Digitalise Youth: Reimagining Scouting Education through Digital Citizenship, Youth Leadership and Democratic Participation

Paper type: Practice Paper / Case Study, Innovation Brief

Congress thematic area: Scouting Education and Youth Development; Youth Leadership and Participation; Peacebuilding, Dialogue, and Global Citizenship

Keywords: digital citizenship, youth leadership, civic participation, non-formal education, digital rights

Author's names: Cathy Nyake and Calisto Ochieng

Affiliation: World Scout Bureau, Africa Support Centre

Email address: cathy.nyake@scout.org / calisto.ochieng@scout.org

Consideration for publication: Presentation, Congress proceedings and post-Congress publications.

Abstract

As digital technologies reshape civic participation, young people face unprecedented opportunities alongside growing challenges, including misinformation, digital surveillance, online harassment, and shrinking civic space. The Digitalise Youth project, implemented by the World Organization of the Scout Movement, Africa Region under the Digital Democracy Initiative, demonstrates how Scouting education can respond to these changes by equipping young people with the knowledge, skills, and tools required to become responsible digital citizens and leaders. Beyond capacity building, the project advances youth-led advocacy for digital rights at local, regional, and global levels. Implemented in ten National Scout Organizations across Africa as part of a consortium of six organizations working in fourteen countries under the Digital Democracy Initiative, the project integrates digital literacy, civic technology, artificial intelligence for social good, media and information literacy, and digital rights into Scouting's non-formal education model.

This paper presents Digitalise Youth as a case study of educational innovation that combines technical capacity development, institutional strengthening, and direct investment in youth-led initiatives to promote democratic participation both online and offline. It empowers Rover Scouts as peer educators and community leaders who design local initiatives, lead digital awareness campaigns, and promote safe, ethical, and inclusive civic engagement. The programme embeds safeguarding through online safety, ethical technology use, critical thinking, and protection from

digital harms while strengthening the capacity of National Scout Organizations to sustain youth-led action. The paper argues that the future of Scouting education depends on integrating digital citizenship into leadership development and positioning young people as co-creators of educational solutions. It shares lessons on building strategic partnerships, fostering youth innovation, strengthening institutional capacity, and transforming National Scout Organizations into learning ecosystems that prepare young people to lead confidently in both physical and digital civic spaces. The Digitalise Youth model offers a scalable framework for advancing youth participation, safeguarding, democratic engagement, and systems transformation across the global Scout Movement.

Author Biography

Cathy Nyake is a Grant Management and Quality Assurance professional at the World Organization of the Scout Movement, Africa Support Centre. She supports the regional grant portfolio across Member Organizations and contributes to monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning, as well as quality assurance and donor reporting. Within Digitalise Youth, she supports grant management and programme learning across participating National Scout Organizations. She holds a bachelor's degree in Organisational Communication and brings experience in advocacy, stakeholder engagement and programme coordination.

Calisto Ochieng is Manager, Strategic Partnerships and Fundraising at the World Organization of the Scout Movement, Africa Support Centre. He has more than eight years of experience in strategic partnerships, resource mobilisation, programme development and grant management across Africa. He works across WOSM Africa's regional partnership, fundraising and advocacy portfolio. He supports Digitalise Youth as Project Coordinator, overseeing overall implementation, planning, communication and reporting. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Development Studies.

Introduction

Digital technology has changed the environment in which young people learn, communicate and participate in society, including how they take part in civic life. Social media, mobile devices, artificial intelligence and online civic platforms have created new opportunities for young people to access information, express ideas, organise communities, and engage with decision-makers. At the same time, young people face misinformation, online harassment, manipulation, surveillance, digital exclusion and other forms of digital harm, and a shrinking space for civic action. These risks add to challenges young people already face in accessing quality education and economic opportunity.

Scouting's non-formal education model builds skills through direct experience, peer mentorship and community engagement. World Scouting applies this model to digital-era civic challenges through the Digitalise Youth project. Implemented under the Digital Democracy Initiative, the project integrates digital citizenship, digital rights literacy, and civic technology skills into Scouting's existing educational structure. Ten National Scout Organizations (NSOs) across Africa take part, within a consortium of six organizations working across fourteen countries.

This paper presents Digitalise Youth as a case study in digital citizenship education within a global non-formal education movement. It documents the project's design, its implementation approach, and the lessons drawn from delivery across diverse national contexts. The project closes on 31 December 2026, and the paper sets out what the model offers Scouting education beyond this single initiative.

Context: Digital Threats to Civic Space in Africa

State surveillance, internet shutdowns, and disinformation campaigns restrict civic space across parts of Africa (European Partnership for Democracy [EPD], 2025). Several governments apply cybersecurity laws against activists, even where continental frameworks such as the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection exist to protect digital rights.

Media and information literacy, a direct defense against disinformation, remains unevenly taught. A 2025 UNESCO review found that only 9 of 54 African countries had integrated media and information literacy into national school curricula, and 19 countries limited this instruction to technical digital skills alone, without covering critical thinking or ethical media use (UNESCO, 2026). Formal education systems have not closed this gap on their own.

Non-formal education movements fill part of that space. Scouting reaches young people through community-based, peer-led learning across urban and rural settings alike. Digitalise Youth tests whether this reach translates into stronger digital citizenship outcomes, delivered through a structure young people already trust.

The Digitalise Youth Project

Origins and Partners

The Digital Democracy Initiative funds civil society action to protect democratic space in the digital era, across six global regions including Sub-Saharan Africa (Digital Democracy Initiative, 2026). Digitalise Youth, launched in January 2025 under this initiative, addresses shrinking civic space and disinformation across the Sahel, West Africa, Central Africa and the Horn of Africa (EPD, 2025).

The project runs through a consortium of six organizations: European Partnership for Democracy, AfricTivistes, Code for Africa, CFI Media Development, the Kofi Annan Foundation, and the World Scout Bureau, Africa Support Centre. Each partner contributes a distinct area of competency: digital literacy and civic technology, media literacy and development, governance research, and non-formal education. Combined, the consortium works across fourteen countries across the Sahel, West Africa and the Horn of Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Togo.

WOSM's Africa Support Centre leads the Scouting-specific component of the project, working directly with ten NSOs to embed digital citizenship content into their Youth Programmes.

Educational Approach

Digitalise Youth combines capacity development, youth-led action, advocacy and institutional strengthening. The capacity development adds five content areas to Scouting's non-formal education model: digital literacy, civic technology, artificial intelligence for social good, media and information literacy, and digital rights. The project delivers this content through Scouting's existing structure, using patrol-based activities, badge work and community projects, rather than as a stand-alone curriculum added on top of regular programming.

Rover Scouts, generally aged 18 to 26, act as peer educators. Training prepares them to run local digital-awareness campaigns, lead workshops for younger Scouts, and design community initiatives

that address real digital-rights problems in their own communities. This model matches the Scout Method's approach to leadership: young people learn through direct responsibility, supported by adult mentors rather than directed by them.

As of July 2026, the project had trained 40 trainers through a Training of Trainers approach. These trainers went on to train more than 500 Rover Scouts and NSO staff at national level, who in turn reached more than 5,000 young people at grassroots level. More than 10,000 Scouts across the ten participating NSOs have started the related badge activity cycle.

Safeguarding runs through every stage of the programme. Training for Rover Scouts and adult leaders covers online safety, ethical technology use, and protection from digital harm, and it links directly to WOSM's existing safeguarding policy framework, the Safe from Harm policy. Young people practicing digital advocacy face real risks, including surveillance and harassment, and the programme treats safeguarding as a standing requirement rather than an add-on module.

Curriculum Pillars in Practice

1. Digital literacy training covers the practical skills young people need to use digital tools safely: device and account security, password practice, and recognition of common online scams and manipulation tactics.
2. Civic technology training introduces Rover Scouts to tools civil society groups use for public engagement, including participatory platforms and simple data-collection tools they apply directly to local advocacy projects.
3. Artificial intelligence for social good covers how AI systems work, where they carry risk, including bias and use in disinformation, and how Rover Scouts apply AI tools responsibly to community projects.
4. Media and information literacy trains Rover Scouts to verify sources, identify manipulated content, and understand how algorithms shape what young people see online. This pillar addresses directly the gap UNESCO identified in African school curricula (UNESCO, 2026).
5. Digital rights training covers the legal and policy frameworks that protect, or fail to protect, young people online, including national data protection laws and the African Union

Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection. Rover Scouts use this training to advocate for stronger protections in their own countries.

Country Example: Benin

"Scoutisme Béninois" illustrates how the model translates into local action. In July 2025, Scoutisme Béninois, with support from WOSM's Africa Support Centre, ran a three-day national training workshop in Cotonou that brought together 50 young people, Scouts and non-Scouts, from every region of the country. Participants worked through digital literacy, cybersecurity, disinformation and online civic expression before taking on peer-educator roles in their communities, and the workshop logged 250 direct beneficiaries and 900 volunteer service hours (Joel Dossou on sdgs.scout.org, 2025). Scoutisme Béninois set a national target of training +500 young people, raising cybersecurity and digital citizenship awareness among 15,000 people, and working closely with "Présidence de la république du Bénin" via l'Institut Nationale de la femme" on a digital campaign on online violence against women.

Youth Leadership and Advocacy

Digitalise Youth treats young people as leaders, not only as programme participants. Trained Rover Scouts run digital-rights campaigns inside their own communities, and the project supports advocacy at regional and global levels, giving young Scouts direct input into digital-rights policy discussions convened by African Union structures and civil society networks (EPD, 2025).

This combination, technical capacity building paired with direct investment in youth-led initiatives, sets Digitalise Youth apart from training-only digital literacy programmes. Young people design and lead the initiatives themselves. Adults in the Movement provide support, resources and safeguarding oversight, not direction.

Through a competitive open call, the project selected and funded 20 youth-led projects to design and pilot digital solutions to local civic and digital-rights challenges. Young people are increasingly seeking out space to advocate on their own initiative, opening conversations with local, national and regional institutions with project support.

Digital Citizenship, Peacebuilding and Global Citizenship

Digital spaces now shape peace and conflict dynamics directly. Disinformation campaigns inflame intergroup tension, and online harassment silences dissenting voices before dialogue can happen. Building young people's capacity to recognize manipulation, verify sources, and engage online with restraint is preventive peacebuilding work, not a separate track from it.

Digitalise Youth links digital citizenship to global citizenship education by design. Rover Scouts trained under the project engage across national lines, within a fourteen-country footprint, comparing how digital threats and civic space restrictions play out in different settings. This comparative exposure builds the kind of cross-border perspective global citizenship education aims for, grounded in a shared practical project rather than abstract discussion. Three participating NSOs took part in Jamboree-on-the-Internet (Jota-Joti) for the first time as a direct result of project support, connecting young Scouts to peers worldwide through the same digital skills built for civic advocacy.

Safe, ethical online dialogue, one of the programme's explicit safeguarding aims, gives young people a concrete skill set for civic engagement that reduces polarisation rather than deepening it. This positions Digitalise Youth as a direct contribution to Scouting's peacebuilding and dialogue agenda, delivered through the same educational structure used to build technical digital skills.

Institutional Strengthening

Digitalise Youth invests in National Scout Organizations as institutions, not only in individual Scouts. Training strengthens each NSO's capacity to continue digital citizenship education after project funding ends on 31 December 2026. This design responds to a common weakness in donor-funded education projects: skills training that stops the moment funding stops.

Early implementation points to specific actions that support sustainability: appointing a digital-education focal point within each NSO, integrating digital citizenship content into standard Rover Scout training rather than treating it as a separate track, and building direct partnerships between NSOs and local civil society organizations for continued technical support after the consortium's involvement ends.

Lessons Learned

Youth-Led, Decentralised Design Drives Ownership and Reach

Decentralised, youth-led approaches consistently increased outreach, ownership and relevance at community level, and participation rose sharply wherever young people led the design and delivery of activities themselves. Youth-led projects also showed that when young people control resources and decisions, they build locally relevant solutions that generate strong community engagement, extend project visibility, and encourage peer-to-peer learning well beyond the project's direct beneficiaries.

Hands-On Practice Builds Stronger Skills Than Theory Alone

Grantees reported that hands-on activities, including content creation, peer-to-peer training and digital challenges, produced a stronger grasp of digital citizenship, cybersecurity and information literacy than theory-only sessions. Youth-led projects now build this practical, applied approach directly into their own knowledge-transfer and skills-application activities.

Strategic Partnerships Extend Reach and Build Credibility

Collaboration with public institutions, media organisations, civil society actors and digital rights partners raised the credibility and visibility of awareness and advocacy campaigns. National Scout Organizations that pursued partnerships actively achieved greater outreach and built relationships likely to continue after the project ends. Several NSOs are now moving beyond Scouting's traditional network, engaging electoral bodies, ministries of education, tech companies and internet service providers.

National Ownership and Continuous Mentoring Drive Implementation Quality

National Scout Organizations that embedded the project into existing structures, kept clear documentation and assigned dedicated project teams consistently delivered stronger results, supported by regular leadership and coordination. Continuous technical support, coaching and monitoring visits allowed early identification of implementation problems, strengthened project management capacity, supported adaptive management, and encouraged the sharing of good practice across participating countries.

Early, Practical Onboarding to Digital Tools Reduces Technical Barriers

Familiarising participants with online platforms and tools in advance of regional and international activities reduced technical barriers and improved participation.

Youth perspectives and voices matter

While many youth programmes consult young people before organisations formulate advocacy messages on their behalf, DY initiatives have deliberately positioned young people as authors of policy knowledge, presenters of recommendations, and legitimate interlocutors with decision-makers. This represents a transition from youth-serving to youth-led advocacy and was viewed as key in contributing to change: “Youth were at the heart of the action…. which certainly contributed to the success of this initiative”

Challenges and Considerations

Project timelines rarely match the pace of institutional change. Digitalise Youth closes on 31 December 2026, and full integration of digital citizenship content into NSO structures needs a longer runway than a single funded project cycle provides.

Ten NSOs across fourteen countries operate under different national conditions, from active civic-space restrictions to differing baseline digital access and infrastructure, and a single fixed curriculum does not fit every context equally well. Connectivity gaps also limit how much of the curriculum young people can practice directly online, requiring offline and low-bandwidth alternatives for parts of the programme.

Civic space conditions shifted during implementation in some countries. Rover Scouts and NSO staff needed real-time guidance on safe advocacy practice, beyond what pre-set training content could anticipate at the start of the project.

Reporting for small, youth-led grants carries its own burden. These grants deliver a strong impact relative to their size, but most activities take place at the local level.

Implications for the Future of Scouting Education

Digitalise Youth sets out a workable path for Scouting education: combine technical skill-building, institutional investment, and direct support for youth-led initiatives inside one project design. The model positions young people as co-creators of educational content, in line with direction set out in WOSM's Roadmap for Education in Scouting, which calls for the Movement to adopt digital education tools and strengthen youth leadership training (WOSM, 2023).

Scouting's reach, more than 60 million young people across over 176 countries, gives the Movement a base for scaling similar models beyond the original ten NSOs. Three conditions support scaling: partnerships with organisations holding technical expertise Scouting does not hold internally, integration of new content into existing Scout Method structures (the four thematic ereas) rather than parallel programmes, and institutional investment that continues beyond individual project cycles.

Positioning young people as leaders and co-creators in digital citizenship education, not only as participants, prepares NSOs to keep pace with a communication environment that continues to change after any single project ends.

Recommendations

Based on the Digitalise Youth experience, four key recommendations emerge for Scouting education that support a shift from digital skills training towards digital citizenship education as part of holistic youth development:

1. **Integrate digital citizenship into Youth Programme frameworks:** NSOs should incorporate digital citizenship competencies into existing educational pathways rather than maintaining isolated digital projects.

2. **Build youth-led peer education models:** Young people should receive structured opportunities to teach peers, facilitate activities and lead community initiatives. Additionally, digital education should include practical projects, campaigns, community service and civic participation.

3. **Invest in institutional capacity:** Digital innovation requires trained people, clear ownership, partnerships, monitoring systems and resources for continuation after project funding ends.

4. **Establish strategic technical partnerships:** NSOs should work with digital rights organisations, media organisations, technology specialists, public institutions and civil society partners to maintain relevant expertise.

Conclusion

The Digitalise Youth project shows that non-formal education movements hold a direct role in building young people's capacity for democratic participation in digital spaces. Working across ten NSOs and fourteen countries, the project embeds digital literacy, civic technology, artificial intelligence for social good, media and information literacy, and digital rights into Scouting's existing educational model, and positions Rover Scouts as peer educators and advocates in their own communities.

Lessons from the project, on partnerships, youth innovation, institutional anchoring, and the pace of systems change, offer World Scouting a scalable framework for digital citizenship education across the Movement. As Scouting education looks toward its next Roadmap, embedding digital citizenship into leadership development stands as a concrete next step grounded in field experience.

The central lesson is therefore not that Scouting needs another digital project. The lesson is that digital citizenship needs to become part of contemporary Scouting education. Young people are already participating in digital spaces. The educational responsibility of Scouting is to ensure they have the knowledge, values, confidence, critical judgement and leadership competencies required to participate safely and constructively. The future of Scouting education will increasingly require learning environments that prepare young people not only for the physical communities in which they live, but also for the digital civic spaces in which they increasingly learn, organise, communicate and lead.

References

Digital Democracy Initiative. (2026). About the Digital Democracy Initiative. https://digitaldemocracyinitiative.net/

Dossou, H. J. (2025). Formation des pairs éducateurs Digitalise Youth [Project update]. Scouts for SDGs, World Organization of the Scout Movement. https://sdgs.scout.org/project/formation-des-pairs-educateurs-digitalise-youth-0

European Partnership for Democracy. (2025). Digitalise Youth. https://epd.eu/what-we-do/programmes/digitalise-youth/

European Partnership for Democracy. (2025). Strengthening digital rights in West Africa and the Sahel region. https://epd.eu/news-publications/strengthening-digital-rights-in-west-africa-and-the-sahel-region/

Scoutisme Béninois. (2025, September 13). Atelier national de formation des pairs éducateurs du projet Digitalise Youth Bénin. https://scoutismebeninois.org/index.php/Article/r/194/atelier-national-de-formation-des-pairs-educateurs-du-projet-digitalise-youth-benin

UNESCO. (2026). Towards an African media and information literacy policy framework. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/towards-african-media-and-information-literacy-policy-framework

World Organization of the Scout Movement. (2023). Roadmap for education in Scouting. https://www.scout.org/news/congress-roadmap-sets-education-direction

World Organization of the Scout Movement. (2026). Call for papers, 5th World Scout Education Congress. https://scoutcongress.org/call-for-papers/

World Organization of the Scout Movement (2025) Digitalise Youth Manual and Toolkit. https://www.scout.org/where-we-work/regions/africa/projects

World Organization of the Scout Movement year 1 impact story. https://www.scout.org/news/digitalise-youth-empowering-africas-next-generation