



## Welcome to the Inaugural Newsletter Issue of the UN NGO Committee on Ageing

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the first in a series of periodic newsletters from the NGO Committee on Ageing (NGO CoA) at the United Nations in New York. In each edition, we will do our best to provide FIVE recurring sections and some surprises:

**#1. Take a Deeper Dive:** Each newsletter will discuss in-depth issues before the UN that are important for older adults worldwide. You will get background on the problems, interesting facts, and actions you can take to further older persons' human rights. You will stay up to date on our work towards a UN Convention on Older Persons' Rights. Above all, you will know how to participate in relevant commissions and working groups of the United Nations. Of course, you will continue to receive the usual notices from us about our program meetings and notable UN events.

**#2. Mark Your Calendar:** This first issue is coming to you on the eve of two major policy groups meeting (virtually) in March 2021.

1. The [Commission on the Status of Women](#) (15-26 March) and
2. [The Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing](#) (March 29—April 1). Our CoA chairperson, Cynthia Stuen, tells us more about these BELOW.

**#3. Catch Up:** Last month (February 2021), The Commission on Social Development, in its annual session, focused on "the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all." **AARP**, a member organization of the NGO CoA, in conjunction with the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), and the International Telecommunications Union, conducted a well-attended side event on Digital Technologies and Older Persons. (If you missed it, here is a link: [14th Annual AARP UN Briefing Series \(aarpinternational.org\)](https://aarpinternational.org)).

**#4. Feature:** We will add to your library of articles on topics at the heart of our efforts. This issue offers a cutting-edge analysis of technology and its impact on age inequality.

**#5. The Language of Age Equality:** Each issue features a phrase or word relevant to our work that is trending or creating a buzz. This issue is "DIGITAL DIVIDE."

In later issues, we plan to say more on technology as it focuses on the UN International Day of Older Persons, sponsored by CoA and UN DESA, in October 2021.

For now, I hope you read and enjoy our first newsletter and send us feedback, which is always welcome.

[Send us your feedback!](#)

*Martha Bial*

Chair, Sub-committee on Communications, NGO Committee on Ageing/NY



## Events of Importance Selected for You by the Chair of NGO Committee on Ageing/NY

Dear Colleagues,

Warm greetings to everyone reading this first newsletter issue. March is a busy and important month for our work. Please check out updates on the websites for the [65th Commission on the Status of Women](#), the 11th [Open-Ended Working Group](#), and the [NGO Committee on Ageing/NY](#). We need all hands-on virtual decks to advocate for older women and a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons NOW!

One of the lessons COVID-19 taught us is that the rights of older persons need to be protected because it is a **human rights** issue. We are working closely with the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP, [www.rightsofolderpeople.org](http://www.rightsofolderpeople.org)) to make a Convention (a universal legally binding instrument) to protect those rights a reality. A campaign slogan for our work has just been released:

### AGE WITH RIGHTS

Visit our [NGO CoA website](#) and the sites of [GAROP](#) and [HelpAge International](#) for background information, tool kits, and *talking points* to speak out. The last consultation day is offered on Friday, March 26, and morning briefings during OEWG.

### And put these events on your calendar:

**March 15-26 Commission on Status of Women(65CSW)** [www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org)

Priority Theme: Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

**Please watch live CSW events on [www.webtv.un.org](http://www.webtv.un.org) (no registration required.)** NOTE: Please send me ([Cynthia.stuen@gmail.com](mailto:Cynthia.stuen@gmail.com)) any feedback on "successful" interventions you can raise or post in the chat box at the parallel/side events at CSW OEWG. Thanks!

- Over 700 parallel events are scheduled by the NGO Committee on the Status of Women <https://ngocsw.org/ngocsw65/> and registration for them is through their Virtual Platform.
- UN Women scheduled side events can be attended with prior registration as noted on each event <https://teamup.com/ksjgjdxx23dqs947md>
- A roster of select parallel events has been identified, sent to members, and is available on [our website](#), encouraging your attendance. I am asking as many members as possible to participate in raising awareness of older women as well as the need for a Convention - Post comments in the chat box on each event. Do check to ensure you register for each event that you plan to attend.
- [Talking points](#) are available for you to use by our CoA Subcommittee on Older Women leadership and available on [our website](#). Any difficulties registering, please contact [Sbsomers5@gmail.com](mailto:Sbsomers5@gmail.com) for assistance.

**March 20-1 April 11 [Open-ended Working Group](#)** to strengthen the protection of older persons' human rights. Two Focus areas are 1) Right to Work and Access to the Labour Market and 2) Access to Justice.

Stay tuned for more events in each issue.

Hope to "virtually" see you!

Cynthia Stuen

Chair, NGO Committee on Ageing/NY

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## Deeper Dive: Digital Divides

Maud Bruce-About

Executive Committee, NGO  
Committee on Ageing/NY

This Article on **Digital Divides** is the first in a series on Digitalization in our NGO CoA newsletter, leading up to the UNIDOP2021. The UNIDOP theme will focus on Digitalization and older persons ensuring they are not left behind. The purpose of this series is to create a better understanding of the various dimensions of the Digital Divide, lay bare the obstacles to technology adoption and enjoyment, share favorable policy and best practice initiatives.

Articles will initially paint a broad picture of the Digital Divide, then quickly focus on older persons, policies, and measures to promote, and ease this population's technology transition.

To stand up for the digital rights of older adults, be it in our work towards a Convention for the Human Rights of Older Persons or in other contexts, we must understand not only what digital rights are but also where we are in history regarding inequalities.

### Digital Divides

The COVID-19 pandemic had dramatic repercussions on the social and economic development and well-being of citizens worldwide. The pandemic laid bare systemic inequalities and weaknesses, and in many cases, reversed progress in the combat against poverty and inequality, leaving many more persons behind.

Meanwhile, the quest to manage different dimensions of both work and life during the pandemic has contributed to our digital transition's acceleration. If this process- often called the 4th Industrial Revolution, has brought colossal benefits to socioeconomic development and improved life quality for many, it has also created divides that now risks further worsening of pre-existing inequalities polarization of our society.

**Therefore, the UN System highlights a people-centered approach - leaving nobody behind - as we now embark on the journey to build back better and sustainable Strategic Development Goals post-COVID-19.**

### ***So, who is offline?***

**The Geographic North vs. The Geographic South Divide:** First, [there are the 3.6 billion people that do not have access to the internet network](#) and at least an access device, be it a PC, a tablet, or a smartphone. [Eighty percent of them live in Africa or the Asia Pacific Region.](#)

Indeed, there is a stark divide between the [Global North - 70 to 98 % internet network access](#) - and the [Global South - access rate of around 40- 42 %](#). [And if we look more carefully, we realize that only 19% in the least developed countries](#)

can benefit from the access compared to 87% in the Global North. To make matters worse, it appears that this gap has widened over the last decade.

**The Rural vs. Urban Divide:** There is also an essential divide between rural and urban areas across all regions. Overall, 60 % of our offline population lives in rural areas, a large share in Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. It is not economical for private operators to service remote areas with low population density and where reliable access to electricity might not be readily available or affordable.

**The Gender Divide:** Gender is another critical dimension of the Digital Divide. Globally, in 2019, 58% of men used the Internet, compared to 48% of women. This gender gap is exceedingly small in the Global North - 3%- whereas it is staggering - 43 % - in the Global South. A low ratio of smartphone ownership can explain part of this gap. Women are 70% less likely to have a smartphone than men in South Asia and 34% less likely in Africa. In many instances, women are "sharing users" and not owners due to cultural or traditional gender norms.

If we then look at the situation within countries, throughout all regions, groups that are already marginalized - women and the rural populations and older persons and persons living in poverty - dominate the offline population.

As digital technology is relatively recent, the digital Divide between generations is essential and increases with age. Whilst 98 % of Europeans aged 16-29 use the Internet, only 20 % of those aged 75 and older do so. As both lack of access and skills hamper usage, there is also a gender divide between older men and women, based on disparities in historical labour market participation and professional occupations.

**The structural Digital Divide is commonly called the usage divide.**

Even when enjoying access, persons of different social class, age, gender, ethnic and cultural origin increasingly use the Internet differently.

Persons with high education levels employ informational, educational, work, and career applications, whilst persons with low levels mainly utilize the Internet for entertainment, communication, and e-shopping.

This is partially due to exacerbated inequalities - economic, cultural, and social - in conjunction with mobile access devices' growth. Such devices are less costly and generally inferior for professional, educational, business, and civic use compared to other devices.

Today, some warn about the appearance of a "mobile underclass," both in the Global North and the Global South, where mobiles and smartphones are promoted as the hope for access via at least one medium. Illustrative is a 98% internet access country like the Netherlands. People with high income and education tend to possess multiple access devices and several subscriptions and apps, whilst those with low income and education merely possess one or none.

This structural Divide, the usage gap, also exists between generations. Whilst 81 % of people 16-29 years old use the Internet for online banking and online shopping, only 46 % of people aged 75 and older shop online at least occasionally.

***Leaving nobody digitally behind: Building Back Better with a digital strategy to help achieve the [2] Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) post COVID-19***

As the Digital Divide is at least partially due to exacerbating economic, cultural, and social inequalities, researchers in the field, like Jan A G M van Dijk, assert that the Digital Divide will never be fully closed unless the underlying social inequalities are addressed. Digital disparities will become more relative as more and more people gain access to an internet network and a device. Inequalities and differences in the sophistication of available technology and the user's digital literacy may replace the simpler "have or have not divide." There is a danger that such fewer glaring inequalities will be considered acceptable and not need attention. Yet, those on the short end of technology will be at a growing disadvantage as technology rises in all spheres of life and work.

Unless underlying economic, cultural, and social inequalities are dealt with, researchers warn that concentration of resources and skills in the digitalization process will widen digital divides and income inequalities - digital media will tend to support people with high positions, more than those with low positions, in a reinforcing loop, over time alimented by ever advanced technology and applications that will further polarize us. (11)

**Experience from the COVID-19 pandemic, although summary and incomplete so far, already indicates that pre-existing social inequalities and digital inequality have increased.**

It is a fact that many have "leap-frogged" into Digitalization - for both professional, educational, and personal reasons - and that those who did not have slid further away in terms of digital skills and usage.

Additionally, [research from the Netherlands](#) indicates that the elderly and the poor are the most in need of COVID-19 information (what the virus is, symptoms, prevention, imposed measures, etc.) and the categories of persons using it less. This is due to a lack of digital skills among the elderly and a lack of traditional literacy among the poor of all ages. These gaps are crucial as COVID-19 is a new, unknown, and complicated condition with features often described in medical language.

Hence, the Digital Divide is important when designing and implementing policy and measures to ensure that nobody is left behind.

**But...what should those policies be? Stay tuned for our next issue when we take a Deeper Dive.**

Maud Bruce-About

Executive Committee, NGO Committee on Ageing/NY

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## **The Language of Age Equality: Digital Divide**

Adriane Berg, Sub-committee on Communications, NGO Committee on Ageing/NY

The term "Digital Divide" is at the heart of the United Nations' recent initiative of worldwide age equity.

But what does the Digital Divide mean in the context of the world's older population? That question has taken on added relevance as COVID-19 was the catalyst cited by 61% of seniors for increasing their use of digital or online tools. ([The Senior List survey of 615 US seniors over 65.](#))

**Four distinguishing features of the DD are unique to older adults.**

**#1. "Digital Immigrants" or issues of proficiency in computer literacy.** Neither the Internet nor the devices for their uses were part of older adult education, and many lack intuitive comfort with the technology. But this barrier to mastery is rapidly disappearing as techniques for training the aging brain, which science assures us is plastic and can learn new tasks, is quickly developing. For example, [See You Link](#), a software program to teach older adults with mild dementia or low vision to use the computer, reported a change from fear to competency in under three months. Watch this [charming video](#) of a 98-year-old Holocaust survivor who learned to use a laptop with the UK's Five Point nonprofit organization's help.

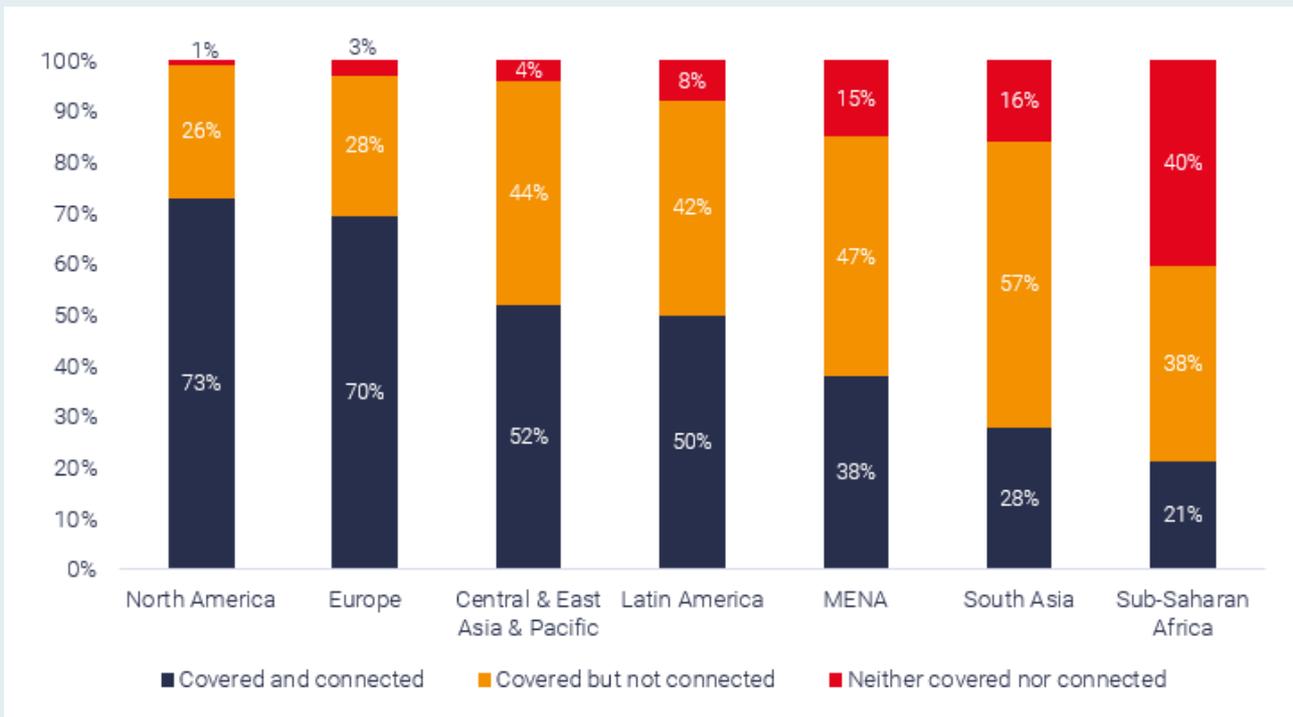
**In the recent Senior List survey, only 15% percent of respondents said adapting to new technologies was "extremely" or "very" challenging.**

In the US, most senior centers and many resources like [OLLI](#), [OATS](#), [Senior Planet](#) teach computer literacy. So, education and training may be the key to eliminating this aspect of the Divide.

#2. **"Digital Device Divide" or lack of hardware, computer, tablet, or mobile phone.** Even those seniors who can afford to buy such devices feel the pinch as technology changes rapidly and devices become quickly obsolete. Many age-tech companies are designing devices for older adults applying age-friendly universal design to technology. (The Consumer Electronics Show offers two pavilions devoted to Age-Tech and Digital Health). All to the good, but for those that do not have the means, the Device Divide is impossible to overcome. Significantly, many libraries are underfunded, and free computers are no longer available to many older users.

**#3. "Infrastructure Divide" for those who have no access to the Internet.**

According to STL partners, 47% of the world's total population has no internet access. 10% of these also live beyond a mobile network's reach. (Source GSMA) Another 3% are covered by 2G data connections which are inadequate for all but basic applications.



**#4. "Digital Health Deprivation," the lever that creates significant**

**inequality.** In the recent past, access to the Internet, computer mastery, and physical devices were necessary for work and connectivity to friends and family. While all these are important, the older adult could still see technology as convenient but not essential. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, healthcare, communication, commerce, world news, and even entrainment is tied to technology, making the Divide not just a lifestyle issue but one where the Divide could be life-threatening.

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