



Access Now Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Climate Change for UN General Assembly 79th Session Report on “Access to Information on Climate Change and Human Rights”

17 June 2024

Introduction

Access Now welcomes this opportunity to provide relevant information to the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Climate Change (Special Rapporteur) to inform the thematic report on access to information on climate change and human rights to be presented to the UN General Assembly at the 79th session.¹ Access Now, a UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) accredited organization, routinely engages with the UN in support of our mission to extend and defend the digital rights of individuals and communities at risk around the world.² Since its founding in 2009, Access Now monitors the abuse and misuse of new and emerging technologies that threaten fundamental human rights, including freedoms of expression, opinion, association, and peaceful assembly, as well as the rights to privacy and non-discrimination. We also closely monitor internet shutdowns and coordinate the global #KeptOn coalition and campaign against internet shutdowns.³

This submission addresses two key topics from the Special Rapporteur’s questionnaire. First, the undue barriers to accessing information on human rights and climate change, particularly focusing on how internet shutdowns and censorship of climate-related content impede this access. Second, the inadequate access of climate-related information from public authorities and businesses, which has significant human rights impacts, and disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, such as refugees, displaced persons, environmental defenders, and Indigenous peoples. It is important to note that while this submission draws upon examples, they are non-exhaustive, and do not represent the lived experiences of all persons at risk. More information is required to take into full account the intersecting forms of oppression of those who are directly targeted.

I. Internet shutdowns as a barrier to accessing climate-related information.

1. Internet shutdowns interfere with fundamental human rights, including the right to access information.⁴ Governments often justify shutdowns with reasons like national security, public safety, and the prevention of misinformation and hate speech.⁵ However, data from the

¹ OHCHR, [Call for inputs: Access to information on climate change and human rights](#), 2024.

² As a grassroots-to-global organization, we partner with local actors to bring a human rights agenda to the use, development, and governance of digital technologies, and to intervene where technologies adversely impact our human rights. By combining direct technical support, strategic advocacy, grassroots grantmaking, and convenings such as RightsCon, we fight for human rights in the digital age. Access Now, [About Us](#), 2021.

³ Access Now, [#KeptOn](#), 2023.

⁴ Access Now, [Digital Rights at the U.N. HRC 49 and Beyond](#), Apr. 2022.

⁵ Access Now, [#KeptOn Annual Report](#), May 2024, page 10.

#KeepItOn coalition — a global campaign of more than 300 organizations from 105 countries fighting internet shutdowns — indicates that governments typically order shutdowns to quell protests or silence citizens during national events like elections.⁶

2. In 2023, a new trend emerged as internet shutdowns coincided with natural disasters in Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, and Türkiye.⁷ These shutdowns exacerbated the devastating impact of 240 calamities globally, driven by rising temperatures and shifting weather patterns linked to the climate crisis.⁸ Rural and developing nations were hit hardest, facing logistical hurdles, protection gaps, and challenges in supplying necessities amidst water pollution and crop losses.⁹
 - a. In **Myanmar**, the military junta’s ongoing digital crackdown worsened the impact of Cyclone Mocha, which struck western Myanmar and parts of Bangladesh in May 2023.¹⁰ The cyclone affected a population enduring internet shutdowns, military attacks, displacement, and movement restrictions for over two years.¹¹ Despite storms being common, 2023 stood out with five extremely dangerous tropical cyclones, including Cyclone Mocha, fueled by record-high global sea surface temperatures observed in the first half of the year.¹² Deliberately cut off from the internet, Rohingya Muslims, oppressed both in Myanmar and as refugees fleeing genocide in Bangladesh, were unable to receive crucial storm warnings, evacuation routes, or post-disaster relief assistance.¹³
 - b. Furthermore, when a massive earthquake struck the Middle East in February of 2023, authorities in **Iraq** had blocked social media and messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, X, and Instagram in a misguided attempt to prevent cheating in school exams.¹⁴
 - c. Similarly, **Türkiye’s** government blocked access to X platform to suppress protests and online criticism of its crisis response efforts.¹⁵
 - d. Similarly, following the devastating floods caused by Storm Daniel in **Libya** in September 2023, communication blackouts and internet shutdowns worsened the

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* at 15.

⁸ Eos Data Analytics, [Natural Disasters 2023: A Year of Tragically Record-Breaking](#), 22 Feb. 2024; Access Now, [#KeepItOn Annual Report](#), May 2024, pages 15-16.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Reuters, [At least three killed as powerful storm batters Myanmar](#), 15 May 2023.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, [Myanmar: Junta Blocks Lifesaving Cyclone Aid](#), 20 June 2023.

¹² Eos Data Analytics, [Natural Disasters 2023: A Year of Tragically Record-Breaking](#), 22 Feb. 2024.

¹³ Human Rights Watch, [Myanmar: Junta Blocks Lifesaving Cyclone Aid](#), 20 June 2023; Access Now, [Fighting systemic racism in the digital age: a global challenge](#), 10 Dec. 2020.

¹⁴ Access Now, [People need the internet during emergencies: #KeepItOn in Iraq](#), 7 Feb. 2024.

¹⁵ Access Now, [In the aftermath of devastating earthquake, authorities in Turkey must #KeepItOn](#), 9 Feb. 2023.

disaster.¹⁶ The floods killed at least 11,300 people and displaced 43,000.¹⁷ As with Cyclone Mocha, record-high global sea surface temperatures fueled the storm's intensity.¹⁸ Although the Libyan Post Telecommunications & Information Technology Company blamed the internet disruption on a cut in fiber optic cables and restored services the same day,¹⁹ evidence suggests communications were deliberately cut during large protests demanding accountability for the catastrophic flood and the burst of Mansour dams.²⁰ Additionally, authorities reportedly ordered journalists to leave the city during these protests.²¹

3. Overall, these internet shutdowns constitute a disproportionate response and violate human rights, hindering access to information and curtailing freedoms of expression and assembly.²² This is particularly detrimental during emergencies when connectivity is crucial for accessing climate and disaster-related information, seeking aid, and providing mutual support.²³ Moreover, internet shutdowns can have a damaging impact beyond the duration of the shutdown itself. Emerging technologies and services like Google Crisis Response complement real-time data from weather monitoring systems and environmental sensors in specific locations to accurately predict climate-related disasters and threats.²⁴ However, internet shutdowns can disrupt the flow of this vital data, preventing timely and accurate forecasting, and consequently compromising response efforts during natural disasters.

II. Censorship of climate change information and misrepresentation of climate-related content.

4. In addition to government-mandated internet shutdowns, the censorship of climate information and removal of related content by corporations create significant barriers to accessing vital information.

¹⁶ Abdulkader Assad, [Phone calls, Internet cut off in Derna since Tuesday dawn](#), 9 Sept. 2023; Access Now, [Libya floods: people need reliable internet now](#), 22 Sept. 2023.

¹⁷ France 24, [UN says death toll at least 11,300 in Libya's flood-hit Derna](#), 17 Sept. 2023; OCHA, [Libya: Flood update Flash Update No.6](#), 21 Sept. 2023.

¹⁸ Eos Data Analytics, [Natural Disasters 2023: A Year of Tragic Record-Breaking](#), 22 Feb. 2024; University of Maine, Climate Reanalyzer, [Daily Sea Surface Temperature](#), 10 Dec. 2023.

¹⁹ LPTIC, [Facebook post](#), 19 Sept. 2023; LPTIC, [Facebook post](#), 19 Sept. 2023.

²⁰ France 24, [Communications cut to flood-hit Libya city after protests](#), 19 Sept. 2023; BBC News, [Libya flood: Derna mayor's house burnt down in protests](#), 19 Sept. 2023.

²¹ New York Times, [Residents See Signs of Crackdown on Dissent After Libya Floods](#), 2023; Access Now, [Libya floods: people need reliable internet now](#), 22 Sept. 2023.

²² Human Rights Committee, [General Comment No. 34](#), U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/GC/23, 12 Sept. 2011; Human Rights Committee, [General Comment No. 37](#), U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/GC/37, 17 Sept. 2020.

²³ Access Now, [In the aftermath of devastating earthquake, authorities in Turkey must #KeepItOn](#), 9 Feb. 2023.

²⁴ "Through partnerships with local governments, we've developed real-time flood forecasting models that predict when and where a flood might occur, along with its severity . . . Using data from NOAA's satellites and the computing power of Google Earth Engine, we're able to detect an active wildfire and produce an approximate boundary on Google Search and Maps." Google Crisis Response, [Google's crisis alerts provide access to trusted safety information across Search, Maps, and Android](#); Google Research, [The Technology Behind our Recent Improvements in Flood Forecasting](#), 3 Sept. 2020; see also Ambee, [Safeguard Your Business Against Disasters With Natural Disasters API](#); see generally Access Now, [Human rights matter in the AI debate. Let's make sure AI does us more good than harm](#), 8 Nov. 2018.

- a. During the unprecedented 2023 wildfires in **Canada**, Meta’s decision to block news content from Canadian outlets on Facebook and Instagram hindered emergency response efforts and the dissemination of crucial wildfire updates.²⁵ This left many without timely information on evacuation orders, safety protocols, and fire developments, exacerbating the risks faced by affected communities.²⁶ The lack of reliable news sources also fueled the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories, further endangering lives.²⁷ While wildfires occur naturally in many ecosystems, their intensification due to global warming made the 2023 fires particularly devastating, causing widespread damage and loss of life.²⁸ Criticism from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau underscored Meta’s prioritization of profit over public safety, calling the company an "irresponsible web giant."²⁹ Such actions undermine community safety and well-being, preventing access to critical climate information when it is most needed.
5. Another growing trend that hinders people’s access to accurate climate information is the proliferation of “greenwashing” or “climate-washing” campaigns by corporations on social media. By making false or misleading claims about their environmental impact, such as promoting minor eco-friendly initiatives while continuing harmful practices, these corporations mislead the public and distort the reality of climate change.³⁰ A study analyzing over 8,000 ads served more than 20,000 times on Facebook found many green claims to be “vague, meaningless, or unsubstantiated”.³¹ For instance, in early 2023, a class action lawsuit was filed against Delta Air Lines Inc., alleging that Delta’s claim of carbon neutrality was false, relying on ineffective “junk carbon offsets” that failed to address the climate crisis.³²
6. Overall, the major social media and internet platforms fail at a systemic level “to acknowledge and take the issue of climate disinformation seriously,” according to a coalition of climate and anti-disinformation organizations.³³ X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, consistently scores lowest in the group’s analyses, including for its lack of transparency around any policies regarding misleading information about climate change.³⁴

²⁵ The Conversation, [Meta’s Canadian news ban could put people at risk during public emergencies](#), 30 Apr. 2024.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Eos Data Analytics, [Natural Disasters 2023: A Year of Tragic Record-Breaking](#), 22 Feb. 2024.

²⁹ CTV News, [Trudeau points to fire fight, says Meta news ban degrades safety as it makes billions](#), 10 May 2024.

³⁰ United Nations, [Greenwashing – the deceptive tactics behind environmental claims](#).

³¹ The Conversation, [Social media ads are littered with ‘green’ claims. How are we supposed to know they’re true?](#), 30 Nov. 2023.

³² Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change, Ian Fry, [U.N. Doc. A/78/255](#), 28 July 2023.

³³ Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD), [Underperforming & Unprepared](#), 18 Apr 2024.

³⁴ NBC News, [Musk’s X, formerly Twitter, ranks last in climate misinformation ‘scorecard’](#) 20 Sept. 2023.

7. Furthermore, the growing adoption of artificial intelligence by Big Tech companies raises concerns about its energy consumption and impact on climate change.³⁵ Apple’s recent announcement to integrate AI features into its devices through a partnership with OpenAI has heightened these worries.³⁶ Experts estimate AI-powered data centers could consume 4.6% to 9.1% of U.S. electricity by 2030, with AI tasks like those handled by ChatGPT or Siri using at least ten times more electricity than traditional Google searches.³⁷ Consequently, despite Big Tech’s public commitments to sustainability,³⁸ the introduction of these advanced products significantly increases their carbon footprint, potentially misleading consumers about their environmental impact. The justification for the widespread introduction of such energy-intensive tools is further challenged by the concerns around their impact on fundamental rights, including data protection and privacy,³⁹ as well as their basic unreliability which has recently been highlighted by the various issues surrounding the release of Google’s AI Overviews⁴⁰ as well as recent research on the unreliability of generative-AI based legal tools.⁴¹ With critics pointing out that the basic unreliability of many generative AI tools may not be possible to mitigate using methods currently available,⁴² it must be asked whether there is sufficient justification for the widespread rollout of such energy-intensive and unreliable tools.

8. In addition to corporate greenwashing, some governments have actively censored climate change information.⁴³ In the **United States**, from 2017 to 2021, the Trump administration made about 1,400 alterations to federal agency websites, removing and censoring “science-based information on environmental issues such as water pollution, climate change, and endangered species.”⁴⁴ These websites are vital for government communication with the public, so these changes impacted access to crucial climate information, depriving the public of essential scientific knowledge necessary for understanding environmental regulations and their health implications.⁴⁵ Therefore, the administration’s actions could have violated Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which requires states to “recognize the right of everyone to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications” and “respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research.”⁴⁶ Concerns about

³⁵ Nikkei Asia, [AI's looming climate cost: Energy demand surges amid data center race](#), 12 June 2024; Brookings, [The US must balance climate justice challenges in the era of artificial intelligence](#), 29 Jan. 2024.

³⁶ NPR, [Apple doubles down on artificial intelligence, announcing partnership with OpenAI](#), 11 June 2024.

³⁷ Axios, [AI data center demand poised to juice U.S. power needs](#), 30 May 2024.

³⁸ Apple, [Apple 2030: A plan as innovative as our products](#). Microsoft, [Corporate Responsibility](#).

³⁹ Access Now, [What you need to know about generative AI and human rights](#)

⁴⁰ WIRED, [Google Admits Its AI Overviews Search Feature Screwed Up](#), 30 May 2024

⁴¹ Magesh et al., [Hallucination-Free? Assessing the Reliability of Leading AI Legal Research Tools](#), Preprint manuscript, June 6, 2024

⁴² TechCrunch, [Why RAG won't solve generative AI's hallucination problem](#)

⁴³ Columbia Law School, Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, [Silencing Science Tracker](#).

⁴⁴ Union of Concerned Scientists, [Trump Administration Censored Information on Water Pollution, Climate Change, and Endangered Species](#), 13 July 2021; see also Audubon, [How the U.S. Government Is Aggressively Censoring Climate Science](#), 2018.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ OHCHR, [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#), 16 Dec. 1966; see also AAAS, [Right to Science](#).

access to accurate climate information are especially heightened with the possibility of the Trump administration's return next year.⁴⁷

III. Human rights impacts of inadequate information access on refugees, displaced persons, environmental defenders, and Indigenous peoples.

9. Climate change disproportionately affects refugees, displaced persons, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalized communities,⁴⁸ posing significant challenges in accessing crucial climate information. This issue is acute in disaster-affected regions, such as the 2023 earthquake in Syria, Iraq, and Türkiye, which host large populations of refugees and internally displaced persons. The lack of accessible communication channels locally and across borders exacerbates these challenges.⁴⁹ For example, heavy rainfall in 2021 affected more than 12,000 Rohingya refugees, damaging 2,500 shelters.⁵⁰ By 2050, the number of people vulnerable to floods is expected to rise from 1.2 billion in 2022 to 1.6 billion.⁵¹ Therefore, safeguarding access to information and communication channels is essential during crises and must never be intentionally disrupted.⁵²

10. Additionally, inadequate access to climate information and censorship of climate-related content significantly impact environmental human rights defenders. Internet shutdowns, content removal, and the misrepresentation of crucial data by state and corporate entities hinder the participation of those most affected by climate change in decision-making processes.⁵³ Indigenous leaders, who play key roles in protecting the environment, face particular challenges due to these barriers.⁵⁴ Violations of Indigenous peoples' rights to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent,⁵⁵ coupled with corporate greenwashing and difficulties accessing environmental impact assessment reports,⁵⁶ further impede their efforts to protect ancestral lands and preserve environments crucial for climate change management.⁵⁷

⁴⁷ The Economist, [A first look at our election-forecast model](#), 12 June 2024; The Washington Post, [Why scientists fear a second Trump term, and what they are doing about it](#), 12 June 2024.

⁴⁸ Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change, Ian Fry, [U.N. Doc. A/78/255](#), 28 July 2023.

⁴⁹ Access Now, [#KeepItOn Annual Report](#), May 2024, page 15; see also Reuters, [We fled war to die in an earthquake, says Iraqi woman mourning family in Turkey](#), 8 Feb 2023.

⁵⁰ Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change, [U.N. Doc. A/77/226](#), 26 July 2022, page 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* at 8.

⁵² Access Now, [#KeepItOn Annual Report](#), May 2024, page 16.

⁵³ Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change, [U.N. Doc. A/77/226](#), 26 July 2022, page 17.

⁵⁴ [Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean \(Escazú Agreement\)](#), 2018; see also The Climate Reality Project, [ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS IN THE AMAZON](#), 11 Apr. 2024.

⁵⁵ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, [Indigenous Peoples](#).

⁵⁶ The Guardian, [World's top banks 'greenwashing their role in destruction of the Amazon'](#), 11 June 2024; see also Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework, [U.N. Doc. No. A/HRC/17/31](#), 21 Mar. 2011.

⁵⁷ The Guardian, [The 'carbon pirates' preying on Amazon's Indigenous communities](#), 21 Jan. 2023.

11. Moreover, environmental defenders, including Indigenous peoples, face alarming levels of attacks both online and offline. Many rely on the internet to advocate for their causes but are at high risk of surveillance and vilification, often leading to physical assaults and even assassinations.⁵⁸ Latin America has seen a surge in violence against these defenders, with the Amazon being particularly affected.⁵⁹ In 2022, 88% of defender killings occurred in Latin America, with 36% being Indigenous peoples.⁶⁰ Women defenders are disproportionately targeted by identity-based disinformation and smear campaigns, and attacks often extend to their families and colleagues, creating a chilling effect.⁶¹ These digital human rights violations further impede access to essential information, intensifying the risks for those protecting the environment.

Recommendations

12. Based on the following submission Access Now makes the following recommendations:

States

- a. Ensure access to accurate, timely, and comprehensive climate information, including unrestricted environmental data and research, adhering to best practices and standards on open data;
- b. Provide equitable access to climate-related information for marginalized communities, addressing language, cultural context, and accessibility needs;
- c. Engage in international cooperation to improve global climate information access, publicly commit to keep the internet on, and condemn internet shutdowns.

Private sector (applicable to both the business community and its investors)

- a. Publicly disclose carbon footprint, sustainability efforts, and compliance with environmental regulations;
- b. Adopt sustainable business practices, including reducing emissions, investing in renewable energy, and supporting eco-friendly technologies;
- c. Support environmental human rights defenders with policies protecting them, amplifying their voices in corporate decisions, and providing financial or technical aid;
- d. Refrain from using overly broad and harsh legal mechanisms and defamation lawsuits, dubbed Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), to combat climate disinformation;
- e. Invest in initiatives promoting digital inclusion, ensuring universal internet access and digital tools for climate information.

⁵⁸ Access Now, [Sustainability and digital rights: how they're connected and what that means for our work](#), 25 Sept. 2019; see also Access Now, [Digital Rights at the U.N. HRC 49 and Beyond](#), April 2022.

⁵⁹ The Climate Reality Project, [ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS IN THE AMAZON](#), 11 Apr. 2024.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ APC, [Resistance and Resilience: Collaborative Responses to Online Attacks on Environmental Defenders](#), 25 Jan. 2024.

International organizations

- a. Support global frameworks and agreements for climate information access and human rights, including endorsing treaties like the Escazú Agreement for information, participation, and environmental justice;
- b. Provide technical assistance to enhance climate information capabilities in Global Majority countries for collection, management, and dissemination;
- c. Foster collaboration among countries, civil society, and the private sector through platforms that share information, best practices, and innovative climate solutions;
- d. Establish monitoring mechanisms to track and improve access to information commitments, identifying progress, gaps, and recommendations.



Access Now (<https://www.accessnow.org>) defends and extends the digital rights of individuals and communities around the world. As a grassroots-to-global organization, we partner with local actors to bring a human rights agenda to the use, development, and governance of digital technologies, and to intervene where technologies adversely impact our human rights. By combining direct technical support, strategic advocacy, grassroots grantmaking, and convenings such as RightsCon, we fight for human rights in the digital age.

For more information, please contact: un@accessnow.org