

Research report

Forum: Economic and Social Council

Issue: Bridging the digital divide through inclusive digital infrastructure and digital skills

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Introduction

In this era of technology a big focus has been put on how new advancements can be used for more inclusivity, community and equality. This is obviously true but it hides the fact that it is currently causing a massive gap between people who have technology and those who don't. Not only that but also the gap between people who have issues that cause them to be unable to use technology and those who don't. The United Nations have in the past attempted to deal with this issue. Their attempts were not fully failed but rather not fully helpful either. Nowadays technology has no longer become something useful to have but also a basic necessity. People without it do not have access to Digital Identity, Digital Trade and so much more.

To address any issue we must first look at who is affected. In this case that is anyone without (the ability to) access technology. This already rules out everyone without any technological devices and without any way of having access to technological devices. Then we can also rule out everyone physically unable to use technology. This is disabled people who have issues with using technology. Another group with a large percentage of people who can not use technology is the elderly. This is not due to lack of access but due to the inability to use technology.

The rise of AI has also had a large impact on the digital divide. Currently it is not a tool that is a necessity in our daily lives but has become a large boost for a lot of people. If used correctly it can be used to support the 17SDG's and help people in need. This is currently not the case and unless action is taken to change that it will only make the digital divide larger. A key part to this is the fact that a lot of people fear AI for multiple reasons, the main one being that it is going to steal our jobs. This should not be the case. Growth should first of all be gradual as to ensure that nobody is left behind. Secondly AI should be used as a supportive tool. It relies on the information we give it, not the other way round. Thirdly we must ensure that everyone is informed about AI and what it is doing.

Definitions of key terms

Digital divide

The digital divide is used to refer to the gap between people with and without the internet. It is often used to talk about the negative impact of the lack of internet. It is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "the problem of some members of society not having the opportunity or knowledge to use computers and the internet that others have."

Digital skills

Digital skills are the skills you need to be able to use technology. By downloading this research report you have demonstrated digital skills. Obviously some people have more digital skills than

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others. Examples of people with lack of / no digital skills are the elderly and the youth. In this era digital skills are no longer something optional but a necessity.

NGOs and IGOs

These two terms are important for all MUN topics and for a basic understanding of international relationships, knowing the difference between them is also important. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are independent, mission driven non profits that normally address social issues, human rights violations and things related to international relations and rights.

Intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) are organisations between multiple governments based on a treaty. Their goals are to work together with good faith to deal with issues of common interest. A debated organisation is Interpol which can currently best be described as a de facto IGO.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

ICT is the combination between information technology (IT) and communication technology (CT). Under IT falls management of data, systems, and hardware, everything necessary to store, process, create, and exchange all forms of technological data. Under CT falls all social and communication technology so for example social media.

Digital Infrastructure

The best way to explain digital Infrastructure is that it is the foundation of all ICT-services. This includes things like mobile data, wifi and data centers. It is everything that makes sure that people have the ability to have basic access to technological services. In a growing digital society access to such infrastructure has become a necessity.

General overview

In this era growth is happening faster than it ever has before. A key part of that growth is technology. It has gone from a tool that is a luxury to a key part of daily life. The term digital divide is from during the 1990's but it has only become more and more prominent as time goes on. During COVID-19 it was proven how technology is not just a tool anymore it is something used to promote society, community, small businesses and cultures. As this technology continues to grow the more difficult it will be to bridge the technological divide. In 2025 there were 2.2 billion people without technology and this has caused them to miss out on so many chances. This is not the whole issue as simply being connected to the internet is not the whole issue. Accessibility and education are also key issues in dealing with this divide.

In the report by the ITU (International Telecommunication Union) from 2025 it was stated that 2.2 billion people were still offline. That means in 2025 74 per cent of the world's population

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was online. That is compared to 71% in 2021. In MEDCs 94 percent of the country was using the internet while in LEDCs only 23% of the population used the internet. If you look at regions then Africa has the lowest internet use with only 36%. This shows that the digital divide is related to sustainable development goal 1 (End poverty in all its forms everywhere).

Following more data from the ITU (still from 2025) the digital divide is also a gender gap. 71% of women use the internet compared to 77% of men who use the internet. This gap is the smallest in Europe with 94% of women using the internet and 95% of men using the internet. The gap is the largest in Arab States with 64% of women using the internet and 75% of men use the internet. This emphasizes the importance of sustainable development goal 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) when talking about the digital divide.

Yet again following more data from the ITU (yet again still from 2025) the digital divide is also a generation gap. 82% of the youth (people from 15-24) use the internet compared to 72% of the rest of the population. This gap is the smallest in the Commonwealth of Independent States (a regional group of Eurasia) with 96% of the youth using technology and 93% of the rest of the population using technology. The biggest gap is in Africa where 50% of the youth use technology and 32% of the rest of the population use technology. This recognizes that goal 3 (ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages) is also affected.

In paragraphs 2-4 I talked about specific sustainable development goals, however there are so many more that are affected by the digital divide like goal 10 (reduce inequality within and among countries). The other goals that are affected are goal 9 (build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation) and goal 12 (ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns). This is important as it makes it clear that the digital divide is not one issue, it is multiple issues coming together to make a bigger issue.

The last issue that has to be addressed when talking about the digital divide is Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI can be used as a tool to help so many people but only when used correctly. First of all a lot of people fear AI for reasons that include but are not limited to the idea that AI is going to steal their job and that we will become dumber due to AI. There are valid complaints surrounding AI like climate change. Despite this AI currently has the potential to help boost people's lives. Due to this it is ECOSOC's responsibility to make sure AI is used in a beneficial way.

Major parties involved

UN

This seems like a very obvious choice as we are an UN council but it is important to acknowledge which committees and agencies are involved with the digital divide. These are the United Nations Development Programme, Economic and Social Council, United Nations Office on Digital Emerging Technologies and International Telecommunication Union. Delegate this where a lot of your research should be from.

EU

The European Union has many times shown how the digital divide is something they find a pressing issue. They have recognized and attempted to deal with the issue in many ways including the hiring of ICT specialists. Their previous attempts could possibly be useful when recreated at a global level. They however are the group that struggles the least it comes to the digital divide.

African Union

The African Union is a key part of the digital divide as Africa is the continent with the largest digital divide. They have addressed this with the digital transformation strategy for Africa and the African Digital compact. As the United Nations it is our duty to support our member states, ergo (henceforth), it is our duty to help support the African Union.

Timeline of Key Events

17 May 1865	The ITU (International Telecommunication Union) was founded.
1945	The signing of the UN charter which was accompanied by the creation of ECOSOC.
1946	The first programmable computer was created, the ENIAC.
21 June 1948	The first computer program ran on a computer.
3 April 1973	The first hand held mobile phone.
1974	Xerox Parc Alto, the first computer with a monitor, introduced.
1979	The creation of 1G. The G stands for generation.
1990	The creation of 2G.
During the 1990's	The coining of the term digital divide.
1st October 2001	The launch of 3G.
November 2001	The creation of the UN ICT task force with the goal of the use of technology to bridge social and economical gaps.
2003	First WSIS forum in Geneva was to ensure that all states had the opportunity to grow inclusively surrounding the topic of ICT.
2005	Second WSIS forum in Tunis to build on the founding of the previous forum.
2006	The creation of GIAD. Which was the first real attempt to bridge the digital divide as previously mentioned solutions were created to address gaps that are close to the digital divide. GIAD was the first solution to address the gap caused by technology. (This is slightly up to interpretation).
2009	The launch of 4G.
2019	The launch of 5G.
22 September 2024	The adoption of the Global Digital Compact which has 5 objectives similar to the 17 SDG's but about technology. Objective 1 is about the bridging of the digital divide.

1 January 2025	The establishment of the UN Office on Digital Emerging Technologies with the goal of upholding the 17SDG's through ICT. It has multiple functions, a key one being the support of the Global Digital Compact.
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Previous attempts to solve the issue

The oldest UN agency the ITU (International Telecommunication Union) is the best example of an agency with a goal of connecting people internationally. Even though at its starting the term digital divide didn't exist (it was first coined in 1990) the ITU is still related to the digital divide. The goal of international connection requires the bridging of the digital divide and vice versa. A fun fact about the ITU is that it existed before the United Nations and the League of Nations. It became a part of the UN in 1947.

An early attempt to deal with the digital divide was the UN ICT Task Force (UNICTTF). It was created in 2001 by the UN Secretary General by mandate of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It had a 3 year mandate and it was not created with the purpose of dealing with the digital divide. It is still a previous attempt at dealing with the issue as the goal of the task force was very similar to the bridging of the digital divide. It shows that the UN has always believed ICT can be used to address the digital divide and the poverty gap if harnessed correctly. Please do not spend too much time on this as little information is findable about the UNICTTF for example if you go to unictaskforce.org you end up at an untrustworthy french fitness website.

One of the most notable attempts to use ICT to spread information globally. The two first meetings were in Geneva 2003 and Tunisia 2005. The goal is to build a people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society. It ended up establishing a global multistakeholder framework for addressing information and communication technology (ICT) issues, including digital inclusion, cybersecurity, development, and digital cooperation. WSIS forums are still held and they are a key part in bridging the digital divide.

The Global Alliance for ICT and Development (GAID) is one of the previous attempts that aligns very closely with our current question. Its creation came after the first WSIS forums and the UNICTTF which both helped lay the groundwork for GAID. It currently has taken a lot of actions to address the digital divide but since its beginning it has been devoted to ensuring a global approach to a global issue. It offered a new way to use ICT to deal with the poverty gap, a way that was focused on making sure everyone was involved NGO's, IGO's, and individuals.

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One of the newest UN attempts to address the digital divide is the UN Office on Digital Emerging Technologies (UNDODET) which was created January 1st 2025. A key goal of UNODET is to promote the Global Digital Compact which is best described as a digital version of the 17 SDGs. These goals also show that as time goes on the existence of the digital divide has become more and more concrete. The Global Digital Compact has 5 objectives, the first being closing all digital divides.

Possible solutions

As the Economic and Social Council a lot of the help we offer is through funding. This is also a key solution to solving this issue. Funds will be necessary to ensure that everyone has access to digital infrastructure. This would be done by supporting the funding of technology in LEDC's to ensure that everybody had access to the internet. Important to remember is that as the MUN we have infinite money so this should also be clear when talking about funds.

Offering lessons and courses is a way to bridge the digital divide and boost community. By offering such lessons in places like the library we can make the internet more accessible for all. When thinking about this it is also important to recognise certain groups like the elderly people. Another possible location to offer this is a local government building like a town hall.

An idea that fits really well with the last solution is the implementation of local digital infrastructure. This would include putting laptops in local governments that are accessible to all people. This would help ensure that everyone has access to technologies no matter their income.

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