

LONDA 2025

DIGITAL RIGHTS & INCLUSION IN AFRICA REPORT

Sierra Leone

Country Report



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Sierra Leone

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Executive Summary

This report is informed by information from diverse sources, reports from media rights organisations, government institutions' websites, articles, and press statements. The country report is assessed using the TheScore Index by Paradigm Initiative, which evaluates compliance with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information. It examines key thematic areas, including internet access and digital inclusion; online freedom of ex-

pression and access to information; data protection and cybersecurity; privacy and surveillance; developments in ICT and Emerging Technologies; and the Universal Service Fund.

The findings highlight notable progress in stakeholder engagement on emerging legislation, such as the Data Protection Bill, amendments to the Right to Access Information Act, and the expansion of internet penetration supported by national digital policies. However, the analysis also identifies persistent challenges, including the misuse of the 2021 Cybersecurity and Crime Act, which restricts online expression; recurring internet disruptions

during politically sensitive periods; growing privacy concerns related to biometric systems; and deep inequalities in digital access for rural populations, women, and low-income groups.

To strengthen digital rights protection, the report recommended amending pro-

visions that limit citizens' rights in cybersecurity laws, adopting and enforcing a comprehensive data protection framework, increasing transparency around state surveillance, expanding affordable connectivity, and prioritising inclusive digital literacy initiatives.



Introduction

Since 2016, Sierra Leone has made notable progress in strengthening digital rights within the broader context of democratic reforms. One of the most significant milestones was the repeal of Part V of the 1965 Public Order Act in 2020, which decriminalised libel and seditious libel. This reform contributed to a substantial improvement in the country's press freedom environment, reflected in its rise in the World Press Freedom Index from 85th in 2019 to around 46th by 2024. Digital connectivity has also expanded, with internet penetration increasing from about 13% in 2018 to over 30% by 2025,¹ supported by initiatives such as the National Digital Development Policy (NDDP). Between 2023 and 2025, there were no internet shutdowns recorded, including during the 2023 elections, indicating a modest progress in internet disruption in the country. There is also improved engagement between government and civil society in policy processes, as seen in more inclusive consultations on emerging digital legis-

lation, as well as in the ongoing development of the Data Protection Bill.²

Despite these advances, Sierra Leone continues to face persistent and structural challenges to digital rights. The 2021 Cybersecurity and Crime Act has been frequently used to target online speech, leading to arrests and investigations that have contributed to a climate of self-censorship among journalists, bloggers, and human rights defenders. The digital divide remains a significant barrier to inclusive digital transformation, with rural communities, women, and low-income groups disproportionately excluded from affordable, reliable internet access.

Furthermore, the rapid expansion of biometric ID systems and digital surveillance capabilities has heightened concerns about privacy and data protection in the absence of a comprehensive legal framework. Although ongoing policy initiatives signal a commitment to strengthening

1. Ministry of Information and Civic Education <https://moice.gov.sl/moice-press-conference-tuesday-21st-january-2025/> (accessed on 12 January 2026).
2. Ministry of Information and Civic Education <https://moice.gov.sl/moice-concludes-final-national-validation-of-the-data-protection-and-right-to-access-information-bill-2025> (accessed on 12 January 2026).

digital governance, gaps in enforcement, limited institutional capacity, and socio-economic inequalities continue to limit Sierra Leone's alignment with regional and international human rights standards, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

Internet Access

Internet connectivity is improving slowly but with notable transformation. Early 2025, 1.80 million people used the Internet, which increased the online penetration to 20.7%, and 1.15 million (13.2%) were social media users, mobile phones are the primary means of access yet an estimated 79% remains offline due to low effective internet use and multiple SIM ownership.³ A strong urban and rural divide persist, with 45% of the population living in urban centres, mainly Freetown and provincial capitals, benefiting from

better coverage, faster speeds, multiple ISPs and fixed broadband options such as fibre or fixed wireless,⁴ while 55% in rural areas rely on 2G networks that support only limited browsing or messaging.⁵ The 4G population coverage rose to 79% by 2025 (from about 70%),⁶ improving access in semi-rural areas, and operators like Africell and Orange continue network upgrades, including Orange's 5G pilot Freetown's central business district launched in September 2023.⁷

Affordability

The cost of access is high, and mobile data prices are roughly five times higher than the UN's recommended affordability threshold. The cheapest smartphone costs about four months of the average salary around Le800 (approximately US\$33).⁸ In late 2022, Sierra Leone's NATCOM announced a nationwide mobile data increase of over 150%,⁹ triggering

3. DataReportal <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-sierra-leone?ts2.tech#:~:text=,include%20access%20to%20the%20internet> (accessed on 6 November 2025).
4. Sierra Leone National Broadband Strategy 2023-2028 <https://mocti.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/National-Broadband-Strategy>. (accessed on 6 November 2025).
5. Internet Society Pulse <https://pulse.internetsociety.org/en/reports/sl/> (accessed on 6 November 2025).
6. As above, n-5.
7. The Calabash Newspaper "Orange Sierra Leone Launches 1st 5G Trial Technology in Freetown" (2023) <https://thecalabashnewspaper.com/orange-sierra-leone-launches-1st-5g-trial-technology-in-freetown/> (accessed on 29 October 2025).
8. Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development <https://www.broadbandcommission.org/advocacy-targets/2-affordability/> (accessed on 5 November 2025).
9. National Communications Authority <https://www.natca.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Public-Notice-23.pdf> (accessed on 5 November 2025).

public backlash and a temporary suspension,¹⁰ yet prices still rose in 2023, further burdening users. As of November 2023, Africell charges Le 2 (approx. US\$0.08) for 100 MB (one day), Le 20 (approx. US\$0.81) for a 1 GB monthly, Le 120 (approx. US\$4.8) for 6 GB, and Le 300 (approx. US\$12) for 15 GB,¹¹ with Orange offering similar bundles (e.g., 2.6 GB for around Le 52, roughly US\$2)¹². Although these prices appear low per GB, they are unaffordable in a very low-income country like Sierra Leone.¹³ Despite these gains, mobile internet remains a luxury for many Sierra Leoneans, who often limit use to low-data services such as Facebook Basics and WhatsApp.

Digital connectivity and network infrastructure has made gradual progress, with expanded coverage and improved reliability, particularly in provincial areas,

under the government's Digital Transformation Programme. The Programme extended the national fiber-optic backbone from eight to 14 districts and increased mobile network sites from 798 in 2019 to 1,405 in 2025.¹⁴ Performance improved in 2023, with Ookla reporting a 52% increase in internet speeds, and with average downloads of about 17.63 Mbps for both mobile and fixed broadband.¹⁵ In 2024–2025, Orange and Africell showed mixed results average speeds of 16.40 Mbps (Orange) and 12.15 Mbps (Africell) in January 2024,¹⁶ rising to 16.95 Mbps for Orange but falling to 7.57 Mbps for Africell by January 2025.¹⁷

The digital divide is both a coverage gap and an affordability gap. Even where network coverage exists outside urban areas, many rural residents cannot afford smartphones or data plans. By early 2025, ru-

10. Sierraloded 'NATCOM Suspends New Internet Data Prices' (2022) <https://sierraloded.sl/news/natcom-suspends-new-internet-data-prices/> (accessed on 2 November 2025).

11. Sierraloded 'Data Prices Surge in Sierra Leone as Mobile Companies Secure Government Agreement' <https://sierraloded.sl/news/data-prices-surge-sierra-leone-mobile-companies-government-agreement/> (accessed on November 2025).

12. As above, n – 14.

13. African Future with AUDA-NEPAD <https://futures.issafrica.org/geographic/countries/sierra-leone/> (accessed on 7 November 2025).

14. Ministry of Information and Communications 'National Digital Transformation Programme Progress Report' (2025) <https://mocti.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Lite-2025-Sierra-Leone-Innovates-Digital-Government-Summit-Newsletter.pdf>

15. Ookla (2024). Speedtest Global Index: Sierra Leone Internet Performance Data. <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index> (accessed on 29 October 2025).

16. SpeedChecker Insights (2024). Mobile Data Speed Report: Sierra Leone <https://insights.speedchecker.com/africa/sierra-leone/sl-january-2024/> (accessed on 29 October 2025)

17. SpeedChecker Insights (2024). Mobile Data Speed Report: Sierra Leone <https://insights.speedchecker.com/africa/sierra-leone/sl-january-2025/> (accessed on 29 October 2025).

ral internet penetration remained in the single digits, while urban penetration was significantly higher due to better network quality and higher incomes.¹⁸ Addressing urban–rural disparities remains a key policy challenge, as reflected in government strategies and donor-supported rural connectivity programs.¹⁹

Findings from the 2021 Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) Analytical Studies No. 83 revealed that only 12% of women and 21% of men used the internet at least once per week, while 43% of women and 64% of men owned a mobile phone.²⁰ The rural and urban divide is particularly stark; 24% of rural women owned mobile phones compared to 65% of urban women, and 50% of rural men compared to 81% of urban men.²¹ Nationally, just 27% of the population

has access to mobile internet, and 12% to broadband internet as of 2021, meaning internet users accounted for less than one-third of the total population.²² These figures highlight persistent inequalities in digital access and the urgent need for inclusive policies to address both affordability and coverage gaps.

Internet disruptions

In March 2018, authorities shut down the Internet and all mobile communication services following the closure of polling stations during the Presidential runoff, reportedly to prevent result sharing.²³ In August 2022, a nationwide internet shut-down occurred amid protests over the high cost of living and food shortages,²⁴

18. World Bank (2024). Sierra Leone Digital Economy Diagnostic Report. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/185761624271466646/sierra-leone-digital-economy-diagnostic> (accessed on 7 November 2025).
19. Ministry of Information & Communications ‘National Digital Transformation Strategy (2023–2027)’ 2023 <https://www.mots.gov.zm/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/National-Digital-Transformation-Strategy.pdf> (accessed on 7 November 2025).
20. Statistics Sierra Leone (Stats SL) ‘Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) Analytical Studies No. 83’ 2021 <https://www.statistics.sl/index.php/sierra-leone-demographic-and-health-survey.html> (accessed on 7 November 2025).
21. As above, n – 37.
22. International Telecommunication Union (ITU) ‘ICT Development Index and Internet Penetration Statistics’ 2023 <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/idi2023/> (accessed on 7 November 2025).
23. ARTICLE 19 ‘Authorities shut down the internet around protests and elections’ <https://www.article19.org/reader/global-expression-report-2018-19/regional-overviews/africa-regional-overview/authorities-shut-down-the-internet-around-protests-and-elections/> (accessed on 27 October 2025).
24. CNN ‘Internet cut off as protesters shared images of police brutality. CNN investigates’ <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2022/08/24/sierra-leone-protests-internet-cut-off-pkg-polglase-intl-l-dn-vpx.cnn> (accessed on 27 October 2025).

coinciding with clashes between protesters and police that resulted in casualties and property damage. While authorities cut access as events unfolded, Zoodlabs Sierra Leone attributed the shutdown to emergency technical maintenance, a claim widely questioned due to its timing.²⁵

Between 2023 and 2025, no internet shutdowns were recorded, including during the 2023 elections, indicating modest progress. However, despite the reduced frequency of shutdowns, compliance with the African Charter on the right to information remains weak.²⁶

Online Freedom of

Expression and Access

to Information

Freedom of expression online is increasingly under threat, with arrests of jour-

nalists, activists, and bloggers creating a climate of fear. The Constitution of Sierra Leone 1991, Section 25(1),²⁷ guarantees freedom of expression, including the right to hold opinions and impart information without interference, Section 25(2) permits restrictions in the public interest, provided they are necessary and proportionate, such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The repeal of Part 5 of the Public Order Act 1965 in 2020 marked a significant advancement in upholding online freedom of expression in Sierra Leone, as it removed criminal penalties for defamatory-seditious libel and the publication of false news that had historically been used to suppress dissent and journalism, and was widely welcomed by the media as aligning national law international standards favouring civil remedies over criminal sanctions.²⁸ However, the progress is tempered by continuing restrictions

25. Zoodlabs Sierra Leone <https://twitter.com/ZoodlabsS/status/15574329535417221> (accessed on 2 November 2025).

26. African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, Art 9.

27. The Constitution of Sierra Leone 1991, s 25(1) <https://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/constitution1991.pdf> (accessed on 7 November 2025).

28. Media Foundation for West Africa 'Major Boost for Press Freedom as Sierra Leone scraps Criminal Libel Law after 55 Years' 2020 <https://mfwa.org/major-boost-for-press-freedom-as-sierra-leone-scraps-criminal-libel-law-after-55-years/> (accessed on 7 November 2025).

under the Cyber Security and Crime Act, Section 44 on cyberstalking and cyberbullying, which has been applied to arrest and prosecute social media users for online content deemed abusive or insulting,²⁹ including expressions critical to the government.

These issues got the attention of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), the Right to Access Information Commission (RAIC), and the Independent Media Commission (IMC), who raised concerns that the Cyber Crime law has infringed on the fundamental right to free speech, and that the law should not be used to suppress dissent, noting its use in intimidation and arrests related to online expression.³⁰

The Right to Access Information Act 2013 strengthens transparency by granting citi-

zens the right to information held by public authorities and establishing the Right to Access Information Commission (RAIC) to oversee implementation and handle complaints.³¹ The Act is currently under amendment to further strengthen the Commission. Between December 2024 and May 2025, RAIC recorded 92 information requests nationwide, surpassing the previous year's total of under 40. Requests were distributed as follows: Western Region (37, 80% approved); Southern Region (16, 1 denial); Eastern Region (25, 90% approved, 2 pending); and Northern Region (15, 10 successful). These figures reflect growing public awareness and improved compliance, as recognised at the 2025 International Conference of Information Commissioners (ICIC).³²

The RAIC expanded public engagement through media outreach, including the bi-weekly "RAIC Hour" on SLBC TV,³³ appear

29. Sierra Leone State House <https://statehouse.gov.sl/sierra-leones-president-julius-maada-bio-signs-cybersecurity-and-crime-law-praises-bipartisan-support-in-parliament/> (accessed on 7 November 2025).

30. Sierraloading 'SLAJ Raises Concern Over Implementation of Cyber Law' <https://sierraloading.sl/news/slaj-raises-concern-implementation-cyber-law/> (accessed on 7 November 2025).

31. Right to Access Information Act 2013 <https://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2013-02.pdf> (accessed on 1 November 2025).

32. RAIC Sierra Leone Excels in Africa Regional Report at ICIC 2025 in Berlin <https://raic.gov.sl/index.php/all-categories-list/press-release/raic-sierra-leone-excels-in-africa-regional-report-at-icic-2025-in-berlin> (accessed on 1 November 2025).

33. Right to Access Information Commission 'RAIC Signs MOU with SLBC to Promote Access to Information' <https://raic.gov.sl/index.php/all-categories-list/news/raic-signs-mou-with-slbc-to-promote-access-to-information> (accessed on 1 November 2025).

ances on AYV, regional outreach visits,³⁴ and plans for nationwide public lectures at universities. Digitally, the Commission launched an online request platform covering 50 Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs), enabling simultaneous submission to MDAs and RAIC, with plans for nationwide expansion.

The RAIC maintained strong collaboration with the Ministry of Information and Civic Education on amendments to the Act and the Data Protection Bill. In June 2025, the High Court upheld RAIC's authority by fining the Bank of Sierra Leone Le70,000,000 (approx. US\$2,848,418) for non-compliance.³⁵ The Commission also fined Freetown City Council Le70,000 (approx. US\$2,848) following a complaint over failure to respond to an FOI request concerning the Ephraim J. Robinson Municipal School recreation field.³⁶ Despite these achievements, key challenges persist. A pervasive culture of secrecy in public institutions continues to

hinder transparency. Furthermore, low proactive disclosure remains an issue for 79 institutions engaged last year; only slightly over 50 met complete compliance requirements, and many institutions lack websites or digital platforms for sharing public data.³⁷ While the RAIC framework broadly aligns with international standards, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, implementation gaps continue to limit its effectiveness.

Censorship and

Content Removal

The transparency reports from Facebook documented four government-ordered requests between 2021 and 2023, in 2021 there were three requests; one was done under a legal process, while the other two were requested under emergency disclosure. In 2023, there was one documented government request. In addition, Google

34. Right to Access Information Commission 'RAIC's Regional Offices Join 10th Anniversary Celebration' <https://raic.gov.sl/index/all-categories-list/press-release/raics-regional-offices-join-10th-anniversary-celebration> (accessed on 1 November 2025).

35. Right to Access Information Commission 'RAIC Secure Legal Victory Over Bank of Sierra Leone' (2025) <https://raic.gov.sl/index.php/all-categories-list/press-release/raic-secures-legal-victory-over-bank-of-sierra-leone-in-landmark-freedom-of-information-case> (accessed on 1 November 2025).

36. 'RAIC Fines Freetown City Council Le 70.000 for Failing to Release Information' <https://raic.gov.sl/index.php/all-categories-list/news/raic-fines-freetown-city-council-le-70-000-for-failing-to-release-information> (accessed on 1 November 2025).

37. 'RAIC Engages Stakeholders on Digital Access to Information and Compliance in Makeni' <https://raic.gov.sl/index.php/all-categories-list/press-release/raic-engages-stakeholders-on-digital-access-to-information-and-compliance-in-makeni> (accessed on 1 November 2025).

reported one request from the Sierra Leone Police on December 31 2012 seeking the removal of 60 YouTube videos related to violence.³⁸ Such actions may be justified under the Cybercrime Act 2020 as the law grants broad discretionary powers to restrict content deemed “offensive” or “threatening” without clear safeguards for necessity, proportionality, transparency, or oversight.

Internet disruptions

Self-censorship is widespread among individuals, journalists, and human rights defenders, particularly women journalists, due to fear of arrest, harassment, or reprisals under laws such as the Cybercrime Act. A notable case is that of journalist Umu Thoronka, who was dismissed from the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) in July 2024 after posting a TikTok video showing a woman questioning President Julius Maada Bio about rising living and food costs at a Presiden-

tial Town Hall Meeting. SLBC management deemed the video critical of the President.³⁹

Following her dismissal, Thoronka reported intimidation, online death threats, and unidentified individuals visiting her home. After complaints to SLAJ, Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), and other bodies yielded no government response, she fled the country. WIMSAL and RFK Human Rights subsequently filed a petition on her behalf before the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice. Incidents such as this have intensified self-censorship among women journalists and activists, creating a chilling effect that undermines constitutional protections and international standards on free expression.⁴⁰

38. Google Transparency Report ‘Government requests to remove content – Sierra Leone’ <https://transparencyreport.google.com/government-removals/overview?hl=en> (accessed on 17 November 2025).

39. Forum News Sierra Leone <https://forumnews-sl.com/ecowas-court-petition-highlights-the-pervasive-challenges-faced-by-women-journalists-in-west-africa/> (accessed on 4 November 2025).

40. Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights <https://www.facebook.com/RFKHumanRights/posts/-case-updatesierra-leonean-journalist-umu-thoronka-endured-years-of-sexual-haras/1229387102567248/> (accessed on November 2025).

Freedom of expression and access to information

Between 2020 and 2025, arrests and prosecutions for online expression occurred sporadically, often under provisions of the Cybercrime Act or legacy laws. In the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, Sierra Leone ranked 64th out of 180 countries (score 64.27), a 10-place drop from 2023,⁴¹ with Reporters Without Borders noting increased political pressure on the media.⁴²

Documented cases include:

- Thomas Dixon (June 2024): Subjected to online attacks and threats over commentary on the First Lady; SLAJ condemned the intimidation.⁴³
- Joy Bayoh Esq. (June 2024): Arrested for alleged cyberstalking following a Facebook post; released on bail and

case dismissed.

- Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyer (October 2025): Publicly threatened with removal from office following remarks criticising government priorities during a radio program.⁴⁴

These cases demonstrate a pattern of selective enforcement and intimidation, reinforcing self-censorship and weakening protections for freedom of expression and access to information in Sierra Leone.

Gendered Disinformation

Gendered disinformation is an increasing concern in Sierra Leone, primarily circulated through social media to target and discourage women in politics and other high-profile professions. This form of disinformation often involves false, exaggerated, or inflammatory content that undermines women's competence and morality, often through sexualisation and psychological harm. A 2022 study by the Sierra Leone Association of Women in

41. <https://wadr.org/sierra-leone-falls-10-places-in-2024-world-press-freedom-index/> (accessed on November 2025).

42. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-world-press-freedom-index-2025-economic-fragility-leading-threat-press-freedom> (accessed on 8 November 2025).

43. Media Reform Coordinating Group 'thirteenth edition of Press Freedom report' <https://mrcgonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/THIRTEENTH-EDITION-PRESS-FREEDOM-REPORT-2024.pdf> (accessed on 21 October 2025).

44. <https://www.globalparliamentofmayor> (accessed on 3 November, 2025).

Journalism (SLAWIJ) found that 64% of women journalists experienced threats, harassment, or violence, much of it occurring online.⁴⁵ In December 2021, rapper Alhaji Amadu Bah (LAJ) posted a Facebook video insulting Radio Democracy Director Asmaa James in response to her station’s reporting and issuing a threatening remark. Reporters Without Borders condemned the comments as “obscene, disgraceful, irresponsible and dangerous,” using the incident to call for an end to online harassment of journalists in Sierra Leone.⁴⁶

Although Sierra Leone has committed to several international frameworks on gender equality, such as the African Union Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and adopted national laws and strategies such as the Cybersecurity Act 2021, Data Protection Strategy 2022, National ICT Policy 2011, and National Telecommunications Act

2006, these frameworks remain broad and lack specific provisions addressing the distinct challenges and violations faced by women in the digital space.⁴⁷

Data Protection and Cybersecurity

Sierra Leone does not yet have a comprehensive data protection law. The Data Protection Bill 2025 has completed final national validation and is awaiting passage.⁴⁸ In the interim, partial safeguards exist under Article 22 of the 1991 Constitution (right to privacy) and the Telecommunications Act of 2006, which provides limited protection for telecommunications data.

In June 2025, during a national digital policy engagement, the Minister of Information and Civic Education, Chernor Bah, reaffirmed the government’s com

45. Sierralii ‘The state of Cyber-Bullying in Sierra Leone: Where is the law?’ [https://sierralii.gov.sl/articles/2023-12-08/Hump hrina/the-state-of-cyber-bullying-in-sierra-leone-where-is-the-law](https://sierralii.gov.sl/articles/2023-12-08/Hump%20hrina/the-state-of-cyber-bullying-in-sierra-leone-where-is-the-law) .(accessed on November 2025).

46. Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism (2022) ‘Threats Against Public-Facing Women in SL’ <https://www.internewslocalvoices.globalchange> (accessed on 3 November, 2025).

47. Media Foundation for West Africa ‘Women’s rights online in Sierra Leone: national policy gaps and recommendations’ 2023 <https://mfwa.org/publication/womens-rights-online-in-sierra-lone-national-policy-gaps-and-recommendations/> (accessed on November 2025).

48. Ministry of Information and Civic Education ‘MoICE Concludes Final National Validation of the Data Protection and Right to Access Information Bill 2025’ <https://moice.gov.sl/moice-concludes-final-national-validation-of-the-data-protection-and-right-to-access-information-bill-2025/> (accessed on November 2025).

mitment to press freedom, privacy, and responsible journalism, announcing that the Media and Information Policy and the Records and Archives Policy had been tabled before Cabinet for approval following nationwide consultations.⁴⁹

Sierra Leone currently lacks a dedicated data protection authority. Enforcement and investigation responsibilities are handled by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), the Cyber Crime Unit, and the National Cyber Security Coordination Center (NCSCC). The proposed Data Protection Bill is expected to establish an independent authority and provide mechanisms for individual redress once enacted.

The Cyber Security and Crime Act of 2021 criminalises unauthorised access, interference, and deletion of computer data and identity theft, with penalties of up to five years imprisonment and fines of up to Le 500 million.⁵⁰

In August 2025, the All People's Congress

(APC) reported an alleged data breach in its Diaspora membership portal, citing unauthorised deletion, alteration, and insertion of member records, raising serious concerns about data integrity and personal data security.⁵¹ Additionally, during the arrest of Sylvia Blyden, her laptop and phone were reportedly seized and accessed, raising concerns over unauthorised data access.

The Cybercrime Act contains overly broad investigative powers that raise concerns regarding human rights. Section 10(5) allows authorities to extend searches to connected systems without fresh judicial authorisation, risking intrusive digital raids. Sections 13 and 14 permit real-time interception of traffic and content data without clear safeguards or independent oversight.

Section 44(2)(b) criminalises electronic messages deemed “insulting,” “annoying,” or causing “ill-will,”⁵² using vague terms that may restrict legitimate criti-

49. Ministry of Information and Civic Education ‘Minister Reaffirms Commitment to Press Freedom and Digital Rights at National Policy Dialogue’ <https://moice.gov.sl/minister-reaffirms-commitment-to-press-freedom-and-digital-rights-at-national-policy-dialogue-organised-by-paradigm-initiative-and-the-media-reform-coordinating-group/> (accessed 27 October 2025).

50. Cyber Security and Crime Act of 2021, Part V, S 33. <https://mocii.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Sierra-Leone-Cyber-Crime-Act-2021.pdf> (accessed on November 2025).

51. Forum News Sierra Leone <https://forumnews-sl.com/alleged-data-breach-and-identity-theft-in-apc-diaspora-membership-portal-a-crisis-that-demands-swift-action/> (accessed on 23 October 2025).

52. Media Foundation West Africa [https://mfwa.org/how-sierra-leon-is-hiding-behind-the-fight-against-cybercrime-to-abuse-digital-rights/?](https://mfwa.org/how-sierra-leon-is-hiding-behind-the-fight-against-cybercrime-to-abuse-digital-rights/) (accessed on November 2025).

cism and dissent. In early 2025, social media influencer Hawa Hunt was arrested under the Act for allegedly transmitting “insulting messages” critical of the President and First Lady.⁵³

Sierra Leone signed the AU Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection, also known as the Malabo Convention, in 2016, but has not yet ratified it.⁵⁴ While the country currently relies on the Telecommunications Act 2006 for limited safeguards, the Data Protection Bill, finalised on 7 November 2025 after nationwide consultations, aims to align national law with international best practices and strengthen digital rights protections.⁵⁵

Digital IDs and Human

Rights Implications

In 2021, Sierra Leone launched its first biometric driver’s licenses in the country

by issuing the President of Sierra Leone a biometric driver’s license.⁵⁶ According to the Sierra Leone Road Safety Authority (SLRSA), the license includes a smart chip, QR code, enhanced security features, and integration with the National Civil Registration Authority database. While these measures strengthen authenticity and road safety monitoring, they also raise important considerations regarding privacy, data protection, and potential misuse in the absence of a comprehensive data protection framework.⁵⁷

Privacy and Surveillance

The Cybersecurity Act authorises state surveillance but lacks clear requirements for necessity and proportionality, raising potential conflicts with Article 4 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR). The Data Protection Act is still under development, and there is no comprehensive regulatory framework governing biometric or facial data, da

53. The Guardian ‘Fears grow for health of social media influencer arrested on live TV in Sierra Leone’ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/feb/10/social-media-influencer-sierra-leone-hawa-hunt?> (accessed on November 2025).

54. African Union Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-union-convention-cyber-security-and-personal-data-protection> (accessed on 23 October 2025).

55. Ministry of Information and Civic Education ‘Nationwide Consultations Begin on Sierra Leone’s First Data Protection Law’ <https://moice.gov.sl/nationwide-consultations-begin-on-sierra-leones-first-data-protection-law/> (accessed on 27 October 2025).

56. Sierra Leone President receives biometric driver’s licence <https://statehouse.gov.sl/sierra-leone-road-safety-authority-presents-biometric-drivers-license-to-president-julius-maada-bio/> (accessed on 23 October 2025).

57. As above, n -75.

ta-sharing, or algorithmic accountability.⁵⁸ These gaps create serious human rights concerns, increase the risk of mass surveillance, and privacy breaches.

On January 16 2025, the police officially announced the CCTV surveillance systems across Freetown and other major provincial areas in the country, described in local media as “smart video” installations intended for crime prevention, a deployment that implicitly enables the use of facial recognition in public spaces.⁵⁹

In 2024, the government expanded facial biometric systems through the National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA) and the Sierra Leone Police. The NCRA launched a biometric national ID system combining fingerprints and facial data, with mobile enrollment beginning in December 2024 and nationwide verification checks starting in January 2025.⁶⁰ By mid-2025, over 90% of citizens were reportedly enrolled, making it one of the country’s largest facial biometric databases, with significant

implications for privacy, non-discrimination, and freedom of assembly.⁶¹

There are no publicly documented cases of systematic government-requested content takedowns. However, in 2022, the National Cyber Security Coordination Center (NCSCC) announced stricter monitoring of social media content to address fake news, incitement, cyberterrorism, and online abuse.⁶² Framed as a cybersecurity measure, this signalled increased scrutiny of online political discussions, viral content, and private messaging platforms under existing cybercrime and ICT laws.

Sierra Leone has a legal framework for the oversight of its intelligence/surveillance apparatus, providing both Parliamentary and Judicial oversight. Parliament exercises oversight through committees such as the Parliamentary Oversight Committee on Defence, Internal and Presidential Affairs and the Committee on Communication, Technology, and Innovation,⁶³ which

58. Ministry of Information and Communication <https://moice.gov.sl/nationwide-consultations-begin-on-sierra-leones-first-data-protection-law/> (accessed on 5 November 2025).

59. Sierra Leone Police (SLP) <http://www.police.gov.sl/uncategorized/slp-rolls-out-cctv-cameras-in-bo-city-to-combat-crime/> (accessed on 5 November 2025).

60. National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA) <https://ncra.gov.sl/> (accessed on 5 November 2025).

61. <https://www.biometricupdate.com/202506/sierra-leone-reaches-93-percent-national-id-coverage-80-percent-services-digitized> (accessed on 5 November 2025).

62. Sierra Leone Observes <https://slobserver.org/wp-content/Library/220811%20NCCC%20%20warns%20public%20against%20engaging%20in%20cyber%20terrorism.pdf>. (accessed on 5 November 2025).

63. <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Sierra-Leone-MP-Roles-Responsibilities-Manual-2008.pdf> (accessed on 19 November 2025).

reviews security-sector operations, laws, and budgets.⁶⁴ Judicial oversight exists through a complaints tribunal for grievances against the Central Intelligence and Security Agency (CISA), and the Supreme Court adjudicates disputes over intelligence activities and information disclosure on national security grounds.

Developments in

ICT and Emerging

Technologies

AI Policy development

There is no existing AI bill or policy in Sierra Leone yet, but the Government is taking a

proactive approach by developing its first comprehensive AI strategy through an “AI Readiness Assessment.”⁶⁴ This report is called the Technological Need Assessment - Sierra Leone,⁶⁵ which will serve as the foundational blueprint for a national AI policy and regulatory framework. This effort aligns with the National Digital Development Policy (2021), which promotes the use of emerging technologies to address national challenges in education, healthcare, and public administration.⁶⁶

In 2019, the GOSL, through the Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation (DSTI), published a 10-year National Innovation and Digital Strategy (NIDS). The strategy includes AI as a key component, prioritising a “country-as-AI-lab” model, aiming to leverage AI and data science to address societal challenges and improve government decision-making and service delivery.⁶⁸

64. https://www.cpahq.org/directory/sierraleone/#:~:text=The%20Parliament%20of%20Sierra%20Leone%20website%20is%20is%20Public%20Petition%20Committee%20*%20Supervisory%20Committee (accessed on 19 November 2025).
65. Ministry of Communication, Technology and Innovation ‘Sierra Leone Takes a Purpose-Driven Approach to AI’ <https://iafrica.com/sierra-leone-launches-national-ai-readiness-assessment-with-world-bank-support/> (accessed on 14 November 2025).
66. [sierra_leone_technology_needs_assessment_final.pdf https://www.un.org/technologybank/sites/www.un.org/technologybank/files/sierra_leone_technology_needs_assessment_final.pdf](https://www.un.org/technologybank/sites/www.un.org/technologybank/files/sierra_leone_technology_needs_assessment_final.pdf) (accessed on 16 March 2026).
67. Ministry of Communication, Technology and Innovation https://mocti.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/S_L_Digital-Development-Policy.pdf (accessed on 14 November 2025).
68. Eta & Associates ‘The AI Regulatory Framework in Africa: A Focus on Sierra Leone and Nigeria’ <https://etaandasociates.com/our-thinking/the-ai-regulatory-framework-in-africa-a-focus-on-sierra-leone-and-nigeria/> (accessed on 14 November 2025).

Facial Recognition
and Other Emerging
Technologies

Sierra Leone had implemented facial recognition technologies primarily for civil registration through its national ID cards and for security and efficiency in areas like pension management and border control.⁶⁹ The University of Management and Technology (UNIMTECH) in Sierra Leone has commissioned a facial recognition system to “automate facial data of students” for tracking their status.⁷⁰ Mobile service has been launched for Biometric ID issuance to expand access to these cards.⁷¹

The Government developed its National Innovation & Digital Strategy (NIDS) 2019

- 2029, that aims at guiding Sierra Leone’s investments, policies, and governance frameworks for present and future development, making references to emerging technologies such as Internet of Things (IoT), Blockchain, Quantum.⁷² In 2018, a blockchain-based digital voting solution was piloted during the presidential election, using a permissioned blockchain to enhance transparency. While innovative, this initiative sparked debates about trust, accessibility, and technical oversight.⁷³ In July 2024, EON Reality established Sierra Leone’s first Spatial AI Center, marking a significant step toward equipping students and professionals with advanced skills in virtual, augmented, and spatial AI technologies for sectors such as mining, agriculture, and renewable energy.⁷⁴

Sierra Leone has made efforts to incorporate multi-stakeholder consultations in digital policy development through work-

69. ‘Sierra Leone partners to build blockchain-powered digital ID system’ <https://www.biometricupdate.com/202511/sierra-leone-partners-to-build-blockchain-powered-digital-id-system> (accessed on 14 November 2025).

70. The University of Management and Technology ‘UNIMTECH, The Mother of Innovation and Technology in Sierra Leone’ <https://unimtech.edu.sl/7794/> (accessed on 15 November 2025).

71. <https://www.biometricupdate.com/202412/sierra-leone-launches-mobile-service-to-expand-biometric-id-issuance?> (accessed on November 2025).

72. As Above, n -88.

73. World Economic Forum ‘The world’s first blockchain-powered elections have just happened in Sierra Leone’ <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2018/03/the-world-s-first-blockchain-powered-elections-just-happened-in-sierra-leone/> (accessed on 15 November 2025).

74. EON Reality ‘EON Reality Announces National Rollout in Sierra Leone with the Launch of Spatial AI Center and Introduction of 10,000 Tailored Courses’ <https://eonreality.com/eon-reality-announces-national-rollout-in-sierra-leone-with-the-launch-of-spatial-ai-center-and-introduction-of-10000-tailored-courses/> (accessed on 15 November 2025).

ing groups, public forums, and national events. The National Digital Development Policy (2021) benefited from validation exercises and expert consultations across infrastructure, digital skills, and emerging technologies.⁷⁵

Also, the Digital Transformation Project, led by the Ministry of Communication, Technology, and Innovation (MoCTI), featured public engagement through workshops, digital summits “Sierra Leone Innovates,”⁷⁶ and awareness initiatives, including the publication of a YouTube video on the National Fibre Backbone II project.⁷⁷

Digital Inclusion

According to the 2015 Population and Housing Census (PHC), persons with disabilities accounted for 1.3% of the

national population (93,129 individuals), with the Northern Region recording the highest number, with 32,849 persons with disabilities, representing 35.3% of the country’s disabled population. Disease or illness is identified as the leading cause of disability, followed by congenital conditions (16.2%), other unspecified causes (10.5%), accidents (8.8%), and natural ageing (8.1%).⁷⁸

The Government has taken steps to enhance digital inclusion through policies such as the Assistive Technology (AT) Policy and Strategic Plan.⁷⁹ In September 2025, the Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation (DSTI) and the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) signed an MoU to expand digital literacy and inclusion.⁸⁰ This initiative resulted in the training of 1,000 persons with disabilities in basic and intermediate digital skills through DSTI Digital Learning Hubs in Bo, Kenema, Freetown,

75. Ministry of Communication, Technology and Innovation ‘MoCTI hosts a one-day stakeholder engagement to review the state of digital public services in Sierra Leone’ <https://mocti.gov.sl/mocti-hosts-a-one-day-stakeholder-engagement-to-review-the-state-of-digital-public-services-in-sierra-leone/> (accessed on 15 November 2025).
76. MoCTI <https://mocti.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Lite-2025-Sierra-Leone-Innovates-Digital-Government-Summit-Newsletter.pdf> (accessed on 15 November 2025).
77. MoCTI <https://mocti.gov.sl/sierra-leone-digital-transformation-project/> (accessed 15 November 2025).
78. <https://at2030.org/assistive-technology-policy-and-strategic-plan/&opi=89978449&psig=AOvVaw1YO pB23Y-lUtAy2gdp 1YEz&ust=1763330813326000> (accessed on 15 November 2025).
79. As above, n- 100.
80. DSTI and NCPD Sign MoU to Advance Digital Inclusion for Persons with Disabilities https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-directorate-of-science-technology-and-innovation/posts/?lipi=urn%3Ali%3Apage%3Adflagship-3detail_base%3BH4u62qixSDmjPnWI%2Bog%2B6A%3D%3D (accessed on 21 October 2025).

and Makeni, improving pathways to employment and entrepreneurship

Furthermore, the Government, together with DSTI, has also developed the “Leh We Tok” app, designed to empower people living with speech and hearing impairments.⁸¹ The Technical Director of the DSTI noted that digital platforms will be adapted with accessibility features to enhance participation, stressing that the initiative will ensure inclusivity and co-creation at every stage of design and implementation.⁸²

Child Online Safety

There is no specific law on online child violations; however, the existing national laws relevant to Online child violations include the Child Rights Act, the Sexual

Offences Act 2019, and the Cybersecurity and Crime Act 2021. Article 47 of the Cybersecurity Act criminalises online child abuse and child sexual exploitation, which is punishable by law.⁸³ These laws don’t explicitly and fully criminalise all forms of OCSEA-related offences nor include provisions that explicitly recognise the rights and gendered risk faced by girls.

Over the year, there has been a rapid increase in OCSEA in Sierra Leone. Studies show that 20% of girls aged 15–19 have experienced online sexual exploitation,⁸⁴ 24% of teenagers have faced cyberbullying, and 17% of young women have been affected by cybercrime.⁸⁵ In response, the Comprehensive School Safety Policy (2023) introduced guidelines on online safety.⁸⁶

81. ‘DSTI develops Lek We Tok App, an assistive technology for people living with speech and hearing impairments’ <https://lnkd.in/druWWz74> (accessed on 21 October 2025).

82. <https://thecalabashnewspaper.com/ncpd-dsti-ink-historic-mou-to-empower-persons-with-disabilities-in-digital-space/> (accessed on 22 October 2025).

83. Cybersecurity and Crime Act 2021, Art 47

84. ‘Girls & Young Women-Led Assessment on Online Sexual Exploitation, Abuse & Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Africa’ <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/GYW-Led-Assesment-Report-on-OSEA-and-Tech-Facilitated-GBV.pdf> (accessed on 17 November 2025).

85. As above, n-106.

86. Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2023_Comprehensive-School-Safety-Policyvf-1.pdf (accessed on 17 November 2025).

Privacy and

Surveillance

In Sierra Leone, the Universal Service Fund is referred to as the Universal Access Development Fund (UADF),⁸⁷ which was established by the Government of Sierra Leone, entrusted with a mandate to ensure equitable access to mobile and broadband internet services across the nation. The UADF aims to bridge connectivity gaps in underserved communities. In 2023, UADF installed towers in Yorweama (Moyamba District) and Sogbaleh (Bonthe District), extending connectivity to communities of approximately 5,000 and 3,500 residents, respectively. In 2024, 47,000 people in 14 communities, 30 schools, and 10 community health centres across Sierra Leone have now benefitted from UADF's rural connectivity initiative. Complementary initiatives, such as Mobile Phone E-Money and Charging Kiosks, the Tokeh Community Digital Services and Hotspots Centre, and ICT hubs, have improved access to ICT services, supported SMEs, and empowered women in agriculture. The primary sources of

funding for UADF's projects and activities included revenue from the service levy imposed on licensed service providers and financial contributions from the National Communications Authority (NATCA).

However, transparency remains a concern. UADF did not formally respond to information requests regarding fund allocations, citing internal approval processes. Available information was sourced from its 2023 annual report.

87. Universal Access Development Fund <https://uadf.gov.sl/> (Accessed on 23 October 2025).

Conclusion

Sierra Leone has demonstrated notable progress in digital transformation, policy innovation, and inclusion initiatives. Improvements in press freedom, digital governance, and civic participation signal political commitment to reform. However, gaps persist between policy commitments and implementation. Weak data protection, limited oversight of emerging technologies, uneven enforcement of cybersecurity laws, and persistent digital inequalities continue to undermine

trust and the protection of rights.

To strengthen its digital rights environment, Sierra Leone must accelerate passage of the Data Protection Bill, embed human rights safeguards in AI and emerging technology governance, enhance independent oversight, and invest in equitable access and digital literacy. With sustained reforms, the country is well-positioned to consolidate gains and advance toward a more inclusive, rights-respecting digital future.

Recommendations

The Government should:

- Amend the Cybersecurity and Crime Act (2021) to remove provisions that criminalise legitimate online expression and align enforcement with regional and international human rights standards.
- Adopt and enforce a comprehensive Data Protection Law, including the establishment of an independent, well-resourced data protection authority with investigative and redress powers.

- Guarantee non-disruptive access to the internet by prohibiting shutdowns and throttling except under strictly lawful, necessary, and proportionate circumstances.
- Introduce clear safeguards, judicial oversight, and public reporting on surveillance technologies, procurement processes, and data-handling practices.
- Invest in affordable and reliable internet infrastructure, particularly in rural and underserved areas, and strengthen the effective use and transparency of universal access funds.
- Provide human-rights-based training for ministries and security agencies on privacy and digital rights, and institutionalise meaningful multi-stakeholder consultations in digital policy development.

Civil Society Organisations should



- Expand digital rights awareness campaigns and systematically document and report violations, including misuse of cybercrime laws, surveillance abuses, and internet disruptions.
- Build coalitions across human rights, media, legal, and technology sectors to coordinate advocacy, share expertise, and respond effectively to digital rights threats.
- Provide digital security training for journalists, activists, and human rights defenders; advocate for transparency and safeguards in biometric and surveillance systems; and support strategic public-interest litigation.
- Contribute expert, rights-based input into draft legislation and national digital policies, particularly on data protection, AI, and cybersecurity.

The Media should:










- Enhance digital literacy, cybersecurity, and data protection skills among journalists to improve online safety and secure reporting practices.
- Increase investigative journalism on digital governance, surveillance, data protection, internet shutdowns, and online child safety issues.
- Uphold ethical standards in online reporting, counter disinformation, and actively participate in policy debates on digital laws and press freedom.
- Strengthen media associations to provide legal aid, advocacy, and support networks for journalists facing digital threats, and produce public-facing content on online safety, privacy rights, and responsible digital use.





The Score Index

Sierra Leone, 2025

1 = Totally non-compliant; 2 = Mildly compliant; 3 = Moderately compliant;
4 = Considerably compliant; 5 = Fully compliant

Indicator	ACHPR Principle	2025 Score	2025 Justification
Internet Shutdowns	P38(2)		In 2025, there were no internet shut-downs, even during the 2023 elections, indicating a modest progress in internet disruption.
Inexistent laws, policies, and other measures to promote universal, equitable, affordable, and meaningful access to the internet	P37		There is an existing law, the National Communications Authority Act 2022, and the Government, through the Universal Service Fund, also known as the Universal Access Development Fund, has implemented many initiatives to bridge the digital divide in the country.
False News Criminalisation	P22(2)		Sierra Leone's existing law continues to criminalise online speech, leading to arrest and prosecution sporadically between 2020 and 2025.

Indicator	ACHPR Principle	2025 Score	2025 Justification
Sedition Legislation	P22(2)		The Sedition and Libel provision in Part V of the Public Order Act was repealed in 2020.
Arbitrary Arrests and Harassments of the Media, HRDs, and Citizens	P20(1) & (2)		There has been a high rate of threats, harassment, assault, and intimidation of journalists, human rights defenders, and activists in 2024 and 2025.
Data Protection Legislation.	P42		Sierra Leone does not have a comprehensive data protection law yet, but the final national validation of the Data Protection Bill 2025 has been completed, which is still awaiting passage.
Online Content Removal Without Process	P38 and P39(4)		Sierra Leone has no documented cases of government-ordered blocking or filtering by Meta or TikTok in 2024 and 2025. However, between 2020 and 2023, there were four recorded government requests for content takedowns from Sierra Leone.
Invasion of Privacy of Communications	P41		The Cybersecurity Act authorises surveillance but lacks clear requirements for necessity and proportionality, raising potential conflicts with Article 4 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

Indicator	ACHPR Principle	2025 Score	2025 Justification
Failure by the government to proactively disclose and disseminate information on digital technologies.	P29(3)	 3	The websites of most government institutions are not regularly updated to fully comply with the Access to Information Act, 2013 by proactively disclosing and disseminating information.
AI and Emerging Technologies national strategies	P39(6)	 2	There is no existing AI bill or policy in Sierra Leone yet, but the Government is taking a proactive approach by developing its first comprehensive AI strategy through an “AI readiness assessment. This report is called the technological Need Assessment -Sierra Leone.
Adoption of specific child laws, policies and measures promoting children’s digital safety and privacy online	P37(5)	 1	Sierra Leone does not have a specific law or policy focused on children’s digital safety. However, there are existing national laws that criminalise online child violations.
Digital Inclusion	P37(3)	 2	The Government has implemented a lot of initiatives and strategies towards digital inclusion and advancement in the country.

Total (out of 60):

2025
33



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