



Resolution 2510 (2023)¹

Closing the digital divide: promoting equal access to digital technologies

Parliamentary Assembly

1. As early as 2001, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defined the “digital divide” as “the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities”.
2. Since then, the continued expansion of the fields in which these technologies are used has broadened the situations where they create inequalities, with the Covid-19 pandemic casting a harsh light on the problem. From the moment restrictions on the movement of people were imposed, digital communications quickly took on unprecedented importance in almost all areas of life. Commercial exchanges, contacts with public administrations, certain types of work, interactions with family, education, medical appointments: even in spheres where information technologies had until recently played a modest role, their place quickly expanded.
3. As the Secretary-General of the United Nations pointed out at the time, the pandemic made the digital divide a matter of life and death for people unable to access essential healthcare information. Today, this divide is threatening to become the new face of inequality as it reinforces the social and economic disadvantages already suffered by women and girls, the elderly and the young, ethnic minorities, socio-economically disadvantaged people, people with disabilities and people in particular situations such as prisoners, protected adults and asylum seekers.
4. Today, access to the internet and to the material means required in order to be able to use it and proficiency in basic digital tools have become fundamental needs; digital exclusion is a major barrier to equality. Lack of access to digital technologies prevents those concerned from accessing public services, education and many of the opportunities that life has to offer. Awareness of this problem must spur us to act now to adopt a truly inclusive approach to the digital realm.
5. People already suffering from inequality and discrimination and struggling to make their voices heard are left even more exposed by the digital divide. As policy makers, we stand at a crossroads today: we can either continue to let technologies exacerbate existing disparities or harness these technologies to build a safer, more sustainable and more equitable future for all.
6. The digital transition cannot take place without State support. In order to ensure equal access to rights in an increasingly digitalised world, States must take steps to combat digital illiteracy and to provide effective support to all those who are not proficient, or not yet sufficiently proficient, in digital technologies. They must guarantee equal access for all to education and careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and see to it that everyone has access to the tools and infrastructure needed in order to fully exercise their rights and participate in society on an equal footing. They must ensure that digital technologies, tools and services that are essential to citizens' lives remain affordable for their users and that efforts are made to limit their environmental impact. As it can prove particularly difficult for some children with disabilities to follow online education, States must provide the tools and mechanisms necessary to ensure that these children enjoy equal and unhindered access to education, particularly in times of crisis.

1. *Assembly debate* on 23 June 2023 (19th sitting) (see [Doc. 15776](#), report of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, rapporteur: Ms Edite Estrela). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 23 June 2023 (19th sitting).



7. The Parliamentary Assembly further underlines that authorities have a special responsibility in the digital area when they themselves set about digitalising public services. In fact, while objectives such as rationalising administrative costs, simplifying the management of case files or improving the efficiency or speed with which cases are processed may be legitimate, under no circumstances must those who do not have ready access to digital technologies be left behind in the pursuit of those goals. To do so would deprive them of access to their rights and constitute an infringement of the obligation to ensure continuity of public services.

8. The Assembly refers to the texts which it has already adopted and which provide important solutions in this area, in particular [Resolution 2256 \(2019\)](#) "Internet governance and human rights", [Resolution 2343 \(2020\)](#) "Preventing discrimination caused by the use of artificial intelligence" and [Resolution 2144 \(2017\)](#) "Ending cyberdiscrimination and online hate". It also draws States' attention to General Recommendation No. 1 of the Council of Europe Expert Group on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) on the digital dimension of violence against women, which contains crucial recommendations addressed to governments to ensure that the measures they take to implement the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention") fully reflect the digital dimension of the situations covered by the Istanbul Convention.

9. In the light of these considerations, and in order to remedy the inequalities that already exist in this area and prevent the emergence of new ones, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member and observer States, as well as on all States whose parliaments enjoy partner for democracy status to:

- 9.1. consider all policies for combating the digital divide as a priority;
- 9.2. focus in these policies on making digital technologies, tools and services inclusive, equitable, accessible, affordable and safe for all;
- 9.3. provide strong, structured and sustainable support to local initiatives that seek to achieve this aim in order to avoid leaving behind all those who do not know how to use digital technologies, or who do not want to;
- 9.4. ensure that policies to combat the digital divide are accompanied by adequate funding;
- 9.5. subject these policies to regular scrutiny by national parliaments;
- 9.6. remove any obstacles that prevent some children with disabilities from enjoying equal access to education when the latter is based on digital tools and technologies.

10. As regards the development of mobile telephone and high-speed or very high-speed internet services, the Assembly, referring to Resolution 2256 (2019) mentioned above, recommends that States:

- 10.1. implement national public investment policies which are coherent, with the objective of ensuring universal access to the internet;
- 10.2. aim in particular to remedy geographical imbalances (for example between urban and rural or remote areas);
- 10.3. implement policies for deploying networks that make it possible to achieve this objective.

11. As regards combating digital illiteracy and ensuring access to education and careers in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, the Assembly calls on States to:

- 11.1. consider the provision of digital training for everyone, regardless of gender, age, social status, economic situation, disability and any other personal characteristic, as an investment;
- 11.2. promote access for all to studies and careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, along the lines already set out by the Assembly in Resolution 2343 (2020) mentioned above;
- 11.3. provide continuing training and make it accessible, so that the entire population can enjoy the benefits of digital tools;
- 11.4. ensure equal access to seed funding, venture capital funding and the acquisition of business skills in the field of digital technologies.

12. As regards the digitalisation of public services, and bearing in mind that exercising rights online requires the user to have, *inter alia*, an adequate internet connection, device, storage capacity, operating system and paid-up subscription, and public services themselves to have correctly functioning devices, servers and tools that are designed to take into account the full variety of situations of all potential users, the Assembly calls on States to:

12.1. move from a logic of fully digital public services to a logic of full accessibility of these services, including through maintaining non-digital access to public services wherever necessary to ensure equality of access to and continuity of public services and their adaptation to users;

12.2. take into account, from the first steps in designing any new online service, the needs of and obstacles faced by all potential users of the service, in order to guarantee equal access for all;

12.3. ensure that individuals always have access to effective support in carrying out their administrative procedures, not only to complete and submit online forms but also to get advice from public service staff able to answer specialised questions about the rights and procedures in question;

12.4. develop free internet access points and services to support individuals in carrying out their administrative procedures online;

12.5. promote the development of a chain of production, reuse and repair of digital devices and tools, provided that they work properly and are available at an affordable price;

12.6. guarantee to each individual the possibility of correcting, through simple and accessible procedures, any error in the data concerning them and in procedures carried out online.

13. With around 3.6 billion people in the world having no internet access, the Assembly further considers that States must take into account in development aid measures the importance of reducing the digital divide as a means of facilitating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.