World Vision

World Vision Australia

National Indigenous Australians Agency Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan Submission

Contents

Introduction

World Vision Australia (WVA) is a child-focused international community development organisation and, since 1974, we've been adapting our successful community-led development approach to support First Nations communities to lead their own development. We have partnered with First Nations communities for over 40 years and in the last twelve years have brought our international Development Program Approach to deliver First Nations early childhood education and youth programs in Australia to ensure Indigenous children and young people are educated for life through both-ways learning.

In March 2021, World Vision released a report Connecting on Country: Closing the Digital Divide for First Nations students in the age of COVID-19. This report was in response to the dire situation facing First Nations students when the world and specifically schools' ground to a halt with the emergence of COVID-19. The disparity of digital inclusion for First Nations peoples was already well understood and the lack of urgency to address this gap meant that First Nations students now face even greater education disadvantage, and this will have a profound impact for generations to come.

COVID-19 has accelerated the digital revolution across many sectors, including in education, which makes it more important than ever to urgently close the Digital Divide. Beyond education, online access is also critical for job opportunities and e-commerce, health advice, accessing government services and participating in broader society. There is an opportunity for governments and the private sector to work together with First Nations communities to ensure access, affordability and ability. Critically, remote First Nations communities have by far the greatest online disadvantage across all measures. These communities should be given the highest priority for improving online access.

Access

There are many factors which contribute to digital access for Indigenous people. Some are consistent for all communities while other vary based on geographical location. The Digital Divide increases with remoteness. First Nations people living in remote areas are much less likely to be able to access the internet. According to the 2016 census, 82.8 per cent of First Nations people in major metropolitan areas accessed the internet, 73.2 per cent in regional areas, 61.3 per cent in remote areas, and only 49.9 per cent in very remote areas. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016a)

The Digital Divide is a significant issue in Australia, especially when you compare internet access between First Nations Australians and the general population. According to the 2016 census conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, almost one in four First Nations households did not have internet access. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016a) This is notably less than the access to the internet for all Australian households: 75.3 per cent of First Nations households have internet access versus 85.8 per cent of all households in Australia. (Rennie, Thomas, & Wilson, 2019)

The Centre for Appropriate Technology surveyed very remote First Nations communities in 2016 and found only 37 per cent of the 401 small communities surveyed had internet coverage and in 80 per cent of those communities this was only available in one household.(Rennie et al., 2016) This disparity in online access has been confirmed by the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), which examines Australia's online participation. The Index measures access, affordability, and digital ability. The 2020 ADII (ADII) found that First Nations people living in urban and regional areas had low digital inclusion (55.1, or 7.9 points below the national average). The access score is 68.5 which is 7.8 points less than the national average. (J. Thomas, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I,

Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, 2020) This can be largely attributed to mobile only access and is increasing yearly as more Australians have fixed NBN access which is not experienced at the same rate for First Nations people.

There's also a unique set of challenges with urban First Nations Communities. These communities are often less visible as they are dispersed among the broader population. Though there may be pockets which are more recognised, these may be hubs and not necessarily where people live.

Co-design with First Nations Communities is of critical importance. Transposing gold standard programs from one Community to another without proper process has been an ongoing mistake of government. This shouldn't be repeated with Digital Inclusion. What needs to be examined if a program has been successful is the genesis of the programs, the processes for the establishment and sustainability of the program and how communities were engaged and directed programs. Future strategies should be reflective of Community needs and aspirations. This should recognise cultural requirements, employment and economic development, education and health and social services. The ACCAN report on Remote Indigenous Communications Review: Telecommunications Programs and Current Needs for Remote Indigenous Communities, 2020 led by Dr Daniel Featherstone has comprehensively mapped past, current and planned initiatives. This covers access and ability and describes approximately 50 different programs. (Featherstone, 2020)

The role of youth as future Community leaders but as current Digital Leaders in Communities. The education system plays an important role in preparing future First Nations generations and communities to be engaged effectively online. Much of the knowledge and skills for online connectivity already lies with children who are very savvy online. First Nations youth can play a role in knowledge transfer and upskilling of older generations. There is also potential for them to be tech support in remote and regional communities which is a possible industry that can be nurtured to beyond their communities if the right infrastructure is established.

High mobile phone dependence for online access is one of the reasons behind the low digital access scores for First Nations people. The National Broadband Network (NBN) hasn't been rolled out in many First Nations households. This is also a contributor to disparity in internet access, which widened by about 50 per cent from 2018 to 2019 alone. (J. Thomas, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, 2019)

The benefits of closing the Digital Divide would be wide ranging – it would open opportunities for learning, education continuity, First Nations e-commerce, and the digitising of First Nations history, culture and language.

Affordability

Affordability is highly related to mobile phones for online access. First Nations people, primarily because of the high levels of exclusive reliance on mobile phones to access the internet. The problem is that mobile phone is data is more expensive and often less reliable than broadband data, and the cost can lead to some First Nations households to have no internet access altogether. Around 36.8 per cent of First Nations people exclusively rely on mobile data to access the internet compared to 21.1 per cent for the general Australian population. (J. Thomas, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, 2019) With prepaid service there can be gaps in access with many First Nations people living pay cheque to pay cheque. (40% of First Nations people in lowest income quintile). (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016b) Prepaid fixed line internet may be a solution in

some respects this also poses a problem when the data runs out and there's no money to top up account.

The risks of First Nations education divide now being widened due to online learning disadvantage. The question is how will this be remedied in the short, medium and long term? Opportunities for telehealth for diagnostics and treatment are also of high importance to bridge the gaps in health outcomes this includes social and emotional wellbeing therapy which has much potential to have First Nations people in remote areas receiving high quality treatment.

Digital ability

The absence of any specific programs to address First Nations communications needs and the limited investment in targeted programs at a Federal level is creating a disparity on what is being described now as a basic human right. The systemic exclusion from online connectivity online marginalises and creates significant disadvantage for vulnerable Communities. UNDRIP Article 14.2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination. (Rosnon, Talib, & Rahman, 2019) Target 17 is of high importance in Closing the Gap Agreement. This is highly relevant to not only online access but importantly to data sovereignty. First Nations people should have the right to collect, own and use information about themselves.

Effective culturally relevant Social marketing campaigns will be important for engaging First Nations people into understanding the potential of digital technologies for themselves and their Communities will be important. Often Community leaders are elders who may have limited experience or interest in digital technology and therefore targeted and tailored messaging should appeal to different segments of the First Nations Community. There is understandably much hesitation about the risks of online access being opened in some Communities and those concerns should be addressed.

Social media, particularly Facebook is also widely used by First Nations Communities so there's opportunities for leveraging FN people with social media profiles as ambassadors for digital inclusion. Solutions also need to be localised to reflect needs and aspirations of communities. Young people also have a major role as our future leaders and are often very savvy in Digital technology.

The state and territory education departments should be leading digital ability education across First Nations communities. There is also an opportunity to expand on existing successful programs such as IndigiMob. First Nations education organisations already play a role in STEM and other information and technology capacity building initiatives for First Nations communities and there are opportunities for this to be built upon to create sustainable solutions. (Guenther, Smede, & Young, 2020)Train the trainer type models could exist in First Nations Communities where select members of the Community can be upskilled and trained in digital technology and they can be the leads in their Communities.

Online safety for First Nations communities is a significant concern. There are already many examples of how online platforms and practices can severely impact First Nations people. Search Engine Optimisation present a unique set of challenges for First Nations people. High usage of Facebook can lead to a high amount of misinformation. For example, COVID 19 misinformation leading to low vaccination uptake in some areas. (Walker, Molenaar, & Palermo, 2021)

There is also lateral violence which is played out online and this has led to First Nations people experiencing twice the level of online bullying and harassment compared to non-Indigenous peoples. (Radoll, 2014)Furthermore, racism which First Nations people experience online is significant and has extremely damaging impacts on the health and wellbeing of First Nations people. This needs to be closely monitored and protections including the racial discrimination act need to be strongly leveraged to protect First Nations peoples. (Rice, Haynes, Royce, & Thompson, 2016)

Data

The main data collection for digital inclusion is the national annual Digital Inclusion Index which captures digital inclusion across several measures. There are however gaps in remote digital inclusion data which is an ongoing issue. World Vision Australia published the Connecting on Country report in 2021 which collated data from numerous data sources with the main sources of data listed below.

1. World Vision Australia, Connecting on Country: Closing the Digital Divide for First Nations students in the age of COVID-19, 2021
2. Remote Indigenous Communications Review: Telecommunications Programs and Current Needs for Remote Indigenous Communities, 2020, Featherstone Daniel, ACCAN
3. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016). Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census, 2016
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016). National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2014-15
5. Close the Gap (2019). Close the Gap, Bridging the Digital Divide: Impact Report 2019.
6. Preston, B. (2020). "Digital inclusion for all public school students."
7. Radoll, P. and B. Hunter (2018). Dynamics of the digital divide, Canberra, ACT: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR),
8. Rennie, E., et al. (2016). "Internet on the outstation: The digital divide and remote Aboriginal communities." Theory on Demand(19).
9. Thomas, J., Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T (2020). Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020. M. RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, for Telstra.

There is a requirement for further data to be collected particularly representing remote and regional First Nations Communities. Current research which is being led by Dr Daniel Featherstone is collecting samples of data from different remote First Nations Communities to map digital inclusion. This will provide significant and comprehensive insights, however, there still needs to be a systematic to continually monitor digital inclusion in remote settings. Further data which could be collected includes on infrastructure establishment and maintenance, digital continuity which recognises the gaps in connectivity due to prepaid access. Bandwidth measures which account for larger households numbers for First Nations people could also be included. Importantly, there needs to be measurements which are consistently collected for online safety.

The removal of internet access from the ABS census data has created information gaps in digital inclusion particularly in remote areas. This should be reinstated and expanded upon in the census data to ensure this basic right is being monitored effectively. There is other proxy measure which could be used to indicate digital inclusion. Data collected through government agencies on how services are accessed based on geographical locations. Data collected at schools on digital technology education attainment can measure how prepared communities are for future

engagement. The number of courses delivered in Communities could also be collated. Social media engagement based on geographical locations is a strong proxy for the level of digital engagement.

Recommendations

1. That urban First Nations Communities be included in the scope of the IDIP.
2. Future digital inclusion strategies be co-designed with Communities at a local to ensure it reflects Community needs and aspirations. This includes training and capacity building.
3. Empower and enable First Nations youth to be leaders for their Communities in digital inclusion as they often hold the greatest existing knowledge, skills and engagement in digital technology.
4. Public/ Private partnerships should be promoted in recognition that much of the inequity which exists is create by market mechanisms.
5. Connectivity continuity be included as a measure in recognition of high prepaid mobile phone use for online connectivity.
6. Online safety needs to be a high priority to ensure Communities are safer from online lateral violence and racism. Communities need to be protected from Optimal Search Engines which can inequitably target First Nations Communities with misinformation and exploitation.
7. ABS data collection on Internet access be reinstated to better capture remote Community data inclusion.

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