



Recommendations for Submarine Cable Resilience in West Africa

WATRA Working Group on Infrastructure
Development

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Contents

1	Sub Marine Cable Resilience in West Africa	1
1.1	WATRA secretariat should:	4
1.2	Administrations are encouraged to:	4



1 Sub Marine Cable Resilience in West Africa

Communications networks support a significant part of the everyday lives of people. However, the fast development of these communication technologies and enormous scope of these networks makes us more reliant on them and create risks. For member states of WATRA and their economies to become competitively digitalised, countries need to be more and more dependent on the Internet and global connection.

Over 99%¹ of international data exchange is made possible by telecommunications submarine cables, which are the backbone of the global digital economy in an increasingly interconnected world. The smooth cross-border operation of cloud services, communication, finance, and vital infrastructure is made possible by these cables.

Twelve (12) submarine cable companies with thirty-seven (37) landing points pass through the West African region, providing a total design landing capacity of 613.12 Terabyte. These companies are listed as follows²: ACE - Africa Coast to Europe, SAT-3/WASC - South Atlantic 3/West Africa Submarine Cable, WACS, MainOne, Maroc Telecom West Africa Submarine Cable, SHARE - Senegal Horn of Africa Regional Express, Equiano, 2Africa, GLO -1, ATLANTIS-2, EllaLink, NCSCS - Nigeria-Cameroon Submarine Cable System.

Submarine cables are however extremely delicate and therefore vulnerable to a variety of threats, including natural disasters that might harm them and unintentional damage from ship anchors or commercial fishing activities.

According to the ITU³, the main cause of submarine cable failure is human activity with 85%. Fishing, anchoring and other natural events such as seabed slides account for 27%, 14% and 4% respectively. Wet equipment failure (e.g. repeater malfunction) remains at only 7%, followed by

¹ <https://www.itu.int/en/digital-resilience/submarine-cables/Pages/default.aspx>

² ECOWAS 2023 Digital Report

³ ITU Presentation to WATRA Infrastructure Development Working Group meeting in Banjul - June 2024



abrasion (permanent contact of the cable with rocks) at 4%. There are still 44% of repairs caused by unknown factors related to human activity, leading to uncertainty as to whether such incidents have been properly investigated by cable owners or local authorities.

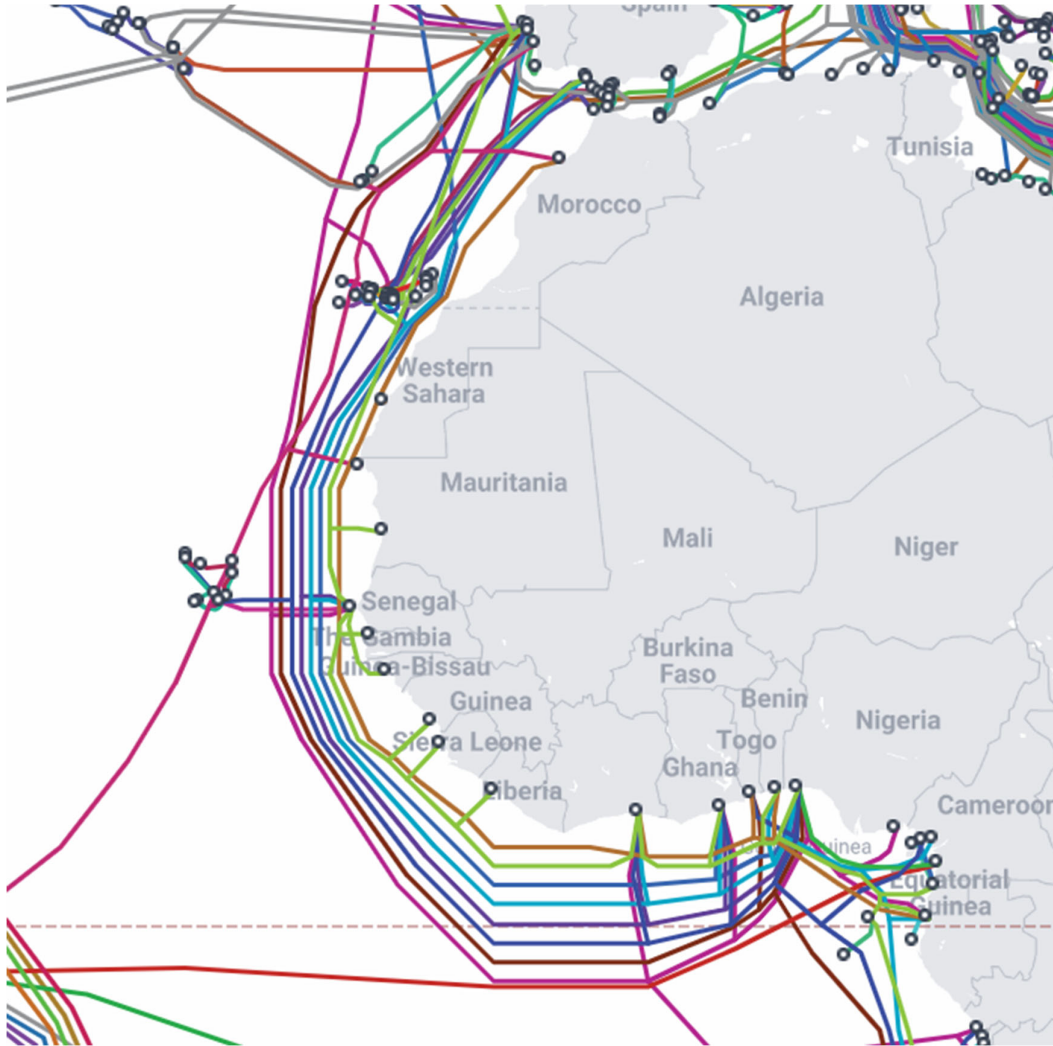


Figure 1 Submarine Cable infrastructure in West Africa.

Source: <https://www.submarinecablemap.com/> (31/03/2026)

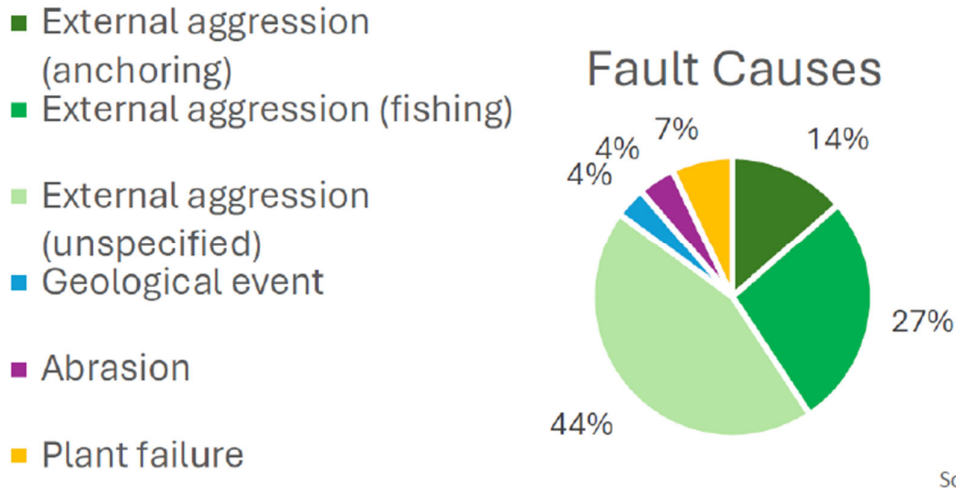


Figure 2 Submarine Cable Faults

At the 21st Annual General Meeting of WATRA in Freetown, Sierra Leone in March 2024, there was a proposal from Nigeria for WATRA to urgently commence work on developing a framework for joint monitoring, risk mitigation and emergency response procedures for the submarine cables that pass through the sub-region. This call was necessitated following the major cuts on several submarine cables on the 14th of March 2024, which resulted in nationwide outages on multiple networks in 12 African countries, precisely: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, The Gambia, and Togo; ten of which are WATRA members.

The impact of submarine cable cuts highlights the need for a coordinated, multilateral approach to protecting shared infrastructure across WATRA member states. Telecommunications outages do not respect borders. The effects rapidly propagate through our interconnected economies and societies.

The Working Group on Infrastructure Development at its meeting in Conakry in November 2024 proposed the following recommendations to help improve the Submarine resilience in West Africa:

1.1 WATRA secretariat should:

1. Promote dialogue and collaboration on potential ways and means to improve submarine cable resilience among all stakeholders including but not limited to: Regulators, Submarine Cable Manufacturers, Submarine Cable layers, Submarine Cable operators, Terrestrial Fibre Operators, Mobile Network Operators, Internet Service Providers, OTT Operators, ITU, ATU among others.
2. Collate a database of terrestrial fibre networks in WATRA member states, leveraging the existing WATRA-ITU Broadband mapping declaration for the West African sub-region.

1.2 Administrations are encouraged to:

1. Conduct National Stakeholder engagements to improve the resilience to disruptions in submarine cable services.
2. Facilitate the interconnection of Submarine cable landing stations using terrestrial mesh fibre infrastructure. This can be achieved through bi-lateral discussions between countries.
3. Promote the building of more undersea cable infrastructure with resilience, redundancy, and security in mind whilst also building healthy competition.
4. Promote the reduction of costs in the design, laying and repair of fibre cables through regulatory interventions where applicable.
5. Address Security concerns with the operation of submarine cables. Member States are urged to promote a high level of security of the submarine cable infrastructure, regardless of who owns the cable. This should be carried out in accordance with relevant actions in their respective Maritime Security Strategy to protect the cables from external threats and preserve its security, including that of data exchanged through the infrastructure.
6. Ensure that administrative applications related to the planning, acquisition, construction, operation, maintenance and repair of



submarine cable infrastructure are processed in an efficient and timely manner. To that end, all national authorities are invited to ensure that the most rapid treatment legally possible is given to these applications.

7. Conduct regular assessments of risks, vulnerabilities and dependencies of submarine cable infrastructures and propose mitigation measures accordingly.
8. Build capacity in the submarine cable value chain.
9. Regularly exchange information on situational awareness, incidents and incident response, as well as best practices applied, to maximise collaboration with appropriate authorities. Member States are encouraged to assist each other to lessen the effects of cable disruptions on the entire West African sub region.

Promote the establishment of more internet exchange points within the West African sub region and ensure interconnection among same.