Digital Challenge For Civil Society

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This article is based on **Digital challenge for civil society** which was published in The Indian Express on 23/07/2021. It talks about the challenge in front of Civil Societies in times of digital era and how it can be resolved.

Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the deep fault lines that have created challenges for India's transition towards a more digitally enabled society.

During the pandemic, several essential services, ranging from access to healthcare services – including vaccines – to education, livelihoods, and rations — have felt the effects of unequal distribution of technology in the country.

Thus, with increasing inequalities and the burden on systems, the need for digitally driven programmes is now more urgent than ever before.

In this context, even the **development sector (NGOs, Civil Society Organisation (CSOs))** cannot remain aloof to new technologies. They must strive for digital transition so that it can be helpful in resolving various digital challenges.

Digital Challenge

- **Digitally Inaccessible Remote Communities:** The first wave of Covid-19 brought with it an immediate and urgent need for the development sector to shift towards technology, when faced by the inability to access communities remotely.
  - A survey in June 2020 indicated that only about half of the respondents were aware of online classes being held in their communities.
  - The consequences of these gaps are likely dire – an estimated 10 million girls could drop out of school.

- **Unserved Remote Areas:** With digital services not being uniformly distributed, communities in remote areas often require on-ground staff to deploy and supplement digital tools.
    - They may also face significant barriers in accessing funding for innovative and infrastructural digital solutions. This, in turn, poses challenges for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).
- **Digital Divide:** During the second wave, urban Indians have consistently relied on social media platforms to seek life-saving medical supplies but rural Indian could not utilise it to the fullest.
    - Unequal access to the internet has also made accessing and registering for Covid-19 vaccines in India a challenge, leaving millions of Indians unable to even register for them.
- **Digital Illiteracy:** It's apparent that a majority of Indian citizens lack **digital literacy** and online safety is an alien concept to many who may have digital literacy.
    - Language and accessibility barriers and limited data and infrastructural systems further compound the scenario.
- **Social barriers and systemic inequality** also play a large role in this — even today, mobile ownership among women is significantly lower than their male counterparts.
    - Moreover, communities continue to remain averse to mobile devices in the hands of young people, especially young women, to prevent them from disrupting existing patriarchal systems.

Way Forward

- **Need For Technology Enabled Development Sector:** It is time for the development sector (NGOs/CSOs) to shift towards technology-driven ecosystems, to enable a more systematic and concerted effort to bridge the present digital divide and help access remote communities digitally.
- **Technological Intervention:** The process of creating and implementing digital solutions is multi-layered and complex. According to many CSOs, the first step is to **address the demands posed by technological interventions across a programme life cycle.**
    - This calls for customised digital interventions. The issue gets complicated because CSOs need to work with local communities who face digital challenges themselves.
    - Digital interventions have to factor in these imperatives.
- **Feedback from People:** The success of technology-based programmes is ultimately contingent on the support for it on the ground, and community feedback is critical to driving successful and sustainable programmes.
    - Programmes, therefore, need to integrate and account for interpersonal mediation and the last-mile "human touch".

- **Partnership with Stakeholders:** To enable them to incorporate technology at scale, CSOs require more systematic partnerships with stakeholders across the development ecosystem.
  - Collaboration with the government, funders, and other civil society partners is vital to normalising the use of technology-based interventions at scale.
  - For example, the government and private sector service providers need to prioritise the availability of digital infrastructure and connectivity while civil society integrates programmatic responses into government priorities.
- **Documenting the Learnings:** There are no blanket solutions to the critical challenges that come with embracing technology in framing programmes for the development sector.
  - Documenting their learnings is an important first step in pushing for more open conversations with regard to digital interventions in India.

Conclusion

Recognising the essential role that digital tools, access and literacy will play in the months and years to come, Civil societies and NGOs should strive to bring technological revolution in their working.

Drishti Mains Question

Civil societies cannot remain aloof to new technologies, and need to shift towards technology-driven ecosystems. Discuss.