

# GTIPA Perspectives: The Vital Importance of Digital Inclusivity for Global Economic Growth



GLOBAL TRADE & INNOVATION  
POLICY ALLIANCE



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The Global Trade and Innovation Policy Alliance (GTIPA) is a global network of independent think tanks that are ardent supporters of greater global trade liberalization and integration, deplore trade-distorting “innovation mercantilist” practices, yet believe that governments can and should play important and proactive roles in spurring greater innovation and productivity in their enterprises and economies. Member organizations advocate and adhere to research and policy consistent with a core Statement of Shared Principles. The Alliance represents a network of like-minded think tanks who have opportunities to collaborate on events, research, and reports while enjoying a platform that highlights and cross-pollinates member organizations’ work on trade, globalization, and innovation policy. Think tanks interested in joining the Alliance should contact Stephen Ezell, Vice President, Global Innovation Policy at the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF), at [sezell@itif.org](mailto:sezell@itif.org).

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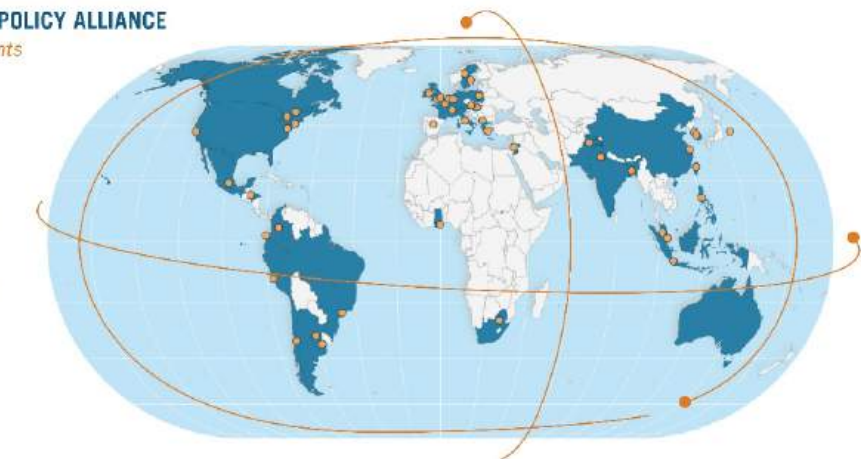
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**CONTENTS**

About the Global Trade and Innovation Policy Alliance ..... 1

Introduction..... 5

How ICT Drives Economic Growth ..... 5

Preview of GTIPA Case Studies..... 9

    Deploying ICT Infrastructure ..... 9

    Promoting ICT Adoption..... 10

    Advancing SMEs’ Use of Digital Tools ..... 11

    Empowering Women..... 12

    Promoting Agriculture and Food Security..... 13

Australia: Australia’s Digital Drive: Innovation and Technology..... 15

    Expanding Access to Quality Digital Infrastructure in Remote and Regional Areas ..... 15

    Enhancing Digital Literacy and Skills Through Targeted Training Programs ..... 15

    Promoting Multi-Device Access to Address Mobile-Only Usage Limitations..... 16

    Conclusion: Toward a More Inclusive Digital Future ..... 16

Bangladesh: Three Ideas to Boost Digital Inclusivity in Bangladesh ..... 17

    Promoting Digital Literacy Programs Targeted at Marginalized Groups ..... 17

    Mobile-Based Solutions for Financial Inclusion ..... 17

    Enhancing E-Government Services for Inclusive Access to Public Resources ..... 18

    Conclusion ..... 18

Canada: Policies to Bridge the Digital Divide..... 19

    Innovation and Food Security ..... 19

    Machine Learning Medical Devices ..... 19

    Broadband ..... 20

    Digital Economy and Technology ..... 20

    Cybersecurity and Data Privacy..... 20

    Rare Diseases and Novel Technology Development ..... 21

    Trade Policy ..... 21

Colombia..... 22

    “Colombia Potencia Digital” Strategy ..... 22

    Integral Digital Connectivity Expansion Plan ..... 22

    Artificial Intelligence Microcenters..... 22

Germany: Policies to Promote Digitalization of the German Economy..... 24

Mittelstand-Digital Initiative.....	24
PIKSL.....	24
#SheTransformsIT .....	25
Ghana: Digital Inclusivity in Ghana: Current Efforts and Policy Recommendations .....	27
Introduction .....	27
Efforts to Expand Digital Inclusivity .....	27
Policy Recommendations.....	27
Conclusion .....	28
Hungary .....	29
The National Digitalization Strategy 2022–2030 .....	29
Digital State and Rules for Providing Digital Services Act (DÁP).....	30
India.....	31
India’s Aadhaar System .....	31
Increasing Broadband Internet Access .....	31
Expanding India’s Presence in Semiconductor Supply Chains.....	32
Ireland .....	33
National Broadband Plan (NBP) .....	33
Manna Aero Drone Delivery .....	33
Brightbeam AI .....	34
Italy.....	35
Fondo per la Repubblica Digitale (The Digital Republic Fund) .....	35
Neoconnessi (Newly connected) .....	36
Digital Leap: A Municipality’s Path to Better Services and Social Inclusion.....	36
Conclusion .....	37
Korea: Sustaining the Global Competitiveness of Korea.....	38
Introduction .....	38
Current Status of SME Digitalization in Korea .....	38
Key Factors Behind the Digital Divide .....	38
Government Policies to Bridge the Digital Divide.....	39
Moving Forward: Korea’s New Integrated Approach.....	40
Conclusion .....	40
Philippines .....	41
National Broadband Program.....	41
Free Wi-Fi Program .....	42

DICT's TECH4ED-DTC Program .....	42
Connected Women .....	43
Poland: Digital Inclusivity and ICT Infrastructure Progress in Poland .....	44
Enhancing Digital Inclusivity .....	44
Deployment of ICT Infrastructure.....	45
Supporting SMEs in Digital Transformation.....	45
San Francisco Bay Area/California, United States .....	47
Executive Order for AI Implementation By California's State Government.....	48
Pilot Partnership With Nvidia to Advance California's AI Capabilities.....	48
South Africa: South Africa's Digital Opportunity .....	50
The South African National Broadband Plan .....	50
The South African Connect Initiative.....	50
Ongoing Challenges to Digital Deployment.....	51
Ukraine: 3 Must-Have Assets in the Ukrainian Resilience and Post-War Recovery .....	53
The Rise of Digital Public Services .....	53
Collaboration With the Tech Sector .....	54
Digital Education .....	54
United States.....	56
Digital.gov.....	56
Connect 313 .....	56
ISPs Partnering with Community Hubs.....	57
Conclusion .....	59
Endnotes.....	60

## AUSTRALIA: AUSTRALIA'S DIGITAL DRIVE: INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

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Australia's digital landscape presents both significant achievements and ongoing challenges, particularly for those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, elderly, or living in rural and remote areas. Despite incremental improvements, digital inclusivity remains unequal, with substantial gaps in access, affordability, and digital skills. According to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), overall digital inclusion improved to an index score of 73.2 in 2023, up from 71.1 in 2021.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, nearly one-quarter of Australians experience some level of digital exclusion, with particularly low scores among the elderly, citizens with disabilities, and those in public housing. Addressing these disparities requires targeted, multi-faceted approaches that account for the unique needs of these groups.

### **Expanding Access to Quality Digital Infrastructure in Remote and Regional Areas**

One of the foundational barriers to digital inclusion is access to high-quality infrastructure, particularly in remote and regional areas. While access scores have increased nationally to 72.0, rural and remote areas continue to experience substantial digital exclusion compared to metropolitan regions, where the score averages 74.8. In non-metropolitan areas, the average score is notably lower, largely due to insufficient infrastructure. This gap is most pronounced in the Northern Territory, where digital inclusion lags due to connectivity limitations, exacerbating the difficulties faced by residents, especially those within remote Indigenous communities.<sup>39</sup>

To address this, a collaborative approach involving both government and private-sector entities could help expand broadband infrastructure in underserved regions. The federal government, alongside telecommunications companies, could prioritize the deployment of robust broadband infrastructure, such as fiber optic and satellite networks, to increase reliability and speed in underserved locations. Remote and very remote areas, where Indigenous communities are heavily represented, stand to benefit significantly from such developments. In these areas, Indigenous communities have digital inclusion scores up to 37 points lower than non-Indigenous populations in urban centers.<sup>40</sup> Establishing community-based access points, which provide shared digital resources in partnership with local Indigenous councils, could also ensure sustainable access and enable more residents to participate actively in the digital economy.

### **Enhancing Digital Literacy and Skills Through Targeted Training Programs**

Digital skills, collectively measured by the ADII as "Digital Ability," form another crucial pillar of digital inclusion. ADII's findings show that certain demographics, particularly lower-income groups and older adults, have limited digital skills, inhibiting their ability to leverage the Internet's benefits fully. Those in the lowest-income quintile, as well as citizens aged over 75, show particularly low digital ability scores. These groups often lack the essential digital literacy needed to access online health services, job applications, and government portals effectively.<sup>41</sup>

To enhance digital skills, it's essential to establish accessible digital literacy programs that cater to the unique needs of these groups. Government-supported community workshops, offered through libraries, local councils, and senior centers, can provide a foundational digital education for older Australians. For economically disadvantaged groups, digital literacy programs offered by non-profit organizations, particularly those operating in partnership with educational institutions,

can help bridge this gap. The Good Things Foundation, for instance, has made strides in delivering free, community-based digital training across Australia. Such programs should focus on basic digital skills, safe Internet practices, and efficient navigation of essential online services like telehealth and job application portals.

Digital literacy programs for First Nations communities should be culturally tailored, recognizing that language and traditional knowledge systems play a role in effective learning. Programs incorporating Indigenous languages and culturally relevant content could make digital literacy training more inclusive and relevant for Indigenous Australians in remote areas.<sup>42</sup>

### **Promoting Multi-Device Access to Address Mobile-Only Usage Limitations**

An increasing share of Australians, particularly those in low-income and rural communities, depend solely on mobile devices for Internet access—approximately 10.5 percent nationwide, with higher rates among First Nations people (21.3 percent) and individuals in remote areas (32.6 percent). Mobile-only access constrains users from basic online activities, limiting their ability to participate in more complex digital tasks like online education and job applications.

To address these constraints, access to affordable multi-device setups is essential. Community driven device-sharing programs, such as local libraries and community centers offering laptops or tablets for temporary use, can broaden access for mobile-only users. Telecommunications providers could further support this by offering bundled, affordable multi-device plans for low-income households and public housing residents. Partnerships with tech companies to supply refurbished devices at reduced or no cost can also bridge the access gap, providing economically disadvantaged individuals with greater digital engagement opportunities.

### **Conclusion: Toward a More Inclusive Digital Future**

As digitalization increasingly permeates all aspects of social, economic, and cultural life in Australia, achieving universal digital inclusion becomes paramount. While the 2023 ADII reports national improvements, persistent digital divides suggest that substantial work remains to create equitable access to digital resources across demographics and geographies. Expanding infrastructure in rural and remote areas, introducing affordability measures, enhancing digital literacy, and ensuring access to multi-device setups form a comprehensive approach to addressing these challenges.

These strategies are not isolated solutions but interdependent actions that require coordinated efforts across government, private sector, and community organizations. Policies that promote digital equity, such as digital skills development programs and affordable pricing models, will be crucial in addressing the multifaceted nature of digital exclusion. Addressing digital inclusion is not only about technological equity but also about fostering social and economic empowerment for all Australians.

## **BANGLADESH: THREE IDEAS TO BOOST DIGITAL INCLUSIVITY IN BANGLADESH**

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IPAG

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Digital inclusivity remains a critical challenge in Bangladesh, where millions still lack internet access and its associated benefits. With over 170 million people, bridging the digital divide is crucial for reducing socio-economic inequalities. Women, rural communities, and low-income groups are disproportionately affected.<sup>43</sup> To ensure broader access to digital opportunities, targeted policies and programs are essential. This article explores three key strategies to enhance digital inclusivity in Bangladesh.

### **Promoting Digital Literacy Programs Targeted at Marginalized Groups**

Digital literacy is essential for accessing the benefits of digital technologies, but many in Bangladesh, especially women, rural residents, and low-income groups, lack these skills. A 2020 Global System for Mobile Communications (GSMA) report highlights that women in Bangladesh are 29 percent less likely to own a mobile phone and 52 percent less likely to use mobile Internet than men.<sup>44</sup> To address this gap, the government and civil society should invest in targeted digital literacy programs, covering both basic and advanced skills such as digital financial literacy, cybersecurity, and e-commerce navigation.

One approach to promoting digital literacy is through the establishment of community-based digital learning centers.<sup>45</sup> These centers could provide free or low-cost courses in local languages to teach individuals how to use digital tools and access information online. The centers could be located in rural areas, schools, and community centers, making them easily accessible to those most in need. In India, for instance, the National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM) has successfully implemented digital literacy training in underserved areas, which Bangladesh could emulate.<sup>46</sup>

Additionally, promoting digital literacy in schools is critical for long-term inclusivity. Incorporating digital skills into the national curriculum will ensure that future generations are prepared to participate in the digital economy. Partnerships between the government, private sector, and educational institutions can facilitate the deployment of affordable digital devices and provide teacher training programs to help integrate technology into classrooms.

To ensure the participation of women and girls into digital literacy programs, targeted outreach campaigns must be conducted. Offering digital literacy programs in women-friendly environments or providing mobile training units that travel to different communities could help mitigate these barriers. A study conducted by the GSMA found that digital literacy programs targeted specifically at women in South Asia can improve not only their digital skills but also their economic opportunities.<sup>47</sup>

### **Mobile-Based Solutions for Financial Inclusion**

Despite the proliferation of mobile phones, many Bangladeshis remain outside the formal banking system. It's found that around 45 percent of adults in the country don't have access to formal financial services, with rural areas having even lower access.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, traditional banks are often located far from rural areas, making it difficult for people in these regions to access financial services.



