



WORLD WIDE WEB
FOUNDATION

DIGITAL EQUALITY

An open web for a more equal world



World Wide Web Foundation Strategy: 2017 - 2022

DIGITAL EQUALITY

VISION

An open web for a more equal world.

MISSION

To build alliances, evidence and action globally and locally to achieve equal digital rights for all, backed by the vision and voice of Sir Tim Berners-Lee.

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

The World Wide Web Foundation (Web Foundation) was established in 2009 by the inventor of the World Wide Web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee. We believe that the web is a public good and a basic right, which should benefit all of humanity equally. This document gives a brief overview of our strategy for the period of 2017– 2022.

From 2012 to 2016 we pursued three policy advocacy goals with a strong focus on the Global South – making internet access more affordable, strengthening the movement for digital rights, and opening up government data online to enhance civic participation.

During this period, we:

- Influenced government policy across more than a dozen countries, protecting and enhancing the web for more than half a billion people.
- Became a key voice in debates around digital rights and development, with original research, such as the Web Index and the Affordability Report, becoming ‘go-to’ materials for policy-makers and influencers.
- Built dynamic global partnerships for action, such as the Alliance for Affordable Internet, the Web We Want campaign, and the international Open Data Charter.
- Grew annual turnover from \$1.5m to \$5m and expanded our team from around 10 to over 30 – the majority of whom are from, and based in, the Global South.

Our distinctive capabilities as an advocacy organisation, which we seek to strengthen in the next five years, include:

- Independence, credibility and objectivity
- The moral authority and convening power of Sir Tim Berners-Lee
- Global reach and grassroots base – through our strong presence and partnerships in the Global South and our influence in international forums, we can bring experience and ideas from the South to bear on key policy debates.
- Holistic approach – we understand that economic and social rights are indivisible from political and civil rights in the online world, and our work embraces both.

2

THE CHALLENGE: DIGITAL INEQUALITY

Over the next five years, we will focus on the growing challenge of digital inequality.

The United Nations and several national governments have recognised internet access, skills, and freedoms as essential for people to realise their human rights and participate fully in society and democracy. One of the first countries to do so was Costa Rica, whose Supreme Court declared in 2010:

“The Internet has become a basic tool to facilitate the exercise of fundamental rights and democratic participation and citizen control; education; freedom of thought and expression; access to information and public services online; the right to communicate with government electronically and administrative transparency.”

Last year, UN member states put ICTs at the heart of the new Sustainable Development Goals for overcoming poverty and inequality, and pledged to achieve universal access to the internet and empower women through technology.

That is the vision. But the reality is that the majority of people in the world enjoy neither the access, skills, nor freedoms to appropriate and control new technologies for their own benefit. And the vast economic, informational, and political power that the web created is increasingly centralised in the hands of just a few actors.

The digital revolution is creating new patterns of privilege and discrimination; it is causing job losses and wage polarisation as well as productivity gains; it risks taking away our privacy and autonomy even as it endows ordinary citizens with new powers; it is isolating us in filter bubbles as well as connecting us across borders; and amplifying voices of fear and hate just as much as voices for tolerance and rationality.

These trends not only threaten the survival of the unique open platform that Tim Berners-Lee gave to the world, they also deepen inequality and marginalisation based on income, gender, ethnicity,

and geography. Against these trends, we need to ensure that each and every person enjoys the minimum digital assets, rights, and protections they need to participate fully in society. We must ensure that new digital assets and tools, such as big data and the computer models used to process it, are subjected to citizen control through accountability and transparency safeguards. We need policies that actively promote equal access to knowledge, voice, rights, and economic opportunity through the open internet.

Re-focusing our work on an open web for an equal world means that we will:

- Prioritise the interests and rights of women, the poor and other excluded and silenced groups in all we do.
- Go beyond access to the internet, to promote equal digital opportunities, skills and assets for all.
- Go beyond access to data, to fight for citizen control over how data is collected, processed and used.
- Help others to make positive use of the web to strengthen people power, particularly by exposing and reducing secrecy, discrimination and corruption in resource use, and promoting diverse and decentralised participation in civic life.

We know that we have many allies in the fight for digital equality, from grassroots movements for social justice and accountable government, to corporations and political leaders concerned about the enormous instability that rising inequality can unleash. Given the unique trust and moral authority that Sir Tim possesses, we believe that we can play a valuable role in helping to convene these diverse actors, assembling and activating powerful coalitions for change. We will also support our allies with research and evidence, the ability to make local insights and priorities heard in the halls of power nationally and globally, and the voice of Sir Tim himself.

OUR GOALS

3

We are a policy advocacy organisation, and everything we do is designed to facilitate, drive or reinforce positive policy change. Over the next five years, we will work towards results in three broad areas:

A. Power: All People Can Make Their Voices Heard Equally

Citizenship, in its broadest sense, is the revolutionary idea that overturned feudal monarchies. It means that all members of a political community have equal rights, freedoms, and responsibilities. In the 21st century, we cannot be equal as citizens if we don't enjoy universal, unfettered use of the internet.

More than that, the open web – particularly when universally accessible (our Goal 3) and complemented by open access to public interest data and information online (our Goal 2) – enables us to make full use of the powers we have as equal citizens, and realise our potential to effect change within our political communities. It can enable us to seek knowledge and think critically about issues in our society, and provide powerful tools to hold both ourselves and others accountable for the impact that our actions have on the common good. This empowering potential is more important than ever in a context of shrinking civic space, declining public trust, and growing authoritarianism. As Frank LaRue, former UN Special Rapporteur, points out,

“to combat situations of inequality it is critical to ensure that marginalized or disadvantaged sections of society can express their grievances effectively and that their voices are heard. The Internet offers a key means by which such groups can obtain information, assert their rights, and participate in public debates concerning social, economic and political changes to improve their situation.”

However, trends towards a more centralised network make it easier for governments to constrain and control what people do online. Freedom House has reported six consecutive years of deterioration in online rights.

The Brookings Institution tracked 81 partial or complete government-ordered internet

shutdowns across 19 countries in a 12-month period, leading to an estimated \$2.4 billion in GDP losses.

In many cases, journalists and activists face harassment or arrest if they dare to use the web to question their government, criticise powerful figures or share data and facts that challenge official versions of reality – jeopardising the web's contribution to accountable and responsive governance (our Goal 2). In Tanzania, for example, new laws make it illegal to spread “false” information online, or to publish or communicate data without official sanction. Several people have been prosecuted for criticising the President on social media, and an environmental group decided not to release data relating to the ivory trade.

New techniques and tools for intercepting private communications, now widely exported, coupled with concentration of internet traffic and services in the hands of a few companies, make it trivially easy for governments to monitor everyone all the time. In Ethiopia, for example, mass surveillance technology was found to be regularly used to arrest and detain dissenters, particularly the ethnic Oromo population. Between 2013 and 2016, laws increasing surveillance powers and data retention requirements were passed in over half of countries surveyed by Freedom House.

Key outcomes we will seek in this area:

Stronger legal protection of people's rights on and to the open web.

For example:

- Freedom of expression and privacy.
- Enhanced control over personal data collection and use.

Greater diversity of voices and content online.

For example:

- Rights of women and excluded groups are protected to participate in online life without harassment, intimidation or surveillance.
- Net neutrality policies enable independent websites and small start-ups to thrive.

3

OUR GOALS continued

B. Accountability: Citizens Hold Governments and Companies to Account

The ‘first generation’ of the open internet decentralised power, and maximised freedom, driving many of the socio-economic benefits attributed to the web. Yet current trends are introducing new control points into the network, threatening to concentrate power into the hands of a few and jeopardising the web’s equalising potential. Such trends include the rise of proprietary, controlled devices and standards, the growing control of social media platforms over the news and information we receive, the development of new surveillance technologies and powers, and the largely unregulated and unaccountable use of big data.

The data we generate online is used not only to track our behaviour, but increasingly to shape our beliefs and actions, and even to take decisions for and about us, mostly without our informed consent. In some cases, the outcomes are highly discriminatory, as has recently been shown of the algorithms used for policing and determining prison sentences in parts of the US.

As Columbia University’s Emily Bell has argued,

“We are handing the controls of important parts of our public and private lives to a very small number of people, who are unelected and unaccountable. We need regulation to make sure all citizens gain equal access to the net works of opportunity and services they need. We also need to know that all public speech and expression will be treated transparently, even if they cannot be treated equally. This is a basic requirement for a functioning democracy.”

Keeping political power in the hands of the people in the digital era requires that privacy is inversely proportional to power. The privacy of individual citizens must be protected from the state, and the use of personal data to make decisions for and about us must be subject to transparency and accountability safeguards. At the same time, data of public interest must be freely and easily available to everyone. When key public interest data (such as government budgets and contracts and company ownership) is freely downloadable in machine-readable formats, this gives citizens and public interest organizations powerful tools to fight corruption, secrecy and bias. Yet to date fewer than 10% of such datasets have been opened up.

Key outcomes we will seek in this area:

Open up key information online, and equip public interest groups to use this data to hold governments and companies accountable.

For example:

- Reduced corruption and better public spending decisions based on the uptake and use of open data.
- Gender data is collected, analysed and leads to more equitable policymaking decisions.

Stronger transparency and accountability in the use of digital resources and tools.

For example:

- Computer models (algorithms) that help determine the information and opportunities available to citizens.
- Collection and use of personal data by governments and companies.

OUR GOALS *continued*

3

C. Opportunity: Women and Other Excluded Group Gain Economic and Social Opportunities and Resources

Our research shows that in countries around the world, a sizeable minority are gaining from the digital revolution. Employment and business opportunities are opening up for them, and they are using the web and open data to express their views and press for improvements in basic services – even, on occasion, to organise for change, or to step in and solve problems themselves when governments are incapable. However, so far, this minority are well-educated, urban, male and relatively affluent – further marginalising those who can’t afford or lack the skills to take to the web to claim their rights.

Today, more than 50% of the world remains offline. The connectivity gap between countries remains enormous, with access rates in low-income countries stagnating beneath 20%, while middle income countries are moving quite fast up the curve towards 50% and beyond.

Connectivity gaps within countries are also very high. While in-country gaps are partly driven by coverage deficiencies in rural areas, socioeconomic factors (e.g., gender, education, and income) play a far greater role. Our research found that women in poor urban communities are 50% less likely to be connected than men.

As the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Frank LaRue, has noted:

“Without Internet access, which facilitates economic development and the enjoyment of a range of human rights, marginalized groups and developing States remain trapped in a disadvantaged situation, thereby perpetuating inequality both within and between States.”

Beyond basic connectivity, there are increasing disparities in the extent to which different social groups gain from digital technologies. The spread of digital work is helping well-educated women in some

countries to close the pay gap with men. On the other hand, job losses due to artificial intelligence-powered automation will disproportionately impact low and medium skilled workers everywhere – and are predicted to be most devastating among agricultural workers in the developing world, the majority of whom are female and live in poverty.

Market concentration — especially among search and content providers and social networking platforms — can further skew the distribution of opportunities in the digital economy, and the race to acquire artificial intelligence capacities is likely to lead to further concentration in the tech sector in the coming years. Already, just one company (Google) controls a third of global advertising revenue; only 30 companies account for more than half of US internet traffic, while Facebook’s suite of properties (Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram) account for over a fifth of all internet traffic in the Middle East. Tie-ups between dominant content providers and large ISPs or mobile operators not only violate net neutrality but also stifle competition and further disadvantage small and medium-sized players.

We need to move beyond the concept of a static “*digital divide*” that can be “*closed*”, to the reality that fast-evolving technologies will continue to throw up new forms of discrimination and disadvantage that markets alone cannot solve. We must be bold and creative in seeking new technical approaches and policy and regulatory solutions to promote equity without stopping innovation. As Professor Chris Gilliard writes,

“You are either attempting to design bias out or you are necessarily designing bias in.”

Key outcomes we will seek in this area:

More inclusive public services and fair opportunities in the digital economy.

For example:

- Affordable broadband for all.
- Scale-up of free public wi-fi schemes and digital skills programmes.
- Increased financial inclusion for women through digital financial services.

4

APPROACH

We will work in strategic geographies across two integrated programme areas, namely:



- **Digital Inclusion:** to ensure that everyone, regardless of gender, income or location, benefits equally from the internet and the economic and social opportunities it creates.



- **Digital Citizenship:** to ensure that the web remains truly open and affords everyone the rights and information they need to participate fully in civic life.

Our approach is both bottom-up and top-down. We will amplify the lessons learned from our countries of engagement to achieve global impact, while simultaneously ensuring global commitments and standards are translated into local action too.

We aim to help build, inspire and unify a nascent field in much the same way that Sir Tim Berners-Lee and his colleagues nurtured the early web community. We place particular value on close and respectful partnerships with public interest organisations in the countries where we engage, knowing that they have the best

understanding of the problems they face, and that they are the ones who must drive and sustain lasting solutions over the longer term. We aim to amplify and connect their voices and capacity, leading from behind as often as we lead from the front, and handing over initiatives to them as soon as possible.

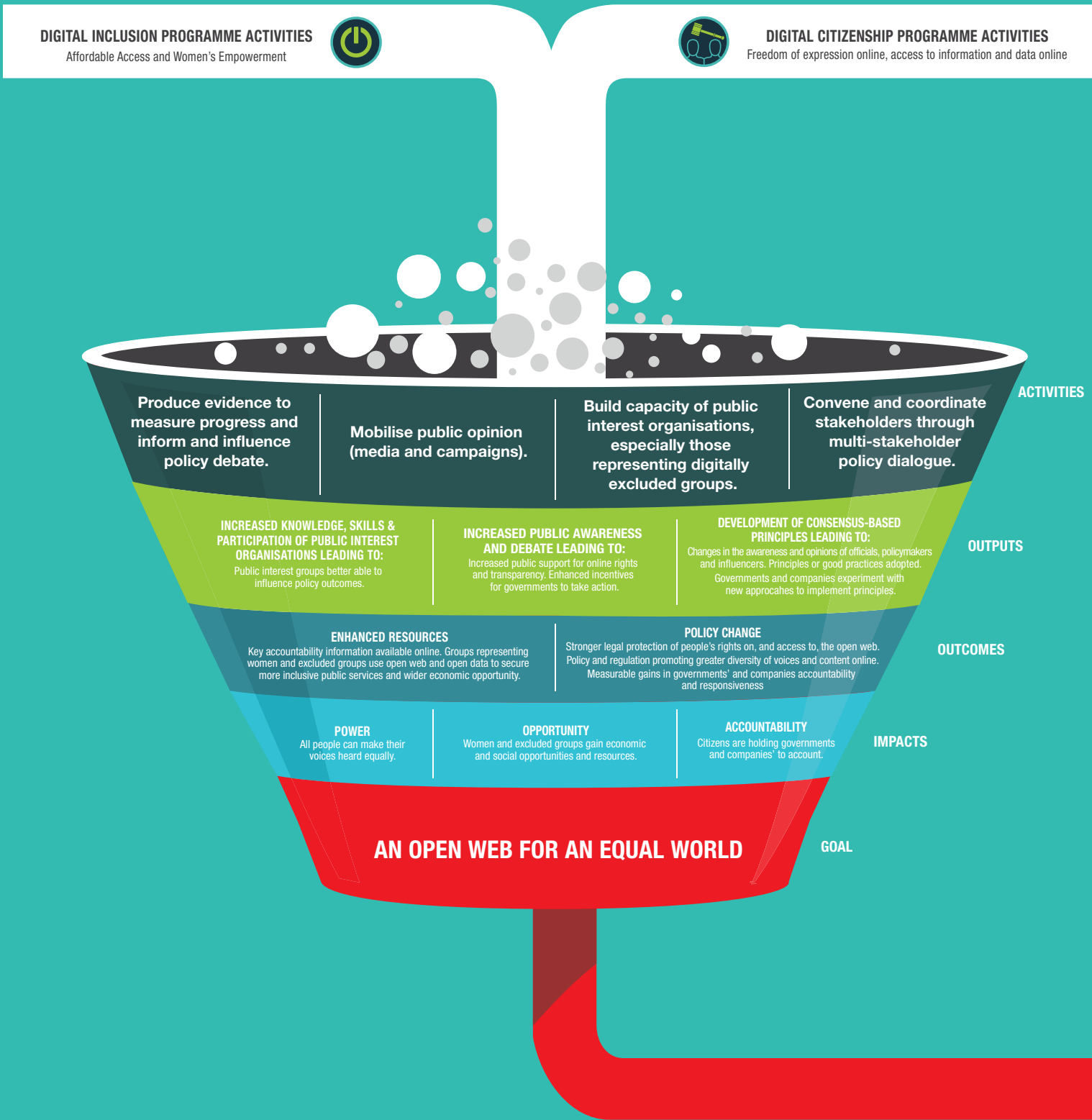
Therefore, our success will be measured not only by the specific policy changes that we and our partners achieve, but also by the increase in the number, capacity, and effectiveness of open web champions fighting for digital equality in the countries and regions where we have engaged.

As the web is international, interconnected and borderless, our scope is global. We will tackle causes of digital inequality in both the developed and developing worlds. We understand that changing the lives of, say, women in a Nigerian village may well require changing decisions taken in Nigeria's capital Abuja – but also in Addis Ababa, Beijing, Washington, San Francisco, or Brussels.

That said, we need to prioritise countries strategically, balancing the potential to make impact with making best use of our resources.

THEORY OF CHANGE

4



5

OUR VALUES

At the Web Foundation, we:

Champion human rights, dignity and justice for all

This value is the foundation of all we do.



Foster collaboration

We are most successful in changing the world when we work together.



Maintain our independence

We take positions on the basis of evidence and rigorous analysis, even if this means swimming against the tide.



Embrace diversity

We value each individual, and our differences make us a happier, more creative and more effective team. We challenge discrimination in our own daily interactions, and the practices of those we encounter.



OUR VALUES

5

Nurture our communities

We are inspired and sustained by the collective support of those around us, and we endeavour to repay their support by striking a balance between working hard and participating fully in our families and communities.



Learn as much from our failures as our successes

While always striving for excellence, we acknowledge our failures and our successes, and let both shape our future decisions.



Practice what we preach

We will be as open and honest as we demand others to be.



Steward resources wisely

We will take care in our use of resources, avoiding unnecessary or ineffective consumption of donor funds, environmental resources, and our own and our colleagues' time.



