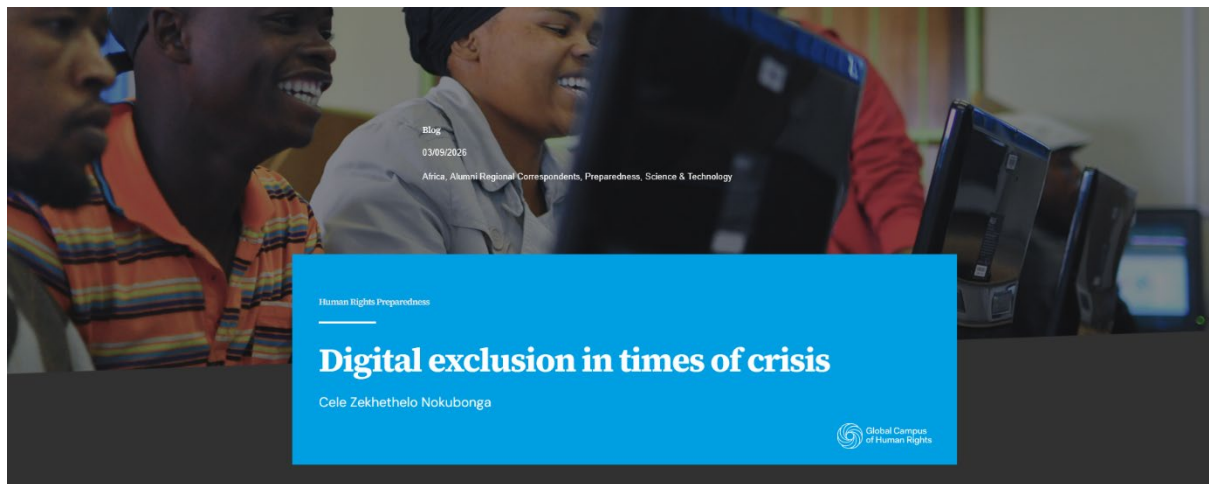




Digital exclusion in times of crisis

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Abstract: Rapid digitalisation has transformed public service reaction to emergencies. Yet the southern African response to COVID-19 exposed how technology excludes many already marginalised groups and individuals. Human rights preparedness requires a more inclusive foundation in preparation for the next crisis.

Whether it is a pandemic, a climate-related disaster, conflict-induced displacement or an economic crisis, [governments are increasingly](#) turning to technology to communicate with the public, administer social protection programmes, facilitate access to healthcare and coordinate emergency responses. Digitalisation is often celebrated as a symbol of innovation, efficiency and resilience. Yet beneath these promises lies a critical question that remains largely overlooked: what happens to those who cannot [access the technologies](#) through which protection is delivered?

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For millions of people around the world, the greatest challenge during an emergency may not be the crisis itself but [exclusion](#) from the systems established to respond to it.

Pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities

The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) exposed this reality with startling clarity. As governments rapidly [shifted services](#) online and digital platforms became gateways to education, healthcare information, social assistance, legal services and public administration. For many, these systems provided continuity during an unprecedented global crisis. For others, they became [barriers](#).

Those without smartphones, internet connectivity, stable electricity, digital literacy or assistive technologies often found themselves unable to access the very services intended to protect them. The pandemic revealed an uncomfortable truth: digital exclusion is no longer merely a technological or developmental concern. It is increasingly a human rights preparedness [challenge](#).

This is particularly significant in Southern Africa, where deep inequalities continue to shape access to technology. While digital transformation has accelerated across the region, access to devices, connectivity and digital skills remains uneven. [Rural communities](#) frequently experience poor network coverage and unreliable electricity. Data costs remain prohibitively expensive for many households. Women and girls continue to face a persistent digital [gender divide](#). Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants often encounter [additional barriers](#) linked to documentation requirements, language limitations and exclusion from formal systems.

As governments become more reliant on digital service delivery, these inequalities risk becoming embedded within emergency response frameworks.

A common [misconception](#) is that digital systems are neutral. In reality, every digital platform reflects assumptions about who its users are and what resources they possess. [Governments](#) frequently design systems that assume access to smartphones, internet connectivity, literacy, banking services, official identification documents and technological confidence. These assumptions may appear reasonable from a [policy perspective](#), but they often fail to reflect the realities faced by many communities.

Certain groups and individuals further marginalised

When access to public services depends on technology, those who are disconnected become invisible.

This is particularly evident for [persons with disabilities](#). Technology has enormous potential to promote inclusion. Accessible digital platforms can improve access to information, increase independence and facilitate participation in public life. However, when accessibility is treated as an afterthought rather than a design principle, technology can become another mechanism of exclusion.

Websites that cannot be navigated using screen readers, emergency announcements without sign language interpretation, inaccessible online application systems and platforms that rely exclusively on visual or audio communication create barriers that can be as restrictive as physical obstacles.

[During emergencies](#), these barriers can have profound consequences. An individual with a hearing impairment who cannot access public health information, a visually impaired person unable to complete an online social assistance application or a person with an intellectual disability struggling to navigate complex digital procedures may effectively be excluded from services essential to their safety and wellbeing.

The consequences extend far beyond disability communities.

Refugees and asylum seekers frequently encounter challenges accessing digital systems due to documentation requirements, language barriers and limited connectivity. [Across Southern Africa](#), migration management systems are becoming increasingly digitalised. While digitalisation can improve efficiency, it can also create new forms of exclusion when systems fail to account for the [realities of displacement](#). Individuals who lack access to devices, stable internet connections or who are not digitally literate may find themselves unable to access documentation, legal protection or essential public services.

Women and girls face [similar challenges](#). Across many communities, women are less likely to own smartphones, have independent internet access or possess the financial resources necessary to remain connected. Similarly, [older people](#) may struggle to navigate increasingly complex online systems, while individuals living in poverty are often forced to choose between purchasing mobile data and meeting basic household needs.

What these groups share is not vulnerability as an inherent characteristic. Rather, their exclusion is produced and reinforced by systems that fail to account for unequal access to technology.

This is why digital exclusion should be understood as a [human rights issue](#) rather than merely a technological challenge.

State obligations

This raises important questions about the responsibilities of States under international human rights law. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([CRPD](#)) recognises the rights to accessibility, access to information and protection in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies. Similar duties arise under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ([ICESCR](#)) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights ([ACHRP](#)). These frameworks require governments to ensure that rights can be enjoyed on an equal basis by all persons, including those who face barriers related to disability, poverty, gender, geography or displacement.

Accessibility is therefore not simply a matter of good policy but a legal obligation. A government cannot meaningfully claim to uphold the right to education, for example, if learning is available only through inaccessible online platforms. Nor can it claim to uphold the right to healthcare if critical information cannot be accessed by persons with disabilities or communities lacking connectivity. Similarly, social protection programmes cannot be considered inclusive if beneficiaries are excluded by digital barriers that were foreseeable and preventable.

As governments embrace artificial intelligence, biometric technologies, digital identity systems, and online service delivery, the risks associated with exclusion are likely to [intensify](#). Without deliberate safeguards, digital transformation may deepen existing inequalities rather than reduce them.

Human rights preparedness requires different approach

First, accessibility must be integrated into digital systems from the earliest stages of design. It cannot be treated as an optional feature added after implementation. Second, governments must maintain alternative pathways through which individuals can access essential services, including physical service points, community-based support mechanisms, telephone assistance and mobile outreach programmes. Third, investment in affordable internet access, digital literacy, assistive technologies and rural connectivity should be understood not merely as development priorities but as essential components of human rights protection.

Most importantly, those most affected by exclusion must be involved in shaping the systems designed to serve them. Persons with disabilities, refugees, migrants, women, rural communities and older people should not be consulted after decisions have been made. Their experiences should inform policy from the outset.

When, not if, the next global emergency arrives, governments will once again rely heavily on technology to deliver protection and coordinate responses. The true measure of preparedness will not be how quickly services can be moved online. It will be whether those services remain accessible to the people most likely to be left behind.