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DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY &
CYBERSECURITY PARTNERSHIP

SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL DIGITAL INITIATIVE (SARDI)

Propels digital connectivity and economic development in South Asia by strengthening the digital capacity of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), raising awareness around critical cybersecurity issues, and fostering opportunities for MSMEs and governments to engage on digital and ICT policy issues.



Photo by Inspira Advisory and Consulting

Mission

SARDI, implemented by DAI's Digital Frontiers, under the [Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership \(DCCP\)](#), promotes cybersecurity, digital upskilling, and digital policies that advance more open, inclusive, and free digital economies in South Asia.

Objectives



Develop and foster a policy and business environment that values reliable and secure digital communications in South Asia in a manner consistent with U.S. national interests.



Increase the capacity and commitment of the private sector and civil society actors in South Asia to engage on important digital policy issues by building up digital skills of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs).



Strengthen the cybersecurity awareness of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to help these enterprises better understand the potential risks of cyber-attacks, recognize dis and misinformation online, adopt basic principles of digital safety and security, and ultimately grow and protect their businesses.



Bridge the gender digital divide, a significant barrier that prevents women from accessing life-enhancing services for education, health, and life-enhancing services, by improving the socio-economic state of women through the use of digital tools.

Countries

India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives

Funding: \$3.7 million

Timeline: October 1, 2019–
September 27, 2023

Key Collaborations:

- USAID/India
- USAID/Bangladesh
- USAID/Nepal
- USAID/Sri Lanka
- Reliance Foundation
- Local Ecosystem Stakeholders
- Private-Sector Stakeholders



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SARDI engaged local partners across South Asia to deliver impact across digital ecosystems

Activity Highlights



129,939
PARTICIPANTS

Trained through 2,211 events
in 4 countries



37,386
PEOPLE

From micro, small, and medium
enterprises (MSMEs)
were upskilled to help their
businesses thrive digitally



3.4 million
INDIVIDUALS

Reached through
cybersecurity campaigns



LOCAL PARTNER ENGAGEMENT



Accelerating Asia



DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT foundation



Advisory & Consulting



LEVERAGING EVIDENCE FOR
ACCESS AND DEVELOPMENT
KREA UNIVERSITY



NITCON

Looking Back

SARDI worked across four different thematic areas to address digital gaps and bridge the gender digital divide in the South Asia region: digital upskilling and connectivity, cybersecurity awareness, cross-regional initiatives, and policy engagement. Highlights of activities include:



Cybersecurity Awareness

Partnerships with local, country-specific partners were essential to optimizing cybersecurity awareness messaging in South Asia. In the case of SARDI's partner Inspira Advisory & Consulting Ltd., this research agency deployed unusual entertainment approaches, ranging from comic strips to a creative take on a popular board game, to better reach MSMEs in Bangladesh. The agency first spotted MSMEs were more likely to experience fraud, mobile financial services scams, data leaks, and phishing compared to other breach attempts. Inspira later identified that business owners needed practical advice on how to confront these new sets of digital risks rather than simply learning about existing threats. Key insights from the agency's research propelled the team to develop the [Bebshay Digital Shurokkha Campaign](#)—informing both first-time entrepreneurs and reputable companies on strategies and tools necessary for advancing a safer cyberspace in-country.



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Digital Upskilling and Connectivity

SARDI, in partnership with the [Digital Empowerment Foundation \(DEF\)](#) in India, launched the [Digital Sarthak](#) program. This program aimed to bridge the gender digital divide in rural India by improving digital literacy among rural women entrepreneurs (WEs). WEs across 13 states and 27 districts were targeted by DEF with digital literacy interventions, which helped them use digital tools to market and sell their products. These interventions were carried out by over 180 trained volunteers, known as Digital Sarthaks, who led capacity-building activities to establish digital centers for women entrepreneurs across seven states in Northern India and oversaw the training of 13,869 women entrepreneurs. Over 85% of participants in the Digital Sarthak program reported increased comfortability with using digital devices, empowering them to utilize online platforms for business growth and participate in their local economies.

The Digital Sarthak's digital connectivity activities strengthened last-mile delivery of broadband services to help WEs, Community Development Organizations (CDOs), and local communities access internet and digital services. Capitalizing on the PM Wi-Fi Access Network Interface (PM-WANI) government initiative—a regulatory and policy-driven approach to proliferate public Wi-Fi access points across India—SARDI helped establish 100 Digital Sarthak centers to serve as spaces for women entrepreneurs to not just utilize internet services, but to empower them to host and provide internet access for their community members in rural and more urbanized areas alike.



Cross Regional Initiatives

Through SARDI's cross-regional program [WeScale](#), and its expansion WeScale+, over 100 women entrepreneurs (WEs) across Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka were trained to use digital/e-commerce platforms, allowing them to market their products and expand their clientele, equipping them to scale regionally and internationally. The WeScale program, launched through grantee Accelerating Asia (AA) Pte and its consortium of local partners, successfully hosted networking sessions with impact investors, provided targeted mentorship for WEs, and gave WEs the confidence to leverage the tech ecosystem for their business endeavors. The launch of the follow-on hybrid program WeScale+, a four-week intensive program that aimed to distill lessons taught in WeScale and provide 1-1 support for entrepreneurs' products, services, and business models, selected 20 entrepreneurs to receive targeted mentorship and coaching. Upon finishing the hybrid program, the WEs of WeScale+ reflected that they learned a great deal, including upskilling in metrics, testing their product market fit, cyber security, and developing their relationships with a wider ecosystem.



Policy Engagement

SARDI, in partnership with NITCON Ltd, in India supported the Digital Enablement and Empowerment Program (DEEP), which built capacity for organizations working with youth and women-led small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to help them translate “digital policies into action”. Activities increased awareness on digital policies, supported capacity building of SMEs in the Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Haryana regions of India, and promoted open lines of communication between the SMEs and government bodies.

SARDI also hosted events including the E-commerce Policy Dialogues in Bangladesh in June 2022 to improve the enabling environment for MSMEs using e-commerce platforms. These dialogues bridged the gaps where safeguarding policies lacked enforcement. It also assisted entrepreneurs and CSO leaders in developing their advocacy skills and articulating opinions about key ICT policy issues.