

Chapter 9

Asia – Europe Cooperation on Empowering Woman and Youth: Digital and Education Connectivity

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Asia–Europe Cooperation on Empowering Women and Youth

DIGITAL AND EDUCATION CONNECTIVITY

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Introduction

Connectivity has become a major theme in the agenda of the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) since 2014. The ASEM Pathfinder Group on Connectivity that was convened in 2016 submitted its recommendations at the 12th ASEM Summit held in Brussels in October 2018. The Summit adopted possible ‘Tangible Areas of Cooperation in the Field of Connectivity’ that would serve as a guiding tool to take the Connectivity agenda forward. The focus areas of cooperation are as follows:

- Connectivity policies and plans
- Sustainable connectivity
- Trade and investment connectivity
- Future connectivity and digital economy
- People-to-people connectivity
- Security challenges linked to connectivity

With the challenges posed by the global COVID-19 pandemic and the fears and uncertainties that have been raised, many may wonder about the impact on the ASEM connectivity agenda. The spread of the coronavirus seems to have given further pause to the globalisation agenda and emboldened the populists and ultra-nationalists to call for more protectionist measures and to roll back policies on connectivity. Yet, the lesson to be learnt from the rapid spread of the virus is how the world is far more connected than we think. The only way we are going to deal with the devastating impact of COVID-19 and control future pandemics is through more connectivity not less. We need digital connectivity to help us through the lockdown and ‘stay home’ orders. Home-based learning for kids and telecommuting or remote working for adults requires access to the internet. We also need more connectivity amongst our scientists and researchers in the race to find a cure or vaccine; we need more institutional connectivity to mount better-coordinated responses to such global challenges, and the list goes on.

Through the ASEM platform, countries in Asia and Europe need to redouble efforts on the connectivity agenda and synergise the different connectivity strategies and plans – from the ASEAN Masterplan on Connectivity to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative to the latest EU-Japan Partnership on connectivity. As we face the double-challenge of recovering from the disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the coming Fourth Industrial Revolution, education, training, and infrastructure for digital connectivity and digitalisation will be a major priority.

In this chapter, I will focus on the digital and people-to-people connectivities aimed at empowering women and youths.

Why the Focus on Women and Youths?

The old African proverb that ‘if you educate a woman you educate a family (nation)’ has long been a rallying call for developmental specialists to try and mainstream women’s empowerment in various development projects and assistance. Some studies have shown that on average women reinvest up to 90% of their income into the family compared to 30%–40% by men, creating long-term socio-economic gains for their communities. The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2020 notes that there is a strong correlation between a country’s gender gap and its economic performance.¹

While the importance of women and gender equality in the development of societies and nations is recognised, women remain under-served in many countries. Gender inequalities persist in many countries across the world. Women’s access to quality education and employment remains a big challenge. The McKinsey Global Institute in one of its report noted that if men and women were to participate equally in the global economy, they would add another US\$12 trillion to global gross domestic product (GDP), an increase by 26%.² Currently, women contribute to only 37% of global GDP.

As societies and economies are transformed by new information and communications technologies (ICT), women face insurmountable obstacles in leveraging on these new technologies to improve their livelihoods and realise their potential. Some of these key obstacles are reflected in the low rate of female students’ participation in science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) education and the gender imbalance in tech skills and tech jobs. Fundamentally, one of the most important challenges is the lack of access to the internet, digital devices, and mobile technology.

How to ensure women have equal access to the opportunities presented by the new technologies in their route to empowerment should be a priority in the ASEM agenda. This would also align the ASEM agenda with the United Nations Sustainable Development

Goals 2030 (UN SDGs), in particular Goal No. 5, which is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

To focus on youth is to keep an eye on the long-term future of countries. Young people account for a large and growing proportion of the population in many developing countries. There are 1.2 billion youths aged 15–24 years around the world and unfortunately up to 70 million of these youths are unemployed and another 145 million underemployed.³ According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), youths are three times as likely as adults to be unemployed. A high level of youth unemployment is not only a drain on a country's vitality but has many other political and societal implications. The dissatisfaction of jobless youths can lead to social unrest and political instability, and jobless youths are also more likely to emigrate.

In many of the ASEM Partner countries, youth unemployment is a real challenge. Some of this unemployment is a result of skills mismatch, and some arises out of the need for fundamental and structural reforms of the economies. Education and skills are important to youth development. However, with technological evolution moving fast and given its volatility, education and training cannot remain static and must evolve to meet the future needs of the labour market.

The magnitude of the problems of unemployed and underemployed young people has been recognised by the UN, and the SDG 2030 goals include one (SDG Target 8.6) that calls for reducing the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training. Another, SDG Target 4.4, also calls for a substantial increase in the number of youths who have relevant skills – including technical and vocational skills – to promote employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship. All these point to the importance of the empowerment of youths in fostering long-term growth and the well-being of nations.

We have established the importance of empowering women and youths. However, in order to put in place meaningful measures and advocate policies for their empowerment, we need to be conscious of how we define and measure empowerment.

There are many different definitions of empowerment, but most of the seminal definitions emphasise agency and gaining the ability to make meaningful choices. Naila Kabeer's seminal

³ See <http://www.intracen.org/news/How-digital-skills-can-help-tackle--youth-unemployment/>.

‘resources, agency, and achievements’ framework also provides a practical intuition for measuring empowerment, which involves three inter-related dimensions:

- Resources – gaining access to material, human, and social resources that enhance people’s ability to exercise choice, including knowledge, attitudes, and preferences.
- Agency – increasing participation, voice, negotiation, and influence in decision-making about strategic life choices.
- Achievements – the meaningful improvement in well-being and life outcomes as a result of the access to resources and increasing agency (Kabeer, 1999).

Looking at empowerment from this perspective, we need to focus first on ensuring equal access to resources and advocating for increasing the participation of women and youths themselves. Once we can ensure full access to these, we can then assess the outcome to identify any other possible obstacles that have to be addressed, whether cultural, social, or political.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated some of the trends that have been set off by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, such as digitalisation, artificial intelligence, and big data. COVID-19 has also brought the full power of the state to bear, as in the interests of public health, governments across Asia and Europe have acquired emergency powers to impose draconian lockdowns. To be able to participate fully in the new economy and in a society where government and community groups employ digital technology for service delivery, citizens will need to have equal access to the internet and digital technology. More importantly, there must also be concerted efforts to teach and acquire the skills and training needed to make full use of these technologies.

ASEM’s agenda and focus areas on connectivity have already recognised the importance of reaching out to women and youths to ensure their effective participation in society and the economy. The empowerment of women and youths is a pre-requisite for their social and economic advancement. For them to reach their potential, the ASEM connectivity agenda needs to place digital connectivity and its attendant soft connectivity in education and human resources as a priority.

The Importance of Digital Connectivity

The digital revolution has changed the way we work, access information, and connect with each other. ICT used in today’s increasingly digital age, such as the internet and mobile phones, amongst others, are becoming more important for the functioning of the 21st century economies. Expanding digital connectivity will accelerate economic growth. According to a World Bank estimate, more than 50% of the world’s people are still

offline. Increasing the percentage of the total population connected to the internet from 48% to 75% would add US\$2 trillion per year to world GDP and help create 140 million jobs. Thus, making the internet universally accessible and affordable should be a global priority. Connectivity for all remains an important development goal but also a tremendous challenge.⁴

ICT and digital connectivity are not only for delivering economic growth but can be effectively harnessed for achieving the SDGs by improving governance and achieving better outcomes in education and health.

While the internet and broadband have been cited by many as potentially important enablers of sustainable development, significant discrepancies persist as to who can actually access and benefit from the technology. A large proportion of the unconnected population is made up of women. The Alliance for Affordable Internet noted that gender discrepancies are not only ‘one of the most pernicious aspects of the global digital divide’ but also disconcertingly growing wider. Compared to men, women are less likely to be connected, and ‘even when they are online, women are less likely than men to use it to improve their lives’.⁵

As economies and societies are being transformed by digital technologies, a 2018 study by OECD found that some 250 million fewer women than men are online. Globally, women are 21% less likely to own a mobile phone than men. Many women live in areas with poor digital infrastructure, and they are less likely to be able to afford digital devices, broadband subscriptions, or the education needed to effectively use and unlock the potential of digital technologies. The digital gender divide is real, and there is a systematic under-representation of women in ICT jobs.⁶

Women’s access to education, healthcare, government services, employment opportunities, and other resources necessary for their empowerment can be enhanced through digital technologies and connectivity. In short, women’s participation in society and empowerment is now more than ever impacted by their access and utilisation of internet and mobile technology. Yet, inadequate infrastructure for connectivity and a lack of access to the technology prevent many women from fully benefitting.

⁴ See World Bank’s World Development Report 2016 on Digital Dividends.

⁵ See Joint Report from World Wide Web Foundation, Alliance for Affordable Internet and UN Women ‘Universal Service and Access Funds: An Untapped Resource to Close the Gender Digital Divide’, March 2018. <http://webfoundation.org/docs/2018/03/Using-USAFs-to-Close-the-Gender-Digital-Divide-in-Africa.pdf>.

⁶ OECD Report ‘Bridging the Digital Gender Divide: Include, Upskill, Innovate’, 2018. <http://www.oecd.org/internet/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>.

The availability of these technologies and infrastructure is one thing, but there is another hurdle to cross when it comes to empowering women – education and training platforms to ensure that women can fully benefit from the use of digital and mobile technologies. The inherent gender biases and socio-cultural stereotypes and norms continue to place obstacles towards equipping women with the skills and capacities to ensure digital inclusion.

In short, ICT has a vast potential for women empowerment. However, with respect to the use of ICT, a gender divide has been observed. Unless this gender divide is specifically addressed, there is a risk that ICT may aggravate existing inequalities.

Similarly, the potential for ICT to support youth development is significant in theory, but many youths around the world still face barriers when it comes to ICT access and the effective use of these tools. Barriers such as the lack of a mobile or broadband network and basic access to connectivity, and the affordability of access to handsets and mobile data services mean that many youths are not able to make full use of the potential of ICT for their own development. The digital divide between the youth and those more than 45 years old is significant.

Then there is also the question of education and training. Even for youths who have easy access to digital connectivity and are seen as digital natives, outdated education policies, lack of training capacities, and market failures may limit the ability of young people to fully participate in the economies. The skills mismatch is a real problem and is reflected in the high youth unemployment rates in several countries across Asia and Europe. Investments in ICT and digital connectivity must go hand in hand with investments in education and training to empower youths in making their choices in the economies. Equipping the youth with digital skills can enhance their employment opportunities.

In several ASEM countries, the need to invest in digital infrastructure to reap the benefits of digital connectivity is well recognised – from Bangladesh in the south to Mongolia in the north. The ASEM platform can be used to coordinate and bring about public–private partnership efforts in these investments. More importantly, ASEM partners can band together and ‘intensify their initiatives that create greater demand for international bandwidth’. These initiatives could include support for private sector broadband network buildout and growing the digital trade and economy between Asia and Europe. Such ASEM support would complement the objectives set out in ASEAN ICT Masterplan 2020 and Europe’s Digital Single Market Strategy (Lallana, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it starker how important digital connectivity and access to ICT is for the development of ASEM economies. COVID-19 is not just a health crisis. It has upended the lives of billions of people. With the worldwide lockdown and draconian measures to shut schools, billions have been forced to stay home and away from schools. COVID-19 has a disproportionate impact on women and youths. Girls and young women

are likely to be the first to be removed from school and may never return to schools as the economic consequences sink in. The ILO has projected an increase in global unemployment of between 5.3 million and 24.7 million because of COVID-19.

The need to go online to work to access education and services accentuates the existing inequalities that divide the countries that have good digital infrastructure and those that do not. According to the UN's International Telecommunications Union, before the COVID-19 outbreak, only 47% of the population of developing countries used the internet compared to 86% of the population of developed countries. Such a digital divide would only widen economic divides as the pandemic forced people to 'stay at home'. Where the internet is inaccessible or access unreliable, the online delivery of education is highly elitist and distortional in terms of expanding inequity.

ASEM, as a forum that brings together 51 countries from the north and the south with both developed and developing economies, therefore needs to put priority on closing the digital divide by investing in digital connectivity. Achieving affordable internet access should be a key priority in ASEM's agenda. The potential for a coalition of ASEM partners, such as China, Japan, and the EU, to work in tandem with host countries across Asia and Europe to create a Digital Silk Road should be top in the ASEM agenda. Digital connectivity should become no less of a necessity as electricity and water.

Together with investments in the hard infrastructure of digital connectivity, there is a corresponding need to expand connectivity in content and other soft infrastructure in the form of educational exchange, with cutting-edge online courses, cultural interactions, cross-border training, and mentorships. This is what I would collectively call 'education and human resource connectivity'. Education – formal and informal – should help prepare ASEM's women and youth for the changing nature of work and governance.

The empowerment of women and youth therefore requires not only access to physical connectivity and material resources, but more importantly to social resources, such as the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that can enhance their agency and ability to exercise choices and decisions and make meaningful improvements in their well-being and life outcomes.

Education and Human Resource Connectivity

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced schools and universities to shut down for months in many countries. Home-based learning for school children, online lectures and classes for university students has been the reality for millions of children and youth.

Yet the pandemic has also revealed the disparities in access to learning in countries and areas with good digital connectivity and those without fast and stable access to internet and mobile connections. Hence, the priority is for governments to invest in infrastructure for digital connectivity.

Good digital connectivity would also open up more creative and multifaceted ways for women and youths across Asia and Europe to access education – both formal and informal. Formal education in schools and institutions of higher learning, but also informal education targeting in particular women and youths to equip them with skills such as financial literacy and communications, etc. would also become more accessible and diversified. Education, information, and communication tools are thus the key to empowering women and youths, which in turn can lead to better-functioning societies.

In several developing ASEM countries, the education system is constrained by the lack of resources. The delivery of good education is hampered by shortages of teachers and shortages of learning materials. Even in the more developed ASEM countries, some of the education systems have been slow to respond to the challenges brought about by technological advances. The skills mismatch that is witnessed is testament to the fact that the formal education system is backward and not preparing the youth for the economy of the future. ICT education in ASEM countries is also uneven with wide intra- and inter-regional differences.

With better digital connectivity between Asia and Europe, how can the ASEM platform be also used to strengthen and enhance education and human resources connectivity to deliver interesting, relevant, and quality courses and skills for the women and youths of ASEM?

On formal education, ASEM education ministers can actively promote online education exchanges between schools and universities. The ASEM Rectors' Conference should focus efforts on how universities across Asia and Europe should join efforts to deliver courses that empower young people to think and act on regional, inter-regional, and global challenges. Universities should also work with industries and corporations to deliver the knowledge and skills necessary for the new economy. A new curriculum design that inculcates and supports lifelong learning amongst the students and courses so that they can continue to benefit from after graduation and throughout their working lives should be a key objective of any reforms taken by universities to prepare their graduates for a fast-changing world.

ASEM countries should invest more in the ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning (ASEM LLL Hub). Established in 2005 as a network of Asian and European higher education institutions working together to achieve excellence in comparative research on

lifelong learning, the ASEM LLL Hub provides a platform also to contribute to dialogue between researchers, practitioners, and policy makers on education reform and innovation.⁷

The cultural, linguistic, and developmental diversities within can ASEM open up tremendous opportunities for the creative harnessing of different strengths of education institutions and different pedagogy and diverse learning frameworks to present an interesting array of educational offerings. All these can be offered through the digital platform to the youth of ASEM countries to help them develop the necessary skills – from cultural sensitivity to empathy, from inter-cultural communications to international marketing, from financial literacy to fintech, and much more.

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) has a series of interesting education projects aimed at school-going children and youth that should be further developed. For example, there is the Asia-Europe Classroom Network – a platform for collaborative learning and intercultural exchanges amongst high school students in Asia and Europe. To turn the tide against toxic nationalism and promote a culture of international cooperation, ASEF can work with educational institutions across ASEM to design a Global Citizenship Curriculum made available to all schools in ASEM. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed our interdependence and, hence, the need to raise awareness on global emerging issues and create mutual understanding on what it takes to be a global citizen collaborating on and co-creating solutions to global challenges.

Another priority to be considered in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic is how to engage with the youth and youngsters graduating at this most challenging time, amid job losses, heightened competition, and economic disruptions. The cohort of youth graduating from high schools, colleges, and universities in 2020–2021 will face particular challenges, particularly in the job markets. The COVID-19 crisis could have a longer-term impact on this cohort of students. Studies have shown that entering the labour market during a recession has persistent negative effects on future earnings. The careers of this cohort of youths will be severely affected by COVID-19. The Ministers in charge of Youth Development in ASEM countries should be connecting to exchange information and policy experiences on some of the immediate and mid-term measures to help this cohort of youths.

What can be done to connect them to shore up skills, such as entrepreneurship, digital marketing, etc. should be considered. What are the skills that would be necessary for a ‘distance economy’? Can ASEM countries share their experiences on job creation,

⁷ Refer to website: <https://asemlllhub.org/>.

job support and trainee and internship programmes and consider cross-border cooperation to plug into each other's programmes.

A fundamental issue in considering the empowerment of youths is how to deal with rising job competition as more jobs 'move to the home' with telecommuting gaining traction after the pandemic. Several tech giants have announced that they are making the move to work from home a more-or-less permanent one. Facebook has said that it expects more than half of its 45,000 employees will work from home within the next 10 years. The ability to work from home while empowering some would of course also mean heightened job competition. Many jobs up for grab would be open to global competition. Many of these jobs would be contract based, adding to the precarity and insecurity of workers. Going digital and remote working open up both opportunities and challenges. Empowering youths to understand both the opportunities and challenges should be a priority in the ASEM agenda.

For the empowerment of women in the digital age, a lot needs to be done. As noted earlier, the digital gender divide is huge. COVID-19 will only further exacerbate this divide. The divide is manifested in different aspects. For example, women in developing countries have less access to the internet and mobile technology, while those in developed countries may not have problems with access but instead face a gender gap in fields of science, technology, engineering, and maths that grows with age, as well as the systematic under-representation of women in ICT jobs and in tech start-ups.⁸

Beyond addressing the issue of access (which ASEM countries should make a priority through investments in digital connectivity), many of the gaps to be addressed relate to education and training. Education and training institutions, together with social policy institutions, need to work together to deliver relevant training courses that can further equip and empower women to grasp the opportunities offered by technology. Having training courses that are flexible in schedule and modular in design would help to remove the obstacles to women's informal education and training. However, even more important than the training course would be mentorship and support schemes that can help women to enter STEM fields and tech industries. Studies have shown that one of the best ways to empower women in the workplace and to build sustainable female leadership is through structured mentorship where women can learn from each other (Neal, Boatman, Miller, n.d.). Digital connectivity can engender online mentorship where women can inspire women in ASEM countries.

⁸ OECD Study, 14 March 2018, 'Empowering Women in the Digital Age: Where do we stand?'

Concluding Remarks

Digital technologies are transforming the worlds of business, work, and service delivery. Women and youths are two groups in our societies that need special attention to reap the digital dividends. Women, because the gender inequalities persist, will be made worse by the technological disruptions if attention is not paid to how they can access and utilise the technologies. Youths of this generation will be most impacted by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the need to be nimble and flexible to cope with a rapidly changing economic landscape and increased global competition.

Empowering women and youth through digital connectivity complemented by improvements in the delivery of education, training, and human resource capacity building should, therefore, be one of the key priorities in ASEM's agenda. The stakes are high because the digital revolutions will leave behind countries that do not make the necessary reforms to unleash the full potential of their women and youth in the digital era.

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