



# Community Networks for Social Good

LAST MILE ACCESS | DIGITAL EXCLUSION | PANDEMIC

Online Conference

November 15, 17 & 23, 2021

An initiative of



Internet Society



DEF

DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT foundation  
empowering people @ the edge of information

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## Introduction

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Getting online remains a challenge for billions across the globe. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an inevitable surge in the use of digital technologies due to nationwide lockdowns. People and organizations all over the world adjusted to the new normal – with meetings going completely online and office work shifting to the home. At the same time, many rural and low-income communities around the world lacked reliable and affordable access. Wireless access rapidly became a basic need rather than a 'nice to have'. The lack of affordable access was an issue as it prevented people from having access to a range of digital services – from public health and information to education.

Today, nearly half the world still has no Internet access. The majority are in developing and least developed countries, and for them the need to be online is even more urgent. In recent years, community networks have played a significant role in connecting and empowering rural and underprivileged populations and providing them with access to information, education, healthcare and so much more.

In 2017, Digital Empowerment Foundation and the Internet Society (ISOC) organized the first Community Network Exchange (CNX). Since its inception, CNX has played a crucial part in understanding the role, relevance, and evolution of community networks in different contexts. CNX 2020 took place amid a new pandemic-induced reality that explored the need – and significance – of community networks and the various dimensions related to meaningful access.

In 2021, the subsequent waves of the pandemic intensified the fundamental issue of lack of access. Much of the pandemic's management from vaccinations to movement tracking depends on being digitally connected. As a result, the vulnerability for literally billions of people has increased further. With this in mind, the theme for CNX 2021 is "Community Networks for Social Good". Within this overall theme, session sub-themes will reflect on the importance of community networks in accelerating reach and providing help to the communities to respond to COVID-19 and also to benefit from digital opportunities. It will also explore the experiences and challenges faced by community networks during the pandemic.

## **Objectives & Methods**

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CNX 2021 will run online on November 15, 17 and 23rd 2021. To ensure maximum engagement, each day of the conference will only have two focused sessions, running for a total of 135 minutes. The sessions will be held using Zoom and will be broadcast live on a number of diverse platforms including Livestream, Facebook Live and YouTube.

To maintain participants interest and engagement, each session will have three components:

- A moderated crisp panel discussion for 30 minutes with 3 speakers
- A 10 min segment called “Voices of Social Change” which will include short videos from community networks around the region and beyond
- A curated free-flowing open mic session to cater for questions and answers on the session topic.

The second session will run in the same format, and it will be preceded by a short break. The conference has been structured to promote substantive discussion among the stakeholders. The sessions will be delivered by experts and stakeholders, focused on sharing research, evidence-based practices, and policy recommendations with specific implications for action.



## Voice of Social Change Segment

Each session will have a 10-minute segment called "Voices of Social Change" which will feature short videos from locations around the region (and beyond) where community networks have helped bring about social change. The segment will cover human interest stories, regional stories, and impact stories in English and regional languages.

Each day of the virtual conference will run for 2 hours 15 minutes in total (135mins). The online platform will go live 10 mins prior to the daily start time to allow participants and speakers to connect, and to ensure a timely start to proceedings.

### CNX 2021 Format

<b>05 Min</b>	Welcome and Introduction of first topic
<b>30 Min</b>	Panel discussion for speakers & moderator
<b>10 Min</b>	Voices of Social Change
<b>15 Min</b>	Question & Answer
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Break (10 Min)- Video Display	
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<b>05 Min</b>	Introduction of second topic
<b>30 Min</b>	Panel discussion for speakers & moderator
<b>10 Min</b>	Voices of Social Change
<b>15 Min</b>	Question & Answer
<b>5 Min</b>	Wrap-up/Close of Day

**0500 – 0715 UTC**



<b>1030-1245 IST</b>	<b>1200-1415 BKK</b>	<b>1000-1215 ISB</b>
<b>1300-1515 SIN</b>	<b>1800-2015 SUV</b>	<b>1600-1815 SYD</b>



# CNX 2021 Theme



# Day 1

15th November 2021

## Opening of the Conference

### Session 1

#### **The Pandemic, Digital Dependence and the Unconnected: Challenges and Opportunities**

*Panelists: Attached separately*

The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated – or perhaps forced - the uptake of digital solutions, tools, and services, speeding up the global transition towards a digital economy. However, it has also exposed the wide chasm between the connected and the unconnected, revealing just how far behind many are on digital uptake. This gap exists within and between segments of the population e.g., minority and rural communities, as well as in different sectors e.g., education and health, and has impacted developed and developing countries. This session will explore how the region has coped - or tried to cope, and the digital gaps that prevail. It will also look at how complementary access solutions such as community networks have helped communities during the pandemic, and highlight some strategies, best practices and learnings for the future.

### Session 2

#### **Community Networks: Empowering Education and Health Care**

*Panelists: Attached separately*

In the field of education and learning, disruptions in the delivery of lessons to students and the shift to online learning have made the digital educational divide more pronounced. According to UNESCO, around 1.5 billion learners are affected by school closure caused by COVID-19. This emphasizes the point that while the pandemic is new to many of us, the digital divide has been with us for quite some time now. This session will discuss ways and means of accelerating online learning and how initiatives such as community networks can be used to promote education in underserved communities in both structured and unstructured ways. This session will also discuss the role of digital tools and services for health care providers and members of the community during the pandemic, and the need for people to have affordable access to connectivity. It will also explore how health care providers in rural areas have leveraged community networks to deal with the pandemic.

## Day 2 17th November 2021

### Special Session: Synergies between Community Radio and Community Networks

*Panelists: Attached separately*

Both Community Networks (CN) and Community Radios (CR) are by the community, for the community and with the community. Both CR and CN broadcast or facilitate infrastructure for information sharing. CRs and CNs also enable huge community participation and can often be found in localised (and underserved) remote areas. Both CRs and CNs are people technologies.

Operationally, while CRs produce lots of content for broadcasting, CNs allow the Internet to reach the hands of the people and open access to information and content. Both CRs and CNs use the public spectrum for public use. Interestingly, besides producing large amounts of locally relevant public content, CRs also use radio towers. Such radio towers are also a primary requirement of CNs to enable localised Internet connectivity using WiFi.

During the first CNX APAC held in 2017, the synergies between CRs and CNs were explored, and have continued to be discussed in subsequent events. The following key points emerged from those discussions between CR and CN practitioners:

- Community radios are already present in the most difficult and remote regions. Established manpower at community radios can be used for community networks.
- Since community radio works within a local community, providers understand the local dialect and language, which is crucial for community network providers as well.
- Community radio stations can provide a wide range of content and services to community network providers. Community network providers and community radio station owners can collaborate and work together to produce content of local interest.
- Community network providers can seek help from community radio station audiences and create and deliver the content on the basis of their audiences. A community network could act as a repository for content in their server that radio stations already put out.
- Community radio stations find it difficult to sustain themselves since subscription models are rare. There is a possibility that community radio subscriptions could include access to the Internet through community networks.
- Technical assistance is still a challenge since these rural areas have a dearth of experienced technicians.

This session will be an interactive discourse on the synergies of Community Networks and Community Radio in association with The Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD). This special session will be focused on the 'Why' and 'How' of CN and CR. The two hour session is divided into three parts:

**Session 1 (45 minutes):** Why CN and CR are Twins: Discussing the synergies CR and CNs have between them, and examples of their impact on the local (and typically unconnected) community.

**Session 2 (20 Minutes):** CR & CN Case Stories: Discussing and showcasing a couple of case studies of CR+CN in terms of their modus operandi and execution on the ground. The examples would be that of:

- Barefoot College in Tilonia Where the entire campus is WiFi and they have Community Radio and they both work in tandem
- DREAM project of APC and DEF: Where content and training material developed on misinformation and through the use of Chatbot and Community radio outreach took place at the time of Covid19
- How Meo Community in Haryana in the district of Nuh using Community Networks to connect themselves and also use Mewat Community radio to reach out to villagers
- Session 3 (45 minutes): The How and Future of CN and CR Collaboration: Further exploring how CR and CN complement each other, how they can operate together, how they can leverage each other, what are the building blocks of working in synergy, and how they could work together in the future to provide enhanced information and content for local communities.

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**Resource Persons:** *Philomena Gnanapragasam; Rajnesh Singh and Osama Manzar*



## Day 3 23rd November 2021

### Session 3

#### **Community Networks: Media, Misinformation and Misuse**

*Panelists: Attached separately*

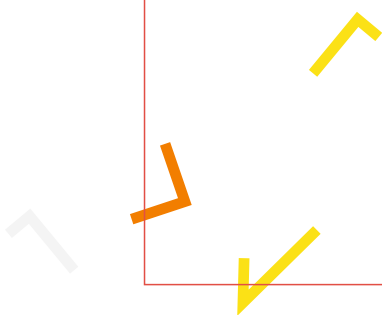
Access to credible information is crucial during crises such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In response to this, messaging apps and digital platforms have been asked by Governments to help disseminate accurate information related to the pandemic. However, without a proportionate response to provide the same information through other channels, including traditional media, those who have no access to digital technologies struggle with differentiating between fact and fiction. This is more important as often hearsay comes into play in many communities. This session will discuss how community networks in underserved areas can be leveraged to disrupt misinformation and how traditional media – including community radio – can be leveraged.

### Session 4

#### **Rural Changemakers and Innovators: Community Networks as a Catalyst for Digital Transformation**

*Panelists: Attached separately*

Digital Transformation is on the agenda for most policymakers, but that is typically focused around urban centres and industries. Developing countries have also put much emphasis into rural development programmes, yet these do not always appear to prioritise leveraging digital connectivity. This points to an obvious disconnect. Community Networks can serve as a foundation for helping build the digital economy at a very local level. They can also serve as a catalyst for digital transformation by empowering the local community to embrace digital technologies in their locality e.g. with agriculture and other local industries that may be present. Equally, Community Networks can also serve as a rural makerspace, where the community can learn new skills and be innovators in their own right. This session will explore how Community Networks can be leveraged to create the next generation of rural change makers and innovators.



## Co-Conveners of CNX-APAC 2021

**Rajesh Singh**, Regional Vice President, Asia-Pacific, Internet Society and  
**Osama Manzar**, Cofounder & Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation

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