

Bridging the digital divide of marginalized communities through digital inclusion initiatives: A narrative review

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Digital inclusion has emerged as a vital strategy for addressing social exclusion in an increasingly digitized world. However, marginalized communities continue to experience multiple layers of digital exclusions due to infrastructural deficits, socio-cultural constraints, and institutional shortcomings. Although numerous digital inclusion initiatives have been implemented globally, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the specific communities targeted, the types of initiatives employed, and the long-term challenges to their sustainability. This narrative review aims to address these gaps through three key objectives: (a) to examine the profiles and geographic distribution of marginalized communities targeted by digital inclusion initiatives; (b) to identify the types of initiatives implemented and the nature of the organizations responsible; and (c) to explore the challenges that threaten the long-term sustainability of these initiatives. A narrative review was conducted using literature retrieved from Scopus and Web of Science, enabling a thematic synthesis of the existing literature. Eleven relevant studies were analyzed in depth. Findings reveal that digital inclusion efforts primarily target rural populations, ethnic minorities, indigenous groups, and low-income urban residents across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and Western countries. Telecentres emerged as the most commonly implemented initiative, particularly in rural areas, along with mobile internet and broadband adoption programmes. These initiatives are typically operated through partnerships among governments, NGOs, and private stakeholders. These initiatives have shown promise in improving digital access and literacy, particularly among rural women and indigenous populations, disadvantaged youth and ethnic minorities. However, their sustainability is undermined by persistent challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, affordability barriers, socio-cultural resistance, institutional inefficiencies, and privacy and safety concerns. Without context-sensitive, inclusive, and community-driven approaches, digital inclusion initiatives risk perpetuating the very inequalities they seek to overcome. This review underscores the need for more adaptable and localized strategies to ensure the long-term impact of digital inclusion on bridging the digital divide in marginalized settings.

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