



TOWARDS AN ENABLING DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

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FULL REPORT

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PREFACE

Forus is a global civil society network of 68 National NGO Platforms (NPF) and 7 Regional Coalitions (RC) from across 5 continents. As a legitimate catalyst and representative of the voice of NGOs worldwide, Forus works to strengthen the capacities of civil society to ensure the effective and efficient participation of civil society actors in official negotiations.

Forus advocates for better resourcing of civil society and the defence of an enabling environment for civil society organisations so that they can work to influence public policy at the national, regional, and international levels.

In recent years Forus and its members have directly experienced the multiple ways in which the accelerating global process of digitalisation is rapidly transforming the 'operating space' of civil society everywhere.

On the positive side, many digital innovations are enhancing and strengthening civic space at different levels. But while digital technologies provide civil society with new ways to exercise their freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, they are simultaneously providing governments and others with new ways of restricting those rights, raising questions about how technological advances will affect an already shrinking civic space.

The purpose of this report, "Towards an enabling digital environment for civil society", is to highlight the impacts of digitalisation experienced by our civil society members; to explore risks and important opportunities; and to advocate for an inclusive, human-rights-based and democratic form of digitalisation that will empower and enable rather than restrict and repress.



[LINK TO CAMPAIGN](#)





STUDY APPROACH

This report was developed with valuable guidance and expertise from TechSoup, the world's largest civil society digital capacity building NGO, which has supported the digital transformation of more than 1.4 million CSOs globally. Forus members from Taiwan to Slovenia, and other activists from around the world, contributed their stories, challenges and experiences of engaging with digitalisation to the report through interviews and participative workshops convened by Forus. We thank them all for their rich contribution to this report.

Civil society needs to develop important strategic partnerships with governments, international organisations, donors, private sector organisations, tech for good NGOs and others to promote cross-sectoral co-operation so that the collective benefits of digitalisation can be realized, and the risks minimised for all.

We anticipate that this Forus position paper will contribute to the growing public debate on digitalisation. We hope that its conclusions and recommendations will help to steer the work of our network, its members, partners, and allies from different sectors in this key area, and that it can contribute towards the eventual creation of a truly democratic, inclusive, and enabling digital future.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



01

DIGITALISATION: MEGATREND AND DISRUPTOR



- 1.1 The current global process of digital transformation is a '**megatrend**', influencing how people work, communicate, are governed, and ultimately shaping the cultures that they inhabit.¹ It is driving rapid social and economic change and disruption, creating exciting new opportunities while confronting societies with a range of daunting challenges.
- 1.2 Digital technologies have played a key role in international and national responses to the **COVID 19 pandemic**. Countries around the world embraced digitalisation in the battle against the Covid-19 virus.
- 1.3 As different digital technologies become sufficiently powerful and their use increasingly widespread, and as people progressively depend on digital technologies to manage their lives, the digital divide intensifies: stark **inequalities** continue to grow between those who can access and use digital technologies and those who cannot.
- 1.4 Half of the world's population is **not yet digitally connected** and, as a direct result, many people are likely to experience social and economic exclusion and marginalization.

02 DIGITALISATION AND CIVIC SPACE: THREAT AND OPPORTUNITY



- 2.1** Digitalisation has been rapidly **transforming the ‘operating space’** of civil society. On the positive side, many digital innovations have enhanced and strengthened civic space.²
- 2.2** More worryingly, while digital technologies provide civil society with new ways to exercise their freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, they are simultaneously providing governments and others with new ways of **restricting those rights**, raising questions about how technological advances will affect an already shrinking civic space in the future.³
- 2.3** Digital technologies are rapidly proliferating, rendering it difficult to keep track of the changes or their implications. Much will depend on which technologies become dominant, **who controls them** and to what ends.⁴
- 2.4** The potential for digitalisation to **alter civic space** - the physical, virtual, and legal places where people associate, express themselves, and assemble – for better or worse is a key concern for civil society.
- 2.5** In the longer term, the lack of **adequate regulation and more democratic governance** of digitalisation around the globe will significantly undermine rather than advance civic space, human welfare, freedom, dignity, and justice everywhere.
- 2.6** As governments and societies increasingly embrace transformative digital technologies and key policy and decision-making processes move online, it is crucial that the process serves to **expand rather than shrink** the civic space necessary for CSOs to operate effectively. The guarantee of a well-regulated and democratic digital space is essential to promote the optimal functioning of a healthy civil society.

03

ENSURING A HUMAN RIGHTS-PROMOTING DIGITALISATION



- 3.1** The challenge for human rights activists, their foundation and government allies is to learn how the power of technology can be used to **strengthen and reinforce human rights**, as well as how the repressive and inegalitarian dimensions of technology can be predicted, identified, and resisted. Human rights defenders' organizations and their allies, such as civil society umbrella networks, should work with tech companies to develop new tools and strategies for gathering, recording, and sharing information on human rights breaches, to fight misinformation, and to provide digital security for all.
- 3.2** The negative impacts of digitalisation must be mitigated by **adapting existing human rights frameworks to the digital age**. Cross-sectoral collaboration will be necessary to build the digital infrastructure necessary for communities to end digital poverty.
- 3.3** Without appropriate digital policies that reinforce existing commitments to human rights, digitalisation will deliver ever-diminishing social returns as increased usage leads to increased surveillance and the data mining of citizens. Governments, civil society, and business must **re-commit to human rights conventions in the digital era** and work together to implement and monitor the impact of digital policies, access to the internet, and to ensure progressive, rights-first digital usage.

04 DEVELOPING AN ENABLING DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY



- 4.1** An enabling operating environment for civil society organisations both online and offline is a **necessary precondition for civil society to flourish**. This will be essential if CSOs are to fulfil a range of important public interest roles – from supporting governments in promoting social and economic recovery from the recent global COVID 19 pandemic to contributing to the monitoring and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) agenda, amongst others.
- 4.2** Civil society needs to collectively mobilise to ensure that the impacts of digital transformation on its functioning are positive in the longer term. It must act to ensure the necessary **digital information and digital community architecture** are made available to enable it to respond effectively to the challenges and opportunities of digitalisation. A failure to do so will mean civil society remaining fragmented, siloed, and unable to respond adequately and collectively to the serious ‘ecosystem threats’ it faces.
- 4.3** Civil society must call on governments and the international community to act quickly to **ensure the digital inclusion of all**, and particularly of low income and socially excluded demographic groups, by providing fast, affordable, and equitable access to digital infrastructure and data for all.
- 4.4** Civil society must push for the **development of enabling legislative frameworks for digitalisation** which ensure respect for human rights and inclusiveness in technological advances and developments. It must press governments to introduce progressive policies on issues including cybersecurity, privacy, accessibility, inclusion, and data ownership.



4.5 Civil society must insist on the provision of **continuous digital capacity-building** for all to promote greater digital competency and to enable its members to keep pace of rapid developments in the digital sphere.

4.6 Governments must ensure **transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance** of the digital sphere. There is an urgent need for a fundamental shift away from the status quo where control lies in the hands of a number of large private tech companies and a move towards more multi-stakeholder models of governance in which civil society can play an integral role.

4.7 At an international level, the international community urgently needs to develop a **strategic framework** that will link closing civic space, including in the digital realm, to other key foreign policy challenges. This framework should articulate a positive vision of civic space globally, and offer tailored tactical guidance to governments, civil society actors and other interested stakeholders. Experts should be brought on board who understand the rapidly evolving digital landscape to make the connection to civic space issues, including to future threats.

05 THE CHALLENGES FACING CIVIL SOCIETY IN ENGAGING WITH DIGITALISATION



5.1 Organised civil society comprises more than **10 million organizations worldwide**. Civil society organisations have a critical role to play in ensuring the inclusive digitalisation of society in their capacity as witnesses, content providers, and important links to historically marginalized communities.

5.2 While many CSOs are beginning to leverage the **opportunities of digital transformation** for their work, from using drones and satellite technology to detect violations of human rights to the use of mobile phone data to inform humanitarian responses, many others have yet to explore its full potential.

5.3 According to more than 12,000 CSO respondents from 135 countries to a late 2020 survey conducted by TechSoup and its partners, **more than 82% of global CSOs saw services disrupted by the forced digital changes of the pandemic**. Few of these CSOs had dedicated help navigating the challenges,⁵ with 66% reliant on occasional volunteers and 10% with no access to IT support of any kind. Fewer than 25% of them had a digital strategy to guide them. The effect of the pandemic on the 25% with digital strategies in place was quite different – they found it much easier to deal with the challenges they faced.⁶

5.4 Current trends suggest that within the decade, users of digital technologies will need to be **“in the cloud”** as the use of on-premises solutions will no longer be the norm. This is problematic because more than 90% of the 1.4 million civil society organisations registered with TechSoup still use on-premises software for at least some of their daily operations.⁷ Few have the dedicated IT support they will need to migrate to the cloud.⁸

5.5

The pandemic has provided a **wake-up call** as a harbinger of what is to come, in terms of technology moving to the cloud. The on-premise software used by more than 90% of CSOs will cease to exist within the decade.⁹ At that point, CSOs who cannot make the shift due to lack of technical skills or connectivity will experience technological degradation and eventual collapse as the software they rely on becomes unsupported and begins to fail.



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Digitalization has enhanced participation and popular democracy through providing people with access to digital platforms to express their views and to connect with others locally and globally who share their interests and concerns.

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New digital technologies can support CSOs to increase their transparency and accountability to government and the public at large, and to enhance CSO legitimacy and credibility.



06

SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT WITH DIGITALISATION: CREATING A VIABLE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR INCLUSIVE DIGITALISATION



- 6.1** Considering that few CSOs surveyed have **access to technology** support, and the high potential for service degradation or failure should they be unable to migrate to the cloud, it is critical for governments to include civil society in digitalisation strategies. Otherwise, they risk losing the critical services provided by CSOs upon which their most marginalized populations rely.
- 6.2** Full participation in the processes of digitalisation requires a combination of access to the internet, access to appropriate tools, access to learning communities and the creation of relevant digital policies. This combination – which can be referred to as the **‘minimum viable digital infrastructure for inclusive digitalisation’** – is both fundamental to being able to deliver inclusive frontier technologies and is achievable through cross-sector collaboration between governments, businesses, and civil society.
- 6.3** Governments must enable the **digital capacity-development** of their populations, with a particular focus on civil society as crucial intermediaries and service-providers. This is a shared development challenge which is particularly acute across less developed countries. The international community must provide financing and public programmes to increase public access to, and knowledge of digital technologies and tools from an early age and from a lifelong learning perspective. Capacity building needs to address the hard skills-gap between older and younger generations and enable older generations to become familiar with new digital technologies. International donors must support civil society everywhere to develop trustworthy digital tools for civic activism and political participation.

- 6.4** If the digital capacities of civil society are systematically developed and its access to minimum viable digital infrastructures ensured, CSOs will be in a stronger position to share their unique insights, data and intelligence with policy and decision-makers, with a view to ensuring more **inclusive and effective public policymaking and implementation**.
- 6.5** Creating such a viable digital infrastructure would benefit overall governance, particularly in relation to the monitoring and implementation of key public policy frameworks such as the SDGs or the Paris Climate Agreement. There is broad international consensus that these policy frameworks require a **whole-of-society approach** to monitoring and implementation, including the input of civil society, if their goals are to be successfully realised.
- 6.6** Civil society organisations need to continually review and assess their collective digital capacities, and to track their digital progress over time. This can be achieved through their participation in **digital learning communities**, to enable them to leverage available digital tools and data to continue working effectively with the constituencies and communities they serve.
- 6.7** As well as CSOs developing their own access to digital infrastructure and building their digital competencies, they must also **work with local communities** to ensure the ability of these communities, and particularly the most excluded or marginalised, to participate fully in the current process of digitalisation. This will require a combination of access to the internet, to appropriate tools, to learning communities and to relevant digital policies.
- 6.8** In this way, communities should be **facilitated to assume leadership** in working towards an inclusive digital future. They should be enabled to meet their needs today and their ambitions for tomorrow on their own terms, based on their own data.



07

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERSHIPS AND CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATION ON DIGITALISATION



7.1 Governments must work with civil society and the corporate sector to create **flexible regulatory frameworks** which allow multiple types of actors to establish and run a variety of non-profit, not-for-profit and for-profit business organizations to access licenses, build upon existing knowledge, and compete to deliver internet access for all.

7.2 The absence of such regulatory systems which proactively promote **non-profit and not-for-profit alongside for-profit approaches** to the provision of digital access and services, will ultimately result in the data and voices of the unconnected – largely those groups who have historically experienced marginalization and disenfranchisement and who are most at risk of being left behind by digitalisation - remaining invisible in policy making and programme development, particularly in important public policy agendas such as the SDGs.

7.3 Civil society should partner with public and private **'Tech for Good' organisations**, to enable civil society to benefit from their technical expertise and to jointly push for a more enabling digital environment for all.

7.4 CSOs could **partner with a wide range of actors** on different aspects of Digitalisation, including partnerships related to Digital Connectivity, Digital Policies, Digital Tools, Continuous Digital Learning and Digital Resilience.

7.5 Governments, corporations and civil society must work together to develop the business models, supply chains, hardware resilience standards and e-waste recycling programs to **sustainably increase access to first digital devices**.

7.6 Governments, civil society, and business must collaborate to ensure **on-device and in-classroom education** and the implementation of curricular approaches at scale to ensure that digital adoption enables people to flourish as digital citizens, while minimizing risks of exposure to predation online .

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Many of the organizations which focus on using technology for good recognise that human rights must be protected even as technology innovation is accelerating, and that individuals should not be treated as commodities, or be deceived or controlled by technology.



INTRODUCTION

DIGITALISATION

The process of digitization, or the integration of digital technology into almost every aspect of contemporary life, has changed the way people work, access information, connect with each other, how they are governed and is even reshaping the cultures they inhabit. This process is driving rapid social and economic change and disruption, creating many exciting new opportunities but also confronting societies with a range of daunting challenges.¹⁰

The fact that approximately half of the world's population is not yet digitally connected, for example, poses a real risk that many people will experience social and economic exclusion or marginalization as a result.

Digitalisation has been rapidly transforming the "operating space" of civil society over recent years. Many of the changes and innovations that have accompanied digitalisation are enhancing and strengthening civic space. New inclusive and dynamic online spaces have been created which facilitate greater levels of civil society participation, activism, and engagement at multiple levels.

However, the current accelerated process of digital transformation also has a darker side, confronting societies everywhere with a range of serious challenges including the need to ensure equitable digital access for all, mitigate threats to digital security and privacy, tackle online misinformation and extremist propaganda, and promote open and democratic governance of the digital sphere, amongst many other issues. There is a very real risk that in the absence of adequate regulation and democratic governance of the process of digitalisation that is currently taking place, its overall impact will be to undermine rather than advance human welfare, freedom, dignity, and justice globally.¹¹



To date, the rapidly accelerating pace of digitalisation has outstripped any attempts by governments or international institutions to ensure its regulation and democratic governance. Large technology companies increasingly determine the nature, pace and scale of changes taking place in our digital landscapes. These changes are often driven by the commercial and profit interests of large technology companies and their shareholders and often conflict with, or even undermine what is considered the broader public interest. For example, the extractive nature of many of today's social media platforms has resulted in the social and behavioural data of technology users being sold on to companies interested in harvesting this data for the purpose of political influence and manipulation without the explicit consent of users.¹²

CIVIL SOCIETY'S CRITICAL ROLE IN DIGITALISATION

The more than 10 million organisations that partly comprise civil society globally have a critical role in enabling the inclusive digitalisation of society as witnesses, content providers, and as a channel to reaching historically marginalized communities. In its role as witness, civil society works with historically marginalized communities through a multitude of programs; gaining deeper insights into the challenges faced by the communities they serve, and into the impact of decisions taken by those who seek to serve them. In their roles as service providers, civil society organisations provide many of the services which, if digitalized, could help those they serve to benefit from internet usage while contributing data to drive much needed service-improvements. Civil society does this at scale, across a diversity of areas ranging from arts and culture, to supporting those with disabilities, and standing for human rights.

As civil society interacts with communities through the diversity of programmes that CSOs build, it gains first-hand, real-time insights into the challenges faced by humanity; capturing invaluable data that governments need to improve policies. However, that data too often remains hidden in notebooks and spreadsheets, unlinked and unusable. Building the digital capacities of civil society and increasing its access to minimum viable digital infrastructures to ensure it can share its insights, would dramatically increase cross-sector capacities in designing interventions based on situational awareness and an understanding of the likely impact of interventions on specific populations.



IRELAND: ECASS

Working with a community of Irish addiction services organisations, TechSoup's Irish partner Enclude designed a purpose-built case management solution – eCASS.¹³

Built with and for the organisations who use it, the fit-for-purpose tool saves organisations an average of 89 days per year in labour. Perhaps as importantly, the data generated by using eCASS aggregates into a common reporting tool which enables the community to bring frontline evidence to policy work with the Irish government – creating space for critical voices and information that would otherwise remain invisible and left out of decision-making.

That is the promise of the promise of a digitally transformed and mature civil society – not only the increased capability of each organisation to harness technology to deliver on its mission more effectively, but the ability for our sector as a whole to collectively understand and advocate for those we serve based on real-time, situational awareness of the challenges they face.

However, while the potential positive impact of digitalisation of civil society may be clear, the pandemic showed how much work we have to do to establish the baseline digital competencies our sector needs to weather digital disruptions; much less meaningfully participate in digitalisation.



According to the more than 12,000 respondents of a survey conducted by the tech NGO TechSoup and its partners (including hundreds of grant-making foundations) from 135 countries in late 2020, more than 80% of global CSOs saw services disrupted by the forced digital changes of the pandemic.¹⁴ Few had dedicated help navigating the challenges, with a full 66% reliant on occasional volunteers and 10% never having had any digital support of any kind ever. And fewer than 25% had a digital strategy to guide them. The effect of the pandemic on the 25% who did have digital strategies was quite different- they seemed to find it much easier to overcome the challenges they faced.¹⁵

The pandemic must be responded to as a “wake-up call” because it is a harbinger of what is to come as technology moves to the cloud. Currently, more than 90% of civil society uses on-premises software.¹⁶ This will cease to exist within the decade. When it does, organisations unable to make the shift due to lack of technical skills or connectivity, will begin to experience technological degradation and collapse as the software they rely on goes unsupported and begins to fail. Considering that few civil society organizations have access to tech support and the high potential for service degradation or failure should they be unable to manage themselves into the cloud, it is critical that governments work to include civil society in digitalisation strategies or risk losing critical services upon which their most marginalized populations rely.



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We have to make sure that innovative technologies don't further marginalize. - Mauritius.



SECTION TWO: OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS OF DIGITALISATION

OPPORTUNITIES

The current process of digital transformation, which as a global mega-trend presents many opportunities, especially where civil society and its work are concerned.¹⁷ These opportunities include:

INCREASED GLOBAL CONNECTEDNESS

Digitalisation is rapidly and positively transforming the way in which civil society functions. It has connected civil society actors from different regions and backgrounds. Civic actors are now communicating, spreading and accessing information and organising on a whole new scale, in ways that were previously impossible or extremely costly.¹⁸ Digitalisation enables the use of innovative online forums, assemblies and the creation of new online associations. It is also enabling civil society actors to reach new audiences, attract members, and build coalitions and networks across the world. Global connectedness has led to greater access for citizens and organised civil society to international information and support, and has facilitated better coordination, and exchange of good practices between civil society in different parts of the world.

INCREASED GLOBAL INFLUENCE

Digital transformation has also strengthened and consolidated CSO networks as a voice of international civil society and allowed them to speak to a global audience on issues of common concern that go beyond borders. Digital platforms are widely used to run online campaigns that can reach masses of people. Online movements have become increasingly influential, as a result. Issue-based awareness and sensitization campaigns and mass mobilizations have become easier to organise. The fabric of civil society is changing through digital platforms, allowing social movements and other actors to engage in more organic and fluid mobilizations. For example, the #MeToo movement used social media platforms to mobilise women all around the world against sexual violence.¹⁹

Digital technologies have already demonstrated their potential to better coordinate civil society from the national to the international level. These technologies can help to amplify its voice, present it as a serious actor of sustainable change representing people and communities all over the world, and can enhance its recognition as an important interlocutor in the eyes of political and economic decision-makers at all levels- from local to global. Digital transformation can also support more sharing of resources and technical skills in civil society, strengthening collective action.

ENHANCED POPULAR DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATION

Digitalisation has enhanced participation and popular democracy through providing people with access to digital platforms to express their views and to connect with others locally and globally who share their concerns.²⁰ Digital expansion can transform civic space into digital assemblies online, with citizens creating their own types of dialogues, asking questions about public services, looking for greater political accountability etc. Citizen-driven democracy can be strengthened through online community capacity building, and more online state-to-public communication, and convenient and improved mechanisms for public participation in democratic processes (e.g., elections, plebiscites, participatory budgeting etc) can be facilitated. The introduction of electronic reporting systems supports political accountability by allowing people to monitor public action, policies, and how their elected representatives have voted on certain issues. It also has the potential to reduce corruption, including in official circles. New digital technologies can also support CSOs to increase their transparency and accountability to government and the public at large, and to enhance CSO legitimacy and credibility.

Digital transformation has also provided new opportunities for regional and international institutions to consult with citizens and with organised civil society globally. Individuals and CSOs can now provide virtual inputs into, or advocate for community-driven alternatives not only in national but also regional and international policy and decision-making processes.²¹ The UN global survey on the post-2015 development agenda (i.e., Agenda 2030) for example was unprecedented in terms of its process of consultation.

It involved more than 1 million people from all over the world, including civil society, who were invited to share their ideas about the shape and content of the new sustainable development agenda.²²

Digital technologies facilitate innovative approaches to civic engagement and popular referendums. GovChat is South Africa's largest civic engagement platform accessible on line, on any mobile handset and feature phones.²³ 'Better Reykjavík' is an online consultation forum where citizens are given the chance to present their ideas on issues regarding services and operations of the City of Reykjavik.²⁴ The 'Plebiscito Digital por Colombia was a digital referendum made for the Colombians living abroad to cast symbolic votes.²⁵ The digital referendum tested what is commonly referred as liquid democracy i.e. instead of giving a voter the binary option of electing a choice, each voter had 100 votes allocated to be placed as they desire on each of the 7 open decisions of the referendum.²⁶

Many opportunities also exist for civil society and others to use new digital technologies for positive outcomes. For example, new social media and platforms provide new ways of engaging with non-traditional, digitally empowered civil society actors (i.e., social movements) and with youth. New digital technologies have also enabled many CSOs to participate in high-level events that were formerly limited to those who could afford to travel long distances to attend them. It is worth noting however that the type of participation facilitated by many digital platforms, unless carefully designed, can be very passive.²⁷

STRENGTHENED COLLECTIVE ONLINE DECISION-MAKING

Labour action including strikes is another form of civic activism that is often mobilised online, in at least 77 countries.²⁸ Digital platforms and apps have become much more important for labour unions to organise protests, keep in touch with members and provide spaces for online discussions and decision making.

BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES TO POLICY AND DECISION-MAKING

More widespread and popular access to digital technologies is likely to facilitate bottom-up approaches to policy and decision-making, informed by local knowledge and perspectives. As digital transformation diminishes the relevance of physical distance from national and international capitals where policy and decision-making activities are largely concentrated, this should give remote rural communities, indigenous people, and other marginalised groups a greater opportunity to feed their local perspectives and experiences into official processes and to influence the policies and decisions that will directly impact on their lives.

MORE EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT - CIVIL SOCIETY COLLABORATION

In addition to enhancing communication and public consultation, digital technologies have the potential to promote effective government-civil society collaboration. Crowdsourcing and co-design approaches can support new forms of collaboration and engagement, from policy making to service delivery. For example, new approaches to open government data or open-source software - can also lead to joint value creation.²⁹ The Open Government Partnership Toolbox provides another example: it is a collaborative platform which collects digital tools developed and used throughout the world by organisations to improve democracy and promote transparency, participation and collaboration.³⁰ Finally, digitalized CSOs are more able to represent the data of communities, often historically marginalized communities, who remain offline; bridging the information gap between policy makers, the effect of their policy decisions, and those they serve.

ENHANCED GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Digital transformation is also facilitating the emergence of new and more effective systems of global governance. For example, it has facilitated the inclusion of civil society worldwide in monitoring and implementing the ambitious goals and targets of international policy agendas such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the UNFCCC's Paris Climate Agreement.



LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

There is a significant potential for new digital technologies to reach previously neglected or under-served areas and constituencies with whom CSOs are working, and to engage these groups in new forms of digital participation so that they are not “left behind”. These constituencies include people with disabilities, indigenous people, disadvantaged women, people with limited educational levels, unemployed youth, rural populations, older persons, low-income citizens, and ethnic minorities. For example, mobile applications such as GovChat in South Africa, allow for non-traditional ways of participating in public decision making,³¹ and if made accessible to all, can help to increase civic engagement and participation among diverse groups of people. However, it is important to recognise that the potential of these digital technologies to promote greater levels of inclusion and participation will not occur automatically. The risk that the development of digital tools for civic activism and political participation may marginalize certain demographic groups who are unable or unwilling to engage to the same degree as others who are better represented and resourced has been highlighted by several studies.³²

COST-EFFICIENCIES AND POSITIVE SUSTAINABILITY IMPACTS

The current process of digitalisation is already leading to significant cost- and time- savings for civil society organisations worldwide due to a reduced need for physical and international travel. Various digital platforms and applications are now available which provide alternatives to the need for physical travel and facilitate online, and these virtual meetings can be supported by instantaneous interpretation.

The greater use of digital platforms to connect with peers and partners domestically and internationally also assists civil society organisations in reducing their carbon footprint. It increases their capacity to contribute to emission reduction targets in a global context in which an ambitious decarbonization process is underway.



BUILDING POPULAR PRESSURE ONLINE FOR PROGRESSIVE POLICIES ON DIGITALISATION

Building popular pressure online across countries and at multiple levels – local, national, regional and global- has the potential to promote progressive policies on issues of digitalisation, digital exclusion, cybersecurity, and data ownership. Civil society can push for international normative frameworks and for national level legislation on digitalisation which ensures respect for human rights and inclusiveness in technological advances and developments.

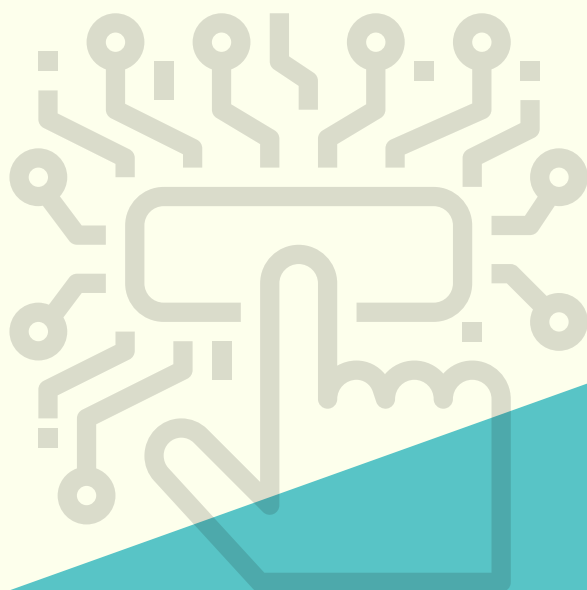
As part of its overall strategy to promote an enabling digital civic space, civil society should consider partnering with public and private ‘Tech-for-Good’ organisations. Such partnerships would provide civil society with the benefit of the technical expertise and help to jointly push for a more enabling digital environment for all. Tech-for-Good organisations tend to focus on the broad social impact of digital technology, and they work to strengthen its positive impacts and to mitigate the negative. Ideally, they understand that responsible and trustworthy technology is important to ensure equality of access and opportunity for everyone, and to build a positive future in which digital technology is useful and trusted by all.³³ Many of the organisations which focus on using technology for good recognise that human rights must be protected even as technology innovation is accelerating, and that individuals should not be treated as commodities, or be deceived or controlled by technology. In partnering with organisations of this kind, civil society can contribute to the development of a stronger and more effective “tech for good” social ecosystem, and helping the tech-for-good movement to become mainstream rather than remaining niche.



TECH FOR SOCIAL GOOD: TECHSOUP

A specific example of such a “tech for good” organisation is the not-for-profit global technology NGO called TechSoup (www.techsoup.global). It has partnered with 63 of the world’s leading civil society organisations to improve lives globally through the use of technology. TechSoup Global Network partners manage a range of technology capacity-building programmes to serve communities in nearly every region of the world. Each network tailors its program to the needs of its community and shares insights with other network partners to better serve communities worldwide. TechSoup and its partners have reached 1.5 million organisations and delivered technology tools and philanthropic services. The network is committed to continue to develop next generation programmes and services to navigate an increasingly digital world. Some of the digital tools and services it has helped to disseminate are listed below:

- **TechSoup's Digital Transformation** – information on how the company approaches the process of digital transformation. [Details](#).
- **START Network Assessment** – TechSoup’s pilot program indicating organisation efficiency maturity assessment program with the START network - [details](#) and [here](#) for US non-profits.
- **Gamechanger** – preventing youth radicalization - [see details here](#).
- **Hivemind** – sources available to counter shrinking spaces and be safe. [Details](#).
- **TechSoup Courses** – [Details](#).
- **Megaphone** – The place to exchange experiences on shrinking civic spaces and countering that. [Details](#).
- **Ukraine** – [Personal Democracy Forum](#).
- **Netsquared** – Global events on tech for good. [Details](#).
- **NGOSource** – Enabling funds for non-profits. [Details](#).



RISKS OF DIGITALISATION

FAKE NEWS AND FALSE INFORMATION

One of the main threats to digital civic space according to the findings of the Digital Society Project dataset relates to the dissemination of false information.³⁴ Autocracies and democracies alike are targets of false information spread by domestic and foreign governments.³⁵ Online manipulation and disinformation are used as a tactic to undermine electoral processes and distort public debate, and sometimes to incite violence. According to David Sangokoya, from “curated social media experiences to online bots misrepresenting public voices in an online government comment system, the digital information ecosystem is rife with disinformation, distraction, and misrepresentation”.³⁶ The proliferation of “fake news” has drawn attention to the lack of transparency and accountability mechanisms as digital technologies have become more widely used, and civic spaces are being correspondingly undermined.³⁷

DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE AND CYBER ATTACKS

States are using digital technology to silence, monitor and harass dissidents, political opponents, human rights defenders, journalists, whistle-blowers, activists and protesters; as well as to manipulate public opinion through misinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and government-sponsored trolling.³⁸ These tactics are intended to intimidate civil society actors, create incentives for self-censorship, destroy their credibility and legitimacy and deny them the attention necessary for mobilisation in the digital space.³⁹

Governments have ordered internet and telecoms shutdowns, and have disrupted and blocked websites and platforms in advance of crucial democratic events including elections and protests.⁴⁰

In its report on Covid-19 and Human Rights, the United Nations stated that: “the use of technologies, including artificial intelligence and big data, to enforce emergency and security restrictions or for surveillance and tracking of impacted populations raise concerns”.⁴¹ The report goes on to say that “the potential for abuse is high: what is justified during an emergency now may become normalised once the crisis has passed. Without adequate safeguards, these powerful technologies may cause discrimination, be intrusive and infringe on privacy, or maybe deployed against people or groups for purposes going far beyond the pandemic response”.⁴² In particular, the UN report highlighted that journalists, activists and political opponents were being arrested often on the basis of fake news, and that online surveillance and aggressive cyber policies are increasing.



Diagram (taken from OECD Report) Table 1.1⁴³ - OECD Table 1.1. Rising digital authoritarianism, by the numbers 8 Consecutive years of global Internet freedom declines.

TABLE 1.1. RISING DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM, BY THE NUMBERS.

8 CONSECUTIVE YEARS OF GLOBAL INTERNET FREEDOM DECLINES.

IN THE PAST YEAR, AT LEAST 17 COUNTRIES APPROVED OR PROPOSED LAWS THAT WOULD RESTRICT ONLINE MEDIA IN THE NAME OF FIGHTING "FAKE NEWS" AND ONLINE MANIPULATION.

18 OUT OF 65 COUNTRIES HAVE PASSED NEW LAWS OR DIRECTIVES TO INCREASE STATE SURVEILLANCE SINCE JUNE 2017, OFTEN SCHEWING INDEPENDENT OVERSIGHT AND EXPOSING INDIVIDUALS TO PERSECUTION OR OTHER DANGERS TO GAIN UNFETTERED ACCESS TO DATA.

OF THE 65 COUNTRIES ASSESSED, 26 HAVE BEEN ON AN OVERALL DECLINE SINCE JUNE 2017, COMPARED WITH 19 THAT REGISTERED NET IMPROVEMENTS. THE BIGGEST SCORE DECLINES TOOK PLACE IN EGYPT AND SRI LANKA, FOLLOWED BY CAMBODIA, KENYA, NIGERIA, THE PHILIPPINES, AND THE BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF VENEZUELA.

Violations of civic freedoms are made worse by the use of new forms of digital surveillance technology, including artificial intelligence, closed-circuit television, and facial recognition programmes.⁴⁴ Predictive policing enables police to disrupt peaceful protests even before they have begun, and facial recognition allows police to identify protesters for detention and questioning.⁴⁵ And while the social media platform WhatsApp is often used for civil society organising and communicating, it can also be used against them: the example given by Front Line Defenders is of Tibetan activists who were sent WhatsApp messages purporting to be from NGOs and journalists, but which contained links enabling the installation of spyware on their phones.⁴⁶

Mandatory sim card registration and intensive collection of biometric information, e.g., for national registries or ID systems, allows for mass governmental surveillance. The Chinese Social Credit System has been given as an example of digital technology being used to monitor the population, ranking people and their access to social services, schools, transport, and jobs, based on their social credit.⁴⁷ Smart cities and Internet-of-Things technology can readily collect data from smartphones in common spaces.⁴⁸

THE DIGITAL WELFARE STATE

Governmental as well as private digital ID systems gather and rely on multiple forms of biometric information— fingerprints, facial recognition, iris scans, palm veins, DNA, and more— and an increasing number of states condition access to various public goods on participation in and compliance with such systems.⁴⁹ And the enthusiasm during the COVID-19 pandemic for the development of contact-tracing smartphone apps, which have been presented as an effective way of helping to control the resurgence and spread of the virus, have raised related concerns about privacy, equity, and freedom, as well as doubts about the effectiveness of such digital tracing mechanisms.⁵⁰

The number of countries adopting digital ID systems on every continent is growing rapidly — one private sector company mentions over 70 but the number is constantly rising.⁵¹ Some of those whose systems have given rise to human rights challenges include India, Kenya, Ireland, the UK, and Tunisia. The report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights to the UN General Assembly in 2019 also highlighted the many problems linked to the emerging digital welfare state.⁵²

WORKPLACE SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance has also increased in the workplace, particularly as the dividing line between work and home has become blurred during the pandemic. This includes growing use of remote monitoring software and even webcam surveillance to monitor the “productivity” of workers. With home working expected to become a permanent feature of British capitalism, there is a risk that Amazon-style surveillance of warehouse workers is rolled out across the economy at large.⁵³

BUSINESS MODELS OF BIG TECH COMPANIES

Any serious efforts to promote a more enabling and rights-respecting digital environment for all will need to engage more frontally with the role of the private sector, given its ownership of many widely used and influential digital technologies, and the fact that it is the private sector that is driving the process of digitalisation. The current business models of technology companies tend to be extractive and anti-privacy, presenting risks to data protection as well as risks of algorithmic bias, discrimination, and undermining the safety and security of online civic spaces.

The agglomeration and further use or onward sale of personal and behavioural data is central to these business models. The constant and ubiquitous gathering and use of data on individuals and groups by these companies, and increasingly by governments themselves, results in a significant loss of privacy and has been referred to as a form of surveillance capitalism.⁵⁴ These companies keep the public in the dark about how content and information flows are policed and shaped through their platforms and services. Too few companies make users’ expression and privacy rights a central priority for corporate oversight, governance, and risk assessment. These companies also fail to disclose enough about what user information is collected and shared, with whom, and under what circumstances. The question of who has rights over the data which creates the digital self or “avatar” that advertising markets target, and how a holistic, rights-based rather than piecemeal approach can be adopted to the protection of such personal data are questions that must be urgently addressed by policymakers and regulators.

Large digital tech companies currently control online civic spaces. Dominant online platforms and social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube – and the Chinese equivalents such as Weibo, WeChat, Youku – have become important gatekeepers to people's ability to enjoy the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, wielding enormous power over whether and how individuals and civil society actors can access and participate in this online democratic space.⁵⁵ Their current policies and practices do not meet the necessary safeguards in terms of transparency and accountability. Further, according to the report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, civic freedoms are dependent on "business enterprises, whose legal obligations, policies, technical standards, financial models and algorithms affect these freedoms".⁵⁶

POLARIZATION AND EXTREMISM

The growth of strengthened online communities and of particular narratives are fragmenting and polarising public discourse.⁵⁷ Digital technologies can negatively affect the quality of public discourse and civic engagement.⁵⁸ Through online digital tools, individuals inclined towards xenophobia, racism, intolerance, misogyny, or homophobia have found similarly minded people that reinforce their views and even sometimes inspire acts of violence. Social media and other digital forms of communication can be exploited as platforms for bigotry to spread hateful and incendiary rhetoric, inciting violence against women, the LGBTQI community, and ethnic and religious minorities and others.⁵⁹ The OECD Digital Transformation Report cites an article from the Council on Foreign Relations which found a correlation between anti-refugee Facebook posts by the German far-right party and attacks on refugees in Germany.⁶⁰

Social media platforms also offer violent actors the opportunity to publicise their acts. The OECD Digital Transformation report cites the example of the white supremacist gunman who opened fire in a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand in March 2019, who filmed the entire crime and livestreamed it directly to Facebook.⁶¹ Societies are now struggling to reconcile the values of free expression with prevention of hate speech and dissemination of terrorist content online.

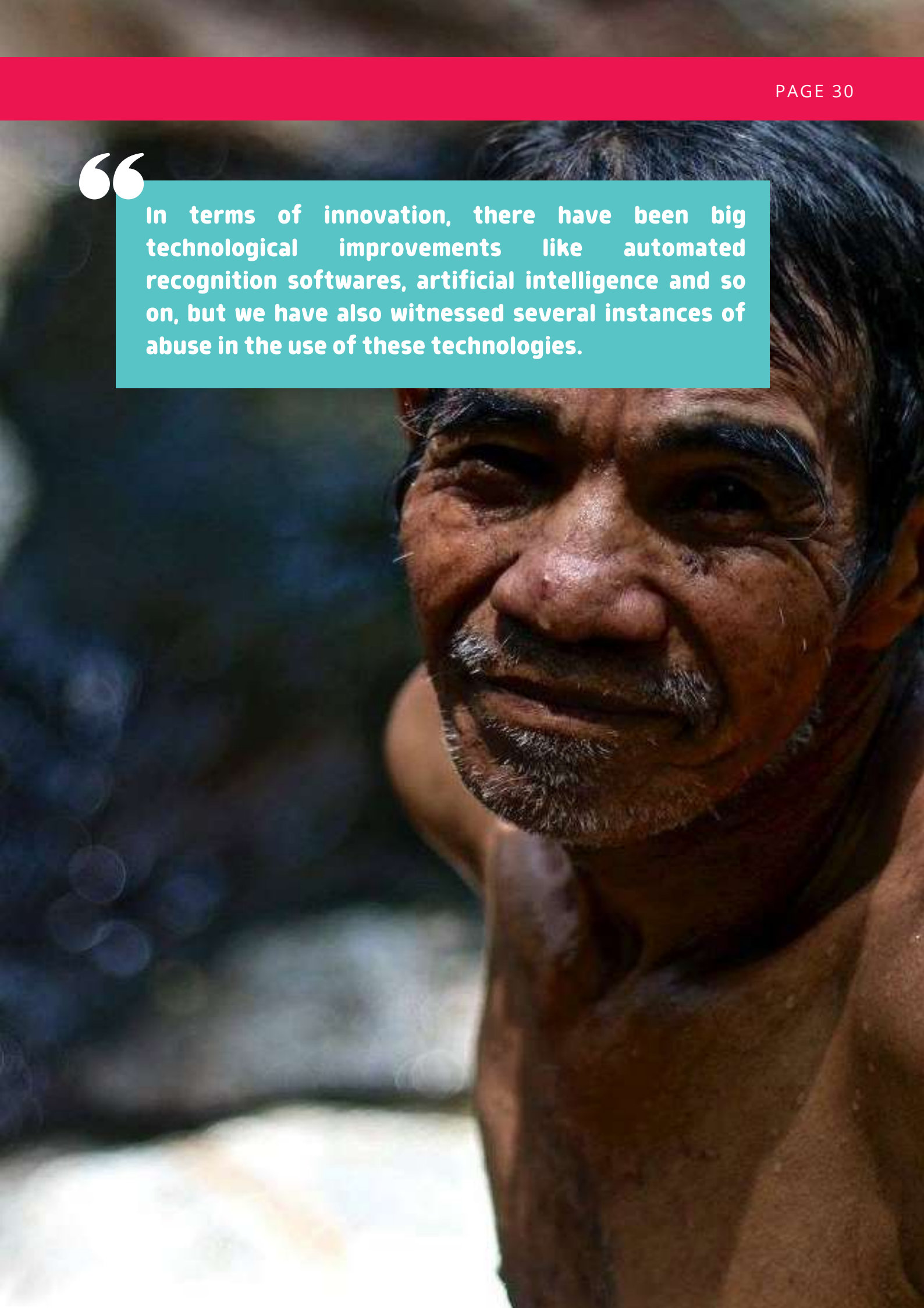
DIGITAL POVERTY

The digital gap between connected, urban groups and those who are not connected (e.g., poor urban and rural groups) continues to widen, and relates to income and education levels, as well as generational and gender gaps.⁶²



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In terms of innovation, there have been big technological improvements like automated recognition softwares, artificial intelligence and so on, but we have also witnessed several instances of abuse in the use of these technologies.



SECTION THREE: HUMAN RIGHTS, CIVIC SPACE, AND AN ENABLING DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM AND DIGITALISATION

Technology is a powerful force with the potential to enhance and promote human rights, or alternatively to impede or undermine them. The power of many existing forms of domestic and transnational human rights mobilization and activism have clearly been enhanced by digital technology. There is ample evidence of actors and institutions at all levels of the human rights system beginning to adapt, both using and confronting technology and its transformative effects in a range of ways. Human rights activists and advocates have to some extent been benefiting from the ways in which technology enhances communication and facilitates novel forms of advocacy and networking. The difficulties created for human rights advocacy organisations by the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions on in-person gathering and mobilizing has also increased their engagement with digital tools and strategies.⁶⁶

Growing concerns about the impact of rapid digitalisation on human rights are not based on the idea that technology is necessarily harmful in itself, but rather that a range of both public and private uses of technology are having negative impacts as well as unpredictable and potentially negative effects on human freedom and welfare.

The constant surveillance and tracking of human beings via their ever more frequent use of technology creates risks not just to privacy but to many other aspects of personal freedom, even when the surveillance and data-gathering is not carried out by authoritarian governments.⁶⁷ And despite the promise of digital inclusion and digital development for addressing poverty, the potential for discrimination and exclusion are only some of the more obvious risks that digitalisation and algorithmic decision-making pose to human rights.⁶⁸

INNOVATIVE DIGITAL RESPONSES

The challenge for human rights activists, just as for the broader community of policymakers, scholars, and activists focusing on the social, economic, and political effects of digitalisation, is to learn the ways in which the power of technology can be used to strengthen and reinforce human rights, as well as the ways in which the repressive, and inequalities dimensions of technology can be predicted and resisted. Human rights defenders' organisations have worked with tech companies to develop new tools and strategies for gathering, recording and sharing information on human rights breaches, to fight misinformation, and to provide digital security.

New organisations like Grassroots Unwired and The Engine Room have been created to advise social activists and human rights advocates on how to make the most of data and technology to increase their impact,⁶⁹ and an annual global gathering on human rights in the digital age brings numerous groups and actors from different disciplines and fields of practice to 'build a global agenda for human rights in the digital age'.⁷⁰

Social movements and grassroots actors have been agile and innovative too. In Hong Kong, for example, democracy activists in 2019 followed the practices of earlier social movements in countering the use of surveillance technology such as smart lampposts, using apps and phones not just to decide on immediate tactics such as where to march, where to retreat in the face of teargas and conveying information large numbers of people in real time, but also voting on 'homegrown apps' on next steps.⁷¹ In Russia, as the government sharply increased its repression of civil society in general and human rights organisations in particular, civil society groups have used technology to circumvent some of those restrictions and to continue their work. One Russian NGO working in the field of freedom of information, which was forced by the government to close down, describes how it re-formed as an informal association of lawyers and journalists, which began to use new media technologies in the non-profit sector.⁷² They used 'online handouts' to advise people of their rights, and have created popular 'text quest' interactive games to advise users on how to communicate with the police and security services, as well as how to protect themselves and their families. Similar experimental and innovative uses of technology by local activists and movements are to be found in many parts of the world.



INNOVATIVE DIGITAL RESPONSES: TELEGRAM

Telegram, the so-called 'rebel application' that is widely used by social movements, first appeared in Russia in 2013. It was launched by the brothers Nikolai and Pavel Durov, who are the founders of VKontakte, one of the largest and most popular social networks in Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union. From the offset, Telegram positioned itself as a reliable and secure means of communication, winning trust among users thanks to its encrypted chat system which protected against excessive interference from security forces (a feature that is much in demand in Russia, as well as in neighbouring countries.) At the time Telegram was the only app of its kind which used so-called 'end-to-end-encryption' with self-deleting messages. This, unfortunately, is why, in addition to its use as a resource for progressive activists blocked from Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, it has also provided a home for supporters of extremist ideologies, from Covid-19 deniers and other conspiracy theorists, to President Lukashenko himself. This app, in other words, presents a genuine social dilemma.

Over the last five years, Telegram has grown at a remarkable rate, and in January 2021 it reached 500 million users. On average, another 1.5 million people are signing up every day. In Belarus itself, which has a population of just 10 million, Telegram's most popular channels have almost 2 million subscribers. Everyone seems to be using the app: from opposition politicians issuing press releases, to journalists exchanging information, to activists seeking advice on how to move, defend themselves and protest.



While Telegram is the key tool in Belarus, activists around the world are increasingly turning towards other technologies to assist in social struggles. A new study by Forus, which was conducted in collaboration with the University of Lisbon, demonstrates more generally how civil society action is taking new forms today, and is placing a greater focus on innovation.⁷³ According to Ana Luisa Silva, the author of the study: *"adapting to the digital revolution is one of the biggest concerns and challenges for civil society networks. Not surprisingly, many of the innovations identified by the participants are in some way related to the use of digital tools such as online learning platforms, social media for awareness-raising campaigns, and virtual forums. The Covid-19 pandemic has only accentuated this tendency to make the most of digital tools to enable collective action when traditional forms of protest and mobilisation are not possible."*⁷⁴

Since the beginning of the pandemic, this has also been happening in democratic countries. In Lithuania, for example, new spaces for online discussion are emerging. In Uganda, a Citizens' Manifesto has been created to increase and sustain democratic participation.⁷⁵ In Brazil, the 'Pacto pela Democracia' uses "technology as an ally to bring citizens closer to politics" in an attempt to counter the polarisation that many of these digital tools have also created.⁷⁶ In Portugal, the Academy of Development brings together different entities - including civil society, businesses and universities - to create opportunities for collaboration and co-learning.⁷⁷ Finally, Nigeria and Finland, two very different countries, are both considering artificial intelligence as a means of solving problems related to land conflict, climate change and sexual assault.⁷⁸

Social networks, social movements and citizens are increasingly mobilising to fight the growing trend of the creation of 'filter-bubbles', a term the activist Eli Pariser has coined to refer to the intellectual isolation that results from the algorithms that currently determine what we encounter online.⁷⁹ Whether through Telegram or the old Morse code, it doesn't matter. There is a real need, and a growing desire on the part of civil society and other actors, to generate new digital spaces for discussion.

NGOS SPECIALIZING IN DIGITAL RIGHTS

The digital era has also seen the emergence of dozens of digital rights NGOs at the national, regional, and international level— many from the global north but increasing numbers also from the global south— which are focused on the risks and challenges to human rights of the uses of technology. A selection of leading Global South organisations include Derechos Digitales (Chile and across Latin America),⁸⁰ Colnodo (Colombia),⁸¹ CIPESA (Southern Africa),⁸² Afroleadership (Cameroon),⁸³ ASUTIC (Senegal),⁸⁴ Unwanted Witness (Uganda),⁸⁵ IPANDETEC (Panama and across Central America),⁸⁶ Software Freedom Law Centre (India),⁸⁷ Digital Empowerment Foundation (India)⁸⁸ amongst many others, while some of the prominent global north organisations to date include AccessNow.org, Alt Advisory, Digital Freedom Foundation, Digital Rights Foundation, European Digital Rights, Digital Rights Watch, Electronic Privacy Information Center, The Global Initiative for Inclusive ICTs, Open Rights Group, along with many more. Others like the Association for Progressive Communication are global networks that include organisations from all continents.

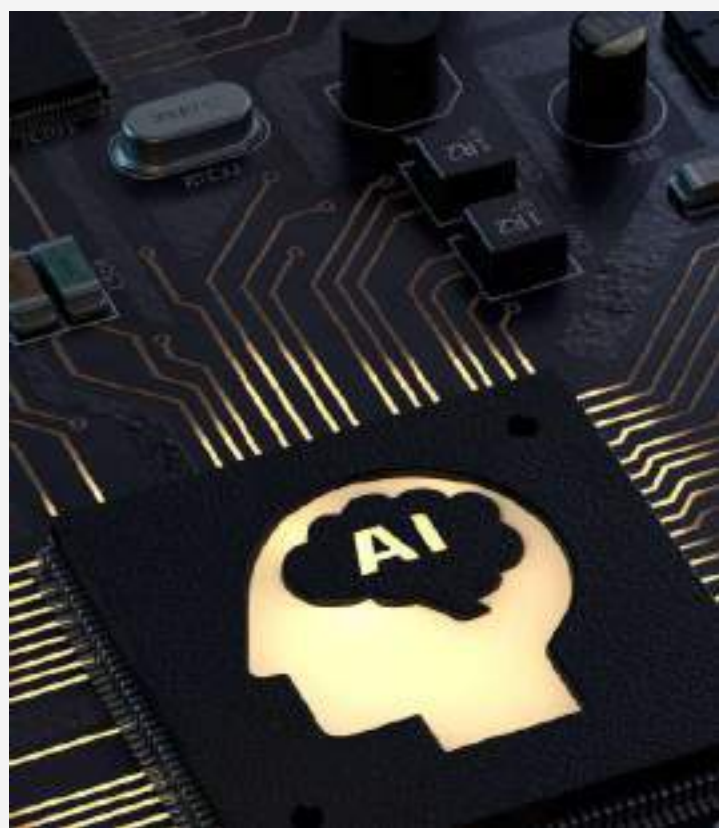
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Artificial Intelligence and in particular algorithmic decision-making are amongst the more obvious risks that digitalisation and algorithmic decision-making pose to human rights.⁸⁹ Today, decision-making by algorithm abounds. Algorithmic decision-making gives rise to numerous human rights-related risks, including its disproportionate impact on those living in poverty. Indeed many of the possible risks have not been considered in advance, yet the technology continues to advance rapidly and to be put into practice. Artificial intelligence and automation are fundamentally changing the workplace, while digital exclusion and data inequality can significantly affect life chances in an era in which access to public services including education, health, and welfare are increasingly conditioned on internet access.⁹⁰

Pasquale recently described a ‘second wave of algorithmic accountability’ research and activism in which more structural concerns have begun to be addressed, following the first wave which focused mostly on existing algorithmic systems with a view to making them fairer.⁹¹ In his terms, the second wave of accountability goes beyond improving existing systems and asks whether they should be used at all— and, if so, who gets to govern them. Social movements, human rights advocates, and activists have also begun to ask these questions, and while they may lag behind technological expertise and corporate interest in their engagement, it would at best be premature to conclude that the human rights movement is not capable of rising to those challenges, and there is already some evidence to the contrary. Nevertheless, given the specialized, complex, and fast-moving nature of the tech sector, the advice of those involved in rethinking human rights strategies to develop new forms of coalition and collaboration and to work with non-traditional allies going forward seems critical.⁹²

INSTITUTIONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH HUMAN RIGHTS AND DIGITALISATION

An array of international institutions and actors have begun to engage with the human rights dimensions of digitalisation, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Human Rights Council, UN General Assembly, the Committee on the Rights of the Child UN, as well as a range of special rapporteurs including those on privacy, freedom of expression, and extreme poverty. Regional actors— and in particular the European Union and its institutions— have made rights protection in the digital era a key part of their policy frameworks. In other words, in addition to the array of new and emerging organisations and actors focused specifically on the impact of technology for social justice advocates, existing human rights institutions as well as multiple actors at grassroots, national, regional, and transnational level are adapting their practices and focus to encompass the specific challenges of digitalisation and technological change.⁹³



CIVIC SPACE

IMPACTS OF DIGITALISATION ON CIVIC SPACE

The opportunities or threats that digital transformation presents to civic space will increase as emerging technologies develop and become more common. Digital technologies are proliferating so quickly in such a multitude of directions all over the globe that it is hard to keep track of the changes afoot let alone their implications. Much will depend on which technologies take precedence and who will control them and to what ends.⁹⁴

While digital technologies are providing civil society with new ways to exercise the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, they are simultaneously providing governments and others with new ways of restricting those rights, raising questions about how technological advances will affect civic space in the future. The potential for digitalisation to alter civic space - the physical, virtual, and legal place where people associate, express themselves, and assemble - for better or for worse - is very clear. The OECD Digital Transformation Report cites the broadly positive comment of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Right to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association from his 2019 report:

“At a time when civic space is shrinking globally, digital technologies offer an alternative space, online, including in countries where the offline exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, of peaceful assembly and of association is heavily curtailed or suspended ”

while noting that others have provided a more nuanced assessment of both the potentially negative and positive impacts of digitalisation on civic space.⁹⁵

NEED FOR A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Recent publications such as the Carnegie Endowment’ “Defending Civic Space: Is the International Community Stuck?” advise those concerned about shrinking civic space to develop a strategic framework that links closing civic space to other key foreign policy challenges, articulates a positive vision of civic space globally, and offers tailored tactical guidance”.⁹⁶ It also recommends bringing experts on board who understand the rapidly evolving digital landscape and can make the connection to civic space issues, including to future threats. The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law has also published best practices on digitalisation and civic space.⁹⁷ In 2019 the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC) stated that: “We remain concerned about the shrinking civic space ... We therefore call for joint actions to analyse the different constraints on our shared support to civil society to play its full role as development actors in its own right, and to work towards relevant recommendations”.⁹⁸ Forus has developed the outline of a strategic international initiative called “A Global Initiative for Strengthening and Investing in Civil Society” which includes eight key pillars.⁹⁹ One pillar concerns the strategic objective of promoting an enabling environment for civil society, which could include the issue of promoting an enabling digital environment for CSOs.



CREATING AN ENABLING DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL

COLLECTIVE MOBILISATION

Civil society is fundamentally committed to ensuring that society navigates the accelerating global process of digitalisation in a way that puts the needs and rights of individuals and communities at the centre. In this regard, civil society urgently needs to mobilise as a sector and to collectively advocate for a more “enabling digital environment” for all. Such action is essential if CSOs everywhere are to successfully transition to operating digitally to a much greater extent as they fulfil various valuable public interest roles. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are crucial actors in promoting peaceful inclusive societies through sustainable people-centred development. They amplify peoples’ voices in policy dialogue, pioneer innovation, and directly engage communities and constituencies in relation to issues that impact on their lives and well-being.

AN ENABLING OPERATING ENVIRONMENT FOR CSOS

As governments and societies increasingly embrace transformative digital technologies and as key policy and decision-making processes move online, civil society must ensure that the civic space necessary for CSOs to be able to operate effectively, does not shrink but rather expands. The guarantee of a well-regulated and democratic digital space is essential to the optimal functioning of civil society. CSOs are important service providers in most countries around the world, particularly in times of emergency.

The civil society sector is a major source of employment in many countries and makes an important contribution to the social and economic well-being of these countries. Given the various important ‘public interest’ roles that CSOs play, they are a critical element of overall social stability in most societies. However, an enabling operating environment for civil society organisations - both online and offline- is a necessary precondition if civil society is to flourish. An enabling operating environment will allow CSOs to fulfil many important public functions, including supporting governments to build towards social and economic recovery from the recent global COVID 19 pandemic, and contributing to monitoring and implementing the important Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) agenda, amongst others.



ADDRESSING GAPS LINKED TO DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Civil society has an important role to play in ensuring that important human and social dimensions of digitalisation are taken into consideration when governments, regional and international organisations are developing their digital strategies. CSOs work with and alongside local communities and understand their needs, and therefore have an important role to play in highlighting and addressing many of the “gaps” remaining in the current process of digital transformation—particularly with regard to local impacts.

“As civil society we are unique in who we represent, and how we represent. We need to be at the decision-making table when national and international digital strategies are being created and renewed”. - **Chris Worman** Vice President TechSoup Forus workshop April 2021.



The many benefits and opportunities presented by the current process of digitalisation will mean little if overall digital governance is weak. A new system of international digital governance is required which is democratic, rights respecting, and which provides safeguards against the potential for abuse. Relevant institutions must be given the legal, judicial and security capacities to address digital rights violations and to promote compliance with global/international digital governance frameworks. Existing discrepancies in levels of engagement with, and use of new digital technologies by different demographic groups must be addressed so that certain groups are not disproportionately represented (i.e., over or under-represented) in digital governance forums. This would undermine what should be a fundamental democratic principle of the inclusive representation of all people in such forums.

If progressive governments and decision makers are genuinely interested in ensuring a plausible future for digital technologies and in gaining the support of civil society and wider society for the rapid processes of digital transformation that are underway, they must ensure the following:

- fast, affordable and equitable access to digital infrastructure and data
- the digital inclusion of all - particularly low income and socially excluded demographic groups.
- the availability of continuous capacity building for all to promote greater digital competency.
- an enabling legal framework through which fundamental rights are respected across the digital sphere, and the promotion of privacy, data protection, and digital security.
- transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance of the digital sphere.

NEED FOR PERSUASIVE PUBLIC ADVOCACY

Civil society must begin to identify the core conditions of an “enabling digital environment” if it is to develop effective public advocacy around this important policy issue. An enabling digital environment for CSOs will assume greater significance over the coming years as governments everywhere increasingly rely on civil society to participate in the monitoring and implementation of key global policy frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the UNFCCC Paris Climate Agreement. Persuasive public advocacy and the development of a strong public narrative are now required, calling on governments everywhere to act swiftly and comprehensively to ensure that the digital sphere becomes a truly enabling environment for all.



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In schools, teachers have started to teach children how to understand information, so-called media literacy, so that they can differentiate between fake news and 'real' news. - TaiwanAID.



SECTION FOUR: DIGITALISATION AND THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

GOVERNMENTS HARNESSING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

Digital technologies played a key role in international and national responses to the COVID 19 pandemic. Countries all around the world embraced digitalisation in the battle against the Covid-19 virus. The use of digital technologies covered a wide spectrum of purposes: from assisting in locating people with symptoms, to monitoring and tracking the spread of the disease (e.g., through the use of mobile phones for contact tracing), to enforcing quarantines and stopping the spread of fake news or misinformation. The widespread use of digital technologies during the pandemic raised many concerns about possible uses of the data collected. Some examples of these in different countries have been discussed extensively in the OECD report on Digital Transformation and the Futures of Civic Space (2020) and **are set out in Annex 2 of this report.**

CSOS HARNESSING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

MONITORING THE USE OF FINANCIAL AID

During the pandemic, many CSOs pushed hard to be included in national policy and decision-making processes linked to Covid-19.

They also insisted that COSs be included in national emergency funding mechanisms, observing that international/national/private donors were providing financial and other forms of assistance directly to the government, thus increasing the risk of corruption. Independent digital monitoring tools were created by CSOs in many countries like the “Covid Donations Transparency Unit” (Central de Transparência Doações Covid) initiative in Brazil¹⁰⁰ or the CovidFundTracka Initiative in Nigeria.¹⁰¹

PUBLIC AWARENESS- RAISING AND CAMPAIGNING

During the pandemic, CSOs also turned to social media and key digital platforms to support short and long-term responses to the pandemic. For example, the regional coalition of Forus in Latin America, Mesa de Articulación, launched a social media campaign to try to connect civil society and governments in the framework of the 2030 Agenda, focusing particularly Goal 17, to overcome the short and long-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁰²

The Forus national platform in India, VANI (Voluntary Action Network India), in a recent research paper highlighted many interesting joint campaigns led by civil society and Indian scientists.¹⁰³ Indian CSOs prepared information resources for different kinds of devices including smartphones. Specific applications were created, and WhatsApp campaigns were designed. Information was made available in 19 Indian languages and in beautiful designs to attract readers. In an attempt to tackle myths or hoaxes, some Indian Universities created a special unit, the “Indian Scientists Respond to Covid-19” (ISRC), which regularly released messages in vernacular language, with minimal use of complex language. CSOs also informed people about the available financial aid programs of the Government, which were not requested by people simply because of a lack of information.

The national platform of Forus in the Dominican Republic, Alianza ONG, along with the Inter-American Development Bank and the government, created the virtual platform “Codo a Codo” (literally elbow to elbow) which sought to manage information on needs identified by CSOs to assist vulnerable populations and communities in different regions of the country.¹⁰⁴ The platform linked them with people or organisations wishing to donate their time as volunteers, or their money by offering products or services. The goal of this platform was simple: to facilitate assistance to vulnerable groups through civil society organisations.

COMMUNICATION WITH MEMBERSHIP

During the COVID 19 pandemic, many civil society organisations faced great difficulties in maintaining contact and communicating with their memberships.

As a result, they turned to digital means to facilitate greater connection. For example, since March 2021, a Forus regional coalition in Africa, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), established virtual meetings with its members to discuss policies, strategies and programmes.¹⁰⁵

Its regional coalition of national NGOs in West and Central Africa (REPAOC) focused on organising workshops for its members to develop their digital communication tools, which in turn facilitated the exchange of Covid-19 related information.¹⁰⁶

ENHANCED VISIBILITY

The ability of CSOs during the COVID pandemic to use digital means to reorient their activities, to create comprehensive plans, to support vulnerable populations with life-saving interventions, to spread awareness and to build new partnerships and coalitions of interest, all had a positive impact on the image of CSOs at the national level, where their actions became more visible through social media. Their use of digital technologies also helped them to recruit many individuals who were interested in engaging as volunteers or activists during the pandemic.



DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE

Even before Covid-19, concerns about big tech and surveillance capitalism were mounting.

However, the recent global pandemic has accelerated the growth of the data economy.¹⁰⁷ It has shifted a vast amount of activity online, so that people now have a much larger digital footprint than before. And it has led to the rise of new forms of medical and locational tracking, which creates a distinct set of new challenges.

With vaccines now being rolled in some parts of the world, governments have started trialling the use of vaccine passports. The implications of this could be far-reaching, ranging from face-scanning in pubs to restrictions on travel, which would create new divides in countries where existing social divides are already problematic. There are also very real concerns that the health data of individuals are increasingly in the hands of private companies and that the tentacles of surveillance capitalism could soon be accessing people's personal health data.

HATE SPEECH

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the virus has had a disproportionate impact on certain communities through the rise of hate speech and the targeting of vulnerable groups (such as migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons), facilitated by social media and other digital tools. The use of phrases such as "foreigner's disease" to describe the virus, the UN warned, has led to discrimination, xenophobia, racism and attacks (United Nations, 2020[22] - from OECD Report).



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The use of new technologies usually reinforces existing societal biases, making those communities particularly prone to discrimination and security threats.



SECTION FIVE: DEVELOPING A ROAD MAP FOR DIGITALISATION

DIGITALISATION AS A MEGATREND

Digitalisation is a megatrend, influencing how we work, what kind of work is considered valuable and the means of dialogue and deliberation available to us. It shapes how we communicate, think, how we are governed and, ultimately, the cultures which we inhabit.

Humanity now faces the daunting challenge of how to productively navigate such multi-faceted and fast-moving processes. The far-reaching impacts of digitalisation on the communications, economics, values and cultures of diverse societies globally can often make the challenge feel impossible.

Yet we must learn to do so. Digitalisation will proceed. As it does it will increase tensions between those who benefit from digitalisation today and its promise to increase the amount of data at our disposal and to enhance our decision-making, and the other half of humanity – the half that is not yet digitally connected and that remains largely excluded and marginalised from mainstream (and increasingly digitalised) processes.

To complicate matters further, digitalisation does not have a finite end point. As digitalisation proceeds, humanity's relationship with technology will continue to evolve.

DELIVERING DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND SKILLS FOR COMMUNITIES

While accepting and working to mitigate the negative impacts of digitalisation by adapting existing, agreed upon, human rights frameworks to the digital age, it will be necessary to work across sectors to build the digital infrastructure necessary for communities to end digital poverty. These communities should be enabled, by means of digital access and the acquisition of digital skills, to assume leadership in working towards an inclusive digital future. In this way communities should be enabled to meet their needs today and their ambitions for tomorrow on their own terms, based on their own data. The plurality of voices and insights which they will be in a position to access digitally will help wider society to gain critical insights into the impacts of digitalisation – and all other megatrends – on the whole of humanity and will enable necessary adjustments and more appropriate planning.



MINIMUM VIABLE DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The ability to participate fully in the current process of digitalisation requires a combination of access to the internet, to appropriate tools, to learning communities and to relevant digital policies. This combination – which can be referred to as the ‘minimum viable digital infrastructure for inclusive digitalisation’ – is both fundamental to being able to deliver inclusive frontier technologies and is achievable through cross-sector collaboration between governments, business, and civil society.

Elements of the model:

- **Meaningful Access:** More than half of humanity¹⁰⁸ is not yet connected to the internet. Many more are under-connected, limited by slow internet speeds and high costs. Meanwhile, organisations like The Internet Society have demonstrated the capacity to connect communities in the most remote areas of the planet.¹⁰⁹ Governments must work with civil society and the corporate sector to ensure regulatory frameworks which allow multiple types of actors to establish and run a variety of non-profit, not-for-profit and for-profit business models to access spectrum licenses, build upon existing knowledge, and compete to deliver internet access for all. Without this, the data and voices of the unconnected – overwhelmingly those groups who have historically experienced marginalization and disenfranchisement and who are most at risk of being left behind by digitalisation - will remain invisible in policy making and program development aimed at achieving targets such as those set forth in the SDGs.

- **Tools:** As demonstrated during the pandemic when millions of families found themselves unable to access or afford basic electronic tablets or laptops necessary for their children to join online classrooms, access remains a barrier.¹¹⁰ Governments, corporations and civil society must work together to develop the business models, supply chains, hardware resilience standards and e-waste recycling programs to sustainably increase access to first devices.
- **Learning Communities:** Access to the internet and to the tools necessary to use it are meaningless – potentially dangerous even¹¹¹ without digital and media literacy training. Governments, civil society, and business must collaborate to ensure on-device and in-classroom education and the implementation of curricular approaches at scale to ensure digital adoption enables people to flourish as digital citizens while minimizing risks of exposure to predation online. Civil society has an extensive track record of developing and implementing digital education programs and standards as technology has evolved that can be mainstreamed in cooperation with national education ministries.¹¹²
- **Policy:** Without appropriate digital policies that reinforce existing commitments to human rights, digitalisation will deliver diminishing returns as increased usage leads to increased surveillance and data mining of citizens. Governments, civil society and business must re-commit to human rights conventions in the digital era and work together to implement and monitor the impact of digital policies needed to increase access to the internet and ensure progressive, rights-first digital usage.

Each pillar of a minimum viable digital infrastructure depends on and reinforces the other. Without the internet, tools and skills are of little use and vice versa. Without policies ensuring meaningful access and digital rights, usage of the internet will be limited to those who can most afford it and they will increasingly be at risk doing so. Without learning communities, the programs, policies and solutions designed to deliver meaningful access will inevitably and rapidly age as technology evolves.

While there are many other layers of digital infrastructure that could be both built and useful, by focusing on minimum viable digital infrastructure, government, civil society and business stakeholders are provided with a baseline to design towards, a clear goal for ending digital poverty, and a foundation from which they might plausibly include communities on the communities' own terms.

Outcomes

Should communities have access to digital connectivity, to the tools and skills to use it, and to relevant policies that increase their confidence to do so, individuals would be more able to utilize the internet, take advantage of digital services, contribute their voice and data to collective intelligence-gathering, and begin to learn how to build their own digital futures. As they do so, civil society will have increased its communications capacities and the insights to be able to understand citizen realities and to channel their needs to policy makers. The for-profit sector will have increased capabilities to design solutions with and for historically underserved communities. Governments will have increased capabilities to better understand the impact of their policy decisions on all social groups, to increase social cohesion and stability through improved services and to reduce digital (and associated economic) disparities.

Ultimately, through ubiquitous minimum viable digital infrastructure, citizens will have onramps into the digital age; those who work to serve them will have increased capacities to understand and channel their voices; and those seeking to build the frontier technologies which hold the promise to improve services and to further reduce historical inequities will have the data they need to do so inclusively.



Definition of A Digitalized Civil Society

Enabled by minimum viable digital infrastructure, the digital transformation of civil society refers to the process of determining and adopting relevant policies, increasing staff capacity, and implementing specific technology systems which allow organisations to deliver their services with greater impact for the individuals they serve, while leveraging data for both their own and for collective decision-making and deliberative processes.

In a fully digitalized civil society, the following outcomes can be expected:

- Social change agents are able to utilize technology to its fullest potential, harness data to understand and grow, and can influence the design of appropriate technologies; organisations of all sizes are able to participate, contribute their data and insights, to grow movements, solve common problems, and influence policymaking.
- communities of civil society organisations can collectively harness technology and data to streamline work processes and address common concerns.
- Those who wish to support civil society will have access to improved data to drive understanding and investments; and,
- individuals and society benefit from better services, informed policy-making and civil society organisations realize their potential.

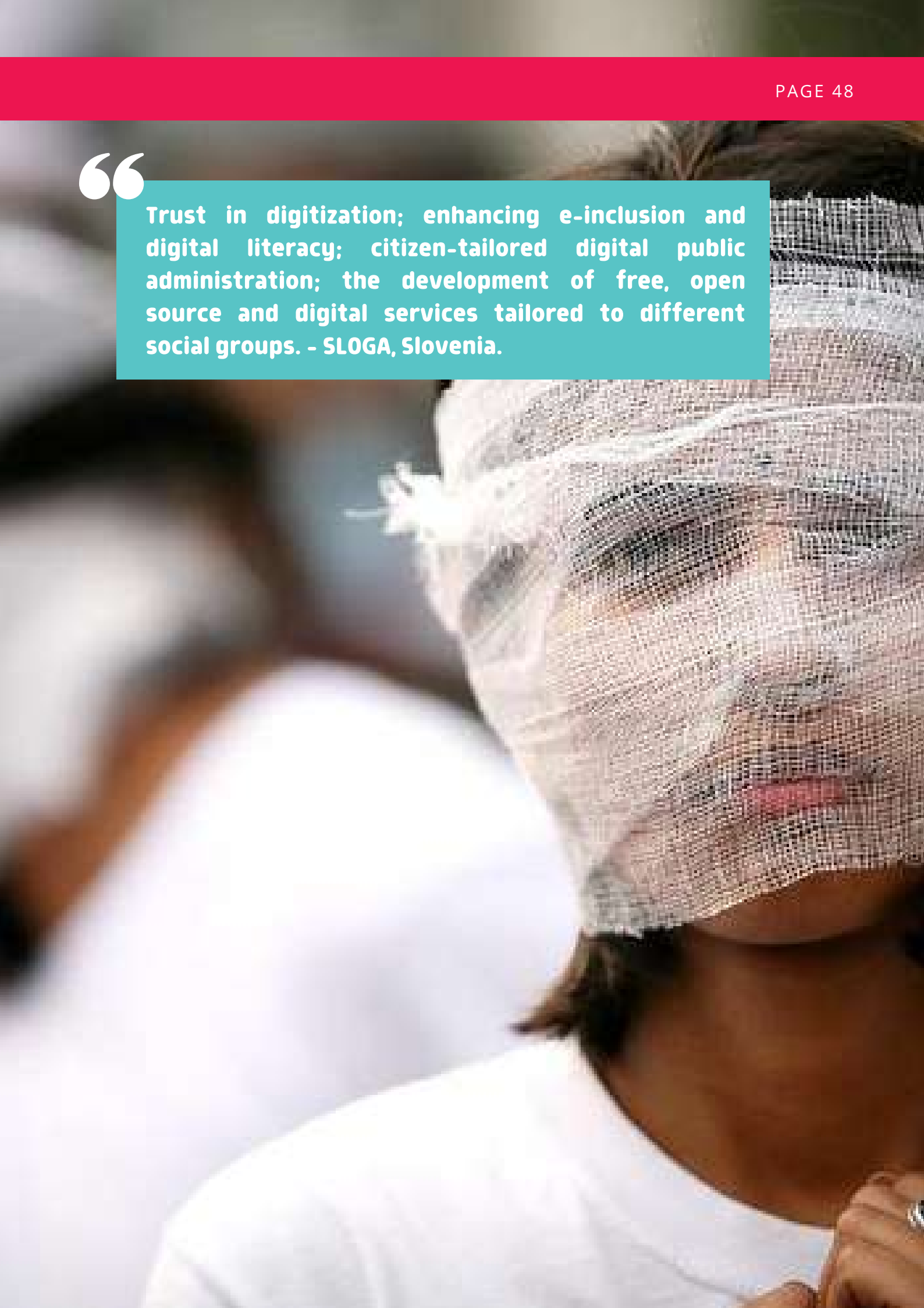
OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIPS WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

There are many opportunities for other actors to partner with CSOs on different aspects of Digitalisation. These include opportunities for partnerships on:

- **Connectivity** – working with CSOs to leverage existing expertise amongst organisations like ISOC¹¹³ and ConnectHumanity¹¹⁴ on national connectivity strategies; add timelines to universal service access fund deployment.
- **Policy** – there are opportunities to partner with CSOs in in multistakeholder dialogue around The Voluntary Principles,¹¹⁵ the Global Network Initiative,¹¹⁶ and around the Open Government Partnership to increase understanding of relevant and applicable policy frameworks supporting inclusive digitalisation.
- **Tools** – working with frameworks like the Digital Impact Alliance's Principles for Digital Development,¹¹⁸ partner with civil society communities like Code4All¹¹⁹ and TechSoup¹²⁰ on the inclusive design and distribution of meaningful tools.
- **Continuous learning** - this area includes the setting of standards, and partnering and centring the work of civil society around principles like those laid out by the DQ Institute.¹²¹
- **Resilience** - Investing in the digital resilience of civil society organisations as part of national resilience strategies as has been done in partnership with foundations in Ireland,¹²² Canadian government's Community Services Recovery Fund,¹²³ or the United States including non-profits as eligible recipients in COVID response and recovery loan funds.

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Trust in digitization; enhancing e-inclusion and digital literacy; citizen-tailored digital public administration; the development of free, open source and digital services tailored to different social groups. - SLOGA, Slovenia.



SECTION SIX : BUILDING DIGITAL CAPACITIES

The process of digital transformation taking place globally at present is impacting the future of employment and work. The way in which CSOs work is no exception to this rule. CSOs are just beginning to leverage the opportunities of digital transformation for their work and have yet to explore its full potential; from using drones and satellite technology to detect violations of human rights to mobile phone data informing humanitarian responses, CSOs are finding ways to harness digital technologies to achieve their goals and to act for the public good. Many CSOs use virtual reality as a medium for communication and advocacy.

DIVIDING LINES

As the use of digital technologies and social media become sufficiently powerful and widespread, people's ability to access them represents a fundamental dividing line. As people increasingly depend on digital technologies for managing different areas of their lives, stark inequalities will continue to grow between those who are able to access and use digital technologies¹²⁴ and those who are not in a position to do so. Many countries have not yet provided the digital infrastructure or the shared digital tools to support people to operate effectively online, develop digital competencies and to evolve through change. This will possibly contribute to unemployment and inequality and highlights the need for skills training.¹²⁵

THE CLOUD IS COMING

One of the shared challenges currently faced by many countries is the fact that "the cloud is coming". Current trends suggest that within five years or so, everybody will need to be "in the cloud" because the use of on-premise solutions (primarily Microsoft Office) will no longer be the norm. This is problematic because although software such as gsuite and O365 are becoming more common, more than 95% of civil society organisations still use on-premise software¹²⁶ for at least some of their daily operations. More than 80% of CSOs have never had any IT support and many will need it to migrate to the cloud. A further challenge relates to the fact that many CSOs do not have the access either to the internet they need or to the regulatory environment that would make the cloud both safe and usable.

CIVIC TECH AND GOV TECH

‘Civic tech’ is a popular buzzword often used to encompass a wide range of Tech4Good, ICT4D and gov tech ranging from e-gov to smart cities. There is a distinction between the two and role for civil society in both.

Civic tech embraces all of the digital tools that enable citizens to easily and effectively participate in and engage with civic life, whether that is reporting an issue to a local authority, engaging with elected representatives or monitoring the use of community assets. Civic tech is often — but not exclusively — built by non-profit organisations working for a better, more representative, democratic, or functional society. The result is often open source ‘tech for good’ software that is free or cheap to implement.¹²⁷

A key aim of the Civic Tech movement is to build trust in technology. This is based on the belief that once people have more trust in technology to make life easier for them, and some increased digital imagination about what technology can do, then they have mentally made a shift toward being more open to digitally transforming the rest of their work.

Gov Tech aims to harness technology to enhance the delivery of government services. Unlike Civic Tech, GovTech is often built by private companies or government agencies themselves. Recently, much of the GovTech discussion has been focused on AI, machine learning and automated decision making as pertains to the delivery of government service. CivicTech and GovTech initiatives have demonstrated enhanced capacities to engage citizens in governance and better provide government services. They have also both shown the complexity of building robust, secure digital technologies that might be improved over time.

Further, with so many of the intended users or beneficiaries of such technologies left offline, there is an extreme risk that the use of civic technologies will be limited to the digitally privileged while Gov Tech services will be inaccessible, or worse biased against their intended users due to lack of data.

Where civil society is concerned, it is important to engage in the design of both civic and government technologies to ensure new technologies are fit for purpose, serve their intended purpose, and reinforce the values that drove the perceived necessity for the technology’s creation. Some in civil society may wish to learn to code through communities such as Code4All.org and should be encouraged to do so so they may participate in the creation of new technologies and increase civil society’s stakeholdership in fundamental technologies. The ability to code is not, however, mandatory to participating in discussions that guide the creation of technology; or in monitoring technology’s impact on communities.

Civil society should advocate for a role in technology design and oversight, particularly of gov tech where there is a mutual interest with government bodies in more efficient and effective digital services. Civil society must also mobilize to ensure those who are not currently online have pathways to meaningful access so that they can access gov tech services and participate via civ tech or both will only serve to accelerate the digital divide.

DEVELOPING THE DIGITAL CAPACITIES OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Several pilot initiatives already exist which can be useful to civil society in building the digital infrastructure that it needs.¹²⁸ This kind of initiative could be partnered with a developmental process to help CSOs to develop their capacities for meaningful digital participation.

There is a clear need for civil society everywhere to ensure it has access to opportunities to develop its own technical capacities. This should have positive reputational benefits for the sector as it will be able to keep up with rapid technological changes in its operating space. This will require a baseline analysis of the digital capacities of civil society organisations everywhere combined with some digital transformation support to help them get up and running in the cloud. They will also require narrative training work linked to digitalisation so they can drive their own narratives. There are potentially a variety of research projects that could also be supported and carried out in this area.

Civil society organisations also need to ensure their capacities to interact digitally with the communities with which they work. A baseline analysis of tools, processes, and services that CSOs could use to interact with and strengthen their ties with their communities should be carried out. There are existing tools such as WorkerConnect.org that can provide an important communications link from umbrella civil society organisations to frontline/grassroots organisations and could also support collective action and platform building. Civil society organisations also need to continue to review and assess their collective digital capacities, and to track their digital progress over time. This will allow them to ensure that they are fully leveraging available digital tools and data to allow them to continue to work effectively with the constituencies and communities they serve.

CHALLENGES FACING GOVERNMENTS AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

There is a clear need for governments to provide for the digital capacity development of their populations, with a particular focus on civil society. This need represents a shared, technical and development challenge, particularly across less developed countries.

The international community must provide financing opportunities and public programmes to increase public access to, and knowledge of digital technologies and instruments from an early age and from a lifelong learning perspective. Capacity building is required to address the hard “skills-gap” that exist between older and younger generations, and to enable older generations to become familiar with using the new digital technologies. International donors must also support civil society everywhere to develop trustworthy digital tools for civic activism and political participation.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is the dominant international framework guiding efforts towards the achievement of a more sustainable model of development, recognises this shared technical and development challenge.

Target 17.6 of this agenda commits the international community to “Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, in particular at the United Nations level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism.”

Target 17.8 of this agenda commits the international community to “Fully operationalize the technology bank and science, technology and innovation capacity-building mechanism for least developed countries by 2017 and enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology”.

Civil society and other stakeholders should target and intensify their advocacy to achieve the speedy operationalisation of these relevant provisions of SDG 17 of the Agenda 2030. Governments- particularly of developed countries should act to ensure that the international commitments to technology sharing, capacity building and data collection and analysis are followed through on.

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They delete my social media posts, they're censoring us! They censor everything that happens in the territory, it is something we should not allow. The leaders come out to deny everything that has happened since 21 N in Colombia - Colombia



Conclusions



This paper aims to highlight the main impacts of digitalisation on civil society organisations, to explore the associated risks and opportunities, and to advocate for an inclusive, human-rights-based and democratic form of digitalisation that will empower and enable not just civil society organisations around the world, but people everywhere.

A **range of recommendations for action are set out below**. They are directed at governments, international organisations, international donors, private tech companies, CSOs, tech for good NGOs, and other stakeholders who have a role to play in creating a more enabling digital environment- not just for the benefit of civil society - but for the benefit of the wider societies in which they operate.

The extremely accelerated pace of digitalisation has meant that societies worldwide have experienced it as an overwhelmingly powerful and largely uncontrollable force. This perception may have militated against the proper regulation of the digital sphere up to this point. But given the increasingly central role that it will play in the future of our societies, and the numerous benefits associated with digitalisation, there is no reason why the current process cannot be harnessed, democratised, and made more equitable.

Sufficient levels of **public and political will need to be mobilised**, as control will need to be wrested back from the few large tech companies who dominate the digital sphere at present. But the prize will be an internet and a process of digitalisation, the potential to align values and human rights principles with digital development, and ensure technology will work in the interests of all and not just those of privileged social groups.

There is no room for complacency where the current process of digitalisation is concerned, given the many risks and dangers that accompany it. **Progressive governments and international institutions will need to play an important leadership role** in working to harness, regulate and democratise the digital sphere. This endeavour will require unprecedented levels of international co-operation at all levels. Civil society is a willing partner in this process, but it will need an enabling environment in which to operate if it is to be effective.

The recommendations below provide an **outline of the key actions required** in order to achieve a more enabling digital environment for civil society and for the wider public.

Recommendations for Action

Leadership by Governments, the International Community & Other Stakeholders

- ▶ Progressive governments, international organisations and international donors need to act quickly to ensure **a well-regulated and democratic digital space**.
- ▶ They must ensure transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance of the digital sphere. There is an urgent need for a fundamental shift away from the status quo where control lies in the hands of a number of large private tech companies and a move **towards more multi-stakeholder models of governance** in which civil society can play an integral role.
- ▶ They should **re-commit to human rights conventions** in the digital era and work together to implement and monitor the impact of digital policies, access to the internet, and to ensure progressive, rights-first digital usage. The negative impacts of digitalisation should be mitigated by adapting existing human rights frameworks to the digital age.
- ▶ Governments, international institutions, donors, and other actors should **ensure the digital inclusion of all**, and particularly of low income and socially excluded demographic groups, by supporting the provision of fast, affordable, and equitable access to digital infrastructure and data for all.
- ▶ Governments should ensure that civil society is **included in the development of national and local digitalisation strategies**. This will also help to ensure that the needs and interests of the most marginalized populations will be addressed by these strategies.
- ▶ International, regional and national-level digital strategies should take into account the critical role that digitalisation plays in enabling civil society and other key stakeholders to effectively monitor and **implement key public policy frameworks** such as the SDGs or the Paris Climate Agreement. There is broad international consensus that these policy frameworks require a whole-of-society approach to monitoring and implementation, including the input of civil society, if their goals are to be successfully realised.

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The necessary digital community architecture and digital information should be made available to CSOs and local communities to enable them to respond effectively to the challenges and opportunities of digitalisation. This will require a combination of access to the internet, to appropriate digital tools, to learning communities and the creation of relevant digital policies. This combination – which can be referred to as the **'minimum viable digital infrastructure for inclusive digitalisation'** – is both fundamental to being able to deliver inclusive frontier technologies and is achievable through cross-sector collaboration between governments, business, and civil society.
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Governments must provide for the ongoing digital capacity-development of their populations, with a particular focus on civil society as crucial intermediaries and service-providers. This is a shared development challenge which is particularly acute across less developed countries. The **international community must provide financing and public programmes** to increase public access to, and knowledge of digital technologies and tools from an early age and from a lifelong learning perspective. Capacity building needs to address the hard skills-gap between older and younger generations and enable older generations to become familiar with new digital technologies.
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Governments, civil society, and businesses must collaborate to **ensure on-device and in-classroom education** and the implementation of curricular approaches at scale to ensure that digital adoption enables people to flourish as digital citizens, while minimizing risks of exposure to predation online
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Governments must work with civil society and the corporate sector to create **flexible regulatory frameworks** which allow multiple types of actors to establish and run a variety of non-profit, not-for-profit and for-profit business organizations to access licenses, build upon existing knowledge, and compete to deliver internet access for all.
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Conduct Human Rights Impact Assessments on all government contracted technology (GovTech) meant to enable government services.
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Governments, corporations, and civil society must work together to develop the business models, supply chains, hardware resilience standards and e-waste recycling programs to sustainably increase access to and use of first digital devices. **The ecological impacts of the process of digitalisation** need to be assessed ex-ante throughout the entire chain, limited and mitigated wherever possible. Measures which are adopted to advance digitalisation should adopt a «do no harm» approach, particularly with regard to ecological footprint and other negative impacts associated with the process. These impacts should be assessed, avoided and mitigated, and, as a last resort, compensation should be provided.
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International donors should support civil society in developing trustworthy **digital tools for civic activism, watchdogging, and political participation**.

- ▶ The international community urgently needs to **develop a strategic framework that will link closing civic space, including in the digital realm, to other key foreign policy challenges**. This framework should articulate a positive vision of civic space globally, and offer tailored tactical guidance to governments, civil society actors and other interested stakeholders. Experts should be brought on board who understand the rapidly evolving digital landscape to make the connection to civic space issues, including to future threats.

Civil Society Action Required

- ▶ Civil society must push for the development of **enabling legislative frameworks** for digitalisation which ensure respect for human rights and inclusiveness in technological advances and developments. It must press governments to introduce progressive policies on issues including cybersecurity, privacy, accessibility, inclusion, and data ownership.
- ▶ CSOs should leverage the **opportunities of digital transformation** in their work, from using drones and satellite technology to detect violations of human rights to the use of mobile phone data to inform humanitarian responses. Many CSOs still have yet to explore its full potential.
- ▶ CSOs need immediate access to **digital support** to assist them in migrating to the cloud, and to avoid technological degradation and eventual collapse as the on -premises software they rely on becomes unsupported and begins to fail.
- ▶ Civil society must advocate for the provision of **continuous digital capacity-building** for all to promote greater digital competency and to enable its members to keep apace of rapid developments in the digital sphere.
- ▶ CSOs need to continually review and assess their collective digital capacities, and to track their digital progress over time. This can be achieved though their participation in **digital learning communities**, to enable them to leverage available digital tools and data to continue working effectively with the constituencies and communities they serve.
- ▶ Human rights activists and their allies, such as civil society umbrella networks need to learn how the power of technology can be used to **strengthen and reinforce human rights**, as well as how the repressive and inegalitarian dimensions of technology can be predicted, identified, and resisted.
- ▶ Human rights defenders' organizations and their allies should work with tech companies to **develop new tools and strategies** for gathering, recording, and sharing information on human rights breaches, to fight misinformation, and to provide digital security for all.

- ▶ In addition to developing their own access to digital infrastructure and building their digital competencies, they must also **work with local communities** to ensure the ability of these communities, and particularly the most excluded or marginalised, to participate fully in the current process of digitalisation. This will require a combination of access to the internet, to appropriate tools, to learning communities and to relevant digital policies.
- ▶ CSO should work with local communities in a way which facilitates these communities to **assume leadership** in working towards an inclusive digital future. Local communities should be enabled to meet their needs today and their ambitions for tomorrow on their own terms, based on their own data.
- ▶ Civil society should partner with public and private **'Tech for Good' organisations**, to enable civil society to benefit from their technical expertise in areas such as Digital Connectivity, Digital Policies, Digital Tools, Continuous Digital Learning and Digital Resilience.
- ▶ Civil society has the potential not just to be a consumer or user of digital technologies but also to be **developers & co-owners of new digital technologies**, which can provide alternatives to mainstream digital technologies.

DISCOVER THE #LET'S TALK DIGITAL CAMPAIGN



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#LET'S
TALK
DIGITAL
”

**No civic space without
digital space!**



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There are times in which the digital space can perpetuate the toxic cycle, or the cycle of discrimination it's trying to break - Nepal



Footnotes

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ANNEX 1: OECD DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION REPORT: COUNTRY EXAMPLES OF DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE OF CITIZENS DURING COVID

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In **Korea**, government agencies harnessed surveillance-camera footage, smartphone location data and credit card purchase records to help trace movements of coronavirus patients and establish virus transmission chains. Detailed location histories on each person who tested positive for the coronavirus were posted online.

In **Singapore**, the government maintained an online dashboard that provided detailed information about each positive Covid-19 case. The Ministry of Health posted information online about each coronavirus patient. The idea was to warn individuals who may have crossed paths with them, as well as alert the public to potentially infected locations. Singapore also introduced a smartphone application for citizens to help the authorities locate people who may have been exposed to the virus. The application, called TraceTogether, used Bluetooth signals to detect mobile phones that are nearby. If an application user later tested positive for the virus, the health authorities could examine the data logs from the application to find people who crossed their paths. The application preserved privacy by not revealing users' identities to one another.

In **China**, citizens were required to use software on their phones that automatically classifies each person with a colour code — red, yellow or green — indicating contagion risk, based on their travel history and self-reported health condition. The software determines which people should be quarantined or permitted to enter public places like subways. Disinfecting robots (deployed to complete tasks such as cleaning and sterilising and delivering food and medicine to reduce the amount of human-to-human contact i.e. contactless delivery), smart helmets (that can measure the temperature of anyone within a 5 metre radius), thermal camera-equipped drones and advanced facial recognition software are all being deployed in the fight against Covid-19 to scan crowds for fever/detect temperatures and identify individuals not wearing masks. Drones have been deployed to transport medical samples and conduct thermal imaging.

In **Lombardy, Italy**, the authorities analysed location data transmitted by citizens' mobile phones to determine how many people are obeying the government lockdown order and the typical distances they move every day.

Israel approved emergency measures for its security agencies to deploy surveillance technology normally reserved for battling terrorists to track the mobile-phone data of people with suspected coronavirus. Location data collected through telecommunication companies by the domestic security agency, was shared with health officials. Once an individual was highlighted as a possible coronavirus case, the health ministry was then able to track whether or not they were adhering to quarantine rules.

The **United Kingdom** developed a smartphone application that notified individuals who may have come into contact with those infected with the coronavirus. People would sign up for the programme and would agree to share their location data on a voluntary basis and out of a sense of civic duty.

In the **United States**, discussions between technology companies and the White House focused on using large amounts of anonymous, aggregated location data captured from Americans' mobile phones to conduct general public health surveillance, including by tracking whether people are keeping one another at safe distance to stem the outbreak and to anticipate where more serious outbreaks are likely to occur.

The Government of **Brazil** created an application to offer health information to citizens. Sweden developed a new education platform that offers resources for children who can no longer access school. Canadians created a platform that allows people to post #ISO posts ('in search of' help requests), or #offerposts, enabling people to acquire important medical or household goods that they may not have been able to find for health or mobility reasons.

The closure of schools, and other education institutions in various countries during the pandemic created a damaging interruption in the teaching programs of many children globally. Many governments supported and funded the use of digital technologies by schools which allowed the education of children to continue by means of remote learning. However, such measures often had the effect of increasing the existing inequalities between public schools and private schools, as the latter were able to put in place more effective remote learning systems. In many countries children do not have access to appropriate digital tools, or a good internet connection, and digital data is often very expensive.

ANNEX 2: Interviews to Forus members and activists

Annex 2, below, presents a range of testimonies from Forus members and partners based in different countries around the world. The testimonies were generated during in-depth interviews and workshops conducted by Forus during the first six months of 2021. The testimonies largely describe how digitalisation is impacting on different national contexts from the perspective of civil society in these countries. The contributions of Forus members and partners have deliberately been presented as anonymously as possible to protect the identities of individuals and their civil society organisations.

Indonesia (Asia) CSO testimony

"Indonesia has been experiencing shrinking civic space in recent years as are many countries across the globe. The Covid pandemic has exacerbated the situation. There are some good developments, but in general in terms of freedom of expression or sharing opinions on social media for instance, our freedom is very much limited. During the Covid-19 pandemic and before that, we witnessed cases in which human rights activists, or people who were vocal in criticizing the government, were criminalized. Policing and the criminalisation of activists tend to be based on unclear evidence – for example fake news and hoaxes. There is a cyber patrol unit – including in the President's or public official offices – which is used by the national police to silence critics..

Several months ago, an activist I know witnessed severe cyber attacks. Up until then he was very much active in criticizing the government's policies on handling Covid-19, and in particular how it undermined the gravity of the pandemic. This activist's Whatsapp number was hacked and he was accused of inciting riots. He was taken into custody, "kidnapped" as fellow activists said. He was taken out of his friend's house to an unknown location. His number was accused of inciting hate and violence...it was his number, but it was hacked. There are several other examples I could share about cyber attacks against activists, journalists, human rights and environmental defenders."

Latvia (Europe) CSO testimony

"As a country of the European Union, Latvia is a quite free country. We enjoy democratic freedoms and we can stand openly for our rights and we are not put in prison – unlike our neighbours in Belarus, that we are supporting at the moment. But we experience the same challenges as other countries, we experience populism, radicalisation of opinions and disinformation on social media. All global trends touch us, but at the same time, we can be open with our opinions and still feel safe.

At the start of the pandemic, I participated in a social media "hackathon". This is not usual for me, because I always think that hackathons are for younger people, different generations, and I am not good with such technical elements. But as I was at home, I decided to take part, and as a result, life brought me in contact with a very interesting project called "Movement of Volunteers – Stay Home". I was among 8 people, I was the only one from the civil society sector. The others were from start-ups, the IT sectors and other stakeholders, but we started this movement together. The idea was to bring together people through technology – to unite people at home who needed help with volunteers – who are mostly young people very comfortable with technology.

We connected the phone numbers of elderly people with mobile apps. This changed how we look at voluntary work. Often people don't want to get engaged in voluntary work because they don't have time as they have their own commitments – personal business or family. But through this project, people could help concretely, at a concrete time, with concrete work. We got a thousand people who registered with the application and we could help so many, because digitalisation made it easy. The app rebranded after the first wave, it's now called "Easy to Help". And we were able to react as well to the crisis in Belarus.

As a civil society actor, this was such a new experience for me. As a national platform, we work more on policy issues, or with other NGOs, but this was such practical work in the field involving new technologies. And it introduced a new concept of voluntarism in Latvia. We got attention from the media and other stakeholders. People started to see NGO work differently. This was jumping in cold water and surviving, and it motivated me to do something I was a bit afraid of, but in the end it allowed me to gain valuable new perspectives."

Belarus - (Eastern Europe) **CSO Testimony**

"For months now, Belarusian citizens have been gathering in Minsk and other parts of the country to demand that Aleksander Lukashenko steps down from his position as President. In fact, the country has been shaken by protests since 9 August 2020, when Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994, won the national elections once again. According to Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the currently-exiled head of the opposition, and a large proportion of the population, the vote was rigged.

I am 21 years old and a member of the Belarusian Students' Association: I witnessed the events of the 9-10 August with my own eyes. My mother told me to be careful and that I shouldn't go. But how could I not? That election night I saw grenades, gas and other weapons for the first time in my life. This dictatorship is taking away our youth. Due to my participation in the protests I have been forced to leave not only my flat but the country itself. The same thing has happened to many of my friends and colleagues, who are now in prison or 'self-exiled' in Lithuania, Poland and Estonia. "We were forced to leave the country, in this emergency manner, to avoid being detained. I've been living in exile for almost two months now, because the authorities consider me a public danger... yet I've never done anything illegal.

Since the start of the protests, over 25,000 Belarusians have been temporarily detained or arrested, and hundreds of people have been injured in clashes with the police. On 15 November, officers in Minsk detained more than 300 people in a single day. This was a hard crack down on what were largely peaceful protests. According to the Washington Post, the squares were filled with 200,000 people. I'm in my early twenties now. I've lived under Lukashenko's rule all my life: nursery, high school, the first years of university, my law degree. I've never seen real political parties, elections without fraud, democracy without tyranny. In Belarus it has become normal to live without thinking about freedom. Belarus is a country free of all freedoms. I want to go home, and soon. The protests are ongoing, but they are changing form. Belarusians won't let themselves be silenced again. They might lock us in prison for 24 hours, beat us or start criminal trials, but we will keep on fighting. With limited internet access and police using stun grenades, tear gas and batons, civil society and activists in Belarus are increasingly turning to innovative 'encrypted' methods to coordinate their activities. The most popular of all is Telegram."

Belarus (Eastern Europe)

Second CSO testimony

"In Belarus activists are using Telegram, a messaging app and social network which enables users to send private messages and access news to challenge a regime they vehemently oppose. Across the world, though, this growing link between technology and social movements raises major questions about where espionage ends, and where the right to information begins.

Even my parents use Telegram, which is in itself a form of protest," explains Lavon Marozau, a former university professor, now active in a youth organisation called RADA in Belarus. Due to the political situation and state restrictions on freedom of association, RADA was, in theory, liquidated by the Supreme Court in 2006. Since then, however, it has been operating 'underground' like many other activist organisations. In 2014, RADA registered a technical department in Lithuania to provide legal security and to make its work more transparent. "We created a Google Doc, a kind of 'personalised shopping list'... If one of our group members gets arrested, it provides information such as: give my cat some food, bring me those books, cigarettes... anything you think you might need once you're in prison."

Telegram is an obvious tool for sharing sensitive information within organisations and social movements. The so-called newsgroups - themed channels or secret chats with self-destruct timers for messages - are all encrypted. Moreover, in order to access them, one has to be a 'trusted individual' and be invited by someone within the group. For this reason, Telegram is the single common thread that links young activist groups in Belarus. Members of certain organisations, who wish to remain anonymous here, receive up-to-date information every day: which might include urgent news about the release of friends from prison, or the number of political prisoners or young activists locked up by the KGB, Lukashenko's secret service (as of December 2020 the number is 147).

Lavon is constantly sharing stories of injustice and violence, but also of hope and innovation. The messages are often accompanied by images, testimonies and proposed strategies. Some people post notes and comments, but fundamentally this is a form of independent documentary making in a context where propaganda reigns supreme: "It's not a revolution, it's about our right to protest. The right to say 'we don't agree', week after week. How can you help us from across the border? Just explain to your friends what is happening here in Belarus."

Colombia (Latin America)

CSO testimony

"Since the beginning of May, Colombia has witnessed a wave of online and street protests, joined by citizens from all walks of life shouting "enough is enough". The marches began last week after President Iván Duque proposed a fiscal reform aimed at covering an economic deficit related to the pandemic. "The voices and proposals of civil society organisations are an urgent call for economic, political and social measures to contribute to the recovery from the serious aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic," explains the Confederación Colombiana de ONG (CCONG) in a public statement.

The current protests are a continuation of the so-called "National Strike" or "21N", a series of demonstrations held between 21 November 2019 and 21 February 2021, which were momentarily halted by the health measures of social distancing, but which are now taking to the streets with force. Although the protests that are being experienced today have managed to stop Duque's current tax reform, this reform was only the eighth in a series of reforms that Iván Duque has been issuing since the beginning of his mandate in 2018.

Colombians are demonstrating against the poverty and inequality that have worsened the lives of millions since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Moreover, civic space and the right to protest are deteriorating across the country, as protesters and activists face powerful militarised police repression that treats them as "criminals".

The morning after that night of terror, I was afraid to go out, because I saw my life being violated. I was stopped on the road by the police... And you feel fear because you can be identified as a social leader and killed". Guillermo expresses his concern about the so-called "False Positives", non-belligerent civilians killed by the Colombian army and passed off by the army as combat casualties against criminal organisations.

Online, on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, several activists and citizens have reported that their posts have been removed in an effort to censor protesters. Around the world, the constant threat of cyber-surveillance of internet data and social media content has led many people to use data protection tools such as virtual private network (VPN) applications, encrypted messaging services and anonymous browsers to be able to communicate and post content without fear of detection or arrest.

"They delete my social media posts, they're censoring us! They censor everything that happens in the territory, it is something we should not allow. The leaders come out to deny everything that has happened since 21 N in Colombia".

Nepal (Asia)

Jesselina Rana, Nepali Feminist, Pad2Go

"The digital activism space in Nepal is still "niche". Mostly because of no access to connectivity in rural areas. A lot of the activism that happens is still in English. A lot of people are still trying to get information out around Nepal, although Nepali is not the only language in Nepal, there is still a lack of activism in indigenous languages. Definitely, there is a lot of work to be done. There are times in which the digital space can perpetuate the toxic cycle, or the cycle of discrimination it's trying to break.

But looking at the positive aspects. The digital space has really given people the ability to be part of the conversation. I was reading a twitter thread from the collective Body and Data and they were talking about how a lot of the people put an emphasis on going to the streets and marching. But we often don't realise that protesting is a privilege of the able-bodied people, and for people with disabilities, the digital space becomes a very important dimension to share their voices.

Similarly, the ability to be anonymous on digital platforms is very important for people receiving real-life threats or those who are victims of physical violence. Interestingly, in all social justice movements, the feminist one in Nepal included, we see a handful of older generations feminists for instance taking the lead and not passing the mike. I recently read that no voices are unheard, they are just not given the space to be heard. Social media has the ability to give that space to people - the ability to "take the space" - rather than waiting for someone to give it to you.

I really think that social media has the power to get people to talk about issues, get authorities to respond immediately to the issues raised. It has the potential to be the voice of the masses, but we have to work on it so that it doesn't once again turn into the voice of the few. Hopefully, with internet connectivity spreading across the country, we will be able to reduce the divide that currently exists".

Taiwan (Asia)**CSO testimonial - TaiwanAID , Jay Hung**

"According to the global digital report 2020, the number of digital technology users in Taiwan is more than 20 million. Internet penetration is 86%. Social media penetration stands at 88%. Due to the influence of Covid 19, the number of people using digital technologies has probably increased. Civil society has different roles to play in relation to digitalisation. Firstly it needs to function as an educator. NGOs should invest in digital skills capacity building for disadvantaged groups or other groups. Civil society can also establish its own platforms and independent media to spread information widely. CSOs should also be advocates for open data and open government. They should monitor the implementation of policies and ensure that the format of government publications and data are accessible to all.

Civil society organisations should also fulfil a "guardian" role. They should protect children against cyber porn, fake news and online rumors. They should also become technical experts where possible to help to deal with urgent digital technical problems. CSOs also need to develop their capacities to digitally analyse data and to incorporate this analysis into their work with institutions. Back in the 1990s, the Frontier Foundation administered the TechSoup Taiwan program linked to the strengthening of digital capacities, and peer learning. Recently, more NGOs are providing such services in Taiwan, such as the Jengi academy. Free online courses are provided for students and their parents can follow their progress. A school for migrant workers has also been established which is an educational platform for South East Asian workers. It covers business skills, knowledge of living in Taiwan etc. A Taiwanese CSO launched a social incubation impact for young leaders in Asia through online workshops. This also helped them to start their own NGOs in their own countries. There is also an Open Culture Foundation in Taiwan which is dedicated to advocating the use of open source technology in different sectors, open government, open data etc. It focuses on 'data for social good', employing data science to enable change agents to develop tools for data literacy. They are encouraged to use data from different institutions and to examine the data to find new solutions to solve social issues.

I went to the TechSoup Headquarters in San Francisco and found it a very good program. Its programs tend to harvest the positive side of digitalisation, using that to solve social problems. In Taiwan, traditional media have become less influential in mass communication while digital and social media have become widely used. 75% of the young generation is paying more attention in social media to social issues. Meanwhile, the older generation remains more traditional in its means of assessing news. The Taiwanese government limits face to face activities because of the pandemic and this will take more people into digital spaces. If we want to talk to the young generation in Taiwan, we need to learn how to utilize digital skills, because young people are the future so we need to catch up with that.

There has been a backlash in terms of digitalisation in Taiwan - there are the issues of misinformation, information security, and filter bubbles. Organisations also use digital tools to attack CSOs, spread hate speech etc. It is a difficult environment in which to operate. As far as CSOs are concerned, traditional media are still important. It is also important for CSOs to continue to dialogue with the Taiwanese government and to advocate for the regulation of digital space. NGOs in Taiwan try to act as a "fact check center", and tackle fake news and online rumors. They have international connections. Several NGOs got together in Taiwan to create a particular initiative. And the government is involved too. It looks at how people learn or experience information from the Internet. In the schools, teachers have started to teach children how to understand information, so that children can differentiate between fake news and real news.

There has been an increased use of digital tools by the government in Taiwan. In 2015 an online public policy participation platform was created to widen participation - it was an iconic move by the government. In 2016, the Taiwanese Ministry of Interior established an online management system and NGOs use the Internet now to submit their reports - we don't need to send papers to the government now.

I think CSOs still play an important role in advising the government on how to improve their operations. For me, the most important issue is trust - how can CSOs win the population's trust in cyberspace? We need to learn how to keep our integrity in cyber space. That's a public problem, we need to learn that if CSOs speak online, we are speaking to the public. If we understand that Facebook and other social media platforms are public tools, then we can use them in this way and therefore we can be more positive about, and contribute to the process of digitalisation in Taiwan".

Slovenia (Europe)

CSO testimonial - Institute for Electronic Participation – InePA/Network of NGOs for an Inclusive Information Society in Slovenia in collaboration with SLOGA Platform.

"The National Cyber Security Index measures the preparedness of countries to prevent cyber threats and manage cyber incidents; Slovenia's ranking is 42nd on the National Cyber Security Index¹³⁰ according to the semi-annual report on cyber incidents and attacks.¹³¹

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, an increase has been recorded in the use of digital technologies as a result of distant work and distant learning and increased traffic on the internet.

On 28 January 2010, the Slovenian National Assembly adopted changes to the law governing gambling. Under the law, internet service providers are responsible for blocking access to gambling websites that are not licensed by the Slovenian government.¹³² There are no government restrictions on access to the Internet or credible reports¹³³ that the government monitors e-mail or Internet chat rooms without appropriate legal authority.¹³⁴

SHARE Foundation (Serbia)¹³⁴ is an example of a Digital Monitoring Database that monitors digital rights in a number of neighbouring countries in Southern and Eastern Europe.¹³⁵ There are also examples of databases of representatives of foreign companies in Serbia that citizens can turn to to exercise their legal rights such as access, deletion, portability and other rights in relation to personal data.¹³⁶

In its call to the Government for digitalization in 2020, the national Slovenian Digital Coalition, among others, pinpointed the following needs/challenges relating to digital society: trust in digitization; enhancing e-inclusion and digital literacy; citizen-tailored digital public administration; the development of free, open source and digital services tailored to different social groups.¹³⁷

An example from the civil society sector is the NGO thematic/issue network that is working towards an inclusive information society in Slovenia (NVO-VID; <https://www.informacijska-druzba.org/english/>). The network connects 32 NGOs on national level and aims to empower NGOs by means of digital transformation and to contribute to the quality of people's life in information society.¹³⁸ Main activities of the network are policy advocacy for human-centered digitalisation, awareness-raising and capacity building for digital inclusion, competences and literacy, open government and data, free software, internet governance and democratic e-participation.

Mauritania, Nigeria, Cameroon and Kenya (Africa)

CSO testimonial - Tanya Lallmon

*“Paradigm Initiative is a social enterprise that builds an ICT-enabled support system and advocates digital rights in order to improve livelihoods for under-served youth. Across its offices in **Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya**, and beyond, Paradigm Initiative works to connect under-served youth with improved livelihoods through its digital inclusion and digital rights programs. Through its flagship platform, the Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum (DRIF), Paradigm Initiative sets the tone as the arena for tough topical global issues around digital rights, privacy, access, digital tools, violations, digital empowerment for underserved communities and similar themes — especially in Africa — and consolidating views from civil society, technology companies, government, academia and other stakeholders.*

The DRIF is an important platform where conversations on digital policy in Africa are shaped, policy directions debated and partnerships forged for action. It hosts diverse skills and capacities for enhancing digital rights and inclusion within the African continent and beyond. Past editions have been held at a single location attracting diverse members of civil society, the technical community, academia, government and private sector for shared engagements. In view of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 DRIF was held as a distributed multi-country festival of in-person convenings that communities can join virtually. The event kick-started with a virtual open day on 12th of April 2021 and ran until 30th April 2021. Following the cancellation of the 2020 DRIF, the 2021 DRIF came at a critical time when most countries are finding their digital momentum while working towards a post-COVID-19 world. Digital Grassroots was represented at the 2021 DRIF by Nandini Tanya Lallmon, our 2020 Community Leader for Internet Health, from Mauritius. On the DRIF opening day, she hosted a webinar titled “LGBT Rights in the Digital Space,” in an attempt to map out what is at stake for LGBT people in digital and connected spaces.

The physical and digital worlds are increasingly intertwined when it comes to safety. Prejudices that manifest online can lead to physical harm, and marginalized communities, particularly LGBT people, are increasingly prone to security threats. It is therefore necessary that the LGBT community and civil society in general becomes aware of the intersection of human rights and technology. Online surveillance and censorship impact everyone’s rights, and particularly those of already marginalised groups such as LGBT people. The use of new technologies usually reinforces existing societal biases, making those communities particularly prone to discrimination and security threats.

The centralisation of electronic communications services around a few platforms create new barriers for LGBT people to exercising their digital rights. The practices of powerful platforms result in many LGBT accounts, posts and themed ads being taken down on, while homophobic, transphobic and sexist content often remains untouched. The rising trend of applying strict real-name policies online affecting transgender people is also an important one. Governmental authorities use social media platforms to track down and persecute LGBT people in countries where there is no hate crime legislation. LGBT people can also be exposed to extortion by cybercriminals who can purchase leaked credentials to obtain intimate personal details and/or photos of LGBT individuals.

Given all of these threats online and the deliberate targeting of marginalized individuals and communities, we will continue to work to empower members of civil society as well as the LGBT community to take their rights to privacy and security into their own hands wherever possible. They can do this through pushing for tech companies to engage with affected communities in order to develop tools that are privacy friendly and inclusive-by-design. Profit-driven companies need to change their services according to meet specific needs while maintaining them free and accessible for all. Users of digital technologies and social media need to be trained to become familiar with apps’ privacy policies (data retention periods and third party data sharing) before providing personal information. The use of virtual private networks to increase security and to evade state supported surveillance needs to be promoted. Finally users need to be trained how to avoid accidental outing through encryption, data security and through personal information protection”.

ANNEX 3 : International and National responses to digitalisation

Many states, international and regional organisations and research and policy institutions have become increasingly proactive in attempting to shape the process of digitalisation through the development of common standards, legal frameworks and citizen's charters. Various examples of these policy and legal documents are set out in Annex 3, below.

1. The European Union

The EU's digital strategy aims to make the current process of digital transformation work for people and businesses, while helping to achieve its target of a climate-neutral Europe by 2050. The European Commission is determined to make this Europe's "Digital Decade". Europe intends to strengthen its digital sovereignty and to set standards, rather than following those of others – with a clear focus on data, technology, and infrastructure.

On 9 March 2021, the Commission presented a vision and avenues for Europe's digital transformation by 2030. This vision for the EU's digital decade evolves around four cardinal points: Skills, Government, Infrastructure, Business.

Safeguarding EU values and citizens' fundamental rights and security is a key element of the digital transition. The EU aims to follow a human-centric approach which respects social differences across the union. Digitalisation is an essential component of the EU's response to the economic crisis caused by COVID-19. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the need to accelerate the digital transition in Europe more pressing.

Key policy areas of the EU digital strategy

The EU is working on several policies contributing to the digital transformation. Below are the main policy areas.

Digital sovereignty

In the post-COVID-19 environment, the EU aims to protect and reinforce its digital sovereignty and leadership in strategic international digital value chains as key elements to ensure strategic autonomy in the digital area, while also promoting common EU values and respecting fundamental freedoms, including data protection and privacy, safety and security.

In October 2020, EU leaders invited the Commission to present, by March 2021, a comprehensive Digital Compass which sets out the EU's concrete digital ambitions for 2030. The Commission presented its proposal on 9 March. It is structured on four main areas:

- skills
- business
- government
- infrastructures

The proposal outlines a vision for Europe's digital transformation with concrete targets and milestones to be reached by 2030.

Europe's Digital Decade: digital targets for 2030 (European Commission)

Digital services

Online platforms are an important part of the EU digital market and economy. EU member states recognise the need to strengthen, modernise and clarify the rules for digital services to:

- ensure the safety of users online
- allow innovative digital businesses to grow

The EU's legal framework for digital services has been unchanged since the adoption of the ecommerce directive in 2000. In the meantime, digital technologies, business models and services have changed at an unprecedented pace. Until 8 September 2020, the European Commission held a public consultation to gather evidence with which to inform its initiatives.

The Digital Services Act package was presented by the Commission in December 2020. It includes:

- the Digital Services Act
- the Digital Markets Act

With this package, the Commission proposes new ambitious rules to better govern the digital space and digital services, including social media platforms. Its key goals are to:

- ensure digital users have access to safe products and protect users' fundamental rights
- allow free and fair competition in the digital sectors to boost innovation and growth
- [The Digital Services Act package \(European Commission\)](#).

Data economy

With the development of technology, more and more data is available. EU member states recognise the importance of the data economy for Europe if it is to grow and prosper in the digital age. They aim to develop this economy in a human-centric way and in line with common EU values, ensuring that there is more data sharing and data re-use across sectors and across borders, which can be the basis for a wide range of innovative services and applications.

The European Commission has proposed a strategy for European data that will facilitate the digital transformation for the next five years. During the October 2020 Special European Council, the European Council welcomed the strategy, which supports the EU's global digital ambitions to build a true European competitive data economy, while ensuring European values and a high level of data security, data protection and privacy.

On 7 December 2020, telecommunications ministers held a policy debate on the proposal for a data governance act, presented by the Commission on 25 November as the first legislative initiative under the European data strategy. The proposal aims to promote the availability of data for reuse across sectors and borders and is expected to play a central role in enabling and guiding the creation of EU-wide common interoperable data spaces in strategic sectors such energy, mobility and health. During the discussion, ministers broadly welcomed the proposal as an important enabler for a strong European data economy and increased competitiveness.

- [European data strategy \(European Commission\)](#)

Digital taxation

Digital services have become a growing challenge for existing taxation systems. The current rules governing international taxation matters were designed to apply to businesses with a physical presence in a country. As a result, profits from digital activities are often not taxed in the country where the profits are generated.

The work on adapting EU countries' taxation systems to make them fit for the digital age is ongoing. The EU plays an important role in this process, not least in the context of the current negotiations within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which are seeking a long-term solution based on a global consensus. The Council is nevertheless ready to examine possible solutions at EU level, if the prospect of a global solution is not forthcoming.

The European Commission is expected to present a proposal on a digital levy in the first half of 2021.

Artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence can contribute to a more innovative, efficient, sustainable and competitive economy, while also improving safety, education and healthcare for citizens. It also supports the fight against climate change. While supporting the development of AI technology, EU member states recognise the potential risks and encourage an ethical and human-centric approach to this technology.

On 2 October 2020, the European Council invited the Commission to:

- propose ways to increase European and national public and private investments in Artificial Intelligence research, innovation and deployment
- ensure better coordination and more networks and synergies between European research centres based on excellence
- provide a clear, objective definition of high-risk Artificial Intelligence systems
- [Artificial intelligence: presidency issues conclusions on ensuring respect for fundamental rights \(press release, 21 October 2020\)](#)

Enabling technologies

Cloud computing, quantum technologies and high-performance computing play a key role in building up Europe's digital resilience.

- Cloud computing is essential in ensuring that data is processed efficiently and can contribute, among other things, to the green transition in areas such as farming, mobility, buildings and manufacturing
- High-performance computing (HPC), also known as supercomputing, means that data can be processed and analysed thousands of times faster than it would by other computers, and could bring about major scientific advances
- Quantum technologies use the properties of quantum mechanics to create practical applications that can bring important improvements to science, industry and society

Connectivity

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has proven the need for fast and ubiquitous connectivity across the EU to give all Europeans access to digital technology. The EU has set objectives for connectivity for 2025, including:

- gigabit connectivity for all of the main socio-economic drivers
- uninterrupted 5G coverage for all urban areas and major terrestrial transport paths
- access to connectivity offering at least 100 Mbps for all European households

On 9 June 2020, EU ministers asked the Commission to develop a new action plan for 5G and 6G deployment.

The EU also supports the need for a coordinated approach to mitigate risks related to cybersecurity and to ensure a secure 5G deployment.

- **Connectivity - Shaping Europe's digital future (European Commission)**

United States

USAID Digital Strategy

The United States Agency for International Development is an independent agency of the United States federal government that is primarily responsible for administering civilian foreign aid and development assistance. USAID launched its Digital Strategy in April 2020, charting a path for USAID to strengthen open, inclusive, and secure digital ecosystems by taking a systems-level approach to understanding and responding to the opportunities and risks of digital technology.

The strategy was based on the principle that to succeed, implementers and donors should work together to understand how a development challenge and proposed intervention fit within the digital ecosystem as a prerequisite to identifying and launching a digital solution. Understand the Existing Ecosystem, one of the nine Digital Principles, required the evaluation of the local context to ensure that a proposed intervention was relevant and sustainable.

Digital Ecosystems

In the first year of the Strategy's implementation, USAID created tools and resources that enable development practitioners to navigate programs in a rapidly changing field.

Laying a solid foundation

USAID and DAI's Digital Frontiers project conducted four pilot Digital Ecosystem Country Assessments (DECAs) in Colombia, Kenya, Serbia, and Nepal, with two additional DECAs in Pakistan and Libya currently underway. The DECA was designed to help Missions and partners understand, work with, and support country digital ecosystems. It assesses the digital landscape, identifies opportunities and risks, and provides specific recommendations to help decision-makers better utilize or contribute to the digital ecosystem. SAID/Colombia used their DECA both strategically and practically by incorporating digital into their long-term plans and by adopting specific recommendations, such as pursuing projects that enable women entrepreneurs to harness digital tools, like the StartPath Empodera activity.

Supporting innovation

USAID established the Digital Ecosystem Fund (DEF), which provides catalytic funding to USAID Missions and teams to help strengthen regional and country digital ecosystems. USAID selected the DEF beta round awardees in March 2020 for their unique approaches to fostering open, inclusive, and secure digital ecosystems in USAID partner countries.

For example, to combat the spread of misleading information about COVID-19, USAID/Bangladesh received funding to partner with the NGO BRAC to leverage existing networks and platforms to identify, track, and counter false, misleading, or inaccurate pandemic information through an innovative 'Rumour Map'. The project set up a social media-based community and volunteer network to disseminate accurate information in a responsive and agile manner.

The Bangladesh Digital Ecosystem Activity (BDEA) bridges the information gap between decision makers and the public by building the capacity of community-level organisations in data management, tracking and monitoring processes, and supporting critical communications at the government level.

Implementing Partners and Stakeholder Activity

These tools help implementing partners and USAID to work together to understand and strengthen the ecosystems in which they operate. These tools and products help different actors to understand their Mission's priorities and create a common operating picture.

The publicly available DECA reports are invaluable resources for partners looking to launch a project in any country that has completed a DECA. Additionally, USAID and Digital Frontiers are currently developing a *DECA Toolkit: A How-To Guide for USAID Mission and Implementers* that Missions can use to conduct their own DECAs with implementing partners.

The findings from a DECA signal sectoral and geographic priorities, indicating digital interventions the Mission may be interested in piloting and could help partners think through what digital applications may be the right fit for an upcoming project.

Similarly, the DEF gives Missions funding to work with partners to test digital interventions that otherwise may not have been possible. The outcomes from these pilots can inform what solutions work in certain contexts and how to best adapt them. The DEF also gives partners the opportunity to learn from one another.

For example, the Sahel Mission received DEF financing to create a digital working group that will be a forum for partners across Niger and Burkina Faso to share lessons learned and support one another with implementing digital tools.

The DECAs and the DEF are just two Digital Strategy initiatives reshaping digital development at USAID. In the coming years, USAID and DAI will continue to use the Digital Strategy as a guiding force to engage with stakeholders and partners to achieve and sustain open, secure and inclusive digital ecosystems that maximize the benefits and manage the risks of digital technology.

Canada

Canada's Digital Charter was introduced by the Canadian Government to build a foundation of trust and to help Canadians to trust that their privacy was protected, that their data would not be misused, and that companies operating in this space communicate in a simple and straightforward manner with their users. The Canadian government believed that this trust would be the foundation on which Canada's digital and data-driven economy would be built, encouraging continued growth across its economy. The Charter relies on governments, citizens and businesses working together to ensure that privacy is protected, data is kept safe, and that Canadian companies can lead the world in innovations that fully embrace the benefits of the digital economy.

The 10 principles of the Charter include:

1. **Universal Access:** All Canadians will have equal opportunity to participate in the digital world and the necessary tools to do so, including access, connectivity, literacy and skills.
2. **Safety and Security:** Canadians will be able to rely on the integrity, authenticity and security of the services they use and should feel safe online.
3. **Control and Consent:** Canadians will have control over what data they are sharing, who is using their personal data and for what purposes, and know that their privacy is protected.
4. **Transparency, Portability and Interoperability:** Canadians will have clear and manageable access to their personal data and should be free to share or transfer it without undue burden.
5. **Open and Modern Digital Government:** Canadians will be able to access modern digital services from the Government of Canada, which are secure and simple to use.
6. **A Level Playing Field:** The Government of Canada will ensure fair competition in the online marketplace to facilitate the growth of Canadian businesses and affirm Canada's leadership on digital and data innovation, while protecting Canadian consumers from market abuses.
7. **Data and Digital for Good:** The Government of Canada will ensure the ethical use of data to create value, promote openness and improve the lives of people—at home and around the world.
8. **Strong Democracy:** The Government of Canada will defend freedom of expression and protect against online threats and disinformation designed to undermine the integrity of elections and democratic institutions.
9. **Free from Hate and Violent Extremism:** Canadians can expect that digital platforms will not foster or disseminate hate, violent extremism or criminal content.
10. **Strong Enforcement and Real Accountability:** There will be clear, meaningful penalties for violations of the laws and regulations that support these principles.

The Canadian Charter was implemented by a Digital Charter Implementation Act in November 2020. The Implementation Act modernized the framework for the protection of personal information in the private sector. This legislation took a number of important steps to ensure that Canadians are protected by a modern and responsive law and that innovative businesses will benefit from clear rules, even as technology continues to evolve, including:

- increasing control and transparency when Canadians' personal information is handled by companies;
- giving Canadians the freedom to move their information from one organisation to another in a secure manner;
- ensuring that when consent is withdrawn or information is no longer necessary, Canadians can demand that their information be destroyed; and
- providing for the strongest fines among G7 privacy laws—with fines of up to 5% of revenue or \$25 million, whichever is greater, for the most serious offences.

Spain - Preparation of a Spanish Digital Charter

On 15 June 2020, Spain began a participatory process for the creation of the Digital Rights Charter, in which civil society, as well as entities and public administrations, such as the City Council of Barcelona, were able to respond to a public consultation launched by the Spanish Secretary of State for Digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence (SEDIA) which is leading the elaboration of the Charter. Five months later, SEDIA has published a first draft of the document, granting a period of public consultation to all citizens until 4 December. The main purpose of this Charter is that, through an inclusive and transparent process, individuals' rights in the offline dimension will also be preserved in the online dimension. This purpose takes up (almost literally) the proposal of the Coalition of Cities for Digital Rights in its Declaration of 2018. The preparation of this Charter maintains Spain in a leading position at a European level in the protection of digital rights, contributing to what has already been achieved through the regulation of rights in the digital environment, as contemplated in Title X of the Organic Law of 3/2018, of 5 December, of the Law on the Protection of Personal Data and the Guarantee of Digital Rights. This draft is divided into different sections led by a category of rights:

- The Rights of freedom, among which we can highlight the protection of privacy and security of digital information, and the newness of the Right to pseudonymity, which guarantees access to digital environments under a pseudonym and Right to digital heritage, which preserves that digital goods can also be inherited.
- The Rights of equality, which of course regulate equality of people in digital environments and non-discrimination, as well as the protection of minors, the elderly and people with disabilities.
- The Rights of participation and conformation of the public space, in this section, in addition to the Right to Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Information, the Right to the neutrality of the Internet (and an open Internet), the Right to citizen participation in digital media, as well as the Right to digital education and the digital Rights of citizens in their relations with Public Administrations are preserved.
- The Rights in the work environment, in which the right to digital disconnection by the worker is guaranteed, as well as protection of privacy in the work context regarding the worker's exposure to video surveillance or geo-localisation. - This right is set out in the Spanish Organic Law 1/18 on Data Protection and the Guarantee of Digital Rights.
- In the last section, the draft aims to incorporate Digital rights in specific environments, addressing access to data for research and development purposes as well as freedom of creation and the right to access culture in the digital environment always within the limits of intellectual property law. There is also a specific mention in this section of the Rights in relation to Artificial Intelligence, seeking to guarantee the right to algorithmic non-discrimination and to ensure transparency, auditability, explicability, traceability, as well as access, use and reliability. We point out that this is an area of work in which the Coalition has worked intensively and has proposed a register of IA-based administrative systems.

This step forward in the participatory process of the Declaration of Digital Rights in Spain is undoubtedly good news in the context of digital rights protection. From Barcelona City Council, we encourage the Spanish Government to also incorporate three specific aspects that would give the Charter of Digital Rights the ambition to protect rights that we have been demanding from the Coalition of Cities for Digital Rights:

- Reference to citizen participation in the processes of designing digital public services;
- Consideration of certain essential data as a "public good";
- Inclusion of the possibility of using open and interoperable technologies, with standard formats that allow for informational self-definition and non-discrimination.

In any case, the pioneering initiative of the Government of Spain in developing a legal mechanism for the protection of digital rights is to be applauded, and we urge it to collaborate closely with local councils for its development and implementation.

<https://citiesfordigitalrights.org/second-public-consultation-charter-digital-rights-spain>

Pakistan

On 9 March 2021, Pakistan launched the national assessment using UNESCO's Internet Universality Indicators (IUIs) via the first meeting of the Multi-stakeholders Advisory Board (MAB) in the country. The meeting was well attended by diverse experts and stakeholders representing Parliament, government, media, academia, legal, information and technology sector, who serve on the MAB board.

The national assessment of Internet development in Pakistan was supported by UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) and conducted by the research team of Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD). Ms Sadaf Khan, co-founder of MMfD and the lead researcher for this assessment, stressed that this study would help different stakeholder groups to collectively assess the policies and practices to further advance the digital ecosystem in Pakistan.

Participants expressed their shared interest to map policy and practical gaps in the Internet development in Pakistan, and to provide actionable and evidence-based policy recommendations to enhance the digital environment in the country. One of the major deliverables is to deliver a comprehensive and evidence-based assessment report on the country's alignment with those international standards of human Rights, Openness and Accessibility and Multi-stakeholder participation as set out by Internet Universality Indicators (IUIs).

For that purpose, the role of MAB is to foster inclusiveness and legitimacy of the national assessment of IUIs while ensuring its quality and transparency. "The MAB members are expected to provide guidance to the overall implementation of the IUIs assessment and strategic recommendations to ensure that it is executed through an inclusive and multi-stakeholder approach," stated Ms Xianhong Hu, UNESCO focal point for Internet Universality project.

The Internet Universality ROAM-X Indicators framework is a set of 303 indicators (109 core ones) that aim to assess how well national stakeholders, including governments, companies and civil society perform in adhering to the ROAM principles of Rights, Openness, Accessibility, and Multi-stakeholder participation as well as cross-cutting ones concerning gender and the needs of children and young people, sustainable development, trust and security, and legal and ethical aspects of the Internet.

European Digital Rights Initiative

European Digital Rights (EDRi) is a network of 36 civil and human rights organisations from 21 European countries. Its goal is to promote, protect and uphold fundamental human rights and freedoms in the digital environment. During the European elections 2014, EDRi led an innovative campaign to raise the profile of digital rights issues. EDRi's members drafted a 10-point Charter of Digital Rights that candidates running for the European Parliament could promise to defend.

The booklet aimed at giving further guidance and explanation of the ten principles of the Charter of Digital Rights to MEPs. These principles included **(i)** Promoting Transparency, Access to Documents and Citizen Participation **(ii)** Supporting Data Protection and Privacy Legislation, **(iii)** Defending Unrestricted access to the Internet and Online Services **(iv)** Promoting an Update of Copyright Legislation **(v)** Opposing Blanket Unchecked Surveillance Measures **(vi)** Promoting Online Anonymity and Encryption **(vii)** Opposing Privatised Enforcement outside of the Law **(viii)** Supporting Export Controls of Surveillance and Censorship Technology **(ix)** Defending the Principle of Multi-Stakeholderism **(x)** Promoting Free Open Source Software **(xi)** Defending Democracy and the Rule of Law

UNESCO

On 31 July 2020, UNESCO convened an online session during [RightsCon 2020](#) to present the national assessment results and impacts of the Internet Universality Indicators for advancing human rights.

Guy Berger, UNESCO Director for Strategies and Policies in the Field of Communication and Information highlighted the fact that it's important to highlight the human rights dimension of the Internet in the assessment grounded on a package of ROAM principles encompassing human Rights, Openness, Accessibility, and Multi-stakeholder participation.

Mr Berger explained that a national assessment of Internet Universality Indicators upholds an international standard that aims to improve human rights around the world in order to inform local recommendations for a better Internet in the country concerned.

Xianhong Hu, the UNESCO focal point of the Internet Universality project said that the national assessments progressing in 20 countries illustrated well how the ROAM principles and indicators could contribute to safeguarding online human rights and advancing Internet development in a holistic approach. Assessments were also being held in Ghana, Germany, Benin, Kenya and Brazil. Speakers agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic has reminded the world of the importance of the Internet, and that UNESCO has also re-affirmed more than ever the relevance of the UNESCO's Internet Universality Principles."

Representing the two newly launched assessments in [Ghana](#) and [Germany](#), Dorothy Gordon, UNESCO's Chair of IFAP (Information for All Programme), and Dr Matthias Kettemann, Leibniz Institute for Media Research/Hans Bredow Institute confirmed that an inclusive and gender balanced Multi-stakeholder Advisory Board (MAB) has been established to guide the national assessments in both countries.

A keynote speaker highlighted that the process linked with the Internet Universality indicators assessment allows more people in the conversation to tackle Internet governance related issues and that Covid-19 pandemic revealed the fact that too many policies are tech-oriented, but the UNESCO's Internet Universality ROAM principles and indicators broaden that discussion.

It was also agreed that even for a developed country such as Germany, issues related to accessibility and human rights of the Internet such as privacy are still relevant and prevent people from taking part in full-fledged knowledge societies. Regarding the challenges Germany is facing in the completion of their national assessment, it was explained that the data gathering process can be difficult and that all of the indicators are looked at.

On the assessment in Kenya, the most striking finding of the ROAM-X assessment in Kenya was the lack of data from institutions and governmental bodies. Researchers were unable to track marginalized groups and thus formulate appropriate policy recommendations including in some areas of online freedom of expression, privacy and content regulation.

In Benin, the striking impact of the Internet Universality indicators assessment was that the government quickly followed and implemented the policy recommendations by creating a platform to counter the lack of data and to give researchers access to relevant data. A framework on the ethics and human-rights in Artificial Intelligence (AI) to foster a national AI strategy is also underway.

Brazil participated in the consultation phase and testing of the UNESCO indicators at the very beginning of the development process. The assessment was well supported by the Multi-stakeholder Advisory Board represented by Brazilian Internet Steering Committee ([CGL.br](#)).

The main strength of the Internet Universality framework is its holistic approach and identification of the institutional changes needed to fully implement policy recommendations and reforms tackling emerging challenges of privacy protection and countering disinformation.

The multi-stakeholder approach and its diversity was considered necessary to successfully conduct a national assessment and a monitoring mechanism is recommended to be put in place to support the implementations of the policy recommendations after the completion of the assessments.

UNESCO is launching a Dynamic Coalition of Internet Universality at the Internet Governance Forum in 2020. There are also plans to develop an online platform with Indicators generated by UNESCO to allow for worldwide sharing of data and knowledge of the indicators assessments. The national assessment reports of Benin, Senegal and Kenya have been finalized and UNESCO intend to publish them as the new editions of Series of Internet Universality National Assessments.

UNESCO advocates Internet Universality Indicators for advancing human rights at Rightscon 2020

UNESCO : Children's digital rights

On 24th March 2021, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child launched a guiding document on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, which embeds children's rights online into the larger framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The landmark document highlights and raises awareness of the risks children face online, as well as the opportunities the online environment brings to them, exhorting all those responsible from the public and private sectors to take action to address them.

UNESCO congratulated the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child for this significant achievement and joined the End Violence Partnership, the International Telecommunication Union, UNICEF, UNODC, the WeProtect Global Alliance, the World Childhood Foundation USA, and the World Health Organisation in calling on the international community to implement the principles of General Comment 25.

The General Comment was adopted on 2nd March 2021, following a consultative process started in March 2019 and which saw a large participation from States, regional organisations, United Nations agencies, national Human Rights institutions and Children's Commissioners, children's and adolescent groups, civil society organisations, academics, the private sector, as well as other entities and individuals.

Linked to its work on promoting freedom of expression, children rights to education, including a lifelong learning approach and media and information literacy, UNESCO participated in these consultations emphasizing inter alia the importance to ensure a balanced approach for children to benefit from engaging with the digital environment. This includes learning to create content relevant to their personal lives and communities, while mitigating the associated harms, including for children in disadvantaged or vulnerable situations.

For these reasons, UNESCO stressed that policies addressing these challenges should therefore be supported by Media and Information Literacy and digital competencies. The earlier children are exposed to media and information literacy competencies the more discerning and critical they become about information, digital, and media content as they grow older.

UNESCO welcomes new international instrument on children's rights in relation to digital environment



Forus, previously known as the International Forum of National NGO Platforms (IFP/FIP), is a member-led network of 68 National NGO Platforms and 7 Regional Coalitions from all continents representing over 22,000 NGOs active locally and internationally on development, human rights and environmental issues.



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