



ADVANCING DIGITAL ACCESS FOR PWDs IN ANGOLA, CAR AND DRC



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This Policy Brief assesses the digital inclusion of persons with disabilities (PWDS) in Angola, CAR and DRC under the Greater Internet Freedom Project and makes pertinent recommendations to ensure no one is left behind.

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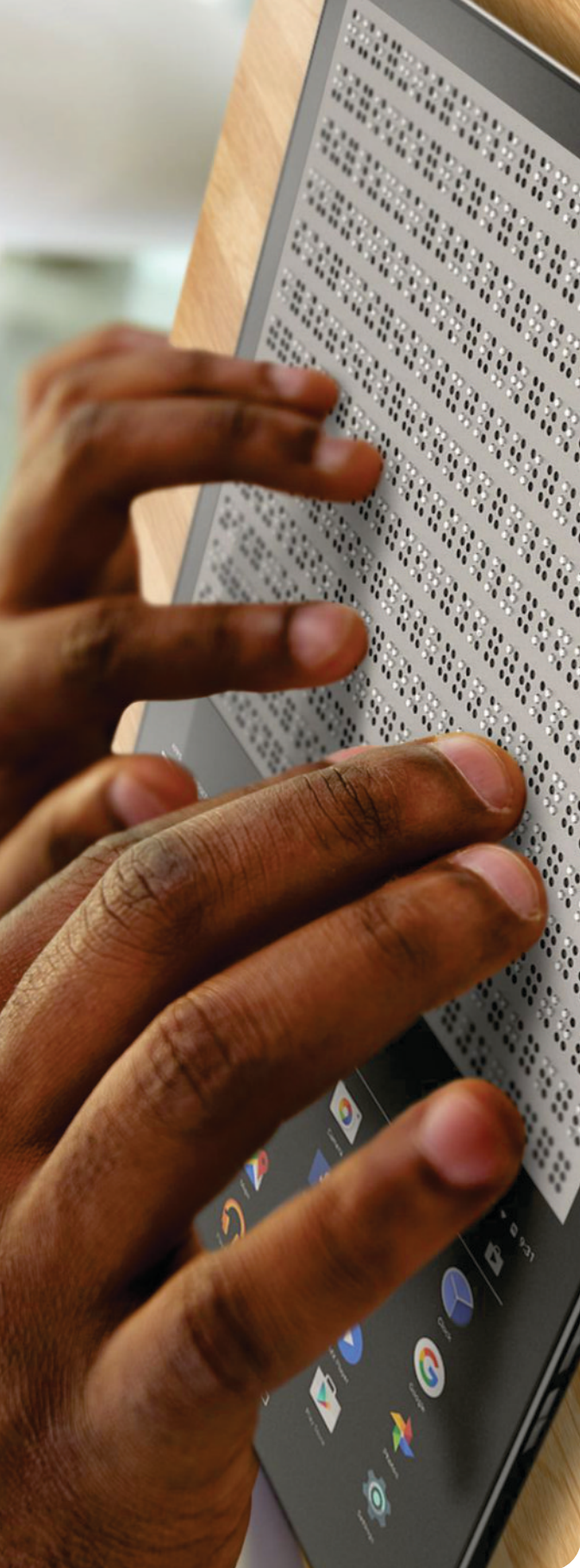
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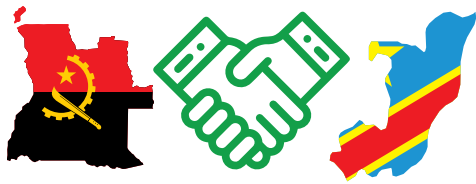
BACKGROUND

Digital exclusion of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Angola, the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a cause for concern, and particular consideration needs to be adopted by the three countries to ensure no one is left behind. Angola, CAR and DRC are state parties to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter)¹ and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),² which posit the respect for freedom of expression and access to information, with articles 9 and 19 respectively instructive. Both treaties entrench the right to equality in Article 2, and disability is not a basis for discriminatory practices when accessing digital technologies.

The digital age has facilitated the free flow of information, and access to digital technologies has become a critical component to enjoying these rights under the African Charter and ICCPR. Any disproportionate access to these technologies for persons with disabilities is exclusion and can be deemed discriminatory.

1. <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights>

2. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>



Angola and DRC have signed the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa (the ADP)³ which calls on States to take all appropriate legislative, administrative, budgetary and other measures to ensure equality for PWDs.

While this treaty is not yet in operation due to low ratification, all three countries are state parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. To enable PWDs to live an independent life and to participate in all aspects of life adequately, Article 9(1) of the CRPD obliges States to *'take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems (ICTs), and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas.'* Access to the Internet and ICTs is, therefore, relevant to human dignity and life for persons with disabilities. As such, the governments of Angola, CAR and DRC must look at their policies, laws and practices to take the relevant measures to safeguard the rights of PWDs.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY AND LITERACY

Digital inclusion for PWDs is beyond just practices addressing the low data cost for everyone or providing laptops and smartphones to communities. It is an all-encompassing solution to the needs of PWDs that looks at the relevant assistive devices and software that guarantee access to information and services. Access to screen readers such as the Job Access with Speech (JAWS) for Windows and software magnifying screens can enhance the ability to read content from laptops while text readers enable access to information.⁴

The cost of accessing digital technologies for PWDs is high and prohibitive and, as such, needs to be supported by budgetary measures that deliberately aim to advance general growth in ICTs and digital accessibility for PWDs. In addition, tax exemptions for PWDs are another measure that can enhance digital accessibility. While governments should take necessary steps towards improving digital accessibility, another equal measure is implementing digital literacy programs for PWDs to ensure a correlation between digital access and the ability to utilise digital technologies for vast benefits, such as access to digital services and information.



Tax exemptions for PWDs are another measure that can enhance digital accessibility.

3. https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36440-treaty-protocol_to_the_achpr_on_the_rights_of_persons_with_disabilities_in_africa_e.pdf

4. <https://dap.berkeley.edu/types-assistive-technology>

01

ANGOLA



OVERVIEW

Angola is a Southern African country with a population of around 36,115,555⁵ and has 656,258 PWDs.⁶ Over 50 per cent live in urban areas, with 56 per cent men and 44 per cent women, according to results from the last census held in 2014.



Angola enacted the Accessibility Act No. 10/16, which establishes general accessibility rules, conditions and criteria for persons with disabilities or reduced mobility and is intended to eliminate architectural, communicational, instrumental and methodological barriers.”⁸

Article 23(2) of the Angolan Constitution states that *‘no-one may be discriminated against, privileged, deprived of any right or exempted from any duty on the basis of ancestry, sex, race, ethnicity, colour, disability, language, place of birth, religion, political, ideological or philosophical beliefs, level of education or economic, social or professional status.’⁷*

Communications are a critical component of accessibility for PWDs, yet the lived exclusion realities in Angola suggest a failure to address this effectively. The National Directorate for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities is responsible for formulating policies for advancing disability rights in Angola. It has a role in developing policies that enhance the social and economic inclusion of PWDs.

5. <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/angola-population/#:~:text=The%20current%20population%20of%20Angola,of%20the%20total%20world%20population.>

6. See Presentation of the Report <https://www.un Geneva.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2023/03/experts-committee-rights-persons-disabilities-command-angola>

7. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Angola_2010.pdf?lang=en

8. https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_isn=109841&p_lang=en

DIGITAL AND INTERNET ACCESS

The depth of digital exclusion has yet to be well researched and articulated in Angola and remains an area of study to appreciate the problem entirely. Such a study will unveil the actual statistics about Internet access and use for PWDs. However, it is commendable that Angola ratified the ADP, showing commitment ahead of most African countries in promoting the rights of PWDs in Africa. Nevertheless, gaps still exist in digital access and digital literacy for PWDs. In a recent 2023 release of concluding observations on Angola by the United Nations Experts of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the Committee) with regards to Angola's obligations under the CRPD, the Committee applauded Angola for some strides in promoting disability rights but raised apparent concern over the fact that there was no support from the State for PWDs and especially those with visual impairment to access information, communication, and new technologies.⁹ The Committee emphasised that the few with computers and smartphones with screen readers had purchased them themselves without government assistance.

The government of Angola responded to the Committee concerning the implementation of the Accessibility Act, highlighting interventions in providing sign language interpreters, braille writing devices and human support teams but did not refer to steps taken to enhance communications through digital technologies for PWDs. While human assistance has been obtained for PWDs, digital technologies improve the quality of life and limit the reliance on human service, which in many instances is flawed and poses a threat to privacy.



RECOMMENDATIONS

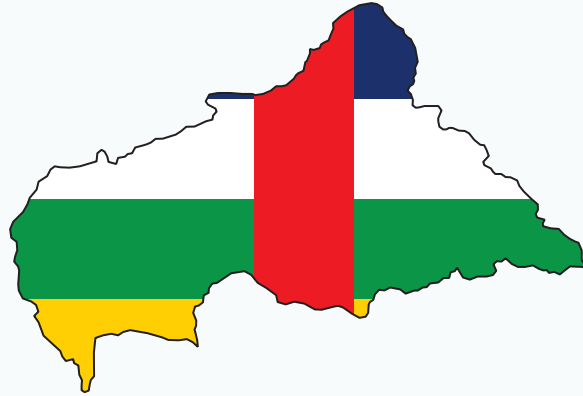
The government of Angola must do the following to guarantee digital inclusion for PWDs.

- Develop a robust digital inclusion strategy (DIS) to ensure PWDs have digital and Internet access after robust consultations with relevant disability groups and digital rights actors.
- Include in the DIS, a roadmap to ensuring digital literacy programs are rolled out nationwide.
- Increase national budget allocation for ICTs, specifically promoting digital access for PWDs.
- Ensure meaningful tax exemptions for PWDs for ease of procurement of digital assistive devices.
- Research to ascertain the extent of digital exclusion for PWDs.

9. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/03/experts-committee-rights-persons-disabilities-commend-angola-moves-develop-disability>

02

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC



OVERVIEW

Central African Republic (CAR) is a country in Central Africa with a population of 5,457,154¹⁰ and has a long history of political instability since its independence in 1958. Conflicts can contribute to the increase in disabilities due to landmines and other war-related accidents.¹¹



Digital infrastructure for learning aids has been a missing link in education for PWDs, and humanitarian action¹⁶ has jumped in to cover for the gaps in the capacitation of PWDs.”

CAR ratified the CRPD¹² on 11 October 2016 and enacted Law 00.007 in December 2000¹³ that promotes labour inclusion, special aid and financial support for PWDs. CAR has an equality clause, and Article 6 of its 2016 constitution states that: *“The State assures the reinforced protection of the rights of the minorities, of the autochthonous peoples, and of handicapped persons.”*¹⁴

While there has been an attempt to protect and promote the rights of PWDs with the provisions mentioned above, the reality on the ground is quite different. No current updated statistics state the number of PWDs in CAR. The latest attempt at a number is from 2003, in which 1.3% of the Central African population was cited as having declared a disability.¹⁵ PWDs face hurdles in accessing education, employment and other socio-economic rights.

10. <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/dataset/world-development-indicators/>

11. https://asksource.info/pdf/0402_CBRnews32_2000.pdf

12. <https://education-profiles.org/sub-saharan-africa/central-african-republic/~inclusion>

13. http://ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=fr&p_isn=88121&p_country=CAF&p_count=89

14. <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/Caf183136.pdf>

15. Ministère de l'Economie, du Plan et de la Coopération Internationale : La RCA en chiffre : Résultats du Recensement Général de la Population et de l'Habitat de décembre 2003 17.

16. <https://www.hi.org/en/country/central-african-republic>

DIGITAL AND INTERNET ACCESS

There is a lack of research and available data articulating the state of digital access for PWDs in CAR, posing a threat to digital inclusion as the State can't make adequate budgeting to ensure digital access for PWDs.

In 2020, CAR received recommendations from the United Nations Human Rights Committee (HRC) in concluding observations during the 127th Session on matters of inclusion and discrimination under disability rights. The HRC commended CAR for adopting the CRPD in 2016. However, they urged CAR to adopt a comprehensive anti-discrimination law that makes provision for effective remedies in case of violation to ensure that its legal framework provides comprehensive and effective protection against discrimination in all areas, including the private sphere, and on any ground of discrimination, including sex, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity, or any other status.¹⁷ Given these observations, digital inclusion of PWDs is a work in progress in CAR.

RECOMMENDATIONS

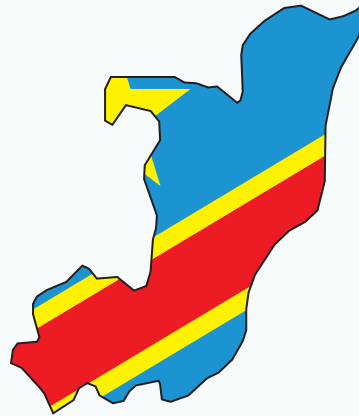
The government of CAR should act on the following to ensure better inclusion of PWDs in ICTs.

- Carry out research and census to provide statistics on the size of the PWD population in CAR.
- Increase the budget allocated to including PWDs in Internet access and access to digital technologies.
- Invest in making digital tools more accessible to PWDs through subsidies.
- Collaborate with academia to conduct comprehensive research on the technological needs of PWDs to enhance development.

17. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/concluding-observations/human-rights-committee-concluding-observations-third-periodic>

03

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO



OVERVIEW

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has a population of 95,894,118¹⁸ with an estimated 10.5 million people living with disability, which accounts for 15% of the population.



**PWDs face
numerous barriers
in the areas of education
and employment, with**

90%

of them being illiterate,

93%

unemployed, and

96%

living in poverty.¹⁹

In 2010, the DRC ratified the CRPD. DRC also established a rehabilitation plan named the Programme National de l'integration et de Rehabilitation des Personnes Handicapées (PNIR/PH), aiming to ensure free access to healthcare, education and discounted taxes to PWDs. Moreover, Article 49 of the Constitution provides that *"persons with disabilities are entitled to specific measures of protection commensurate with their physical, intellectual and moral needs."* However, despite this effort towards ensuring the rights of PWDs, they face challenges such as the stigma that leads to violence and neglect in their communities. Furthermore, PWDs face numerous barriers in the areas of education and employment, with 90% of them being illiterate, 93% unemployed, and 96% living in poverty. With such economic and educational challenges, access to ICT tools and the use of the Internet is hindered and requires proper policy implementation to ensure the digital rights of PWDs.

18. <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/dataset/world-development-indicators/>

19. <https://www.paddc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/DRC-Country-Primer-on-Disabilities.pdf>

DIGITAL AND INTERNET ACCESS

In DRC, there are some laws to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. In the current Congolese Digital Code, Article 366 instructs the Ministry in charge of electronic communications to take appropriate measures to guarantee disabled users and users with specific social needs equivalent access to electronic communications services open to the public, including emergency services and directories, at an affordable cost.²⁰

Digital and Internet access are generally low in DRC, even for the citizens. According to the Regulatory Authority of the Post and Telecommunications of Congo (ARPTC), the mobile penetration rate was at 23.77% in the second quarter of 2022.²¹



The GSMA Mobile Connectivity Index indicated that mobile connectivity and network coverage remain fundamental challenges in the DRC as only 75% of the country is covered by 2G, and only 54% by 3G.



RECOMMENDATIONS

DRC's government must take the following steps to ensure digital inclusion for persons with disabilities:

- Enact a law on ICT accessibility that encourages digital entrepreneurship and promotes the inclusion of people with disabilities.
- Establish a digital inclusion strategy with accessibility tools in educational and professional sectors.
- Encourage discourse and conversations around the inclusion of PWDs.
- Include PWDs in the national digital plan Horizon 2025.

20. <https://numerique.gouv.cd/actualites/assemblee-nationale-juge-recevable-le-projet-de-loi-portant-code-du-numerique-1svfuk>

21. <https://arptc.gouv.cd/>



CONCLUSION

With the adoption of the CRPD by Angola, CAR and DRC, all three countries should ensure that PWDs are included in the digital age. Access to digital technologies through enabling policies, laws and appropriate budgetary allocations is pertinent. There is an urgent need for

enumerations that capture the number of PWDs accordingly and in-depth research to ascertain the extent of digital exclusion. Without a proper understanding of the extent of the problem, States can not take adequate measures to provide digital tools to PWDs.



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