Meaningful Access, Data & Hyper Local Communities

Report - 2025
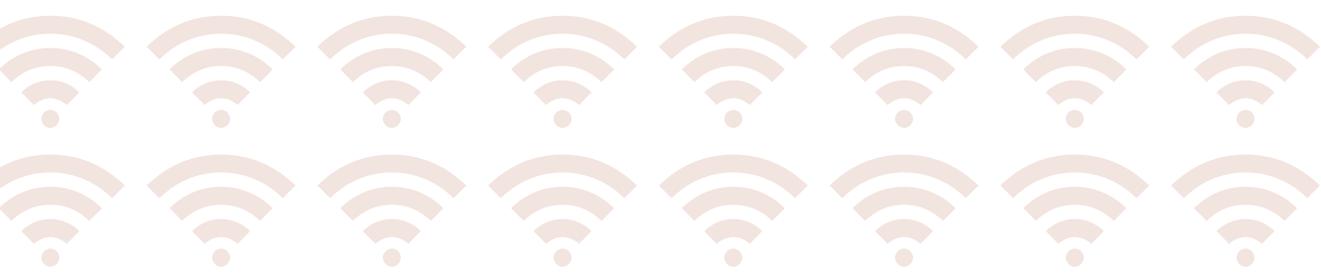
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Content

INTRODUCTION

In an era where digital technologies shape access to education, healthcare, livelihoods, governance, and rights, millions of communities across the Asia-Pacific region remain excluded from meaningful participation in the digital world. Barriers such as poor infrastructure, economic marginalisation, low digital literacy, geographic isolation, and systemic digital divides continue to deny entire populations the opportunities afforded by information and connectivity. The Community Network Xchange (CNX) Asia-Pacific was conceived as a response to these enduring inequities, championing community-driven connectivity that goes beyond mere online access to centre people, agency, and local knowledge in digital ecosystems.

First organised in 2017 by the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and the Internet Society (ISOC), CNX has become a unique regional platform where practitioners, community builders, technologists, activists, and policymakers gather to share solutions, learn from grassroots experience, and collectively imagine

alternatives to top-down connectivity models. Over successive editions, the exchange has spotlighted community networks as people-powered infrastructures that extend communication, resilience, and social empowerment to regions that market-led and state-led connectivity consistently fail to reach. Through thematic explorations of sustainability, social impact, conflict resilient networks, and hyperlocal solutions, CNX reinforces that true digital inclusion is rooted in community ownership of technology and information.

At its core, CNX advocates for a reframing of digital access, from a commodity to be delivered, to a process to be co-created with communities. This year's sessions, including those on meaningful access, empowering rural changemakers, and community networks in crisis, reflect this evolution. By foregrounding the voices, strategies, and lived realities of community networks and information intermediaries, the CNX community advances a future where connectivity empowers people to shape their own development, resilience, and digital futures.

SPEAKERS

Jayesh Ranjan

Special Chief Secretary, Government of Telangana, and CEO, Industry & Investment Cell (CMO) & SPEED

Jayesh Ranjan, IAS is a 1992-batch officer serving as Special Chief Secretary, Government of Telangana, and CEO, Industry & Investment Cell (CMO) & SPEED. He also holds additional charge of Youth Advancement, Tourism & Culture (YAT&C) and Director, Archaeology. He serves on the boards of RICH, WE HUB Foundation, and T-Works, and is an Agenda Contributor to the World Economic Forum. Since 2023, he has co-led the Digital Citizen Summit and has co-curated the Just AI Awards since its launch in 2024.

Amandeep Singh Gill

United Nations Under-Secretary-General and the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology, heading the UN Office for Digital & Emerging Technologies (ODET)

Amandeep Singh Gill is a United Nations Under-Secretary-General and the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology, heading the UN Office for Digital & Emerging Technologies (ODET). He leads UN digital cooperation, including follow-up to the Global Digital Compact and work on AI governance, and serves on the Secretary-General's High-level Advisory Body on AI and Scientific Advisory Board. Earlier, he was India's Ambassador & Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament and chaired the 2017 UN Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems; he also led the Secretariat of the UN High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation and was CEO of I-DAIR in Geneva. He holds a BTech from Panjab University and a PhD from King's College London.

Osama Manzar

Founder-Director
Digital Empowerment Foundation

Osama Manzar works at the intersection of Access to Rights and Rights to Access. A Senior Ashoka Fellow and British Chevening Scholar, he is the founder of the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), established in 2002. Under his leadership, DEF has digitally empowered over 35 million people through a network of 2000+ Communication Information Resource Centres across India. Osama has been a key architect of India's inclusive digital ecosystem, influencing national initiatives such as the Digital Literacy Mission, Common Service Centres, the ban on Free Basics, and the liberalization of ISP licensing through PM-WANI. He has also led pioneering grassroots efforts to counter misinformation, including the creation of a cadre of rural women fact-checkers, frontline digital defenders combating misinformation in underserved communities. At the core of Osama's vision is the SoochnaPreneur model, a community-driven social entrepreneurship model to digital development that empowers local communities, especially women and persons with disabilities, to deliver last-mile access to information and citizen services. Osama serves on several global boards and advisory bodies, including WiDEF, APC, GNI, and the World Summit Awards. He was profiled by The Hindu as "the man who travelled more than 10,000 villages." A regular columnist for Mint, he has co-authored over 20 publications, including Internet Economy of India and NetChakra.

Srinivas Taluka

T-Hub

Mr Srinivas Taluka is the Vice President of Facilities at T-Hub. A seasoned management professional with 25 years of experience, Mr Taluka brings expertise in facilities management, infrastructure management, general administration, marketing, and corporate communication.

Sonia Jorge

Founder and Executive Director, Global Digital Inclusion Partnership

Sonia Jorge is the Founder and Executive Director of the Global Digital Inclusion Partnership (GDIP). Sonia is an experienced leader and international digital policy expert. She had successfully led global coalitions, bringing together the private sector, governments, and civil society actors from across the globe to deliver the policies needed to reduce the cost to connect and make universal meaningful connectivity a reality for everyone in global majority countries. As a policy advisor and gender equality advocate with experience in over 45 countries, she has led numerous digital policy and development projects in several regions and with international organisations, such as the World Bank, UNDP, UN Women, ITU, and for private sector companies and associations.

Anriette Esterhuysen

Senior Advisor on Global and Regional Internet Governance at Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

Anriette Esterhuysen is an internet activist and policy leader, currently Senior Advisor on global and regional internet governance at Association for Progressive Communications (APC). She previously served as APC's Executive Director, where she advanced access, rights, and ICT for development across the Global South. A former Executive Director of SANGONeT, she has been active in digital rights and connectivity initiatives since the 1980s and was inducted into the Internet Hall of Fame in 2013 for her pioneering work connecting civil society in Africa.
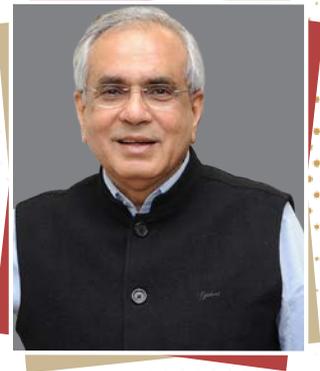
Dr. Rajiv Kumar

ChairmanPahlé India Foundation

Dr. Rajiv Kumar is a prominent economist and policy-leader who currently serves as Chairman of the Pahlé India Foundation, a think-tank he founded in 2013. He previously held the position of Vice-Chairman of NITI Aayog (2017—) with the rank of Cabinet Minister. Dr. Kumar holds a PhD in Economics from the University of Lucknow and a D.Phil. from the University of Oxford.

Neeti Biyani

Senior Advisor, Strategy and Development APNIC Foundation

Neeti Biyani is Senior Advisor, Strategy and Development at APNIC Foundation. She brings extensive regional and global experience spanning intergovernmental and governmental agencies, civil society, and the technology sector.

Over the years, Neeti has worked on issues of transparency, governance, social development, and justice, driven by her belief in strategic, evidence-based approaches to create meaningful and sustainable transformation. At the Foundation, she leads strategy, planning, development, and impact initiatives while also coordinating advocacy frameworks focused on digital and internet development. Her work bridges the Foundation's diverse programs, leveraging synergies to strengthen outcomes and advance systemic change.

Setu Bandh Upadhyay

Senior Advisor - Policy & Advocacy,Internet Society

Setu Bandh Upadhyay is Senior Advisor for Policy and Advocacy at the Internet Society, leading global efforts to advance an open, secure, and trustworthy internet. He has previously worked with the Global Network Initiative, Mozilla, Global Voices, and the Alexander von Humboldt Institute, focusing on community and people-oriented tech policy and civil society engagement across the Global Majority. Setu holds a Master's in Public Policy from Central European University and is a trained lawyer in India.

Dr. Syed Sultan Kazi

Director at Council for Social and Digital Development (CSDD)

Syed is an ICTD professional for over 20 years now. He specialises in digital for community development and has worked in key pan India programmes, at policy, research, advocacy and implementation levels. Currently, he is Director at the Council for Social and Digital Development (CSDD), a research, policy and implementing organisation, with focus on North East India Himalayan Region States. He is Senior Advisor at Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF). He is an active participant in global and regional IGFs including APrIGF. He is a contributing author to the North East Vision Document 2047, by the North Eastern Council (NEC), under Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Govt. of India. He has key research and published works. He is an MPhil and PhD from the Centre for the Study of Law & Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. He is native of Assam, India.

Dr Senka Hadzic

Connectivity | Telecom Policy | Digital Transformation | ICT4D

Dr Senka Hadzic (she/her) is a telecommunications engineer (PhD) and digital development expert with 10+ years of experience advancing inclusive digital infrastructure, connectivity policy, and public interest technology. She is affiliated with leading digital policy think tanks including Research ICT Africa and FGV Center for Technology and Society (CTS), and consults with various non-profits, UN agencies, and organizations in the development and humanitarian sectors on digital inclusion and equity. She is also coordinating the Dynamic Coalition on Community Connectivity (DC3) at the United Nations Internet Governance Forum (IGF).

Michael Ginguld

Director, Strategy and Operations,
Rural Broadband Pvt. Ltd.

Michael Ginguld born and raised in Israel, Michael has close to 30 years of experience working in ICT, community and rural development projects in India, Indonesia, Cambodia, Nepal, and Israel. He holds a B.Sc. from the Hebrew University in Israel, an MA in Development Studies from the Institute of Social Studies in the Netherlands, and an MA in Public Administration from Harvard University, USA.

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee Belur

Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS-Pilani, Hyderabad campus

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee Belur is currently affiliated to the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS-Pilani) Hyderabad campus as a Visiting Assistant professor in the department of humanities and social sciences. Her area of expertise is Citizen science, Science and technology studies where she area of focus is on technology and its social impact, digital humanities and gender studies. She has worked for over 12 years in the area of community networks in India and in Asia Pacific.

Siddhartha Malempati

Directing Council-General of the Commons Collective

Siddhartha Malempati is a multifaceted professional with over 18 years of experience spanning computer science, patent law, and economics. As the Directing Council-General of the Commons Collective, he leads a global network of activists, researchers, and practitioners working to advance the commons as a foundation for social progress.

A serial entrepreneur, Siddhartha co-founded Helico Consulting, Octacomm Technologies, and Radius EduTech, companies pioneering innovations in cloud computing, AI-driven communication, and learning management systems. A recognized free and open-source policy advocate, he has championed digital rights, net neutrality, and community technology initiatives, extending digital education to over 30,000 individuals in rural India.

Guided by a deep commitment to technological justice and collaborative innovation, Siddhartha's lifelong mission is to harness technology and collective intelligence to build a more equitable and sustainable world.

Gayani Perera is an experienced Project Manager currently leading the "DiGiSavi" Project under the Nenasala Development Project at Foundation.lk —LK Domain Registry. She has over ten years of experience at the Information and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA), where she played a key role in several national-level digital empowerment and community development initiatives.

She holds a Master's degree from Cardiff Metropolitan University and is passionate about promoting digital inclusion, capacity building, and sustainable development through technology-driven community projects.

Gayani Perera

Project Manager, Foundation.lk

Gayani Perera is an experienced Project Manager currently leading the "DiGiSavi" Project under the Nenasala Development Project at Foundation.lk – LK Domain Registry. She has over ten years of experience at the Information and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA), where she played a key role in several national-level digital empowerment and community development initiatives.

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T.B. Dinesh

Janastu and Setvelots
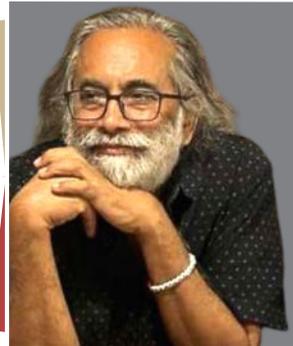
T.B. Dinesh is a community media activist with a background in computer science. For over two decades, he has been associated with Janastu and Servelots (janastu.org) in Bangalore, India. His work focuses on developing storytelling methods and empowering communities marginalized by "literates"- especially women - to share their own stories and document their ways of life. To advance this vision, several initiatives have emerged, including IruWay, a rural research lab; Anthillhacks, inclusive camps celebrating local places; Renarration Web, an annotation-driven social semantic web; COW Mesh, a decentralized community mesh network with rich media services; and CrafterSpace, a crafts and maker space for women and youth. Recently, Dinesh and his team have been exploring ways to leverage AI to lower barriers of interaction for low-literate women.

Gustaff Harriman Iskandar

Co-founder and Managing DirectorCommon Room Networks Foundation

Gustaff Harriman Iskandar is co-founder and managing director of the Common Room Networks Foundation. Graduating from the Fine Arts Department at the Bandung Institute of Technology, he has since been at the forefront of integrating art, technology, and community development. Through initiatives like the Bandung Center for New Media Arts and Common Room, he has championed interdisciplinary collaborations that bridge urban and rural communities. His work emphasizes participatory approaches, fostering inclusive digital ecosystems that empower local cultures and promote sustainable development across Indonesia.

Akhmat Safrudin

Leader Technology Development

Akhmat Safrudin is an experienced ICT leader with over 15 years in technology development, software engineering and cloud infrastructure. Currently serving as the Asia regional coordinator for capacity building for the Local Networks initiative, his current focus is on addressing the digital divide by fostering community-centred connectivity initiatives. He has a strong background in open source technology and has led initiatives in software development, the internet of things (IoT) and cybersecurity.

Indriyatno Banyumurti

Executive DirectorICT Watch Indonesia

Indriyatno Banyumurti is executive director of ICT Watch Indonesia, a civil society organization pioneering the "Internet Sehat" movement since 2002. With extensive experience in public education, policy engagement, and community empowerment, he focuses on promoting safe, responsible, and inclusive use of digital technology across Indonesia. He has been actively involved in developing digital literacy modules, training educators and communities nationwide, and collaborating with government institutions, private sectors, and international organizations to combat misinformation, online harm, and digital inequality.

Manoj Bhardwaj

Head, Projects and Skilling

Manoj Bhardwaj joined AirJaldi's deployment team in 2013 and went on to serve as Network Head and later as Regional Head in Uttarakhand. In 2024, he assumed the role of Head of Projects and Skilling, where he leads AirJaldi's projects, partnerships, training, and skilling initiatives. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Arts and is a graduate of the AirJaldi Networking 108 course. Manoj is based in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh.

Prof. Bornini Lahiri

Assistant Professor of Linguistics, Indian Institute of Technology

Prof. Bornini Lahiri is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics at the Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur. Her research interests include Language and Folklore documentation and Description, Linguistic Typology and Language Resources for Minority Languages. For the last several years, she has been working on documenting and describing various minor languages of Eastern India, including Dhimal, Mahali, Toto, Mundari, Kurmali etc. She has led the creation of language resources, digital materials and teaching-learning materials for these languages. She has also extensively studied ethno-linguistic features of these languages, bringing to the fore amazing facts about these languages and cultures. She currently leads the SpeeD-TB project (funded by MEITY), which aims to build 1200 hours of speech datasets and speech technologies for six of the minortised Tibeto-Burman languages such as Toto, Nyishi, Chokri, Kok Borok, Bodo and Meiteilon.

Rajasekhar P.

operations, focusing on building resilient and accessible communication systems.
Octacomm

Rajasekhar P. is part of the Commons Collective and has been involved with the Free Software Movement for more than a decade, working on community-led approaches to technology and communication. He currently works with Octacomm in operations, focusing on building resilient and accessible communication systems. With earlier experience as a journalist at The Times of India and Deccan Chronicle, he brings insights from media and public communication into his work on last-mile connectivity and decentralised, offline models for rural communities.

Ritesh Kumar

Co-founder and Director, Council for Diversity and Innovation, Co-founder and CEO of UnReaL-TecE LLP

Ritesh Kumar is a Co-founder and Director of the Council for Diversity and Innovation, and Co-founder and CEO of UnReaL-TecE LLP, Agra. He is also a Fellow and Lead in the Division on Artificial Intelligence and Linguistics at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research, New Delhi. His research interests lie broadly at the intersection of pragmatics, sociolinguistics and language technologies for underrepresented communities and languages. He has worked on the theoretical and computational modelling of politeness, impoliteness and aggression in language, leading to the development of automated systems for the recognition of hateful, offensive and aggressive language.

Ritu Srivastava

IEEE Future Networks' CTU and FNEM (Consultant) and Director, Jadeite Solutions

Ms. Ritu Srivastava is a technology and connectivity policy professional with an interdisciplinary academic background, holding a Master's degree in Electronics and Telecommunications and an MBA in Information & Technology. Based in India, Ms. Ritu work lies at the intersection of communication technologies, digital inclusion, and community centric infrastructure models. Currently, she is serving as a Program Officer at IEEE Future Networks and suppor6ng them for two programs - Connecting the Unconnected (CTU) program and the Future Networks Entrepreneurs Mentorship (FNEM).

Sampath Sri Rajarathne

Senior Project Coordinator Foundation.lk

Sampath Sri Rajarathne is a senior project coordinator for Foundation.lk, Sri Lanka. He is currently engaged in projects that promote digital literacy and Cybersafety awareness. He is an active contributor to many initiatives that are sponsored by the Foundation. lk including Cyber Lowata Piyapath, Gurugedara projects which were providing ICT knowledge to the school students of Sri Lanka and the Hithawathi cyber safety project. He is engaged with many government institutions and non-government organizations which works co-operatively in the same interest areas. He represents the Foundation.lk in digital and mass media while also being a Development Enthusiast, Transformation Strategist and a Change Maker. Sampath is a member of ISOC Sri Lanka chapter.

Shalini A.

Janastu and Servelots

Shalini who works on Community technology projects is been part of the Janastu and Servelots (janastu.org) in Bangalore, India for more than a decade. She does setting up Community Networks to the unconnected areas in various part of India to establish meaningful connection. She is closely associated with women and youths who can adopt technologies for their entrepreneurial and aspirational needs. She is also associated in developing open source dencentralized applications which is beneficial for the low-literate communities and also focuses on enabling local craft and technology for the women in the communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Community Network Exchange (CNX) Asia-Pacific convening and this report are the result of the collective efforts, insights, and commitments of a wide range of individuals and organisations dedicated to advancing meaningful access and community-centred connectivity.

We extend our sincere gratitude to all the speakers, panellists, moderators, and participants who generously shared their experiences, grounded perspectives, and critical reflections across sessions. Their contributions—from on-ground practitioners and community leaders to researchers, technologists, civil society actors, and policy advocates—have enriched the discussions and strengthened the collective understanding of community networks as resilient, people-first infrastructures.

We are especially grateful to community practitioners and local changemakers from across the Asia-Pacific region, whose lived experiences and field-based innovations anchored the conversations in real-world challenges and possibilities. Their work continues to demonstrate how hyperlocal networks can respond to crises, bridge digital divides, and foster trust, agency, and resilience within communities.

We acknowledge the support and collaboration of partner organisations, knowledge institutions, and networks whose continued engagement made CNX a meaningful platform for exchange and learning. Our thanks also extend to the rapporteurs, documentation teams, and volunteers whose efforts ensured that the insights, debates, and learnings from CNX are carefully captured and shared through this report.

Finally, we thank all those who believe in and contribute to the vision of a more inclusive, decentralised, and equitable digital future—one where connectivity is shaped by communities, grounded in local realities, and oriented towards social good.

Welcome Address

Mr Jayesh Ranjan (IAS), Special Chief Secretary for Special Projects (SPEED) and Investment Cell, Chief Minister's Office, and Special Chief Secretary, Tourism, Culture & Sports, Government of Telangana, Hyderabad

Mr Jayesh Ranjan (IAS), opened the 7th Digital Citizen Summit 2025 with a warm welcome to participants and dignitaries from across India and the world. He highlighted the continued collaboration between Government of Telangana and the Digital Empowerment Foundation, noting the Summit's growth in scale, participation, and quality, including the Just AI Awards and Digital Artisans of India Awards. Framing the summit's

theme around data and accountability, he underlined growing concerns around data misuse, surveillance, and citizens' limited awareness of how their data is collected and used.

He reflected on Telangana's early leadership in ethical data governance, beginning with the adoption of an **Open Data Policy in 2015,** making it one of the first Indian States to institutionalise open data. A defining decision was entrusting the management of the state's open data portal to an independent organisation, Factly, to ensure credibility, autonomy, and safeguards against misuse. He highlighted how open data has enabled evidence-based solutions in mobility, transport planning, women's safety, agriculture, and public services citing examples where ride-sharing and transport datasets informed traffic management, public transit planning, and targeted interventions by government departments and startups.

Addressing the digital divide, he noted that infrastructure alone does not guarantee meaningful use, drawing on Telangana's early broadband rollout through T-Fiber, which revealed the need for locally relevant digital solutions. This insight shaped the state's focus on agriculture, particularly small and marginal farmers, leading to the creation of the **Agriculture Data Exchange (ADeX)** and the **Agriculture Data Management Framework (ADMF)**, and later the **Telangana Government Data Exchange (TGDEX)**. Concluding, he emphasised the importance of balancing innovation with citizen trust through strong data governance frameworks, reaffirmed Telangana's commitment to partnerships and learning from grassroots initiatives, and invited participants to use the summit as a platform for collective reflection and collaboration toward an inclusive digital future.

Welcome Address by Mr Jayesh Ranjan (IAS)

Opening Remarks

Osama Manzar, Founder and Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation

Osama Manzar, Founder and Director of the Digital Empowerment Foundation, opened the Digital Citizen Summit 2025 by framing the gathering as a critical space to question data, accountability, and citizen agency in an increasingly AI-driven world. He cautioned that data collection has become pervasive and largely invisible, embedded in everyday use of apps, devices, Wi-Fi networks, and surveillance systems—often without meaningful consent or awareness. Emphasising that people are increasingly reduced to data points, he warned that such data now fuels AI systems that amplify surveillance, profiling, and decision-making power.

He further highlighted the growing asymmetry between those who generate data and those who control it, particularly affecting rural communities and artisans whose data originates locally but is governed by distant corporate and institutional actors. Calling for accountability to emerge from citizens rather than data collectors alone, he urged participants from government, civil society, academia, and industry to actively engage over the next two days. The summit, he noted, offers a vital opportunity to collectively reflect, question, and shape more ethical, inclusive, and people-centred digital futures.

Welcome Note & Opening Remarks by Osama Manzar

Inaugural Plenary

Digital Citizenship and Platform Accountability

Session Summary

The inaugural plenary of the Digital Citizen Summit2025 set the tone for the event by examining the expanding role of digital platforms in everyday life and the growing need for accountability within platform-driven ecosystems. The discussion highlighted how increased connectivity and platformisation ,while enabling convenience and access, have also resulted in significant power imbalances ,with

data ,decision-making and control concentrated among a small number of platforms .It was noted that connectivity alone does not ensure meaningful participation ,as large sections of the population remain digitally present yet excluded from tangible benefits ,even as their data continues to be collected and utilised.

The session emphasised the importance of moving beyond a consumer-centric digital model towards a people-centred approach grounded in rights ,safeguards and democratic accountability .It explored the risks associated with depersonalisation ,opaque algorithmic governance and techno-driven public policy ,and underscored the need for stronger regulatory oversight, ethical data governance ,community-led digital initiatives and greater public awareness .The discussion concluded that while platform-based systems are likely to persist, ensuring accountability ,transparency and citizen agency is essential to protect rights and sustain social and democratic relationships in an increasingly digital society.

Key Discussion Points

- Data extraction vs .data benefits :Large-scale data collection is justified for public-good solutions) traffic planning ,agricultural interventions (but creates risks when commercial uses or opaque sharing replace public interest guardrails.

- Platform concentration of power :Platforms centralize information ,decision-making ,and market access ;this yields convenience for some but structural dependency and bargaining power imbalances for workers and small sellers.

- Opacity of algorithms and enforcement :Algorithmic rules that control gig work ,listing visibility or user-blocking lack transparency and due process for affected workers and sellers.

- Digital inclusion is not only connectivity :Broadband rollouts) e.g ,.T-Fiber (do not automatically translate

into meaningful use ;uptake requires relevance, demonstration of value and local problem-solving.

- Local solutions matter :Hyper-local data and community networks) CNX examples (can counterbalance global platform hegemony by producing tangible benefits and building trust.

- Ethical ,governed data exchange as a middle path: Telangana's ADEX / TGDEX models illustrate how curated data exchanges with governance rules can enable innovation while attempting to protect contributors.

- Power ,privilege ,precarity triad in the app economy: Consumers hold privilege ,platforms hold informational power ,workers/small vendors face precarity — policy must address all three simultaneously.

- Depersonalization and accountability gaps: Platformisation risks severing relational accountability between citizens ,service providers and government, weakening democratic responsiveness.

Key Recommendations:

- Adopt transparent data-governance frameworks: Mandate disclosure of data flows ,permitted uses, and data-sharing partners ;require clear consent and accountability mechanisms for commercial reuse.

- Scale ethical data exchanges with enforceable norms: Promote state or multi-stakeholder data exchanges)ADEX/TGDEX model (with access rules ,benefit-sharing clauses and audit trails for commercial usage.

- Regulate algorithmic fairness and due process :Require platforms to publish high-level algorithmic decision criteria ,provide appeal mechanisms for worker/seller deplatforming ,and mandate impact assessments.

- Design meaningful-connectivity programs :Pair broadband rollout with targeted digital public goods and demonstrations) e.g ,.agriculture tools,

local services (so communities experience immediate benefits.

- Protect gig workers and small sellers :Extend labour protections or social security schemes adapted to platform work ;enable collective representation/unions and platform transparency on ratings/penalties.

- Support local & community networks :Fund and integrate CNX-style local practitioners into policy deliberations ;prioritize interoperable ,open local platforms that preserve agency.

- Promote public awareness and digital literacy :Run targeted campaigns explaining data rights ,consent, and platform risks — especially among artisans ,rural users and small enterprises.

- Foster public–private–civil society partnerships: Use pilot partnerships to test rights-respecting tech interventions) e.g ,.open mobility datasets ,hackathons that solve local problems (and scale successful models.

DAY 1

Session 1

Joint Advocacy for Regulatory Impact: Building Ecosystems for Community Networks

Speakers:

- **Senka Hadzic,** Independent Researcher

- **Anriette Esterhuysen,** Senior Advisor, Association for Progressive Communications

- **Sonia Jorge,** Executive Director, Global Digital Inclusion Partnership

Moderator:

- **Neeti Biyani,** Senior Advisor, Strategy and Development, APNIC Foundation

Session Summary:

The panel explored how joint advocacy and ecosystem-building can strengthen the regulatory recognition, sustainability, and scale of community networks globally. Framed within the broader discourse of meaningful connectivity, the discussion emphasised that connectivity is not merely an infrastructure challenge but a people-centred, rights-based, and multidimensional issue.

Speakers reflected on how community networks continue to operate in regulatory grey zones despite their proven ability to address digital exclusion, particularly in underserved and marginalised communities. Drawing from global and regional examples, the session highlighted the urgent need for policy frameworks, funding mechanisms, and governance models that legitimise and support community-centred connectivity solutions as a core component of digital development strategies.

Speaker Insights:

1. Reframing Connectivity through a Meaningful, Human-Centred Lens

Sonia Jorge articulated meaningful connectivity as an evolving and multidimensional framework that goes beyond basic internet access. She emphasised that true connectivity must include:

- Affordability, speed, reliability, and adequate devices

- Digital skills, relevant local content, and language access

- Digital right, safety, privacy, and user agency

Sonia Jorge

> *She noted that current global metrics, such as defining an "internet user" as someone who accessed the internet once in three months, mask deep inequalities and distort policy priorities. Meaningful connectivity, therefore demands new measurement frameworks that reflect lived digital experiences rather than headline statistics.*

2. Policy Gaps and the Illusion of Progress

Anriette Esterhuysen critically examined global digital governance spaces such as WSIS and IGF, arguing that averaged indicators and self-congratulatory narratives obscure persistent digital inclusion. While governments and corporations often appear aligned in showcasing progress, digital inclusion frequently lacks urgency in real policy action.

Anriette Esterhuysen

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- She highlighted that:

- Digital exclusion is widely acknowledged but rarely prioritised

- Market dominance by large telecom and platform companies marginalises community-led models

- Community connectivity is undervalued as an economic and entrepreneurial driver

> *Speakers cautioned against a "double standard" where unrestricted internet use is normalised in wealthy contexts, where marginalised communities are expected to justify connectivity only through development outcomes.*

3. Community Networks as Empowerment Ecosystems

Speakers collectively emphasised that community networks should be understood not only as access providers, but as part of a broader local empowerment ecosystem, supporting livelihoods, education, culture, gender equality, and civic participation.

Community-designed connectivity solutions:

- Reflect local needs and priorities

- Foster ownership and long-term relevance

- Enable social and economic interdependence rather than passive consumption

However, their sustainability is constrained by limited access to finance, absence from MSME frameworks, and lack of regulatory recognition.

4. From Advocacy to Systemic Change: Global Examples

Senka Hadzic shared practical models for embedding community networks into national policy ecosystems:

- **Brazil -** A regulator-led multistakeholder working group on community networks, exploring infrastructure sharing, public fibre access, and school connectivity integration (top-down approach).

- **South Africa:** Formation of a Community Networks Association to collectively engage regulators, influence spectrum policy, and access funding mechanisms (bottom-up approach).

Senka Hadzic

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Key Challenges Identified:

- Regulatory invisibility of community networks within national telecom and digital policy frameworks

- Inadequate measurement metrics that fail to capture meaningful access and empowerment

- Limited access to financing, including universal service funds and SME support mechanisms

- Market concentration, crowding out small, community-led connectivity initiatives

- Capacity constraints, as community networks lack the legal and advocacy resources of large operators

Key Takeaways

- Meaningful connectivity must be understood as connectivity on people's own terms

- Community networks are not interim or "last mile" solutions, they are legitimate, sustainable models

- Joint advocacy is essential to shift policy narratives from access numbers to digital citizenship and rights

- Building ecosystems, rather than isolated projects is key to long-term regulatory impact

Conclusion

The session reaffirmed that meaningful and equitable connectivity requires more than expanding infrastructure. Community networks were recognised as effective, community-driven solutions to persistent access gaps, particularly in underserved contexts. However, their long-term sustainability depends on enabling regulatory frameworks, access to financing, and formal institutional recognition.

Speakers emphasised that lasting impact requires aligning top-down policy reforms with bottom-up community initiatives through joint advocacy. Strategic engagement by governments, donors, and civil society is essential to build inclusive digital ecosystems that support community agency, digital rights, and locally grounded development outcomes.

Joint Advocacy for Regulatory Impact: Building Ecosystems for Community Networks

Session 2

We the Community: Why We Can't Own Our Own Data?

Speakers:

- Gustaff Iskandar, Co-founder and Managing Director of the Common Room Networks Foundation

- Michael Ginguld, Director, Strategy and Operations, Rural Broadband Pvt. Ltd.

- Setu Upadhyay, Senior Policy & Advocacy Advisor, Internet Society

Moderator:

- Dr Syed S. Kazi, Director, Council for Social and Digital Development

Session Summary:

The session examined the evolving politics of data governance through the lenses of community rights, infrastructure ownership, and digital power asymmetries. Drawing on experiences from community networks across South and Southeast Asia, the discussion analysed why communities, despite being primary generators of data, continue to be excluded from meaningful control over data, digital infrastructure, and decision-making processes.

Speakers reflected on how the rapid digitisation of public services, increasing platformisation of the internet, and the expansion of AI-driven data economies have heightened risks related to privacy, consent, and data misuse. While governments increasingly position themselves as custodians of citizen data through regulatory frameworks, the discussion highlighted persistent gaps between policy intent and lived realities, particularly for marginalised and underserved communities. The session emphasised that debates on data ownership and governance cannot be addressed in isolation, but must be situated within broader questions of infrastructure control, political accountability, and community agency.

Speaker Insights:

1. Community Connectivity as Political Infrastructure

Gustaff Harriman highlighted how community connectivity initiatives became critical lifelines during COVID-19 pandemic, yet continue to face declining policy attention in post-pandemic digital strategies. He framed data governance as a fundamentally political issue, where communities generate data but lack control over how it is accessed, monetised, or repurposed. Drawing on local

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Data is political; communities create value but lack control and agency.

experiences, he underscored contradictions in current governance models, where communities are restricted from using data for public or environmental good, while corporations extract and monetise data with limited accountability. He stressed the need for sustained policy advocacy, digital literacy, and community capacity-building to reclaim community agency in the digital ecosystem.

2. From Data Consumers to Community Stewards

Setu Upadhyay characterised the current data ecosystem as a "tragedy of the digital commons", where collective data generation contrasts sharply with concentrated corporate ownership and control. He emphasised that meaningful community data ownership is unattained without community control over connectivity infrastructure itself. Highlighting global examples, including regulatory reforms in Brazil, he demonstrated how shifts toward community-centric connectivity and regulatory recognition can rebalance power. He argued for systemic approaches that move communities from being passive data consumers to active stewards within data governance and digital economy frameworks.

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Data ownership begins with community control over digital infrastructure.

3. Consent, Purpose, and Practical Data Governance

Michael Ginguld grounded the discussion in practical considerations, noting that core questions around data ownership, consent, and rights predate the digital era and remain unsolved in contemporary policy debates. He distinguished between different categories of data and cautioned against one-size-fits-all regulatory approaches. Emphasising consent and purpose limitation, he argued that data collected for specific services should not be repurposed without transparency and user agreement. He further noted that while regulatory safeguards exist at the infrastructure level, platform-driven data exploitation and limited user awareness continue to pose significant challenges, underscoring the importance of digital literacy alongside regulation.

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Consent, literacy, and purpose limitation are central to fair data use.

Key Challenges Identified:

- Communities generate data but lack control over infrastructure, platforms, and value extraction mechanisms.

- Data protection laws exist but enforcement, accountability, and community-level safeguards remain uneven.

- Access to essential services increasingly requires data sharing, often under opaque consent frameworks.

- Growth of AI, IoT, and surveillance technologies deepens risks of misuse, profiling, and exclusion.

- Communities rarely participate meaningfully in data governance and policy design processes.

Key Takeaways:

- Data governance is not only a technical issue but a political one shaped by power, policy, and infrastructure control.

- Communities are primary data producers yet remain excluded from ownership, decision-making, and value creation.

- Meaningful data ownership is inseparable from community control over connectivity infrastructure.

- Rapid platformisation and AI-driven data economies have intensified risks related to consent, privacy, and misuse.

- Existing data protection frameworks show gaps between regulatory intent and on-ground realities, particularly for marginalised communities.

Conclusion:

The session underscored the urgent need to re-centre communities within data governance and digital infrastructure decision-making. Participants called for policy frameworks that move beyond symbolic data protection toward enforceable recognition of community rights over connectivity, data use, and local digital ecosystems. Without intentional support for community-centred connectivity, digital literacy, and accountable platform governance, current models risk deepening exclusion and consolidating power. The discussion reaffirmed that meaningful access, data justice, and democratic digital futures require sustained advocacy, regulatory reform, and investment in community-led alternatives.

We the Community: Why We Can't Own Our Own Data?

Session 3

Workshop: "Shared Device, Shared Spaces, Shared Languages: Rethinking Access at the Community Level"

"From Voices to Data: Co-Creating Language Technologies with Communities"

Speakers:

- Ritesh Kumar, Co-Founder and Director, Council for Diversity and Innovation, Co-founder and CEO of UnReaL-TecE LLP

- Prof. Bornini Lahiri, Assistant Professor of Linguistics, Indian Institute of Technology

Ritesh Kumar

Prof. Bornini Lahiri

Session Summary

This workshop focused on community-led approaches to data creation for language and speech technologies, emphasising that inclusive digital systems must begin with the active participation of the communities whose languages are being documented. Drawing on experiences from under-resourced and endangered languages such as Toto and Irula, the session highlighted how conventional data collection methods often fail to reflect local cultures, livelihoods, and worldviews.

The discussion outlined participatory methods including translation-based elicitation, stimuli-guided narration, role play, spontaneous conversations, and culturally adapted questionnaires. Speakers focused on the importance of capacity building through hands-on training, ethical engagement grounded in informed consent and trust, and recognising community members as co-creators rather than data sources. The workshop concluded that community-centred data practices are essential to developing language technologies that are equitable, accurate, and responsive to local realities.

Key Learnings and Challenges

The workshop highlighted that conventional questionnaires and prompts often fail to capture lived realities, leading to poor-quality or misrepresentative data. Participants learned that data collection must adapt to local contexts, livelihoods, and cultural norms. Challenges discussed included limited digital literacy, resource constraints, language endangerment, and the risk of extractive data practices if communities are excluded from decision-making. Capacity building and offline, low-resource workflows were identified as critical responses to these challenges.

Key Takeaways

- Community participation is essential at every stage of data creation, from design to validation.

- One-size-fits-all data collection methods are ineffective for under-resourced and endangered languages.

- Ethical data practices require ongoing consent, trust-building, and recognition of community agency.

- Community-centred data practices are foundational to equitable and inclusive language technologies.

Conclusion:

- The workshop demonstrated that inclusive language technology development begins with community-centred data creation. By combining capacity building, culturally grounded methods, ethical engagement, and participatory governance, communities can move from the margins of digital innovation to active roles in shaping technologies that reflect and serve their linguistic and cultural identities.

Shared Devices, Shared Spaces, Shared Languages: Rethinking Access at the Community Level

Session 4

"Women-Led Communities: Can We Build Equitable Community Networks as an Alternative to Platformisation"

Speakers:

- Sarbani Banerjee Belur, Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS-Pilani, Hyderabad campus

- Mahima, SoochnaPreneur, Digital Empowerment Foundation

- Gayani Perera, Project Manager, Foundation.lk

Moderator:

- Sonia Jorge, Executive Director, Global Digital Inclusion Partnership

Session Summary

This session explored whether women-led community networks can offer more equitable and meaningful alternatives to platform-driven connectivity. Drawing on experiences from India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia, the discussion highlighted how gendered social norms, safety concerns, and unequal access to devices shape women's digital participation. Speakers emphasised that community networks succeed when they are designed around women's lived realities, prioritising safe spaces, trust, and local leadership rather than infrastructure alone.

Speaker Insights

- Gayani Perera (Foundation.Ik, Sri Lanka) shared how women-focused digital centres and help desks address cyber harassment and fear online. By combining cyber safety awareness with continuous handholding, these spaces enable women, including homemakers and entrepreneurs, to use digital platforms confidently for livelihoods and daily needs.

- Sarbani Banerjee Belur (BITS Pilani) highlighted that connectivity projects often fail women because infrastructure placement, device access, and usage assumptions ignore gendered mobility and safety constraints. Her work demonstrated that when women shape network design and governance, community networks become more inclusive and sustainable.

- Mahima Sonal (SoochnaPreneur, Digital Empowerment Foundation) illustrated how women-led digital centres function in Dharchula, Uttarakhand as local information hubs. Through patient support and trust-based engagement, these centres help women access services, learn digital tools, and market handmade products online, strengthening both income and confidence.

> **"**
> The discussion underscored that meaningful digital inclusion depends on sustained mentoring and culturally sensitive approaches, not one-time training.

Women-Led Communities: Can We Build Equitable Community Networks as an Alternative to Platformisation

Key Learnings and Challenges

Women-Led Communities session underscored that women's digital exclusion is driven less by lack of skills and more by fear, surveillance, time poverty, and social control. Challenges include limited smartphone access, cyber harassment, lack of safe learning spaces, and inadequate funding for community-led initiatives.

Key Takeaways

- Women's leadership is central to building inclusive and sustainable community networks.

- Safe, women-only spaces enable confidence, learning, and meaningful use of connectivity.

- Connectivity must be designed around women's safety, time, and social contexts.

- Community networks can bridge online and offline empowerment, improving livelihoods, and wellbeing.

- Advocacy is needed to shift policy, funding, and design towards gender responsive connectivity models.

Conclusion

The session highlighted that women-led community networks offer a more equitable alternative to platform-centric connectivity by prioritising safety, trust, and local leadership. When women shape network design and governance, connectivity moves beyond access to enable confidence, livelihoods, and collective agency. The discussion reaffirmed that meaningful digital inclusion requires sustained, community-rooted support—not one-time interventions or infrastructure alone.

DAY 2

Session 5

Lightening Talks: The Power of Local Stories from the Field"

This lightning session brought together two grounded perspectives that demonstrated how local leadership, participation, and storytelling can reshape connectivity, media, and digital power from the ground up. Rather than focusing on infrastructure alone, the speakers highlighted how communities, when trusted with skills and agency, build more resilient, inclusive, and meaningful digital ecosystems.

Insights from Akhmat Safruddin (LocNet) -

Akhmat Safruddin shared field-based experiences from Indonesia and Philippines to show how community-led connectivity initiatives outperform externally designed solutions. Drawing from cases such as Taliabu Island and indigenous communities in West Java, he emphasised that meaningful connectivity emerges when communities co-design, maintain, and govern their own networks.

Across multiple Asian contexts, the work demonstrated that participatory approaches strengthen ownership, sustainability, and relevance. Akhmat also mentioned that connectivity only becomes meaningful when it improves social and economic wellbeing, supports local leadership, and recognises gender as a critical factor.

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Small tools, when placed in local hands, can create lasting systemic shifts.

Insights from Heena Singhal (Video Volunteers) -

Heena Singhal presented a contrasting yet complementary perspective focused on community media as infrastructure for voice and accountability. Over two decades of work across rural and marginalised communities in India, Video Volunteers has trained local citizens to document everyday governance issues through video stories, enabling dialogue with authorities and driving tangible change.

With over 20,000 community produced videos and a significant impact rate, Heena highlighted that connectivity and technology must serve participation, representation, and power redistribution, not just access. Their work showed that collaboration with government institutions, rather than confrontation alone, can unlock systemic impact. Innovations such as digital portfolios for community content creators further strengthened credibility, visibility, and long-term engagement.

Key Learnings and Challenges

- Communities understand their own realities better than external experts; solutions must start from a lived context.

- Capacity building is not just about tools, but about confidence, voice, and the right to be heard.

- Representation remains a major gap, with marginalised voices still excluded from mainstream digital and media platforms.

- Local power structures, mental health risks, and unpaid community labour pose persistent challenges.

- Top-down technology design continues to limit the potential of community first digital ecosystems.

Key Takeaways

- Meaningful connectivity is built through people, leadership, and trust, not infrastructure alone.

- Participatory and community-first approaches lead to more sustainable and inclusive outcomes.

- Gender-responsive leadership strengthens the longevity and relevance of networks

- Community media and connectivity together can bridge citizens and institutions

- The future of digital inclusion depends on shifting from top-down models to community-first technology and governance

Conclusion

The meaningful connectivity cannot be delivered through top-down infrastructure alone. Experiences from community networks and community media initiatives showed that when people are trusted as creators, decision-makers, and leaders, digital systems become more inclusive, resilient, and accountable. Centering community knowledge, gender-responsive leadership, and participatory design is essential to ensuring that connectivity strengthens voice, agency, and social well being rather than reproducing existing digital inequalities.

The Power of Local: Stories from the Field

Session 5

Workshop - "Build Your Own Network: Building Local Community Networks as Digital Public Infrastructure"

Speakers:

- Michael Ginguld, Director, Strategy and Operations, AirJaldi

- Manoj Bhardwaj, Head, Projects and Skilling, AirJaldi

- Sudharkar, Lead, Networks in Moinabad, Hyderabad, AirJaldi

- Rajesh, Coordinator, Telangana, AirJaldi

Session Summary

This workshop-focused session provided a grounded, practitioner-led overview of how community networks are planned, built, and sustained in the Indian context. Designed as a practical guide rather than a theoretical discussion, the session walked participants through the full lifecycle of a network—from identifying users and geography to selecting technologies, planning finances, and navigating regulatory compliance. Drawing on live examples from Telangana, Gujarat, and other regions, the session demystified the complexities of rural connectivity while underscoring that community networks are long-term infrastructure projects, not short-term pilots.

Speaker Insights

Network practitioners from AirJaldi and community network leaders shared step-by-step insights into real-world network deployment. They emphasised that connectivity design must begin with understanding who is being

connected, where they are located, and how demand may grow over time. Speakers illustrated how terrain, population density, and line-of-sight constraints influence choices between wireless and fiber technologies, and why technology-agnostic approaches allow networks to remain adaptable and cost-effective.

The speakers also highlighted operational realities often overlooked in connectivity initiatives. These included the need for careful network architecture planning, realistic assumptions about bandwidth and loads, and the importance of maintenance and upgrades over time. Drawing from experiences , they stressed that while tools and software simplify network design, successful deployment depends on aligning technical decisions with social, economic, and geographic context.

Key Learnings and Challenges

The session highlighted that sustainability is the central challenge for community networks. Beyond capital costs, ongoing operational expenses, regulatory compliance, and revenue generation must be planned from the outset. Participants learned that underestimating financial requirements, user numbers, or legal obligations can quickly destabilise networks. The complexity of India's telecom regulations, reporting requirements, and security compliance was identified as a significant barrier, particularly for small or first-time operators.

Key Takeaways

- Community networks must be designed around users, geography, and long-term demand, not technology alone.

- Wireless and fiber solutions involve trade-offs, mixed, flexible approaches are often most effective.

- Building a network is only the first step; sustainability depends on realistic financial and operational planning.

- Regulatory compliance is unavoidable and must be integrated into network design from the beginning.

- Despite challenges, community networks remain critical to closing persistent connectivity gaps and can succeed with the right planning, partnerships, and support.

Build Your Own Network: Building Local Community Networks as Digital Public Infrastructure

Session 6

Hyperlocal Community, Networks and Meaningful Access

Speakers:

- Prof. Sarbani Banerjee Belur, Visiting Assistant Professor, BITS-Pilani Hyderabad

- Ritu Srivastava, Director, Jadeite Solutions

- TB Dinesh, Technical Director, Janastu

Moderator:

- Senka Hadzic, Independent Research Consultant, ARISE member

Session Summary

This panel explored how hyperlocal community networks enable meaningful access by responding to social realities such as language diversity, low literacy, gender exclusion, and fragile connectivity. Through practitioner experiences from Odisha, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, the discussion highlighted that community networks are not merely technical infrastructures but people-centred systems rooted in trust, local governance, and cultural context.

The session demonstrated how hyperlocal approaches, such as community radio-anchored networks, offline local servers, women-led service nodes, and audio-first platforms, can sustain access even in contexts of poor connectivity, internet shutdowns, or commercial neglect. Speakers emphasised that meaningful access emerges when communities are able to create, manage, and use networks in ways that reflect their everyday needs and identities.

Speaker Insights

- **Ritu Srivastava** shared insights from integrating community radio with community networks through initiatives such as CR Bolo. She explained how radio stations function as trusted public institutions with existing infrastructure, skilled local staff, and deep community relationships. During COVID-19 and internet shutdowns, radio-anchored networks enabled voice-based services, IVR systems, and local content access in multiple dialects. Her intervention underscored that voice, local languages, and offline access are critical to meaningful connectivity, especially where data costs and literacy remain major barriers.

- **TB Dinesh** discussed hyperlocal networks designed around storytelling, local knowledge, and women's participation. He highlighted how low-literate women use audio- and video-based tools to record stories, annotate content collectively, and share knowledge within trusted groups before public dissemination. He also reflected on emerging experiments with AI-based voice interfaces to reduce interaction barriers, while noting persistent challenges around policy ambiguity and the absence of regulatory frameworks for such community-driven models.

- **Prof. Sarbani Banerjee Belur** shared the experience of the Pathardi community network in a tribal village in Maharashtra where commercial connectivity was unavailable due to geographical constraints. She described how a SIM-based router and offline local network enabled women-led eSathi (Ethos) operators to deliver essential e-governance, banking, and documentation services. Over time, the network evolved into a self-sustaining, women-led ecosystem, supporting cultural knowledge repositories, cooperative finance, and livelihood linkages. She also mentioned that trust, local ownership, and women's leadership allowed the network to remain relevant even after commercial telecom services later entered the area.

Key Takeaways

- Hyperlocal community networks enable meaningful access by centering language, culture, and trust.

- Voice-based and offline-first systems are essential in low-literacy and multilingual contexts.

- Women-led and community governed models strengthen long-term sustainability.

- Community networks remain relevant even after commercial connectivity arrives.

- Policy and regulatory gaps continue to constrain grassroots innovation.

- Meaningful access requires sustained monitoring and culturally sensitive approaches, not one-time training.

Conclusion

The panel discussion underscored that meaningful access is not achieved through connectivity alone, but through hyperlocal, community-owned networks that integrate local content, language, trust, and care. By centering women's leadership, community media, and offline-first approaches, the discussion showed how such networks remain resilient, socially relevant, and sustainable even alongside or in the absence of commercial connectivity.

Hyperlocal Community, Networks and Meaningful Access

Session 8

Community Networks in the Era of AI & Platformisation

Speakers:

- Rajasekhar P., Commons Collective

- Indriyatno Banyumurti, Executive Director of ICT Watch Indonesia

- Gustaff, Co-founder and Managing Director of the Common Room Networks Foundation

Moderator:

- Siddhartha Malempati, Directing Council-General, Commons Collective

Session Summary

This session discussed how community networks are navigating the growing influence of artificial intelligence and platform-driven digital ecosystems, particularly in contexts where centralised technologies deepen exclusion rather than resolve it. Drawing from experiences in India and Indonesia, the session explored how hyperlocal, community owned networks offer alternatives to extraction, platform-centric models of connectivity.

Speakers reflected on how AI, data-driven platforms, and commercial internet architectures reshape power, control, and access, often marginalising communities who are primary data producers but have little agency over how technology is deployed. The discussion positioned community networks as critical counter-models - grounded in local governance, ethical use of technology, and people-centred design.

Speaker Insights

Gustaff Harriman Iskandar (Common Room Networks Foundation, Indonesia)

Gustaff highlighted that technology adoption, including AI-enabled systems, must be rooted in cultural context and community consent. Drawing from Indonesia's diverse geographies, he demonstrated how community networks rely on frugal, locally built infrastructure and strong human relationships rather than scale-driven efficiency. He cautioned that platformisation risks cultural homogenisation and dependency unless communities retain control over design, data, and decision-making.

Indriyatno Banyumurti (ICT Watch, Indonesia)

Indriyatno emphasised that platform-driven connectivity without digital literacy can amplify harms such as misinformation, online gambling, and exploitative content

economies. He stressed that meaningful access in the era of AI requires continuous mentoring, ethical awareness, and contextual digital literacy, rather than one-time training. Community networks, he argued, are well placed to embed these values because they operate within trusted local ecosystems.

Rajasekhar (Commons Collective, India)

Rajasekhar discussed Indian community network experiences that foreground community ownership, cooperative funding, and shared governance. He critiqued platform-centric and policy-driven connectivity models that reduce communities to service endpoints rather than stakeholders. He also shared emerging work on localised, offline-first, and federated AI applications designed to support education and knowledge access while minimising dependence on centralised platforms and data extraction.

Key Learnings and Challenges

- Platformisation concentrates power, data, and decision-making away from communities.

- AI systems risk reinforcing exclusion if deployed without local context and accountability.

- Digital literacy must address platform harms, data, ethics, and community wellbeing.

- Regulatory and policy environments often privilege large platforms over community-led models.

- Funding and sustainability remain critical challenges for non-platform alternatives.

Key Takeaways

- Community network offers a people-centred response to AI-driven and platformised digital systems.

- Meaningful access in the era of AI depends on local governance, ethical design, and community agency.

- Frugal, decentralised, and offline-capable technologies can counter platform dependency.

- Capacity building must be sustained, relational, and culturally grounded.

- The future of inclusive digital ecosystems lies in community-controlled alternatives to centralised platforms.

Conclusion

The session AI and platformisation reshape the digital landscape, community networks are more relevant than ever. By prioritising local control, ethical technology use, and collective governance, community networks challenge extractive digital models and offer pathways toward equitable, resilient, and meaningful access. In an era dominated by platforms, the discussion reaffirmed that digital futures must be built with communities - not imposed upon them.

Community Networks in the Era of AI & Platformisation -

Session 9

Empowering Rural Changemakers: Lessons from SoochnaPreneurs

Speakers:

- Mansi, SoochnaPreneur, Digital Empowerment Foundation

- Priyanka Paswan, SoochnaPreneur, Digital Empowerment Foundation

- Manjuwara - SBM, Digital Empowerment Foundation

- Jinnat - SBM, Digital Empowerment Foundation

- Bharat Toto - District Coordinator, Digital Empowerment Foundation

Moderator:

- Abner Manzar, Research and Communications, DEF

Session Summary

The session highlighted the role of DEF's SoochnaPreneurs as grassroots digital changemakers enabling meaningful access to information, services, and connectivity in some of India's most remote disaster-prone, and underserved regions. Through lived experiences shared by SoochnaPreneurs and community leaders from Uttarakhand, Assam, North Bengal, and indigenous regions, the discussion demonstrated how locally rooted information intermediaries bridge critical gaps between communities and digital governance systems.

SoochnaPreneurs mentioned operating in contexts marked by weak infrastructure, geographical isolation, frequent natural disasters, and low digital literacy. In these settings, SoochnaPreneurs centres function as community-owned digital hubs, providing access to essential services such as Aadhaar, PAN, health cards, pensions, education support, and government entitlements, while also ensuring communication continuity during emergencies.

A key insight from the session was the transformative role of women SoochnaPreneurs. Women-led centres were shown to significantly enhance trust, inclusion, and participation, particularly for other women and girls, while challenging entrenched social norms. Beyond service delivery, SoochnaPreneurs act as educators, mentors, disaster responders, and cultural stewards, supporting livelihoods, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and local knowledge preservation.

The session reinforced that meaningful digital inclusion requires more than connectivity—it depends on human intermediaries, continuous capacity building, cultural sensitivity, and community ownership. The SoochnaPreneur model demonstrates how decentralised, people-centred approaches can create resilient digital ecosystems that respond to local realities and aspirations.

Key Takeaways

- SoochnaPreneurs serve as trusted bridges between communities and digital public services.

- Women-led digital centres strengthen inclusion, leadership, and social change.

- Community-owned connectivity is critical in disaster-prone and remote regions.

- Digital literacy must be practical, continuous, and context-specific.

- Meaningful access combines infrastructure with local trust and agency.

Conclusion

This session highlighted that empowering rural changemakers is central to building inclusive and resilient digital societies. By placing communities, and particularly women as key drivers of digital service delivery, the SoochnaPreneur model offers a scalable pathway for achieving meaningful access that is equitable, sustainable, and grounded in local realities.

Empowering Rural Changemakers: Lessons from SoochnaPreneurs -

Session 10

Community Networks as Digital Lifelines in Times of Crisis

Speakers:

- Heena Singhal, Video Volunteers

- George Thangmuansang, Manipur Community Network Access (Online)

- Shalini A., Janastu

- Aamir Rahman, Deputy General Manager, Digital Empowerment Foundation

Moderator:

- Dr Syed S. Kazi, Director, Council for Social and Digital Development

Session Summary

Community Networks as Digital Lifelines in Times of Crisis was a panel discussion that examined how hyperlocal community networks function as critical infrastructure during periods of disruption such as internet shutdowns, ethnic conflict, climate disasters, and prolonged isolation in remote regions. Drawing from lived experiences in Manipur, Odisha, and Uttarakhand, and other crisis-prone geographies, the session highlighted that connectivity failures intensify social vulnerability, misinformation, and exclusion. Speakers collectively argued that community networks, when locally owned and governed, can sustain communication, access to information, and collective resilience when mainstream digital systems collapse.

Speaker Insights

Heena Singhal (Video Volunteers) reframed community networks as people-centred ecosystems rather than purely digital infrastructure. Drawing from COVID-19 and mining-affected regions in Odisha, she emphasised that trusted local information, human networks, and community journalists play a decisive role during crises marked by misinformation, fear, and governance gaps. Her insights stressed that the right to be heard, local storytelling, and community accountability mechanisms are as vital as internet access itself.

Shalini A. (Janastu) shared implementation experiences from Manipur and Odisha, highlighting the challenges of introducing community networks in areas unfamiliar with such models. She explained that adoption depends on grounding connectivity in everyday community needs, news access, safety, healthcare, and education, especially during shutdowns and conflict. Her intervention highlighted that local Wi-Fi and mesh networks enable communities to stay connected internally even without internet backhaul, strengthening trust, coordination, and confidence during prolonged crises.

George Thangmuansang (Manipur Community Access Network) joined online and offered a first-hand account of building a community-owned network amid Manipur's extended internet blackout following ethnic violence. He described how digital exclusion deepened fear, disrupted education, healthcare, and livelihoods, and fueled misinformation. The Manipur Community Access Network emerged as a peace-building and resilience initiative, enabling students, displaced families, and local entrepreneurs to regain access to information, services, and learning through a locally managed system.

Aamir Rahman (Digital Empowerment Foundation) addresses regulatory and operational considerations, clarifying that hyperlocal community networks can be deployed lawfully within India's existing framework when compliant equipment, spectrum bands, and tower norms are followed. He further emphasised that sustainability - economic, technical, and social - must be embedded from the outset, with women-led models and livelihood integration playing a central role in long-term network liability.

Key Learnings and Challenges

- Internet shutdowns, disasters, and conflict transform connectivity into a survival necessity rather than a convenience.

- Community networks function most effectively when they combine digital infrastructure with strong human and social networks.

- Low awareness, misinformation, equipment access, and local capacity gaps hinder adoption in remote and conflict-affected areas.

- Misinformation thrives during digital blackouts, deepening fear and mistrust between communities.

- Sustainability requires local ownership, livelihood integration, gender inclusion, and continuous capacity building.

Key Takeaways

- Community networks act as digital and social lifelines during crises where mainstream connectivity fails.

- Hyperlocal, community-owned models strengthen resilience, safety, and collective problem-solving.

- Meaningful access must prioritise trusted information, local voice, and community governance.

- Women-led and youth-driven participation enhances continuity and sustainability of networks.

- Policy-compliant, ethically deployed community networks can support peace-building, education, and recovery in crisis-affected regions.

Conclusion

The session reinforced that community networks are not merely alternative connectivity models but essential resilience infrastructure in times of crises. By centering local ownership, trusted information flows, and inclusive participation, community-led networks enable communities to remain connected, informed, and empowered amid conflict, disaster, and digital exclusion.

Community Networks as Digital Lifelines in Times of Crisis

Concluding Plenary

Data Governance and Accountability

Speakers -

- Neeti Biyani, APNIC Foundation

- Setu Upadhyay, Internet Society

- Rakshita Swamy, Social Accountability Forum for

- Action and Research

- Indranil Niyogi, Swiss Philanthropy Foundation

Chair -

- Dr Amir Ullah Khan,

Session Summary -

The concluding panel reflected on the intensity and depth of discussions across the two days of the Digital Citizen Summit, focusing on accountability as the defining challenge of digital citizenship. The conversation examined how rapid digitisation, platformisation, and data-driven governance have outpaced mechanisms for transparency, redress, and citizen agency. Speakers and audience members collectively questioned who defines accountability, who demands it, and how marginalised communities, often reduced to data points, can reclaim rights, voice, and power within digital systems. The session set the agenda for future action, calling for rights-based governance, bottom-up accountability, community collectivisation, and active citizenship to shape the path ahead.

Speaker Insights -

- **Indranil Niyogi** framed accountability as a rights-based demand, not a charitable offering by systems. Drawing from grassroots and philanthropic work, he highlighted how digitised governance often lacks feedback loops—where citizens submit data or applications but cannot track decisions, delays, or denials. He argued that true accountability begins when communities have the capacity and mechanisms to seek answers and challenge systemic bottlenecks.

- **Rakshita Swamy** emphasised that accountability must be clearly qualified—accountable to whom and by whom. She critiqued top-down models that treat digital exclusion as "collateral damage" and called for bottom-up accountability, where historically marginalised communities can question design failures, demand compensation for harm, and ensure that systems work for those most excluded, not just the majority.

- **Setu Upadhyay** discussed the accelerating reality of platformisation, noting that accountability is rarely

embedded by design. While some global regulations attempt to rein in platforms, he cautioned that enforcement risks authoritarian misuse. He stressed that sustained citizen awareness, collective pressure, and balanced regulation are essential to ensuring platforms remain accountable without undermining freedoms.

- **Neeti Biyani** reframed the debate by questioning whether people are still citizens or increasingly becoming digital subjects. She highlighted how terms like "inclusion" and "empowerment" reinforce power imbalances and argued for a shift toward agency, where individuals and communities design their own digital futures. She underscored the importance of recognising intersectional identities—gender, age, caste, class, and ability—in shaping digital vulnerability.

Audience Perspective

Audience interventions expanded the discussion to senior citizens excluded from digital systems, linguistic and cultural diversity, women's underrepresentation in data collection, welfare delivery failures, climate vulnerability,

and the erosion of citizen-centric governance. Speakers and participants collectively stressed the importance of collectivisation, unions, community organising, and citizen activism as practical pathways to demand accountability and resist systemic neglect.

Key Recommendations

- Define responsibility, transparency, and redress across governments, platforms, and data intermediaries.

- Centre local realities, gender, language, and lived experience in connectivity and platform design.

- Expand digital literacy to include consent, surveillance awareness, and citizen data rights.

- Resource women-led groups, community networks, and civil society as bridges between people and digital systems.

- Mandate explainability, audits, and rights-based safeguards in AI-driven and data-intensive systems.

Townhall

Mr. Amandeep Singh Gill, Under-Secretary-General and Special Envoy for Digital and Emerging Technologies

Mr. Amandeep Singh Gill, Under-Secretary-General and Special Envoy for Digital and Emerging Technologies (joined online)

Session Summary:

This town hall provided a critical bridge between the community-focused discussions of the summit and the high-level global governance processes at the United Nations, particularly the implementation of the Global Digital Compact (GDC).

Mr. Gill outlined the UN's three-pillar approach to AI governance:

1) Addressing information asymmetries through an AI Advisory Body.

2) Fostering a global dialogue for inclusive and interoperable AI rules.

3) A major push for global capacity-building, including a

proposed $3 billion fund for countries at risk of being left behind.

The interactive Q&A session tackled core summit themes: the role of youth in setting ethical benchmarks, the challenge of "selfishness" in international cooperation, the balance between curbing AI-powered misinformation and protecting free expression, and most importantly, how to "ladder up" community voices to shape global frameworks.

Key Discussion Points :

The UN's Framework for Inclusive AI Governance: Mr. Gill detailed a structured approach to ensure AI benefits all humanity, moving from high-level principles (GDC) to practical mechanisms like the AI Advisory Body and a global capacity-building fund, emphasizing that "every country, big or small, rich or poor, has a seat at the table."

Youth as Architects, Not Just Beneficiaries: In response to a question, Mr. Gill asserted that young people are "overturning orthodoxy" and actively writing the tech future. He advocated for grounding the GDC in local contexts where young innovators are most active, allowing them to set high benchmarks for trusted innovation and data rights.

The Central Challenge: "Selfishness" vs. Solidarity: Mr. Gill identified the biggest hurdle to inclusive governance as a "me-first" approach in international engagement. The solution, he argued, is a "people-centric democratic approach" that uses community voices to dampen this selfishness and promote global cooperation.

A "Laddered-Up" Implementation for the GDC: Mr. Gill and Mr. Manzar discussed practical strategies to connect global frameworks with on-the-ground realities. This includes working with UN Regional Commissions, Resident Coordinators, city mayors, and directly with community organizations through initiatives like the Open Source Week and the DPI Summit.

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In the name of countering misinformation... we take harsh and excessive measures... They may be driven by good intentions, but they end up having a disproportionate impact on sustainable development and freedom of expression.

Mr. Amandeep Singh Gill on balancing accountability with rights.

Participant Interaction

The session was highly interactive, with three key questions from the audience (and moderators) that shaped the dialogue:

Question 1 (Youth & Ethics): How can youth influence global norms to prioritize community rights over corporate rights and center ethics in the GDC?

Question 2 (Grassroots Inclusion): What are the challenges in bringing grassroots voices to the global table, and what strategies is the UN employing?

Question 3 (Misinformation & Free Speech): How can global governance balance freedom of expression with the need for AI accountability regarding misinformation?

Key Recommendations :

- Operationalize the "Laddering Up" Model: The UN, in partnership with organizations like DEF, should systematize the channeling of community-led innovations and demands into regional and global policy discussions, using the GDC as a living framework.

- Invest Heavily in Multidisciplinary Capacity Building: There is an urgent need to fund and implement the proposed global AI capacity-building fund, focusing on government officials, educators, and citizens, particularly in the Global South.

- Champion Context-Specific, Open-Source Solutions: Support for open-source AI models, digital public infrastructure (DPI), and shareable use cases should be a cornerstone of international digital cooperation to avoid vendor lock-in and promote sovereignty.

Adopt a Nuanced Approach to Misinformation: Governance must avoid overly broad measures that lead to internet shutdowns or censorship, instead combining platform accountability with robust, bottom-up digital literacy initiatives.

To watch the townhall : Townhall with Amandeep Singh Gill | UN Envoy on Digital & Emerging Technologies | DCS 2025

Way Forward

The discussions at CNX 2025 highlighted the urgent need to re-centre people within an increasingly platform-driven digital ecosystem. While digital platforms and public digital infrastructures are expanding rapidly, CNX platform highlights that access alone does not guarantee empowerment. The way forward lies in advancing meaningful access that integrates rights, accountability and community agency, ensuring that digital systems serve public interest rather than reinforcing existing inequalities.

This platform calls for stronger policy and regulatory frameworks that promote transparency in data use, algorithmic decision-making and platform governance, particularly where livelihoods, public services and civic participation are concerned. Governments and regulators must actively address power concentration and safeguard the rights of citizens, workers and small producers, while civil society and research institutions play a critical role in evidence-building, advocacy and public awareness.

At the same time, CNX emphasises the importance of hyperlocal, community-led digital models that strengthen social connections and enable collective participation. By fostering collaboration between communities, policymakers, technologists and global networks, CNX seeks to contribute to alternative digital pathways rooted in equity, accountability and democratic values. These efforts are essential to shaping a digital future where people are not merely users of platforms, but active digital citizens with voice, choice and agency.

Thank you all for your engagement and support. Together, let us continue strengthening our efforts towards digital empowerment and equal digital citizenship!

See you at CNX 2026.

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