

EXTERNAL IN-DEPTH EVALUATION OF THE STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES/IMPROVING LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS (SCILLS) PROGRAM

SUBMITTED TO:

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TRIANGLE
POLICY | RESEARCH | MEDIA

Acronym	Full Name
BOLD	Bridging Online Learning Divide
CITI SBE	Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative – Social, Behavioural, Educational
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
GI	Group Interview
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IDI	In-Depth Interview
IMT	International Mobile Telecommunications
ISOC	Internet Society
ISP	Internet Service Provider
KII	Key Informant Interview
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
MSME	Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee
SCILLS	Strengthening Communities/Improving Lives and Livelihoods
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
ToT	Training of Trainers
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

Despite the Internet's central role in education, livelihoods, and civic participation, nearly half the world remains offline—deepening existing inequalities, particularly for women, rural communities, and low-income groups. Access alone is not enough: digital inclusion depends on affordability, skills, and culturally relevant support.

The Internet Society Foundation's Strengthening Communities/Improving Lives and Livelihoods - SCILLS program, launched in 2020, addresses this gap through community-led digital inclusion efforts in Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Ghana, Indonesia, and Senegal. With over \$8.6 million invested across 42 projects, SCILLS equips underserved groups—especially women, youth, Indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities—with digital skills linked to economic empowerment. Programs include training in ecommerce, digital finance, and safe internet use, with over 9,000 learners gaining digital competencies and more than 6,600 youth using these skills for income generation. Locally tailored and gender-responsive, SCILLS turns connectivity into a pathway for inclusive growth and resilience.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The ISOC Foundation commissioned Triangle to independently evaluate the SCILLS Programme to understand how and to what extent it advances digital inclusion and economic empowerment in digitally underserved communities. The evaluation aimed to generate evidence on programme performance, surface lessons, and inform future strategic decisions. The evaluation of the SCILLS programme was grounded in a mixed-methods approach across six countries—Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Ghana, Indonesia, and Senegal—to assess how SCILLS advances digital inclusion and socioeconomic empowerment. Four core research questions guided the study, focusing on the programme's impact on digital skills, education, and economic opportunities; the pathways and enabling conditions through which these outcomes occur; the sustainability of benefits beyond the funding period; and the programme's potential for scale. The framing was shaped by the Global Framework for Digital Inclusion, the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique, and OECD-DAC evaluation criteria, ensuring a structured and holistic analysis of how SCILLS bridges the digital divide by strengthening access, skills, digital environments, and online use.

Primary data collection involved 33 remote key informant and group interviews, 23 in-depth beneficiary interviews, and 136 online staff surveys. Interviews were conducted with

a cross-section of grantee staff, trainers, and programme leadership, while the beneficiary interviews focused on capturing lived experiences of digital transformation among men, women, youth, and persons with disabilities. Surveys collected data on implementation experience, operational barriers, and programme reach. Together, these tools allowed the evaluation to triangulate qualitative insights with quantitative evidence, trace participants' digital journeys across SCILLS' core streams, namely, skills development, economic empowerment, inclusion, and community engagement, and generate robust findings to inform future strategy.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

RELEVANCE

SCILLS demonstrates strong relevance through its alignment with global development goals and its responsiveness to local needs across six country contexts. Rooted in the SDGs and the Internet Society Foundation's 2030 vision, the programme targets digital inclusion through tailored interventions in education, gender equity, and economic opportunity. Country and grantee selection is guided by operational feasibility, infrastructure readiness, and community vulnerability—ensuring activities are both strategic and context-specific.

By embedding digital skills into national curricula and community learning ecosystems, SCILLS fosters institutional ownership and long-term sustainability. Projects adapted to local conditions, delivering culturally relevant content and accommodating linguistic, geographic, and social diversity. Inclusive outreach—particularly to women, youth, and marginalized groups—has reinforced the programme's local relevance.

SCILLS's flexible theory of change enables implementers to adapt content based on stakeholder input and local feedback. Where infrastructure allowed, SCILLS translated training into tangible outcomes; in lower-access settings, it surfaced critical gaps and empowered communities to advocate for broader digital access. This adaptive, inclusive design has made SCILLS consistently relevant across varied and complex environments.

EFFECTIVENESS

SCILLS has proven highly effective in building foundational digital literacy across its six implementation countries. Digital literacy emerged as the most consistently delivered and impactful component, with participants, many of whom had no prior exposure, gaining essential skills in internet navigation, safety, and digital communication. Women, rural populations, and older participants showed particularly strong gains in digital confidence, thanks to SCILLS's use of interactive, hands-on training and peer-supported delivery.

These approaches helped break down initial fears around technology use and opened access to digital spaces previously out of reach.

Beyond basic skills, SCILLS helped participants build capacities in content creation, social media marketing, and soft skills development. However, advanced training in areas such as coding, e-commerce, and financial literacy was limited and uneven across countries. Women and marginalized groups were less likely to access these higher-level trainings, pointing to persistent gender and access gaps. Structural barriers, most notably lack of devices, unstable internet, and unaffordable data, constrained participants' ability to apply their skills after training. In some projects, only a fraction of available computers were functional, and participants relied on outdated phones or shared devices, with women often facing additional constraints due to household responsibilities and safety concerns.

Despite these barriers, SCILLS succeeded in translating digital skills into economic gains for many, especially youth and women entrepreneurs. In countries like Ghana, Senegal, and Indonesia, participants used digital tools to expand customer reach, launch new businesses, and improve visibility through platforms like WhatsApp Business and Google Maps. Yet these successes were often tied to the presence of reliable infrastructure or additional mentoring support. In areas without sustained follow-up, mentorship, or post-training pathways to employment, participants reported difficulty turning knowledge into opportunity. Trainers frequently supported learners informally, but this depended on goodwill rather than institutional design, highlighting an opportunity to systematize post-training support.

The programme also fell short in delivering consistent disability inclusion. While SCILLS supported several strong disability-focused initiatives—particularly in Bangladesh and Indonesia—other projects either deprioritized or lacked the capacity to adapt programming for persons with disabilities. Only a third of grantees reported making strong adaptations for People Living with Disabilities with women with disabilities reporting lower inclusion rates than men. These gaps, alongside limited reach in remote areas due to infrastructure deficits, illustrate the need for more systematic, cross-cutting strategies for equity. Still, SCILLS demonstrated a strong capacity to adapt using flexible delivery models, offline strategies, and community partnerships to respond to evolving needs and shocks. This flexibility, combined with grantees' trust in SCILLS's supportive donor model, enabled real-time adjustments that strengthened implementation across diverse and challenging contexts.

EFFICIENCY

SCILLS delivered its programming with strong operational efficiency, meeting planned milestones and making effective use of resources across six countries. Most grantees rated

the programme's resource use as highly efficient, highlighting its flexible budgeting, rapid approval processes, and trust-based donor approach. Implementers were able to reallocate funds in response to emerging needs, such as increased demand or equipment shortages—without compromising quality. Partnerships with local institutions and public infrastructure networks further expanded reach at minimal cost.

Projects adapted training schedules and delivery methods to local realities, ensuring high participation rates. This included evening classes for working adults, transportation stipends for rural learners, and adjusted training content for religious and cultural needs. In areas with limited internet or electricity, grantees deployed offline materials, portable routers, and mobile ICT labs to maintain delivery. These logistical adaptations were especially important for reaching women, youth, and remote communities.

Many grantees embedded participatory feedback and M&E mechanisms, enabling real-time adjustments to curricula and delivery. However, this level of responsiveness varied. Several projects lacked the capacity to systematically track outcomes or align training schedules with academic calendars—most notably in Brazil—affecting continuity and follow-through. Persistent resource gaps, especially in devices and connectivity, remained a major challenge, disproportionately affecting women and rural participants.

Despite these constraints, SCILLS stood out for its responsive donor engagement and strong communication systems. Regular feedback loops, open dialogue, and adaptive support allowed implementers to respond to shocks—like political unrest or climate disruptions—without derailing implementation. SCILLS's efficiency stemmed not only from good management, but from a model rooted in flexibility, local ownership, and responsiveness to community needs.

IMPACT

SCILLS's impact lies in its locally embedded, flexible design, one that enables communities to build their own pathways to digital inclusion, economic resilience, and long-term social transformation. The programme has generated meaningful, community-level impact by advancing digital literacy, strengthening education, and expanding economic opportunity across its six focus countries. Its regional, community-driven model prioritizes depth over scale, enabling lasting engagement with participants—particularly women, youth, and rural communities. Through hands-on digital training and inclusive delivery methods, SCILLS has equipped individuals with essential skills in internet safety, digital tools, and entrepreneurship. These skills translated into tangible improvements in academic performance, income generation, and business development.

In the education sector, SCILLS supported curriculum integration, teacher training, and improved student outcomes in ICT, reading comprehension, and language skills. In Ghana, Senegal, and Bangladesh, teachers reported that access to digital tools enhanced classroom engagement and student performance, while students applied new skills in national exams and extracurricular roles. These outcomes also reinforced broader education system resilience, particularly in underserved regions.

Economically, the programme enabled job placements, business launches, and stronger online visibility for micro-entrepreneurs. Women gained confidence and independence through digital marketing and e-commerce tools, often shifting household dynamics and earning national recognition. Community knowledge-sharing—such as youth teaching elders or families supporting one another’s businesses—amplified these impacts beyond individual participants.

However, infrastructure limitations, inconsistent follow-up support, and persistent sociocultural barriers continue to constrain equitable access. Public community spaces like libraries and schools proved essential for inclusive learning but require additional investment and outreach—particularly for women in conservative or rural settings. In areas with strong connectivity and partnerships, SCILLS transformed underused spaces into active digital hubs, catalysing broader community development and economic collaboration.

SUSTAINABILITY

SCILLS has fostered long-term sustainability by embedding digital skills into national systems, building local capacity, and investing in grassroots partnerships. Across all countries, implementers emphasized post-programme follow-up, partnerships with local governments, and training-of-trainers (ToT) models as key strategies for sustaining outcomes. Alumni networks, community digital hubs, and ongoing collaboration with public institutions have helped maintain relevance and momentum beyond initial funding cycles.

Institutional integration proved especially impactful. In Ghana, Colombia, and Bangladesh, SCILLS aligned with national curricula and supported education ministries in scaling digital content delivery. Participants became local champions, continuing to teach, share resources, and support peers. Community infrastructure—libraries, schools, and ICT labs—served as physical anchors for continued access and informal learning, particularly in underserved areas.

Yet structural barriers remain. Deeply rooted sociocultural norms, especially around gender and youth access to the internet, continue to undermine digital inclusion. In

contexts like Bangladesh and Colombia, parents, religious leaders, and social norms still limit women and children's participation, despite demonstrated interest and outcomes. Infrastructure challenges, including unstable electricity and poor connectivity in rural and mountainous areas, also hinder programme continuity.

SCILLS's sustainability rests not only on infrastructure, but on its community-led, flexible approach. Peer learning networks, WhatsApp groups, and household-level skill sharing have multiplied the programme's impact organically. Trainers, parents, and participants have become digital advocates, bridging gaps, adapting tools, and reinforcing relevance across generations. As a result, SCILLS has laid the foundation for resilient, locally-owned digital ecosystems, though further investment, policy alignment, and cultural engagement remain essential to protect and expand these gains.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen the SCILLS programme's impact and sustainability, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

Enhance Flexibility and Adaptation

- Enable more adaptable funding by streamlining approval processes and allowing for real-time budget reallocations. Consider establishing contingency funds or micro-grants for crisis response.
- Institutionalise adaptive programming through regular check-ins and support for timeline revisions, local pacing, and evolving content.
- Provide continuous technical assistance and coaching, rather than one-time support, to ensure quality and adaptability over time.

Ground Support in Local Realities

- Conduct joint needs assessments with communities before project design and funding. Use findings to tailor support and reduce misalignment.
- Strengthen feedback loops by promoting regular learning sessions and transparent reporting from grantees, enabling real-time adjustments.
- Improve communication accessibility by adapting donor communications to local languages and formats, including for disability inclusion.

Build Internal Capacity for Strategic Growth

- Periodically map ISOC's comparative advantages to inform strategic planning and funding focus.

- Invest in internal staff learning on digital inclusion, gender, disability, and policy engagement.
- Use internal reviews to identify gaps and pilot enhancements such as advanced training or school-edtech linkages.

Standardize M&E While Preserving Flexibility

- Set core indicators (e.g., learners trained, satisfaction) while allowing partners to define local metrics.
- Promote light-touch, outcome-driven reporting using short digital tools.
- Reward grantees who apply M&E findings through top-up grants or capacity support.

Establish a SCILLS Curriculum Framework

- Consolidate proven modules (e.g., digital literacy, online safety) into a core adaptable framework, with modular and open-source options.
- Include universal design and rural delivery protocols to ensure equity and accessibility.

Institutionalize a Community of Practice (CoP)

- Launch a global CoP platform with peer forums and shared tools.
- Host regional summits and learning exchanges to deepen cross-country learning.
- Recognize peer mentors and high-performing partners who model inclusive digital practice.

Invest in Long-Term Sustainability

- Promote policy engagement and government alignment from the outset.
- Require projects to demonstrate institutional linkages and co-funding pathways.
- Support multi-year grants and train-the-trainer models to embed ownership within local institutions.

Strengthen Uptake of Evaluation Findings

- Tailor outputs by audience—summaries for leadership, full annexes for practitioners.
- Use dashboards, briefs, and interactive webinars to engage diverse stakeholders.
- Disseminate findings continuously via layered channels—workshops, videos, newsletters—to maximize learning and accountability.