USAID DIGITAL STRATEGY

USAID'S FIRST-EVER [DIGITAL STRATEGY](#) CHARTS AN AGENCY-WIDE VISION for development and humanitarian assistance in the world's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION has given way to the promise of a digital world that spurs economic growth, improves health outcomes, and lifts millions out of poverty using new technologies and services. While digital tools present immense potential to advance freedom and transparency, generate shared prosperity, strengthen inclusion, and inspire innovation, it also presents significant risks to privacy and security through competing models of Internet freedom.

STRATEGY GOAL

To achieve and sustain open, secure, and inclusive digital ecosystems that contribute to broad-based, measurable development and humanitarian-assistance outcomes and increase self-reliance in emerging market countries.

DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM: *stakeholders, systems, and enabling environments that together empower people and communities to use digital technology to gain access to services, engage with each other, or pursue economic opportunities.*

The *Digital Strategy* includes two core, mutually reinforcing objectives:

— RESPONSIBLY USE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY —

OBJECTIVE 1

Improve measurable development and humanitarian-assistance outcomes through the responsible use of digital technology in USAID's programming

USAID   **Partners**

— STRENGTHEN DIGITAL ECOSYSTEMS —

OBJECTIVE 2

Strengthen openness, inclusiveness, and security of country digital ecosystems.

Civil Society   **Partner Governments**   **Private Sector**

To achieve the overall goal of the *Strategy*, these objectives will be executed through four tracks:

TRACK 1: ADOPT AN ECOSYSTEM APPROACH ▶ **Develop tools and resources** necessary to deliver development and humanitarian assistance effectively in a digital age

TRACK 2: HELP PARTNERS NAVIGATE RISK AND REWARDS ▶ **Build capacity of our partners** to navigate the unique opportunities and risks that digital technology presents across USAID's Program Cycle

TRACK 3: SHIFT TO "DIGITAL BY DEFAULT" ▶ **Support implementing partners** in adoption of digital operations

TRACK 4: BUILD THE USAID OF TOMORROW ▶ **Invest in our human capital** to guide the Agency through the digital age

CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

USAID's first-ever [Digital Strategy](#) outlines a path to strengthen open, inclusive, and secure digital ecosystems in all partner countries, and calls on the Agency to "augment our commitment to close the gender digital divide and address the disproportionate harm women and girls face online."

CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 AND DEVELOPMENT

The gap between women and men's access to and use of the Internet and mobile phones is significant. As COVID-19 increases countries' reliance on digital services, men will benefit disproportionately to women since they will have greater access to life-saving information. Women and girls not having access to resilience-building information will be left behind, exacerbating existing gender inequalities. While there is pressure to act quickly, gender must be considered across all response and recovery efforts. The decisions made now will have long-term effects on the stabilization and resilience of communities, especially women and girls.

WHAT IS THE CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE INITIATIVE?

The Digital Strategy commits USAID to helping build inclusive digital economies, and specifically calls out the need to ensure that women and girls are fully included in the digital ecosystem. Women are, on average, 14 percent less likely to own mobile phones than their male counterparts, and 43 percent less likely to engage online.[1] Empowering women economically and socially is a core tenet of development policy, but persistent—and growing— gaps in women's access to, and use of, digital technology significantly hamper their ability to improve their lives, the stability of their families, and the resilience of their communities. No country will be self-reliant if citizens cannot benefit equally from the gains of a global digital ecosystem.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE IN COVID-19 RESPONSE PROGRAMMING

Questions to ask when designing a digital intervention for COVID-19 response:

- **Will your digital intervention reach vulnerable populations and is it responding to their needs?** Do women and girls have access and full ability to use the digital solution? Will social norms prevent them from using this digital solution – if so, how will programming address and overcome barriers? It is critical to understand the size and shape of the gender digital divide in your specific context (e.g., is it more about access, ownership, employment in ICT fields, financial tools, etc.), noting that it can vary within a country.

- **How can you better use digital tools to ensure that inequalities are not exacerbated in this crisis?** How do you ensure women and girls can access life-saving digital tools and services while mitigating potential harms, like online gender-based violence?

- **How can you ensure all gender identities are being included across the data lifecycle: collection, analysis, sharing?** Are you collecting sex-disaggregated data AND data on intersectionality and social factors, such as age and sexual orientation?

1. AfterAccess, 2018.

Questions to ask partners (continued):

- **How can you work directly with community leaders to create compelling cases for women's technology use – under what conditions would women be allowed to use the Internet?** How can this allowance be expanded over time? Are there technologies or policies that can uniquely support these "use cases"?

- **Could the private sector provide expertise in gender dynamics around technology use and COVID-19 response?** Do they have relevant data on women's access and use of digital technology to better inform COVID-19 response programming?

Similarly, there are risks and opportunities that can arise during a response to a global pandemic and need to be considered. Examples of risks and opportunities related to the Closing the Gender Digital Divide Initiative can include:

RISKS

Exacerbating the gender digital divide. Because the pandemic is increasing society's dependence upon information technology to curb COVID-19 and to keep economies running, the pandemic will substantially increase the cost of digital exclusion for the one billion women currently not using the internet and their families. If men have wider access than women to digital solutions that preserve livelihoods and health, a failure to address the gender digital divide will increase gender inequality.

Increased online and physical harm. Digital technology can provide information, outreach, and support, but only when women and girls can safely access and use the technology. Failure to carefully consider the ramifications of promoting increased digital technology and Internet use is not responsible. Digital intervention should be assessed with a gender lens focused on mitigating potential harm. Digital technology has been linked to violence against women and online sexual harassment. With increased time at home and time spent online, women, and in particular young girls, are at increased risk of online gender-based violence (GBV) and technology-facilitated GBV during the COVID-19 health crisis.

Excluding women and girls from data collection, analysis, and sharing. We need to adopt a gender-integrated approach to data collection and analysis, because without data on the gender differences of outbreaks, trends and risks can be obscured, response management will be ineffective. Gender data is needed to understand the nuance of what is happening in the COVID-19 crisis and how gender dynamics may play out in various contextual settings.

OPPORTUNITIES

Closing the gender digital divide increases women's access to information. Digital technology enables access to critical health services and opportunities for education, civic participation, and economic engagement. It acts as a vital gateway for women to access information that can improve their livelihoods and significantly enhances their ability to contribute to their families and the global community.

Leverage the private sector and government focus on reaching last-mile populations through digital platforms. Consider how to work with mobile network operators, local Internet service providers, and other digital technology companies, such as app developers, to demonstrate the business case for inclusive connectivity and digital tools.

Resources and contact information

For more information on the gender digital divide, please contact digitaldevelopment@usaid.gov.

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