Digital Literacy
YOUTH

Photo by Miles Sedgwick, Rana Labs

Digital Literacy and Youth[1]

Over the past ten years, the global youth population has increased by 1.4 billion people at the same time that digital tools have transformed the societies and economies of USAID partner countries. To access the full benefits of digital transformation, like highly skilled jobs and digital citizen engagement, young people need to cultivate the skills to use—and protect themselves while using—digital tools. The critical role that digital skills[2] play in driving positive youth development is reflected in one of USAID's Youth in Development Policy Guiding Principles: "Promote responsible use of technology by and for youth by leveraging digital literacy, appropriate skills development, and digital citizenship opportunities, while reducing risks for digital harm." Without developing the digital literacy competencies of young people, USAID programs will struggle to fully realize the benefits of digital tools in the lives of youth around the world.
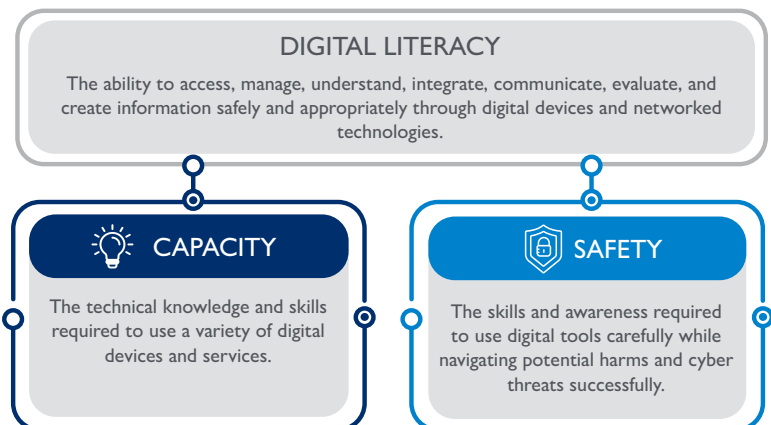
Definition of Digital Literacy

> USAID, building on **UNESCO's definition** of the term, defines digital literacy as "*The ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networked technologies for participation in economic, social, and political life.*"

USAID's Digital Literacy Framework

To effectively and equitably achieve access, USAID's approach to digital programming must extend beyond infrastructure and devices to ensure that users possess a nuanced set of skills to meaningfully, responsibly, and safely participate in their digital ecosystem. Two pillars underpin USAID's definition of digital literacy: capacity and safety.

- **Capacity** refers to the technical knowledge and skills required to use a variety of digital devices and services such as mobile phones,

DIGITAL LITERACY
The ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networked technologies.

CAPACITY
The technical knowledge and skills required to use a variety of digital devices and services.

SAFETY
The skills and awareness required to use digital tools carefully while navigating potential harms and cyber threats successfully.

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1 Unless otherwise cited, all information in this sectoral brief comes from USAID's Digital Literacy Primer. Full citation: "Digital Literacy Primer: How to Build Digital Literacy into USAID Programming" (USAID, 2022), https://www.usaid.gov/digital-development/digital-literacy-primer.
2 This can range from basic digital skills, like posting on social media, to highly advanced and in-demand digital skills, like software development and data science.

tablets and computers; the internet and social media services such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook; and audio and visual tools.

- **Safety** refers to the skills and awareness required to use digital tools carefully while navigating potential harms and cyber threats successfully. This pillar includes, but is not limited to, strategies for strengthening cyber hygiene,[3] countering mis- and disinformation and forthcoming Protecting Children And Youth from Digital Harm Primer.

As explained in the Digital Literacy Primer, USAID takes two primary approaches for incorporating digital literacy into program design:

FOUNDATIONAL ACTIVITIES Foundational digital literacy activities build digital literacy skills applicable to all aspects of users' economic, social, and personal lives—a goal in and of itself.	**TACTICAL ACTIVITIES** Tactical digital literacy activities prepare target populations to use digital tools in particular sectors to ensure that a specific digital intervention is effective (though digital literacy may not be the singular goal of the activity).

Digital Literacy in USAID's Youth Portfolio

As the targets of digital literacy interventions, youth face varying social, economic, and political realities that shape their relationship with digital tools and their ability to develop digital literacy competencies. USAID builds digital literacy across its cross-sectoral youth programming portfolio, aligned to the three categories of youth programming in USAID's Youth in Development Policy:

- **Youth-focused**: USAID's youth-focused programming typically takes a tactical digital literacy approach to teach 21st century skills necessary for enhancing young people's employment prospects, building a sense of citizenship and community, and promoting healthy alternatives to violent extremism:

  » *Enhancing youth employment prospects*: In-demand digital skills can help young people find gainful employment. For example, in Kosovo, USAID partnered with Cactus Education to train 59 youth in ICT skills and 46 in entrepreneurship skills, and helped secure four full-time jobs and 75 internships for trainees in the ICT sector. These partnerships improved workforce skills for out-of-school youth while creating a platform for sustainable job creation. Similarly, USAID's Skills for Youth Project (SYP), a partnership with Cisco, developed the IT skills of 3,000 students in Pakistan (558 of whom were female) and sponsored three job fairs to help match students with IT-related jobs.

  » *Promoting alternatives to violent extremism*: Media literacy and other digital skills can help youth identify, discern, and look beyond violent extremism. The Cyber Champ program in Bangladesh trained youth to exercise tolerance and employ good internet safety principles to discourage them from online interaction with extremist groups. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the program evolved into a virtual "Olympiad" quiz event with students around the country, enabling them to continue to participate in internet safety training while schools were using remote learning.

Photo by Jack Gordon for USAID

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3   Cyber Hygiene definition: The practices and steps that users of computers and other devices take to maintain system health and improve online security. These practices are often part of a routine to ensure the safety of identity and other details that could be stolen or corrupted.

» ***Building citizenship and community***: Developing digital competencies at a young age can foster good digital citizenship skills for life. For example, the USAID-funded [Ukraine UNITY](#) project leverages social media to amplify Ukrainian youth voices and encourage them to build skills to enable their broader civic, community, and economic participation. Similarly, USAID supports [YouthMappers](#), a network of students from nearly [300 universities in more than 60 countries](#) who generate open-source geospatial data by mapping their own communities on the YouthMappers OpenStreetMap platform. YouthMappers and its offshoot initiatives YouthMappers Academy and Everywhere She Maps help young people develop a sense of civic activism, along with in-demand job skills around geo-spatial data, demonstrating the cross-cutting nature of USAID's youth-focused portfolio.

- **[Youth-relevant](#)**: In USAID's youth-relevant programming, young people can participate in digital literacy programming alongside other segments of the population. However, they can also play an important role in teaching other community members about digital literacy to help achieve activity outcomes. For example, in agriculture, youth may be recruited to serve as digitally enabled facilitators in their communities, particularly in situations where feature and smartphone ownership in the community is low. Through [USAID's Village Agent Model (VAM) in Uganda](#), young men and women are recruited and trained to provide agricultural extension services or offer guidance to farmers in their communities on good agricultural practices, often aided by a mobile device to monitor transactions or offer decision support.

- **[Youth-led](#)**: Tactical digital literacy approaches in youth-led programming help ensure that youth cultivate the skills they need to succeed in the workforce and become a productive member of society. For example, [USAID's Kefeta](#) program in Ethiopia includes a component that seeks to address youth unemployment by deepening youth involvement in community development. It aims to improve foundational workplace skills—including digital literacy and entrepreneurship training— for 7,000 youth through community-based youth centers and higher education institutions.

USAID enables young people to safely navigate online spaces

A core component of USAID's digital literacy upskilling with youth is building their capacity to recognize and respond to digital harms, such as mis- and disinformation, online bullying, sexual exploitation, and gender-based violence. This is the key focus of the Digital Strategy's Protecting Children and Youth from Digital Harm workstream which aims to share knowledge and raise awareness across USAID about digital harms to children and youth, as well as implement five programmatic priorities that prevent and address these harms. The "[Learn to Discern in Schools](#)" media literacy pilot taught middle school students in Ukraine to recognize disinformation by critically evaluating the information they receive through social media and television. The program added media literacy lessons to standard history, literature, and arts appreciation courses in over 1,500 public schools in four cities, empowering future voters and leaders to make conscious choices about media they consume and share.

Key Considerations for Digital Literacy in USAID's Youth Portfolio

Considerations vary based on the maturity level of local digital ecosystems.

☑ Assess the current digital literacy levels of the target youth audience for the digital literacy intervention, then customize the intervention accordingly.

» This typically requires interviewing or surveying youth within the target audience about which devices, platforms, and digital tools—and which of their functionalities—they use, if any.

» If their digital literacy levels are highly variable, segment digital literacy interventions into different levels.

☑ Develop context- and user-specific digital literacy interventions and materials:

» Conduct scoping exercises to ensure that digital literacy interventions targeted to youth address their most critical digital literacy needs, also taking into account intersectionality. Because youth are not a monolith, the digital literacy needs and levels among different youth segments (migrant children, LGBTQIA+, girls vs. boys, rural vs. urban, etc.) differ.

> *For example, develop tailored digital literacy interventions for girls and young women to minimize the risk of widening the gender digital divide or preventing online gender-based violence. To this end, mentorship is an especially important element of gender-specific digital literacy programming because it creates role models for young women and girls.*

» To ensure the applicability of digital skills, build partnerships with vocational training institutes and relevant private sector entities when developing employment- or workforce development-related digital literacy activities. Collaborate with them to promote their integration of digital literacy training into other types of workforce development activities and employment or entrepreneurship training.

Photo by Riaz Jahanpour for USAID Tanzania

☑ To ensure sustainability and longer impact of digital literacy programs, USAID should work with local partners to build capacity and to ensure programs are integrated into community and education systems.

» This will require USAID to establish partnerships with local organizations, governments, and private sector actors to enhance the impact and sustainability of digital literacy programs.

☑ Promote safe online behaviors among youth and their caregivers:

» In addition to teaching youth how to use digital tools, ensure that all digital literacy curricula and interventions address digital harms, such as online mis- and disinformation **and** gender-based violence and integrate digital safety and civility content.

» Educate, train, and build the digital literacy skills of teachers and caregivers to ensure that they: 1) are aware of online digital harms and 2) implement preventive mechanisms to protect young people in digital spaces.

» To protect their privacy, teach young people how to effectively use basic online safeguards, like privacy settings.

☑ Engage youth champions and ambassadors in digital literacy activities, as intermediaries for digital services, and/or as innovative solution providers that influence their broader communities to adopt digital skills. This requires providing youth with digital literacy training—to help them build the capacity of other people—and promoting their increased access to digital services.

☑ To identify areas of improvement and to measure intervention **impact**, USAID and partners should develop monitoring and evaluation frameworks. This will help to ensure that programs are effective and identify areas for improvement.

For more information, For more information on the digital literacy and youth nexus in USAID programming, please reach out to digitaldevelopment@usaid.gov.

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