

PilibosMUN

United Nations
Economic and Social Council

Background Guide



Chairperson: Aram Nercessian (anercessian@pilibos.org)

Dias: Armen Sassouni (asassouni@pilibos.org), Amanda Hogtanian (ahogtanian@pilibos.org)

Committee Topic: Bridging the Global Digital Divide and Ensuring Equitable Access to Technology

I. Committee Background and Historical Context

The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was established in 1945 as one of the UN's principal organs, tasked with coordinating international economic, social, and related work among member states and specialized agencies. ECOSOC serves as a central platform for policy dialogue, consensus-building, and coordination on global development challenges. Through its oversight of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ECOSOC plays a critical role in advancing inclusive growth, reducing inequality, and promoting sustainable development across economic and social sectors.

As digital technologies have become increasingly central to global development, ECOSOC's mandate has expanded to address issues related to information and communication technologies (ICTs), digital inclusion, and equitable access to innovation. Since the early 2000s, international forums such as the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) have emphasized the importance of bridging the digital divide to ensure that technological progress benefits all populations. ECOSOC works closely with bodies such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), UNESCO, and the World Bank to promote policies that expand connectivity, digital literacy, and access to technology in developing and least developed countries.

The global digital divide has evolved alongside rapid technological advancement, exposing persistent inequalities between and within nations. While high-income countries have largely integrated digital infrastructure into education, healthcare, and economic systems, many low-income and rural regions remain excluded due to limited infrastructure, affordability barriers, and insufficient digital skills. These disparities were further highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when reliance on digital platforms became essential for daily life. As a result, ECOSOC now faces the challenge of coordinating international efforts that not only expand access to technology but also ensure that digital transformation supports equity, resilience, and sustainable development.

II. Introduction

In the 21st century, digital connectivity has become vital for economic development, social inclusion, and civic participation. Access to reliable internet and technological literacy now determines whether individuals can participate fully in education, healthcare, commerce, governance, etc. Yet the world remains deeply divided in its ability to benefit from these technologies. The global digital divide, otherwise known as the gap between those with meaningful access to digital technologies and those without, has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges facing the Economic and Social Council.

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 2.9 billion people (approximately 37% of the global population) remain offline. This divide is not limited to simple connectivity but extends to affordability, digital literacy, content relevance, and the availability of devices capable of more than basic consumption. As nations move toward increasingly digital economies, individuals and communities lacking these tools face new forms of oppression.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought this inequity into focus. As schools and workplaces rapidly shifted online, billions of people were excluded from remote learning or digital commerce. These gaps not only reinforce existing inequalities but risk widening them further unless addressed through coordinated, sustainable policy frameworks.

For ECOSOC, addressing the digital divide is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Access to Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender and Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, innovation, and infrastructure), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Viable strategies that can ensure universal access to digital technologies are necessary to empower everyone to participate in the global digital economy.

III. The Digital Divide

1. **Connectivity and Infrastructure** - While 91% of individuals in high-income countries are internet users, the figure significantly drops to 27% in low-income countries. Limited broadband infrastructure and unreliable electricity leave many rural and remote areas disconnected.
2. **Affordability** - Even where internet access exists, the high cost of data plans, devices, and maintenance prevents millions from meaningful participation. Affordability

challenges disproportionately affect low-income households, women, and oppressed communities.

3. **Digital Literacy** - Technical access means little without the skills to use digital tools safely and effectively. Gaps in education systems, lack of training programs, or limited exposure hinder individuals from participating in digital workforces or even navigating basic online services.
4. **Relevant and Localized Content** - Large portions of digital content remain unavailable in native languages or fail to address local needs. Without culturally and linguistically appropriate information, digital spaces fail to serve the communities that need them most.
5. **Devices and Hardware** - Smartphones alone cannot provide the full range of opportunities needed for economic advancement. Access to computers, tablets, and other tools for content creation or coding is critical for true inclusion.

IV. **Economic and Social Implications of the Digital Divide**

1. **Economic Development** - The World Bank reports that a 10% increase in broadband penetration can boost GDP growth by 1.4% in developing nations. With global markets increasingly digitized, countries lacking digital infrastructure risk falling further behind, reinforcing cycles of poverty.
2. **Education** - Remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic exposed extreme disparities. Students without stable connectivity or devices fell disproportionately behind, and these educational losses translate directly into long-term workforce challenges.
3. **Healthcare** - Telemedicine and digital diagnostics (along with various other health information systems) are now essential components of modern healthcare. Without digital access, vulnerable populations are unable to benefit from these services, making health inequalities even worse.
4. **Gender Inequality** - Women and girls face unique barriers, including limited device ownership and cultural restrictions. Closing the gender digital divide is essential for equitable development.
5. **Employment and Innovation** - Digital skills are now prerequisites for many jobs. Without access to training and technological tools, millions of people are excluded from the modern labor market, narrowing opportunities for economic mobility.

V. Existing International Efforts

- **International Telecommunication Union (ITU)** - Programs promoting affordable broadband, spectrum management, and infrastructure deployment.
- **World Bank and Regional Development Banks** - Investing in digital infrastructure expansion.
- **United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** - Initiatives on digital literacy, ICT in education, and multilingual content development.
- **UN Women** - Efforts to address digital gender disparities.
- **Public/Private Partnerships** - Such as Giga and Microsoft Airband, which explore creative infrastructure

VI. Key Challenges to Address

1. **Financing Universal Connectivity** - Connecting the global population requires billions in investments. Developing nations often lack financing mechanisms or rely heavily on external donors, which may limit long-term sustainability.
2. **Net Neutrality and Open Internet Principles** - Policies restricting free access to information can limit equitable digital participation.
3. **Data Privacy and Cybersecurity** - Increased connectivity exposes individuals to greater surveillance and data exploitation. Ensuring privacy protections while expanding access is vital.
4. **Building Digital Skills and Workforce Capacity** - Infrastructure alone cannot close the divide. Digital literacy programs and community learning centers are essential.
5. **Addressing Gender and Social Inequities** - Various policies expand access for women, low-income individuals, people with disabilities, and any other group disproportionately affected by digital exclusion.
6. **Strengthening Device Access** - Partnerships to reduce hardware costs and expand access to computers and Educational technologies are crucial.

VII. Existing Avenues of Action

1. **Universal Service and Access Funds (USFs)** - Many countries operate USFs funded through small taxes on telecommunication companies. These funds subsidize broadband deployment in lower-income rural regions, support community Wi-Fi centers, and expand access to educational technology.

2. **ITU's "Connect 2030 Agenda" / Broadband Commission Initiatives** - The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development work with governments and private companies to expand affordable broadband and set global connectivity targets. Current projects include the Global Connectivity Report and technical assistance for infrastructure planning.
3. **Community Networks and Local Infrastructure Models** - Grassroots, community-operated networks (Such as Mexico's indigenous community telecoms) offer sustainable, low-cost connectivity where commercial companies are not willing to invest.
4. **Affordable Device and Educational Technology Programs** - Existing initiatives include:
 - a. *One Laptop per Child (OLPC)* - Deployments in Latin America and Africa.
 - b. *World Bank device-subsidy loans* - Support national digital education reforms.
5. **International Data Protection and Digital Rights Frameworks** - Several regions have advanced regulatory models that other countries can adapt:
 - a. *EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)* - Sets global standards for privacy and data protection.
 - b. *African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection* - Provides region-wide norms.
6. **Multilingual and Culturally Relevant Content Development**
 - a. Local-language expansions by Khan Academy and Coursera
 - b. The African Storybook and Global Digital Library initiatives aim to enhance children's access to local-language e-books.

VIII. Conclusion

Ensuring equitable access to technology is of utmost importance for economic growth, social equality, and human rights. As technology continues to evolve, the risk of widening disparities increases; however, as innovation accelerates, so does the risk of disparities. Communities without reliable connectivity or digital literacy face deepening marginalization in economic and social spheres. The consequences extend beyond individual opportunity for unequal access affects national productivity, global competitiveness, and the ability of societies to respond to crises such as pandemics or natural disasters. Without efforts to close this digital

divide, technological progress risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than creating shared prosperity and sustainable development.

IX. Guiding Questions

1. What does equitable and meaningful access to technology look like, and which barriers (infrastructure, affordability, literacy, content, etc) should be prioritized?
2. How can governments and international organizations share responsibility for closing the digital divide while ensuring sustainability and accountability?
3. What policies can ensure expanded digital access while also protecting data privacy and cybersecurity?
4. How can digital inclusion strategies address social inequalities, particularly those affecting rural communities and marginalized populations?
5. What measurable actions can be used to accelerate progress toward the SDGs and build long-term digital resilience?

Bibliography

“About OLPC – OLPC.” *OLPC*, 2023, laptop.org/aboutolpc/.

“African Storybook.” *Www.africanstorybook.org*, www.africanstorybook.org/.

African Union. “African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection | African Union.” *Au.int*, 2014, au.int/en/treaties/african-union-convention-cyber-security-and-personal-data-protection.

“Bringing Digital Tools to Popular Sectors in Argentina for the Past 30 Years.” *Association for Progressive Communications*, 7 Dec. 2025, www.apc.org/en/blog/bringing-digital-tools-popular-sectors-argentina-past-30-years. Accessed 11 Dec. 2025.

“Broadband Statistics.” *OECD*, 2024, www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/broadband-statistics.html.

“Digital Security.” *OECD*, 2024, www.oecd.org/en/topics/digital-security.html.

European Commission. “Data Protection.” *Commission.europa.eu*, 2024, commission.europa.eu/law/law-topic/data-protection_en.

“Evidence to Impact: Advancing Gender Empowerment in the Digital Age.” *Equals*, Sept. 2025, www.equalsintech.org/post/evidence-to-impact-advancing-gender-empowerment-in-the-digital-age. Accessed 11 Dec. 2025.

“Geographic AI for Disaster Relief and Infrastructure - Giga.global.” *Giga.global*, Dec. 2025, giga.global/geographic-ai-for-disaster-relief-and-infrastructure/. Accessed 11 Dec. 2025.

GSMA. “Gender Gap - Mobile for Development.” *Mobile for Development*, 2024, www.gsma.com/r/gender-gap/.

“Internet & Technology - Research and Data from the Pew Research Center.” *Pew Research Center*, 2023, www.pewresearch.org/topic/internet-technology/.

“ITU Publications.” *ITU*, 21 Nov. 2021, www.itu.int/en/publications/Pages/default.aspx.

“Media and Information Literacy | UNESCO.” *Www.unesco.org*, 2024, www.unesco.org/en/media-information-literacy.

“Open Educational Resources | UNESCO.” *Www.unesco.org*, 2019, www.unesco.org/en/open-educational-resources.

“Our Digital World - Broadband Commission.” *Broadband Commission*, 2 Dec. 2025, www.broadbandcommission.org/publication/our-digital-world/. Accessed 11 Dec. 2025.

World Bank. “World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends.” *World Bank*, 2016, www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2016.

World Health Organization. “Digital Health.” *Www.who.int*, 2022, www.who.int/health-topics/digital-health#tab=tab_1.

“Global Strategy on Digital Health 2020-2025.” *World Health Organization*, 2021, www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240020924.