PRESS RELEASE

Digital Empowerment Foundation concludes Community Network Xchange-Asia Pacific (CNX-APAC) 2024 and Digital Citizen Summit (DCS) 2024 in Partnership with Government of Telangana and T-Hub

The Digital Empowerment Foundation is pleased to announce the successful conclusion of the 8th edition of the Community Network Xchange-Asia Pacific (CNX-APAC) 2024 and the 6th Digital Citizen Summit (DCS) 2024, held on **15th and 16th November 2024** at **T-Hub, Hyderabad** in partnership with **Government of Telangana, T-Hub, Internet Society**, **APNIC Foundation**, **Association for Progressive Communications**, **Global Digital Inclusion Partnership**, and **Centre for Development Policy and Practice.**

There were more than 1,600 registrations and over 90 speakers from across South Asia, who highlighted the need to build a future where there was no denial of rights due to a lack of digital infrastructure, data biases, or algorithmic injustice, and to develop responsible AI for social good.

The welcome address for the summit was delivered by **Sujit Jagirdar, CEO of T-Hub**, where he highlighted issues related to the digital divide and challenges in sectors such as health, education, and insurance, emphasising how digitisation could ensure the welfare of the people.

The inaugural plenary session titled **"Imagining a Just Future: Intersections of Access, Rights, and AI",** moderated by **Pankaj Pachauri [Founder & Editor-in-Chief, GoNews]**, delved into the intricate interplay between digital rights, access, and artificial intelligence in shaping a more equitable future. **Sowmya Kidambi [Director & CEO, The Barefoot College, Tilonia]**, set the stage by underscoring the deep interconnection between rights and access, stressing that fundamental access to rights remains a critical issue in the digital age. **Rakshita Swamy [Founder and Director, Social Accountability Forum for Action and Research (SAFAR)]** critically examined technological solutions to governance challenges, highlighting the limitations of tools like facial recognition in MNREGA and Aadhaar in addressing corruption, and emphasised the need to confront systemic issues before pursuing digital justice. **Sonia Jorge [Founder and Executive Director, Global Digital Inclusion Partnership]**, introduced the concept of "meaningful access," spotlighting how intersecting factors like gender, caste, and class shape access disparities, both locally and globally, and potentially exacerbate social inequalities. Rajnesh Singh **[CEO, APNIC Foundation]** concluded by advocating for robust infrastructure as the cornerstone of digital inclusion, stressing the importance of foundational development for enabling meaningful technological accessibility.

The inaugural session highlighted the need for a holistic approach to digital transformation, balancing technological innovation with a deep understanding of systemic inequalities and social structures.

Key Highlights of the Two-Days Event:

1. **Discussions on AI, Access, Rights, Algorithms, and Accountability**

The two-day event featured thought-provoking discussions on AI, algorithms, and accountability from a citizen-centric perspective, with participation from renowned organisations such as Digital Green, SFLC, Access Now, Youth Ki Awaaz, Pacta, CDPP, Commons Collective, DFL, POV, and ISEA. Workers' unions, including the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and the Telangana Gig Workers and Platforms Union, highlighted the challenges of data-driven governance and its impact on citizen rights.

The discussions underscored the critical intersection of access, rights, and artificial intelligence, calling for citizens to remain at the centre of digital transformation while stressing the importance of strong accountability from corporations and governments for their digital policies and deployments, which continue to shape lives and future experiences.

2. **Public Hearing on "Mass Digital Exclusion"**

The session on 'Mass Digital Exclusions,' organised by SAFAR, MKSS, LibTech India, and Jharkhand delegates, combined a Jansunwayi (Public Hearing) and a Panel Discussion on Digital Accountability to address systemic flaws in welfare delivery and their impact on fundamental rights. During the public hearing, individuals shared firsthand experiences of being excluded from rights such as wages and pensions due to issues like data theft and corruption.

The session concluded with a powerful protest song critiquing corruption, exclusion, and governance failures, followed by discussions on how inadequate infrastructure, lack of accountability, and misuse of user data exacerbate digital exclusion and undermine citizen rights.

3. **WiDEF Launches India Round of Grants to Close the Gender Digital Divide:**

Women in the Digital Economy Fund (WiDEF) unveiled its India Round of Grants aimed at bridging the gender digital divide. The key highlights of the initiative were shared, focusing on empowering women with access to digital tools and opportunities.

The grants are open to local small and medium-sized for-profits and nonprofits with valid FCRA registration. WiDEF will support innovative projects in five core areas: improving access and affordability, developing relevant digital tools, fostering digital literacy and skills, enhancing online safety, and driving gender-focused research.

This program underscores WiDEF's commitment to advancing women's digital inclusion and economic participation, calling for organizations to seize the

opportunity to drive transformative change.

4. Reports, Book and Journal Launches

- **An Exploratory Study of Adoption and Usage of Technology by Rural Women for Entrepreneurship and Empowerment":** This report explored the challenges rural women face in accessing technology, particularly mobile phones, and shared their lived experiences.
- **"Connected Resilience: Gendered Experiences of Meaningful Connectivity through a Global Pandemic":** Launched by the Global Digital Inclusion Partnership, this report examined the impact of internet connectivity on gender and digital inclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also provided policy recommendations to bridge the digital divide, focusing on women and marginalised communities.
- **The Digital Journey to Swaraj:** The book highlights grassroots change by showcasing how Fellows used digital tools to create citizen-focused solutions and strengthen digital ecosystems. A testament to the transformative impact of the Digital Swaraj Fellowship, this anthology captures the experiences, learnings, and insights of the 2023-2024 cohort of Fellows who have championed digital inclusion across diverse regions of India. This initiative shares personal reflections on their challenges and successes, celebrating their journeys as emerging leaders in the digital and development sectors.

  This launch celebrated the power of digital transformation and the vital role of changemakers in bridging digital divides and building inclusive communities.

- **Navigating through Digital and Social Realities: Stories of Struggle, Hope, and Resilience:** The launch of a book by Youth Ki Awaaz (YKA) and the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), featuring 30 citizen stories that explore the challenges and opportunities of digital access in India. The book aims to highlight grassroots narratives, emphasizing the role of digital connectivity in enabling citizen rights and fostering inclusivity.

- **The Journal of Development Policy and Practice,** released by Osama Manzar, Founder-Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation, featuring articles on the intersection of technology and society.

5. Presentation on BYTES BEYOND BANDWIDTH (3B on Wheel)

The session led by Asshar Farhan on 'BYTES BEYOND BANDWIDTH.' This initiative aims to address the unequal distribution of telecommunication networks and the resulting digital divide, despite advancements in optical fibre infrastructure.

The event underscored the need for placing citizens at the centre of digital transformation and ensuring robust accountability from corporations and governments for their digital policies and deployments.

For more information and to access reports and session materials, please visit:

- Community Network Xchange: cnxapac.org
- Digital Citizen Summit: dsummit.defindia.org

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