

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

ECLAC SUBREGIONAL HEADQUARTERS FOR THE CARIBBEAN



Report of the expert group meeting to review a study on digital inclusion in Caribbean digital transformation frameworks and initiatives

A review



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Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean

Expert group meeting to review a study
on digital inclusion in Caribbean digital transformation
frameworks and initiatives: a review

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**REPORT OF THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING
TO REVIEW A STUDY ON DIGITAL INCLUSION IN CARIBBEAN
DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION FRAMEWORKS AND INITIATIVES:
A REVIEW**

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CONTENTS

A. ATTENDANCE AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK.....	2
1. Place and date	2
2. Attendance	2
3. Meeting agenda.....	2
4. Documentation.....	2
B. SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS.....	2
1. Opening of the meeting.....	2
2. Presentation of the study “Digital inclusion in Caribbean digital transformation frameworks and initiatives: a review”	3
3. Main conclusions and recommendations	4
4. Discussion.....	5
5. Closing of the meeting.....	6
Annex I List of participants	7

A. ATTENDANCE AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK

1. Place and date

1. The Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC) subregional headquarters for the Caribbean convened an expert group meeting to review the study “Digital inclusion in Caribbean digital transformation frameworks and initiatives: a review”. The meeting was convened virtually via Zoom on 5 October 2022.

2. Attendance¹

2. The meeting was attended by Caribbean information and communications technology (ICT) experts from the member States of Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago, and from the associate members of Anguilla and Aruba. ICT experts from the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Caribbean Telecommunications Union (CTU), the Public Utilities Commission – Anguilla (PUC), the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT), and the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) – British Virgin Islands also participated.

3. Meeting agenda

1. Opening of the meeting
2. Presentation of the study “Digital inclusion in Caribbean digital transformation frameworks and initiatives: a review”
3. Discussion
4. Closure of the meeting

4. Documentation

3. The background document for the meeting was the draft study entitled “Digital inclusion in Caribbean digital transformation frameworks and initiatives: a review” which was presented for review by the meeting participants. The study evaluated the extent to which digital inclusion was considered in Caribbean digital transformation frameworks by assessing the digital transformation policies of 11 countries and territories of the Caribbean, and the views of ICT focal points and policymakers in the region.

B. SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

1. Opening of the meeting

4. The Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean welcomed the participants to the online event. She explained that the purpose of the meeting was to engage in a discussion on the study “Digital inclusion in Caribbean digital transformation frameworks and initiatives”. Digital inclusion, she contended, was not simply another buzzword describing efforts to reduce inequalities in access to ICTs or to bridge digital divides. While such aspects were certainly considered, digital inclusion moves beyond that to examine the relationship between social inclusion and access to, use of and benefits derived from ICTs, from an intersectional perspective.

¹ See annex 1 for a full list of participants.

5. Digital inclusion is, therefore, inextricably linked to social inclusion and social inequality, and to that end, the Director situated it within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. She asserted that combatting inequality was an essential aspect of the global sustainable development agenda. Two of the key principles of the 2030 Agenda are to “leave no one behind” and to “reach the furthest behind first”. Moreover, Sustainable Development Goal 10, which aims at reducing inequality “within and among countries” is of particular relevance to this discussion, as the digitally excluded tend to be the most marginalized in society, including indigenous peoples, rural communities, women, people with low education or income, migrants and refugees, older persons, and people with disabilities.

6. As a framework, the Director noted that digital inclusion acknowledges that the introduction and wider dissemination of digital technologies in our societies was not a panacea for the challenges that were faced. Rather, it addresses the ways in which digital technologies amplifies existing societal challenges and creates new ones if the societal transformation process is left undisturbed. It also acknowledges that the persons most likely to be negatively impacted are those who are already the most marginalized in society. To that end, given the well-known negative impacts of inequality on sustainable development, and the links between social and digital inclusion, it is, therefore, imperative to strive to ensure that within the Caribbean, the digital sphere does not become, or remain, another sphere of inequality.

7. Against that background, the Director informed the meeting that the study on digital inclusion in the Caribbean was the first to be conducted by the subregional headquarters for the Caribbean, and she envisaged exploring the topic further in future research endeavours, as part of ECLAC’s support for the sustainable development aspirations of the subregion. The aim of this instalment was to provide policymakers and other relevant stakeholders in the Caribbean with a theoretical foundation for a policy discussion on the issue in the Caribbean. To that end, the review and assessment of the policy framework of the targeted 11 Caribbean countries and territories provided critical insight into how digital inclusion was conducted.

8. The Programme Management Officer of the Caribbean Knowledge Management Centre also offered remarks during the opening of the meeting. He noted that the focus of the research was to identify a baseline from the assessment of the digital transformation policy frameworks of the targeted countries. From this baseline, it is expected that subsequently, at set intervals within the medium-term, progress in advancing digital inclusion would be measured to facilitate regional and global comparisons.

9. This preliminary dive into the digital transformation policy environment revealed that most countries did not explicitly treat with the development issue of digital inclusion. He suggested that this was probably informed by the varying stages that countries were at in their digital transformation journeys. In particular, the data revealed limited strategic direction, where digital inclusion efforts appeared to be piecemeal and ad hoc. Furthermore, in most cases, only tacet references and inferences in national ICT agendas, where they existed, and in some national development plans.

10. Altogether, he indicated that an important takeaway from the research experience was that given the nexus between digital inclusion and digital transformation, it was imperative that the requisite policy framework foster and facilitate whole-of-society engagement in the pursuit of digital transformation.

2. Presentation of the study “Digital inclusion in Caribbean digital transformation frameworks and initiatives: a review”

11. The results of the study and the methodology used to gather the data were presented by the Associate Programme Management Officer of the Caribbean Knowledge Management Centre and Kwesi Prescod, consultant to ECLAC in the conduct of the study. Taking into consideration the impacts of COVID-19 in the Caribbean, the Associate Programme Management Officer observed that digital inclusion

was identified as a relevant context within which to initiate a review of digital transformation within the subregion and facilitated an inclusive approach regarding the diversity of the countries and territories in the Caribbean. The study countries and territories were Anguilla, Aruba, Barbados, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

12. The presenters observed that the lack of a common understanding of the theoretical concepts surrounding digital inclusion and the broader context of digital transformation was particularly evident from the different policy approaches adopted in the subregion. As a result, the research methodology included the review of a wide variety of documents, including national development policies, national and sectoral ICT plans, various sources of administrative data, as well as surveying and interviewing ICT policy experts in the study countries.

3. Main conclusions and recommendations

13. Digital inclusion is not as yet a priority in the digital transformation frameworks of countries, where those exist. The countries and territories of the Caribbean took different approaches to digital transformation. Progress, however, was unevenly deployed, as revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which showcased the many people who did not have access to devices and connectivity and were largely isolated and deprived of the many benefits ICT provide. This notwithstanding, the broader concept of inclusion tends to be considered in the national development plans of many countries, thus providing a foundation upon which they can pursue digital inclusion as a national policy priority. Cross-cutting, multisectoral digital transformation plans that are people-centred and that aim at ensuring digital inclusion for all should be developed.

14. The limited availability of data regarding digital transformation in the Caribbean, including data regarding populations that are excluded, is a challenge. Furthermore, the lack of administrative data, in particular, with regard to initiatives that had been undertaken to further the digital transformation or digital inclusion, represents a severe limitation. The lack of data regarding populations that are excluded, suggests that digital inclusion efforts may be ad hoc or may encounter challenges in the future. At present, given that few digital inclusion efforts have been undertaken, any well-designed effort is likely to have a positive impact. However, bearing in mind the 2030 Agenda principles to “leave no one behind” and “reach the furthest behind first”, efforts to identify not only who is left behind, but also who is furthest behind, should be made as soon as possible. Therefore, Caribbean governments should ensure regular reporting related to existing digital inclusion initiatives.

15. No formal mechanism exists in the Caribbean to measure performance and track the progress of countries in pursuing digitally inclusive societies. A set of metrics to measure digital inclusion would be essential for evidence-based policymaking. The development of methodologically sound, contextually appropriate metrics to facilitate action on digital inclusion would be an important future step. To that end, policymakers should discuss the development of digital inclusion metrics to further digital inclusion in the Caribbean and ultimately reduce digital divides within national borders and the Caribbean subregion.

16. Digital transformation efforts in the Caribbean are primarily government focused. Notwithstanding, the digital skills within the public service in most countries is limited, and there is a lack of awareness surrounding digital tools. The available data suggest that in only a few countries are public servants comfortable using digital tools and electronic information. As a result, to ensure that digital transformation efforts are not hampered by a lack of skilled human resource within government, there is, therefore a need to intensify efforts to increase the ICT skill level of the Caribbean populace, particularly within the public service, including both public-facing and back-office services.

4. Discussion

17. The representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines welcomed the draft study, and acknowledged that, due to the limited participation of experts from her country, the study did not fully capture the number of initiatives and developments in ICT and digital inclusion in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and indeed, in other countries of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS). For example, although the countries of the OECS subregion were at different stages in their implementation, there had been some progress towards the passage of supporting legislation in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, including the Freedom of Information, Data Protection and Privacy and the Electronic Evidence Acts, which had all been submitted for the consideration of Parliament, yet to be passed.

18. The representative also observed that the Government, through the Ministry of Education, had embarked on an extensive ICT training programme throughout the country. She, however, could not provide data on the degree to which the programme was inclusive, such as the level of participation by people with disabilities.

19. Further, the representative suggested that the section in the study on “Expert views on digital inclusion in the Caribbean”, should also be expanded to treat with additional barriers beyond access to devices. Suggested dimensions included bandwidth, quality of Internet connection, reliability of connection, Internet providers and security. ECLAC welcomed this suggestion, which will be taken into consideration for future instalments, that will explore efforts in greater detail. Moreover, from a national perspective, ECLAC remained especially interested in the reach of the ICT skills programme and the extent to which it included people with disabilities.

20. The representative of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago thanked ECLAC for conducting this study and expressed her appreciation for the emphasis that had been placed on digital inclusion as a policy priority. This reconciled with the focus of Trinidad and Tobago, which had transitioned to this expanding policy position from one which merely took consideration of digital divides. In particular, she observed that the four dimensions of access, motivation, skills and trust that were highlighted in the study were critical pillars for closing ICT gaps at the national level.

21. Taking into consideration that the data for the study was collected in December 2021, the representative also revealed that the Authority expected to publish quarterly market updates for the first and second quarters of 2022 in the near future. She suggested that these reports may contain data which could be of value to the study. ECLAC undertook to review the data to identify any appropriate updates that could be included.

22. The representative of the CARICOM Secretariat noted that inclusion issues were impactful for the subregion and thanked ECLAC for the study. The representative also welcomed the large number of countries which were included in the study, as that would enable the Secretariat to better use this research in its engagement with the member States. Ultimately, the representative looked forward to being able to widely share the published study with ICT officials and other experts throughout the Caribbean when it is released.

23. The representative noted that CARICOM had several regional plans which had already been approved and enquired about ways in which the various processes could be harmonized, coordinated and highlighted to better facilitate the adoption and adaptation by member States. Two examples which were proffered were “Fast Tracking Digital Transformation” and the “Girls in ICT”, which were both approved in February 2022. The representative also advised about the existence of a regional ICT skills plan, and recalled that around 2014, the region agreed to some core values, which included social inclusion. In this regard, she envisages that the Secretariat and ECLAC will be able to collaborate to bring together these and other development pieces to advance digital inclusion in the Caribbean.

24. Ultimately, the representative suggested that existing regional plans could be highlighted in the section “Comparative analysis of digital inclusion, and implementation of, Caribbean digital transformation frameworks”. ECLAC welcomed this suggestion for strengthening the study, and the opportunity to further collaborate with the Secretariat to advance digital inclusion in the Caribbean.

25. Wayne Butcher, an ICT expert, commented that the study was very timely and extremely useful. He noted that input-oriented metrics were very important and suggested that consideration be given for the use of specific indicators from the ITU Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development, and in particular, the core list of ICT indicators, as a useful starting point. ECLAC welcomed the suggestion on the role which the core list of ICT indicators could play in response to the lack of a formal measurement mechanism.

5. Closing of the meeting

26. In concluding the discussions, the Programme Management Officer of the Caribbean Knowledge Management Centre thanked the meeting participants for their active engagement during the research phase of this project and their interventions and suggestions for improving the study, which were all well received. He reminded participants that digital inclusion is a multi-year research agenda for ECLAC for the next several years, and stressed that, in an effort to increase the likelihood that the research remains relevant to the entire subregion, the approach of including a large number of diverse study countries will continue. Ultimately, ECLAC looks forward to furthering its collaboration with the countries and territories of the subregion to advance the sustainable development of the Caribbean.

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