

# BUILDING CAPACITY FOR INTERNET SHUTDOWN ADVOCACY



A COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

Internet shutdowns are among the most extreme and draconian censorship tactics that governments use to control speech and stifle civic participation; disrupted access to the internet not only deprives citizens their rights to expression and information, but also threatens health, safety, and economic security. Despite the impact that shutdowns have on a country's human and economic vitality, internet shutdowns continue to occur with alarming frequency—even amidst the current global pandemic.

There is a diverse international community of dedicated individuals and organizations monitoring, documenting, and advocating against internet shutdowns around the world. However, as internet shutdowns often occur with little notice, activists are forced to mobilize when capacity for communication and organization is most curtailed. Funding for internet shutdowns advocacy largely focuses on rapid-response efforts to end a shutdown, with few resources developed for local civil society to better prepare for a shutdown and build longer term advocacy strategies to prevent and protect against future shutdowns. Internews' OPTIMA program is designed to build resources and advocacy capacity such that civil society organizations (CSOs) in high-risk countries can better and more proactively predict, prevent, and be prepared to respond to internet shutdowns.

As part of this program, we designed a needs assessment to survey 142 civil society organizations working in 87 countries in order to more clearly identify challenges these organizations face when advocating against shutdowns, the resource and skill gaps they feel they need to fill to be more effective in this advocacy and the opportunities for better support from funders and global advocacy groups. The purpose of this assessment is to inform future strategic planning and funding agendas as well as to ensure resources are collaboratively developed to meet community needs.

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## INTRODUCTION

Internet shutdowns are one of the most extreme and draconian censorship tactics that a government can use to control civil discourse. Shutdowns take a variety of forms and can include full network blackouts (sometimes referred to as the “internet kill switch”), blocking popular social media platforms and messaging apps, and throttling internet speeds such that internet users cannot effectively access or circulate information. Disruptions can target mobile networks or broadband or both. Internet shutdowns are costly for governments—not only in financial terms due to lost revenues from interrupted business activities and decreased productivity— but also politically, as they are highly visible and incur greater levels of international and national scrutiny. For these reasons, shutdowns are often a “last resort” tactic used by governments when other, more quotidian censorship tactics have failed or are perceived as inadequate, especially around politically sensitive situations (such as during mass protests or before or after elections).

Despite the drawbacks and reputational risks associated with shutting down the internet, shutdowns are on the rise.<sup>1</sup> Access Now has documented a 32% increase in the number of countries using shutdowns as a tactic from 2018 to 2019 alone.<sup>2</sup> These shutdowns are not only occurring in authoritarian contexts but also happening in both transitioning and stable democracies. They take place in countries with diverse levels of existing internet access but largely occur in locations with existing connectivity challenges and digital inequities—where shutdowns further exacerbate existing divides and disproportionately impact marginalized populations. Major network disruptions massively unravel the socio-political fabric of a

country and not only violate citizens’ rights to freedom of expression but also threaten health, safety, and economic security.

Shutdown orders can come from national, state, or regional governments, and they can be legal or illegal actions. To justify shutdowns, those governments frame them as necessary to promote public safety, to prevent the circulation of hate speech or fake news, to defend national security, or even to prevent cheating on school exams. Despite the official rationale provided (if one is even given), these tactics are often actually used to quell planned or ongoing protests, to prepare for a potentially contested election, or to control coordination around controversial historical or religious events. In addition, without clear documentation of when and how these shutdowns occur technically, it is often quite easy for officials to claim that a shutdown is caused by a technical problem or even an outside state actor.

### DEFINING INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

*For the purpose of this needs assessment, an “internet shutdown” is defined broadly to include not only internet blackouts (when the government completely cuts off access to the internet) but also internet throttling (when the network is deliberately slowed) and major instances of blocking (when major social media platforms and messaging applications are blocked).*

<sup>1</sup> The number of shutdown incidents and countries implementing shutdowns has increased steadily over the past few years. However, experts predict that there will be a decline in the number of shutdowns occurring in 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, there is also proof that governments in several countries will continue to use this “last resort” tactic even in the middle of a major public health crisis.

<sup>2</sup> This increase is in large part based on new countries in sub-Saharan Africa using shutdowns for the first time in 2019. <https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/02/KeepItOn-2019-report-1.pdf>

Civil society plays a key role in pushing back against shutdowns through advocacy efforts, awareness raising, and strategic litigation. Considering the many ways that shutdowns can occur in countries with different legal, political, and technical contexts, it is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to advocacy. While there are certain patterns and trends around shutdown occurrences, accurately predicting if or when or in what form a shutdown will occur can be extremely difficult. This makes it hard for local civil society to try to prevent or even prepare for a shutdown. Instead, civil society and international organizations are often forced to respond either *during* a shutdown, when their abilities to coordinate and share information are severely hampered, or *after* a shutdown to try to raise awareness or prevent future shutdowns.

***It is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to internet shutdown advocacy***

As part of Internews' work supporting advocates to better respond to internet shutdowns, we determined there was a need to strategically examine how organizations are currently fighting shutdowns in their countries and regions to develop more responsive frameworks and guidelines for support. Toward these goals, we designed a needs assessment to understand the most pressing challenges civil society organizations face in fighting to prevent and curtail internet shutdowns, the resource and skill gaps they feel they need to fill to be more effective in this advocacy, and the opportunities for support from funders and global advocacy groups. The purpose of this assessment is to inform future strategic planning and funding agendas as well as to ensure resources are collaboratively developed to meet community needs. This report outlines the main findings on the current challenges and resource needs and then offers several recommendations on how best to support the advocacy communities facing these threats.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **The threat of shutdowns is high:** 58% of regional / national - level organizations surveyed said there has been an internet shutdown in their country in the past year; 61% said another one is either "likely" or "very likely" in the next year.
- **Advocates do not feel prepared for future shutdowns:** Almost half (49%) of the respondents assessed the advocacy capacity in their country as either weak or nonexistent, noting that only a few organizations are working on these issues, with varying levels of engagement. Of the respondents who indicated that they have never worked on internet shutdown research or advocacy, 84% reported that they do not have any preparatory measures in place in case of an internet shutdown.
- **Many respondents reported that resource constraints and the reactive and rapid-response nature of advocacy around shutdowns leads to short-term campaigns focused on ending a shutdown rather than longer-term advocacy:** International organizations and donors also reported that most support provided related to internet shutdowns is focused on reacting to shutdowns during an emergency.
- **Of the groups that did report having success from their advocacy around internet shutdowns, the majority reported that they were able to raise awareness and release public statements as part of national, regional, and international coalitions:** Local organizations reported that their most common response to shutdowns is public awareness building (82%) and advocacy with international stakeholders (59%), national stakeholders (55%), and regional bodies (52%).

- **Network measurement tools and datasets are not widely used by local advocates working on shutdowns**, both because many local advocates do not have the staff with expertise to run the required tests or because of funding constraints needed to build “in-house” measurement and data analysis capacity.
- **Advocacy organizations would like to engage more with internet service providers (ISPs) but find that it is difficult to determine the best approaches with companies that are sensitive to government demands, licensing constraints, and ownership structures.**
- **It is unclear what the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will have on shutdowns, but organizations expect it to change approaches to advocacy around shutdowns:** Many indicated that social distancing and quarantine policies make the internet more vital during the pandemic and thus might make it less likely that the government would want to disrupt internet services. Others, however, are more pessimistic, noting that increased disinformation around COVID-19 on social media sites as well as longer-term impacts of emergency response policies might lead to a legal and political environment that is more enabling of shutdowns.

## SURVEY METHODS AND RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Data were collected for this study via a web-based survey distributed to digital rights organizations and human rights groups between April 3 and May 4, 2020. The survey was open to any of these groups, but outreach efforts were specifically focused on organizations based in countries where internet shutdowns have occurred. Responses were solicited both from organizations that have experience working on internet shutdowns (via the KeepitOn listserv and direct outreach) as well as human rights and freedom of expression organizations in high-risk contexts that have not engaged directly in internet shutdown advocacy.

In total, the survey received 142 unique responses. Respondents were segmented based on their responses to questions about their organizations’ geographic scope such that individuals received slightly different question sets based on whether their organization’s advocacy efforts focused on a particular country, group of countries, or region, or if they work on digital rights issues on a global scale. Survey questions focused on organizations’ assessments of risk related to internet shutdowns; on the current advocacy practices organizations engage in before, during, and after an internet shutdown; and on identifying current capacities and needs. All questions were optional, and organizations could choose to answer anonymously.



Respondents were distributed across a range of regions, including sub-Saharan Africa (38%), Latin America (17%), Asia (14%), the Middle East/North Africa (14%), Eastern Europe (4%), and the United States and Canada (2%). An additional 12% of the respondents indicated that they work across more than one region. The respondents represent 87 unique countries, with the most responses reported from organizations based in Sudan, Uganda, South Sudan, Kenya, Zambia, India, Cameroon, Malawi, and Mexico.<sup>3</sup>



### Human Rights and Media Advocacy Organizations

- These are human rights defenders who have not worked specifically on internet shutdown advocacy but know they threaten human rights.
- Only 16% report that they have some preparatory measures in place should a shutdown occur.
- A majority (60%) of these organizations have never used resources or tools that could assist them to prepare for a shutdown and are unaware of other organizations in their country or region who could assist them if an internet shutdown should occur.

## RESPONDENT PROFILES/SNAPSHOTS



### Experienced Digital Rights Organizations

- These are organizations working at the national or regional level with direct experience advocating against shutdowns.
- These groups report that internet shutdown advocacy communities in their countries are nonexistent (11%), weak (38%), or in need of strengthening (35%).
- Only 16% of respondents who had previously experienced a shutdown describe the shutdown advocacy community as strong or very strong.



### International Organizations & Donors

- These are organizations with a global scope focusing on digital rights and media freedom.
- These organizations provide advocacy and legal support, fight against shutdowns in international channels and forums, produce research, and engage with the private sector.
- They are instrumental in collecting and distributing resources and funding for internet shutdown advocacy.
- Much of their work focuses on responding to imminent and ongoing shutdowns.

<sup>3</sup> Some specific methodological limitations should be noted to contextualize and interpret the findings. First, it is important to note that the sampling methods used for this survey did not aim for global geographic representation but instead focused on soliciting responses from organizations based in countries where shutdowns have occurred or are more likely to occur and drawing on outreach methods through existing internet shutdown and digital rights communities. In addition, while comparisons are made in this report across regional and demographic sub-groups of respondents, these sub-groups make up a small percentage of the full sample size. Finally, as most questions in the survey were optional, and respondents could skip questions, the number of respondents for each question is frequently lower than n = 142.

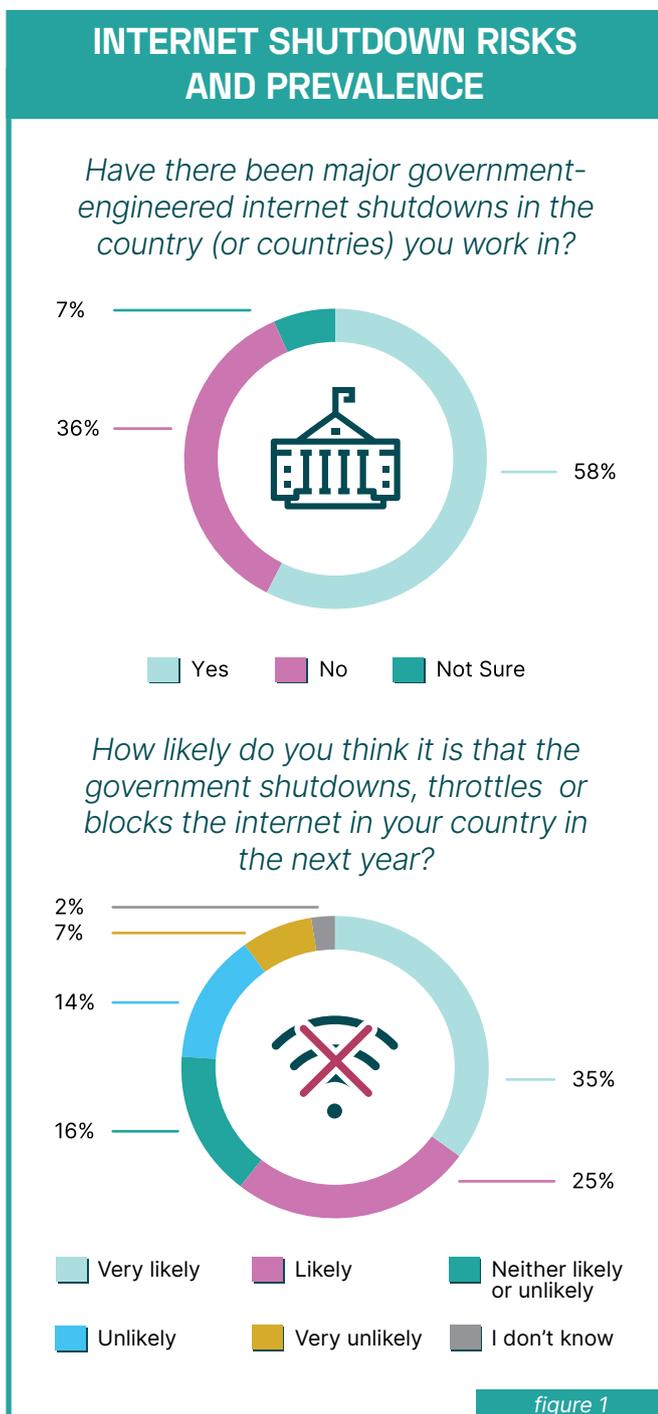
# FINDINGS

## ASSESSING RISK: SHUTDOWNS, BLOCKING, AND THROTTLING

Of the organizations that work at the national or regional level, 58% reported that there has been an internet shutdown in their country in the past year, and 60% indicated that it is likely or very likely that a shutdown

will occur in their country in the next year. Not all internet shutdowns are alike, with governments using different technical means to deprive digital access to citizens. Therefore, in addition to rating the likelihood of an internet shutdown, respondents also assessed threats specifically as they relate to the different technical tactics and mechanisms governments use to disrupt internet access—including full internet blackouts, platform-specific blocking, and bandwidth throttling. Governments deploy these various shutdown tactics with one end goal in mind (to shut down the internet and stifle online communication), but, depending on the internet infrastructure and institutional makeup of a particular country, they can choose one technical approach over another or use different tactics at different times. CSOs face distinct challenges related to documenting, circumventing, and advocating against these different kinds of shutdowns.

**Blanket internet shutdowns**, in which the government cuts off access to the full network, also known as internet “blackouts” or internet “kill switches,” are often the focus of much media attention, but they can be harder to carry out in countries with more diverse and decentralized internet architectures (with more ISPs and internet exchange points). They are a highly visible and relatively easily detectable shutdown method and can thus draw a good deal of attention and international scrutiny. On average, blanket shutdowns were rated by respondents as having the lowest risk out of all shutdown types (with an average risk score of 3.0 on a 5-point scale for shutdowns in specific regions within a country and a 2.8 average risk score for shutdowns that target the entire country’s network). This does not mean, however, that these shutdowns are not likely to occur as 32% of the respondents rated a partial country blackout as the highest level of risk (5), and 20% rated a blackout for the entire country as the highest risk (5). Countries with respondents that rated blanket shutdowns as the highest risk include Sudan, Afghanistan, Gambia, Venezuela, Pakistan, India, Cameroon, and Zambia. Average ratings for both regional and country-wide blackouts



were significantly higher for respondents from the Middle East/North Africa (3.6 for regional blackouts and 3.3 for full-country blackouts) and Africa (3.3 and 3.2, respectively).

**In many cases, governments choose to block specific platforms and popular messaging apps**, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Telegram. As the blocking of specific platforms and apps can be easier to implement and these applications serve as the portals through which many people in these countries access the internet, blocking has become a frequent tactic used by governments to prevent citizens from organizing protests or communicating before and during elections. Indeed, more respondents rated the blocking of major platforms and messaging services as the highest level of threat (39% of respondents) compared to any other type of shutdown, with the average rating across all respondents at 3.6.

Finally, **bandwidth throttling**, when the government deliberately slows internet speeds such that they are unusable, is also increasingly used by governments. Respondents rated bandwidth throttling as the most likely type of shutdown (receiving the highest average threat rating of 3.7). This tactic is particularly effective within the context of protests, civil unrest, and elections as it prevents the circulation of photos and videos that require higher bandwidth. Additionally, throttling is particularly challenging for CSOs to prepare for, document, and advocate against. Within countries and regions where connectivity is constrained and internet penetration is low, it is often difficult (for regular citizens as well as advocacy organizations) to distinguish between intentional internet throttling and regular connectivity problems—giving governments greater ability to falsely claim or disguise a shutdown as a technical infrastructure issue. As one respondent noted, the government often tries to “justify the throttling by the weak infrastructure.” Organizations also rated low levels of connectivity and infrastructure investment as a high threat, especially as shutdowns are easier to justify and implement

in countries and localities with low levels of internet penetration. Respondents mentioned that these strategies are not always used in isolation, with one respondent noting that often, before an election, the government will “start by throttling connectivity” and then block different platforms (as well as media outlets).

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## PREPAREDNESS OF THE ADVOCACY COMMUNITY IS LOW

**Respondents overall do not feel that the advocacy efforts to prevent shutdowns or raise awareness on them are adequate in their countries.** Almost half (49%) of the respondents assessed the advocacy capacity in their country as either weak or nonexistent, noting that only a few organizations were working on these issues, with varying levels of engagement. Another 35% feel that there is at least *some* advocacy capacity in their countries but indicated that internet shutdown coalitions could be strengthened. Only 16% described local advocacy as strong or very strong.

**Even organizations who had experienced internet shutdowns before did not describe the internet shutdown advocacy community in their country as prepared for a future shutdown.** Only 12% of respondents who had previously experienced a shutdown described the shutdown advocacy community as strong or very strong. Another 42% reported that even after experiencing a shutdown, the advocacy community in their countries was still weak or nonexistent. Respondents that expect a shutdown in the near future also reported low levels of advocacy capacity and readiness. Of those respondents who indicated that an internet shutdown is likely or very likely to take place sometime in the next year, 41% reported that the shutdown advocacy community is weak, 8% stated it was nonexistent, and only 14% reported that the shutdown advocacy community is strong or very strong.

## ADVOCACY CAPACITY

*How strong/robust do you feel the local advocacy in your country is as it relates to fighting shutdowns/blocking/throttling?*

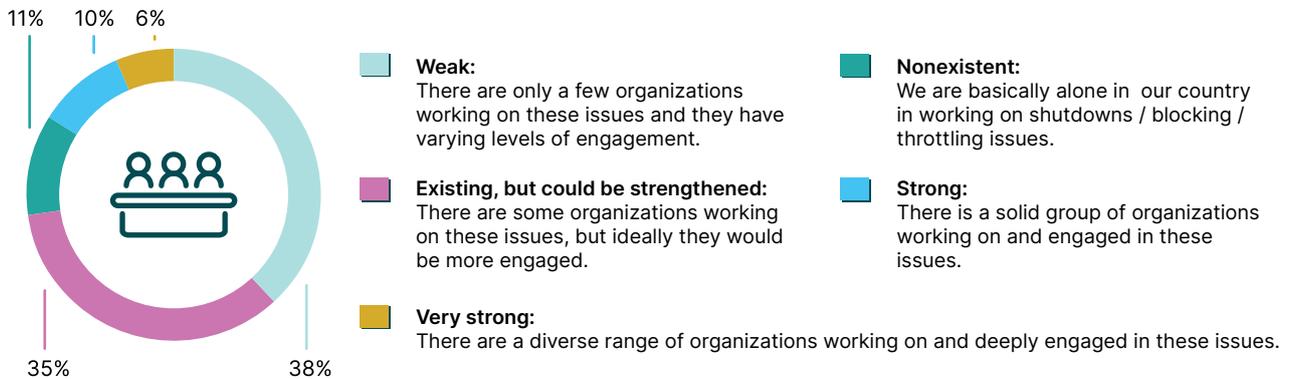


figure 2

**Organizations that have not worked on internet shutdowns are unprepared.** The vast majority of organizations that are new to shutdown advocacy do not feel prepared to address a shutdown if it were to happen in the countries where they work. Of these groups, 84% said that they did not have a plan for a shutdown, while only 16% reported that they had some preparatory measures in place. A majority (60%) of these organizations reported that they had never used resources or tools that could assist them in preparing for

a shutdown, and another 55% indicated that they were unaware of other organizations in their country or region who could assist them if an internet shutdown should occur.

**Advocates in countries that have experienced shutdowns noted that while there are strategies to try to predict a shutdown and better assess risk, organizations do not always have the capacity or resources to conduct these activities.** For most, these tracking efforts, including the monitoring of major political events, declarations by relevant ministries or officials, and changes in government censorship tactics, are not conducted regularly or in a systematic way. One respondent articulated how important it is to map the architecture of the network in a country to assess how many internet connection points exist, to determine the ownership of ISPs to better understand how a shutdown can happen both technically and legally, and to understand the vulnerabilities of the network. By and large, respondents noted that the resources (financial, technical, and informational) are not available to better develop localized tools and strategies to fully monitor networks and better prepare for shutdowns before they occur.

### THERE ARE CLEAR DIFFERENCES IN REPORTED STRENGTH OF ADVOCACY COMMUNITIES AND PREPAREDNESS ACROSS REGIONS.

Responding to this question, **27%** of African organizations reported the shutdown advocacy community as strong or very strong as compared to **8%** in Latin America, **4%** in Asia, and none in the Middle East/North Africa. Those organizations that rated the advocacy community as weak or nonexistent made up **67%** of all Asian respondents, **64%** of Latin American respondents, **63%** of Middle Eastern/North African respondents, and **31%** of African respondents.

**There is a need to produce more shutdown materials and resources that are usable, relevant, and accessible to local communities.** While many organizations described working with the international community in shutdown advocacy efforts, a few respondents noted that international groups often do not understand the local context, sometimes leading to a disconnect between the materials and resources offered by international organizations and on-the-ground realities. Respondents described a need for more research around internet use and practices of specific vulnerable populations (such as women and minorities) to produce literacy and outreach materials such that these populations are better prepared and protected during shutdowns. Additionally, respondents described few efforts to translate resources that are overwhelmingly produced in English. These challenges with translation and localization were mentioned frequently alongside critiques of circumvention tools, with respondents noting that they have difficulties promoting the use of these tools with rural populations and individuals who speak local languages. One respondent identified a need to conduct better local user interviews and research around circumvention tools to improve uptake and make these tools more effective.

## CURRENT ADVOCACY PRACTICES (AND RESOURCES) FOCUS ON EMERGENCY AND RAPID-RESPONSE EFFORTS IN LIEU OF LONGER-TERM PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Many respondents stated that resource constraints and the reactive and rapid-response nature of advocacy around shutdowns lead to short-term campaigns focused on ending a shutdown rather than longer-term advocacy. As described by one respondent, advocacy approaches to shutdowns develop when organizations are in “emergency mode” as the advocacy

community is often forced to mobilize quickly in response to a changing situation on the ground and unpredictable circumstances. This kind of rapid-response action also occurs when communication capacity is curtailed by the shutdown and it is more difficult to access constituents and allies. Respondents described challenges for low-resourced organizations to do outreach, coordinate diverse groups, and build awareness and knowledge amongst stakeholders in a more ongoing way.

**Respondents from international organizations noted that most resources go to organizations dealing with active or impending shutdowns and that it is less common to fund proactive or preventative advocacy or monitoring for possible upcoming shutdowns.** Several respondents from these global organizations described how they are largely reliant on alerts or requests from advocacy groups working at the national and regional levels and thus are often driven by the emerging needs of partners and shared information “about imminent or ongoing instances of shutdowns.” As one respondent described, “Our shutdown work in these countries is more reactive than pre-emptive—if local partners flag them as a recent experience or future threat, then we will invest resources and support partners to address shutdowns.”

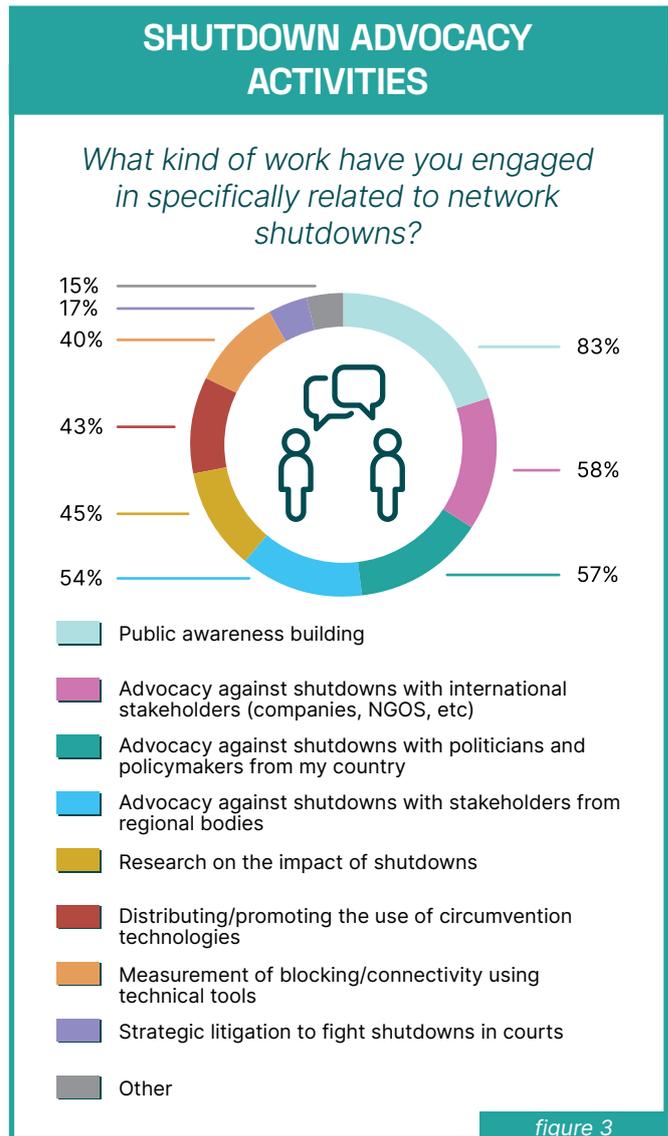


*“When you’re living a shutdown, it can become almost impossible to get information out, and this very challenge makes it very difficult to find allies and make noise, inform others, to raise awareness. This all needs to happen outside of the shutdown.”*

With internet shutdown numbers rising around the world, it is no surprise then that **most advocacy around shutdowns is reactive and responsive to current shutdowns, focusing on building support and awareness amongst**

**key national and international stakeholders to end a shutdown.** When asked to select the kinds of advocacy activities and approaches that organizations deploy as part of anti-shutdown advocacy, “public awareness building” was the approach cited most frequently by respondents (82%), followed by advocacy with international (59%), regional (52%), and national stakeholders and policymakers (55%).<sup>4</sup>

Organizations also reported that they largely initiate outreach and engagement with key stakeholders who are most able to put pressure on governments to end a shutdown: the general public, regional and international organizations, other advocacy groups, and journalists who can report on the effects of the shutdown. In describing policy outcomes and advocacy successes, most respondents (69%) reported that their efforts led to increased awareness about shutdowns amongst the general population and key groups. An additional 33% described **these efforts as culminating in the release of public statements condemning shutdowns and declarations from international organizations**, such as UN bodies, regional organizations, and global advocacy organizations. As an example, several respondents described the adoption by the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights of the revised Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information as an important outcome of regional advocacy efforts, and another respondent noted their participation in the



Universal Periodic Review Peer Mechanism. **Activities that demand more time and resources before or after shutdowns are less common**, including “distributing/promoting the use of circumvention technologies” (44%), “research on the impact of shutdowns” (42%), “measurement or blocking/connectivity using technical tools” (41%), and “strategic litigation to fight shutdowns in courts” (17%). In particular, organizations engaged in legal support and strategic litigation pointed out challenges around longer-term litigation timelines and shorter-term advocacy approaches to shutdowns, saying that they “do not align with typical project-based funding timelines, and litigation needs can arise quickly and need rapid action.”

**“What we have been able to accomplish regarding shutdowns is an increased public awareness and knowledge in the use of tools and tactics to circumvent certain circumstances as well as the difference between different types of blockages.”**

<sup>4</sup> These percentages are derived from a multiple-choice question asking respondents to select all the advocacy activities they regularly engage in.

## LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP AND NETWORK BUILDING WITH KEY NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS IS IMPORTANT, BUT SUCCESS VARIES FROM COUNTRY TO COUNTRY

Respondents argue that **they also face challenges when it comes to building longer term relationships and establishing ongoing dialogue with government stakeholders to advocate for policies that can prevent and prohibit future shutdowns.** While government engagement is context-specific and especially difficult in repressive contexts, respondents noted that there is a need to think through how to better and more strategically engage in ongoing dialogue and awareness raising with powerful stakeholders. Respondents reported low levels of engagement with information ministries, regulatory bodies, parliamentarians and politicians, regional governance bodies, and national judges and courts. One respondent noted that engagement with government stakeholders depends on understanding the nuanced relationships and structures within government to better know the levers of influence and potential for awareness raising

within government agencies and governing bodies. Other respondents pointed out that shutdowns are often justified, exacerbated, and prolonged due to “little understanding or application of human rights in the digital arena” amongst government actors and a “lack of awareness among the judiciary around internet-related issues and international practices” and resulting “bad implementation.”

For the few organizations noting that they have been able to build spaces for communication and engagement with these actors, respondents stated that **these ongoing efforts have yielded significant results, including halting legislation and substantially impacting policy.** One respondent described successes around building awareness and knowledge about the effects of shutdowns with Ministry of Justice staff and noted that efforts to work closely with their country’s national assembly had led to wider discussions on protecting and promoting internet connectivity. Another respondent described how the continual publication and dissemination of policy briefs and information led government stakeholders to consult with their organization to discuss concerns about hate speech before a major election. These respondents also reported

### STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

*Which stakeholders has your organization successfully been able to engage with in your work related to shutdowns?*

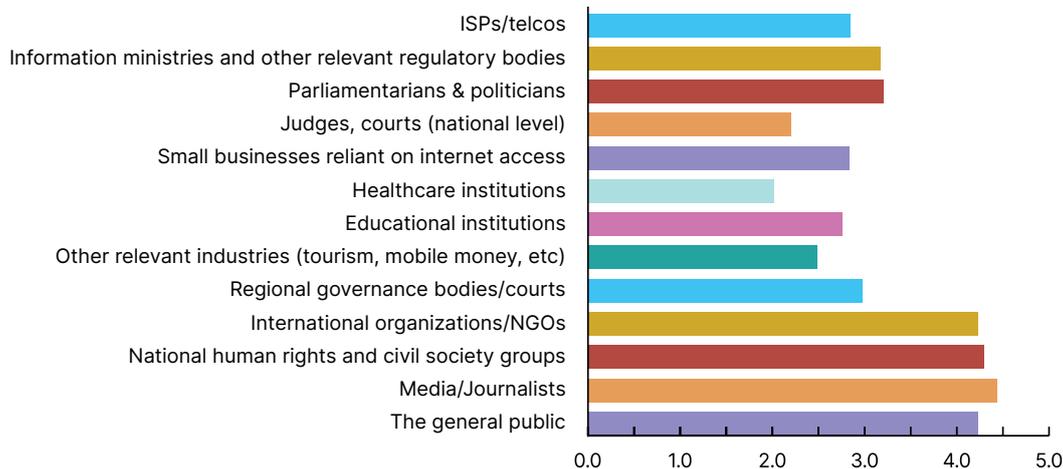


figure 4

that efforts to organize and participate in multi-stakeholder events, such as national IGFs, allow for relationship building and more regular communications with relevant government ministries and regulatory authorities.

**Respondents also reported rare engagements on these issues with other important public and private sector actors, such as small businesses reliant on internet access, and other relevant industries, such as tourism or mobile money and educational and healthcare institutions who are impacted substantially by connectivity interruptions.** According to respondents, these institutions are difficult to contact or communicate with successfully during a shutdown and are not often prioritized as part of crisis response efforts. In addition, respondents indicated that there are few opportunities and spaces for advocacy groups to engage these stakeholders on digital rights topics in general and shutdowns in particular.

**African respondents are significantly more likely to report that they regularly engage with information ministries and regulatory bodies than respondents from other regions (with an average rating of 4 as compared to an average of 2.9 in Asia, 2.4 in Latin America, and 2.1 in MENA.)**

## ADVOCATES COULD USE MORE SUPPORT IN FOUR KEY AREAS

Many of the activities that allow organizations to do more strategic planning and longer-term advocacy around connectivity, access, and shutdowns require staff with specialized skillsets. Developing these specific kinds of expertise and fine-tuning technical, legal, research, and advocacy staff capacities require significant training and human capital investment. Respondents were asked to assess their organization’s capacity to deploy certain skills and tactics toward shutdown advocacy on a 5-point scale from “we have no capacity” (1) to “we have expertise in these activities.” (5) For each set of capacities, respondents could also provide more information, reflecting on their organizations’ capacities and challenges around each skill type.

**Respondents indicated lower capacity in areas including engaging in ongoing dialogue with ISPs and telecommunication providers, documenting network interference using measurement data, working with lawyers to challenge shutdowns in court, and determining the economic impact of network interference events.** Each of these capacities is related to activities that would

### ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITIES

*Please rank your organization’s current capacities in the following areas:*

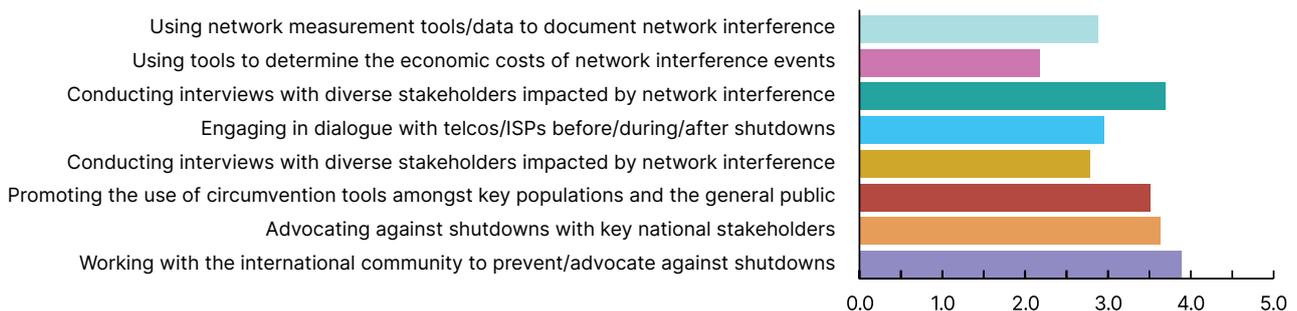


figure 5

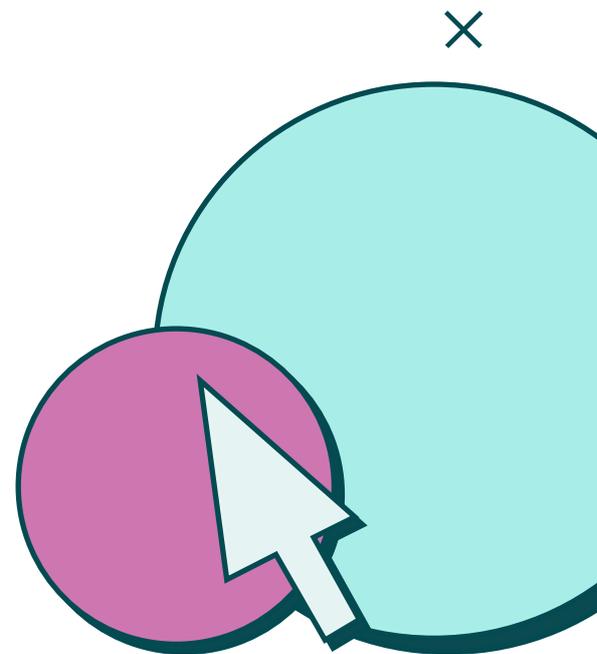
allow for organizations to better monitor and prevent future shutdowns, reflect upon past advocacy approaches, and establish precedent after they have ended. They are also skillsets that require long-term time investments and approaches to capacity building within countries and across regions.

### ISP AND TELCOS ARE HARD TO ENGAGE

Internet and mobile service providers lose money and face reputational challenges when they comply with internet shutdown requests. For this reason, it would seem that these stakeholders could serve as powerful allies in the fight against shutdowns. However, many respondents describe how ISPs and telecommunication companies are often not “keen on engaging with civil society or releasing information” in countries where shutdowns happen and are often bound by government orders and confidentiality clauses. ISPs and telcos are often closely related to or owned by governments, making it less likely that these entities will push back against shutdown orders. International companies, while less tied to specific governments, face threats, license revocations, and fines if they do not comply with internet shutdown orders. Despite these hurdles, some respondents noted that they have seen some successful collaborations between these companies and shutdown advocates. Respondents pointed out that in certain countries, companies have

been instrumental in making the shutdown process more transparent by demanding legal justifications for shutdowns and publishing government orders.

Companies have also worked with civil society groups after shutdowns to challenge disruptions in courts and to document the economic impact of the shutdown. Organizations in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia report more capacity for engagement (3.4 and 3 on average, respectively) with telcos/ISPs than in Latin America and the Middle East and North Africa regions (2.4 and 2.1, respectively). This may be at least in part due to the concentration of government ownership or influence over telcos and ISPs in countries in these regions.



### COMPARING ACROSS REGIONS: ISP ENGAGEMENT

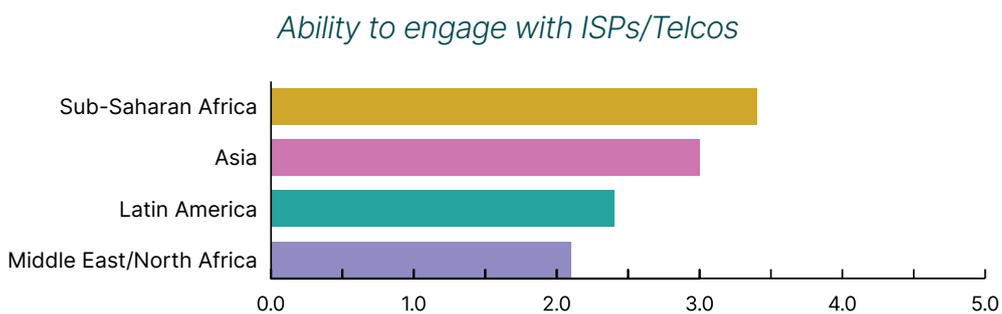


figure 6

## ADVOCATES ARE NOT CONDUCTING NETWORK MEASUREMENTS BECAUSE THEY DON'T HAVE THE CAPACITY

Respondents stated that advocacy efforts, especially those aimed at governmental stakeholders, are more effective when they can cite clear evidence and document the duration, nature, and cause of a shutdown. As connectivity is often unreliable in countries where shutdowns are common, governments can claim that a shutdown did not occur or that the authorities played no role in the disconnection. Network measurement—using tools and methods that help advocates collect and analyze network data in order to document shutdowns and other forms of network interference—allows advocates to refute these claims with empirical evidence and develop improved understanding of the technical mechanisms governments use to shut down the internet and how those tactics evolve over time. However, measurements must be collected regularly within countries, and the analysis of these data requires collaboration with individuals who have more specialized expertise, who are often located outside of the country.

The majority of respondents reported that they are not able to collect network measurements, with nearly half (45%) indicating that their organizations have little or no capacity to conduct measurements. Only 35% of the respondents reported that they have the capacity or expertise to regularly use measurement tools and data. Respondents stated that they lack the financial resources needed to build “in-house” measurement and data analysis capacity and that few experts with measurement skillsets exist within these countries. Instead, several of these respondents noted that they “rely on the measurement community to provide this data” and often start advocacy efforts “without measuring tools” when they experience “such symptoms as irregular connectivity with unexpected breaks, slow network connection, slow data transfer, poor signal strength.”

Amongst the advocates who reported that their organizations have familiarity with network measurement tools, the vast majority indicated experience only with the tools run by the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI). Very few respondents described experience using other tools and network performance datasets.

### CAPACITY TO USE NETWORK MEASUREMENT TOOLS & DATA

*Please rate the capacity of your organization for using/analyzing the following tools/datasets to document network interference and the impact of interference:*

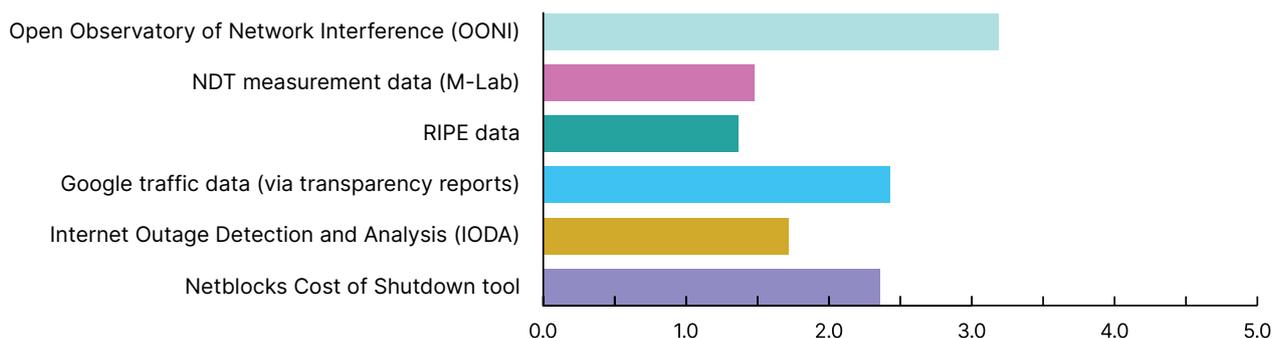


figure 7

Respondents noted additional challenges related to ease of use of tools, problems with accessing more localized network data, and general confusion around how to accurately measure when a government throttles bandwidth. Several respondents described certain tools as being harder to engage with and learn, offering few ways for less technical local users to visualize and interpret data. As described by one respondent, “currently there are no tools which have easy interfaces to detect or measure shutdowns.” Respondents also noted challenges with accessing data and using certain tools in low bandwidth environments and with older equipment.



*“The shutdowns are often at the district or regional level. It is very difficult to get measurement data for such shutdowns.”*

**In addition, respondents emphasized that most existing network datasets focus on national connectivity and do not include more granular and localized network data.** Thus, organizations are less able to document network performance at the sub-national level (such as in a particular city or district) where shutdowns often occur. Respondents pointed out that taking measurements often relies on having trained individuals located in specific places to test the network at the local level but that there are not enough knowledgeable individuals to run tests in many locations. Other respondents reported that they have not been able to use any existing tools to accurately measure and verify when the government deliberately slows the internet (throttling) despite the fact that this tactic is increasingly used by governments. Finally, a few respondents noted that there are “poor protection mechanisms” for those who conduct measurements in heavily censored and surveilled countries and little understanding of the risks.

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## THERE IS LIMITED FUNDING FOR LONGER TERM STRATEGIC LEGAL INITIATIVES AND CAPACITY BUILDING

While internet shutdowns are legal in some countries, other regimes’ efforts to disrupt internet access are in violation of national laws or international human rights frameworks. Some advocacy groups have been successful in bringing legal challenges against governments who illegally shut off the internet (including notable examples in regional and national courts from [India](#) to [Zimbabwe](#) to [Togo](#) and [Pakistan](#)). Even the cases that are not won offer advocates the opportunity to raise public awareness, add pressure to the government and telcos, and increase transparency around shutdowns. **While strategic litigation could be a successful avenue for some advocates,**

**most respondents cited limited funding and the substantial costs of engaging in lengthy litigation processes as prohibitive.** One respondent noted that they have challenged digital rights violations in court but that “the main challenge has been the long legal process... which drains our resources while the government is able to sustain the case for a while.” Several others noted that they have accessed pro-bono legal services for these kinds of cases but that they can be slow and “not taken with seriousness.” While some advocacy organizations do have the legal expertise in-house and could provide amicus curiae to support other CSOs’ efforts, they stated they couldn’t take on these cases themselves due to lack of access, expertise, or financial resources required.

**Many other respondents stated that there are not enough lawyers working on digital rights issues who are willing and able to challenge shutdowns in courts.** One respondent noted that we don't have expert lawyers in this area... on other issues we have alliances with lawyers." Another respondent argued that, based on their experience, "litigators need to be trained about technical aspects of internet shutdowns and also the internet's architecture more generally." Others described how lawyers often face risks and threats to their safety by pursuing legal action, discouraging this kind of action and engagement from independent lawyers who have few protections.

## COVID-19 BRINGS CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THOSE WORKING ON SHUTDOWNS

All survey respondents were asked to also reflect on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted or might impact advocacy around internet shutdowns. In many countries, internet connectivity and access have often been treated as a luxury, secondary to other public policy objectives.

However, many respondents optimistically noted that reliance on internet-enabled technologies throughout the crisis has brought digital rights issues and connectivity to the forefront of public attention and policy discussions. With stay-at-home orders implemented in many countries around the world, respondents mentioned that digital divide and connectivity challenges have exacerbated the associated public health and information crises as those without the internet are less able to access high-quality information, communicate with community leaders, and receive support. In this way, the

crisis has promoted the argument that the internet should be treated as a human right or as critical infrastructure and that the internet shutdown advocacy community should be using this "high-potential impact" moment as an opportunity to "speak more about the consequences of violating digital rights." Some also note that the crisis has created COVID19-related opportunities to partner with ISPs to improve internet quality and reach that could extend beyond the crisis.

**With this increasing reliance on the internet for jobs, health, education, and other vital services, some respondents speculated that this dependence on digital services would make it more difficult for governments to justify shutdowns.** They pointed out that shutting down the internet or social media could negatively impact social distancing practices and COVID-related health efforts, saying, "governments are relying on social media to get their public health messages and testing updates out to the public," and "if communication services are interfered with to the extent that citizens and civic groups cannot freely communicate, then the messages for preventive messages against COVID-19 will not get to the citizens." A few respondents provided examples of cases in which governments, such as in Pakistan and



***"This pandemic has been the first since the internet-age and the citizens and policymakers have been absorbing information and using online communications tools like never before. This means people will have a heightened awareness of the importance of connectivity and be more sensitive to shutdowns. This is a golden opportunity for the shutdown community to start working with businesses, governments and citizens to ensure they all understand the risks and likelihoods of future shutdowns and how they can help build a positive campaign environment to prevent them."***

India, have failed to restore internet access in certain regions with detrimental impacts on the communities' abilities to respond to the pandemic.

**While many respondents acknowledged the opportunity that the crisis provides to argue for improved access, connectivity, and protections against internet disruptions, they also pointed out that the pandemic has the potential to also lead to policies that erode civil liberties as declared responses to a public emergency.** Many respondents in restrictive contexts pointed out that the pandemic has allowed governments to use the crisis as a way to "concentrate power" and that these efforts to maintain power could become increasingly draconian and lead to a greater likelihood of shutdowns. Many respondents expressed fear that disinformation related to the pandemic will lead governments to justify internet shutdowns and other forms of online censorship. Others noted that food shortages and/or economic recessions precipitated by the pandemic might lead to protests or other forms of violence and that in these cases the government would feel justified in resorting to shutting down the internet.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From these findings, there are clear priority areas that the internet shutdown advocacy community (particularly funding organizations) could take on to strengthen advocacy capacity within countries, build supportive networks and resources to improve collaboration globally, and expand the parameters of the debate to include new stakeholders in the fight for uninterrupted internet access.

### BUILD COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCES FOR BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER A SHUTDOWN

**Create guides and resources to help advocacy organizations better strategize, prepare for, and respond to shutdowns.** National, regional, and international advocacy coalitions must continue to engage in rapid response for new and ongoing internet shutdowns. However, as indicated by this research, there is also a need to build resources at the national and international levels to ensure community resilience and enable response in countries where shutdowns have occurred or are likely. Throughout the survey, respondents suggested that there is a need to provide "permanent resources and methodologies" to better prepare, mobilize, and plan before a potential shutdown. As described by one respondent, there is a need to "build some materials (document, manuals, and communication spots) to prevent and learn... implement a protocol to document and act in case of a shutdown, and make training materials or a virtual training." Another respondent seeks "a pro-active methodology that increases the threat level for a country given its antecedents. For example, some countries are more prone to shutting access during elections or mass protests, a proactive red flag could be raised in order to improve advocacy and engage with state authorities on such proposed shutdown."



***"The pandemic is increasing awareness of how crucial the Internet can be during times of crises. However, it also means that attention is diverted from human rights issues. In addition, it may increase public sympathy for governments increasing their emergency powers and some governments are taking advantage of the crisis to do so. There is a risk that while there will be increased public attention to the need for Internet activity during this time, in reality the legal and policy frameworks will shift to become more enabling of Internet shutdowns in the future."***

One respondent reported that their organization had created “advocacy kits readily available especially towards crucial times like elections or planned protests.”

These advocacy kits, frameworks, and guides should draw on what the internet shutdown advocacy community has learned thus far to offer best practices and resources for before, during, and after a shutdown. Suggested resources include efforts to:

- **track major political events and monitor debates that might trigger a shutdown**
- **identify technical vulnerabilities and risks**
- **distill advocacy best practices**
- **provide outreach materials for a variety of core stakeholders that can be customized for specific countries**
- **provide guides to measurement tools and resources, circumvention methods, and legal support resources.**

Respondents also suggested that resources should be provided to ensure that protocols, frameworks, and guides are customizable and contextualized for different countries, political systems, risk profiles, and sub-populations. This could be addressed through the “translation of available toolkits into local languages” and by making current guidelines on circumvention tools and other technical resources “easy to use and simplified.”

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## INVEST IN LONGER-TERM NETWORKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

**Provide resources and build spaces to engage new stakeholders and expand anti-shutdown coalitions.** The findings of this research indicate that there is a need to invest in coalition-building and outreach efforts for longer-term and more strategic approaches to shutdowns. There are a variety of stakeholders within countries that could

increasingly be incorporated into ongoing campaigns for uninterrupted internet access. As national CSOs largely operate in emergency response mode during an imminent or ongoing shutdown, coalitions are often formed on the fly and include “the usual suspects”—human rights and advocacy groups, journalists, and international NGOs. Certain stakeholders that are less involved in digital rights networks also have vested interests in reliable and robust internet access and could be incorporated into advocacy coalitions. These groups, however, likely require engagement across longer time horizons and during less politically sensitive moments. These stakeholders include business associations, internet-reliant industries, banks, educational institutions, and healthcare providers.

**Make internet shutdowns relevant to organizations working on human rights, gender equality, economic development, and democratization.** A majority (84%) of the respondents for this research indicated that advocacy communities within their countries needed strengthening. As part of wider efforts to support and strengthen organizations working on these issues, efforts can and should be made to conduct outreach to other communities working on relevant human rights and development issues and to CSOs outside the digital rights space, such as organizations that serve women, disabled people, LGBTQ groups, and other marginalized populations who might be more adversely impacted by an internet shutdown. By expanding and diversifying the coalitions of actors fighting against shutdowns, shutdown advocacy communities can build resilience, discover new opportunities for funding, and better provide target communities with resources and preparatory materials. Of the organizations surveyed that reported they had never engaged in internet shutdown advocacy, 55% said that they were unaware of organizations who could provide resources in the case of a shutdown. As internet shutdowns impact a variety of constituencies and vulnerable populations, outreach and awareness-building efforts conducted in collaboration with groups that work specifically with these populations

can improve knowledge and awareness around shutdowns, improve the usability and uptake of circumvention techniques, and incorporate new perspectives on the impacts of shutdowns.

**Engage the government whenever possible.** Indeed, in countries where it is possible, respondents to the survey indicated that developing longer-term and stronger relationships with individuals embedded within government bodies allows for opportunities to communicate with and educate those officials making decisions around shutdowns. Throughout the survey, respondents stated that these selective engagements and relationship-building activities with government lead to improved awareness, outreach from government to digital rights CSOs as respected experts, and even some cases where legislation has been changed or stopped. Efforts should be made to fund engagements on internet shutdowns during national and regional multi-stakeholder events, such as national and regional IGFs and to build the capacity for organizations to lobby governments more effectively. Of course, government engagement is highly constrained in many contexts where internet shutdowns occur, and thus approaches should be tailored based on what is possible within a country's specific political context.

**In addition, there is a need to build more regular engagement between international ISPs and telecommunication companies and national partners fighting against shutdowns.** Efforts can be made by the community to better map telco and ISP ownership structures in key countries to determine the potential levers of influence these companies might have to resist a shutdown request, to improve the transparency of these requests, and to document best practices around ISP participation in shutdown advocacy.

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## LOCALIZE NETWORKS AND EXPERTISE

**Build expertise and capacity within countries.** Throughout the survey, respondents articulated the need to “localize” and “contextualize” existing resources and to build national and regional coalitions to support these localization efforts. As described by one respondent, there is a need to “adapt to the local environment according to the characteristics we identify in the shutdowns.” For many respondents, regional networks enable more contextualized knowledge as well as the ability to amplify campaigns and serve as links with international efforts. According to one respondent, there is a need for “creating a close-knit network of national efforts in region, led by local insights and best practices of what works well in the region.” Others from countries that face less risk of shutdowns also described interest in building these kinds of regional networks, with one respondent arguing that “it is essential for us to engage more actively regionally and offer preventive and supportive measures to particularly endangered countries.”

These efforts can complement and build upon capacity building and specialized training programs to encourage the development of expertise in regions and in key countries related to private sector engagement, technical measurement and documentation, training on circumvention technology use, and strategic litigation. As described by one respondent, there is a need for “peer-to-peer support,” which could include “a regional helpline, reporting platforms regional advocacy strategies, and funds for litigation.”

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## ONGOING RESEARCH & MEASUREMENT

**Support network measurement efforts in key countries and build capacity for longer-term, ongoing measurement observatories.** Respondents in this research described how research outputs, reports, trackers, and collaborations with measurement organizations such as OONI have garnered

media attention and are cited by politicians, public officials, and courts. This kind of research and monitoring is vital not only to better predict and respond to shutdowns but also to provide clear evidence that a network interruption is a deliberate action. However, respondents rated their organizational capacities for collecting and interpreting network measurement data as low and reported only some level of ability to use tools provided by OONI, with little to no self-reported capacity to use other measurement methods and tools.

Survey respondents identified a particularly acute need to **support longer-term and more ongoing network testing** to respond more quickly and better understand patterns around network performance and connectivity. Respondents with experience working on network measurement noted the need for more granular and localized data and emphasized the importance of **training and retaining experts distributed throughout the country** who have the technical skills to collect data and engage in this kind of ongoing monitoring at the local level.

Compiling enough evidence to decisively attribute documented disruptions to government is especially difficult in the context of network throttling. **Additional resources should be aimed at building new methods and expanding sources of data** to improve this research. As described by one respondent, there is also a need for “collective standards regarding what we consider a shutdown” as well as knowledge on how to measure different types of shutdowns and how to collect and interpret data from multiple sources.



***“The technical speak of internet measurements will need to be translated for legal redress and advocacy. It is important that there is a greater synergy between several disciplines”***

Finally, many respondents described the need for **more resources and usable tools to translate, visualize, and contextualize technical data to tell compelling stories** that can be used as a part of improved advocacy strategy. Respondents noted that existing network measurement tools can be hard to understand for non-technical audiences and that efforts to build platforms to easily visualize data would allow for new groups to better deploy technical measurement in their advocacy work. In addition, several respondents argued that technical research should be used in combination with other research methods (such as surveys, interviews, focus groups) to contextualize technical data and better determine social and economic impact. Respondents also noted the need for more location-specific user research to better understand “how communities are impacted by network disruptions, how they mobilize, and how they use circumvention tools.” Others mentioned the effectiveness of efforts to quantify the economic costs of shutdowns and the desire for more trainings on this kind of economic analysis.

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## ADDRESS CONNECTIVITY CHALLENGES & THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

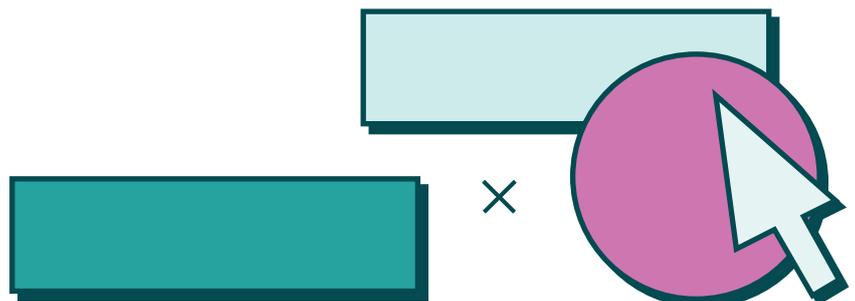
**Address the connectivity challenges and digital divides that enable internet shutdowns.** While advocacy around shutdowns is, by its very nature, crisis response, activists also describe challenges around building more sustainable national and regional coalitions to protect against shutdowns and promote connectivity over the long term. Several respondents argue that there is a need to expand the debate around shutdowns to discuss wider challenges around internet access, infrastructure investment, connectivity, affordability, and digital inequities. Within low bandwidth contexts, it is more difficult to both document and advocate against internet shutdowns when citizens are used to regular disconnections due to poor infrastructure and lack of access to high-quality and consistent

bandwidth. As explained by one respondent, “there are people who live in a constant shutdown because of lack of connectivity and unaffordable access.” Citizens become normalized to an internet that occasionally or frequently does not work, and in this context it is far easier for governments to claim a shutdown as a technical failure. In addition, higher quality and more affordable internet

connections lead to businesses, public institutions, and citizens who integrate digital technologies into their lives and livelihoods such that the choice to shut down the internet becomes politically and economically unfeasible. This is in line with recent research suggesting that at a connectivity threshold, certain types of network interferences are statistically less likely in a given country.<sup>5</sup>

### ADVOCACY NEEDS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER SHUTDOWNS

Before	During	After
Advocacy toward better & more affordable connectivity and infrastructure	Provide emergency shutdown-resilient communication tools and circumvention tools that work in a variety of contexts and are user friendly	Advocacy toward better & more affordable connectivity and infrastructure
Awareness campaigns around negative impact of shutdowns for public and policymakers	Defend against security threats	Document the impact on communities, economies, and networks
Create, circulate, contextualize, and translate preparedness guidelines and protocols for preparing for and responding to shutdowns	Draw on national, regional, and international networks to raise attention and amplify issues	Challenge shutdowns in courts
Build capacity to monitor and analyze internet interference and perform testing regularly	Provide resources for rapid legal advice and support	Advocate for longer-term digital rights legislation to make shutdowns illegal
Strengthen domestic legal frameworks to ensure transparency and force governments to justify their actions	Support to monitor and verify internet interference	Continuous testing and data analysis
Develop relationships and capacity to better engage with ISPs/Telcos	Communicate with ISPs/Telcos	Advocate for transparency and responsible behavior from companies
Build and expand regional and national anti-shutdown networks	Document impact and consequences of shutdown	Build case studies analyzing impact of shutdowns and response



<sup>5</sup> <https://globalnetworkinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Disconnected-Report-Network-Disruptions.pdf>

## CONCLUSION

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As activists work to defend democracies and protect the most marginalized in an era of global decline in democratic norms and throughout the coming months (or years) of the a global pandemic, the internet is vital—for distributing health information, allowing for remote work and school, and building public awareness and combatting government attempts to limit civil liberties during the crisis. This presents new challenges as governments, desperate not only to control the virus but also the associated political and economic crises, may use the public health emergency to justify increased censorship and surveillance online. It also offers new potential opportunities for those fighting against internet restrictions to build stronger arguments, approach new allies, and lay the infrastructure for integrated, strategic, long-term visions for unobstructed internet access.

Through the collection and analysis of a diverse range of perspectives, this needs assessment has sought to lay the groundwork for donors and advocacy organizations alike to build capacity and design new strategic frameworks to resist and ultimately eliminate internet shutdowns. Internews and OPTIMA partner organizations will continue to build on the findings from this report, solicit feedback and best practices from advocates fighting shutdowns in a variety of contexts, and provide resources and funding opportunities to meet the needs outlined in this report.

For more information on the OPTIMA project and to participate in future research and programs, please visit [globaltech.internews.org](https://globaltech.internews.org) or email [lhenderson@internews.org](mailto:lhenderson@internews.org).