

International Webinar on 'Building Inclusive Digital Infrastructure for Resilient and Sustainable Cities'

Date: 29th July

IST - 4:30 pm - 6:30 pm

CST – 1:00 pm – 3:00 pm

Since the early 2020s, the COVID-19 pandemic has usurped the usual way of life. With the restriction of movements, implementation of lockdowns, curfews, and closing of many facilities such as schools, malls, offices etc., the entire world, Indian cities included, has taken to the online way of life. The pandemic has led to a huge surge in the usage of digital technologies and digitisation. There has been a shift in governance and service delivery, where most of the services are made available digitally. From shopping for essentials to office work to school lessons, and access to urban services and health facilities, people have been using digital technologies. The Internet and its services for communication are being used for their daily rituals and recreation. Services like zoom have seen 10 fold increase in their usage. In India, applications like instamart, google pay zepto etc. exploded in popularity. As such, Bangalore city is recorded to have a 100% internet traffic increase¹.

In juxtaposition to this surge in IT, the pandemic has created an alarming digital divide like never before where those without internet access are excluded from all forms of development. As can be seen with the case of those that had the privilege to 'work from home' and those that had to 'walk back home'. The COVID-19-induced national lockdown in 2020 catalysed the 'reverse migration phenomenon' and millions of informal settler families and workers were forced to walk miles back to their homes in the rural hinterland. This was due to their inability to observe COVID-19 protocols in their small dwellings and dense settlements, and low sustenance capacity without income flows. The digital divide is magnifying the existing social inequities. With about 600 million, India ranks second in terms of the number of internet users. However, half of its population lacks access to the internet and only a small 20 per cent has knowledge of digital services. According to a study by Oxfam, around 80% of Indian students did not have access to online schooling². The issue of access to digital infrastructure is compounded for persons with disabilities. Many of the upcoming applications, platforms and websites have not been optimised for the use of persons with disabilities³. Evidences show that persons with disabilities have been

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7280123/>

² <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/covid-19-pandemic-risks-a-lost-generation-in-india-as-digital-divide-widens-11608163456184.html>

³ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10209-021-00803-5>

at the margin of this digital boom. Ranging from performing a basic task like ordering groceries online to getting online doctor appointments, accessibility remains a challenge.

With the growing trend in IT usage across the globe, it is only imperative to bridge this divide to mitigate the increasing problem of unemployment and poor economic growth. Studies have estimated that countries with robust digital infrastructure can cushion half the pandemic's negative economic impacts. Countries whose digital infrastructure is weak were the worst hit by the pandemic⁴. While the pandemic has highlighted the disparities and inadequacies in ICTs, it has also provided important lessons for cities to build back better. It is pertinent to rethink design systems that are inclusive and cater to the needs of all sections of the marginalized population. With the delivery of vaccinations currently occurring in full swing, cities are at the doorstep of recovery- they now have the opportunity to work towards adopting a robust, efficient and effective ICT system. The connectivity and opportunity provided by digital technology could benefit marginalized and vulnerable communities the most.

In this perspective, the Inclusive City Centre (ICC) of the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) aims to organize an International Webinar on 'Building Inclusive Digital Infrastructure for Resilient and Sustainable Cities.' The webinar aims to bring national/international experts and thought leaders to present best practices on leveraging digital technologies for the benefit of marginalised and vulnerable communities, especially the urban poor, informal workers, and persons with disabilities. Acknowledging the urban plurality in India and ensuring that no one is left behind, panellists will be invited to deliberate on three key topics:

1. Bridging digital divide for integration of informal sector in the city value chain
 - a. Has the internet-based economy impacted the informal economy in India? If so, in what ways and how deeply?
2. How do we use ODPs to help integrate informal settlements in city development?
3. What are the ways to address inclusion of persons with disabilities through accessible IT and assistive technologies?

⁴<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/12/02/urgency-of-bridging-digital-divide-in-central-asia-increases-as-a-result-of-the-covid-19-pandemic>

Objectives

The international webinar aims to:

- Identify the existing vulnerabilities of marginalized communities regarding digital infrastructure.
- Bridge the digital divide by mainstreaming the needs of the marginalized communities.
- Leverage existing digital technologies for the inclusion of the informal sector workers and settlements
- Identify best case studies and scenarios that can be implemented in cities through participatory methods and contextualisation
- Building the capacities to adopt an inclusive approach to creating a robust and accessible digital infrastructure
- Facilitating cities to invest in digital infrastructure so that everyone including the most marginalised can access digital services with ease

Expected Outcomes

- Creating a robust city digital infrastructure that is driven by the needs of the people. Especially the urban poor, the informal workers/families, and persons with disabilities
- Aligning the city's digital governance with the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Increase the knowledge and capacities of cities on inclusive digital governance
- Understanding the key issues and challenges that people from the lower strata of the society, with disabilities and informal sector