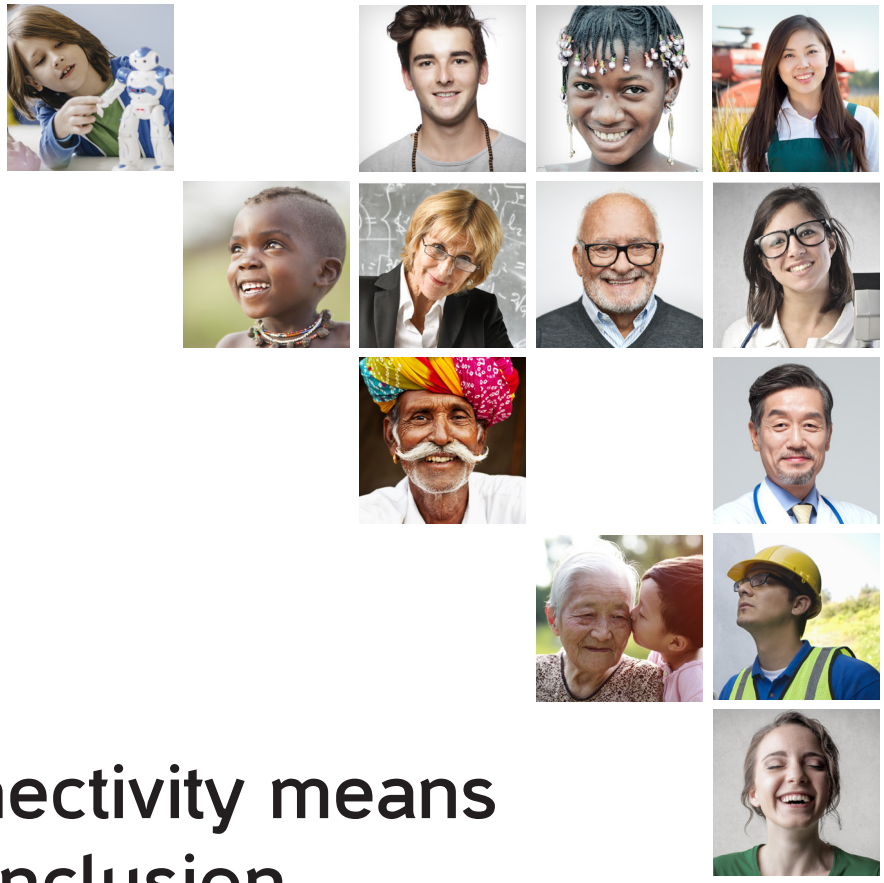
TECH 4 ALL



What connectivity means for digital inclusion

A key message from this year's Global Mobile Broadband Forum (MBBF) was the need for operators, regulators, and ecosystem partners to collaborate on digital inclusion efforts, highlighting the potential of such campaigns to increase access to critical services that enable environmental protection, healthcare, and education.

By Zhu Wenjie, Xu Boxin

Operators are racing toward 5G, yet GSMA data shows half the world's population – some 4 billion people – lack online access. Of those, 1 billion aren't covered by 3G or 4G.

In a Mobile World Live TV panel discussion at MBBF, Huawei ICT Infrastructure CMO Kevin Zhang encouraged policymakers, communities, developers, vendors, and NGOs to work together to define a plan to change those statistics. "When we talk about digital inclusion, nobody can do it by themselves. We need to work together," said Zhang.

> TECH4ALL targets advancements in four dimensions: healthcare, education, development, and the environment. It aims to provide the technology, applications, and skills necessary to move the development needle in local communities.

Societal uplift

Akinwale Goodluck, GSMA's Head of Sub-Sahara Africa noted there are major social benefits to digital inclusion, pointing to a "significant correlation" between Internet adoption and increases in GDP, living standards, and access to education and financial services.

Indeed, economic modelling by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reports that a 10 percent increase in mobile broadband penetration produces a 1.5 percent increase in GDP. The data showed a heightened impact in developing regions such as Africa, where the same increase in penetration was estimated to yield a 2.5 percent uplift in GDP.

"This unlocks a lot of very vulnerable communities. It unlocks a lot of opportunities for women, for our farmers, and for people in rural communities," Goodluck said.

Huawei initiatives

Zhang highlighted Huawei's new TECH4ALL initiative, which focuses on delivering the benefits of digital inclusion to an additional 500 million people over the course of five years. The program targets advancements in four dimensions: healthcare, education, development, and the environment. It aims to provide the technology, applications, and skills necessary to move the development needle in local communities.

Zhang gave the example of the healthcare campaign TrackAI, which Huawei launched in collaboration with DIVE Medical. The goal, he said, is to develop a smartphone-based AI solution that can be used by non-professionals to identify visual disorders in babies as young as 6 months old, as 70 percent of visual disorders are in fact preventable or curable if detected early enough.

He also talked about an environmental project in partnership with the NGO Rainforest Connection that uses old Huawei mobile phones to collect data in a Costa Rican rainforest to stop illegal logging and poaching and protect the habitat of species such as spider monkeys, and the education campaign DigiTruck, which uses solar-powered converted shipping containers to function as mobile classrooms to teach digital skills to remote communities in Kenya.

> An enabling policy and regulatory environment requires several prerequisites. These include political will and vision at the national level. Then it can come under a policy, strategy, roadmap, and regulatory framework.

Zhang cited Huawei's capabilities at providing connectivity to enable digital education and technical know-how to teach individuals and enterprises how to develop applications. But he stressed the need for collaboration and partnerships, adding "we cannot do everything alone."

Next steps

In addition to the 1 billion people who fall outside network coverage areas, GSMA data indicates that there are 3 billion people who are covered by 3G and 4G networks but who don't subscribe to the service.

Goodluck said there are a number of factors preventing more people from going online, including a lack of digital literacy, affordable devices, content, and user concerns about privacy and security.

"We must address this misconception that everybody's online, everybody's connected...We need to be able to get people to come online, stay online and pay to be online. The content has to be relevant, it has to be in local languages...It has to move from an infrastructural based approach to doing all the other things to stimulate demand and get the right people online."

He added more must be done to address issues relating to the economics of rural deployments, which typically come at a high cost with "very, very diminished revenue" returns. Goodluck pointed to Huawei's recent work in Ghana as an example of how to solve that problem, hailing its collaboration with government officials and the use of lightweight, low-cost infrastructure to create a sustainable rural coverage solution.

ITU pushes for action

Dr. Eun-Ju Kim, Chief of Digital Knowledge Hub at the ITU's BDT unit, agreed with Zhang that collaboration is key and stressed the need for policy alignment or collaborative policy and regulation in digital ecosystem.

"An enabling policy and regulatory environment requires several prerequisites. These include political will and vision at the national level, which can be ensured by policy, strategy, roadmap, and regulatory frameworks with actions customized to each country."

Ultimately, Kim believes that it is critical for all involved to follow through on whatever goals are set and states "We can have lots of good strategy, but without action it doesn't work."