We are

New-Delhi based non-profit Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) that has been working since 2002 to connect the unreached and underserved communities of India.

With the belief in the power to "Inform, Communicate and Empower", DEF aims to find sustainable digital solutions to overcome information poverty among rural and marginalised communities in backward and remote districts across India’s wide geography.
Our approach

Access & Infrastructure
We establish village-level community hubs to provide digital tools, digital services, digital literacy and access to the Internet.

Education & Empowerment
We introduce ICT tools in teaching and learning spaces for capacity building and skill development.

Governance & Citizen Services
We enable access to government schemes, services and entitlements to strengthen citizen rights.

Markets & Social Enterprises
We introduce digital interventions to establish market linkages and improve livelihood of rural entrepreneurs and artisans.

Knowledge Hub & Network
We identify, felicitate and mentor innovators who use digital interventions for societal development.

Research & Advocacy
We believe access to Internet is a human right that encourages equal opportunities.
We have impacted lives

- 20 million Digitally Empowered
- 10 million Women Digitally Enabled
- 5,000,000 People Availed Entitlements
- 70,000 Artisans Digitally Empowered
- 50,000 Trained In Digital Content Creation & Dissemination
- 10,000 Digital Innovations Documented
- 6,000 NGOs Digitally Enabled
- 2,000,000+ Youth Empowered with STEM Learning Program
- 1500+ Community Information Resource Centres

2,000,000+ Youth Empowered with STEM Learning Program
We aim to

Reach all 272 backward districts of India to digitally enable marginalised and underserved communities and bring them out of information poverty and empower them with digital tools and technology to improve their lives.
ACCESS & INFRASTRUCTURE

Community Information Resource Centre (CIRCs) are community-oriented infrastructure and information hubs built to create digitally literate, information-empowered and equitable communities across the country.

Wireless for Communities (W4C) is an initiative of DEF and the Internet Society that has been supported by various partners over the years. It aims to connect rural and remote locations of India, where mainstream Internet Service Providers are not willing to provide Internet connectivity, through frugal technology and unlicensed spectrum bands.
National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM) aims at empowering at least one individual in every household of India with crucial digital literacy skills by 2020. With a target of 60 million individuals spread across the country, NDLM is an effort to complement the government’s vision to digitally transform one individual in every household.

Internet Saathi is an initiative of Google and Tata Trust to introduce women to digital tools and the content, information and opportunities the Internet holds. DEF is an implementation partner in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh where it has mobilised women volunteers (or Internet Saathis) and equipped them with ICT tools and knowledge to remote communities to the mainstream world, thus bringing them out of information darkness.

District Library Programme, dedicated to repositioning public libraries in India, aims to strengthen the public library system to transform public libraries into Knowledge, Resource & Service Centres for citizens by strengthening digital capacities of the libraries and its staff.

Raising Standards of Education and Going Digital (RAISED) is a project implemented by DEF in partnership with Capgemini to ensure education level in public schools is brought at par with private school education through modern teaching methods and compliance with the Right to Education Act.

English and Digital for Girls’ Education (EDGE) is an initiative of the British Council and implemented by DEF to enhance English proficiency, digital skills and awareness of social issues among adolescent girls to enable them to make more informed and independent life choices.

Integrated Approach to Technology in Education (ITE), an initiative of the Tata Trusts, is an innovative education programme aimed at fostering higher order learning among primary and upper primary students.
DigiPrayas, a joint initiative of Axis Bank and DEF, was launched immediately after the historic demonetisation in November 2016. It aims at imparting digital financial literacy to individuals, SHGs and enterprises in rural communities where modern developments in banking have not yet been properly conveyed.

Soochna Seva is an initiative of DEF and the European Union aimed at facilitating information about government schemes and entitlements, and enabling access to the same for rural communities in an effort to support, strengthen and enhance capacities of grassroots communities to access and avail information and entitlements in critical areas of health, education, social & financial inclusion, livelihood and employment. information and entitlement needs.

Soochnapreneur is a rural entrepreneurship-based project initiated by DEF and Qualcomm in 2016 to empower youth in Indian villages to sustain their livelihood by providing information to those living in information darkness with the help of a bilingual app called MeraApp.
Digital Cluster Development Programme (DCDP) primarily involves inclusive and decentralised use of ICT and other digital tools in critical aspects of cluster development, especially to improve and scale up weaving skills, designs, marketing and entrepreneurship, besides creating sustainable livelihood options for the youth in artisan clusters.

eNGO Programme transforms grassroots civil society organisations into validated entities with a global online presence, and digital capacities for fundraising, collaboration, content creation, networking, outreach and Internet safety.

52 Parindey is a project dedicated to identifying and documenting the lives of grassroots-level innovators who are making a conscious living for themselves and the planet through alternate or traditional vocations in Indian towns and villages.

eHeritage Project is an initiative of DEF and UNESCO India to digitally document the history, heritage, culture, oral tales and folk art of India.
Crowdsourcing Week Summit (CSW) was brought to India for the first time by DEF in partnership with Crowdsourcing Week in 2017 to reflect on how crowdsourcing is reshaping industries and transforming organisations in today’s time.

Social Media for Empowerment (SM4E) is a platform that identifies, recognises and honours initiatives that leverage the power of social media to bring about a change.

mBillionth Awards is a platform that identifies and recognises best mobile-based initiatives from South Asia.

Manthan Awards is a platform that recognises and felicitate best practices in the area of ICT4D across South Asia.

eNGO Challenge is a platform that recognises grassroots organisations that are utilising digital tools for effective implementation, monitoring & evaluation, outreach, advocacy and fundraising, among other roles and responsibilities.
Digital Citizen Summit, an initiative of DEF and the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, focuses on access, online rights privacy, violence against women and communication blackouts to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas amid relevant stakeholders, and create a blueprint for future understanding of the concept of individual digital rights.

Internet Rights advocates towards ‘Internet for All’ and addresses concerns such as right to information, Internet & information access, Internet governance, Internet regulation, content specifications, cyber law, and appropriate policy frameworks. The project brings out critical aspects of the Internet with relation to human rights, right to information and right to services and schemes for marginalised and underserved communities.

Digital Security is an initiative headed by the Research & Advocacy wing of DEF. In an effort to strengthen its efforts in the area of advocacy for Internet rights and human rights, DEF organises digital security trainings and develops curriculums for high risk groups such as human rights defenders and civil society organisations.

Ocean in a Drop is a feature-length film, made by Australian film-maker Andrew Garton in collaboration with DEF, describing the impact the Internet is having on India’s rural and tribal entrepreneurs, community leaders, youth, children and women.
impact stories
Rakhi Uikey, from Kesla block in the Hoshangabad district in Madhya Pradesh, goes around her village to teach women how to use a mobile phone and access the Internet. The last house she visited belongs to a woman, who must be in her late 40s and earns a livelihood through poultry farming. An illiterate, she giggles shyly when Rakhi tells her that she is there to teach her how to use a mobile phone.

They sit next to each other by the door — one woman swiftly using a smartphone, the other peeping into the screen amazed by her companion’s ease at handling the device.

“You see this button? Press this to switch on the phone,” Rakhi instructs patiently. The woman picks up the phone hesitantly, and manages to switch on the phone after several attempts.

“Are you scared? Don’t be,” says Rakhi encouragingly, to which the woman replies, smiling nervously, that she is a little scared to touch the phone, lest she breaks it.

Rakhi is an Internet Saathi. Rakhi is one of the 3,000 women across rural Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, who have been equipped with a smartphone and undergone a three-day training facilitated by DEF under Google and TATA Trust’s Internet Saathi project.
Meet Anjali, 25, a young woman SoochnaPreneur who joined the initiative six months ago in Ranchi district of Jharkhand. Ever since, she has been serving community members with information and enabling access to government schemes, citizen rights and public entitlements. A young, motivated woman, Anjali is a champion for some and a threat for others.

Like many other parts of the country, girls in the villages of Ranchi are married off much before they reach the legal age of 18. One such girl, 14-year-old Anju Kumari, was being forced into child marriage in Anjali’s village when she heard about it. Anjali immediately headed for the venue and asked the parents to call off the wedding. When they didn’t agree, she recorded the ongoing ceremony’s video on her tablet and shared it with a local reporter who contacted child line officials in the region. The prompt action by Anjali, followed by the prompt response by the child line helpline initiated a police investigation, which revealed that after the girl would have been married off, her in-laws would have sold her to somebody in Punjab.
A VOICE & A PLACE ON THE MAP

Centuries ago, the Little Rann of Kutch — an unsurveyed piece of land that accounts for 37 per cent of the Gujarat’s total salt production — was part of the sea. This mudflat area is covered by sea water for four months and turns into dry land for the remaining eight months of the year. Here, 300 families of the Agariya community (salt farmers) extract one of the rarest types of salts, called vadagara crystals, and communicate with each other through mirror flashes.

DEF has reached the Little Rann of Kutch with Internet connectivity through Zero Connect, an initiative of DEF and the Internet Society. Zero Connect aims to give the Agariyas a digital voice through which they can communicate within and outside their community. With a mobile van equipped with Internet connectivity, laptops and an LCD screen, the Agariyas can now become digitally literate, apply for government schemes, access edutainment content, receive quality health care via telemedicine and find direct market linkages.
Nichlagarh near Mount Abu in Rajasthan made headlines when its female sarpanch met US President Barack Obama in June 2015. However, the village’s 7,500 residents still had to travel at least 25 kilometres to make a phone call, get a print out or fax documents.

In a village where its people are deprived of any mobile connectivity, the sale of smartphones has increased ever since DEF established a CIRC and created a Wi-Fi network. In this tribal village with no functional telecom service, parents now video chat with their sons settled in West Asia. With panchayats, schools, health care centres now connected to the Internet, not only has access to information and government schemes and services become easy, so have facilities like e-banking or digital services.

“We cannot make phone calls but we are connected to our loved ones through Skype, WhatsApp ad Facebook. Though we are not connected to a mobile network, we are just a click away from the world,” says Mahesh.
Bidyaabati Meher belongs to a weaver family that lives in a small village called Barpali in Odisha. Famous for hand-woven ikat sarees, the village is home to about 20,000 handloom weavers. Through Bidyaa completed her graduation from Barpali College, losses in the family vocation of weaving restricted her from paying her dues to college, forcing the institute to withhold her certificate of graduation. But that hasn’t stopped Bidya from achieving her dreams.

When DEF opened a digital resource centre in Barpali, Bidyaabati was one of the first few students to enroll for digital literacy. With so much to learn and access, Bidya enrolled for digital literacy and soon became one of the most active and fast-learning students at the centre. While the classes lasted an hour, Bidya was usually seen at the centre until much later.

Today, Bidya is a digital designer and trainer at the centre where she started as a trainee less than a year ago. She not only trains other youth like her in basic digital literacy and digital designing using advanced software, but also mobilises community members to adopt digital tools and accept digital interventions to improve their livelihood.
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