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Digital Policy Digest

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This publication is not for sale. It is provided as a part of Paradigm Initiatives mission to “Connect African youth with digital opportunities and ensuring digital rights for all”.

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This Digital Policy Digest (DPD) documents digital rights policies and laws and presents guidance on areas needing reform. This edition assesses Sierra Leone’s National Innovation & Digital Strategy (2019 - 2029) and features the recently adopted Resolution 580 by the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights on Internet Shutdowns and Elections in Africa.

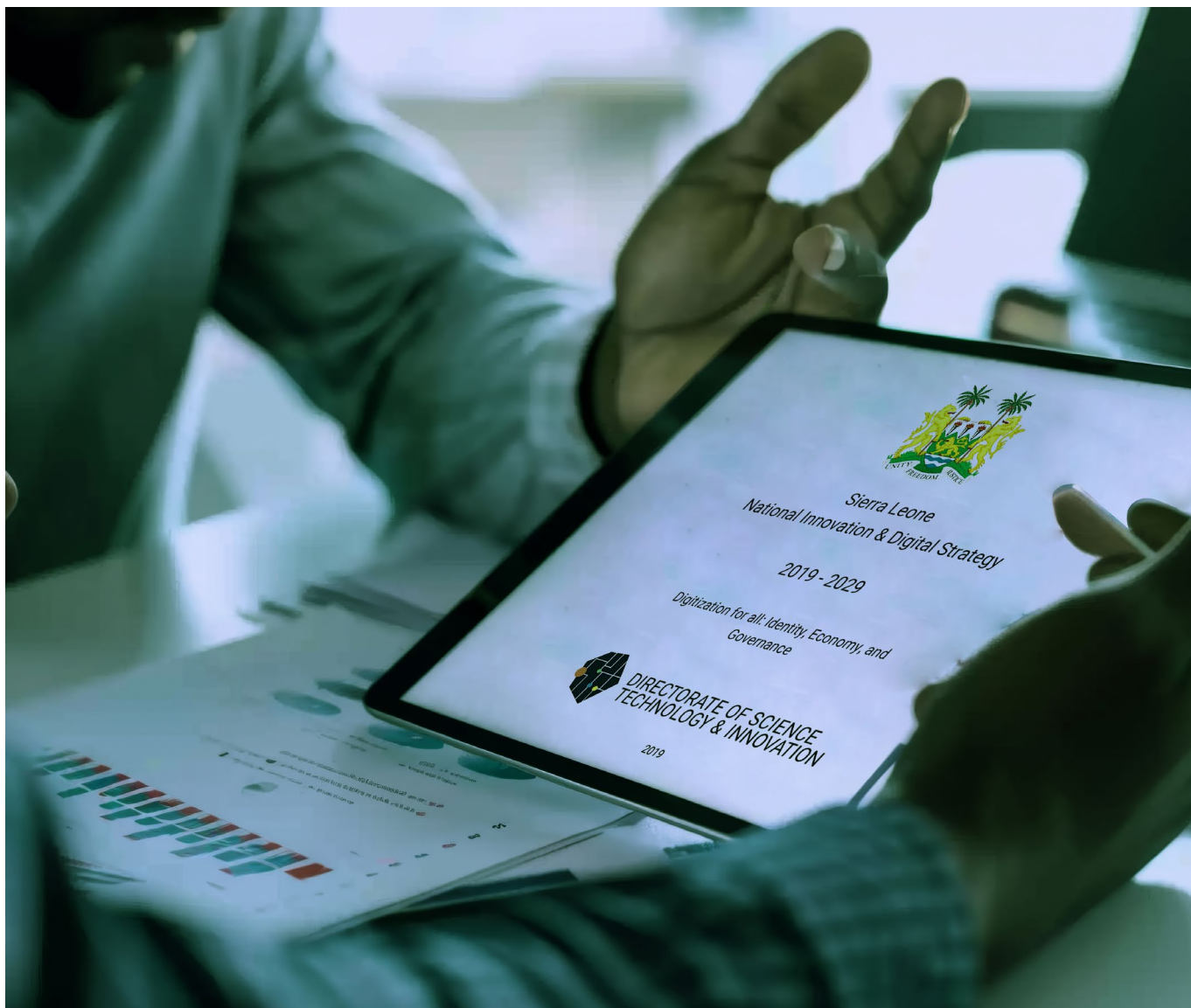
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An Analysis of Sierra Leone National Innovation & Digital Strategy (2019 - 2029)

By Khadijah El-Usman

Background

Sierra Leone's recent history has been marred by a devastating civil war that ended in 2002. Despite significant economic growth in the years following, the country still grapples with the lingering impacts of the war, recurrent pandemics, and polarising politics that hinder its progress. The majority of the population in Sierra Leone engages in subsistence agriculture and the nation boasts abundant natural resources, including iron ore, diamonds, gold, bauxite, and rutile. Post-war governments have faced the formidable challenge of reconstructing the nation's physical and social infrastructure and promoting reconciliation¹. A new administration was sworn in April of 2018² where the President, Julius Maada Wonie Bio was quoted to have made big promises that include digital innovation. By 2019, the new government published its National Innovation and Digital Strategy (the Strategy Document).

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1. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/sierraleone/overview>
 2. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/04/12/sierra-leones-new-president-has-made-big-promises>

Overview

The 20-page long strategy document is divided into three parts. It highlights its philosophies and principles, short term activities and medium and long term activities. The philosophy is one that centres on the inclusion “Digitization for All: digital identity; digital economy; and digital governance.”³ Acknowledging that it is a good communications slogan the document insists that without inclusive and available digitisation all technology and science advancements will fail.

The strategy document is very specific on the core focus it will undertake for 10 years as follows: Digitising identity (individuals, assets, institutions, entities, etc.), the economy (financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, process optimization for government, businesses and industries, etc.), and Governance (service delivery between government and citizens).

Without inclusive and available digitisation
all technology and science advancements
will fail.

3. <https://www.dsti.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Sierra-Leone-National-Innovation-and-Digital-Strategy.pdf>

Strategy Outline

1. Philosophy and Principles

The strategy starts with outlining the foundation for the entire document and using this as the value proposition for everything digital in the country.

The overarching philosophy in this document is digitisation for all, centering inclusion. The main features to highlight are as follows:

- Under this philosophy **Digital Identity** is highlighted as Essential for socio-economic participation because identity is a right to every citizen. The strategy aims to create a unified digital identity for all citizens, inspired by models like Estonia's digital ID and India's AADHAR system.
- The **Digital Economy** philosophy emphasises the strategy's plan to shift from physical cash to digital transactions, leveraging mobile money and fintech innovations. The Bank of Sierra Leone's regulatory sandbox for fintech is a key initiative here.
- **Digital Governance** was also highlighted as a means to make government services accessible and efficient through digital platforms, enhancing transparency and citizens' engagement. Examples include Mexico City's crowdsourced constitution and Estonia's e-services

2. Principles

The principles in the strategy were made as a means to inform how the government and its partners work; guide resource mobilisation and investments into policy implementation, and drive support for research and development priorities across Government, academia and the private sector some of which are:

- A. Mobile-First: Given the high mobile penetration in Sierra Leone, the strategy prioritises mobile technologies for delivering services. This includes the use of USSD, SMS, and Interactive Voice Response to ensure inclusivity.
- B. Country-as-AI-Lab: Sierra Leone aims to serve as a laboratory for AI and data science research, focusing on applied solutions for governance. This includes:
- C. Applied Data Science for Governance: Leveraging AI for informed decision-making.
- D. Evidence-based Policy Framework: Using data to inform policies.
- E. Citizen-Centred Design: Ensuring solutions are designed with user needs in mind.

The strategy aims to create a unified digital identity for all citizens, inspired by models like Estonia's digital ID and India's AADHAR system.

Strategic Activities

The activities listed under the strategy are deliberately divided into short and long term activities that are projected to improve upon implementation.

1. Short Term Activities

It was forward thinking for the strategy to indicate a timeline of 2-3 years for the implementation of the strategy. The short term activities are broadly divided into 6 parts with subdivisions.

- **National Digital Identities:** Implementation of a national registry for digital IDs, acknowledging that they collect biometric information from citizens and proposing a consortium of national institutions will set the standards for digital identities including data formats, data access and exchange working closely with existing government instruments. It lists many relevant institutions.
- **Applied AI for Governance:** Integrating AI in sectors like education, healthcare, banking, agriculture and justice.
- **Infrastructure Development:** Ensuring connectivity and legal frameworks for innovation. This section focuses on internet penetration and access to connectivity, referencing the roles of institutions National Telecommunications Commission, the Universal Access Development Fund.
- **Cyber Security:** Developing standards for IT and exploring quantum computing.
- **Entrepreneurship and Society:** Establishing incubators and accelerators to foster innovation.
- **Organisational Architecture:** Strengthening institutions responsible for data protection and IT governance.

2. Medium and Long Term

These activities will evolve based on technological advancements and achievements over the initial years of the strategy, with periodic updates every 3-5 years.

The first activity outlined is Ecosystem Mapping, highlighting stakeholder Engagement and the ways to align government and private sector stakeholders to enhance national capacity for innovation. It further spoke to policy Development and its bid to create supportive policies and legislation by 2022. The next activity was Data Systems and the need to Establish standards for data handling and metrics for innovation progress by 2023 as well as digital tools and infrastructure for secure citizen data management by 2025. Finally, the strategy outlines service Delivery and Digital Solutions with a focus on increasing mobile penetration and lowering access costs by 2025.

Gaps	Recommendations
The strategy acknowledged significant challenges to implementation such as high mortality rates, illiteracy, and unemployment. it failed to outline mitigating measures.	The strategy would have benefited from a risk analysis, prioritising them according to severity and urgency and the mitigating measures to reduce the possible impact.
The strategy did not outline its awareness strategy to the public alongside how it will get buy-in from other government organisations.	Wide communication and outreach on the strategy are recommended to secure necessary political buy-in at government level, raise wider public awareness at grassroots level, and garner support from all key stakeholder groups.

The document does not outline an implementation strategy beyond noting a yearly timeline for the delivery of various aspects of the strategy.

The strategy needed an implementation plan.

A bulk of the strategy document is within the short term category of activities and that might not be achievable within the timeline noting the pattern of government bureaucracy.

Some of the short term strategy should be moved to the long term depending on how realistic it is to implement

The strategy does not outline what specific roles and responsibilities these institutions will have. And while some level of indebtedness can be found here, the rest of the strategy does not list its own implementing organisations.

The success of the implementation of this strategy will also depend on the implementing institutions. The strategy outlines that a consortium of national institutions will set the standards for digital identities including data formats, data access and exchange working closely with existing government instruments. However, many other roles are yet to be defined.

The Strategy document is quoted to say “This is a National Innovation and Digital Strategy of the citizens, by the citizens and for the citizens of Sierra Leone.” However, it is unclear the stakeholders that were involved and consulted in the development of the strategy document.

Where the strategy is clear on the stakeholders consulted then it will assist in further stakeholder buy-in.

The absence of a monitoring, evaluation and accountability model from the inception of the strategy can cause it to be difficult to measure success of the strategy at the end of 2029.

The strategy should be clear on a monitoring, evaluation and accountability model.

The strategy missed out a key factor to allow its implementation and success which is funding mechanisms. The questions as to what domestic resources should be mobilised? How can this be kept functional, sufficient and independent? There was a sparse mention to the universal access fund without mention of how much of this will be directed to the implementation of the strategy.

The strategy should be clear on its funding mechanisms

The strategy notes that it will have periodic updates every 3-5 years. It has now been 5 years and the strategy is yet to be updated.

The strategy should be updated with all the recommendations highlighted.

Strides since the development of the Strategy

1. The Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) Projects

The DSTI have undertaken different projects that have worked toward digital innovation. However the reports do not make it clear which is directly connected to the strategy, which then means strides might be made but not toward the plan.

Some of which are:

- Project Giga which is an initiative to connect every school to the internet and every child to information and opportunity.⁴
- Digital Learning Hubs: The GoSL has established four Digital Learning Hubs (DLHs) across the country. A project connected to the Medium Term National Development Plan.⁵

2. Passing Digital Development Policy Towards a Digital Economy 2021⁶

The GoSL launch what it called a high-level vision for the digital economy is articulated in the new National Digital Development Policy (NDDP),

4. <https://www.dsti.gov.sl/giga/>

5. <https://www.dsti.gov.sl/project/digital-learning-hubs/>

6. <https://moic.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/National-Digital-Development-Policy-2022-06-02.pdf>

which was approved by the Cabinet in December 2021 setting the GoSL's vision to transform Sierra Leone into an inclusive digital economy and society and to leverage digital technology. This document notably references and seeks to be in alignment with the National Innovation & Digital Strategy.

3. The establishment of the Ministry of Communication, Technology, and Innovation in July 2023⁷

The Ministry was established with the mission to develop and promote ICT growth and render effective information services to the Sierra Leone society. A vision to live in a digitally inclusive society with synergy between the people and the State. And a mandate to formulate policies and laws that regulate standards and services in the Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) sector, Telecommunications and the Media industry.

7. <https://www.rsvpweekly.com/blog-posts/sierra-leones-tech-ambition-pioneering-africas-digital-transformation>

Conclusion

Sierra Leone National Innovation & Digital Strategy document was developed as an ambitious first step toward the country's digital future. To this end DSTI's Director, Abdul Malik Tejan-Sie was quoted to famously say "Sierra Leone is on its pathway to the fourth industrial revolution: leaving no one behind"⁸. Although the document lacked a few details to the proper implementation of the plan and have not made it clear through transparency reports how much has been achieved 6 years into the strategy. The government of Sierra Leone has demonstrated a commitment to improving the country's digital economy through the strides it has made.

8. <https://www.dsti.gov.sl/>



ACHPR Says Keep it On During Elections!

By Thobekile Matimbe

Background

A notable win for digital rights in March 2024 was recorded when the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) passed **Resolution 580 on Internet Shutdowns and Elections in Africa** at the 78th Private Ordinary Session, held virtually from 23 February to 08 March 2024⁹. The Resolution was passed at a timely moment in a year that commenced with at least 21 African countries set to hold elections¹⁰. In the past, Internet shutdowns have presented opportunities for some African countries to shut down the Internet, with countries like Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, Togo and Zambia with a history of exhibiting this undemocratic conduct. Resolution 580 serves as a reminder to African governments of their commitments under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Covenant on Human and Peoples' Rights to respect and promote freedom of expression and access to information as stipulated in Articles 9 and 19 respectively. Resolution 580 was passed after the ACHPR made another call in Resolution 573 Resolution on the deployment of mass and unlawful targeted communication surveillance and its impact on human rights in Africa at the 77th Ordinary Session held from 20 October to 09 November 2023. The ACHPR continues to make strides towards promotion of digital rights ensuring that States have an appreciation of what is at stake through actions that violate online rights.

9. <https://achpr.au.int/index.php/en/adopted-resolutions/580-internet-shutdowns-elections-africa-achpres580-lxxvii>

10. <https://www.eisa.org/election-calendar/>

Echoing Guiding Standards

The ACHPR expressed its recognition of the right to regular, free, fair and credible election as critical to a democracy and the provision for this right in Article 20 of the African Charter and the right of individuals to participation in public affairs under Article 13 of the African Charter as key. For an election to be regarded as credible, there should be an enabling environment for fundamental rights to thrive and co-exist with the election environment. This is aptly captured in Article 4(1) of the **African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Good Governance**¹¹, that urges State Parties to make a commitment to promote democracy, the principle of the rule of law and human rights.

For an election to be regarded as credible, there should be an enabling environment for fundamental rights to thrive and co-exist with the election environment.

Principle 37(2) of the **ACHPR Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa (the Declaration)**¹²

11. <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-democracy-elections-and-governance>

12. <https://achpr.au.int/en/node/902>

articulates the role of the Internet, making a call for States to recognize that universal, equitable, affordable and meaningful access to the internet is necessary for the realisation of freedom of expression, access to information and the exercise of other human rights. Resolution 580 was adopted following an reflection on Article 26 of the **Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa**, which demonstrates that while regulatory bodies of broadcasting media, national security or other entities may have the urge to stifle the internet, they must refrain from actions such as blocking access to the Internet or any other media during the elections.



A Crystal Clear Call

The ACHPR in Resolution 580 emphasises the importance of the internet and social media as they are critical platforms used by the media to disseminate information to the electorate, election observers and stakeholders who manage the electoral process. When the Internet is shut down, this interferes with the free flow of information and ultimately affects the integrity of the election process, freedom of expression and access to information.

Resolution 580 makes clear recommendations to State parties to do the following¹³:

- Ensure compliance with the African Charter, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Good Governance and relevant regional and international human rights instruments during the electoral process;
- Take the necessary legislative and other measures to ensure open and secure internet access before, during and after elections, including ensuring that telecommunications and internet service providers take adequate steps to provide unrestricted and uninterrupted access;
- Refrain from ordering the interruption of telecommunications services, shutting down the internet, and/or disrupting access to any other digital communication platforms before, during or after the elections;
- Require telecommunications and internet service providers to inform users of potential disruptions and exercise due diligence to resolve any disruptions expeditiously.

13. <https://achpr.au.int/index.php/en/adopted-resolutions/580-internet-shut-downs-elections-africa-achpres580-lxxvii>

More About PIN

Paradigm Initiative has worked in communities across Nigeria since 2007 and across Africa since 2017, building experience, community trust, and an organisational culture that positions us as a leading non-governmental organisation in ICT for Development and Digital Rights on the continent. Across our regional offices in Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and beyond, we have impacted youth with improved livelihoods through our digital inclusion and digital rights programs. The organisation's programs include Life Skills, ICTs, Financial Readiness, Entrepreneurship (LIFE) Training Program, a digital readiness workshop for girls, and Life@School Club Program. PIN has also built online platforms that educate and serve as safe spaces for reporting digital rights violations. These mediums, in the form of reports, short films, and educational online platforms, include Ayeta, Londa, and Ripoti. The organisation is also the convener of the annual Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum (DRIF), a pan-African platform where conversations on digital policy in Africa are shaped, policy directions debated, and partnerships forged for action. The forum has been held since 2013.

LIFE

**DRIF
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AYETA!

Ripoti

LONDA

