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## G20 and Digital Governance in Africa: Perspectives from Connectivity Challenges, and Regulatory Fragmentation

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### Abstract

The G20 and its Think Tank Engagement Group (T20) play a pivotal yet conflicting role in shaping digital governance in Africa, especially in addressing connectivity challenges and regulatory fragmentation. While the G20 Digital Economy Task Force (DETF) promotes inclusive connectivity, cybersecurity, and data governance, its influence often aligns with the priorities of dominant global economies, creating policy misalignments and dependencies that do not always meet Africa's specific needs. Despite efforts to expand broadband access, over 50% of Africa's population remains offline, particularly in rural areas, exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. This policy brief compares G20-backed digital impacts in South Africa and Nigeria. South Africa advances via strong regulations and broadband growth, while Nigeria struggles with poor connectivity and inconsistent policies. The brief supports an Africa-led, context-aware digital governance model supported by G20 and T20 frameworks. Using a qualitative research design, it proposes a three-pronged strategy: (1) enhancing inclusive connectivity through public-private partnerships and innovative financing; (2) developing a harmonized digital public infrastructure that prioritizes security, interoperability, and citizen-centric services; and (3) establishing adaptive regulatory policies that protect digital freedoms, mitigate cybersecurity risks, and ensure equitable access.



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## Introduction and Background

The G20 Digital Economy Task Force (DETF) has consistently committed to inclusive connectivity, secure digital infrastructure, and human-centric data governance, particularly under presidencies like Japan (2019), Saudi Arabia (2020), and Germany (2017), which launched initiatives such as the #eSkills4Girls and the G20 Principles on Data Free Flow with Trust. With South Africa now holding the G20 presidency in 2024–2025, this policy brief interrogates how African realities align or conflict with these commitments. Specifically, it highlights two urgent priorities: the disparity in digital governance and internet freedom across African countries, and the need for Africa to strengthen domestic regulatory coherence to effectively contribute to global digital frameworks. While the brief supports the G20’s inclusive digital agenda, it argues that these goals will remain unachievable unless G20 frameworks are implemented with greater contextual sensitivity and reinforced by stronger African agency.

This brief makes two central arguments: first, that the fragmented and often restrictive digital governance environment in Africa threatens the implementation of G20 principles on inclusion and rights; and second, that African countries must invest in building cohesive, rights-based digital policies at home to meaningfully shape and benefit from global digital governance.

Between 2019 and 2021, internet use in Africa grew by 23 per cent, signalling strong digital uptake. However, this progress masks deep inequalities: while about half of urban residents are online, only 15 per cent of rural populations have internet access. The divide is even greater in Least Developed Countries, where urban access (47 per cent) far outpaces rural access (13 per cent). Despite 95 per cent of the global population being covered by mobile broadband, 18 per cent of Africans, mostly in rural areas, remain completely offline, and another 11 per cent only have access to 2G networks (International Telecommunication Union, 2021).

These connectivity challenges are compounded by a fragmented regulatory landscape across the continent. Inconsistent national policies, weak institutions, and externally driven governance models have created barriers to cross-border data flows and digital market integration. Governments have increasingly imposed internet shutdowns and restrictive content policies in response to political crises, contributing to rising internet fragmentation (Nwobilor, 2024). Africa accounted for more than one-third of global internet shutdowns in 2021 alone. According to Freedom on the Net 2024 (Funk, Vesteinsson & Baker, 2024), many African countries face persistent access barriers, censorship, and violations of user rights. These practices erode public trust and threaten the foundation of democratic digital participation. Without strong safeguards for digital rights, inclusive and secure digital ecosystems will remain out of reach.

Table 1 shows that out of the 17 African countries assessed, only South Africa achieved a “Free” rating with a score of 74 out of 100, while the rest were classified as either “Partly Free” or “Not Free,” highlighting the broad digital governance challenges facing the continent. The rankings are based on three dimensions: obstacles to access, limits on content, and violations of user rights. The strong performance of South Africa in all three areas sets it apart as a regional outlier in upholding internet freedom.

**Table 1: Africa’s Ranking of Internet Freedom in 2024**

Country	Internet Freedom Score (2024)	Status
South Africa	74	Free
Ghana	65	Partly Free
Kenya	64	Partly Free
Zambia	62	Partly Free
Tunisia	60	Partly Free
Angola	59	Partly Free
Malawi	59	Partly Free
Nigeria	59	Partly Free
The Gambia	56	Partly Free
Morocco	54	Partly Free
Uganda	53	Partly Free
Zimbabwe	48	Partly Free
Libya	43	Not Free
Rwanda	36	Not Free
Egypt	28	Not Free
Sudan	28	Not Free
Ethiopia	27	Not Free

Source: Funk, Vesteinsson & Baker (2024), p. 27.

Against this backdrop, this brief critically examines the G20's influence on digital transformation in Africa through a qualitative research design that adopts case studies of Nigeria and South Africa, which illustrate differing pathways and outcomes in connectivity and regulation.

## Comparative Case Studies of South Africa and Nigeria

### South Africa

South Africa exemplifies a balanced approach to digital governance, aligning strategically with global initiatives while cultivating a strong domestic regulatory framework. It actively engages in multilateral platforms such as the AU-EU Digital Economy Task Force and has benefited from European-funded programs like the Global Gateway strategy, which support infrastructure development and digital inclusion. These international engagements are matched by progress in domestic policy and service delivery. As noted by Alcaide et al. (2023), South Africa has significantly advanced the use of digital tools across various sectors. In e-government procurement (e-GP), the introduction of the e-Tender Publication Portal and the Central Supplier Database in 2015 reduced inefficiencies and improved transparency in public procurement. In the tax sector, digital systems for e-filing and e-payment have streamlined procedures and enhanced revenue collection. The judiciary has also modernized, with electronic systems for court case management improving access and reducing corruption risks. Collectively, these efforts reflect South Africa’s dual-track strategy of leveraging global collaboration while advancing practical, citizen-focused digital solutions.

## Nigeria

Nigeria, Africa’s most populous country, faces distinct challenges in its digital landscape. While mobile phone penetration is high, internet access remains uneven, particularly in rural areas. Regulatory efforts have been inconsistent and, at times, contentious. Multiple government bodies, including the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), have introduced overlapping frameworks aimed at regulating social media and digital content. Notably, the NCC’s Technical Framework for Social Media Use (2019) emphasised cybersecurity principles such as confidentiality, integrity, and availability, encouraging institutions and individuals to adopt transparent and protective policies against cyberbullying, misinformation, and data breaches. However, more controversial efforts like the Protection from Internet Falsehoods and Manipulations Bill (2019) drew strong criticism for proposing criminal penalties for online falsehoods, raising fears of censorship and drawing comparisons to restrictive legislation in Singapore. Similarly, NITDA’s Code of Practice for Interactive Computer Service Platforms (2022), while aiming to enhance online safety and tackle disinformation, sparked debate due to its co-regulatory model, which critics argue may undermine digital freedoms.

Similarities in regulatory fragmentations between South Africa and Nigeria in Table 2 highlights their regulatory differences in areas such as data flows, digital taxation, cryptocurrency, and central bank digital currencies.

**Table 2: Fragmentation in Digital Regulation between South Africa and Nigeria**

	South Africa	Nigeria
<b>Data Flows</b>	The Protection of Personal Information Act regulates personal data transfer to foreign countries under strict conditions. The draft National Policy on Data and Cloud (2021) seeks data localization for economic development, with job creation as a key justification.	The National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) mandates local hosting of sovereign data, unless approval is granted. NITDA’s guidelines require telecommunication and networking companies to host subscriber data locally.
<b>Taxing Digital Services</b>	Non-resident digital service providers are subject to VAT on income earned in South Africa.	Companies providing digital services in Nigeria must pay a 6% tax on their annual turnover.
<b>Cryptocurrencies</b>	The Crypto Assets Regulatory Working Group plans a phased approach to regulating crypto assets, focusing on anti-money laundering, cross-border financial flows, and financial sector laws. The South African Reserve Bank and Financial Sector Conduct Authority are developing a regulatory framework for cryptocurrencies.	The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) banned cryptocurrencies in 2021, but the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) introduced regulations for digital assets in 2022. 33% of Nigerians use or own cryptocurrencies.
<b>Central Bank Digital Currencies</b>	South Africa’s Reserve Bank is experimenting with a wholesale CBDC (wCBDC), but further analysis is needed on its legal status and implications.	Nigeria became the first African country to launch a CBDC pilot in 2021, called eNaira, aimed at financial inclusion, remittances, and reducing cross-border payment costs. The eNaira is the digital equivalent of the Naira, supporting payment system resilience and reducing transaction costs.

Source: Teleanu & Kurbalija (2022)

# The G20 and Africa's Digital Governance: Challenges and Opportunities

The G20 cannot fulfill its digital commitments without meaningful progress in Africa. Despite G20 backing for global digital inclusion, African states remain under-connected and digitally fragmented, undermining both local development and the global digital commons. If the G20's vision of a secure and inclusive digital economy is to be realized, it must address persistent gaps in infrastructure, regulation, and digital rights across the continent. These deficiencies not only hinder Africa's transformation but also pose risks to the coherence of global digital systems.

African agency in the G20 reflects a broader struggle to overcome structural constraints and influence global digital governance. This tension is shaped by historical dynamics and the strategic use of "Africa" in global negotiations (Mabera, 2019). G20 initiatives on digital standards and infrastructure often fall short in Africa due to capacity gaps, policy fragmentation, and external agendas. The AU's Digital Transformation Strategy (2020–2030) promotes harmonized regulation and local innovation (World Economic Forum, 2023), but global powers like China, the US, and the EU continue to dominate investment models. While G20 efforts like #eSkills4Girls offer support (Mabera, 2019), poor infrastructure especially in rural areas, limits their reach.

## Policy Recommendations

To align global digital governance with Africa's development agenda, this brief proposes a three-pronged approach:

### 1. Enhance Inclusive Connectivity

Governments should partner with the private sector to expand affordable broadband, especially in rural areas. Supporting local content creation and digital literacy will boost meaningful engagement. To scale efforts sustainably, innovative financing tools, such as digital levies, blended finance, and regional development funds, can help mobilize resources and ensure broader access.

### 2. Build Harmonized Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)

Investing in secure, interoperable systems like digital IDs, e-payments, and e-government portals, can boost inclusion and state capacity. Strengthening regional trade frameworks and aligning cybersecurity and data protection standards across Africa will reduce fragmentation, foster trust, and enable smoother cross-border collaboration.

### 3. Develop Adaptive and Rights-Respecting Regulation

Legal frameworks must protect freedom of expression and digital rights while addressing challenges like cybercrime and misinformation. Regional regulatory bodies can promote coherence, accountability, and cross-border learning. Also, capacity-building initiatives are essential to equip policymakers and institutions with the skills and tools needed to navigate the complexities of digital governance.

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