

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2024 SPECIAL EDITION

**WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity
and justice for our digital future**



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC),
IT FOR CHANGE, WACC GLOBAL
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

Global Information Society Watch 2024 SPECIAL EDITION

WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity and justice for our digital future

Operational team

Valeria Betancourt (APC)
Alan Finlay (APC)
Maja Romano (APC)

Project coordination team

Valeria Betancourt (APC)
Cathy Chen (APC)
Flavia Fascendini (APC)
Alan Finlay (APC)
Leila Nachawati (APC)
Lori Nordstrom (APC)
Maja Romano (APC)

Project coordinator

Maja Romano (APC)

Editor

Alan Finlay (APC)

Assistant editor and proofreading

Lori Nordstrom (APC)

Publication production support

Cathy Chen (APC)

Graphic design

Monocromo

Cover illustration

Matías Bervejillo



We would like to extend a special note of thanks to authors who have made ad honorem contributions to this edition of GISWatch.

We gratefully acknowledge the following: Ana Neves (Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia – Unidade FCCN)

APC would like to thank the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), IT for Change and WACC Global for their support for this Global Information Society Watch 2024 special edition.

Published by APC

2024

Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Some rights reserved.

Global Information Society Watch 2024 Special Edition web and e-book

ISBN: 978-92-95113-67-1

APC-202404-APC-R-EN-DIGITAL-357

Disclaimer: The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of Sida, IT for Change, WACC Global, APC or its members.

What does “meaningful connectivity” actually mean? A community-oriented perspective

Kathleen Diga (APC),¹ Nils Brock and Bruna Zanolli (Rhizomatica)

APC and Rhizomatica

<https://www.apc.org/en/node/35376/>

This report reflects on some of the current definitions of “meaningful connectivity” or “meaningful access”. It draws on the work of the Local Networks (LocNet) project, an initiative by APC and Rhizomatica, which has been advocating for and supporting community-centred connectivity initiatives since 2017. Its purpose is to draw attention to the different meanings of “meaningful” connectivity and access so that when these terms are used by stakeholders in discussions at forums such as WSIS+20, participants are aware that there may be an overlap in understandings, but there also may not be shared meanings about what the terms signify. Understanding the differences is important for any collective discussion to be grounded and transparent.

An overview of some definitions of meaningful connectivity and access

There is a great deal of focus from different actors on how to address the so-called digital divide, and the concepts of “meaningful connectivity” and “meaningful access” have been in use for some time as a way to qualify how digital inclusion for marginalised communities might be made relevant to these communities. Many global or macro-level institutions are moving away from a perspective that the work of “connectivity” is complete once this connectivity, mainly through mobile coverage, has been supplied. They also realise that when broadband supply reaches communities, there remain other factors holding people back from using the connectivity, resulting in what is called the “usage

gap”.² This measures the “gap between the total potential for the market and actual current usage by all consumers in the market”,³ and includes unused spectrum and telecommunication infrastructure. The same global or macro institutions are also articulating the idea that there are many issues that prevent people from getting online as “beyond connectivity”.

Some of the latest definitions of meaningful connectivity and access come from global institutions such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the Global Digital Inclusion Partnership (GDIP, formerly the Alliance for Affordable Internet), and the Internet Governance Forum Policy Network on Meaningful Access (PNMA). Their definitions of meaningful connectivity and access are listed in Table 1.

Overall, these definitions appear to fall short in trying to understand the meaning of the internet or connectivity from the perspectives of people themselves, especially those located in the global South. In particular, they fail to consider aspects of community participation and the potential for digital production by communities themselves. Rather, the metrics used to measure meaningful connectivity and access are largely quantitative and top-down, offering a narrative of access shaped by assumptions. The result is that people are merely seen as passive consumers in the consumption value chain.

In the aspects that try to incorporate the human experience, there are some individual or household-level measures around competencies or digital skills and how often the internet is used. For example, the ITU includes “digital skills” in its five axes defining “meaningful connectivity”.⁴ However, it chooses

¹ We would like to acknowledge the substantive inputs from our Local Networks (LocNet) community and team members, specifically from the collective inputs of the 2023 in-person LocNet team meeting, interviews with LocNet regional coordinators Sarbani Belur, Catherine Kyalo, Josephine Miliza, Talant Sultanov and Lilian Chamorro, and comments on various drafts from Carlos Rey-Moreno and Peter Bloom.

² GSMA. (2022, 21 September). Addressing the Mobile ‘Usage Gap’ is Key to Achieving Sustainable Development Goals. <https://www.gsma.com/newsroom/press-release/addressing-the-mobile-usage-gap-is-key-to-achieving-sustainable-development-goals>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gap_analysis#:~:text=The%20usage%20gap%20is%20the,Existing%20usage

⁴ Prado, D. (2023, 30 June). Seeding change: How Indigenous villages in Brazil built Nhandeflix, their own streaming platform. APC. <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/seeding-change-how-indigenous-villages-brazil-built-nhandeflix-their-own-streaming-platform>

TABLE 1.

“Meaningful access” or “meaningful connectivity” definitions and indicators

Organisation	Definition	Indicators
ITU	Meaningful connectivity “is a level of connectivity that allows users to have a safe, satisfying, enriching and productive online experience at an affordable cost.” ⁵	Five connectivity axes: Infrastructure (availability and quality of mobile and fixed networks), affordability (affordability of connection and device), device (access to mobile and fixed devices), skills (digital skills), and security and safety (connection security and navigation safety).
GDIP	Meaningful access/meaningful connectivity “is a tool to raise the bar for internet access and set more ambitious policy goals for digital development.” ⁶	Four meaningful connectivity indicators: 4G-like speed, an appropriate device, unlimited broadband connection, and daily use. ⁷
PNMA	Meaningful access “is the potential of the internet as a way to create, communicate and produce contents and services locally and in local languages.” ⁸	Three areas of focus: Connectivity (infrastructure and business models), digital inclusion through a citizen approach (accessibility and multilingualism: local services and content in local languages based on local needs and resources), and capacity development (technical skills training).

not to include an account of things like value-added services or the use of applications, as well as benefits of connectivity, in its definition. Questions such as “what is connectivity used for?” and “what impacts does connectivity have?” are considered outside of its scope of work. The problem is that it is in these areas that you discover the meaningfulness of connectivity for communities, including in areas it defines as falling outside of the scope of its definition, such as accessing information, “communication, civic participation and collaboration”, “e-commerce, trade, and transactions”, learning, work and entertainment.

Similarly, the GDIP concentrates mainly on technological aspects “as a way for differentiating levels of internet access.”

The PNMA has some interesting areas of focus beyond connectivity, specifically looking at digital inclusion through a citizen approach and capacity development. However, it does not provide much detail on its conceptualisation of these focus areas, nor technical guidance.

Exploring meaningful connectivity from a community-centred perspective

Our approach to meaningful community-centred connectivity can be defined by the need to strengthen local interests, social ties and relevant activities of respective communities. In other words: connectivity is not created as an external “add-on”, but rather part of ongoing dialogues that are already happening (or “already put in common”, which we consider an interesting definition of communication) in a community. These locally expressed activities, based on specific needs, are preconditions to create ownership and trust and thereby also ensure support for new local services, technologies and communication formats.

5 Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology & International Telecommunication Union. (2022). *Achieving universal and meaningful digital connectivity: Setting a baseline and targets for 2030*. https://www.itu.int/itu-d/meetings/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2022/04/UniversalMeaningfulDigitalConnectivityTargets2030_BackgroundPaper.pdf

6 Jorge, S., & Woodhouse, T. (2022, 21 December). What is meaningful internet access? Conceptualising a holistic ICT4D policy framework. Global Digital Inclusion Partnership. <https://globaldigitalinclusion.org/2022/12/21/what-is-meaningful-internet-access-conceptualising-a-holistic-ict4d-policy-framework> and <https://a4ai.org/meaningful-connectivity>

7 Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology & International Telecommunication Union. (2022). Op. cit.

8 IGF Policy Network on Meaningful Access. (2023). *IGF 2023 Policy Network on Meaningful Access Work Plan*. https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/256/26111

In the absence of looking at the local value or meaning of this connectivity, access can intersect with power and control in a way that does not benefit the community. Aside from the potential introduction of a mono-culture through the global internet, there are some communities we have worked with, especially Indigenous communities from Latin America, that are very aware of the harms that internet connectivity can bring. This includes cultural and social alienation, exposure to harmful content, financial scams, the manipulation of opinion, psychological stressors such as relationship problems, and facilitating environmental crimes, among others. Because of this, there are situations where communities do not feel ready to connect to the internet. In some cases, they want to have a more controlled experience of connectivity. For example, Cabécar women who worked with the organisation Sulá Batsú in Costa Rica have stated that they do not feel safe or confident to have internet connectivity in their territory. In the end, they chose to use walkie-talkies as a communication technology for their initial community network initiative. In a Guarani project supported by Intervozes in Brazil, the Indigenous communities have opted to reduce the exposure of youth to harmful content by blocking IPs and limiting the time of certain online activities such as gaming. This decision was made by local leaders in discussions with the community. In turn, the limitations have fostered some local content production and a local video streaming platform called Nhandeflix⁹ as a way to counterbalance the negative impacts of the internet and stimulate Indigenous media. At the extreme end, the lack of good content alternatives that mitigate the potential harms of the internet may entice some communities to rather remain unconnected.¹⁰

When unpacking the term “meaningful” within a community-centred perspective, it is important to look at several elements, such as cultural practice and political relevance, community processes, gender empowerment, agency and livelihoods. Also, when saying the word “meaningful”, there should be space for grassroots organisations and local, rural and Indigenous communities to determine what “value” is to them in order to shape what meaningful community-centred connectivity signifies. It is through the collective contribution of

communities and their agency that an appropriate local or community communication activity or digital pathway is designed for their future. If applied in a strategic and reflective manner, the fostered connections can serve as tools to further enhance cultural sovereignty, local economies and the sustainability of the planet.

Cultural practice and political relevance:

“Meaningful” community-centred connectivity activities derive from everyday practices and needs that already exist in a community. For example, connectivity might facilitate access to government services, digitally document or archive local traditions like dance or artisanal products for e-commerce or collective sharing, or locally develop content as educational resources, amongst numerous other everyday needs. Many traditional communities have difficulties in demarcating their territories and face constant incursions into their lands like through illegal mining and logging, and the dumping of pollutants, on top of human rights violations. Connectivity can and should serve as a monitoring and reporting tool for these violations, using, for example, environmental sensors, local services and offline-first and decentralised services to collect data that can serve as evidence in such political processes. In other words, “meaningful” comes from activities done on a regular basis which address people’s existing demands for specific community services, and cultural, human and environmental rights-based needs on the ground.

Engaging community processes: Community-centred connectivity networks work best when communities are proactive in their interest to change their current connectivity situation. It is then that the transformative potential of collective efforts can be seen. The bottom-up and “local action” approach will make a difference in terms of local ownership. Community-centred connectivity can create this drive for local and participatory action, bringing people closer together. Intrinsically, this could promote self-determination not only in the field of connectivity, but by pushing communities to mobilise in other areas that have been structurally absent in the community.

Increasing gender equity and reducing prejudice: Although addressing gender and other power imbalances and prejudices may not be the main priority for community-centred connectivity projects, we see that when women and gender-diverse people have active roles in the community’s projects and have a strong sense of gender justice, connectivity acts as a way to address gender imbalances and gender-based violence in those

9 Prudencio, K., & Bloom, P. (2021, 9 June). Mantenlo análogo: parámetros para una exclusión voluntaria de la conectividad. *Rhizomatica*. <https://www.rhizomatica.org/mantenlo-analogo-parametros-para-una-exclusion-voluntaria-de-la-conectividad>

10 Ibid.

communities. There are many examples of how the process of building community-centred connectivity can increase gender awareness and improve the lives of women and gender-diverse people. For instance, fostering the participation of women in technical and management capacity-building processes usually increases their sense of self-value and capability. Women and gender-diverse people also tend to see and understand both the community's needs and individuals' struggles better.

Agency: One perspective that can help us to think of “meaningfulness” beyond “connectivity” measurements is offered in a 2022 piece by Richard Heeks¹¹ who asks us “how” people are connecting. Is their access to the internet going to lead to greater inequality or what he calls “adverse digital incorporation”? This refers to “inclusion in a digital system that enables a more-advantaged group to extract disproportionate value from the work or resources of another, less-advantaged group.” In practice, this might entail, for example, communities getting connected but being subjected to things like data harvesting and treated as consumers, which only benefits big, already powerful corporations. His paper suggests that increasing the agency of underserved groups is part of the meaningful change we should be seeking when it comes to connectivity.

Local economic development/livelihoods:

This is an understanding that communities and individuals are collectively instrumental through their actions to determine not only their digital pathways but also in developing alternatives of meaning through local economic development. This is similar to the idea of “localisation”. Localisation is about production that is for one's own community and can enhance local bonds of interdependence, whether they be economic, social or environmental. Localisation aims for biodiversity, community well-being and resilience.

Conclusion

Global definitions on connectivity fall short in expressing community-centred perspectives because they are guided by top-down mechanisms. Rather, grassroots communities have a strong understanding of what is meaningful or of high value to them.

Our articulation of “meaningful” refers to an approach that remains community-oriented. The

future of local communication reaching those who remain disconnected or poorly connected will not merely be reached by just concentrating on the technical: devices, better broadband quality, affordability, and treating people merely as consumers. What becomes apparent when comparing the top-down paradigm of connectivity and access to the bottom-up approach, concludes Josephine Miliza, a LocNet co-ordinator, is “a missing link between the internet as such and all the grassroots activities: high levels of illiteracy, language, relevance and affordable devices. Those gaps of language, content, information and devices should be addressed.” Although the technical axes are very important, it seems to us that there is a great lack of cultural and historical recognition in the technical, supply-side approach, since for connections to be really meaningful for a population, it is essential to recognise value in the community production of knowledge, community understandings of the world, and the ways of life that inhabit unconnected territories.

Action steps

Based on the above observations, it is important for civil society to:

- Contest ideas of meaningful connectivity and access that do not centre communities and their needs in this definition. Technology comes second, and the right not to be connected needs to be respected.
- Encourage inclusive community face-to-face dialogues and assessments around community values and needs in order to determine “meaning” that may catalyse connectivity efforts.
- Support efforts where grassroots communities are trying to shape and co-design their connectivity, local service and/or technology proposals. Dialogue and facilitation should empower voices that are usually unheard, especially the voices of women and Indigenous, Black and traditional community members from the global South, and encourage active participation by the community around technology choices, use and adoption.
- Develop safe and open spaces of exchange which allow peers to learn from each other and share their expertise or experiences.
- From these understandings, help to build community-centred connectivity solutions that have embedded meaning for communities.

¹¹ Heeks, R. (2022). Digital inequality beyond the digital divide: conceptualizing adverse digital incorporation in the global South. *Information Technology for Development*. <https://www.ictworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Adverse-Digital-Incorporation.pdf>

WSIS+20: REIMAGINING HORIZONS OF DIGNITY, EQUITY AND JUSTICE FOR OUR DIGITAL FUTURE

Twenty years ago, stakeholders gathered in Geneva at the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and affirmed a “common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society.”

This special edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) considers the importance of WSIS as an inclusive policy and governance mechanism, and what, from a civil society perspective, needs to change for it to meet the challenges of today and to meaningfully shape our digital future.

Expert reports consider issues such as the importance of the historical legacy of WSIS, the failing multistakeholder system and how it can be revived, financing mechanisms for local access, the digital inequality paradox, why a digital justice framing matters in the context of mass digitalisation, and feminist priorities in internet governance. While this edition of GISWatch asks: “How can civil society – as well as governments – best respond to the changed context in order to crystallise the WSIS vision?” it carries lessons for other digital governance processes such as the Global Digital Compact and NETmundial+10.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2024 Report
www.GISWatch.org

