

## Connectivity and Sustainable Development

While the impact of Internet connectivity and the extent to which it exists has been widely documented<sup>1</sup>, ARTICLE 19 believes that current strategies and traditional models to address the digital divide are not sufficient. Although governments have put forward strategies and action plans specifically to connect unconnected people and communities, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>2</sup>, these plans are often developed primarily in the context of improving social and economic development. In practice, this lens does not facilitate the kind of meaningful connectivity solutions that support the free and full expression of all rights, particularly the full breadth of civil and political participation.

Internet connectivity is necessary for the full exercise of freedom of expression and access to information online as a means to form thoughts and opinions and share them with others. It enables people to access information from public authorities, the media, and other relevant bodies. It directly impacts other human rights, including the right to freedom of association and, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the right to health<sup>3</sup>. The lack of connectivity puts populations at greater risk of economic exclusion and being disconnected from essential elements of life: working, accessing government services, healthcare, and education.

However, providing universal and meaningful connectivity - which includes “bridging the digital divide” - remains an outstanding problem. Approximately one third of the global population<sup>4</sup> remains unconnected today, and many who have Internet access do not have the quality and types of service to fully exercise their rights online. This is largely due to current models for expanding connectivity infrastructure, whereby incumbent telecommunication network operators prioritise access for those who can afford it and deploy infrastructure in areas that will generate the greatest profit<sup>5</sup>. As a result, poor, rural, and remote communities that would incur higher deployment costs and provide fewer returns on investment remain unconnected or poorly connected.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly recognises that the spread of information and communication technologies has the power to bridge the digital divide; as such, governments are increasingly addressing connectivity expansion as part of their efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainable development is a framework that recognises the interconnection of social and economic well-being and a healthy environment. However, framing connectivity solely as a facilitator for sustainable social and economic development is limiting. For example, government approaches to bridging the digital divide through this lens may prioritise infrastructure development

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/> and

<https://www.un.org/ohrls/news/connectivity-least-developed-countries-status-report-2021>

<sup>2</sup> <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/SG-Report-Socio-Economic-Impact-of-Covid19.pdf> and

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/digital-development/covid-19-were-tracking-digital-responses-worldwide-heres-what-we-see>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Coronavirus-briefing.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> <https://a4ai.org/news/new-mobile-broadband-pricing-data-reveals-stalling-progress-on-affordability/>

in urban and commercial areas or the establishment of community business centres<sup>6</sup>. These approaches ultimately privilege economic producers; by contrast, people and communities who choose not to participate in the mainstream economy - or are marginalised from doing so because of other structural inequalities - are often overlooked. At the same time, connectivity approaches that focus on achieving broad national or regional social and economic development targets may still belie the exclusion of people and communities that rely on connectivity to enable their civil and political participation in ways that may challenge the government or other incumbent power-holders<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, connectivity is only useful if it is meaningfully designed for the particular needs of people and communities. Needs for robust economic and social participation may not be the same as needs for robust civil and political participation. For example, certain forms of civil and political participation may require connectivity approaches that embed stronger personal digital security and underscore the importance of ensuring the right of individuals to choose which information and communication platforms they wish to access or use.

Re-centring connectivity as a human rights issue will result in more comprehensive responses to bridging the digital divide to improve civil and political participation, in addition to economic and social development. However, there is still the need for further elaboration on the relationship between connectivity and the international human rights framework. In its 2021 resolution on The promotion, protection, and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet<sup>8</sup>, the UN Human Rights Council called on States to promote affordable and reliable connectivity and expand access “wherever possible”. However, this language falls short of providing a comprehensive approach to rights-based connectivity beyond these parameters and ultimately leaves it to governments to decide how, where, and when Internet connectivity expansion will be carried out. As a result, we recognise that there will not be sufficient change to the status quo.

ARTICLE 19 calls governments and intergovernmental agencies to reinforce the relevance of universal and meaningful connectivity as a fundamental enabler of human rights and elaborate on this relevance for the protection, promotion, and enjoyment of civil and political rights, in addition to economic and social development.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.itu.int/dms\\_pub/itu-d/opb/pref/D-PREF-EF.BDR-2020-PDF-E.pdf](https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/pref/D-PREF-EF.BDR-2020-PDF-E.pdf) and [https://www.itu.int/dms\\_pub/itu-d/opb/pref/D-PREF-BB.REG\\_OUT01-2020-PDF-E.pdf](https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/pref/D-PREF-BB.REG_OUT01-2020-PDF-E.pdf) and <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/pr27-2020-facts-figures-urban-areas-higher-internet-access-than-rural.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Starlink satellites are providing Internet in the Amazon region, which, according to NGOs and experts was key to expand illegal mining activities in the region, increasing the violence against indigenous people and the destruction of the environment in the area. <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2023/02/20/internet-de-elon-musk-e-vendida-a-garimpeiros-da-terra-y-anomami-por-compradores-de-ouro-ilegal>

Case studies carried out by NGOs in Brazil, Colombia, Kenya and Malaysia showed how the spread of zero rated apps, especially Whatsapp in the Global South, as a strategy to offer cheap connectivity, ended up creating a dependency in the app that was exploited by political campaigners in sharing disinformation <https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/whatsapp/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/47/L.22](https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/47/L.22)

ARTICLE 19 also calls for governments to adopt a human rights-based approach to national, regional, and local connectivity expansion and improvement plans. Considering the roles of small, community, and non-profit operators in providing complementary connectivity for rural areas and minorities beyond the sole reliance on incumbent telecom infrastructure providers will sustainably address the digital divide.