27 April 2021

To: United Nations Office of the Envoy on Technology
          (digital inclusion sub-group)

          c/o: Ms Anni Tervo
          email: anni.tervo@un.org

RE: Digital Inclusion Definition

                    For more information, please contact:

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Introduction

1. Growing socio-digital inequalities[1] imply that finding better methodologies for promoting equal, meaningful, and safe access is as important as addressing the problems themselves. This starts with using the right words and terminology. I therefore welcome this opportunity to submit written comments in response to the draft definition of digital inclusion proposed by the sub-group's co-champions, the Governments of Mexico and Canada and UN Women, in the context of the work of the UN Office of the Envoy on Technology. This submission is based on an oral statement made upon kind invitation to address this group on 14 April 2021.

2. I was encouraged to see the UN Secretary-General's *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation* emphasize the importance of both digital inclusion and universal connectivity in goals 1 and 3. But I am even more encouraged to see tangible work being done to take those recommendations forward.

3. This submission draws upon discussions with supervisors and other advisors at the London School of Economics and Political Science (where I am a PhD researcher in the Department of Media and Communications); with valuable work done with colleagues at Research ICT Africa (where I am a doctoral fellow); and on deliberations within the Freedom Online Coalition's Taskforce on Digital Equality (where I serve on the FOC Advisory Network). I would like to specifically highlight the work of the latter two in this context:

    3.1   **Research ICT Africa (RIA)** is a regional digital policy and regulation think tank based in Cape Town and active across Africa and the global South. RIA conducts research on digital economy and society that facilitates evidence-based and informed policymaking for improved access, use and application of information and communication technologies (ICTs)

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[1] Gillwald, A. & Mothobi, O. (2019) *After Access 2018: A demand-side view of mobile Internet from 10 African countries*. Cape Town: Research ICT Africa. Available at: https://researchictafrica.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019_After-Access_Africa-Comparative-report.pdf.

for social development and economic growth. RIA also has a dedicated digital policy unit which specialises in Internet governance, digital rights, cybersecurity, gender, innovation (including artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things), and data justice. Understanding the needs and digital challenges of vulnerable and marginalised communities – including women, youth, children, the elderly, and people in rural areas, for example – form an integral part of RIA's work.[2]

3.2 The **Freedom Online Coalition** is a partnership of 32 governments, working to advance Internet freedom. FOC members work closely together to coordinate their diplomatic efforts and engage with civil society and the private sector to support Internet freedom – free expression, association, assembly, and privacy online – worldwide. The FOC's **Task Force on Digital Equality** aims to promote digital equity, provisionally construed as digital inclusion that is equitable, inclusive, meaningful, safe, high-quality and human rights-respecting while also, among other objectives, translating the FOC's *Joint Statement on Digital Inclusion* (adopted in February 2020 in Accra, Ghana)[3] into concrete action that has tangible, positive outcomes for promoting digital equality in the global North and global South alike. The Taskforce encourages and fortifies global South participation and perspectives, and is committed to a cross-cutting, normative human rights-based approach (including fostering, cultivating and preserving a culture of diversity, equity and inclusion).[4]

4. While this submission draws upon work done with these entities, it is important to note that it reflects my own thinking, which may not be shared by all.

5. I would like to thank the co-champions for their work on drafting this definition, which is already much more nuanced and holistic than most other definitions of digital inclusion that I have thus far seen:

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[2] For more about RIA, please visit: researchictafrica.net.

[3] Available here: https://freedomonlinecoalition.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FOC-Joint-Statement-on-Digital-Inclusion.pdf.

[4] For more about the FOC, please visit: https://freedomonlinecoalition.com.

5.1   I am particularly encouraged to see the definition use an intersectional inequality lens to understand digital exclusion, and that it to some extent addresses demand-side needs such as the need for digital engagement to be human-rights based, meaningful, and safe.

5.2   I also welcome the understanding of digital technology as extending beyond the Internet to other emerging technologies (for example, those associated with broader datafication processes or the notion of the Fourth Industrial Revolution[5]).

5.3   More importantly, I appreciate the emphasis on the specific needs of people who are in vulnerable or potentially marginalised positions.

6.   While I think the definition should therefore be commended for going some way towards enabling digital inclusion, I believe it could go further to ensure digital inclusion efforts actually have beneficial outcomes for people and societies, rather than merely enabling digital inclusion for the sake of digital inclusion.

7.   This submission therefore primarily focuses on a conceptual argument urging the sub-group to broaden the definition to one that focuses on the *outcomes* of our engagement with technology (or *digital equality*), but also adds minor technical points with regards to the existing definition. These two overarching recommendations aim to be constructive, rather than critical. Each of them are dealt with separately below.

Recommendation 1: conceptual focus

8.   Like many other policy commitments and instruments, the UN Secretary-General's *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation*'s focus on digital inclusion is based on an assumption and even belief that the ability to participate in online environments is a positive development for everyone everywhere – and perhaps even inherently and definitively so.

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[5] e.g., Gillwald, A.; Calandro, E.; Sadeski, F. & Lacave, M. (2019) *Unlocking the Potential of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in Africa: South Africa*. African Development Bank Group/Technopolis. Available at: https://4irpotential.africa/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/4IR_SOUTHAFRICA_V01PRINT.pdf.

9. But what if digital technologies (and access to them) do not always present the opportunities we so readily assume? What if digital engagement can facilitate or exacerbate the exploitation of human vulnerabilities, the creation of new platforms for misogynistic abuse, the virality of disinformation, interference with political processes, the diminishing of human agency, and the more profound discrimination against people who are already disadvantaged or marginalised?[6] What if promoting digital inclusion could therefore lead to the introduction of new or the exacerbation of existing digital and other inequalities? What if, simply put, digital inclusion makes things worse rather than better for people? And what if some people or policymakers are poorly prepared to respond to and mitigate these risks?

10. The outcomes of digital inclusion are not always positive, and nor are they equally distributed. Millions of children have been unable to continue their schooling during the pandemic because their families cannot afford reliable Internet access or multiple devices; work conference calls have been 'zoom-bombed' with abusive content; and sham 'doctors' have advocated against vaccines on viral videos. Digital technologies thus introduce not only the opportunities so readily assumed, but also risks. Digital inclusion efforts, similarly, can expose people to new, different, and global risks for which they

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[6] e.g., Couldry, N. & Mejias, U.A. (2019) *The Costs of Connection: How Data is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press; Scheerder, A.J.; van Deursen, A. & van Dijk, J. (2019) Negative outcomes of Internet use: A qualitative analysis in the homes of families with different educational backgrounds. *The Information Society,* vol. 35(5): 286-298; Eubanks, V. (2018) *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor.* New York: St. Martin's Press; Zuboff, S. (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power.* New York: Public Affairs; Micheli, M., Lutz, C., & Büchi, M. (2018) Digital footprints: An emerging dimension of digital inequality. *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*, vol. 16(3): 242–251; Noble, S. U. (2018) *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism.* New York: NYU Press; Friederici, N. Ojanperä, S., & Graham, M. (2017) The Impact of Connectivity in Africa: Grand Visions and the Mirage of Inclusive Digital Development. *Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries*, vol. 79(2): 1-20; Helsper, E. J. & Reisdorf, B. C. (2017) The emergence of a "digital underclass" in Great Britain and Sweden: Changing reasons for digital exclusion. *New Media & Society*, vol. 19(8): 1253-1270; Lutz, C., & Hoffmann, C. P. (2017) The dark side of online participation: Exploring non-, passive and negative participation. *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 20(6): 876–897; Mansell, R. (2017) Inequality and digitally mediated communication: divides, contradictions and consequences. *Javnost - the Public*, vol. 24(2): 146-161; Napoli, P., & Obar, J. (2014) The emerging mobile Internet underclass: A critique of mobile Internet access. *The Information Society*, vol. 30(5): 323–334; Livingstone, S. (2013) Online risk, harm and vulnerability: reflections on the evidence base for child Internet safety policy. *Journal of Communication Studies*, vol. 18(35): 13-28; Halford, S., & Savage, M. (2010) Reconceptualizing digital social inequality. *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 13(7): 937–955; Heeks, R. (2002) Information systems and developing countries: failure, success and local improvisations. *The Information Society*, vol. 18(2): 101–112.

or the institutions in their contexts might be ill-prepared – thereby exacerbating existing inequalities or even introducing new ones.

11. I fear that the term 'digital inclusion' risks becoming an unfortunate platitude that tends to ignore these more risky and negative aspects of our engagement with technology. Perhaps more importantly, adopting this term not only implies that broad and frequent use indicates digital inclusion, but risks facilitating ignorance of the structural and societal factors that set boundaries around which positive outcomes are derived from the use of technology.[7]

12. This is crucial, as there is now greater understanding that digital inequality is commonly a manifestation of (and tends to mirror and even compound) structural and 'offline' social and economic inequalities.[8] Digital inclusion is no silver bullet: demand-side challenges, including relevant institutional contexts and 'offline' inequalities, matter. RIA's research has shown, for example, that despite increasing levels of Internet access and so-called 'digital inclusion' in Africa, inequalities are increasing rather than diminishing on the continent. This is a significant and perplexing problem which we need to acknowledge and investigate more urgently.[9]

13. Focusing on digital equality or equity as aspirational goal of the outcomes of our engagement with digital technology enables us to move beyond the provision of access to technology and more on demand-side or human development challenges to people coming more optimally and equitably

[7] Helsper, E. (2021) *The Digital Disconnect: the social causes and consequences of digital inequalities*. London: SAGE Publishing.

[8] Blank, G., & Lutz, C. (2018) Benefits and harms from Internet use: A differentiated analysis of Great Britain. *New Media & Society*, vol. 20(2): 618–640; Robinson, L.; Cotten, S.; Ono, H.; Quan-Haase, A.; Mesch, G.; Chen, W.; Schulz, J.; Hale, T.M. & Stern, M. (2015) Digital inequalities and why they matter. *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 18(5): 569–582; Van Deursen, A. J. A. M & Helsper, E.J. (2015) A nuanced understanding of Internet use and non-use amongst older adults. *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 30(2): 171-187; Halford & Savage, 2010, *ibid;* Robinson, L. (2009) A taste for the necessary: A Bourdieuian approach to digital inequality. *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 12(4): 488–507; Graham, M. (2008) Warped Geographies of Development: The Internet and Theories of Economic Development. *Geography Compass*, vol. 2(3): 771-789.

[9] Gillwald, A. & Mothobi, O. (2019) *After Access 2018: A demand-side view of mobile Internet from 10 African countries*. Cape Town: Research ICT Africa. Available at: https://researchictafrica.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019_After-Access_Africa-Comparative-report.pdf.

online.[10] It allows us to prod the underlying logic of business models that now make it easier for risks to proliferate while exploiting human vulnerabilities, diminishing human agency, and discriminating against people who are already disadvantaged. It enables us to acknowledge that access to and the use of digital technologies present not only opportunities and choices, but also new risks which could mean the exacerbation of digital and other inequalities. And, more fundamentally, it then enables policymakers to take appropriate steps to respond to and mitigate such risks.

Recommendation 2: Refocus and simplify

14. Besides this conceptual argument, which is important in ensuring that we work towards ensuring opportunities for equal, meaningful and safe participation by all rather than merely providing access, I think the draft definition in its current form could benefit from being both refocused and simplified. This recommendation is made in consideration both of the intended audience and of ensuring the utility of the definition for working purposes.

15. Terms like "providing" (access), for example, risk being construed as top-down and even technocratic in its focus on infrastructure rather than the causes of exclusion. One possible suggestion is to focus on "jointly creating opportunities and better outcomes", as opposed to "providing access".

16. While I support the specific focus on 'those in vulnerable positions or traditionally marginalized and equity-seeking groups', the way these groups are currently referred to also risks assuming primarily negative rights rather than enabling a more empowering, positive approach in this context. It might be helpful for the definition to start with those who are disadvantaged and marginalised, along with the reasons for their disadvantage and exclusion, rather than the infrastructure, as is discussed next.

17. The definition could also be simplified, because policies for equity and inclusion should ideally be useful to their subjects. While the draft definition is commendably nuanced and detailed, it risks causing confusion about needs, priorities and goals. In the second part of the draft definition, for example, the links between social and digital inequality are highlighted, and five socio-political pillars are highlighted for addressing and dismantling structural social inequalities. Without going into detail about the specificities of the pillars, I have at least two concerns with this approach, and would suggest that the pillars be removed:

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[10] Helsper, 2021, *ibid*.

17.1 Digital inclusion itself is very unlikely to dismantle existing structural social inequalities, as the definition currently seems to imply. Digital inclusion is rarely a solution to general, social and economic inequality. Affordability, for example, is primarily a problem of poverty and economic inequality and less one of the costs of digital engagement. In the African context, for example, RIA has shown that even when prices of digital products and services are effectively regulated and cost-based, they still remain unaffordable to most Africans.[11]

17.2 I wonder whether the pillars are indeed necessary or appropriate for inclusion in the definition, at least partly because the pillars are not a definitive or exhaustive list. Besides these pillars, there are many other barriers to access, and their relative importance to enabling or hindering digital equality really depends on the context. In some high gross domestic product (GDP) contexts, for instance, availability of relevant infrastructure is less of a concern than, say, a lack of trust or fears of surveillance (something which is not cited as a pillar). But availability is more pressing in rural, remote and mountainous areas in least developed countries (LDCs), alongside other structural inequalities, of course.[12]

Conclusion

18. As noted, I strongly believe that finding better ways and methods for addressing digital inequalities is as important as addressing the problems themselves. This starts with using the right words and terminology in these policy debates. I therefore welcome and encourage the efforts of the co-champions and others to draft a common language for better understanding the nature and outcomes of our engagement with digital technologies. And I appreciate the opportunity to submit these recommendations, along with my earlier oral statement.

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[11] Gillwald & Mothobi, 2019, *ibid*.

[12] e.g., Razzano, G.; Gillwald, A.; Aguera, P.; Ahmed, S.; Calandro, E.; Matanga, C.; Rens, A. & Van der Spuy, A. (2020) *SADC Parliamentary Forum Discussion Paper: The Digital Economy and Society*. Available at: https://researchictafrica.net/publication/sadc-pf-discussion-paper-the-digital-economy-and-society/; Van der Spuy, A. & Souter, D. (2018) *Women's Digital Inclusion: Background Paper for the G20*. Geneva: APC & the Internet Society.

19. To summarise, I commend the draft definition for its nuanced, holistic nature, but I would respectfully argue that it might benefit from being both simplified and refocused. And, from a more conceptual point of view, I would also like to encourage the sub-group to take a broader, more aspirational and forward-looking view by somewhat refocusing or calibrating its focus on digital inclusion to a focus on digital equality.

20. Thinking in terms of the need for digital equality might be more challenging – and, indeed, demands more from us as policymakers, as activists, as researchers, but being more aspirational also gives us something positive to strive towards.

21. Accordingly, for the reasons I have advanced, I would urge this sub-group to recalibrate its approach to focus on digital equality rather than digital inclusion. By enabling a better understanding of the outcomes of our engagement with technology, I believe we can do more to enable more people to benefit more equally from the risky opportunities of digital technologies.

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