World Benchmarking Alliance

Roundtable on the Digital Inclusion Benchmark

Mumbai – 7 March 2019

Summary document

Overview

The Mumbai roundtable on the 7th March 2019, facilitated the WBA's approach to multi-stakeholder dialogue as an integral part of the Digital Inclusion Benchmark's development process. It was attended by a mix of private sector, government and civil society organisations. Following an opening presentation by the benchmark lead, Lourdes O. Montenegro, the participants worked through a series of group discussions and breakout exercises on the following questions:

- **How can a company-level benchmark propel greater corporate contribution towards digital inclusion and SDGs?**

- **How can individual ICT companies at different layers of the ICT sector contribute to each of the four dimensions of digital inclusion?**

As with previous consultations in Mumbai, discussions were high-energy and full of character. The roundtable provided an invaluable opportunity to test and strengthen ideas laid out in the benchmark scoping report. The report included an outline of a conceptual framework for measuring company-level contribution to digital inclusion, a review of current approaches, comparison of related benchmarking initiatives, identification of gaps, and proposal for scope of industries and potential companies to cover.

The discussion during the Mumbai roundtable supported WBA's comprehensive framework for digital inclusion which considers four dimensions: material access, skills, use, and innovation. Further demonstrating the need for a company-level digital inclusion benchmark. Additionally, participants contributed greatly to mapping how different types of companies, such as device manufacturers, network operators, and platform giants contribute variously to these four dimensions of digital inclusion.

Amongst discussions on a diverse range of topics and complexities around digital inclusion, two key takeaways emerged that were particularly relevant to the development of the benchmark's methodology:

1. **The benchmark needs to capture actions that go beyond business as usual in order to clearly differentiate leaders from laggards.**

2. **The benchmark needs to include an indicator tracking how companies prioritise the development of affordable technology and services geared towards meeting the SDGs more directly.**

How can a company-level benchmark propel greater corporate contribution towards digital inclusion and SDGs?

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Digital inclusion versus digital exclusion

Participants spent time exploring the multifaced quality of inclusion, specifically in the context of India. Noting that whilst inclusion acts as the benchmark's guiding principle, time should be spent understanding how discriminatory corporate action also acts as a driver of exclusion – particularly of communities who experience marginalisation on a cultural, caste and geographic basis. For example, participants spoke of cases where government deployed AI services resulted in unfair denial of welfare payments. Participants agreed that ensuring technology empowers rather than disempowers individuals when it reaches them should be a key concern for companies in this space, and that further research into the tensions around inclusion and exclusion, and increased understanding on what 'digital poverty' looks like at country level, is needed to ensure that corporate action is guided correctly.

Rethinking CSR

The issue was raised that current regulation around mandatory 2% CSR spending in India restricts companies to use their core competencies and connectivity infrastructure for CSR purposes. One of the participants noted, however, that CSR is only a miniscule part of the entire business and therefore companies should not restrict their efforts to CSR-labelled projects but rather link

it to their core business. This link to core business could also ensure that corporate initiatives have continuity. It was subsequently noted that regulatory agencies do not always create enabling environments thus making it challenging for companies to increase access to services.

As one participant put it, "when we seek to connect the unconnected, we must make sure this connection is safe and fair." The phrase 'digitally-enabled social impact' was put forward as an alternative to digital inclusion, of which some felt was too passive. One participant felt this framing helped to align profit with impact, creating more emphasis on the shared end goal.

Shaping the benchmark

Practical – Participants agreed that the benchmark must demonstrate what a company can actively do to contribute to digital inclusion on an enabling and solutions-oriented level. In structuring corporate contribution in operational, strategical and collaborative 'buckets', one participant noted the benchmark can remove itself from the risk of becoming a "long and unproductive shopping list of demands on what companies can and should be doing."

Sustained – Adding to this, participants agreed that the iterative process of the benchmark, which reflects the need for benchmarks to learn, adapt and evolve over time, will help the benchmark to become an effective tool for long-term corporate engagement.

Enlightening – Refining what we understand as good and bad business behaviour was considered an important question to explore further, and one participant felt this to be crucial in establishing the enlightenment value of the benchmark. Not only defining the parameters of corporate responsibility for digital inclusion, but then disseminating this information across other stakeholder groups to create more commonality of knowledge. One participant noted that if the methodologies and benchmarks can create this common ground, companies may well be more proactive in their service and operation disclosures.

How can individual ICT companies at different layers of the ICT sector contribute to each of the four dimensions of digital inclusion?

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In groups, participants mapped corporate activities and contributions to digital inclusion across three layers: network elements, network providers, and content platforms and applications. The activity sought to draw out examples and analysis of granular-level activities which will help guide and focus the benchmark over time. This report will highlight the common denominators which formed across the three levels.

Material Access

Affordability – Participants highlighted that affordability underpins inclusive access to digital technology and connectivity. Affordability is especially important to sustain efforts to use digital technology to meet UN SDGs. ICT companies can support deployment of technology for social good by offering discounted pricing to community organisations and non-profits working with marginalised groups. Orienting R&D investments towards affordable versions of digital technologies is also a way for companies to contribute to affordable access. For example, while drone technologies could be potentially useful in agriculture, many smallholder farmers are unable to afford them unless innovation is geared towards more affordable models.

Infrastructure availability – Participants emphasised that companies, both current network providers as well as content and platform firms,

can contribute to improving infrastructure by investing in 'last-mile connectivity' especially in rural areas. Infrastructure sharing by network providers can also help ensure more benefits for communities. One participant gave the example of a mobile tower whose solar power also provided electricity for the village. Other participants pointed to the need to make more dark fibre available for use or adopt open 'peering' policies which allows for the direct exchange of Internet Protocol traffic between two networks, often at no cost.

Quality – As one participant put it, "quality really matters". Poor quality and speed negatively impact the extent to which people can benefit from digital services and technologies. Company level activities such as granular level monitoring and evaluation of services were considered important to ensuring quality and transparency around company performance. Participants agreed that telcos should publish data on the services they offer, and that this data should be aggregated, anonymous, and publicly available in order for access and quality of access to be fairly assessed. One participant suggested that part of measuring the quality of access includes determining the extent to which companies provide commercial services to beneficial end-users such as school and hospitals and whether they provide any lower-cost solutions in these areas.

Skills

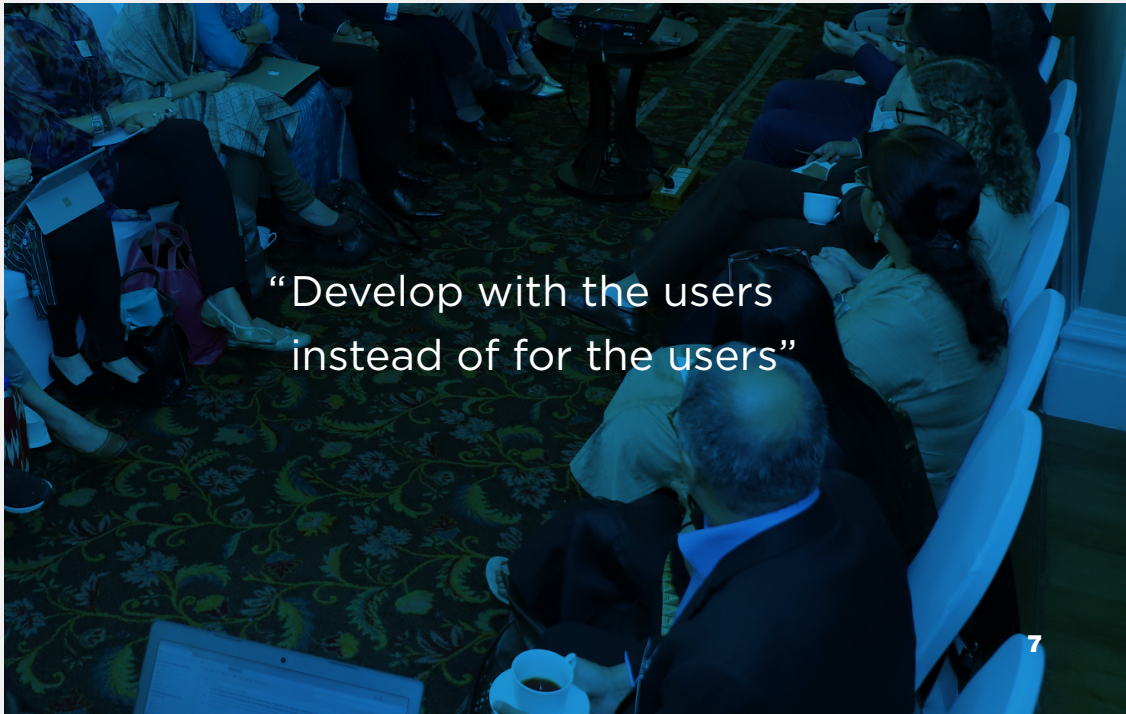
Education – building 'digital literacy', i.e. the capacity of users to understand and engage with technology, was considered crucial in developing reach, equality and sustainability of services. Built-in teaching solutions and door-to-door education were noted as proven to be successful in showing people how these technologies could work for them and how they can use them. Youth from rural villages could have

an important role in this regard and corporates could use their CSR funds to train youth; consequently, absorbing them in company activities and creating new employment opportunities through what's become known as 'barefoot engineering'. Other key target groups included, women, the elderly and primary school children.

Capacity building – as skills develop over time, participants saw the potential for users to further tailor and enhance services to align with their community's needs, broadening the reach of company activity in rural and remote areas. This can drive social innovation and empowerment. Combined with long-term assessment of activity and impact, evolution in skills will create the space for local network engineers to develop new initiatives and solutions. Some participants suggested volunteering could be an avenue through which companies can contribute to digital capacity building. In order to be successful, companies would need to educate their employees on digital inclusion at a community-by-community basis to ensure volunteering translates into actual outputs and is not just CSR window dressing for publicity and CSR reports. Community services for network engineers – similar to compulsory community services for doctors in South Africa – was raised as an interesting way in which ISPs and telco companies could 'give back' to rural communities.

Use

Involving users in the design – In order to guarantee the equal usability of products and services irrespective of gender, income, literacy, age and disability, participants felt that companies should include users in their design. In designing technologies and user interfaces, companies and their engineers have to make an effort to model how different users interact with technology. This can ensure lowering frictions between users and usability and enhance the relevance for users.



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Culture and language – Language is very important in the Indian context, and participants emphasised the value of integrating colloquialisms into design of services, content and applications. One participant noted that this will help to broaden the dissemination of services and tackle corporate biases towards cultural and economic status. Participants highlighted that greater attention to translation would enable broader user-interaction with services and tackle the ongoing problem of fragmentated messaging due to technical constraints. Participants noted the possibility for interactive voice response (IVR) to provide inclusive solutions to complexities around translations and for illiterate users, and localisation of SMS services – including banking, and public and government broadcasting – in local language to reduce user-exclusion. Applications which offer services for women, the physically disabled and youth, in and out of education, were considered by participants important interventions within the Indian context.

Transparency – Participants felt that more transparency is needed in terms of how a company's actions – services, policies and R&D – are positively or negatively impacting digital inclusion. Participants saw value in companies performing social audits in order to better measure, understand, recognise and improve their social performance. Whilst discussions concluded that there is much positive and transformative work being done within the ICT sector, knowledge of this remains minimal. One participant suggested that telcos could be more open on, for example, the number of cross-sector enterprise users and contracts within education, health and agriculture.

Digital rights – Participants agreed that whilst security and privacy can establish an enabling environment for digital rights and expression that encourage active and productive use of digital technologies, the issue isn't black and white. Companies can provide users with access to their own data, generating control and ownership of personal data. Individuals working in the informal sector were raised as important beneficiaries of enhanced data protection and security given the precarious and informal nature of their employment. Participants also encouraged more attention to grievance redressal to foster user-trust, and the implementation of biometric access technology – voice, facial, finger print – to enhance security. Some also expressed the need to balance respect for privacy and data protection with the need to foster local ICT start-ups and the use of data for social good. As one participant noted, "inclusion would not have happened if we didn't compromise on privacy." Another making the point that privacy might be counterproductive if we want to achieve universal digital inclusion. The sharing of anonymised and aggregated data for the social good was itself highlighted as an important contribution of ICT companies towards digital inclusion and UN SDGs.

Labour rights – One participant drew comparison between industrialisation and digitalisation, in the way both eras compelled a drastic shift in the nature of employment in India and beyond. As one participant reflected, we should not only consider digital inclusion from the consumption perspective, but use it to frame how we address challenges to labour rights within production. The sharing-economy and data-based platforms, for example, were considered to be contributing to increased precarity within employment as participants felt that innovation is often not mindful of labour protection and rights.

Innovations

Investment – Within India, participants noted that the majority of investments come from the government. Given the pace and complexities of the digital transformation in this context, some participants looked to 'venture' and 'patient' capital to help drive and support innovations that advance the SDGs, in the short- and long-term. Examples included redirecting capital to foster start-up entrepreneurship, nurture 'intrapreneuship' within companies, and support more cooperative, community business models. One participant stressed the importance of investment and innovation that purposefully make social impact the goal of digital technologies. Another suggested that directing capital to services built through 'design thinking' will enable more empathetic and value-oriented interventions: "you cannot act sensitively if you do not know, respect and listen to human values."

How can individual ICT companies at different layers of the ICT sector contribute to each of the four dimensions of digital inclusion?

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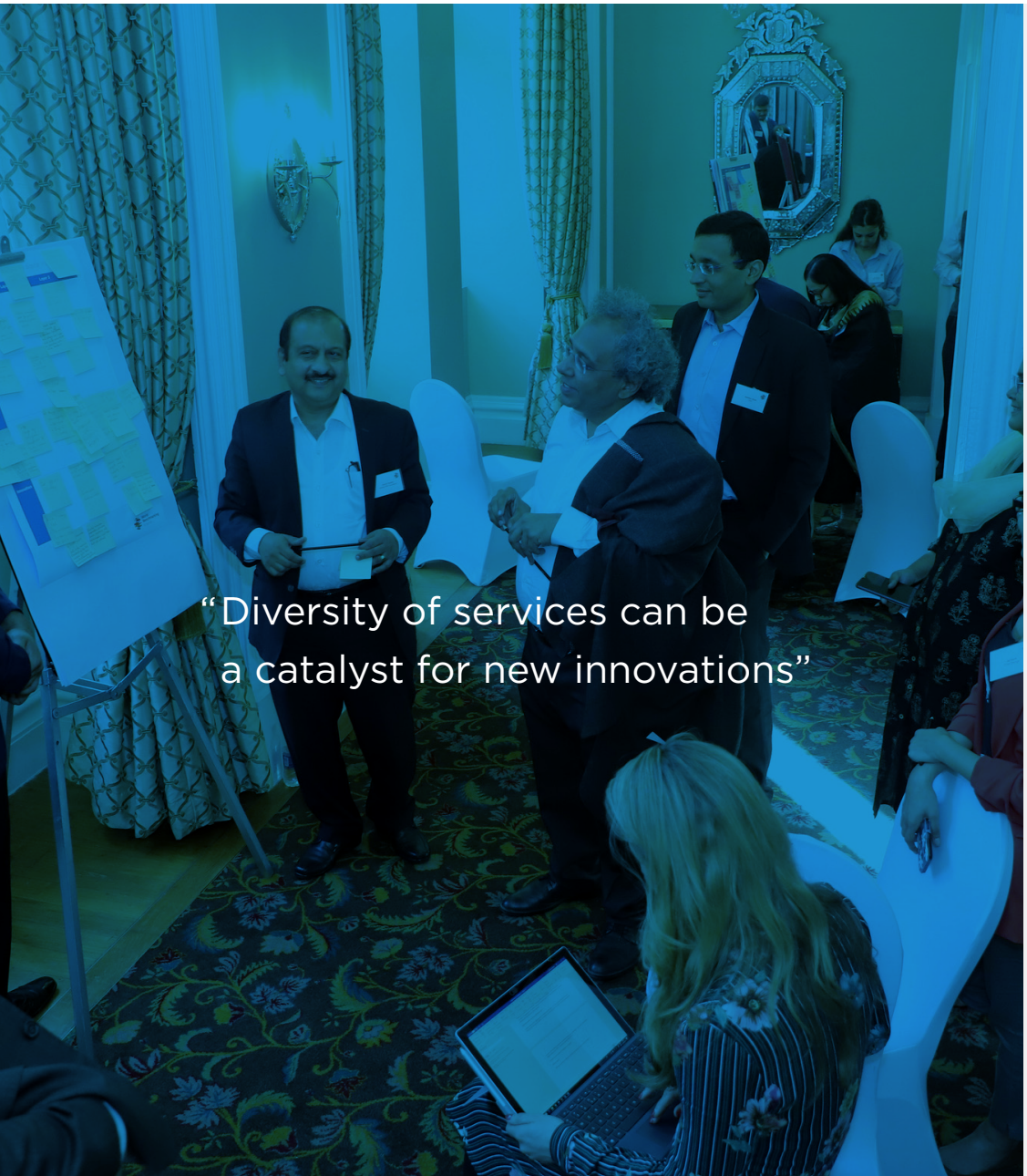
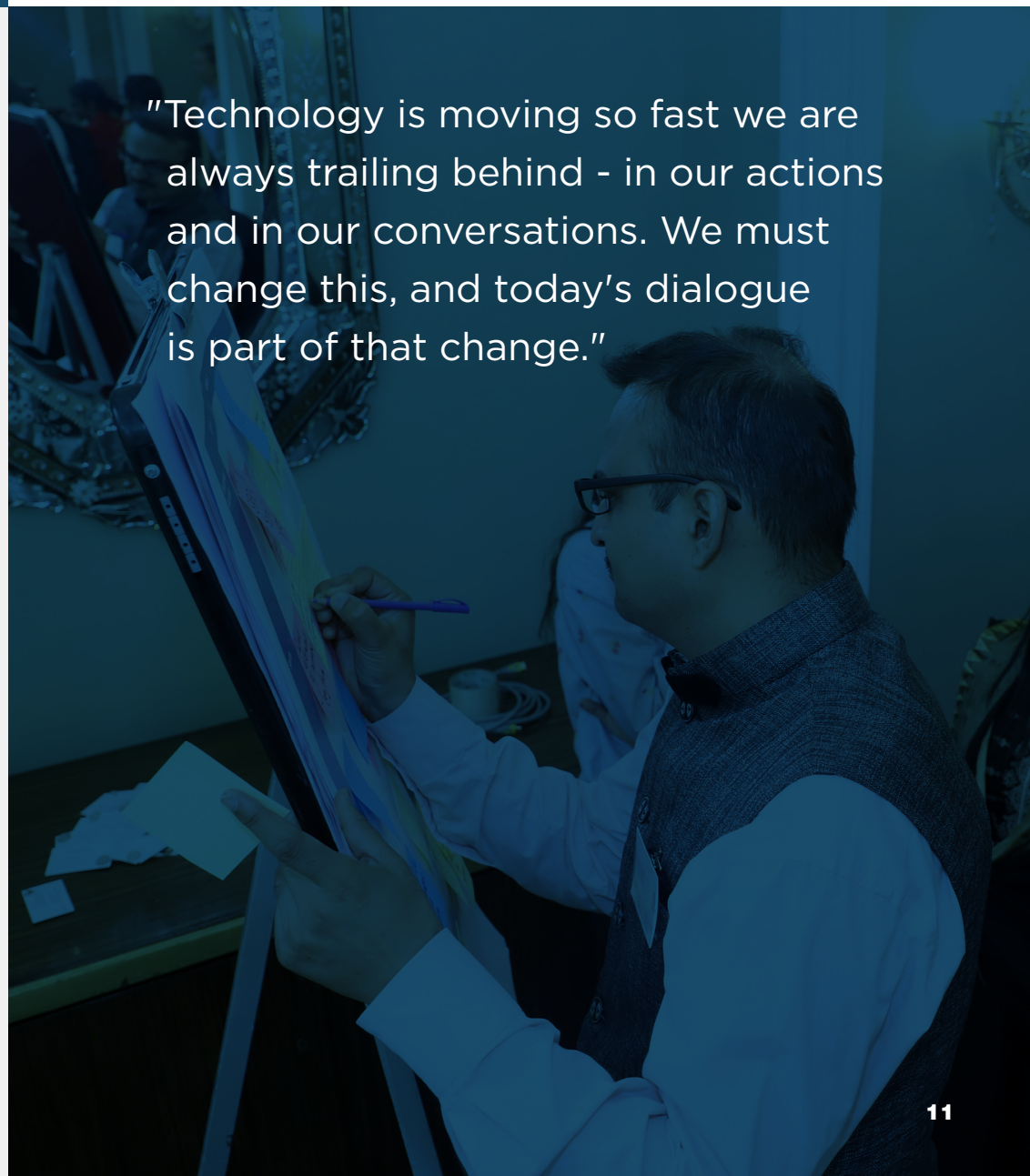


Reach – Innovations in company services, product offerings and R&D, which enable services to be designed for those on the margins of society, were considered key enablers of inclusive digital interventions. In the context of India, participants saw a huge potential in utilising the sheer diversity of potential user-base – geographically, gender, income group, age, formal and informal sector etc. Participant examples included, developing variety of content and user-interfaces, building products which specifically target and support excluded users, designing offline applications adaptive to environments where connectivity is poor and engineering products and services using open-standards. Another participant noted that the re-cycling and re-use of used or discarded devices can provide considerable and cost-effective inclusion.

Next steps

The insights gained from the Mumbai roundtable discussion will provide valuable guidance in the development process of the Digital Inclusion benchmark. Combined with the research included in scoping report, continual consultation with experts in the sector and outreach at international ICT-related events, we will now work towards creating the draft methodology report.

We continue to welcome any feedback on the benchmark – please contact Lourdes O. Montenegro at l.montenegro@worldbenchmarkingalliance.org



List of participants

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Bharat Inclusion Initiative

Caux Roundtable Japan

Cellular Operators Association of India

Digital Empowerment Foundation

Fintech Yatra

Geneva Association

Gram Marg: Rural Broadband Project

IDOBRO

Indus OS

Internet and Mobile Association of India

IT for Change

LirneAsia

Maharashtra Information Technology Corporation Ltd. (MahaIT)

Mahindra

Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology, Government of India

Mozilla Foundation

NASSCOM Foundation

Navana Tech

Observer Research Foundation

Pavan Duggal Associates

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Tandem Research

Tata Communications