Roundtable on the Digital Inclusion Benchmark

Stanford University
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Summary document

The World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA) held a consultation roundtable last November 6, 2019 at the Stanford University Faculty Club, in collaboration with Stanford University's US-Asia Technology Management Center. The roundtable is part of a series of global multi-stakeholder consultations that input into the development of a corporate Digital Inclusion Benchmark which the World Benchmarking Alliance has committed to publish in 2020.

During the 2019 UN General Assembly's High Level Dialogue on Financing for Development, the WBA announced its intention to benchmark 100 of the most influential ICT companies worldwide starting 2020. The benchmark will track individual company contributions on four dimensions of digital inclusion: access, skills, use, and innovation. The full scoping report outlining the benchmark's framework can be accessed here.

The November 6 roundtable was attended by fourteen senior representatives from the technology industry, ten representatives from civil society organizations, three representatives from governmental organizations, three from academia, and a tech investor.

The roundtable opened with a keynote from Mr. Gerbert Kunst, Consul General in San Francisco for the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Mr. Kunst's keynote set the tone for a productive consultation, highlighting how digital inclusion is also an "overarching goal of the Netherland's Digital Agenda for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation" and that "benchmarks allow for common metrics of success … stimulates a race to the top for businesses."

The keynote was followed by a brief presentation about the WBA and the digital inclusion benchmark by Lourdes O. Montenegro, who leads work on the digital sector at WBA. The presentation was followed by two workshops designed to draw out diverse, multi-stakeholder perspectives on two key questions:

1   **How can each of the draft indicators be improved? What was helpful and challenging for each indicator?**

2   **How can we make the digital inclusion benchmark more useful to stakeholders, in particular, to companies seeking to improve their performance on digital inclusion?**

Key takeaways from the roundtable

Amongst discussions on a diverse range of topics and complexities around developing a system to score companies on digital inclusion the following takeaways emerged:

- **Systemic transformation a) requires coordination and cooperation, b) is in the interest of companies, and c) means cutting to the core of digital inclusion.**
- **To build a robust and relevant benchmark, WBA must d) focus on performance and e) establish clear best practices.**

a) Coordination and cooperation

One corporate participant noted that we are at an inflection point – unless the ICT community moves more quickly to exercise leadership on digital inclusion as well as sustainability, the industry will drag down the SDGs. However, with robust cooperation, as well as openness from corporates to change, the digital economy can be transformed to drive digital inclusion, reduce inequality, and be a game changer for inclusive sustainable growth.

b) Responsibility is in the interest of the bottom line

Companies that focus merely on short-term financial goals are not the ones that survive. As one corporate participant said, "If you have a value system, it helps you in the long run. Customers will stick with you if they know that the customers' values also align with the company". Additionally, participants discussed how

c) Cut to the core

The draft indicators are useful as they focus on companies' core activities – their product. Core products of ICT companies are the best levers for digital inclusion. One corporate participant emphasised that "disruption philosophy blinds companies against understanding how products will be used" and "it is critical to ensure digital products are oriented towards positive impact". Products include the three layers described in the Digital Inclusion Benchmark – hardware such as smartphones and laptops, network services such as broadband and mobile, as well as software/platforms. By focusing on product, corporates can ensure that SDG achievement does not 'feel tacked on' and is instead an integral component of the company's business.

"We (the ICT corporate community) are truly at an inflection point … ethical failures of corporations have led to series of global crises."

Silicon Valley corporate participant

d) Focus on performance

The benchmark must focus on performance to hold companies accountable for their actions as 'actions speak louder than words' on sustainable development. Although several proposed indicators already focused on performance, participants generally felt that they could be further strengthened. However, there remains a role for indicators on corporate commitments. As one corporate participant noted: "there are areas where (concrete) action is lacking and where a focus on commitment can also be a productive starting point for the Benchmark".

e) Establish clear best practices on digital inclusion

Unlike other areas of corporate social responsibility, digital inclusion is quite new. The indicators, and more broadly the digital inclusion benchmark itself, will serve as a guide for companies as they strive to use ICTs as a force for good. Participants emphasized that to establish best practices, the benchmark must clearly define terms and best practices.

Conclusions and call to action

The participants, including representatives from tech companies, have welcomed the Digital Inclusion Benchmark, highlighted the need for this kind of work, and provided constructive feedback on indicators.

The roundtable has also brought home the complexity of issues being dealt with and the importance of having the digital benchmark well-resourced and supported to ensure solid, credible research and sustained outreach to stakeholders.

In the end, there was a call to action for the participants to form a community of practice, to understand the Digital Inclusion Benchmark and use its results to improve corporate contribution to digital inclusion and SDGs. As one participant asked in closing "how do we leverage the accomplishments of this meeting, support the development of the Digital Inclusion Benchmark, and leverage the benchmark to allow companies to be leaders on digital inclusion?"

To know more about the next steps and how your organization can contribute, please drop us an email at: info.digital@worldbenchmarkingalliance.org

Participating organizations*

The Aspen Institute, Business for Social Responsibility, Cisco Systems, The Cloudera Foundation, Entirety LLC, The Netherlands consulate general in San Francisco, Orange SV, Kobe University – Graduate School of Business, Microsoft Corporation, Stanford Angels, Salesforce, Sustainability Standards Accounting Board, Stanford University, swissnex San Francisco, UN Foundation, University of California Berkeley Haas School of Business, Verizon Communications, Wikimedia Foundation, Women's Startup Lab.

About WBA

The private sector has a crucial role to play in advancing the SDGs, but to boost companies' motivation, there needs to be real change in the way that their impact is measured. WBA is benchmarking companies to compare performance on the global challenges the world faces. We are grounded in the aspiration that real progress can only be accomplished by working with others. WBA will act as an independent, transparent body with a broad group of more than 100 allies who will provide WBA with the necessary support to be a successful driver of change. The benchmarks free and publicly available to all will empower all stakeholders, from consumers and investors to employees and business leaders, with key data and insights to encourage sustainable business practices across all sectors.

*Includes all participating organizations who wished to be named.