DIGITAL INCLUSION AND DIGITAL EQUITY: PERSPECTIVES FROM PHILANTHROPY.

In this digital age, access, adoption, and digital literacy are imperative resources. There is a plethora of research that has explored digital inequities, inequalities, and divides looking at the countries, communities, and individuals digitally disadvantaged or left behind. And from this research, we know plenty regarding what is deficient and for whom. However, there is far less attention paid to how these digital inequities, inequalities, and divides can be assuaged. This is in some part due to the context specific nature of the digital inequities, inequalities, and divides in various communities with these inequalities manifesting as primary level divides including material access, secondary level divides referring to skills and use, and tertiary level divides denoting outcomes of differentiated access and use. Accordingly, digital inclusion activities cannot follow a one-size-fits-all approach, addressing these cultural and context specific digital inequities, inequalities, and divides will lead to greater digital inclusion across the world.

Digital inclusion has largely been defined as the activities essential to guarantee that all individuals and communities, even the most underprivileged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). By implication, therefore, digital exclusion manifests where a lack of access to information and digital technology adversely impacts personal, political, and economic capabilities of individuals and communities, making them unable to participate in the normal activities of society. This could include access to internet, access to digital devices that meet the users' needs, access to digital skills training, technical support and several other things that can be done to bridge the divide and bring about digital equity.

Digital equity, therefore, is a state of affairs in which all individuals and communities have access to the information communication technologies they need for full participation in society. Full society participation ranges from civic and cultural participation and employment to access to essential services and lifelong learning allowing access and effective use of technology by individuals and communities.

Digital inclusion thus denotes efforts to remedy deficits in digital equity which are made manifest through the digital divide that encompasses disparities in access to and usage of Information Communication Technologies between individuals and communities.

Digital inclusion has rapidly become a critical element of social inclusion with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 which confined millions of people to their homes, working and schooling remotely. The role and import of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) has become flagrantly obvious in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where society has been required to rely heavily on technology to meet daily basic needs including accessing basic goods and services, maintaining social connections, working from home, and homeschooling and this has led to renewed debates about the digital inequalities and inequities that have existed all along. As reliance on digital devices and reliable internet surges, it is also becoming more and more apparent that being digitally excluded also means being socially excluded. The International Telecommunications Union estimates up to 3.7 billion people are digitally excluded as of 2020 with developing countries claiming the lion's share of this enormous figure.

Sequential lockdowns instituted by governments during the pandemic have exacerbated the digital divide but have also brought with them opportunities for digital inclusion. Technology has played a pivotal role in enhancing social protections through delivery of relief to the most vulnerable to enable management of the pandemic and the general digitization of the public services as well as the recovery process, enabling governments and civil society to extend social protection coverage and proficiently pay out financial support.

UNICEF in 2020 estimates that over 90 per cent of monitories of education around the world have enacted some form of policy to provide for digital learning whether in form of online curricula or broadcast remote learning since the pandemic broke. Studies show that the digital divide might cause political exclusion, social participation exclusion and economic exclusion whole others indicate that the exponential increase in digital based commerce has crated new jobs and incomes, seeing the improvement in some household incomes even among rural communities.

So, the question still begs, how does philanthropy play its part in promoting digital equity and inclusion so as to bridge the digital divide experiences by the last mile communities and have them access ICTs that promote their full societal participation. In this regard, it is imperative to have these last mile communities co-create the programming that is designed to support them. Evidence based programming that brings beneficiary communities into the fold and have them lead on co-creating solutions not only increases the sustainability and ownership of interventions but also ensures that the one size fits all approach is abandoned and bespoke interventions promoted. The localized action of global change is an imperative in the delivery of redolent change in communities. Partnership

with indigenous communities promotes community philanthropy and such platforms for collaboration and alliance building reinforce the understanding that local communities are the fabric of the change we seek in supporting digital inclusion and equity.

In the developing context, support to grassroots funds is quickly becoming quintessential. Grassroots funds have an invariable contact with grassroots communities and have developed alliances and built movements among the communities and thus present a unique opportunity for bespoke support to communities with the willingness to walk the 'change journey' with the communities. Technology specifically presents the challenge of often being dynamic and rapidly changing. It can become obsolete in an instant but also requires regular refurbishment and in some cases replacement. This therefore calls for adaptability and flexibility which often challenges 'big philanthropy' and positions grassroots funds uniquely given their deepened relationships with communities. Supporting grassroots funds would ensure that interventions are made at the right level, be it primary digital exclusion or secondary or tertiary digital exclusion and that cultural and context specific inequalities are addressed even as communities evolve.

The convening power of philanthropy cannot go unmentioned. Philanthropy the world over holds enormous convening power with the ability to bring stakeholders together to spotlight particular issues and identify areas of synergy, build alliances and grow collaborations that ameliorate the challenges in communities that they serve. Similarly, philanthropy has the ability to exercise its convening power to bring digital inclusion stakeholders together to synergize and create communities of practice that not only seek out context specific solutions to the growing digital

divide but also promote dynamic accountability that ensures that grassroots communities and all other stakeholders are encompassed in inclusive, participatory and meaningful engagements. This includes the integration of ICTs and digital rights in various aspects of social justice work and the mainstreaming of digital rights as a necessity for the full enjoyment of other fundamental human rights.

As the necessity of functional digital devices and reliable internet access increases, it is indicative that being digitally excluded also means being socially excluded and the notion that digital inclusion is an essential constituent of social inclusion become more glaring with the advent of COVID-19. As the gap continues to grow between those with and those without digital access and stakeholders continue to work towards addressing policies, internationally and locally that address and attempt to close the digital divide and promote digital literacy, philanthropy has a major role to play in the realization of this endeavor. Not just any kind of philanthropy will do; it must be responsive philanthropy that listens to and is receptive to the emerging needs of the communities that they serve and philanthropy that is bold enough to put beneficiary communities front and center, even more as COVID-19 continues to undermine the gains from decades gone by.