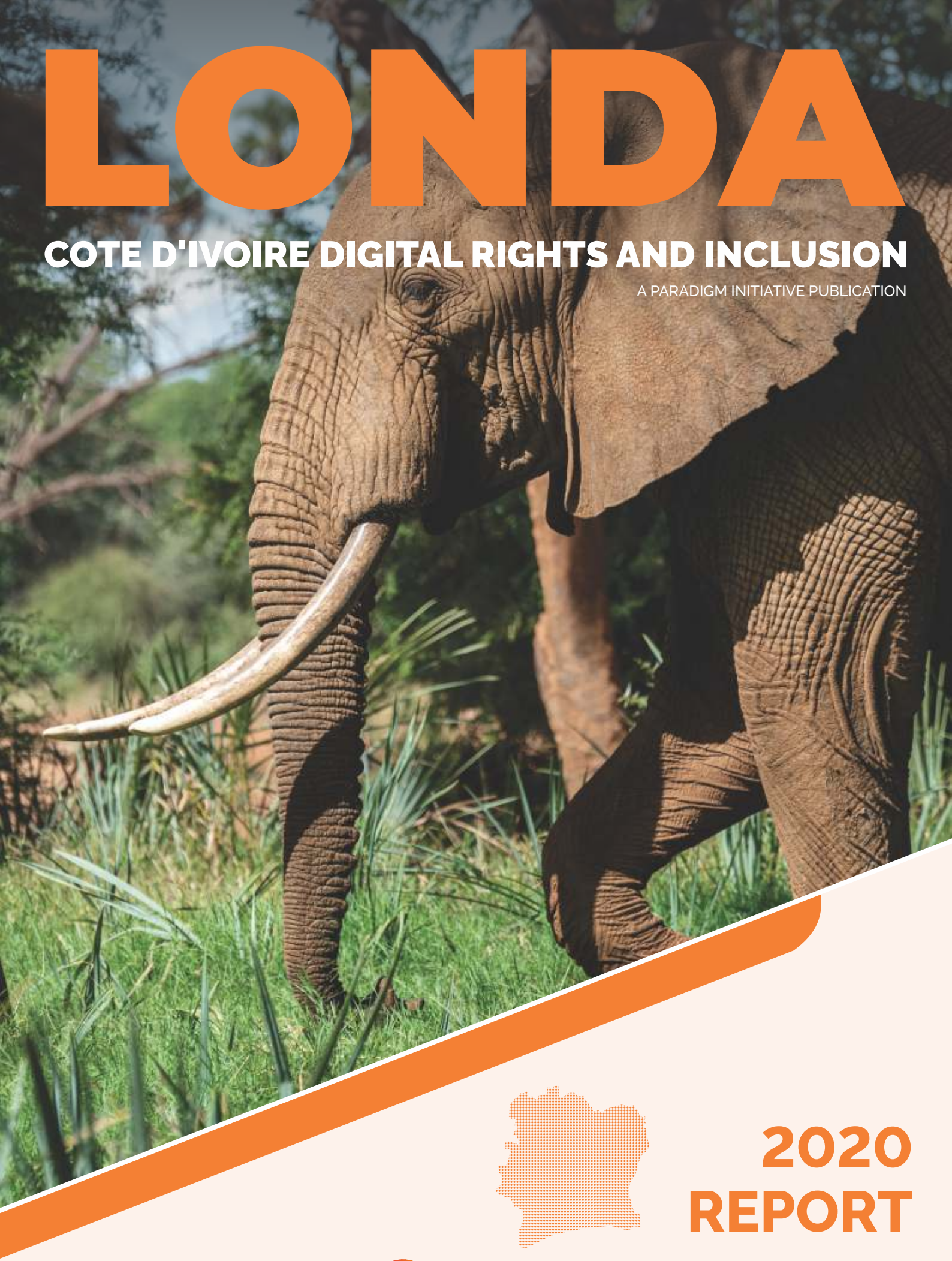

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COTE D'IVOIRE DIGITAL RIGHTS AND INCLUSION

A PARADIGM INITIATIVE PUBLICATION

2020 REPORT

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Civil society organizations continue to work to advance digital rights and inclusion in Africa, ensuring best practices are adopted into policy and legislation. This report analyses the state of digital rights and inclusion in Cote d'Ivoire, examining violations and gaps, investigating the use and application of policy and legislation, highlighting milestones and proffering recommendations for the digital landscape in Cote d'Ivoire. This edition captures among other issues, the digital divide worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and unearths infractions on different thematic areas such as privacy, access to information, and freedom of expression with the legislative and policy background well enunciated.

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Cote D'Ivoire is situated in the western part of Africa. The population made up predominantly of young people is estimated at 26,453,542 in 2020.[1] The internet penetration rate is 26,3%. In 2018, the number of people connected to the internet in Cote d'Ivoire was estimated at around 6.53 million, out of a population of 24.9 million.

INTRODUCTION

DIGITAL RIGHTS AND INCLUSION IN COTE D'IVOIRE

The mobile penetration rate is also estimated at 131.6%.[2] In general, 60% of the Ivorian population is connected to the internet through a smartphone, 38% from a computer and 2% from a tablet.[3] Cote D'Ivoire is number 9 in Africa and is 131st at the global level on the information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Development Index by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).[4]

INTERNET INFRASTRUCTURE AND POLICIES

The Ministry of Digital Economy and Post is responsible for the telecommunications sector. It is supplemented by the Telecommunications/ICT Regulatory Authority of Côte d'Ivoire (ARTCI), and by the Commission for Access to Information of Public Interest and Public Documents, (CAIDP). In terms of legislation, Côte d'Ivoire has legal instruments including Law No. 2012-293 of March 21 2012 relating to Telecommunications and Information and Communication Technologies, to govern the telecommunications sector. There is also Law No. 2013-867 of December 23 2013 relating to access to information of public interest, Law No. 2013-451 of 19 June 2013 relating to the fight against cybercrime and Law No. 2017-803 of December 7 2017 on the orientation of the information society.

60%

of Ivorian population is connected to the internet through a smartphone

1. Internet user Statistics for Africa
2. Authority of the Telecommunication Regulation of Côte d'Ivoire
3. Digital report 2018 in Western Africa "we are social"
4. ICT development index 2017 "ITU"

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DIGITAL RIGHTS AND INCLUSION

The first cases of COVID-19 were identified and confirmed on March 11 2020. Since then, Côte d'Ivoire has recorded 21,513 confirmed cases.[5] In an announcement on April 15, Doctor Aka Aouele, Minister of Health and Public Hygiene indicated that "the average age of patients is 40 years with extremes of 18 months to 82 years."[6] The government has deployed a crisis management plan mainly focused on economic, social and humanitarian aspects.

The National Security Council proceeded to contain the city of Abidjan on March 29. In fact, the economic capital represents the epicenter of the pandemic and this measure was intended to contain it by reducing mass movement of people. Companies were exempted from tax audits for a period of three months. The penalties for delays in the execution of public contracts and orders with the State and its branches during the crisis period were also canceled.[7] These measures were aimed at maintaining economic activities, relieving businesses' cash flow and preserving jobs. On the public health front, websites were put into service with all the information in real time relating to the pandemic, its news, and preventive and safety measures.[8] The official Facebook page of the Ministry of Health and Public Hygiene also supported communication on social networks with daily updates on the development of the health situation.

Mobile phone operators and internet service providers (ISP) have also contributed to curb the impacts of the crisis. Main operators such as Orange, Moov and MTN have launched awareness campaigns through their various channels. In collaboration with the government, an SMS system regularly informs and sensitizes the citizens on protective measures against the coronavirus.[9] Special internet packages have been made available for each social layer, so that everyone can communicate and access different internet services.[10] The measures taken by the telephone operators were crucial as to ensure the social welfare of the populations, given the imposed social distancing measures.

5. Ministry of Health and Public Hygiene
6. http://apanews.net/news/lage-moyen-des-personnes-atteintes-du-covid-19-en-cote-divoire-est-de-40-ans-ministre
7. Retrouvez l'intégralité des mesures prises par le gouvernement su, https://www.ccifci.org/actualites/mesures-gouvernementale-en-ci-face-au-covid-19.html
8. http://info-covid19.gouv.ci et http://sante.gouv.ci
9. https://www.orange.ci/fr/tous-engages-contre-le-coronavirus.html
10. https://www.orange-business.com/fr/covid-19-solutions-voix-et-data-temporaires-pour-collaborateurs

Faced with the health crisis, the actions of the government resulted in less than 200 deaths per day. However, this commendable government response was in many ways somewhat delayed and punctuated by a crisis in access to information about the disease in light of the changing world situation. In general, COVID-19 has prompted the government to take a series of barrier measures against the pandemic which impacts on human rights. The government's lack of proactivity was noticeable in particular in the management of communication on social networks.[11] This has manifested itself in the rise of fake news and cases of human rights violations.

According to Doctor Eddy Gnapia, the difficulties of access to accurate information in the early days of the health crisis in Côte d'Ivoire pushed citizens not only to flock to social networks, but also to produce and relay information without verifying the sources.[12] Social networks have thus become the main channel for disseminating information both for citizens and for certain press houses.

According to the report issued by the Network of Online Press Professionals of Côte d'Ivoire (REPPRELCI), "Some 30% of fake news (false information) on COVID-19 in Côte d'Ivoire has been disseminated in traditional media against 70% on social networks during the period from May 3 to July 31 2020."[13] Citizens, crystallized by fear and hungry for information about the pandemic were sharing the information at their fingertips without verification. Some press houses also took advantage of this, often publishing fake news in order to generate traffic on their platforms.

According to Anderson Diédri, "The fake news broadcasts mislead citizens and lead them to behave unreasonably. We saw people destroy the screening center that was under construction in Yopougon,[14] believing that this center was going to receive patients who were going to contaminate them, when in reality it was a screening center that was to help improve management within the framework of the fight against the pandemic."[15]

The mismanagement of the crisis on social media has also given rise to numerous cases of degradation and violation of human dignity. Indeed, photos and videos of people, victims of corporal punishment and humiliation of all kinds, during the curfew period were widely shared on social networks.[16] The police forces, in their desire to enforce the curfew established by the President of the Republic, exceeded their sovereign mission which is to ensure the safety of citizens. The security forces "therefore took to the field with confidence. No mercy for those still outside after 9 p.m." Some human rights organizations widely denounced the abuses committed against citizens. These waves of condemnation forced the National Police to release a statement to reassure the populations and public that measures will be taken to respect the rights of citizens in the exercise of their mission.

> ***"The government's lack of proactivity was noticeable in particular in the management of communication on social networks"***

11. Les réseaux sociaux, ennemis ou alliés de la lutte contre le COVID 19 – in, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=259755478483571&ref=watch_permalink
12. Les réseaux sociaux, ennemis ou alliés de la lutte contre le COVID 19 – in, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=259755478483571&ref=watch_permalink
13. http://www.atoo.ci/2020/08/15/70-des-fake-news-sur-la-covid-19-ont-ete-diffusees-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux-rapport/
14. Commune de la ville d'Abidjan
15. https://www.lemediacitoyen.com/epidemie-de-coronavirus-retour-sur-une-crise-de-linformation/
16. Couvre-feu à la matraque : l'Afrique de l'Ouest se rebelle in, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/03/30/couvre-feu-a-la-matraque-l-afrique-de-l-ouest-se-rebelle_6034953_3212.html

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The coronavirus pandemic was not far from a simple health crisis in Côte d'Ivoire. It has indeed served as a test of the entire state system at the political, educational, social, economic and health levels. What should be noted is that the challenges to be met are still significant, especially in terms of digital rights and access to information which, in all likelihood, were not perceived as priorities at the start of the crisis. This situation has caused the rise of fake news with very often the disclosure of false information or personal data of citizens on social networks.

The coronavirus disease has also enabled the Ivorian government to better deal with technological tools, particularly teleworking and the gradual digitization of certain sectors of activity. The challenge of education in the proper use of social networks and in knowledge of the legal measures which govern this new virtual space of expression must also be taken up by the Ivorian State because, poorly trained and poorly informed citizens constitute a danger above all in times of crisis such as COVID-19.

“This situation has caused the rise of fake news with very often the disclosure of false information or personal data of citizens on social networks.”

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