

From Equity to Leadership

Digital Inclusion as a Gateway to Measuring E-Government Maturity

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Summary

Many governments and technology developers seek to embed digital inclusion as a core enabler within their services, in order to strengthen social participation and promote sustainable development. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), digital inclusion refers to ensuring that everyone, regardless of geographic location, gender, age, or differences in abilities, can access and benefit from digital products and services in a fair and equitable manner (ITU, n.d.).

Digital inclusion encompasses several groups of technology users, including people with disabilities of different types (such as physical, hearing, visual, and cognitive disabilities), senior citizens, and residents of remote areas. In this context, a report issued by the Saudi Digital Government Authority in July 2025 indicates that there are more than 1.3 million persons with disabilities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, while older persons account for approximately 5% of the total population (Digital Government Authority, July 2025).



Strategic Value of Digital Inclusion

Beyond ensuring equitable access to digital services, digital inclusion contributes to achieving a range of strategic objectives for governments and organizations. It plays a key role in enhancing transparency and trust in institutional services, supporting economic growth by encouraging broader social participation, and improving quality of life for all segments of society through easy and convenient access to services.

However, embedding inclusion within digital services depends on several interrelated dimensions. These dimensions collectively shape the extent to which digital services are accessible, usable, and beneficial to diverse user groups, and they form the foundation for sustainable digital transformation (ITU, n.d.).

Key Dimensions of Digital Inclusion

Digital inclusion rests on multiple, mutually reinforcing dimensions. Each dimension addresses a different barrier to equitable participation in the digital environment and requires coordinated policy and operational responses.

Regulatory and Legislative Dimension

Effective legal and regulatory frameworks are essential to guarantee access to digital services as a fundamental right. Such frameworks obligate public and private sector entities to incorporate inclusive features into their digital services, ensuring that accessibility and usability are not optional but mandated components of service design.

Technical Infrastructure Dimension

Another critical dimension is the availability of adequate technical infrastructure, including telecommunications networks and internet connectivity. This infrastructure enables individuals across different geographic areas, particularly remote and underserved regions, to access digital services reliably and efficiently.

Cultural and Educational Dimension

The cultural and educational dimension focuses on building the skills required to interact with technology. This includes training and capacity-building initiatives, especially for groups with greater needs, such as elderly, to ensure that access to digital services contributes into effective and meaningful use.

Saudi Arabia's National Efforts in Digital Inclusion

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia places particular emphasis on digital inclusion, as evidenced by the launch of national initiatives and the adoption of relevant legislation. Digital

transformation efforts under the National Transformation Program include initiatives aimed at enhancing digital inclusion across various sectors, thereby contributing to the reduction of social gaps and the expansion of access to resources and services.

A prominent manifestation of these efforts is the ecosystem of integrated government digital platforms, such as Madrasati, Sehhaty, Qiwa, and Balady, among others. These platforms provide comprehensive digital services designed to serve a broad spectrum of users.

In addition, the Kingdom has established an authority dedicated to the care of individuals with disabilities, serving as an umbrella body responsible for addressing their needs, including the development and enhancement of services provided to them. Furthermore, the Digital Government Authority has launched the “Digital Inclusion Program”, which primarily aims to increase the use of digital platforms by elderly and people with disabilities (Digital Government Authority, 2025).

Digital Inclusion as a Measure of E-Government Maturity

The importance of digital inclusion is not merely limited to enabling equitable social participation or improving service quality, but it has become one of the key criterion for assessing countries’ progress, the maturity of their e-government services, and their compliance with relevant international standards.

One of the most prominent international references in this regard is the United Nations E-Government Development Index (EGDI), in which the Kingdom ranked fourth out of 193 countries in 2024. This index is based on three dimensions that are closely linked to digital inclusion enablers (United Nations, 2024).

Saudi Arabia’s commitment to inclusive and high-quality digital services has also resulted in a significant recent achievement: attaining second place globally out of 197 countries in the Digital Government Maturity Index issued by the World Bank Group (World Bank, 2024).

At the national level, international indicators related to digital inclusion are complemented by local measurement frameworks. The Digital Government Authority has introduced an annual index to measure the maturity of the digital experience, with a strong focus on promoting inclusive access to, and effective use of, digital services by all user groups. Together, these indicators and initiatives reflect the growing importance of digital inclusion in achieving digital equity and reinforcing governments’ leadership positions.

Closing

The article emphasizes that digital inclusion has evolved from a marginal concern into an important pillar of modern digital government. By addressing regulatory, infrastructural, and cultural dimensions, Saudi Arabia has embedded digital inclusion as both a core social equity priority and a key indicator of e-government maturity. National and International indicators demonstrate that inclusive digital services are essential to enhancing transparency, trust, and

global competitiveness, thereby reinforcing the Kingdom's progression from ensuring digital equity to achieving digital leadership.

References

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