CASE STUDY 1

Emmanuel Vitus,
Afrotribune,
Togo

SMALL GRANT HOLDER

Togo does not have appropriate legislation governing internet use and freedom, leaving the government and judiciary to apply the existing penal code to online activities.

Internet shutdowns lasting up to a week are increasingly common, and individuals have been jailed for up to five years for posting information about government or opposition policy on social media.

The need for legislation around internet freedom has been raised in the Togolese media, and the University of Toronto recently published research on how the government uses online space to track dissidents.

Building on this research, Afrotribune conducted a study of the knowledge and perspectives of policy makers and other stakeholders.

This investigation revealed that while lawmakers and civil society organisations were extremely able to discuss 'offline' human rights, the idea of digital rights was new to them.

Emmanuel Vitus, Project Manager for Afrotribune, says, **"Most CSOs and NGOs are experts in offline rights, but are just learning that digital rights exist."**

Some policy makers had attended the Internet Governance Forum and similar events, but demonstrated very little practical understanding of the issue.

Emmanuel and his team saw an urgent need: the Togolese government was ready to take action on digital rights, and to develop appropriate legislation.

However, there was a risk that this legislation would be created without any real understanding of its potential impact on Togolese citizens and civil society.

The exclusion of these voices could mean that surveillance and imprisonment of dissidents, regular shutdowns and other infringements of digital rights could continue with impunity.

No other organisation was active on this issue, so Afrotribune took the lead in starting a national discussion, with the support of a grant from Internews.

"We didn't expect that so many different groups would be interested," says Emmanuel. **"As well as civil society organisations, we met with academia, lawyers, the US and French Embassies in Togo, and representatives from the tech community."**

Over a series of 18 meetings with these stakeholders, Emmanuel and his team discussed the principles of digital rights, how new legislation could affect the Togolese people, and what a new Bill should include.

"We have seen great progress with these groups: within the project we have a case where one CSO has decided to sue the state for freedom of speech violations."

By the end of April 2019, after just 14 weeks' work, Emmanuel's team of four people had drafted a multi-stakeholder Digital Rights Bill, ready for submission to Parliament.

The work continues. Afrotribune has had cordial discussions with government representatives, and will continue to advocate for relevant, appropriate legislation.

Emmanuel and his team are also working with civil society groups and the media to ensure that people across Togo are aware of their rights. Emmanuel concludes:

"If we have a law that includes citizens, government, it will be in the interests of every stakeholder. People can freely live without fear of arrest or persecution."

'Ms Q',
Bolivia

SMALL GRANT HOLDER

Bolivia has no adequate legislation to protect digital rights, and while this affects people throughout the country, the issues differ from region to region. A few international organisations have touched on the topic of digital rights, but this is work that cannot be done without a true understanding of the local context.

Ms Q works for a small organisation based in La Paz, with three paid staff and around 20 volunteers. With support from Internews, the team drafted a personal data protection Bill. They then took this to four locations – La Paz, El Alto, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz – to understand local concerns, to test whether the specifics of the proposed legislation could work in each context, and to begin a national movement to advocate for internet freedom.

In each of the four locations, the team organised two events: one was open to the public, and the other was aimed at specific audiences, according to local priorities.

The *La Paz* event targeted academics, as well as ISP providers, tech start-ups and activists. A Senator who had previously drafted a data protection bill also attended the public event: she had

been working 'behind closed doors', as the government traditionally resisted this type of legislation, but she was interested in hearing more about citizen-led approaches to digital rights.

The majority of people participating in the *El Alto* events were journalists. Ms Q explained, **"El Alto was built 20 years ago, with the remnants of the people who didn't have economic opportunities. These people tried to move to La Paz, but the government housed them in this 'ghetto' on the outskirts of the capital."**

The people there are entrepreneurial, and have the spirit of activism, but they're poor. El Alto was the principal support base for the ruling party until a violent incident seven years ago, and now they're in opposition.

As a result, when journalists criticise government policies or positions, it is not unusual for them to be threatened. Journalists told us that they feel they're under constant surveillance, and constant threat. So their solution is to censor themselves. They're not free."

Cochabamba has a large student population, and the events engaged large numbers of young people. University professors brought groups of students, with many coming forward to ask how they can participate in future activities.

Finally, in **Santa Cruz,** the team saw more activists, particularly feminists, who were experienced in the field of 'offline' human rights, but for whom the idea of digital rights was new.

As Ms Q said, **"Because they're on the frontline, they need to know that their information is safe, and how to have safer communications."**

The Bill is now with the government, but as Bolivia is about to have a general election, it is not guaranteed to be passed, or even discussed, this year.

Ms Q sees this as an opportunity to raise awareness of digital rights, and to build popular support for the Bill.
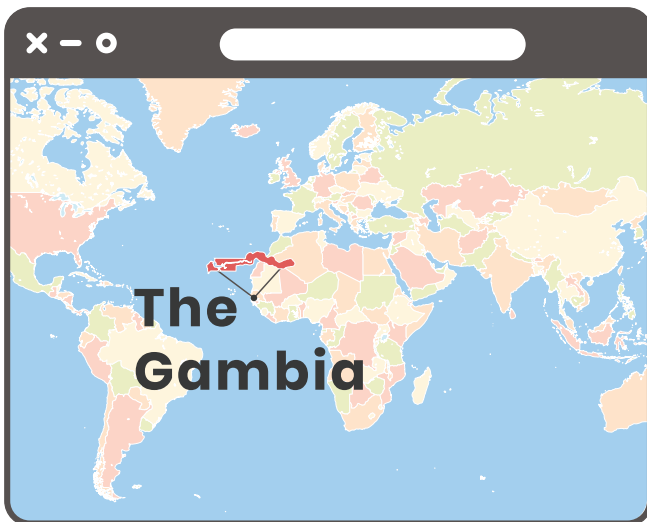
The Gambia

Alieu Sowe, Give1 Project, **The Gambia**

PIONEER

In 2017, when Alieu first started working on digital rights, The Gambia was ruled by dictator. Any criticism of the government, online or offline, was punishable with imprisonment, and in the run-up to the 2017 election, the internet was totally shut down.

Alieu and his team were at risk because they were vocal and visible online, even though they were advocating for digital rights, rather than directly criticising any government official.

But Alieu says that this was an important time: "We had to start the conversation about digital rights, and get people involved. There was no specific law at that time, but people were aware that the government was controlling what was being said, so they wanted to know more about it."

Since the removal of the dictator in 2017, Alieu and his team have seized the opportunity to move forward with the new government.

At the time of writing, the government is carrying out a review of the entire Gambian Constitution, consulting civil society organisations like Give1 to ensure

that the new Constitution reflects the rights, needs and priorities of the Gambian people.

Give1 used its Pioneer funding to expand the conversation around digital rights, and to help the government to understand the issue. As Alieu explains, "The internet is very important in The Gambia. The new President boasted that social media is one of the reasons he was elected. And every single family in the country has WhatsApp. That's all the government are thinking about – they're not seeing the bigger picture."

Give1 organised meetings and conferences to help government officials and civil society organisations (CSOs) understand just how critical the internet is to The Gambia.

Alieu and his team researched topics that they felt politicians would care about, and presented their case using research from the World Bank, private investors and other trusted bodies. For example:

> The Gambia now has effective systems for disease surveillance, monitoring and reporting, which are already improving treatment for malaria, cholera and other preventable diseases in rural areas. All of these systems are online.

Remittances from the diaspora account for around 20% of the Gambian GDP. The vast majority of these transfers are made digitally.

The government met with tech companies in the USA, who were considering investing in The Gambia. But these companies said that they would not invest unless the government could guarantee that there would be no shutdowns.

At the same time, Give1 held a national consultative digital rights forum, which brought together over 70 CSOs, academics and policy makers.

This enabled the team to hone their message, and to bring very specific proposals to the Constitutional Review.

"We are focusing on the right to freedom of speech and assembly online; the right to privacy; protection from mass surveillance; and accessibility," says Alieu.

"This review is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create legislation that protects and upholds the digital rights of the Gambian people. We have to get this right for our country."

CASE STUDY 4

Argentina

Analía Aspis, Weiba Foundation, **Argentina**

SMALL GRANT HOLDER

When Weiba Foundation received their Internews grant, the organisation was only six months old. However, the team were already very clear about their mission: to support ordinary citizens to understand, claim and protect their digital rights.

Analía Aspis, Project Manager,had worked in the internet governance sector for five years, and had seen a divide between the theory of digital rights, and the practical implementation.

"We are lawyers, and we know that when we talk about digital rights, we are sometimes not speaking a language people can understand," says Analía. **"We wanted to bring different sectors together, and translate things for both sides."**

Using their Internews grant, Weiba focused on intellectual property. Argentina has adequate legislation around this, but the majority of artists are unaware of their rights. There is very little information available to them on what they can do to protect their work, and no training or support.

Over eight months, Analía and her team organised a series of workshops and curated an exhibition of artwork responding to the theme of digital rights.

The workshops covered topics such as data protection, privacy, protection for vulnerable people in online spaces, internet governance and intellectual property.

Each workshop lasted up to two hours, and attendance ranged from 25-35 people – more than double what the team had anticipated.

The artists were then invited to produce work in response to the issues discussed in the workshops, with the aim of communicating ideas around digital rights to the general public.

The resulting work was exhibited in a gallery in central Buenos Aires, and although the exhibition only ran for one day (the most the team could afford), and that day happened to see the heaviest rain in Buenos Aires for a decade, well over a hundred people visited.

The exhibition was divided into three areas: Privacy; Politics and Tech; and Censorship. These were the issues most artists had addressed, although a wide range of work was submitted.

The team was on hand during the exhibition to speak with the public about the topics covered. As the team had expected, members of the public had very little understanding of their digital rights, and the extent to which these are routinely compromised.

As a result, many visitors and artists asked how they could become more involved with Weiba Foundation's work, and wanted to learn more. Artists, in particular, asked for more straightforward, practical guidance on how they can protect their work: Analía and her team have linked with some academics who are experts in the field of artistic intellectual property, to provide this.

Analía and her team are applying for additional funding to continue their work, looking for creative ways to engage people with digital rights. Analía reflects, **"It was great for us to work with artists. They're so curious about things they don't understand, and they think in different ways.**

When we're trying to translate legal principles for ordinary people, we get tangled up in words. But they managed to express complicated concepts without using any words at all – and people understood perfectly."

Nonibala Narengbham, RiseUp
India
SMALL GRANT HOLDER

RiseUp is part of Women in Governance (WinG), a coalition of Indian organisations working to improve women's participation and representation in governance and decision-making at all levels.

Nonibala, RiseUp's Director, saw that frequent internet shutdowns were having a negative impact on women's lives, but that nobody was speaking out on the issue.

Nonibala and her team published a survey of internet connectivity and accessibility in 2017, and met with other women's organisations to discuss the implications. It became clear that there were two types of shutdown:

A. Unintentional, due to poor infrastructure – particularly common in rural areas.

B. Intentional – with increasing frequency, the government shuts down the internet whenever social or political issues arise. This may or may not be announced beforehand, and can last for up to a week.

Social and political issues arise often in Manipur and the whole of north-eastern India, where Nonibala is based.

Since 1958, the armed forces have had special powers, including the license to kill any citizen on suspicion of any crime. To date, there have been 1,528 documented cases of this, with many more undocumented.

Many women whose husbands or sons have been killed in this way desperately want to protest, but are afraid to do so.

Similarly, gender-based violence is widespread, but any groups trying to campaign for perpetrators to be brought to justice have been silenced, and this has also let to internet shutdowns.

Nonibala says, **"Whenever there are reports or rumours of even mild unrest or protest, the government shuts the internet down. Many people feel that shutdowns are needed, because they solve the problem – they control the situation.**

But our approach is that intentional shutdowns are a fundamental violation of human rights."

RiseUp applied for an Internews grant with the objective of raising awareness of digital rights amongst women's groups, and advocating for change.

Between April and June 2019, Nonibala and her team organised a three workshops, attended by 32 WinG leaders and members, civil society women's groups and individual women.

At these workshops, the team presented the results of the 2017 survey, updated with more recent figures.

For the majority of participants, this was the first time they had understood the connection between their rights and government-led shutdowns. By the end of the workshops, the participants had developed individual and collective advocacy strategies and action plans.

Nonibala explained why it is so important to have women leading on this topic:
"Some of our participants are survivors of gender-based violence. We support them to move from victimhood to leadership, and to become agents of change.

We are advocating for our own rights in a patriarchal society that looks the other way when we are raped, beaten or abused.

If we do not empower ourselves to lead on this issue, who will do it for us?"

CASE STUDY 6

Kyrgyz Republic

Natalia Li, Kyrgyz Republic

SMALL GRANT HOLDER

The absence of legislation governing social media – or any kind of internet regulation – is having extremely negative effects on the lives of ordinary people in Kyrgyz Republic.

In 2017, the Prime Minister ruled that bloggers were equivalent to print or broadcast media houses. This meant that anyone blogging in Kyrgyz Republic would have to register as a company, and comply with legislation designed to control national broadcasters and news outlets.

Anyone liking or sharing content on social media has the same responsibility and legal accountability as the person who created the content.

In a country where anyone discussing human rights is likely to be labelled as a dangerous extremist, this carries risks: recently, a young man was imprisoned because he shared a social media post that criticised the government.

Despite this, and despite the fact that around 70% of the Kyrgyz population regularly access social media content online, there is very little awareness of digital rights amongst the general public.

Not only are people unaware of the risks they run through everyday engagement with social media; they do not realise that their rights are routinely abused by the current legal system.

Natalia, a Kyrgyz journalist, used her Internews grant to work with a team of two other journalists and three editors, to create a series of four articles about internet democracy in Kyrgyz Republic.

The articles compared the situation with other countries, and highlighted the ways in which citizens are currently restricted. The work targeted the general public, and was published on an internet news site.

Natalia and her team also saw a need to provide training for bloggers, to help them to understand their rights and advocate for change.

But the bloggers weren't interested in participating. They didn't understand why the training was needed, and didn't think the regulations were problematic.

There was a similarly disappointing response to Natalia's articles on internet freedom. The team didn't monitor how many people accessed them, but think numbers were low.

As Natalia explains, **"People aren't really interested in such topics, and don't want to read about it. People are interested in murder, violence, juicy politics, and so on.**

But digital rights is quite a complex topic, and articles are maybe not the best way to cover it. Maybe another approach is needed."

This work enabled Natalia and her team to understand that a longer-term campaign is needed, engaging people through more popular social media platforms, like Facebook and Instagram.

As this is such a new concept for the Kyrgyz public, there is a need for in-depth discussion over a period of time that enables people to engage, ask questions and learn about what internet freedom *could* mean for their lives.

As Natalia points out, **"It's complex for people. In this country, we have problems with human rights in general – how can we expect people to understand digital rights?"**

So the articles were an important first step, and provided crucial learning for how to proceed. Natalia and her team were keen to build on this, but struggled to find funding.

After several months of trying to find ways to continue, the team simply couldn't afford to keep working.

Natalia had to take a job that provides a regular salary, and although she hopes to return to the issue of internet freedom at some time in the future, there are no plans for this at the moment.
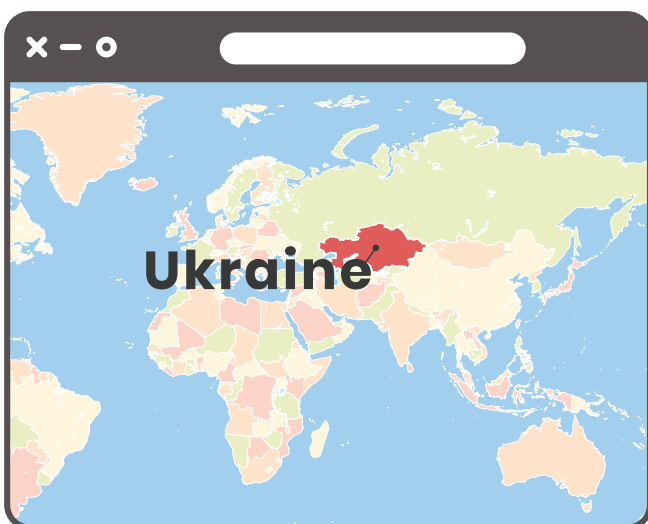
Vita Volodovska, Digital Security Lab, **Ukraine**

PIONEER

Although Digital Security Lab had only been operating for two years when they received their funding from Internews, they had already managed several small projects.

During this period of rapid growth, the team had focused on delivering their projects, and needed support with organisational development.

As Vita explains, **"We were clear on our values and our aims, but hadn't articulated any strategies. We were working on several small projects, but we knew we needed to put these in context – to step back and see the bigger picture. We couldn't do that on our own."**

The Internews team supported Vita and the team to carry out an organisational self-evaluation, and facilitated a two-day strategy workshop with a Ukrainian expert.

This enabled Digital Security Lab to prioritise its work, and to allocate resources more effectively. For example, the team realised that senior staff were spending excessive time on admin, and that they needed more legal experts on call.

Within a few months, the team had recruited HR and admin support staff,

and expanded their team to ten people, plus regional representatives throughout Ukraine. Not everybody works full time, but the organisation now has the right mix of expertise to achieve its goals.

Over the six months of their involvement with Internews, Vita and the team focused on preventing censorship, and promoting rights-positive legislation.

Digital Security Lab worked with other civil society organisations to examine the legal initiatives presented to parliament. The team provided legal analysis, and prepared press releases and articles in language non-experts could understand, to be shared with media outlets and other organisations.
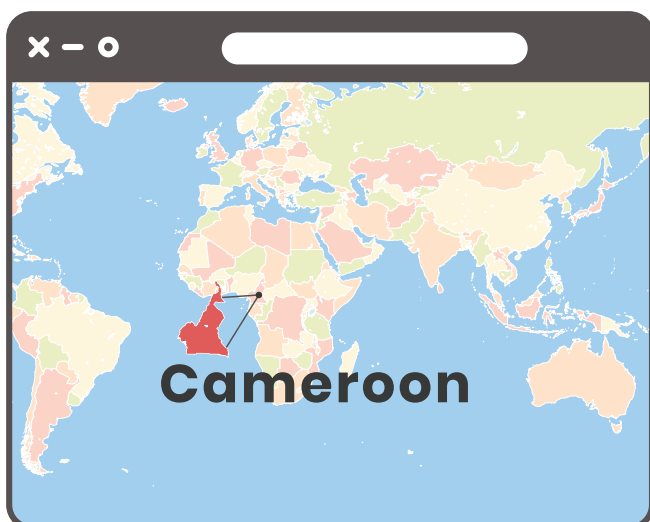
Simultaneously, the team worked with Members of Parliament and other government officials to increase their understanding of digital rights. In this way, they created allies, who they then supported to advocate against censorship in parliament.

This approach was effective, with two proposed Bills, which would have given the government powers to increase surveillance and censorship, being blocked.

Vita is convinced that the organisational development support from Internews, as well as the funding Digital Security Lab, contributed to this. **"At the beginning of the year, we were trying to do too many small things. Now we have a strategy, we are able to focus on the things that really matter."**

AfroLeadership had been working on open data for several years, when internet shutdowns in Cameroon led them to investigate digital rights.

Charles says that this was a shift for the organisation, **"We understood clearly that the shutdowns were a human rights issue, but our work was far from this. My background is in tech, and I saw clearly that digital rights is at the crossroads of technology and human rights."**

The first phase of Internews funding and support enabled Charles and the team to mainstream digital rights throughout their work, and to build a coalition of organisations with similar values to address the issue.

AfroLeadership quickly realised that communication was key, particularly when working with organisations whose focus was traditionally on offline human rights.

"You need to focus more on the rights question – to create the connections before drawing them to your space," Charles says. **"It's a new language for people. You have to meet them where they are."**

Charles Ngounou, AfroLeadership, Cameroon

PIONEER

Cameroon

Charles and his team organised meetings and forums in which journalists, civil society groups and parliamentarians could meet to discuss digital rights.

Although these were well attended, this approach was not risk-free.

In Cameroon, anyone speaking out against the government is at risk of arrest or imprisonment, 'or worse', as Charles says.

AfroLeadership has had to find ways of advocating for change without being seen as dissidents, and this had meant some difficult choices.

Charles is well known to the Cameroonian media as someone who disagrees with the government on internet freedom, and he is frequently asked to comment.

This offers an opportunity to raise awareness of the issue amongst the wider public, but it could also lead to damaged relationships with policy makers, to say nothing of the risk to Charles' personal safety.

AfroLeadership has taken the decision to refuse all interviews for the time being, focusing on building relationships with policymakers, and growing the national digital rights coalition.

In a closed society, change can be slow, but the work of the coalition is already bearing fruit: their principle objective was to prevent internet shutdowns during the 2018 elections, and this was achieved.

Now, AfroLeadership is gaining recognition as a leading expert on internet freedom in Africa. Charles is regularly asked to speak at international conferences, and credits Internews for this, saying, **"Not many donors trust organisations in Africa. But because of** Internews**, we have built our organisation and shown that we can be trusted."**

AfroLeadership is now hoping to expand the digital rights coalition into neighbouring countries, and to work more closely with other Internews grantees in West Africa.
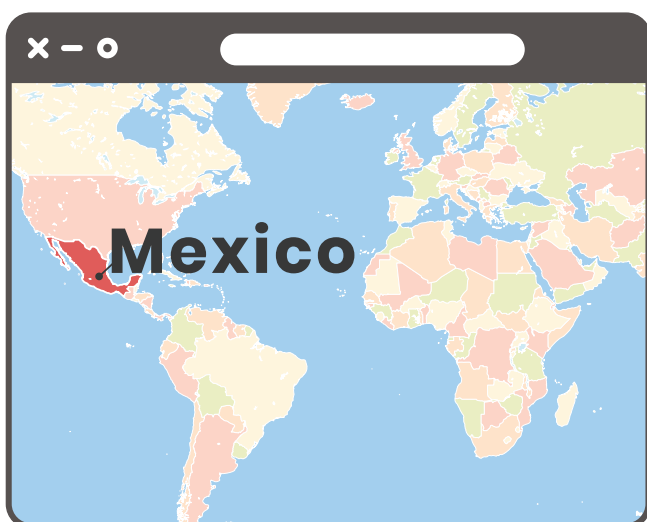
Nancy Reyes,
Accessibility Lab,
Mexico

PIONEER

Accessibility Lab's mission is to promote and defend digital rights, so that all people have equal access to information.

Physical accessibility for people with disabilities has been on the public agenda in Mexico for a long time.

There are established civil society organisations (CSOs) that have effective relationships with the government and private sector, and great progress has been made over the past few decades.

However, people with disabilities still do not have full access to the *digital* world, despite legislation requiring that all websites, apps and digital tools be accessible.

Instead of trying to start from scratch, Nancy Reyes and her team worked with CSOs, using their existing networks and relationships to facilitate introductions to government bodies and companies.

The team used their first small grant to assess Mexican universities' websites, ranking them in terms of accessibility.

They did the same for private sector companies and government departments, creating awareness of the issue of digital accessibility and building relationships.

The larger Internews grant has enabled Nancy and her team to develop proposals for several government departments, including the Federal Institute of Telecommunications.

In 2019, this agency approved Accessibility Lab's proposal to audit and train over 50 Mexican telecom providers, to ensure compliance with digital inclusion legislation.

This project is a prime example of how civil society can use legislation to effect change. As the law stands, companies risk a mandatory fine of 1% of their annual profits for every year that their websites, apps and tools do not comply with minimum accessibility standards.

This law has never been enforced before, but private sector telecoms operators now face the pressure of an external, independent organisation auditing them.

However, they also have the opportunity to take advantage of training and guidance from Accessibility Lab, who will also bring in CSOs for additional support on specific issues.

Nancy and her team anticipate that this will result in significant improvements in accessibility for people with disabilities.

At the same time, training for CSOs has increased understanding of digital rights.

Before the training, people with disabilities made complaints about inaccessible websites, but nothing changed. But now, people understand that the law is being broken.

With technical support from Accessibility Lab, one CSO is now planning to bring Mexico's first lawsuit against a company whose website is inaccessible.

Nancy says, **"For the first time, companies understand that people with disabilities are serious about their rights. Now they risk fines and lawsuits... suddenly inclusion matters to them."**

Accessibility Lab has received requests for training from public and private transport companies, retailers and government bodies.

Clearly, the work of Nancy and her team in publishing audit results, increasing awareness of digital rights and contributing to an informed, empowered civil society is bringing about lasting change.