



The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) notes with grave concern the restrictions on internet access – commonly known as internet shutdowns – ordered by the government of Cameroon. The restrictions, which have been in effect since 17 January 2017, have specifically targeted Anglophone regions of Cameroon, reportedly following protests against the marginalisation of Anglophone Cameroonians’ cultural and linguistic rights by the government.

Relevant international law

In July 2016, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UN HRC) adopted a landmark resolution on the Promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet, unequivocally condemning measures to “intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online in violation of international human rights law.” The UN HRC went further to call on “all States to refrain from and cease such measures.”

In November 2016, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) reaffirmed the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, and specifically that “everyone shall have an equal opportunity to exercise the right to freedom of expression and to access to information without discrimination,” through the adoption of the Resolution on the Right to Freedom of Information and Expression on the Internet in Africa, in which it further noted its concern over “the emerging practice of State Parties of interrupting or limiting access to telecommunications services such as the Internet, social media and messaging services, increasingly during elections.” Of particular relevance, it noted, is Principle II(2), which provides that “any restrictions on freedom of expression shall be provided by law, serve a legitimate interest and be necessary in a democratic society.”

Impact of internet shutdowns

Recognising that the human rights enjoyed offline must, necessarily, apply online, APC is concerned that in addition to unduly limiting the information and expression rights of segments of Cameroonian society, as well as their right to association and peaceful assembly, this internet shutdown threatens the economic, social, cultural and linguistic rights of Anglophone Cameroonians, and unintentionally exposes all those experiencing it to risk of harm. We further note how internet and other communications shutdowns have, in the past, preceded gross human rights violations – which must be prevented by Cameroon’s government at all costs.

Here, we draw to the government of Cameroon’s attention several unintended consequences that may likely ensue as a result of this internet shutdown:

1. Citizens’ ability to communicate with one another about, *inter alia*, imminent risks to person and property in affected regions is severely impaired, exposing them to danger and harm.

2. Internet shutdowns have a direct and adverse impact on national and regional economies, thereby retarding the progress towards the achievement of developmental goals.
3. Shutdowns, however brief, present significant risks for investors in the provision of fixed-line and mobile networking infrastructure, and may even lead to investor flight. This not only directly impairs meaningful participation by citizens in the information society and economies, but also the achievement of critical Sustainable Development Goals.

APC therefore calls on the government of Cameroon to:

1. Order the immediate reinstatement of internet connectivity for all citizens and residents of Cameroon.
2. Take urgent measures to align Cameroon's policy, statutory and regulatory instruments with international law with respect to the application of all recognised human rights to the online space. In particular, we draw the government's attention to the instructive African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms which provides an African-developed framework for the governance and regulation of the internet in an African context.
3. Guarantee that the human rights of all people in Cameroon are fully respected both online and offline.

About APC

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is an organisation and network with 50 organisational members in 36 countries, with its chief operating office in Johannesburg, South Africa. APC's vision is that all people have easy and affordable access to a free and open internet to improve their lives and create a more just world. Its mission is to empower and support organisations, social movements and individuals in and through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to build strategic communities and initiatives for the purpose of making meaningful contributions to equitable human development, social justice, participatory political processes and environmental sustainability.

For further information about this statement, our work in Africa or the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms initiative, please contact:

Sekoetlane Phamodi

APC Africa Policy Coordinator

sekoetlane@apc.org