

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

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Greetings from Kampala, Uganda.

August brought powerful reminders of what coordinated advocacy, solidarity, and strategic partnerships can achieve. In Malawi, criminal defamation laws, long used to restrict civic space and silence dissent, were struck down in landmark court rulings.

These significant wins are the result of persistent efforts across our ecosystem. CIVICUS Alliance, one of CHARM's partners, played a critical role in both contexts: facilitating mid-stream advocacy, supporting partners in UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR), supporting diplomatic dialogue in 2023 Malawi delivering targeted advocacy trainings and providing technical support to national partners. This kind of sustained cross-border engagement is central to CHARM's mission. These legal victories not only protect journalists and human rights defenders but also reinforce the value of grassroots-driven reform, movement-building, and regional solidarity. As a consortium, we celebrate these milestones and recommend deepening collaboration in our shared pursuit of justice, equity, and dignity across the continent.

This month, we also had a conversation with the Magamba Network, one of CHARM core partners, around the Open Data Summit, Africa largest tech experts meetup. They share the journey of the summit, and the changes they have witnessed over the years. Enjoy your read,

The Coordination Team.



Justice Kachale Mwale, Malawi judge who delivered the landmark ruling on scrapped off section 200 of the Penal Code

Malawi Scraps Criminal Defamation Law in Landmark Win for Free Speech

In a major victory for democracy and press freedom, Malawi's High Court has ruled that the country's criminal defamation law is unconstitutional. The decision, delivered on 16 July 2025 by Justices Kachale, Mwale, and Mvula, immediately scrapped Section 200 of the Penal Code ensuring that no one can be prosecuted under it moving forward.

The case was brought by political activist Joshua Chisa Mbele, who had faced criminal charges after allegedly making critical remarks about a government official. He argued that the law was being weaponized to silence dissent and suppress open debate. The court agreed, stating that while protecting individual reputations is important, imprisoning someone for defamation is too extreme in a democratic society.

Instead, the judges emphasized that those who feel defamed should seek civil remedies such as compensation through the civil courts rather than using criminal law to punish speech. The ruling aligns with a broader shift across African and Commonwealth nations to decriminalize defamation and prioritize freedom of expression.

This milestone ruling was supported by sustained advocacy efforts led in part by CIVICUS: A Global Alliance for Citizen Participation, ...

...a key partner of the CHARM Consortium. CIVICUS played a critical role in mid-stream advocacy, including

Legal experts and human rights defenders have welcomed the court's decision as a pivotal step toward protecting civic space and ensuring that open public discourse is not criminalized. However, they also cautioned that civil defamation laws must not be misused as alternative tools to silence critics.

For journalists, activists, and grassroots defenders, this ruling is a clear affirmation: public debate is essential in a democracy, and freedom of expression must be safeguarded and not punished.

Civics' support to partners in Malawi was based on a collaborative approach that recognised the country's unique context. Working with human rights actors, civil society organisations, and human rights defenders, focused on effective partnership, facilitating and supporting their own initiatives. Civics provided meaningful support through capacity building initiatives, sub-granting mechanisms, community mobilisation and dialogues, and knowledge sharing that respected local expertise and focus in civic space. This approach helped Civics build resilient and sustainable relationships between civic actors and key relevant government institutions.

The Open Data Africa Summit: Zimbabwe largest gathering of digital activists.

Every year, the Open Data Africa Summit brings together experts, activists, and students to rethink how technology, data, and civic engagement can shape Africa's future.

This year's edition, which will run from the 24 – 25th of September at Harare Gardens, Moto Republic, is themed "Decolonize the Internet", a powerful call to challenge bias in technology and open up more inclusive digital spaces. Vera Chisvo, Digital X Program Lead, Magamba Network points out that the summit is unique because of its diversity:

"We have hosted journalists from CNN and Al Jazeera as key speakers. I'm not aware of any other space in Zimbabwe where students get this kind of direct access to such speakers. Instead of only reading books or scrolling on TikTok, they get to sit with experts and exchange ideas and hence get different perspectives on how the digital space is expanding."

Over two days, this year's summit will feature lightning talks, masterclasses, exhibitions, and student debates, with over 50 speakers, drawn from local and international organizations. Topics range from how journalism curricula should integrate Artificial intelligence, the ethical dilemmas of machine learning, to how to capitalize on the Western dominance shapes the internet, utilizing the research they have on this to advance the continent digital space.



*Some of the participants in the 2024 Open Data Africa Summit
(Above) Member of Parliament for Buduriro South Constituency
Darlington Chigumbu (left)*



*On a panel with Mlondolozzi Ndlovu (Right) journalist and lecturer
at Christan College of Southern Africa during the Summit (Below)*

The Open Data Summit: Zimbabwe largest gathering of digital activists.

For Kudzayi Zvinavashe, Digital Democracy Africa Officer at Magamba network, the student debates are a highlight: “We draw about 300 participants per day. The anticipation is huge; students and lecturers look forward to it all year. It gives them confidence to step into the same space as global experts and contribute their perspectives.

Hosting such a large gathering in Zimbabwe is never easy. Financial constraints remain a major hurdle, with fundraising often stretching until the final day. Immigration policies have also limited participation from countries like Nigeria, and political sensitivities, especially during election years, mean certain conversations must be navigated carefully.

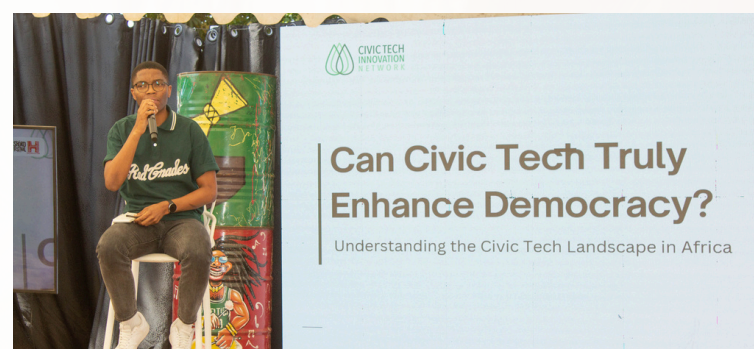
Vera Chisvo, Digital X Program Lead, Magamba Network explains: “Even livestreaming has its risks. One year, an activist raised regime change issues during a session and we had to cut the broadcast. The context here matters, and governments can get nervous when sensitive topics come up.”

Despite these challenges, the Open Data Africa Summit continues to grow in reputation and impact. Students, lecturers, and journalists alike eagerly await each edition. Kudzayi shares some of the future plans: “We want to take the summit to different parts of Zimbabwe, involve students more in curating sessions, and even support travel for those coming from outside Harare. It’s about making this truly people driven.”

The vision is clear: to move beyond a single annual event into a year-round platform that empowers students, amplifies local voices, and reimagines Africa’s place in the digital world. At its heart, the Open Data Summit is more than just a conference, it’s a meeting place of ideas, diversity, and bold new futures.



(Above) Farai Munroe, Magamba Network Creative Director during last year Open Data Africa Summit



Nkosinathi Mcetywa, Communication and community Organizer at the Civic Tech Innovation Network speaking during the 2024 Summit



About CHARM

CONSORTIUM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND MEDIA IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA (CHARM) aims to promote and protect human rights, civic space and media freedoms in Sub-Saharan Africa.

CHARM is a partnership of CIVICUS, Civil Rights Defenders, DefendDefenders, Fojo Media Institute, The Wits Centre for Journalism, Réseau des Femmes Leaders pour le Développement, and Magamba Network.

The partnership acknowledges the role that a free and active media and civil society have in the protection of robust democracies and the promotion of national development.


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