



ITU and UNESCO Regional Digital Inclusion Week **25 - 30 October 2020**

“Serving the underserved in times of crisis: No one left behind”

Concept Note

Overview

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) will be organizing the annual **ITU-UNESCO Regional Digital Inclusion Week for the Arab States** during the period 25 to 30 October 2020 under the theme **“Serving the underserved in times of crisis: No one left behind”**.

2020 is a landmark year for Digital Inclusion, not only because it marks the start of the decade for action to achieve the SDGs, but it is also the year set for realizing 2030 Sustainable Development Goal Target 9.C. This target aims to “Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020”.

According to ITU (2018), as a whole LDCs were on track to reach over 90% mobile broadband coverage with relatively affordable Internet by 2020¹. Research by ITU² has shown positive correlations between mobile internet penetration and various socio-economic measures. These positive impacts are also potentially greater for developing countries and Least developed Countries (LDCs). However, the same research highlights that in spite of the widespread coverage of mobile broadband in LDCs, less than 1 out of 4 people in the LDCs will be using the Internet. This figure is significantly lower than the global average of around 50% connected to the internet.

The large number of people unconnected to the internet particularly in LDCs has a significant impact in their access to services be it educational, health, financial or even governmental; this is particularly acute in rural areas. Marginalized segments of society such as persons with disabilities, women, youth, the elderly etc. are the most affected negatively by this lack of access to the internet especially in times of crisis. This unfortunate fact became a reality as COVID-19

¹ ICTS, LDCs and the SDGs – Achieving universal and affordable Internet in the least developed countries
https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/lde/D-LDC-ICTLDC-2018-PDF-E

² ITU (2018) Experts reports: The economic contribution of broadband, digitization and ICT
https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regulatory-Market/Documents/FINAL_id_18-00513_Broadband-and-Digital-Transformation-E.pdfregulation

hit the world at the beginning of 2020. As of 9 September, the pandemic has reached close to 30 million cases and almost 1 million deaths globally, with warnings from the WHO of the prospect for a more severe second wave. Moreover, the economic and social impacts were just as severe as according to the World Bank, “the global economy will likely contract by over 5 percent in 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19, according to the recently released Global Economic Prospects. The deepest global recession in eight decades is sending hundreds of millions into poverty, and recovery appears to be far off”³.

Digital Inclusion and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of digital inclusion and its contribution to human development⁴. Digitally included students around the world have been able to continue to learn remotely and interact with teachers and classmates in the face of social distancing measures that included school closures. On the other hand, those without devices, internet access and digital skills to take part in online classes are being left behind. Similarly, “digitally included” workers have been able to continue to work remotely. As a result, such workers as well as those with the means and resources are less likely to need to dig into savings or go into debt due to work stoppages and so are less impacted by the disruptions to livelihoods that other employees face. According to Dr. Julie Posetti, Co-author of the UNESCO Policy brief *Deciphering COVID-19 Disinformation*⁵, “access to reliable and accurate information is critical at the best of times, but during a crisis such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it can be a matter of life and death”. Here too, the digitally included have been better equipped to receive and find verified public health information, they are also more likely to have the means and skills to detect and resist disinformation.

Similarly on the health front, digital technologies have become essential weapons in this fight be it to track the virus or share information, or to extend needed digital health services, or event to predict the spread of the virus. This conviction of the essential deployment and use of digital health to fight COVID-19 has spurred more countries, especially low income countries, to build digital infrastructure, and deploy online tools to create digital IDs to speed access to health care and relief services.⁶

The importance of digital inclusion during COVID-19 and its implication for a range of socio-economic and psycho-social outcomes is a stark reminder of the glaring inequalities in our societies⁷. Rather than serving as an equalizer, we see that differences in access to technology lead to differences in opportunities and outcomes. Pandemic-related interruptions to education, gaps in earnings as well as access barriers to quality information will likely create additional setbacks and further deepen the existing divides⁸. These impacts could persist for

³ How can digital financial services help a world coping with COVID-19?

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/psd/how-can-digital-financial-services-help-world-coping-covid-19>

⁴ Digital Innovation to Combat COVID-19

<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/communicationinformationresponse/digitalinnovation>

⁵ Deciphering COVID-19 Disinformation <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/disinfodemic/brief1>

⁶ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/psd/how-can-digital-financial-services-help-world-coping-covid-19>

⁷ UNESCO Inclusive Policy Lab - Inequalities in the time of COVID-19: <https://en.unesco.org/inclusivepolicylab/e-teams/inequalities-time-covid-19>

⁸ d'Orville H. (2020). COVID-19 causes unprecedented educational disruption: Is there a road towards a new normal?. *Prospects*, 1–5. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09475-0>

years to come, disproportionately impacting already vulnerable and at risk communities.

What Can Be Done?

SDG Target 9.c and the COVID-19 pandemic are important calls to address the widening societal divides within and between communities and to leverage the lessons to build together a more equal and inclusive future. The digital divides around us cannot be separated from other forms of inequality, if we are to succeed, digital inclusion must begin with people, not with technology. Although connectivity is necessary for digital inclusion, connectivity on its own cannot address digital inequalities. We need to work in a multi-stakeholder way to address the underlying causes of socio-economic inequality, build skills as well as leverage policies, practices and digital technologies to support desired change. Most importantly, we need to work with and for vulnerable communities with empathy.

Addressing social conditions

- We need to work with marginalized communities and vulnerable populations inter alia youth, women, persons with disabilities, rural and pastoral communities, migrants etc. to understand the specific challenges they face. Support and empower these communities to develop sustainable solutions.
- Enhance citizens' media and information literacy skills enabling them to not only consume but also create content, identify online disinformation and other threats and empower them to act safely and ethically.
- Support the development of relevant, local content and applications in local languages that may contribute to socio-cultural, economic and other needs.
- Support capacity building for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) and public sector agencies to leverage digital opportunities for Accessible, inclusive, effective and efficient service delivery.

Addressing technical, economic and other challenges

- Develop, fund and implement national plans and strategies that ensure universal access to connectivity such as public Wi-Fi in urban, peri-urban and rural areas.
- Support strategic public investments in infrastructure and create an enabling policy environment for local actors to develop their own connectivity solutions
- Reduce cost barriers to obtaining smart devices and broadband data bundles⁹ by enacting appropriate policies, incentives and regulations to ensure universal affordable access to the Internet and provide special support for disadvantaged communities.
- Developing institutional and human capacity to enable countries to respond to emerging digital challenges and opportunities to support broader societal development goals.
- Assuring the freedoms needed for people to make creative and effective use of technologies.
- Foster Open government approaches to enhance transparency and by providing access to government generated open data drive innovation.

⁹ [The State of Broadband 2019: Broadband as a Foundation for Sustainable Development](#) - The Broadband Commission, co-chaired by ITU and UNESCO, advocates entry-level broadband services in developing countries at less than 2% of monthly Gross National Income (GNI) by 2025.

- Create programmes that focus on enabling marginalized and vulnerable groups to acquire the training to participate in new and emerging sectors.

These ideas are neither novel nor radical – we just need holistic, multi-stakeholder approaches and the tenacity to implement them. That said, and as the world tries to cope with the pandemic and evolve into a new normal it is quite clear that policy makers and stakeholders globally and especially developing and least developing countries in the Arab region, will have to make it a priority to provide meaningful connectivity to all citizens, and to invest heavily in digital inclusion in a needed effort to insure that no one is left behind and with the grand objective of taking bigger and more impactful strides to achieving the SDGs.

How to get involved

The 2020 ITU-UNESCO Regional Digital Inclusion Week for Arab States will build on the success of earlier ITU-UNESCO Regional Weeks for Arab States organized annually by ITU and UNESCO since 2017.

Taking into account the public health challenges around COVID-19 the majority of events will be arranged virtually with public hub spots at partnering organizations to support outreach to those with limited access. Adopting a multi-stakeholder approach, the Week will bring together Governments, other UN and intergovernmental bodies, civil society, academia, healthcare professionals, the private sector and citizens in advancing digital inclusion efforts. The Regional Digital Inclusion Week is thus an opportunity to raise awareness, strengthen collaboration amongst stakeholders and advance efforts to combat all forms of exclusion. ITU and UNESCO are therefore inviting stakeholders across the Arab region to organize at least one activity during this Week, to shed light on their key activities in this domain, whether at the national or regional level. Stakeholders are free to design the nature, scope and location of activities and associate them to the Week, as long they reflect the theme of “Serving the underserved: No one left behind”. **The online form on the event website can be used to make your submissions, which should be received before 8 October, 2020.**

We invite you to follow us on social media under the hashtag #Digitalinclusionweek, Further information can be found on our [website](#).

For further information, please contact:

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