 

**Which way forward in the digital world? A call to action to ensure learners who are blind or partially sighted are not increasingly left behind**

**Governments should allocate adequate resources towards the procurement of, research in and development of accessible technologies and educational resources to enable education, social development and participation of persons who are blind or partially sighted.**

**The Issue**

The increasing prominence of online learning and integration of digital tools within the education system have been noteworthy developments in this day and era. COVID-19 further accelerated adoption of distance learning, with significant reliance on innovations in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to ensure educational continuity. Internet-based learning and the use of digital tools such as smartphones, computers and tablets, became a vital strategy to address the disruptive impact of the pandemic and to safeguard people’s right to education in an unusual era of social distancing. However, amidst these progressive developments, persons who are blind or partially sighted faced profound challenges. Even before the pandemic, persons who are blind or partially sighted already faced significant exclusion from ongoing digitalisation trends. The rapid shift to online learning and use of digital tools in education during the pandemic further magnified these challenges, leaving persons who are blind or partially sighted grappling with significant barriers to accessing education platforms and resources.

Recent evidence underscores an alarming digital divide that persists for persons who are blind or partially sighted. For example, despite the widespread deployment of online learning platforms to deliver distance education during school closures, merely a quarter of students globally were reached. Many learners with disabilities, including those who are blind or partially sighted, were among those that could not access education due to limited compliance with Universal Design and accessibility features in the technologies or digital tools that were being used. The severity of the issue is particularly pronounced in developing countries, where the prevalence of disability is higher, and poverty restricts the affordability of and access to digital technology. The link between poverty and limited access to digital technology underscores the intricate interplay between socio-economic factors and educational opportunities for persons who are blind or partially sighted.

**Our position and call to action**

The promise of digital technology in enhancing educational outcomes and upholding fundamental human rights is undeniable. However, the World Blind Union (WBU) and the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) are profoundly concerned that a persistent digital divide[[1]](#footnote-1) continues to exacerbate the exclusion of persons who are blind or partially sighted from educational opportunities. We are mindful of the obligations that governments must fulfil under Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Considering these obligations, we jointly urge governments and other players to take immediate and substantive actions, including the following:

1. **Recommendations for governments**
   1. Ratify and domesticate the Marrakesh Treatyto fully allow for copyright exceptions and facilitate the creation and distribution of digital educational content in accessible formats, compatible with screen readers and other assistive technologies, for persons who are blind or partially sighted.
   2. Adopting a whole-of-government approach, enact and enforce comprehensive Digital Accessibility Policiesin line with the principles of Universal Design (UD) and Accessibility Standards as per Article 9 of the UNCRPD. These policies must mandate the development of accessible digital tools, platforms and educational resources to ensure seamless access for persons who are blind or partially sighted.
   3. In line with Article 4 (3) and Article 33 (3) of the UNCRPD, actively consult and closely involve organisations of persons with disabilities,particularly those representing persons who are blind or partially sighted, when developing and implementing legislation, policies, digital tools, platforms and educational resources.
   4. Allocate adequate budgetary resourcesfor research, development and dissemination of cutting-edge assistive technologies and interventions tailored to the needs of learners who are blind or partially sighted. Interventions may include enacting and implementing tax exemption regimes on assistive devices and software required for educational use by learners who are blind or partially sighted to ensure adequate availability of and ease of access to the assistive devices and software.
   5. Provide specialized training and capacity building opportunitiesto teachers and education authorities to cultivate inclusive teaching practices that accommodates and responds to the individual needs of learners who are blind or partially sighted in digital classrooms. The training programs should also extend to learners who are blind or partially sighted for them to be empowered with skills to effectively use digital tools and other assistive technologies in their education.
   6. Establish and implement robust mechanisms for collecting systematic statistics on disability and promoting research,in line with Article 31 of the UNCRPD, to identify prevailing gaps and evaluate effectiveness of deployed digital tools, platforms and educational resources in order to inform evidence-based policy reforms and interventions.
2. **Recommendations for tech companies / developers**
   1. Actively consult representative organisations of persons with disabilities, along with working with governments, and adopt a co-creation approach,to ensure enhanced accessibility of digital platforms, learning materials and technologies. To this end, the process of developing digital tools and/or assistive technologies should include regular feedback and user testing by persons who are blind or partially sighted to help in identifying barriers and refining the tools or technologies.
   2. Invest in and undertake research to develop innovative, and improve existing, assistive technologies specifically addressing the unique needs of learners who are blind or partially sighted,including screen readers, tactile graphics, haptic feedback devices and adaptive learning platforms.
   3. Develop and disseminate accessible and user-friendly guides, tutorials and resourcesto facilitate digital literacy and ease-of-use of digital tools, learning platforms and assistive technology for both learners who are blind or partially sighted and their teachers.
   4. Consider the unique socio-economic challenges in developing countriesand develop cost-effective solutions that are compatible with lower-end devices and slow internet connectivity, to assist in improving access to quality education for persons who are blind or partially sighted in developing countries.
   5. Champion open-source technologies and adhere to accessibility standards such as the W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) to ensure interoperability and foster collaboration within the tech community. The adoption of open standards for web and application development will ensure that tech companies effectively contribute to creating a fully accessible digital ecosystem.
   6. Commit to providing long-term support including continuous updates, maintenance and technical supportfor digital products.

**Non-state actors, particularly tech companies, have a pivotal role to play in closing the digital gap by, among other things, embracing open-source technologies and adhering to accessibility and universal design standards.**

**Background and rationale**

The adoption of the UNCRPD in 2006 marked a significant milestone in recognizing the centrality of equitable education in achieving high quality education for all learners and building inclusive, peaceful and fair societies. This paradigm shift underscores the importance of providing both quality education and social development for persons with disabilities, including those who are blind or partially sighted. It is now widely acknowledged that inclusive education guarantees the universality and non-discrimination in the right to education.[[2]](#footnote-2) The right to inclusive education, as per Article 24 of the UNCRPD, implies that education systems must accommodate the diverse needs on individual learners – enabling them to thrive in educational environments that celebrate diversity and uphold human rights. For learners who are blind or partially sighted, this means that the education system should provide them with appropriate technology and alternative communication systems, opportunities to learn Braille, orientation and mobility skills.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The past 20 years have seen massive adoption of digital technology tools in all aspects of education, bringing about significant changes in teaching and learning.[[4]](#footnote-4) Undeniably, the advent of digital tools had promised greater access to education resources. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of schools further necessitated the shift to digital learning, exposing the digital divide’s stark realities. Unsurprisingly, learners who are blind or partially sighted were among those left behind, facing significant barriers in accessing digital learning materials and participating in remote or internet-based education.

The impact of the digital divide is particularly pronounced for persons with disabilities, especially those who are blind or partially sighted. The lack of equitable access to digital technology has exacerbated adverse socio-economic outcomes for persons who are blind or partially sighted, contributed to limited educational opportunities, and diminished employment prospects. Disturbingly, 80% of the world’s disability population, including those who are blind or partially sighted, live in developing countries,[[5]](#footnote-5) many of whom are grappling with high levels of poverty and limited resources. Consequently, the digital divide issue is of heightened magnitude in these regions, where poverty restricts both the affordability of digital technology and accessibility of educational resources not only for learners who are blind or partially sighted but also for all other children. In these circumstances, the urgent need to address the digital divide, particularly in developing countries, cannot be overstated.

Digitalisation in education presents immense potential to exponentially improve educational outcomes for all, but this potential remains elusive for persons who are blind or partially sighted who continue to face significant barriers in accessing and utilizing digital tools in their education. By ensuring quality and accessible education for all, and addressing digital disparities, governments can empower persons who are blind or partially sighted to break free of the cycle of poverty and exclusion.

The recommendations outlined in this statement align firmly with the fundamental principles of human rights and the values enshrined in the UNCRPD and other international instruments. WBU and ICEVI reiterate that the right to education in the digital age is not only a legal obligation for governments but also their moral commitment to honoring the inherent dignity and worth of every person. Furthermore, bridging the digital divide for persons who are blind or partially sighted resonates with broader efforts by governments and other relevant stakeholders to foster inclusive, peaceful and fair societies for all.

**About Us**

**World Blind Union**

WBU is a global organization representing over 253 million people who are blind or partially sighted. We exist to co-create a future where people who are blind or partially sighted can live with full participation, autonomy and freedom. Our mandate is to advance human rights, empower members, and improve living conditions of all people who are blind or partially sighted worldwide. Our work is based on the deep conviction that full implementation of and compliance with the CRPD will lead to a more inclusive, accessible, and equal society. We are a founding member of the International Disability Alliance (IDA), and we also serve on its board.

**International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI)**

ICEVI exists to advance the right of persons who are blind or partially sighted to access inclusive, equitable and quality education. As a global membership-based network, ICEVI discharges its mandate with a firm belief that all persons who are blind or partially sighted together with their families have the right to (1) provision of a full range of educational services and to be included in the educational programs of their respective countries and communities, (2) receive early intervention, early childhood development, care and pre-primary education; (3) support by teachers and other professionals who are properly trained; (4) provision of reasonable accommodation for their needs, including accessible educational materials, enhanced technology, teaching methods and programs that are of a high standard and conform to best practices; (5)live in environments that are free of barriers, social stigmas, and stereotypes; and (6) lead productive lives, according to their aspirations and capabilities, without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity.

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1. UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report 2023, *Technology in education: A tool on whose terms?* Available online at <https://www.unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000385723> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. OHCHR, Thematic Study of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to Education, A/HRC/25/29 at para. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. CRPD Committee, [General Comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education](https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-4-article-24-right-inclusive) at para. 34(a). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report 2023, at pg. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. United Nations, Factsheet on Persons with Disabilities, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/factsheet-on-persons-with-disabilities.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)