Digital Inclusion

This definition is a living document, which will be updated and refined as needed.

Background

Connecting online has become an essential tool for everyday functions such as working, accessing information, staying in touch with friends and family, increasing productivity, self-actualization, and other forms of self-empowerment, as well as for receiving basic services. Being connected is a means to providing enhanced personal and societal well-being and digital livelihoods. Online connectivity enables the right and the ability to access basic human services such as health care, economic and personal development opportunities, skills development, and education for all. It also acts as a catalyst for individuals to exercise their right to freedom of opinion and expression, facilitating the realization of a range of other human rights[1].

However, focusing solely on connectivity may lead to or exacerbate existing forms of exclusion or create new ones. The concept of digital inclusion must therefore go beyond basic access, and also discuss the structural barriers for connecting, as well as the threats and risks that operating online poses, particularly to vulnerable populations such as those affected by crisis or conflict. The unequal opportunities to access online platforms and services can deepen inequalities, and the benefits of accessing online are not always equitably distributed. Meaningful access is vital for social, political, and economic empowerment and therefore narrowing digital divides needs to go beyond simply reaching basic internet connectivity.

Many digital spaces reflect the preferences, bias, and motivations of those who throughout the years have had the most opportunities to access computers and the Internet. This has resulted in technology design and development to have then privileged some, for example men over women, urban over rural, and elites over those economically disadvantaged. If services, devices, programmes, and policies are designed and led only by privileged groups, they will first and foremost continue to serve their interests. More inclusive and equitable digitalization can be driven by focusing on intersectionality. For digitalization to be transformative and human-centered, catalyzing efforts are needed across sectors and geographies to develop inclusive, equitable, and gender-transformative technologies and services. Moreover, in moving towards a more digitalized world, we need to ensure digitalization does not happen on the expense of future generations. Therefore, for digitalization to be truly inclusive, it also needs to be environmentally sustainable.

Promoting digital inclusion needs to be a multi-stakeholder, whole-of-society effort based on evidence and disaggregated data. Digital inclusion processes cannot be top-down but need to actively engage with the people who are most affected by them. To embrace new technologies and fully utilize them, people need to see them as inclusive, useful, and trustworthy. Incorporating the perspectives of marginalized communities currently excluded from digital spaces is crucial to harnessing the potential technologies offer to individuals and societies. As the digital world and technologies keep developing, so must the way we define inclusion in it. Reaching equitable digital

[1] A/HRC/17/27; https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G11/132/01/pdf/G1113201.pdf?OpenElement.

inclusion requires constant and conscious re-thinking of the digital world, the actors excluded from it, and the barriers experienced within it. These efforts to achieve equitable digital inclusion need to be affirmed and reified as technologies develop.

Definition of Digital Inclusion

Digital inclusion is defined as "equitable, meaningful, and safe access to use, lead, and design of digital technologies, services, and associated opportunities for everyone, everywhere".

Digital inclusion is enabled by human rights-based, intersectional, and whole-of-society policies and multi-stakeholder approaches and actions, that take into account the various barriers individuals face when accessing and experiencing digital technologies. Human rights are to be promoted, protected, respected, and enjoyed online as they are offline, and the specific needs of individuals need to be taken into consideration in the digital world so as not to leave anyone behind. Digital inclusion should aim to dismantle existing structural social inequalities and enhance well-being for all. We must aim for inclusion that is equitable, so that everyone online has the same opportunities and that marginalized communities are not left behind. For everyone who wants to be connected, we should guarantee the availability and accessibility of the Internet, digital devices, services, platforms, and relevant content; affordable access to them and to critical digital and other skills, education, and tools; and equitable participation in safe, discrimination-free online spaces, with the opportunity to create content and consider and involve different groups in the design, development, testing, and assessments of digital devices, services, platforms, and policies.

Annex 1: Glossary

INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

When discussing digital inclusion, it is crucial to have an intersectional approach. People experiencing exclusion from the digital space might identify with several social identities, which creates different barriers for connecting online and using digital devices, services, and platforms equitably. Intersectionality addresses systemic inequities like systematic racism, unconscious bias, gender-based discrimination, barriers for persons with disabilities, discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities, and other inequities faced by all marginalized populations or persons in situations of vulnerability.

When referring to people experiencing barriers, one needs to recognize variables such as but not limited to gender, age, ability, race, tribe, caste, culture, geography, migration or displacement status, ethnicity, religion, education, language, and socio-economic status. The barriers experienced can vary, but as many online users identify with several variables, they tend to exacerbate one another. In fact, digital exclusion is particularly impactful when several factors are at play simultaneously. For example, rural populations face exceptional geographical and physical barriers to connecting online. At the same time, additional factors like cultural expectations might make it even more difficult for rural women to connect. Or, the lack of relevant skills might create yet another barrier for older persons living in rural areas. In the context of this definition as well as

the framework related to it, intersectional approach is applied throughout when discussing people, their diversity, and their needs in digital spaces. As technologies and their uses advance, the needs of various groups and individuals will also evolve and will require reassessment of what digital inclusion means and looks like in practice for them. This definition thus takes a broad, intersectional approach to digital inclusion rather than listing out the specific needs of separate groups or individuals.

EQUITABLE INCLUSION

Digital inclusion needs to aim towards inclusion being equitable. As more people are getting connected, the risk of digital inequality rises if those with already fewer opportunities are left behind digitally as well. This is not only the case between those online and those offline, but between those who have the resources to use the Internet optimally and those barely online – between those passively consuming a fraction of the apps and services on offer – and those with the resources to use technologies efficiently.

Digital equality means treating everyone the same. Digital equity, however, allows and sometimes promotes fairness through treating people differently depending on need, or prioritising one group of people over another such as in positive discrimination (for example, subsidies for persons with disabilities), or treating one group differently from another because that is practically feasible at the time (for example, rural wireless connectivity despite national fiber targets).

DISAGGREGATED DATA

Promoting digital inclusion should be based on evidence and data. When measuring digital inclusion, the data collected and used needs to be disaggregated. This collection of data needs to go beyond simply disaggregation by sex, data pertaining specifically to women and men, and in addition to it, should include for example data disaggregated by ability, migration or displacement status, age, location (beyond urban/rural), indigenous identity, education, and income to understand the intersectional nature of exclusion and the exact points of policy intervention to rectify it. When possible, data should be open and reusable for transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability.

AVAILABILITY

The availability of basic enabling infrastructure is required for users to connect to the Internet. For users this means for example having a smartphone or a computer, and for the suppliers this relates to building enabling infrastructure such as fiber optic cables, mobile, wireless technologies like satellite, or network infrastructure.

Whereas this infrastructure is readily available in some parts of the world, other regions struggle to connect. The digital divides are emphasized between regions and between and within countries. While limited availability in more connected countries remains a concern, there those persons who cannot afford to subscribe to private services can often benefit from ubiquitous Wi-Fi hotspots, due to a greater proliferation of basic infrastructure. However, generally, persons in less connected

countries do not enjoy the same privilege of public services, as infrastructure is relatively sparse – especially as the Internet's backbone is fiber optic submarine cables, leaving many landlocked countries and remote areas struggling to acquire the additional supports necessary to make use of such cables. In addition to rural populations and indigenous peoples, disaster-prone areas, landlocked states, and island states are disproportionately likely to being unconnected, with these populations also having less access to enabling infrastructures like electricity or roads. In addition, terrestrial infrastructure may not necessarily be the best option in some cases.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, being connected has proven to be not a luxury, but a lifeline. As the pandemic relocated everyday functions such as education, work, and health services online, often within one's home, it became even clearer that it may not be enough to rely on public Wi-Fi networks to connect online and that meaningful and regular connectivity may require access from homes and private networks in an inclusive way. This may require re-thinking aggregation strategies for public access possibilities such as Wi-Fi traditionally in schools, libraries, markets, and community centers with alternative access strategies at local and community level.

For Internet use to really serve its users, the speed and quality of the Internet also needs to be adequate. Users need to be able to use relevant digital services needed for example for studying, working, online banking, and e-commerce in a reasonable manner.

ACCESS

While availability refers to physical infrastructure and physical connectivity, it is only one barrier to connectivity. Online access takes into account the different elements of connectivity, such as access to digital equipment, regularity, and intensity of access, required skills, cultural aspects, and the lack of relevant content in local and relevant languages, in local script instead of spelling in Latin script. For example, the most commonly used language on the Internet is the English language, greatly privileging access for those who speak English and enabling their participation in digital life and the digital economy. In addition, cultural and social norms are one of the most significant, yet largely ignored, barriers preventing access to digital technologies, such as mobile phones and Internet. Cultural, tradition-based, or social barriers for access are especially difficult to address, as they are often structural, deeply entrenched, and subtle compared to some other, more explicit obstacles. There may also be other structural or societal barriers, particularly to women and girls, to access that reflect existing discrimination or inequalities.

Access to the Internet is not sufficient by itself. Access needs to be meaningful, serving the practical online needs individuals have. This also means that access needs to be regular: if people can go online only on occasion, they are not able to obtain the full benefits of the online world. Daily access[2], as opposed to irregular or sporadic access, is a minimum requirement to see real

[2] The United Nations (the International Telecommunications Union and the Office of the SG's Envoy on Technology) has issued a framework and indicators for universal meaningful connectivity - https://www.itu.int/itu-d/meetings/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2022/04/UniversalMeaningfulDigitalConnectivityTargets2030_BackgroundPaper.pd.

benefits for work, education, and communication. Even if one possesses a proper device with adequate features to connect, one needs to have access to the skillset needed for using the devices as well as digital literacy skills. Without the capacity to use digital devices as well as to find, use, and adapt information retrieved from the online world and through digital platforms, in addition to creating content and sharing it online, connectivity alone does very little.

Digital inclusion thus also encompass the ability of users to use technologies efficiently for their own and others' benefit. Digital technological and literacy skills are therefore an important element of digital inclusion to secure a shared prosperous digital future for everyone. However, to navigate in the ever-digitalizing world, more than just basic digital skills are needed. The 21st Century skills[3] include 1) learning and innovation skills: critical thinking and problem-solving, communications and collaboration, creativity, and innovation; 2) digital literacy skills: information literacy, media literacy, ICT literacy; and 3) career and life skills: flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural interaction, productivity, and accountability. In addition to learning 21st Century skills, upskilling is also crucial to ensure that people understand the opportunities the digital world offers and are able to take advantage of those opportunities.

Affordable and equitable access should be guaranteed to digital learning platforms for formal and non-formal education. Access needs to be affordable, private, safe, and providing continuous learning opportunities, with skills that transfer along a child to adult life, also through informal education. Access should also include free and equitable access to digital tools to ensure digital livelihoods.

Access for everyone means guaranteeing the accessibility of digital communication and services for all people – regardless of their gender, age, ability, or location. To achieve equitable digital access, ICTs should be not only be available and affordable, but also accessible to everyone, also to persons with disabilities. As defined in Article 9 in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,"…States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, […] to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems". These measures include eliminating barriers to accessibility to electronic services and promoting access for persons with disabilities to new information and communications technologies and systems, including the Internet, and promoting the design, development, production, and distribution of accessible information and communications technologies and systems at an early stage, so that these technologies and systems become accessible at minimum cost. Given that ICTs have become the primary medium for communications, information, transactions, education, and entertainment worldwide, accessibility is crucial. Its implementation by legislators, policy-makers, ICT providers, platform creators, and other stakeholders in all countries is essential to ensure respect for all people's right to communicate in the connected world.

[3] The definition can be found in many documents that source back to Trilling, Bernie and Fadel, Charles: 21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times, Jossey-Bass (publisher), 2009. ISBN 978-0-470-55362-6. Retrieved 2016-03-13, including https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/21st_century_skills#cite_note-Trilling-11

AFFORDABILITY

Affordability is a crucial obstacle for connecting online. First, devices needed for connecting online need to be affordable. This can mean hand-held devices such as smartphones or a computer. Ensuring Internet-enabled devices at an affordable price point to enable digital inclusion may entail measures to encourage mass production as well as addressing issues related to undue sector specific taxation.

Having a device to connect is not solely enough to access online. In addition to the affordability of devices, the cost of data also needs to be affordable compared to disposable income. If connecting online is to be inclusive and equitable, the cost of connecting should also take into account the level of income of users in, particularly those who are underserved or groups that face barriers to inclusion/connectivity. This should also take into account, for instance, the different amounts of data that may be required to operate online for different functions, since limited data can pose another barrier for meaningful connectivity. Those experiencing barriers to access also often have less opportunities to earn money or possess wealth, and they may need to prioritize how to spend their money and spending it on digital devices or services is not always a first choice. As such, when discussing digital inclusion, the affordability of connectivity needs to be compared within groups, not solely to the median income, as the median income may vary significantly e.g. between women and men, older persons and people working, as well as for persons with disabilities who may not be able to work.

Data needs to be affordable to everyone, irrespective of their wealth, social status, gender, ability, age, location, or migrant or displacement status.

Additionally, many tools and content online require paid subscriptions for accessing, which is the case even for many news outlets. In addition to devices and data, the lack of or the high price of enabling services, such as electricity, can pose another barrier for utilizing digital devices and services meaningfully.

PARTICIPATION

Participation in the digital age refers to how conducive the digital environment is to citizens' engagement around the world, which can be shaped by geopolitical factors among others. For example, digital spaces can be exploited and misused to exclude people through tactics such as online gender-based violence, online harassment, cyberstalking, cyberbullying, trolling on social media, misinformation and disinformation campaigns, phishing, hate speech, censorship, surveillance, data exploitation, and Internet shutdowns. These risks pose even higher barriers to connect, engage, and use information safely, especially for those in marginalized positions or in situations of vulnerability, whose human rights might be threatened. Many of these actions and tactics may be used to target and then exclude certain groups or individuals, such as women and girls, from online spaces.

The Internet can be a tool for empowerment and advocacy for many who might have difficulties in getting their voice heard in the offline world, such as persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples. However, a lack of inclusive technology governance can limit meaningful civic participation and further reduce trust in governments' and companies' abilities to keep online spaces safe and protected. While many international governance bodies pursue multi-stakeholder

approaches, they struggle to equally weigh, evaluate, judge, and incorporate different perspectives and voices.

It is thus important to encourage independent voices and a vibrant and diverse civil society online, so as to hold governments, business, and organizations accountable in ensuring that online spaces are protected, and that technology is used responsibly.

Online spaces should be safe, and people should be able to hold governments, business and organizations accountable for regulating or providing these online platforms. In order for users to feel safe when engaging and participating online, they need to be able to trust technology companies and governments to safeguard fundamental freedoms and rights online as well as users' data and privacy, and that their personal data is used only with their consent. This applies especially to those in marginalized positions or in situations of vulnerability, whose information online can be particularly perilously used to harm them, especially as the use of digital IDs is growing and more personal data has to be shared with different actors online to access even basic goods and services online. Service providers, technology companies, governments, and other stakeholders need to be accountable for creating safe ways of engaging and participating. Individuals should be given a choice about the use of their personal data in order to trust that it is treated responsibly and that their privacy is protected.

Digital inclusion should not be limited to simply using existing digital devices and services. Being able to participate equitably also means being able to create and influence content that is relevant and in one's own language. Additionally, for truly inclusive digital societies, people in marginalized positions or in situations of vulnerability also need to be involved in the design, development, testing, and assessment of digital devices, services, policies, and programmes. Inclusive design means designing for everyone, not just for the privileged, in order to meet the needs of those traditionally marginalized or in situations of vulnerability. Groups should also be involved broadly, as people with different barriers have very different needs. For example, persons living with disabilities have very different obstacles depending on their ability: someone with a visual impairment has different needs compared to those with cognitive challenges. Moreover, including those traditionally marginalized or in situations of vulnerability in the design processes is not sufficient; they should also be in leading positions throughout the processes so as to drive a human-centered, needs-based, and inclusive approach throughout.