

EUROPEAN UNION DECLARATION ON DIGITAL RIGHTS AND PRINCIPLES: Strengthening the external dimension to ensure digital rights for all

March 2022

CONCORD Europe welcomes the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade and its accompanying Communication published by the European Commission on 26th January 2022. These documents will be essential to ensure that the digital transformation puts people at its centre, and that everyone's rights are protected in a digital world. As stated in the Declaration, the vision presented must be proactively promoted in the EU's external relations.

CONCORD Europe would like to propose the following five priorities to complement and reinforce the European Commission's proposal. We believe this will ensure that the Declaration leaves no one behind and contributes to the EU's ambition to promote a people-centred digital agenda in its internal as well as external actions, in an interconnected digital world.



1. Ensure digital rights inside and outside the EU

Digital rights are for everyone, including people in partner countries whose lives are affected by EU external policies on digital for development. CONCORD considers that a chapter on the external dimension in the Declaration is needed so as to reiterate the importance of policy coherence for sustainable development and refer to existing commitments on digital rights in EU external policies. We would like to see a stronger link and a more concrete commitment to protect digital rights outside the EU, in collaboration with partner countries and diverse stakeholders.



2. Define the people-centred approach

We welcome the overall aim of the Declaration to serve as a guide for a value-based, people-centred approach to the digital transformation, and the inclusion of a chapter on this approach. However, we believe that some key elements are missing,

in order for stakeholders to be able to truly take this approach forward in their actions and be accountable. A people-centered approach should:

- Prioritise those who are furthest behind and put availability, accessibility, affordability and inclusivity at its heart.
- Be human-rights based and ensure that no harm is caused to people and the enjoyment of their rights by the EU's actions.
- Ensure a participatory approach to the development and implementation of digital policies and initiatives, to better identify and address barriers, and respond to people's needs.
- Ensure sustainability. Chapter VI on sustainability should be further strengthened by specifying how the minimal environmental and social impact of digital products and services will be achieved and measured, including through transparency obligations and alignment with climate and environmental commitments.
- Support the development of technology that puts people at the centre of its design, with particular attention to safety, the needs of diverse users, as well as transparency and accountability.¹



3. Support the role of civil society to uphold and monitor the principles

The EU should support the role of civil society in an inclusive and people-centred digital transformation and build on civil society's expertise on these questions. In order to do so, it should:

- Actively involve civil society organisations in policy-making, design, implementation and monitoring of digital initiatives. Meaningful

partnerships and engagement with a wide range of civil society organisations, as well as transparent and structured channels for exchange, will be key to ensure this.

- Strengthen the capacity of civil society at different levels to research, advocate and litigate on digital rights and related issues.
- Safeguard online civic space, and support civil society and activists to develop safe digital tools and make the most of the freedoms of the digital space, while mitigating the risks they face online (surveillance, cyberbullying and harassment, mis- and disinformation).



4. Make commitments to gender equality visible

Gender equality and intersectionality is particularly lacking in the Declaration.² The digital gender divide remains an issue around the world, and continues to limit girls' and women's opportunities in the digital space. For a truly people-centred and inclusive digital transformation, the Declaration should recognise the digital gender divide and include commitments to:

- Work with diverse stakeholders to tackle sexual and gender-based violence online, with an intersectional approach.
- Support the inclusion of women and girls in all their diversity in the digital transformation, as users and creators of technology.
- Ensure that digitalisation of the public sector and services is inclusive of all users equitably while providing alternatives to digital services in parallel.

¹ *The Principles for Digital Development* developed by a group of international donors and multilateral organisations provide a strong basis for the design of accessible, inclusive, participatory and efficient digital solutions.

² This recommendation builds on the *EU's Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025* and the recently published European Commission *proposal for a directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence*



5. Monitor the application of the principles in EU external action

The EU has set the ambition to be a leader in a people-centred and value-based digital transformation on the global scene. We welcome the fact that the vision promoted by the Declaration will be promoted in EU external action and partnerships. However as pointed out by the Communication accompanying the Declaration, “for this initiative to be successful, it is important that the manner in which the digital principles will be put into practice is effectively monitored”. We call for the annual report on “The State of the Digital Decade” to include an assessment of how the principles have been applied in EU external action. This assessment should be based on a few key indicators developed with civil society, and linking to existing reporting frameworks on digital rights in EU external action (for example linked to the Human Rights and Democracy Action Plan, or the EU’s Gender Action Plan).



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