ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL COUNCIL

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ECOSOCC Citizens' Forum shapes the future of democracy and digital governance in Africa: *urges civil society to tap into the potential of digital technologies*

Africa's Civil Society Organisations have been urged to take advantage of the potential of digital technologies to achieve continental aspirations and goals, and in particular, democracy.

Officially opening the Economic Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC)'s 2nd Annual Citizens Forum, Kenya's State Department for Information, Communications and Technology and Digital Economy, Principal Secretary, Eng. John Tanui said digital governance could promote citizen engagement, enabling them to participate effectively in decision-making processes that impact their lives.

The highly anticipated Second Edition of the annual Citizens' Forum themed 'Democracy and Digital Governance in Africa,' held from July 10th to July 11th, 2023, was a defining moment in the continent's quest to achieve democracy and digital governance. The forum took place on the side-lines of the 5th Mid-Year Coordination Meeting (MYCM) of the Assembly of the African Union.

The forum cultivated a collaborative and inclusive environment, providing a platform for substantive and thought-provoking discussions on the multifaceted aspects of democracy and digital governance in the African context.

Eng. Tanui noted that democracy, with its principles of inclusivity, transparency, and accountability, provided the foundation for good governance by embracing digital technologies upon which governments in Africa could enhance their efficiency, responsiveness, and service delivery to citizens.

Eng. Tanui said emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence and robotics were critical to Africa's development as they could be utilized in various sectors like healthcare, agriculture and finance to improve services, automate tasks, revolutionize industries and create new avenues for economic growth.

"Africa should actively invest in research and development in these fields, foster collaboration between academia and industry, and build a workforce equipped with the necessary skills to harness the potential of emerging technologies," he advised.

ECOSOCC's Presiding Officer, Mr. Khalid Boudali said digital technology opens doors for active citizen participation, bridging gaps and amplifying diverse voice.
He added that the digital space empowers youth participation and serves as a tool for empowerment and engagement, urging Africans to nurture digital literacy and provide platforms for young voices to be heard.

"However, misinformation and propaganda can exploit digital platforms, impacting public opinion and citizen participation. We must address these challenges and promote responsible use of social media," said Mr. Boudali. "Examining tactics used in misinformation and propaganda is crucial. By understanding these challenges, we can develop strategies to counteract them and promote accurate information."

ECOSOCC Head of Secretariat, William Carew said there was need for digital governance to help shape the political landscape and offer new opportunities for citizen participation, transparency and accountability.

He said good governance and democracy had always monopolized debates across the world, but the novelty lay in bringing technology to the dialogue.

"In today's world, digital technologies offer unprecedented opportunities and challenges, they have the potential for positive transformation, but when improperly used, they can fuel divisions within and between countries, increase insecurity, undermine human rights and exacerbate inequality," Mr. Carew explained.

Mr. Carew explained that efforts to enhance democracy in Africa were ongoing at the AU in advocating for democratic governance, promoting human rights and addressing governance challenges.

"When the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) was adopted in 2007, it was a progressive legal document that identified and addressed some of the continent's main governance challenges such as civil participation, inclusion and representation of women and minority groups, free and fair elections, and unconstitutional changes of government," he said.

Mr. Carew noted that one of the challenges posed by digital technologies was the rapid spread of disinformation and misinformation stating that, social media platforms and online news outlets had increasingly been uses as grounds for the dissemination of false information, propaganda, conspiracy theories, cyber-attacks, hacking and data breaches.

Also speaking during opening ceremony was Executive Director for CoDA in Action, Ms. Soud Aden-Osman who talked about the negativities of Illicit Financial Flows including corruption and degeneration of social services and resources vital for development.

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The Citizens' Forum provided an unparalleled avenue for African CSOs and other stakeholders to lend their voices and expertise to the dialogue on democracy and digital governance in Africa. By embracing holistic participation from diverse stakeholders, the forum not only reinforced its significance, but also nurtured a multi-dimensional dialogue that embodied the values of inclusivity and collaboration.

At the core of the forum's ambitions lay the primary objective of promoting citizen engagement within the overarching continental discourse on the nexus between democracy and digital governance. It achieved this by employing a multifaceted approach that entailed an in-depth examination of the issues as well as the identification of existing continental and international frameworks designed to improve democracy and digital governance. By providing this inclusive space, the forum empowered civil society representatives to assert their voices and articulate their perspectives and concerns. This, in turn, enabled a critical analysis of the intricate challenges, opportunities, and dynamics inherent in the realms of democracy and digital governance. As such, the discussions covered a wide range of topics, including misinformation, propaganda, illicit financial flows, trade and digital governance, bridging the digital divide, youth participation in shaping digital democracy, privacy and security, as well as digital literacy.

ECOSOCC's Citizens' Forum is designed to provide a unique opportunity for African civil society to pronounce itself on the ongoing and pressing issues in Africa that threaten democracy and citizen participation.

The Forum's participation was drawn from CSOs from all five regions of the continent working in relevant fields including youth and women's groups, advocacy groups, community-based organisations, non-governmental organisations, and faith-based organisations; esteemed figures from various sectors, including officials from the AUC, AU member states, UN agencies, development partner institutions, media representatives and academia.

A policy statement and a civil society program of action will be issued at the end of the forum and circulated to all AU member states.

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About ECOSOCC

The Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) was established in July 2004 as an Advisory Organ composed of different social and professional groups of AU Member States. The mandate of ECOSOCC is to contribute, through advice, to the effective translation of the objectives, principles and policies of the African Union into concrete programmes, as well as the evaluation of these programmes.

Learn more at: https://ecosocc.au.int

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