidence alone cannot tell the entire story.

A measurement can show that a network was disrupted. It cannot fully explain what that disruption meant to the journalist who could no longer file a report, the activist who could not reach a colleague, or the business owner who lost digital transactions.

That is why technical measurement must be combined with community-based research and lived experiences.

At Zaina Foundation, our work on internet shutdowns increasingly seeks to connect these two dimensions: understanding what happened to the network and understanding what happened to people.

This approach is particularly important when documenting the experiences of women and other communities that are often missing from technical discussions about connectivity.

Internet shutdowns and the information gap

There is another consequence that deserves greater attention: the information gap created during a shutdown.

When trusted sources of information become inaccessible, people may find it more difficult to verify what they are hearing.

Rumours can move quickly.

Unverified information can spread.

Families may struggle to know whether relatives are safe.

Communities may not know what is happening beyond their immediate surroundings.

Journalists may be unable to independently verify information.

This can create an environment of uncertainty precisely when reliable information is most needed.

In democratic societies, access to information is not a luxury.

It is part of meaningful participation.

People cannot effectively participate in public life if they cannot access information about issues affecting them.

The African context

The conversation at RightsCon Continues also highlighted the importance of looking at internet shutdowns through an African lens.

The continent is experiencing rapid digital transformation. Governments are digitising public services. Businesses are moving online. Young people are using digital platforms to create,

organise and communicate. Civil society is increasingly using technology to monitor human rights and engage communities.

At the same time, digital restrictions, surveillance, platform blocking and internet shutdowns remain part of the reality faced in some countries.

Recent research and reporting on digital rights across Africa continue to document concerns around internet shutdowns, surveillance and restrictions on online civic space. ([Global Voices](#))

This creates a contradiction.

Africa is investing in digital transformation while, in some contexts, the same digital infrastructure is being restricted at moments when citizens most need it.

If governments want citizens to use digital services, participate in digital economies and engage with public institutions online, then protecting reliable and open connectivity must also be part of that digital future.

What should happen next?

Our discussion at RightsCon Continues was not intended to end with the identification of a problem.

It was a call to continue the work.

For civil society organizations, this means strengthening documentation and evidence.

For researchers and technologists, it means developing better tools to measure and understand disruptions.

For journalists, it means documenting the human impact of shutdowns while strengthening digital resilience.

For communities, it means understanding digital rights as part of everyday rights.

For policymakers, it means recognizing that decisions affecting internet access can have consequences far beyond the telecommunications sector.

And for the broader digital rights movement, it means building stronger partnerships across countries and regions.

Internet shutdowns do not stop at national borders.

Neither should solidarity.

Keeping the internet and civic space open

The most important lesson from our RightsCon Continues session is simple:

An internet shutdown is never only about the internet.

It can affect the ability of people to speak.

It can affect the ability of journalists to report.

It can affect the ability of communities to organize.

It can affect the ability of human rights defenders to document.

It can affect the ability of citizens to access information.

And, during critical moments such as elections, it can affect the environment in which people participate in public life.

That is why the conversation about internet shutdowns is ultimately a conversation about democracy, human rights and civic space.

At Zaina Foundation, we remain committed to documenting these experiences, amplifying the voices of affected communities and working with partners across Africa and globally to strengthen digital rights.

The challenge before us is not simply to restore the internet after it has been switched off.

The challenge is to build systems where shutting people out of the digital space is not treated as a normal response to political or social pressure.

We need an internet that remains open, accessible, secure and inclusive even during the moments when democratic participation matters most.

Because when the net goes dark, the consequences do not disappear into the darkness.

People experience them.

Communities experience them.

Democracy experiences them.

And those experiences must be documented, understood and brought into the light.

The internet should connect people to information, opportunity and participation not become a switch that can silence them when they need it most.

About Zaina Foundation

Zaina Foundation is a women-led organisation in Tanzania working to advance digital rights and inclusion, strengthen the safety of women and communities online, and promote a more open, inclusive and rights-respecting digital environment. Through research, capacity building, advocacy and partnerships, Zaina Foundation works with women journalists, women human rights defenders, technologists, activists, lawyers, young people and other communities affected by digital rights challenges.

For Feedback and Collaborations reach out to us info@zainafoundationtz.org