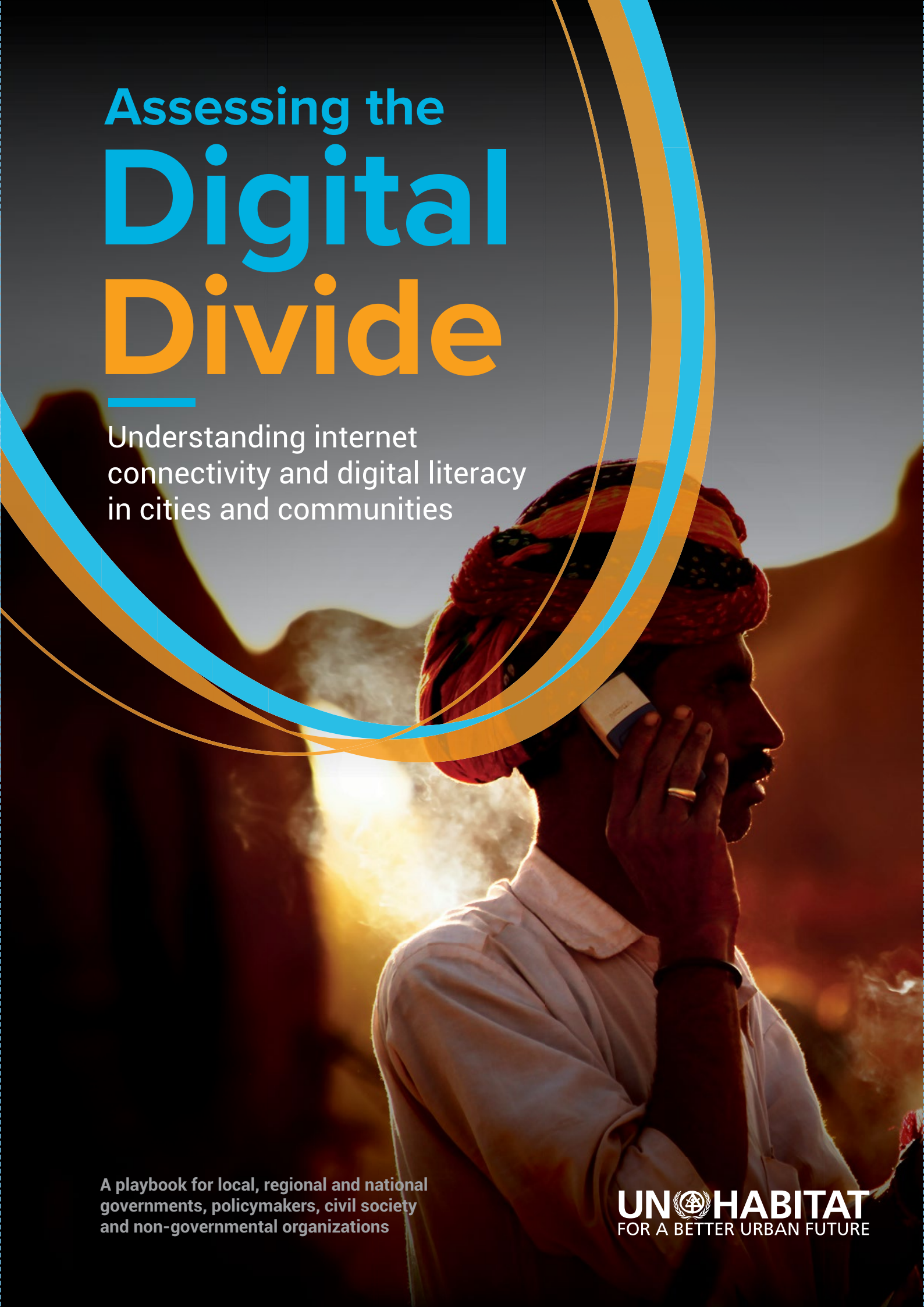
Assessing the Digital Divide

Understanding internet connectivity and digital literacy in cities and communities



A playbook for local, regional and national governments, policymakers, civil society and non-governmental organizations

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Contents

Chapters

01 Introduction to the playbook — page 14

02 Moves towards establishing internet connectivity as a human right — page 18

03 The state of the digital divide: global trends & statistics — page 22

04 Why Digital Inclusion Matters — page 26

05 Who Experiences the Digital Divide? — page 30

06 Key stakeholders in the digital divide terrain — page 34

07 Understanding the digital divide — page 38

08 Targets of a Digital Divide Assessment — page 44

09 Implementation, Tools and Methods — page 48

10 Capacity: Partnerships and resources for city governments — page 60

Digital HelpDesk

Introduction to the Digital Helpdesk 19

The Value of inclusion for digital governance 31

Data-sharing systems for digital cooperation 57

11
After the assessment: Identifying your community's digital divide
page 62

12
Conclusion and next steps
page 64

13
Appendix
page 66

Boxes

BOX 9.1: China's Prefectural Digital Divide 40
BOX 9.2: Africa's Urban/Rural Broadband Infrastructure Divide 40
BOX 9.3: Yosano, Japan's Transition to a Smart Green Village 40
BOX 9.4: Cape Town's VPUU Community Network 41
BOX 9.5: Pittsburgh's Every1Online Program 42
BOX 9.6: Electronic Banking Empowers Women in India 42
BOX 10.1: The Digital Divide in the city of Barcelona 47
BOX 11.1: Surveying informality: Using machine learning to map informal settlements in Honduras 55
BOX 11.2: San Antonio's digital divide in the context of Covid-19 57
BOX 11.3: Mapping Britain's broadband connectivity 58
BOX 11.4: Mapping Shreveport's digital divide with GPS data 58
BOX 11.5: Building mapping infrastructure from scratch: City planning labs initiative in Denpasar, Indonesia 59
BOX 11.6: Processed data: San Antonio's digital divide assessment report cards 59

Tables

Table 1: Popular survey tools used online and in the field for in-person surveys 53
Table 2: Tools used for data visualization and analysis 57

Foreword

Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif

Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

As the agency with the mandate to coordinate urbanisation matters within the UN System, UN-Habitat often highlights that half the world's population - 3.5 billion people - now live in cities. The world is both urbanising and digitising at a rapid pace and we see that digital technologies have great potential to assist Member States in their efforts to achieve sustainable urban development. The 'smart city' as a concept is the lynchpin connecting these two global mega-trends. It can help Member States achieve positive transformative change by harnessing ICTs and digital technologies to improve urban efficiency, quality of life and sustainability.

Whilst digital technology can have enormous transformative potential for positive change, it can also perpetuate existing social and economic inequalities. In 2020, I saw many children struggle to get 'connected' including the students in my rural village with many missing out on their educational needs.

To address this yawning digital divide, the UN Secretary-General has made a strong case for human rights in digital spaces in his 2020 Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, which lays out key areas for action including universal connectivity, promoting digital public goods, and ensuring trust and security in the digital environment. Additionally, in the Connect 2030 Agenda, our colleagues at ITU commit to bridging the digital divide for an inclusive information society and enabling the provision of broadband access for all, leaving no one offline.

For UN-Habitat, the use of digital technologies in cities and by cities must be appropriate to ensure that the prosperity they bring is shared among urban residents, cities and regions. Ultimately, the deployment of technology needs to be grounded in the real needs of people. It should pay particular attention to underserved populations in order to address inequalities and bridge social and spatial divides. Our People-Centered Smart Cities flagship programme was launched in 2020 to provide strategic and technical advice to local, regional and national governments to enable them to take a strategic and proactive approach to digital transformation, while meaningfully engaging their residents and ensuring human rights in digital spaces.

We must address the elephant in the room. People-centered smart cities cannot be built when so many remain outside of the digital world. The People-Centered Smart Cities Playbook Series aims to help cities and communities ensure that urban digital transformation works for the benefit of all, driving sustainability, inclusion and prosperity in the process. Each Playbook in the series represents one of five Pillars of People-Centered Smart City development: Community, Digital Equity, Infrastructure, Security and Capacity. Collectively, the playbooks outline key activities, provide recommended actions, and policy toolkits that provide actionable guidance for cities seeking to ensure a more equitable, inclusive and sustainable future for smart cities.

About UN-Habitat

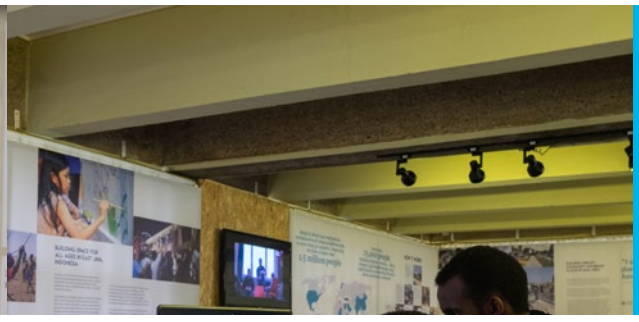
The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) is the United Nations programme working towards a better urban future. Our mission is to promote socially and environmentally sustainable human settlements development and the achievement of adequate shelter for all. We work with partners to build inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and communities and promote urbanization as a positive transformative force for people and communities, reducing inequality, discrimination and poverty. UN-Habitat provides technical assistance, policy advice, knowledge and capacity building to national and local governments in over 90 countries.

UN-Habitat is coordinating the implementation of the UN System-Wide Strategy on Sustainable Urban Development[1] and in close coordination with national and local governments, the agency leads the monitoring of Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG11) on sustainable cities and communities as well as the New Urban Agenda.

UN-Habitat's approach to people-centered smart cities

Launched in 2020, UN-Habitat's flagship programme "People-Centered Smart Cities" acknowledges the transformative potential that digital technologies can have for sustainable urban development. Through the People-Centered Smart Cities flagship programme, UN-Habitat provides strategic and technical support on digital transformation to national, regional and local governments.

Digital transformation is now critical to meet the demands of sustainable urban development. In the past decade, internet connectivity has become a requisite for full participation in society, including access to education, affordable housing, and critical government services -- yet 3.7 billion people were offline in 2019[2]. In recent years, digital innovations like civic technology, geographic information systems, the sharing economy, open data, and digital platforms have changed how people understand, manage and participate in cities. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced even greater urgency for local and national governments alike to bridge the digital divide especially for marginalized groups and informal settlement communities[3], build more efficient and secure data management systems, and protect citizens' privacy when using digital services. These activities are the foundation for inclusive and resilient smart cities.



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