

Background document

Interactive Panel 2: Digital Inclusion - Giving Voice to the Voiceless

Digital inclusion is an essential element of national development strategies. It means that children, girls, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, youth and women can use accessible and affordable information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a tool for their social and economic development. Ensuring digital inclusion is fundamental to building inclusive societies and fostering active citizen participation as well as promoting human rights and national and international development goals such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)¹. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities even require accessible ICTs of its adherents².

In addition to being the right thing to do, digital inclusion is also the smart thing to do economically and politically. Promoting accessible ICTs for persons with disabilities, for example, can unleash vast untapped markets. Many of the features required by persons with disabilities are valued by other groups, including the elderly who may seek simplified user interfaces, or busy parents looking for “hands free” features, or text-to-speech services for indigenous users who may not be able to read the published material.

Likewise, ensuring that women and girls are well prepared and encouraged to take up careers in the ICT sector can play a fundamental role in youth employment strategies. There are far more jobs in ICT, and career opportunities that rely on ICT, than the total number of jobs in all other career fields that do not directly rely on, produce, or manage ICTs³. Globally there is a predicted skills shortfall of some 2 million ICT jobs. People who lack ICT skills are at a serious disadvantage when it comes to finding jobs. Meeting this challenge requires teaching digital literacy skills starting in primary school and continuing such classes throughout secondary school. Teaching digital literacy in schools of course requires schools to be connected to the Internet and equipped either with computers, tablets, mobile phones or e-readers.

There are other compelling reasons to connect and equip schools. One reason is that children with disabilities, who are far too often excluded from educational opportunities, can enjoy an inclusive education where schools are equipped with assistive and accessible ICTs. This opens the door to their active participation in the workforce as adults, enabling adult persons with disabilities to become more financially independent and less reliant on government-funded services. Another reason is that connected

¹ www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/mdg/

² As of 22 May 2012, twenty-three countries in the region had ratified the UN CRPD and an additional nine had signed it. See www.un.org/disabilities/countries.asp?id=166

³ ITU “A Bright Future in ICTs: New Opportunities for the Next Generation of Women”. www.girlsinict.org

schools can be leveraged as community ICT centres offering digital literacy, vocational and life skills training to indigenous peoples, women and other groups. This is the goal of the ITU Connect a School, Connect a Community initiative (www.connectaschool.org). Finally, well educated and employed citizens are the foundation for stable societies and empowered communities, the goal of all political leaders.

A number of countries in the region have made great strides in connecting their schools, a foundation for many digital inclusion initiatives. Uruguay was the first country to provide all primary students with low cost laptops⁴. The United States has expanded its universal service fund to enable connected schools to be used as community ICT centres where the unemployed can apply for jobs online⁵. ITU has provided policy advice to Nicaragua on developing a National School Connectivity Plan as well as equipping model connected schools in remote areas⁶. Peru opted to forgo high spectrum fees in exchange for a commitment from a wireless broadband operator to provide free Internet access to 4 000 schools for ten years⁷. Countries developing national broadband plans can seize the opportunity to include public Internet access in key facilities such as schools and libraries and add digital literacy to their core educational curriculum.

A few countries in the region have also developed policies and regulations to ensure that accessible ICTs are available for persons with disabilities. Others have updated legislation so that universal service funds can be tapped to subsidize the cost of accessible ICTs for persons with disabilities. Brazil requires accessible pay phones and special SMS-only tariff plans so that deaf users don't have to pay for voice services they can't use. The United States, which has a long history of requiring accessible fixed line phone services and broadcast TV programmes has updated its legislation to require closed captioning programmes shown on TV also to be captioned when shown on the Internet and to ensure that accessible features are included on tablets and smart phones.

Building on these experiences, countries could expand their universal service funds to train women to become digitally literate and to create community ICT centres for indigenous peoples and women. Beyond universal service/access funds, governments will seek to invest in digital inclusion for children, youth and girls in particular so that the next generation is prepared for a career in ICTs, the jobs of tomorrow. Brazil, which has predicted a skills shortfall of some 200 000 workers in the ICT sector by 2013, is revising its educational framework to meet this challenge. Countries across the Americas region encouraged girls into the ICT sector by organizing local and national Girls in ICT Day events on 26 April 2012, including in Barbados, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Guyana, Honduras, Mexico, Montserrat, Nicaragua, Peru, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States.

The common theme is that digital inclusion can best be achieved through legislation, policies and regulations as well as business practices, all of which should be developed with input from the targeted

⁴ www.connectaschool.org/en/schools/connectivity/devices/section_5.7/case_studies/Uruguay

⁵ www.itu.int/ITU-D/treg/Events/Seminars/GSR/GSR10/documents/GSRChairman_report.pdf

⁶ www.itu.int/ITU-D/sis/Connect_a_school/Projects/Nicaragua/nicaragua.phtml

⁷ www.itu.int/ITU-D/sis/newslog/2011/01/30/VietnameseCompanyOfferedToProvideFreeInternetAccessToMoreThan4000PublicSchoolsInPeru.aspx

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populations and in close coordination with other relevant government agencies, such as ministries of education, youth, indigenous peoples and women's affairs. Building infrastructure alone is not enough to ensure digital inclusion or to Connect the Americas.

The following questions need to be addressed in order to leverage ICTs for the social and economic development of children, girls, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, youth and women.

For digital inclusion for all, how do we:

- Connect and equip schools and other public facilities?
- Teach digital literacy to primary and secondary students in connected schools?
- Leverage connected schools, libraries, public health offices, and other public facilities as community ICT centres to provide digital literacy, vocational and life skills training to adults in the community, including indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and women?

For persons with disabilities, how do we:

- Develop, implement and enforce e-accessibility policies for mobile, smart and fixed line phones, tablets, public payphones, community ICT centres, websites and TV programmes targeted to the needs of different kinds of persons with disabilities?
- Provide incentives to service providers so they advertise the availability of accessible ICTs among disabled users and disabled persons organizations?
- Update universal service/access fund legislation to cover the cost of accessible ICTs for disabled users and to fund development of text-to-speech engines in local and indigenous languages, accessible digital content and accessible applications for mobile phones?
- Work with education and employment ministries to encourage the use of accessible ICTs in schools and the workplace?

For women and girls, how do we:

- Ensure that women and girls are taught digital literacy in primary and secondary schools as well as Science, Technology, Engineering and Math(STEM) topics?
- Introduce women ICT role models to primary and secondary students?
- Raise awareness among school teachers, administrators and university and career counsellors on ICT career opportunities?
- Organize international Girls in ICT Day events in schools (see www.girlsinict.org)?
- Train women to become digitally literate as part of the ITU-telecentre.org Foundation Telecentre Women Digital Literacy Campaign (<http://women.telecentre.org/>)?
- Use universal service/access funds to train women to become digitally literate and create community ICT centres for women?

For the young, how do we:

- Develop certificate level vocational training programmes for secondary school students, including adolescent girls, teaching them job skills such as web design and development, network privacy and security, mobile app development, etc.?
- Create incubator funds to encourage young ICT innovators, men and women alike, to launch ICT businesses?
- Fund mentoring events where young entrepreneurs, including women, pitch their ideas to potential investors and receive mentoring to improve their business plans?

For indigenous peoples, how do we:

- Create community ICT centres developed in partnership with indigenous peoples and responding to their local needs (e.g. preservation of cultural heritage)?
 - Leverage community ICT centres to teach digital literacy to indigenous school children and young people in their languages?
 - Provide capacity building programmes to indigenous communities to enable them to design and implement their own sustainable projects?
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