Impact Report 2023

THE ENGINE ROOM

2023 IN NUMBERS

85

Short-term, tailored partnerships

85 organisations in 28 countries received targeted strategic advice on digital security, responsible data, emerging technologies, internal workflows, shifting in-person activities to digital spaces, improving tools, building online communities, connecting with technologists, and more!

1

Pilot cohort learning programme on Responsible Data Management

2

Six-month intensive support partnerships

3

Research reports on emerging technology & data in humanitarian work

5

Community Calls & AMAs on:

↗ Information ecosystems in Latin America
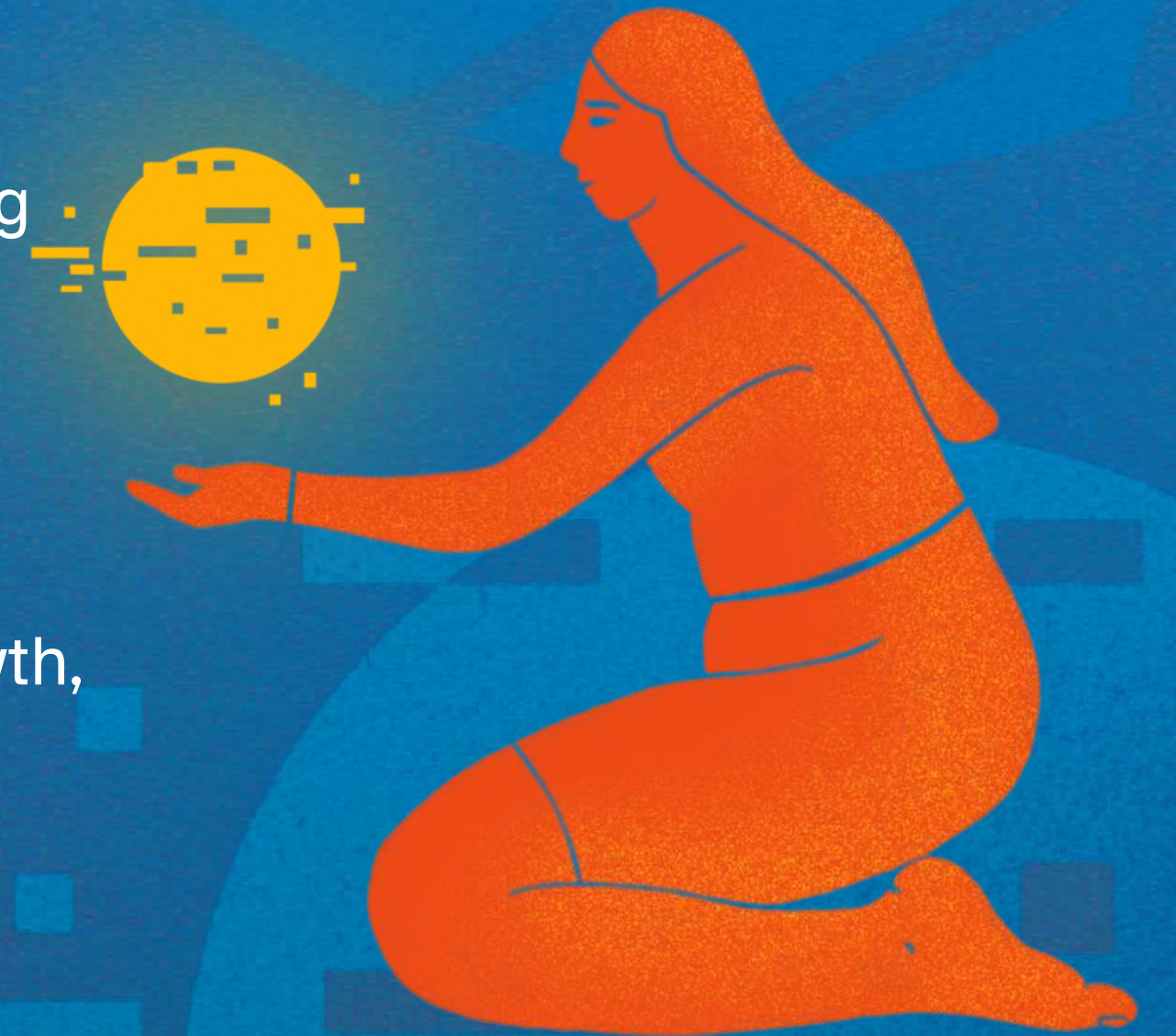↗ Digital Resilience
↗ Responsible Data

13

Talks, webinars, public workshops and participation in facilitated conversations and panels, including:

↗ Embodying everyday technology, with a climate justice perspective
↗ Online hate in the face of the climate emergency
↗ The role of free and open-source software for digital resilience of civil society
↗ Practicing co-leadership for the futures we want
↗ Organising around digital ID systems: exploring advocacy strategies for civil society

THE YEAR'S MOST EXCITING ACCOMPLISHMENTS

1 Established a co-leadership model that aligns with our values and has led us to two co-leaders from the majority world.

2 Reestablished and centred our regional work & relationships in Latin America and deepened our partnerships in Africa.

3 Strengthened the connection between our research and the leaders and communities we partner with, focusing on producing evidence and knowledge that's practical and useful locally.

4 Became more resilient as an organisation by creating greater equity and transparency in our approaches to organisational target-setting, budgeting, compensation, performance and growth, project management, and team structure.

Establishing a co-leadership model

Our work developing an approach to co-leadership has led us to start 2024 with an official model in place that aligns with our values, with The Engine Room now led by two co-leaders from the majority world.

A series of unexpected developments in 2022 led us to start exploring shared leadership as an opportunity to build greater strength and resilience in the organisation. In 2023 we further developed and formalised our approach. The model we developed is based on mutual support and solidarity, makes space for collaboration and responsibility, and centres a healthy environment built on diversity.

When our former Executive Director, Julia Keseru, announced that she would be leaving The Engine Room at the end of 2023, the board officially adopted co-leadership for the organisation, and after a rigorous selection process, Paola Mosso and Dalia Othman were selected as Co-Executive Directors.

Paola Mosso

Paola has been with The Engine Room for eight years. She is embedded in various local (Latin America) and global activist communities and has deep expertise in digital ecosystems and technologies for social justice and equity.
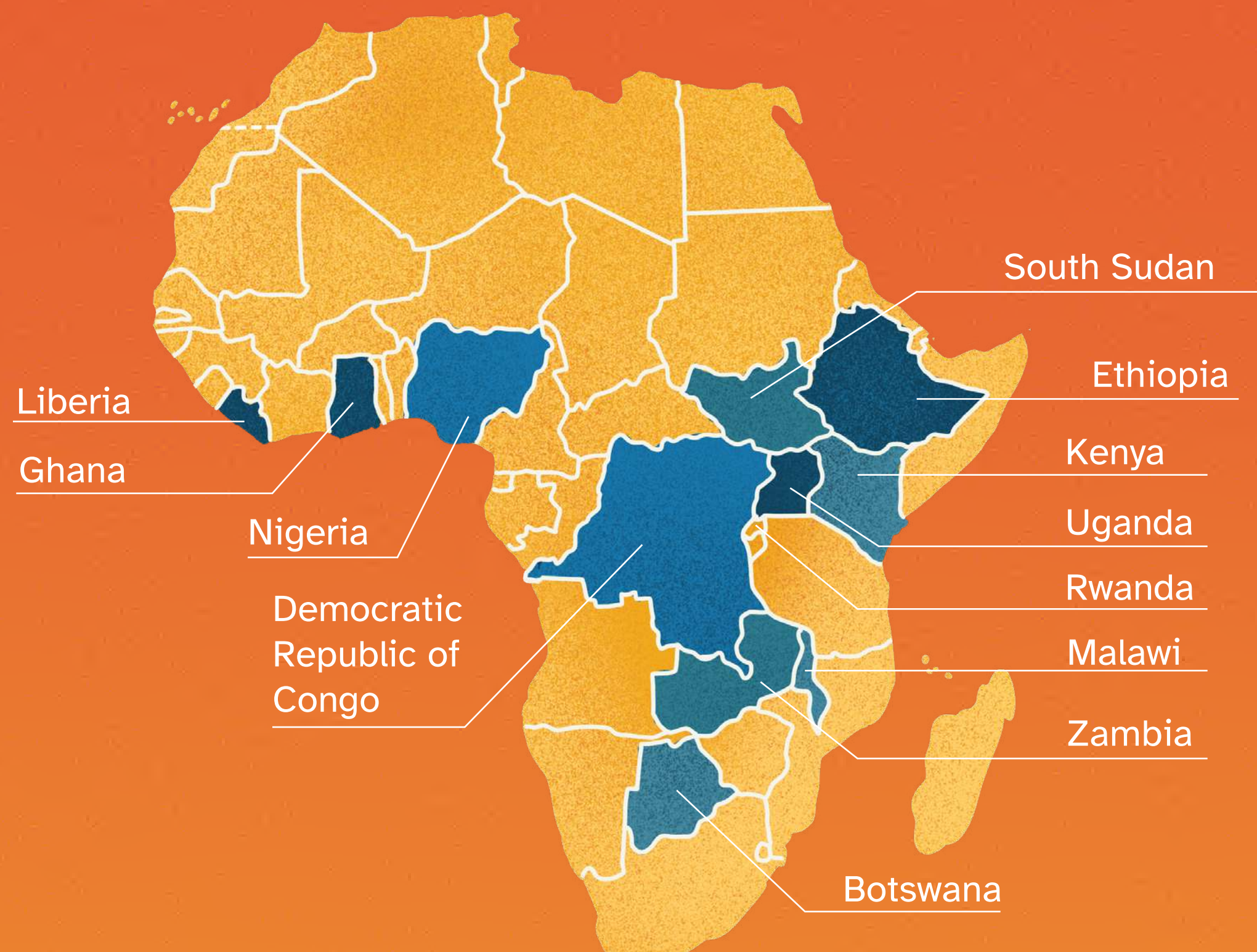
Dalia Othman

Dalia is a digital rights advocate who has worked at the intersection of technology, feminism and social justice. Prior to joining The Engine Room she co-founded and led Jeem, a feminist media organisation that produces knowledge in Arabic on issues related to gender and sexuality.

Centering our regional work & relationships in Latin America & The Caribbean, and deepening our partnerships in Africa

AFRICA

Liberia
Ghana
Nigeria
Democratic Republic of Congo
South Sudan
Ethiopia
Kenya
Uganda
Rwanda
Malawi
Zambia
Botswana

We provided targeted strategic advice and support for 85 organisations in 11 countries, including 14 in Latin America and the Caribbean and 35 in Africa. We also provided longer term (6-month) support for 2 organisations based in Uganda and Nigeria respectively.

National Front for Reconciliation, Uganda

NFR Uganda is a youth-led social movement based in Uganda, working on bridging gaps between generations and across political lines and promoting inclusive progress.
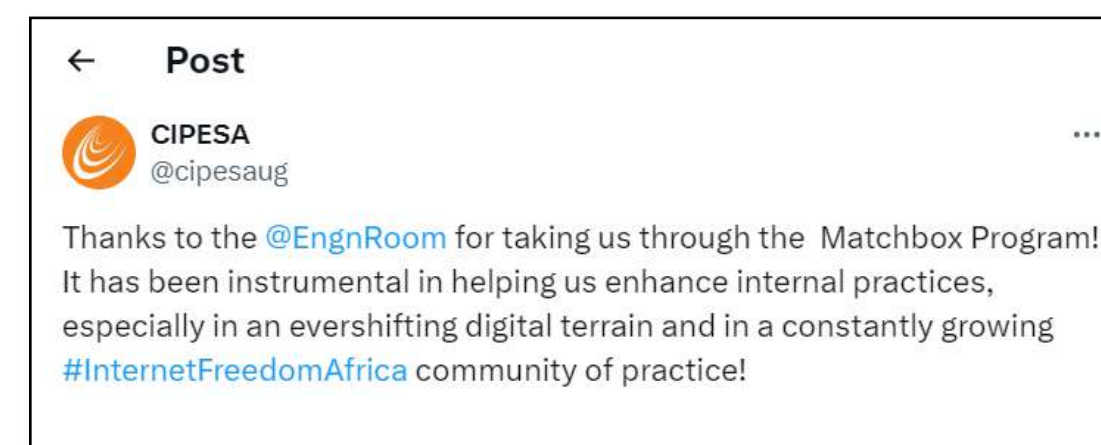
Our targeted strategic consultations enabled NFR to immediately implement measures to improve their internal security practices and start planning how to responsibly handle the data they store.

Shortly afterwards, they also hosted a community meeting aimed at strengthening their online voice and potential reach.

CIPESA, Uganda

The Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) works to promote effective and inclusive ICT policy and practice for improved governance, livelihoods, and human rights in Africa. Through our 6-month engagement, they were able to upgrade their internal technical infrastructures by selecting open-source, values-centred communications tools.

We also worked with them on responsible data practices and organisational data management.

← Post

CIPESA
@cipesaug

Thanks to the @EngnRoom for taking us through the Matchbox Program! It has been instrumental in helping us enhance internal practices, especially in an evershifting digital terrain and in a constantly growing #InternetFreedomAfrica community of practice!

LATIN AMERICA & THE CARIBBEAN

Belize

Haiti

Dominican Republic

Mexico

Costa Rica

Brazil

Argentina

Data Haiti, Haiti

Data Haiti are working to develop a platform to increase transparency and accountability in civic data.

After we gave them feedback on their concept notes, they updated their plans and were able to explore some existing open data tools that were available for customisation, requiring fewer resources than building a new platform.

We also connected them with other groups working on relevant social justice initiatives in the country, which they found particularly valuable.

Helping organisations keep their data and communications secure

We are approached regularly by organisations seeking organisational security advice.

One organisation we advised in 2023, for example, works to promote the rights and dignity of LGBTI people in the country they work in, and they face significant harassment and threats online.

We were able to equip them with advice on tools and strategies for keeping their communications and data safe, and were also able to direct them to individuals and organisations offering digital security support in their region.

Producing practical evidence and useful knowledge: Strengthening the connection between our research and the leaders and communities we partner with

IDENTIFYING AND SHARING ALTERNATIVE & JUSTICE-CENTRED TECHNOLOGICAL APPROACHES

To further support civil society in the majority world in making decisions about technology, we started an initiative exploring the landscape – and assessing the viability – of justice-centred alternatives to big-tech infrastructure.
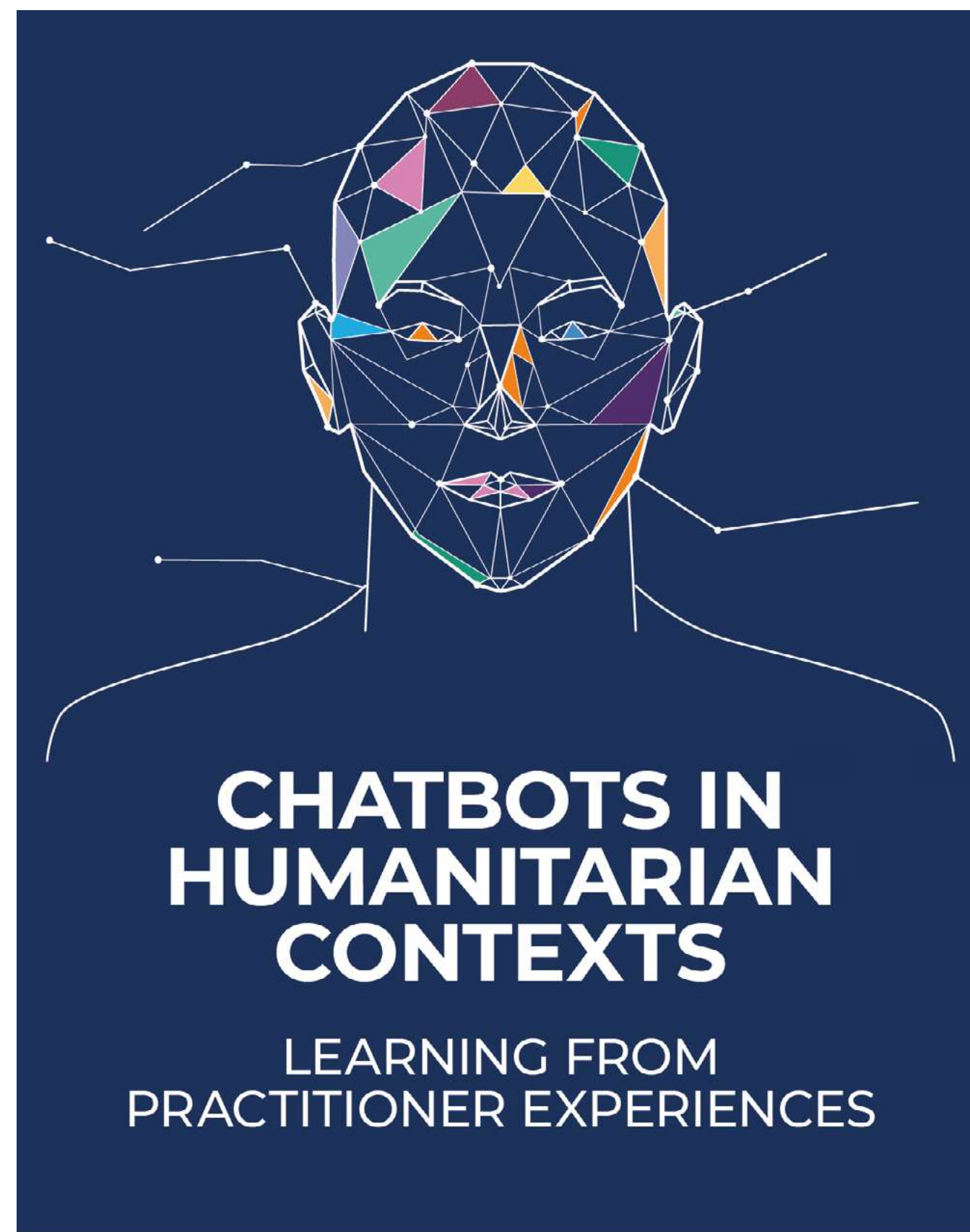
Building on our work exploring different video-conferencing tools ourselves and publishing our learnings, as part of a 'rapid research' initiative we looked into **alternative tools for knowledge sharing** in areas that historically have lower connectivity, and that partners and others can also use in the face of network interruptions such as internet outages during natural disasters and internet shutdowns.

Our research surfaced a variety of approaches from the majority world that are not reliant on commercial and proprietary technology, and that are more accessible (in cost and availability), open source, community designed, low-resource, and cognisant of environmental harms.

CONTRIBUTING TO A HEALTHY & ROBUST INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

We began critical research to identify current trends and regional differences around dis- and misinformation, access to information, privacy and security, and freedom of expression.

Through dozens of interviews and community calls that included 40+ regional organisers, such as the members of Colectivo Noís Radio (Colombia), Artigo 19 (Brazil) and CELE (Argentina) who spoke at our Community Call kicking off this work, we were able to publish preliminary findings and facilitate connections that laid initial groundwork to inform strategic work in the region.
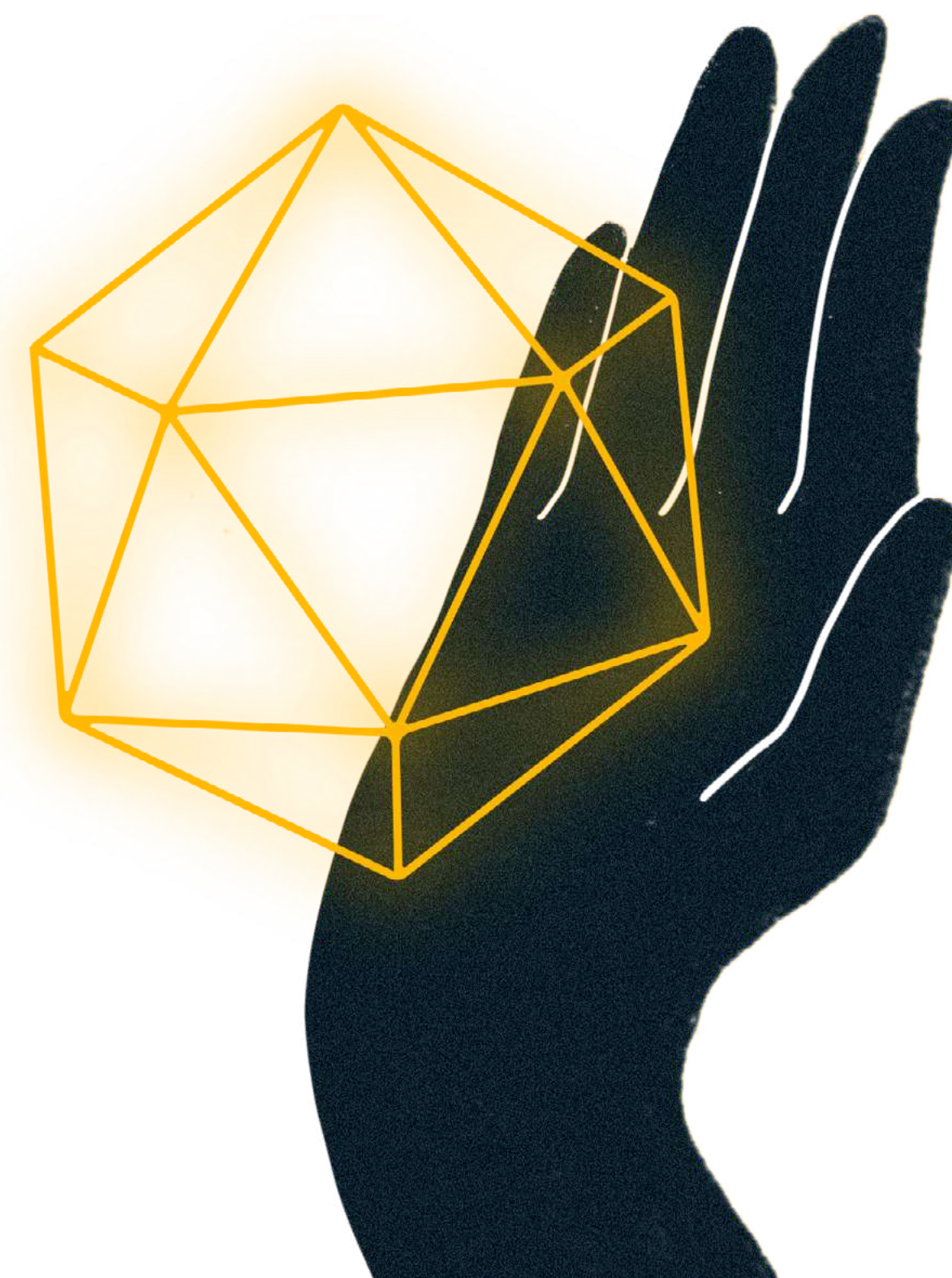
BUILDING EVIDENCE AROUND THE USE OF EMERGING TECH IN HUMANITARIAN AND OTHER CONTEXTS

Our research on chatbot use in the humanitarian sector contained relevant insights from a range of organisations and practitioners that were applicable beyond just humanitarian contexts. One of our key findings was that organisations considering implementing chatbots need to be fully aware of what it entails to develop and maintain such technologies – including what these tools can and can't do.

Our findings were highlighted by several development-focused media outlets (including ICTWorks and India Development review), and were cited in Chatbots and the Complexities of Delivering AI-enabled Support to Survivors of Gender-Based Violence (CHAYN) and Mapping Humanitarian Tech: Exposing protection gaps in digital transformation programmes (Access Now).

The insights contained in our report also proved relevant to some of the organisations who approached us for targeted support. After reading about our findings, an organisation in Brazil that supports victims of gender-based violence approached us for strategic advice on their own plan for a chatbot for their website.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND COLLABORATION: TWO FIRSTS

Through two pilot initiatives, we joined with others to facilitate stronger digital resilience and responsible data through knowledge-sharing across contexts.

PILOTING OUR RESPONSIBLE DATA COHORT LEARNING PROGRAMME

A group of 10 responsible data practitioners based in Latin America, Africa, Europe and Asia, and working on sectors such as environmental law, LGBTQI+ rights and gender-based violence, joined the pilot initiative of our cohort learning program focused on responsible data management. Participants increased their capacities in responsible data management, covered critical aspects of data ethics, discussed justice-based approaches to data such as data feminism, and made concrete changes within their own organisations.

"Thank you to The Engine Room and the coaches who applied patience, because our lives depended on it. You need to be responsible with data." - Cohort participant Vanessa Chisakula, Co-Founder of Word Smash Poetry Movement, Southern Africa.
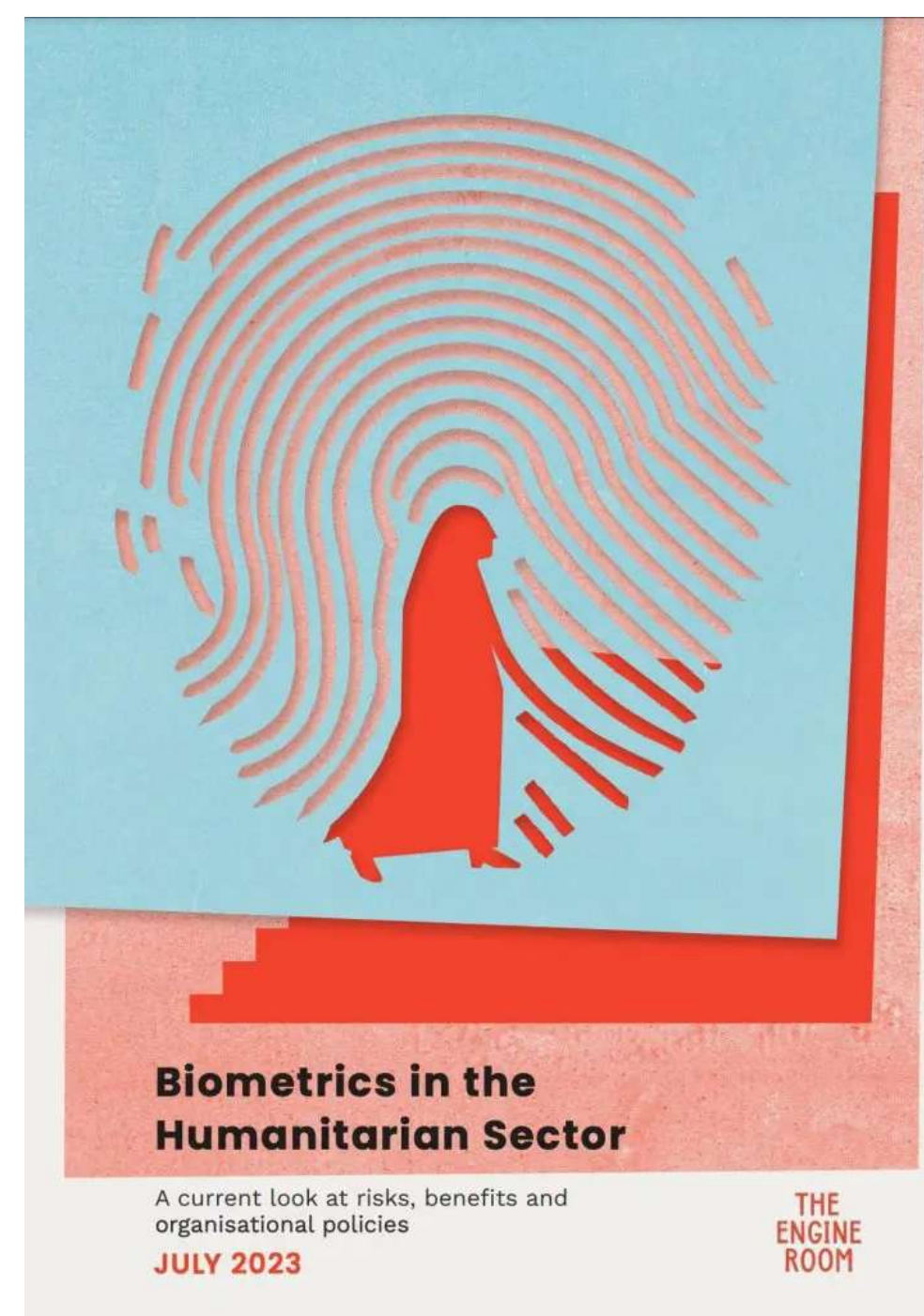
JOINING WITH OTHERS IN THE GLOBAL NETWORK FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND DIGITAL RESILIENCE

Since 2022, we've been one of ten organisations leading on efforts to collaborate to ensure social justice organisations across the majority world can better leverage the benefits of technology while minimising its harms. The Network was formally launched near the end of 2023.

"This initiative brings to life the thesis that those closest to the challenge are closest to the solution. We hope this project serves as a model for philanthropy going forward." - Alberto Cerda Silva, program officer of Ford Foundation's Technology and Society program.

RESEARCH ON DATA USE AND EMERGING TECH IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

Alongside our research on Chatbots in the Humanitarian Sector (see p8), we also launched two significant pieces of related research: Biometrics in the Humanitarian Sector, and Risks and Threats related to Data Sharing in Humanitarian CVA.

Biometrics in the Humanitarian Sector

A current look at risks, benefits and organisational policies

JULY 2023

THE ENGINE ROOM

TAKING A RENEWED LOOK AT THE USE OF BIOMETRICS IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

In 2018 we published a pioneering report on the use of biometric technology in humanitarian work. In 2023 we returned to this topic, finding that the use of biometrics in humanitarian contexts remains risky and full of tradeoffs.

The report informed subsequent research, and was cited in "The digital capacity of German humanitarian action: moving from aspiration to reality" (Centre for Humanitarian Action, Germany) and Private tech, humanitarian problems: how to ensure digital transformation does no harm (Access Now). Its findings were also covered in various online publications, including Geographical magazine, UK (Fears mount over NGOs gathering biometric data)

and Biometric Update, with 3m readers worldwide (Report proposes holistic, responsible approach to biometrics deployment in humanitarian contexts).

"Very useful and timely report" - Head of Delegation for Cyberspace at ICRC, shared on Twitter.

WHAT WE'RE FOCUSED ON IN 2024

Our research and community engagement have shown us how crucial **movement building, community bridge-building and inclusive decision-making** are to our mission.

We are keen to do more work in these areas, especially bringing people and groups from the data and digital rights world together with other social and climate justice communities, with the goals of **collaboration, solidarity and knowledge exchange.**

The Engine Room fights for equitable and sustainable societies by reimagining and redirecting the use of technology and data. For us, in 2024 this means uplifting digital technological approaches and ways of using data that are:

↗ **Community-centred** – defined, held and sustained by communities who can change them as well as phase them out.
↗ **Social justice-oriented** – intentionally weaving anti-oppression strategies into all stages of their creation, maintenance and deployment.

↗ **Transformative** – working to transform lives and ecosystems for the better through supporting justice, collective care, and interconnectedness between all living beings.

The Engine Room is in a critical position to reimagine, in collaboration with the majority world communities we work with and within, how digital technologies can contribute to greater trust, dignity and joy, and a healthy future for us all.

With this in mind, this year we'll be focusing our work in four main areas: Equitable and sustainable technologies, ecological and social justice approaches, digital resilience, and movement building.

Read more about these, and about our organisational targets for this year, in our upcoming Organisational Strategy.

FUNDERS AND PARTNERS

Many thanks to the partners and funders we worked with in 2023. These included:

CORE FUNDERS
Ford Foundation
Sigrid Rausing Trust
Luminate
Open Society Foundations

KEY PARTNERS
Norwegian Refugee Council
ILGA World
Digital Resilience Network
Disability Rights Foundation
EVA Nigeria
LGBTQ+ Rights Ghana
CIPESA
IFRC
Tech Justice UK
EATHAN Kenya
Epic Africa
GSMA
Fenomenal Funds
Ekō (previously SumOfUs)

THE ENGINE ROOM

The Engine Room is an international organisation with a team of advocates, researchers, technologists, and activists who are distributed across four continents and embedded in various local human rights movements.

We help human rights defenders and social justice activists use data and technology in safe, strategic and responsible ways, and actively try to shape an online information ecosystem that is fair, just and sustainable for all.

In the last decade we have worked with more than 800 organisations on five continents, addressing issues ranging from transparency and humanitarian support to human rights and environmental justice.

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