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Bridging the Gap: The Role of Digital Inclusion in achieving Social Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

This review paper is an exploration of the importance of digital inclusion and the need to reduce the digital divide to combat poverty and social exclusion. Here, the impact of digitalization on seniors, the need to increase digital skills, and the importance of equitable and affordable access to technologies are also addressed. Also this review discusses the importance of continuing education to enable individuals to adapt to the rapid and constant changes in the digital world. The digital divide corresponds to social inequalities in access to and use of digital technologies. Access to digital technologies covers access to technological equipment, software, and an internet connection. Access may be limited by the type of device accessible, the quality of the equipment and connection, and the autonomy of access (places where the equipment is used). The digital divide is a reality that affects many people in India, particularly people living in poverty. This divide is manifested by a lack of access to technologies, a lack of digital skills and a lack of confidence in the use of digital technologies. These obstacles create profound inequality in access to information, online services, professional opportunities and education. The digital divide also limits citizens' involvement in democratic life by creating a disparity in the ability to use online resources to participate in decision-making. The lack of digital skills can lead to significant financial and social costs for governments. The Indian government has been actively promoting digital technologies to combat poverty and social exclusion through various initiatives over the past decade. One significant step was the launch of the Digital India campaign in 2015. This initiative aims to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy by providing digital infrastructure, delivering services digitally, and increasing digital literacy. This review concludes that, the community and social economy organizations have a major role to play given the issues related to the digital divide and that they are able to contribute to creating a future where citizens meet their needs and desires by taking advantage of the benefits of technologies, including those resulting from artificial intelligence.

Keywords: *digital divide, artificial intelligence, social inclusion, technology, digital skills*

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I. INTRODUCTION

This review emphasizes the importance of digital inclusion and the need to reduce the digital divide to combat poverty. Also the impact of digitalization on seniors, the need to increase digital skills and the importance of equitable and affordable access to technologies are addressed. The importance of continuing education to enable individuals to adapt to the rapid and constant changes in the digital world is also discussed. The digital divide corresponds to social inequalities in access to and use of digital technologies. Access to digital technologies covers access to technological equipment, software and an internet connection. Access may be limited by the type of accessible device, the quality of the equipment and connection, and the autonomy of access (Li, Brar & Roihan, 2021).

The digital divide is a reality that affects many people in India, particularly people living in poverty. This divide is manifested by a lack of access to technologies, a lack of digital skills and a lack of confidence in the use of digital technologies (Lythreatis, Singh & El-Kassar, 2022). These obstacles create a deep inequality in access to information, online services, professional opportunities and education. The digital divide also limits citizens' involvement in democratic life by creating a disparity in the ability to use online resources to participate in decision-making. The lack of digital skills can result in significant financial and social costs for governments (Aissaoui, 2022).

II. WHAT IS THE DIGITAL DIVIDE?

Today, technology is an integral part of our daily lives, but not everyone benefits from it in the same way. This is the digital divide, the gap that separates those who have access to digital tools and services from those who are excluded (Lythreatis, Singh & El-Kassar, 2022). This disparity does not only concern the use of technology: it also means being excluded from social, political and cultural opportunities. It is the difference between those who can inform themselves, communicate and develop skills and those who, instead, remain on the margins. The digital divide was made even more evident during the Covid-19 period. During the first months of the pandemic, the gap between people who knew how to use and had access to digital technologies and those who could not was evident, especially when considering working from home or distance learning (Litchfield, Shukla & Greenfield, 2021). At the same time, the digital divide also manifests itself in the inability to keep up with the most advanced technological advances, often due to slow connections or outdated devices.

The causes of the digital divide can be traced back to various factors, starting from those concerning the economic aspect, but not only. The lack of adequate basic infrastructures as well

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as digital illiteracy are further elements that can influence the digital divide, especially with the rapid diffusion of new technologies. Even the unique characteristics of a person, such as the level of education, sociocultural background, age, gender, the place where one is born and grows up, are factors that can affect the digital divide (Afzal et al., 2023).

According to the data reported on the World Economic Forum portal, in India, internet use has even quadrupled in the last decade: this phenomenon has affected both urban and rural areas, so much so that at the end of 2023 there were 1.15 billion users with 4G smartphones in the country. According to Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), India is projected to have over 900 million internet users by 2025, with a significant portion coming from rural areas, but a persistent digital divide remains, with rural internet penetration significantly lower than urban areas, with estimates placing rural internet access at around 35% compared to over 70% in urban areas; this growth is driven by increased usage of Indic languages in digital content and a narrowing gender gap in internet access.

A. The consequences and solutions of the digital divide

The consequences of the digital divide are evident both globally and socially. If on the one hand, the inequalities in wealth of nations are reflected in this phenomenon, on the other hand, the cultural background and skills of individuals also change significantly. Anyone excluded from the use of digital technologies is penalized both culturally and socio-economically and the consequences are severe (Heeks, 2022). Just think of the digitalization of activities, which are not accessible to those who do not know (or cannot) use the appropriate digital tools.

For example, many bureaucratic procedures are dematerialized and require digital skills and tools to be able to manage them in the best possible way. The digital divide also entails a limitation in access to information: those who do not have an internet connection may have difficulty finding news or in-depth information on topics of interest (Bentley et al., 2024). Another significant consequence is social exclusion: the inability to use digital tools can make people feel isolated, hindering the building of relationships and participation in community life (Molala & Makhubele, 2021). Finally, opportunities for professional and personal development are reduced when one does not have the digital skills or the means to take advantage of them (Feurich et al., 2024). Reducing the digital divide is important, because only in this way can we have true social inclusion, a better quality of life and balanced economic development throughout the world.

But what are the solutions to combat the digital divide? It is important to invest in digital infrastructures, maintaining widespread coverage across all countries, including rural areas. The

promotion of public policies that encourage the use of digital technologies can be another solution to the digital divide (Feurich et al., 2024). The intervention of private companies that can help make digital transformation less difficult is certainly effective. For example, through the promotion of digital literacy with training programs that help all people to exploit digital technologies. At the same time, it is necessary to create affordable internet packages that provide fast and reliable connections in every part of the population centers (Lima et al., 2021). Furthermore, accessibility must also be guaranteed to people with disabilities, adopting inclusive solutions.

Technological innovation and digital transformation are necessary: in our country it is essential to improve existing infrastructures (for example, the spread of 5G) and ensure that all businesses can make the most of the web. With the digitalization of public administration, India is implementing the best strategies to keep up with developed countries. Among the solutions for the digital divide to be adopted, we cannot avoid thinking about incentives from the government, but also free training within schools that allows for the best use of digital tools and to have a homogeneous digital literacy throughout the country (Litchfield, Shukla & Greenfield, 2021).

B. The digital divide and digital inclusion

Spreading knowledge, skills and reducing the digital divide is important for the digital inclusion of everyone. People must be able to actively participate in the digital transformation and take advantage of the available means to also reduce the intergenerational digital divide to zero. Too often it is said that a baby boomer does not have the knowledge or skills of a person belonging to Gen Z: in reality, anyone can play a fundamental role in the digital transformation of society and make their contribution to reducing inequalities (Adam & Dzang Alhassan, 2021).

There are also many projects that promote the correct use of digital technologies between seniors. For example, NIIT Foundation's programs for seniors focus on providing tailored digital training that addresses their specific needs and challenges. These programs include basic computer skills, internet usage, online safety, and the use of various digital tools and applications. Naturally, the success of these initiatives is also associated with a more inclusive and accessible environment overall: in this way, difficulties are not encountered at any level of society and relationships between the various generations can be strengthened.

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III. PROXIMITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

A. Territorial approach

Today, digital inclusion and social inclusion are two societal ambitions that are playing out in parallel. The current socio-technical revolution is that of a population that appropriates technological tools to put them at the service of the common good, a culture of sharing and greater participation in democratic life (Fisk et al., 2023). It is important that everyone has access to the opportunity to contribute to the digital age, that no form of discrimination affects online communications, and that digital technologies continue to promote job creation, stimulate innovation and economic growth by communities (Pérez-Escolar & Canet, 2023).

In this context, it seems essential to us to recognize citizens as having to be at the heart of innovation. Digital participation spaces located in schools, libraries, community centers, etc., are managed by partnerships between governments and non-profit organizations. They are living laboratories of open innovation, like the excitement of these laboratories all over the world and more particularly those surrounding an innovative use of technologies such as Super Fab Lab in Kochi, Kerala. The challenges of the 21st century require ongoing training in all directions as well as literacy and massive academic catch-up. Understanding information, its nature, its production, its handling, its use must allow for the development of "information skills" as well as the appropriation of tools.

B. Social participation and inclusion

Access to or use of digital technologies by the most excluded or vulnerable categories of the population in society are subject to societal constraints. Social inclusion and digital inclusion are played out in parallel. Low income necessarily represents a significant obstacle in the acquisition of computer equipment and an Internet connection, but the development of uses requires taking the time, which involves components related to fatigue, difficulties in reading, locating or processing information, and accessing alternative devices (speech recognition and synthesis, LSQ (Linear Spectral Quantization, etc.) (Nguyen, 2022).

In this context, the social appropriation of technologies must be seen from the perspective of the right to access technologies. This right must be placed in the wake of human rights such as the right to communication, the right to education or the right for all to benefit from the benefits of technological progress, etc. At first glance, the notion of access to technologies refers to an infrastructure: individual, collective and public access points and locations; equipment and software (Pawluczuk, Lee & Gamundani, 2021). To this are quickly added the basic technical skills and competencies to be acquired by users. Such a definition of access must be seen as

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necessary but not sufficient. The many economic, geographic, social, educational, linguistic, physical, cultural, generational and gender barriers that prevent citizens from either accessing or contributing to the content conveyed or from benefiting from appropriate use of technologies must also be taken into account (Manitsa, 2025).

Both central and every state governments' vision of access combines not only technical connectivity, training and initiation to basic techniques, but also community animation, education – including media education – awareness of the issues, continuing education and the production of a diversity of relevant and enriching content, adapted to the interests and needs of various audiences. It also involves the adoption of recognized norms and standards as well as measures to ensure the accessibility of computer tools, the Internet and access points for people with disabilities (Townsend, Chen & Wuthrich, 2021).

Access must therefore enhance and promote the exercise of citizenship and collective participation, to make full use of the potential for interactivity offered by digital technologies in the social, economic, cultural and democratic fields. Thus the governments must ensure that everyone has access to digital technologies in an equitable and affordable manner.

IV. EDUCATION AND SENIORS

A. Seniors and digital inclusion

Seniors are a population that is particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion. While it is increasingly common for seniors to be online and use digital technologies, many barriers persist. Some of the most common barriers include lack of technical skills, fear of the unknown, and social isolation (Colombo, Carmen & Leopoldo, 2023). Using digital technologies, such as social media, would allow seniors to connect with family, friends, and community, but they do not always feel able to do so. In addition, seniors who are not online are also excluded from the many health, safety, and well-being benefits that are offered by online services (Alhassan & Adam, 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis has also led many organizations to experience the importance and challenges of digital literacy and agility to maintain their activities remotely. The use of information and communications technologies (ICT) has become a way to support and accompany caregivers in order to meet their information, training and psychosocial support needs (Mohan et al., 2024).

B. Continuing education

Digital literacy skills have become essential for many jobs and daily activities. People who lack

these skills may be disadvantaged in the labour market and have fewer employment opportunities. Digital skills are essential to overcome poverty and enable individuals to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life. This requires continuing education that is accessible, affordable and adapted to individual needs. As a society, we must continually invest in digital training to help people acquire the skills needed to succeed in an increasingly digital world (Lythreatis, Singh & El-Kassar, 2022).

C. First nations youth

First nations youth (young people from indigenous tribal communities, most commonly called "Adivasi" youth, who are considered the original inhabitants of the India) are currently in deficit in technology-related occupations (under-represented among engineers, technicians, high-tech specialists). Interest in technology is clear, but according to Li, Brar & Roihan (2021), young indigenous people have less confidence in their digital know-how than non-indigenous people. As technology disrupts our society, this is reflected in the skills expected in the jobs of the future, regardless of the sector: 85% of students will be working in a job that does not yet exist in 2030. In light of this scientific and technological revolution and the opportunities it offers today's world, young people benefit from having a posture that promotes exchange, openness and curiosity (Tomczyk et al., 2023).

V. PROPOSALS FOR ACHIEVING SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH DIGITAL INCLUSION

A. Bridging the digital divide: a societal challenge

- The digital divide must therefore be approached as an additional dimension that adds to current social divides and as a factor that contributes to exclusion and poverty (Pérez-Escolar & Canet, 2023).
- The digital divide must also be considered in terms of unequal access to this communication tool allowing the creation of networks of information, exchange, action and citizen participation.
- This is why we believe that the social appropriation of technologies must be seen from the perspective of the right to access technologies, as a right that follows on from other rights such as the rights to education, communication, information, etc (Sanders & Scanlon, 2021).

B. Adopt a broad definition of access to technologies to promote true social appropriation

- The notion of access combines, a priori, infrastructure, individual and collective access

points, hardware, software and basic technical skills of the user. Access, thus defined, must be seen as necessary but not sufficient, because the many economic, geographical, social, educational, linguistic, physical, cultural, generational and gender barriers that prevent the user from accessing and contributing to the content conveyed and its appropriate use must also be taken into account (Mncube, Tanner & Chigona, 2021).

- Access programs must combine technical connectivity, training and introduction to basic techniques, community animation, education, including media education, awareness of issues and continuing education, as well as the production of a variety of relevant and enriching content, adapted to the interests and needs of various audiences. This vision of access also involves the adoption of recognized norms and standards as well as measures to ensure the accessibility of computer tools and the Internet to people with disabilities (Li et al., 2024).
- Access programs must promote and encourage the exercise of citizenship and collective participation, to make full use of the potential for interactivity offered by digital technology in the social, economic, cultural and democratic fields (Loh & Chib, 2022).

VI. Some avenues of action

A. Support access environments

Resources should be devoted to the human resources needed to carry out training, initiation and familiarization activities for less well-off populations with technologies and the Internet. Resources should also be allocated to animating the environment, in particular to raise awareness among citizens about the issues surrounding the use of technologies. A program should be developed to support the creation of a network of community Fab Labs contributing to the promotion of innovation and social inclusion. These spaces can be vectors of social and economic change, by offering resources, training and support for citizens. Thus, digital manufacturing is not just a way to build an object, but a tool to help people grow within a community, creatively, economically and socially and to increase the resilience of communities in the face of economic and ecological disruptions (Oppedisano, 2024).

B. Encourage content development

Full appropriation of the Internet requires the ability to contribute to content, to have access to multiple sources of information, free or at very little cost and meeting needs. However, there are very few resources that contribute on an ongoing basis to developing and updating websites, databases, documentation, information, etc. Programs and measures should also contain

incentives for the creation of sites that are accessible to people with disabilities (Gallardo, Beaulieu & Geideman, 2021; Chohan & Hu, 2022; and Wiley & Goulding, 2023).

C. Equipping the community with the necessary tools

Programs and measures should be established to equip organizations with the necessary equipment to stimulate integration into practices and develop access within community and social economy groups. These programs and measures should also support the acquisition of equipment adapted for people with disabilities (Chohan & Hu, 2022).

D. Strengthening solidarity, equity and inclusion

In order to leave no one behind and strengthen solidarity and resilience within communities, concrete measures to protect and respect human rights, combat racism and systemic discrimination, and actively support solidarity actions are necessary to commit to reducing inequities and gaps within the population in all its diversity, both social and cultural (Chikomba et al., 2023).

E. Amplifying democracy and participation

Making governance more participatory, open and transparent, so that citizens, in all their diversity and without exclusion, have the opportunity and means to contribute to public decision-making, the improvement of their living environment and the development of their territory requires unparalleled vision and commitment (Fischli & Muldoon, 2024).

F. Stimulating innovation and creativity

Committing to developing an organizational culture open to experimentation, error and learning, working in collaboration with citizens as well as academic, community and cultural circles to find solutions to societal issues (Snowball, Tarentaal & Sapsed, 2022).

G. Partnering with artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence can contribute to social inclusion by helping to identify and solve problems that affect marginalized people (Fernández-Aller et al., 2021). It can help improve accessibility for people with disabilities by providing features such as voice recognition, automatic sign language translation and adaptive user interfaces. Data analytics is an important area of AI that can help identify and understand social and economic issues affecting marginalized communities. AI-based systems can help social groups make collective decisions and work together to solve community problems (Boustani, Sayegh & Boustany, 2022). Machine learning is a sub-discipline of AI that aims to create algorithms that can learn and adapt. These algorithms can be used to help improve decision-making systems to avoid bias or

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unfair discrimination. Developing ethical and inclusive AI is essential to avoid discrimination or marginalization (Zowghi & Bano, 2024). By working together, citizens, researchers, and policymakers can help make AI more accessible and inclusive for all members of society.

VII. CONCLUSION

It is essential that we implement measures that promote digital inclusion to combat poverty and social exclusion. This involves reducing the digital divide through equitable and affordable access to digital technologies, offering continuing education programs and supporting seniors in their use of digital technologies. Promoting the social appropriation of technologies by all citizens of India will require a collective and lasting commitment, because a lot of energy will have to be devoted to these initiatives. Many people are ready to take on this challenge of digital inclusion and to commit to building a citizen, community and solidarity digital territory so that everyone can benefit from the spinoffs of technological progress, have a grip on the social transformations that result from it and actively contribute to defining the society of tomorrow.

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