# Reimagining the Future of Human Rights in Africa:

## *West & Central Africa Convening*

**Securing Gains. Centering Dignity. Shaping Futures.**

Cotonou, Benin | 10 - 12 November 2026

# Concept Note

Reimagining the Future of Human Rights in Africa: West & Central Africa Convening

## 1. Purpose

The Reimagining the Future of Human Rights in West and Central Africa Convening seeks to provide a forward-looking regional platform for dialogue on the evolving human rights landscape in West and Central Africa. It will examine emerging governance, political, economic, environmental and technological challenges affecting the realization of human rights and identify innovative, African-led solutions that strengthen democratic governance, peace, justice and inclusive development.

The convening forms part of a broader continental initiative to develop a future-fit African Human Rights Architecture, ensuring that the perspectives, priorities and experiences of West and Central Africa inform the continental dialogue on the future of human rights governance in Africa. It supports the aspirations of AU Agenda 2063, the implementation priorities of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Strategic Plan 2026-2028, and the United Nations' commitment to advancing human rights, conflict prevention, sustainable development and accountable governance across Africa.

The convening will also inform the strategic thinking and priorities of the recently established Regional Hub for Central and West Africa of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, based in Yaoundé Cameroon.

## 2. Background and Rationale

The West and Central Africa region possesses a rich tradition of people-centered governance approaches founded on principles of dignity, justice, solidarity, and accountability. This is evidenced by historical systems including the Charter of Kurukan Fuga (1236), the Charter of the Hunters of Mandé, the Timbuktu Manuscripts and other endogenous African sources of human rights. These instruments recognized the importance of social responsibility, peaceful co-existence, and respect for human dignity long before the emergence of contemporary international human rights frameworks. Similar values underpin the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and remain relevant to Africa's pursuit of peace, democratic governance and sustainable development.

Over recent decades, countries across the region have strengthened constitutional, legal, and institutional frameworks for the protection of human rights and demonstrated commitment to regional and international accountability mechanisms. The region also benefits from vibrant civil society organizations, active youth movements, growing regional institutions, expanding digital innovation, rich indigenous knowledge systems and increasing recognition of the importance of inclusive governance. These strengths provide a strong foundation for developing innovative, locally driven approaches that reinforce human rights, democratic governance, peacebuilding and sustainable development in line with Agenda 2063, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Notwithstanding this progress, implementation gaps and emerging challenges continue to affect the full realization of these important commitments. Countries in the region are navigating complex and interconnected political, security, economic, social, environmental and technological issues. These present challenges and opportunities for strengthening human rights, good governance, peace and security, sustainable development, and regional cooperation.

Across the region, citizens are increasingly expressing frustration with the inability of democratic governance systems to deliver tangible development, economic, and security outcomes. Consequently, public confidence in governance processes and institutions is declining, highlighting the urgent need to strengthen accountable, inclusive, participatory, and rights-based governance systems.

Armed conflict, violent extremism, organized crime and humanitarian crises continue to affect large parts of the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, Mano River Basin, Great Lakes Region and parts of Central Africa. These challenges have resulted in widespread displacement, civilian casualties, disruption of livelihoods, and increased pressure on the institutions responsible for protecting human rights and delivering essential public services. Strengthening prevention, early warning and accountability mechanisms is therefore essential to promoting peace and protecting vulnerable populations.

Despite abundant natural resources, many countries in the region are still dealing with high levels of poverty, unemployment, inequality, debt pressures, and limited economic opportunities. Challenges relating to natural resource governance, illicit financial flows, domestic resource mobilization and the changing global economic conditions have constrained the capacity of states in the region to invest in social services and mobilize maximum available resources to progressively achieve full realization of economic and social rights.

Climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss further compounds these challenges through desertification, resource competition, food insecurity, forced migration and environmental degradation, issues which, in some cases, lead to inter-community conflicts. The Congo Basin, one of the world's most important ecological systems, highlights the need to balance environmental protection with the rights of indigenous peoples and forest-dependent communities.

The region is also witnessing increasing restrictions on civic space, including limitations on freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Emerging concerns such as digital surveillance, internet shutdowns, online censorship, disinformation and the enactment of cybersecurity and counter-terrorism legislation present new challenges for the protection of digital rights and civic participation. Meanwhile, changing geopolitical dynamics and shifting international priorities also reinforcing the importance of African-led responses and stronger regional institutions.

At the same time, evolving societal debates on identity and nationality, inclusion, sovereignty, technology and development require more adaptive and context-sensitive human rights responses. It is therefore important to prioritize stronger regional ownership, innovative partnerships, and future-oriented institutions capable of anticipating and responding to emerging risks while consolidating social cohesion and stability.

Against this backdrop, the convening will provide an opportunity to reflect on how the existing human rights institutions, narratives and partnerships in the region can be further strengthened to respond effectively to current and emerging challenges. The convening will adopt a forward-looking and solutions-oriented approach as it deliberates on viable recommendations to realize a resilient and inclusive human rights architecture that recognizes the diversity of national contexts and experiences across West and Central Africa.

## 3. Thematic Focus Areas for the Convening

The convening will be organized around four interrelated thematic areas reflecting key current and emerging human rights issues in the region while contributing to the broader continental dialogue on the future of human rights governance in Africa.

### Theme 1: Democratic Governance, Constitutionalism and Civic Space

This theme will examine how governance systems can better respond to citizens' aspirations for accountable leadership, participation, justice, and inclusion. Discussions will explore democratic legitimacy beyond electoral processes, constitutionalism, the rule of law, judicial independence, civic participation, digital rights, and the protection of civic space. Attention will be given to strengthening democratic institutions, restoring public trust, and promoting responsive governance capable of addressing contemporary human rights challenges.

### Theme 2: Peace, Security and Human Rights

Participants will examine the interrelationship between peace, security, good governance and human rights in contexts affected by armed conflict, terrorism, violent extremism, and humanitarian crises. The discussions will explore prevention, early warning, transitional justice, accountability, human rights and conflict-sensitive governance and the protection of vulnerable populations, while identifying practical approaches for integrating human rights into peacebuilding, governance and security responses.

### Theme 3: Human Rights Economies, Triple planetary crisis, Natural Resource Governance and Extractivism

This theme will focus on the relationship between economic governance and the realization of human rights. Discussions will examine inclusive economic development, business and human rights, governance of extractive industries, environmental justice, climate resilience and the impact of illicit financial flows, high debt burdens, and taxation policies on the state's ability to mobilize resources for the realization of human rights, including the right to development. Particular attention will be given to protecting communities affected by natural resource exploitation and conflicts, promoting sustainable management of critical ecosystems such as the Congo Basin, the fair distribution of the benefits of development and advancing human rights-based approaches to economic transformation consistent with the AU Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

### Theme 4: Regional Leadership and a Future-Fit Human Rights Architecture

This theme will explore how regional institutions, including the AU human rights organs (the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR), and the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), Regional Economic Communities, National Human Rights Institutions, civil society, academia and the private sector, can strengthen Africa's human rights architecture. Discussions will identifyopportunities to modernize institutional approaches, reinforce implementation and compliance mechanisms, strengthen partnerships and develop African-led responses to emerging human rights challenges in an increasingly complex global environment. The new architecture of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Africa will also be discussed as a new opportunity for stronger and more responsive support to human rights in the region.

## 4. Cross-Cutting Lenses

Across all thematic discussions, the convening will integrate the following cross-cutting perspectives:

Gender equality and women's rights.

Youth leadership and intergenerational inclusion.

Human rights and emerging technologies.

Disability inclusion and the protection of vulnerable groups.

Indigenous peoples and minority rights.

Climate and environmental resilience, and sustainability.

Global extractivism, Business, human rights, environmental sustainability, and responsible investment.

Prevention, accountability, monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

These cross-cutting lenses will ensure that discussions remain inclusive, evidence-based, and responsive to the diverse realities of West and Central Africa.

# 5. Overall Goal and Objectives

## 5.1 Overall Goal

To generate innovative, African-led policy dialogue and practical recommendations that strengthen human rights governance, democratic institutions, peace, justice and sustainable development in West and Central Africa, while contributing to the development of a future-fit African human rights architecture.

## 5.2 Specific Objectives (Convening-Level)

The convening seeks to:

Analyze emerging political, economic, social, environmental and technological trends shaping the future of human rights in West and Central Africa.

Promote dialogue among governments, regional institutions, civil society, academia, youth, the private sector and development partners on innovative approaches to advancing human rights.

Identify practical policy recommendations and institutional reforms that strengthen democratic governance, constitutionalism, accountability, and civic participation.

Promote human rights-based approaches to peacebuilding, climate action, natural resource governance, and inclusive economic development.

Strengthen collaboration among regional institutions, including the ACHPR, AfCHPR and ACERWC, ECOWAS, ECCAS, National Human Rights Institutions, United Nations entities and civil society organizations.

Generate region-specific recommendations that contribute to the continental dialogue and the development of the Roadmap for a Future-Fit African Human Rights Architecture.

# 6. Convening Design and Approach

The convening will adopt a participatory, evidence-based and solutions-oriented approach that combines policy dialogue, expert analysis and stakeholder engagement.

Preparatory activities will include regional consultations, policy dialogues and public conversations organized in collaboration with think tanks, academic institutions, media organizations and civil society networks across West and Central Africa. These engagements will identify regional priorities, capture citizens' perspectives, and generate evidence to inform the convening.

The three-day regional convening will comprise keynote addresses, high-level panel discussions, thematic breakout sessions and interactive dialogue designed to encourage exchange among policymakers, practitioners and affected communities. Discussions will focus on practical solutions, institutional strengthening, and effective implementation rather than solely identifying challenges.

The recommendations emerging from the convening will be consolidated into a regional outcome document, which will serve as the official contribution of West and Central Africa to the continental convening and inform the development of a future-fit African human rights architecture.

# 7. Venue and Date

Location: Cotonou, Benin

Date: from 10-12 November 2026

## 8. Target Participants

The convening will bring together approximately 70 participants representing diverse sectors and expertise across West and Central Africa.

Participants will include:

African Union organs and institutions.

African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR)

African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC)

ECOWAS, ECCAS, and other Regional Economic Communities.

National Human Rights Institutions.

United Nations entities and mechanisms.

Government representatives.

Civil society organizations and human rights defenders.

Academic and research institutions.

Youth and women's organizations.

Indigenous peoples' representatives.

Business leaders and private sector actors.

Philanthropic organizations and development partners.

Media practitioners and digital innovation experts.

The convening will seek balanced representation across geography, gender, age, language and professional expertise to ensure inclusive and meaningful dialogue.

## 9. Expected Outputs

The convening will produce the following key outputs:

A Regional Outcome Statement highlighting the priority of human rights, governance, peace, security and development issues emerging from West and Central Africa.

Evidence-based policy recommendations to strengthen democratic governance, constitutionalism, civic space, peacebuilding, environmental justice, inclusive economic development and institutional accountability.

A regional synthesis report identifying emerging trends, opportunities, risks and early warning indicators to inform regional and continental policy responses.

Priority recommendations from West and Central Africa to inform the continental convening and contribute to the development of the Roadmap for a Future-Fit African Human Rights Architecture.

A strengthened regional partnership platform that enhances collaboration among the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), Regional Economic Communities, National Human Rights Institutions, United Nations entities, civil society, academia, youth, the private sector and development partners.

A knowledge repository documenting key discussions, lessons learned and innovative practices that can support future policy dialogue and institutional strengthening.

## 10. Expected Outcomes

The convening is expected to achieve the following outcomes:

Increased regional consensus on emerging human rights priorities and the future direction of human rights governance in West and Central Africa.

Stronger collaboration and coordination among regional institutions, governments, National Human Rights Institutions, civil society, academia and international partners.

Enhanced regional ownership of the human rights agenda through African-led policy dialogue and locally grounded solutions.

Practical recommendations that strengthen implementation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, contribute to the achievement of Agenda 2063, and reinforce the United Nations' commitment to human rights, prevention and sustainable development in Africa.

Recommendations on strategic priorities for the new architecture of OHCHR's presence in West and Central Africa

Improved understanding of emerging issues, including digital governance, climate justice, business and human rights, civic space and peacebuilding, and their implications for future policy development and institutional strengthening.

A consolidated regional contribution that shapes the continental dialogue and supports the development of a responsive, resilient and future-oriented African human rights architecture.

## 11. Implementation and Follow-up

Following the convening, the Working Group will consolidate the proceedings, recommendations and agreed priorities into a Regional Outcome Document for dissemination to participants, partner institutions and relevant regional and continental stakeholders.

The regional recommendations will be presented at the continental convening and integrated into the development of the Roadmap for a Future-Fit African Human Rights Architecture, ensuring that the experiences and priorities of West and Central Africa inform broader continental policy development and institutional strengthening.

Partners will continue collaboration and support through the Regional Working Group to:

Promote implementation of agreed follow-up actions;

Monitor progress on priority recommendations;

Document lessons learned and emerging good practices;

Strengthen regional cooperation and knowledge sharing; and

Support integration of the recommendations into relevant AU, ACHPR, Regional Economic Communities, and UN human rights processes.

The Working Group will also encourage periodic reflection on implementation of progress and emerging challenges to ensure that the recommendations remain relevant and responsive to evolving regional priorities.