Societal Empowerment through Digital Inclusion

The following policy recommendations for societal empowerment have been developed following discussions with H.E. Fatou Bom Bensouda, High Commissioner of The Gambia to the United Kingdom and the Royal Kingdom of Norway, and Gambians in Norway and The Gambia. The following three policy recommendations are aimed at strengthening societal empowerment and economic development in The Gambia:

1. Build the Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) in The Gambia based on the principles of universal and inclusive access.
2. Provide every community with a Community Learning & Living Lab to enable underserved Gambians to participate in the digital society.
3. Equip universities and technology centres with the knowledge and means to connect schools and communities and contribute to the Digital Gambia.

Economic development in the last decade has shifted from physical to cyber-physical systems, from data and information to knowledge, and from knowledge to artificial intelligence. Given the economic value of digital societies, The Gambia's path to digital transformation needs to be addressed. The digital divide remains a significant and gendered issue, with the majority of people, especially women and girls, not actively using the benefits of the internet. Bridging the digital divide is a key issue in international discussions, such as the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Forum, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the agenda of UN Tech Envoy Amandeep Singh Gill. These discussions have focused attention on Digital Public Infrastructures (DPIs) to address access and information gaps.

Build the Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) in The Gambia based on the principles of universal and inclusive access

The first policy evolves from the government's plans for digital services and extends the government's transition to universal and inclusive access. The commercialisation of access has resulted in high costs for mobile broadband access and a de facto digital divide. The Gambia's DPI therefore needs to include access to non-profitable services such as information on health, education, agriculture, literacy and government services.

Provide every community with a Community Learning & Living Lab to enable underserved Gambians to participate in the digital society

The second policy directly addresses the digital divide and the flow of information to underserved communities. The internet provides opportunities for access to trusted information and services, but is often hampered by fake news and the influence of social media (see Figure 1). Connected citizens not only have direct access to government services and other reliable sources, they can empower themselves to take advantage of digital services. The unconnected members of society only have information channels to empower themselves and lack the ability to directly access reliable information.
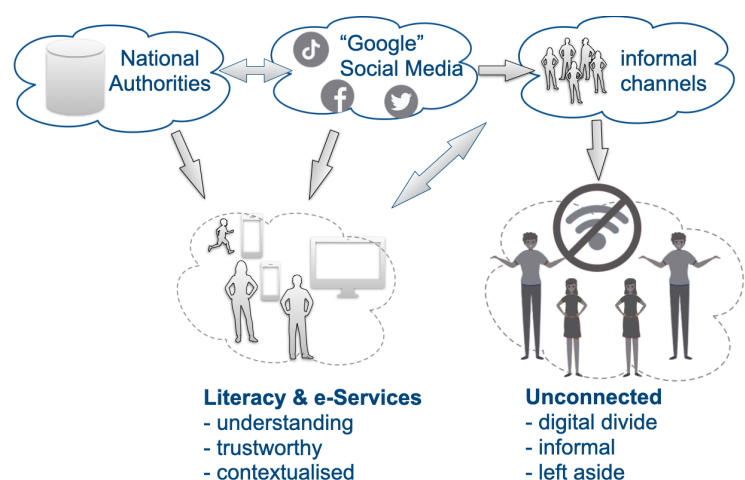

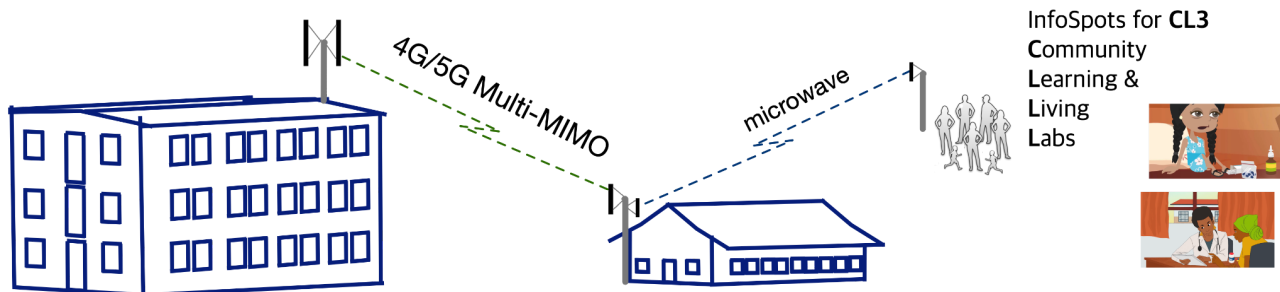Figure 1: Information flow in underserved and unconnected societies

Establishing a Community Learning & Living Lab (CL3) in each community, and actively supporting the unconnected in obtaining digital information and using digital services, is a potential step towards universal and inclusive access.

For example, countries such as Tanzania and Burkino Faso have started to transition their postal services to develop electronic communications infrastructure, support and promote the use of ICT, develop online services and local content, and develop a local ICT-based industry.

Equip universities and technology centres with the knowledge and means to connect schools and communities and contribute to the Digital Gambia

Universities and technology centres play a crucial role in The Gambia's digital transformation. However, they need the means and practical knowledge to contribute directly to access and the digital ecosystem. The establishment of Regional Competence Centres (RCCs) on connectivity and digital service creation allows students to gain practical experience and use this expertise to connect schools and society (see Figure 2).

A prerequisite is the strengthening of the National Research and Education Network (NREN) in The Gambia

Figure 2: Connectivity from Universities to Schools and Communities

to minimise the cost of access. The NREN can be part of the government's DPI for nationwide access, as has been done in other countries. With students from the RCCs connecting schools and communities, the cost of communication can be significantly reduced. For example, equipment to connect schools in Tanzania costs less than USD 500 per school. A current topic of discussion is how 4G/5G technology can be used to reach remote schools, as 5G replaces wired or wireless solutions for connectivity. To enable school connectivity through mobile technology, a certain amount of spectrum should be reserved for the access part of the Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI).

About the policy recommendation

The policy recommendation was developed based on the practical implementations in Tanzania and Kenya by University of Oslo (UiO), the Basic Internet Foundation and NGOs in 14 countries in Africa, including

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