

Towards a New Social Contract: Reducing Inequalities through Digital Public Goods and Youth Collaboration for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Mauricia Abdol Tshilunda, Mohammad Atif Aleem, Eileen Cejas, Marta Galambos, Fernando García, Aleksandra Ivankovic, Victoria Lovins, Oumaima Makhoul, Elliott Mann, Tristan Norman, Juliana Novaes, Aoife O'Mahony, Carolina Rojas, Gustavo Souza (Youth Coalition on Internet Governance; UN Major Group for Children and Youth; Science-Policy Interface Platform; and DESA)

Introduction

For many decades, the General Assembly has been mindful of the difficulties and opportunities presented by technological change. In 2015, the Addis Ababa Agenda for Action [69/313](#) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development established the Technology Facilitation Mechanism to support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Later resolutions [72/242](#) and [73/17](#) specifically address rapid technological change and its impact on the SDGs. Additionally, the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY)ⁱ highlights information communication technologies as a priority area and emphasizes the importance of providing training to promote the use of information and communications technology to protect youth.

The current world youth population is the largest seen at any time in history. There are approximately 1.8 billion people alive today between the ages of 10 to 24, with most young people living in urban areas of developing countriesⁱⁱ. Many young people in these countries experience systemic and intersectional inequalities that impede social mobility. These systemic inequalities include unequal access to Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) infrastructure as well as digital technologies. As of 2020, “93 per cent of the world’s population live within physical reach of mobile broadband or Internet services. However, only 53.6 percent of the world’s population now use the Internet, leaving an estimated 3.6 billion without access.”ⁱⁱⁱ

While ensuring equal access to the internet is critical to bridging the digital divide, it is not sufficient to eliminate digital inequality which also encompasses technical and skill-based disparities, social support, and autonomy of use. This policy brief will introduce the concept of *digital public goods (DPGs)* as a solution for reducing digital inequalities. We will also present policy recommendations towards the creation, adoption, and governance of DPGs, and the need for greater inter-generational stakeholder involvement in these processes.

The Use of Digital Public Goods Towards Reducing Digital Inequality

The Roadmap for Digital Cooperation defines DPGs as: “open-source software, open data, open artificial intelligence models, open standards and open content that adhere to privacy and other applicable international and domestic laws, standards and best practices and do no harm.”^{iv} DPGs are available to all members of society to benefit from regardless of socio-economic background. They offer a unique opportunity to transform social protection systems and reduce inequalities in low- and middle-income countries through empowering digital public services, social enterprises, and engaging young people as co-designers. The successful implementation of open and inclusive DPGs pushes the global community towards a new social contract and accelerates progress towards the SDGs by enabling greater digital access to young people, especially those impacted by the digital divide, including women, young girls, and LGBT+ persons.

A great example of DPGs reducing digital inequality can be found in work done by the Digital Public Goods Alliance^v which is a multi-stakeholder initiative to accelerate the attainment of the SDGs in low- and middle-income countries by facilitating the discovery, development, use of, and investment in digital public goods”. Currently this Alliance is prototyping DPGs to scale in many lower income countries by addressing key elements of the digital divide such as connectivity, digital identity, digital skills and literacy, and critical public services. It is chaired by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Norway, Sierra Leone, and India’s iSpirit. Another example of effective use of DPGs to reduce digital inequalities is the Giga initiative by UNICEF and ITU^{vi}. This initiative aims to bring internet connectivity, critical open-source software, and digital financial services to schools in countries and communities with low internet access. Giga, recognizing that schools are the center of many rural communities, offers digital devices to youth through school-based programs to expand digital services, like tele-health medicine, and connectivity to other groups in their communities, creating a network effect.

These two examples showcase ways in which DPGs can be used to reduce digital inequalities. However, DPGs also face many obstacles that hinder their broad use and implementation. Without a proper governance structure for DPGs, ensuring complete transparency, accountability, and inclusivity will be difficult. As a result, it is critical that equitable policy frameworks be created with support from local governments and the broader international community.

Policy Recommendations

A number of recommendations are suggested in order to promote a global digital commons and reduce digital inequalities. Primarily these consist of the creation, adoption and governance of DPGs, and the need for greater stakeholder engagement, particularly of young people and marginalized groups.

DPGs

- Increase the adoption and use of DPGs (in line with the United Nations Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation).
- Increase capacity-building among marginalized peoples around how to use digital technologies effectively. Promoting digital skills and digital literacy, particularly among population groups at greatest risk of structural inequalities and digital inequalities specifically, must be specifically emphasized.
- Strategies should be formulated to ensure DPGs are well maintained in the long term, including providing incentives for efficiency and accountability. For example, multilateral institutions should create financial incentives that promote the long-term funding and maintenance of DPGs.
- Make further efforts to ensure strong and inclusive policies and governance of such resources. This is crucial to increase access to digital technologies and internet connectivity. Also, governance must be multilateral and multi-sectoral to ensure that a variety of perspectives, approaches and agendas are represented.
- Promote open sourcing of DPGs and public data to improve access, interoperability, and scaling. Thus, the availability and digital distribution of free, peer-reviewed, standardized scientific literature and data should be improved. Furthermore, if the literature is written anew there will be no infringement or immediate threat to existing intellectual property.

- National digital transformation strategies should support and prioritize the development and deployment of DPGs that are deemed highly adaptable, or else with a proven potential to address local-specific priorities. Engagement from key stakeholders, such as youth groups and academia, should be sought to determine which DPGs might be best suited for these purposes.
- DPG introduction should adopt the form of a protracted process of community engagement to help shape and embed the technologies within pre-existing social institutions. DPG support and resource-provision should be contingent on the technology's ability to create skilled human capital and catalyze endogenous innovation capacities.

Stakeholder involvement and youth engagement

- Multi-stakeholder involvement at all stages is key to inclusive and appropriate solutions for addressing digital inequality, including throughout the creation, adoption, and governance of DPGs.
- To engage people from all affected groups, stakeholder involvement should be intergenerational. Youth engagement is important as young people are particularly affected by digital inequalities. Initiatives should therefore attempt to engage young people through co-production of digital products and initiatives, as well as in the governance of these products. Youth capacity-building is essential to adequately prepare young people to take part in this process and equip them with the necessary skills to effectively engage and advocate for digital equality.
- Youth groups should be given the tools and resources necessary to not only experiment with DPGs in controlled settings, but also to become agents of information and deployment within their own communities.
- Stakeholder involvement must be intersectional, representing a broad range of marginalized populations, especially for those most at risk of structural and digital inequalities, such as women, indigenous populations, people with disabilities, refugees and internally displaced persons.
- Coordination between UN agencies and youth initiatives related to digital technology is

necessary to both avoid redundancy in work streams and to increase the impact of any initiatives started in this space. Additionally, coordination would ensure that diverse perspectives are incorporated into the decision-

making process. Thus, it would be useful to create an inter-agency space with young people and youth-led groups focused on issues related to science-policy, including digital technology.

ⁱ<https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wpay2010.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/youth/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2019.pdf>

^{iv} <https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/>

^v <https://digitalpublicgoods.net/>

^{vi} <https://gigaconnect.org>