




Bridging the digital divide: Strategies for inclusive digitalization in metropolises

CONTEXT

The promise of digital transformation for metropolises is undeniable— it can facilitate more inclusive governance, improve quality of life and optimize resource allocation. However, to fully realize the benefits of digital transformation, it must reach the entire population. Unequal access to technology and skills, alongside other deep-rooted social inequalities and regional disparities, threatens to exacerbate existing gaps and create new ones.

The digital divide is the biggest obstacle to digitalization in metropolises

The digital divide, an ever-evolving gap in access to and use of technology, presents the biggest hurdle to equitable digitalization in cities. This divide is driven by:

-  **Material access:** Limited access and affordability of devices; and reliable internet infrastructure.
-  **Digital literacy:** The ability to navigate technology confidently, ranging from basic troubleshooting to advanced skills.
-  **Trust and opportunities:** Factors including gender, race, ability, and socioeconomic status can mean people are excluded from accessing the full potential of digital opportunities.

Digital inclusion strategies that have only focused on the first two levels of digital divides— such as equipping populations with devices and providing digital skills training—have proven to be insufficient.¹ Policy-makers need to address each layer of the divide and understand the societal inequalities that perpetuate gaps in digital access. **Local and metropolitan governments are key in fostering digital inclusion by promoting digital rights, capitalizing on digital technologies, and providing equal opportunities for all.**

Affordability and geography block access to the digital world

Economic barriers and geographic disparities in internet connectivity pose great challenges that impact individuals' **material access to digitalization**. The private sector is a critical actor in the implementation of digital inclusion policies, as they can provide the digital know-how and infrastructure necessary to reach the wider public. However, their involvement requires a legal framework facilitating active public and private sector collaboration.

CITY SOLUTIONS BRIDGING THE GAP IN MATERIAL ACCESS

Major cities across the world have grappled with the challenge of digital exclusion. Rising costs and geographic disparities have left many residents struggling to access the essential tools of the digital age.

1. **London**, like many cities globally, is facing a cost-of-living crisis, which has significantly increased the costs of broadband, mobile connectivity, and devices. **To address these economic barriers, London has introduced three key initiatives: 1) Get Online London**—targeting 75,000 digitally excluded individuals over three years, employing a hyper-local approach through voluntary and community sector organizations; **2) London Device Bank**—redistributing repurposed devices for free with a keen eye on environmental and social impact; **3) London Data Bank**—distributing free mobile SIM cards, collaborating with Virgin Media O2 and utilizing data donated by major telecom companies.
2. In **Toronto**, economic constraints emerge as a significant barrier to internet access, with the monthly cost of internet service being the primary obstacle. Consequently, many households rely solely on mobile phones for internet access. **Toronto's "ConnectTO" policy establishes free public Wi-Fi locations chosen based on specific criteria**, including community centers and areas with high utilization. This initiative has provided free Wi-Fi to 3,500 units and 7,700 residents in Tower Neighbourhood buildings, serving around 4,000 users daily at community recreation centers and approximately 5,600 users across all ConnectTO sites.

Cities are rethinking digital literacy for a more inclusive future

Digital literacy is often seen as the key to achieving a truly inclusive digital society. Yet, policies cannot solely focus on users, devices and content, while overlooking cultural and socio-economic relations. This narrow approach fails to address the ethical and political challenges that arise in today's interconnected world.

CITY-LED INITIATIVES STRENGTHENING DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS

1. In **Bogotá**, one in ten women don't use the internet. This number jumps to two in ten for low-income areas. A major barrier to acquiring digital skills for these women is time poverty, due to paid and unpaid care work. To address this challenge, **Bogotá introduced the "Care Blocks" initiative**. These centers, situated near where many caregivers live, offer a one-stop shop for various services the city provides. A key feature is flexible scheduling, allowing women to access services, including digital training, without sacrificing time for caregiving responsibilities. While women participate in training, on-site professionals attend to their dependents in the same building, creating a supportive environment.
2. **Barcelona** takes an intersectional approach to addressing digital literacy—understanding how factors like age, income, immigration status, and education level create unique barriers. Barcelona Activa's Cibernarium, a municipal digital training center, has launched a **new online test to measure the digital skills level of its citizens**. The test considers various socio-economic factors, and its results give Barcelona a clear picture of the city's digital literacy landscape, enabling them to tailor digital policies and programs to address specific local needs and barriers.

3. Over recent decades, **New York City** has partnered with specialized local organizations to ensure historically underserved communities are included in their digital policies. **They have implemented digital inclusion programs to 1) provide low-wage immigrant workers with access, training and ESL (English as a second language) classes to pursue employment opportunities through the internet; 2) offer specialized training in digital skills to serve older adult populations**, where a growing share are immigrants who are also facing potential exclusion due to race or ethnicity; and **3) designed a digital literacy curriculum available in 10 languages.**

Trust plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' willingness to embrace digitalization

The digital divide isn't just about technology access. Trust also plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' willingness to embrace digitization. As local governments move essential services like healthcare, social welfare and administrative processes online, public servants become crucial digital stewards. Public servants can bridge the trust gap and empower more residents to participate in the digital world by building trust with residents who lack the digital skills or confidence to navigate these online systems.

CLOSING THE DIGITAL TRUST GAP IN CITIES

1. In the **city of l'Hospitalet, a neighboring city of Barcelona**, it was identified that digital inclusion efforts work well when they maximize existing relationships that public servants, social workers, community organizers and peers have with local communities. To address digital needs in low-income areas, **l'Hospitalet introduced the TIC Truck initiative, offering a mobile assistance center for various digital queries.** Staffed by local young people who share similar backgrounds with residents, the TIC Truck fosters a sense of connection and provides effective support on everything from smartphone basics to navigating online administrative tasks.
2. Mistrust in the digital realm is closely tied to confidence in those conducting training programs. The city of **Brussels** also acknowledges the dual role that social workers play in building trust among city residents, helping them overcome their anxieties about online administrative tasks. **Social workers in Brussels City's welfare centers and community hubs are helping vulnerable individuals overcome the digital gap, receiving training and assistance through programs like the Num@tic project.** Additionally, the Citizen Affairs Department's team aids citizens in retirement homes, hospitals, and with mobility issues with tasks such as address changes and identity card applications.

The Path Forward: Recommendations for City Governments

- **Identify digital divide barriers.** Develop a comprehensive strategy to identify which individuals are struggling with the digital divide, considering factors beyond income—such as gender, disability, race, legal status, geographical situation and age. Focus groups help city administrators understand the barriers that residents face and can assist in designing policies that aim for social transformation, guaranteeing that the resources are allocated efficiently to address the root causes of digital exclusion.

- **Tailor digital policies to be inclusive and relevant to resident’s needs.** Digital literacy city programs should be created based on active listening and input from inhabitants—offering compensation schemes for their feedback. To ensure that these programs and other digital services are user-friendly, they should respond to accessibility needs; and be culturally sensitive and inclusive.
- **Take on a multi-stakeholder approach in the design and implementation of digital inclusion policies.** Digital policies should be designed in collaboration with different departments of the city council, alongside valuable inputs from local organizations. Moreover, city governments should leverage public and private partnerships to ensure universal access to digital technologies.
- **Support local organizations in their efforts to promote digital inclusion.** One of the main challenges that local organizations face is a lack of financial resources. It is therefore essential to ensure ongoing and responsive funding for local partners to enable their work.
- **Ease the economic burden of digital access.** Metropolises can implement policies to alleviate the economic cost of digital access. The provision of city-owned digital infrastructure at a low cost, e-SIM cards at affordable prices, or public spaces with free Wi-Fi (prioritizing spaces such as libraries, community centers and municipal buildings), can enhance connectivity options for inhabitants.
- **Guarantee analogue channels and human assistance in digitized services.** Ensure that all services that are digitized have a corresponding analogue channel that is easily accessible to the public. In addition, ensure that those residents who access digitized services can receive personalized assistance throughout the process.

A dedicated working group was formed to explore the issue of digital exclusion in metropolitan areas. This collaborative effort aimed to understand the diverse factors contributing to the digital divide and recommend policy solutions to ensure equitable access to the digital world for all.

References

¹[Digital Future Society](#). 2023. Beyond digital access as a human right in cities: promoting an intersectional, human rights-based, systems approach to digital access Barcelona, Spain.