

# Migrants and Digital Tech: Policy Recommendations

ICT4D  
Collective

## KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy makers and practitioners engaged at the interface between digital tech and migration should:

1. **Recognise the importance of context and difference; there is no “one size fits all” solution to the use of digital tech by migrants.**
2. **Avoid developing new apps specifically for migrants; instead, make use of existing apps and platforms that migrants are already using.**
3. **Involve migrants in the development of policies so that these reflect their interests.**
4. **Put in place practical means through which migrants and their families can learn basic digital literacy skills that will reduce the risks of harassment, abuse, online fraud and surveillance, and thus prevent them from becoming further marginalised.**

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## Introduction: Why digital tech policy for migrants requires rethinking

Two-thirds of the world’s population in 2022 were using the Internet, and three-quarters of those aged 10 or more owned a mobile phone.<sup>1</sup> These technologies have become increasingly widely adopted over the last decade by international agencies, civil society organizations and donors in the development context. This is especially true in the field of migration, with numerous well-intentioned policies and interventions advocating the creation of apps and other digital tech “solutions” specifically for

<sup>1</sup> ITU (2022) [Measuring digital development: facts and figures 2022](#), Geneva: ITU

migrants. Typical of these are the IOM's [MigApp](#), the ICRC's [RedSafe](#), and the Asia Foundation's [Safe Migration App \(Shuvayatra\)](#).

Frequently such interventions do not deliver the expectations of those designing and promoting them. This is mainly because migrants prefer to gain information through sources that they already use and trust.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, insufficient attention has yet been paid at the policy level to the need to mitigate the potential harms of digital tech, so that their benefits can be fully achieved. This policy brief therefore addresses the need for new policy approaches relating to the use of digital technologies by migrants drawing heavily on the work of colleagues within the [MIDEQ Hub](#), and especially those in the [work package on technology, inequalities and development](#).<sup>3</sup> It focuses on four required policy actions at all scales: recognising the importance of context and difference; avoiding adding to the plethora of little used apps designed for migrants; involving migrants in policy development; and ensuring that migrants have the basic digital literacy skills that will help prevent them from becoming further marginalised through not being able to use them, missing out on opportunities offered by their use, and reducing the risks of harassment, abuse, online fraud and surveillance.

## Context matters: one size does not fit all

Migrant experiences vary greatly. At one extreme are well-educated, professionals and entrepreneurs who migrate to seek their fame and fortune elsewhere; at the other there are impoverished labourers sent abroad by their families to eke out an existence so that they can send home remittances. Some migrants are amongst the most marginalised people in the world; others can be among the richest. Digital policies and the interventions that follow from them therefore need to recognise that context matters. Our focus here is on how the poorest and most marginalised can benefit from, rather than be exploited and marginalised through the use of digital tech. There is much generic material available to help marginalised people use digital tech, but little of this

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<sup>2</sup> For more information see working papers developed as part of MIDEQ: Unwin, T., Ghimire, A., Yeoh, S-G., New, S.S., Kishna, S.S., Gois, marginalise., Lorini, M.R. and Harindranath, G. (2021) [Uses of digital technologies by Nepali migrants in Malaysia](#), Egham: UNESCO Chair in ICT4D, Royal Holloway, University of London, Working Papers No.1; Unwin, T., Ghimire, A., Yeoh, S-G., Lorini, M.R. and Harindranath, G. (2021) [Uses of digital technologies by Nepali migrants and their families](#), Egham: UNESCO Chair in ICT4D, Royal Holloway, University of London, Working Papers No.2; Unwin, T., Garba, F., Musaba, M.L., Lorini, M.R. and Harindranath, G. (2022) [Uses of digital technologies by migrants in South Africa](#), Egham: UNESCO Chair in ICT4D, Royal Holloway, University of London, Working Papers No.3; Unwin, T., Marcelin, L.H., de Souza e Silva, J., Otero, G., Lorini, M.R., Anyadi, C., Gonçalves, D.M., Sato, D.P. and Harindranath, G. (2022) [Uses of digital technologies by migrants from Haiti and to Brazil](#), Egham: UNESCO Chair in ICT4D, Royal Holloway, University of London, Working Papers No.4.

<sup>3</sup> This chapter builds in part on our earlier MIDEQ policy brief: Unwin, T., Harindranath, G. and Ghimire, A. (2021) [Migrants and digital technologies for learning and education: recommendations for governments](#), Egham: UNESCO Chair in ICT4D, Royal Holloway, University of London. The work of the MIDEQ Hub has been funded by the UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) [Grant Reference: ES/S007415/1]. The GCRF is a five-year £1.5 billion fund aimed at addressing the problems faced by developing countries. For a review of relevant existing literature see Harindranath, G., Unwin, T. and Lorini, M.R. (forthcoming), The design and use of digital technologies in the context of South-South migration, in: Crawley, H. and Teyte, J. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of South-South Migration and Inequality*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. This is supported by our listing of [interesting literature on digital tech and migration between countries in Africa, South and South-east Asia, and Latin America](#).

is designed specifically for migrants, and even good examples have their shortcomings. The GSM Association's (GSMA) [Mobile Internet Skills Training Toolkit, for example](#), is currently only available in 11 languages. The poorest migrants are often illiterate or only understand their local languages, and so policies need to be developed to enable such resources to be made truly accessible for them. Language- and context-relevant resources must be created and used if poor migrants are to benefit from them.

This also implies that the policies of international organizations should place more emphasis on ways through which their own financial and knowledge-based resources and support for migrants can be accessed in diverse contexts. A commitment to using Open Content and [Creative Commons Licensing](#) (preferably [CC BY SA](#)) is a good starting point, but much more needs to be done to train governments and migrant organizations in how to adapt these in their own contexts. They should also promote the principle that any digitally-focused interventions should be about enabling migrants to benefit from tech in the contexts in which they find themselves, rather than recommending one particular form of digital tech as a "solution" to the problems migrants face.

Governments and agencies should also draw on existing examples of good practices in the use of digital tech that ensure that technologies are made accessible to all people living within their borders, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel by developing their own "solutions". It is particularly important that the policies developed by governments of host countries should ensure that migrants can have relevant information localized in their own languages and culturally specific contexts. Context specificity should also be paramount for those companies or civil society organizations working at a smaller scale to help migrants use digital tech beneficially. Our [training resources in Nepal](#), for example, are available in the six most important local languages.

## **No more unwanted apps**

Migrants tend to use different apps and in different ways at specific stages of their migration journeys. Few migrants ever make use of apps that have been designed explicitly for them. Most use standard apps such as Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitter and YouTube, or messaging apps such as Telegram and WhatsApp. In large part, this is because these enable them to communicate with their families and friends who already use such apps, gain information relevant to their needs, ask questions when they require help, and gain skills that they might need as migrants. The policy implications of this are clear: all organizations working with migrants should focus on finding ways through which the messages that they wish to convey can be delivered through the apps and media that migrants already use, rather than expecting them to sign up to a new app, or use the latest technologies with which they may be unfamiliar. Community media, either video or radio, can also be extremely beneficial as a means of connecting the most marginalised.

International agencies and governments should therefore stop their investment of scarce resources in developing their own digital services and tools for migrants, and instead focus much more on ensuring that those who most need support and advice can access existing resources easily and affordably through the technologies that they

already use. Such agencies should also resist the temptation to work mainly with tech companies to find ways of using the latest technologies, be they blockchain or ChatGPT (and similar AI tools), “for migrants”; more often than not such initiatives serve the interests of the companies more than they do those of the most marginalised migrants. Consideration must also be given to the costs for economically poorer migrants in accessing resources online, and bandwidth heavy apps or portals should be avoided. National governments and migrant organizations can instead provide valuable services to migrants by creating and maintaining high quality portals that provide links to trusted resources pertinent to the many different stages and experiences of migration, including information about official requirements, legal systems in host countries, safety, cultural norms, getting help in specific circumstances, and how to ensure safe transmission of remittances (see box on Nepal).<sup>4</sup>

## Developing training and information resources with migrants in Nepal



*Migrant organizations and tech developers crafting novel resources in Nepal*

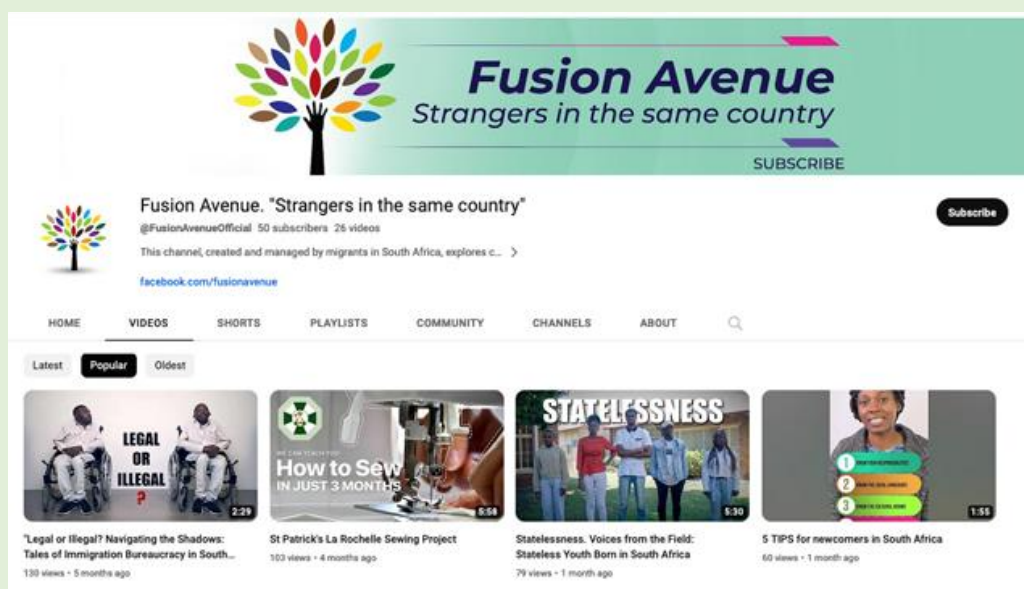
The MIDEQ digital technologies team’s research and practice in Nepal highlights the widespread lack of awareness of important policies and practices that could help migrants benefit from the use of digital tech while mitigating its potential harms. This led us to help facilitate the development of a [digital preparedness training programme](#) at the recommendation of migrant organizations for use in pre-departure training by all potential migrants and their families . The programme consists of resources and guidance on how to use them that draw on existing good practices globally and is available in the six main Nepali languages, as well as English. These are all available under a Creative Commons License (BY-SA) so that anyone can use and develop them further to train migrants. Initial feedback from those working to support aspiring migrants further highlighted the need for an even simpler digital literacy programme for those who have not yet had any exposure to digital technologies. Alongside the digital preparedness training programme, we have also facilitated the co-design of a ‘one-stop-shop’ portal for Nepali migrants (<https://pardesi.org.np>) that brings together and shares the highly fragmented information that they are expected to access or might find beneficial from public and civil society organizations.

<sup>4</sup> Our work with migrant organizations and tech developers in Nepal is seeking to do just this.

## Involving migrants in policy development and implementation

Working closely with migrants has reinforced our view that it is essential for migrants and their representative organizations to be closely involved in the development of policies intended to benefit them through the use of digital tech. The slogan “Nothing about us without us”, widely used by disability groups, is equally pertinent in the migration context. After all, migrants know far more about the challenges and benefits of migration than anyone else, including most academics and policymakers. Videos in their own voices, providing advice and information for their fellow migrants, are a powerful means of influencing change (see box on training migrants in South Africa in video production).

### Facilitating migrants in South Africa to produce high quality videos and to train others about online safety and security



The [YouTube Channel](#) created by migrants in South Africa through the support of MIDEQ

Our MIDEQ digital technologies team worked in 2022 and 2023 with migrants, civil society organizations, and academics to facilitate the design of [interventions](#) that have enabled migrants living in South Africa to learn more about safe, wise and secure use of digital tech, to make their voices heard, to share knowledge, and to learn from their lived experience through the making of high-quality videos. After workshops in Johannesburg and Cape Town that focused on online safety and security using digital solutions (particularly social media), participants joined in practical activities that helped them learn how to make videos. They explored storytelling, storyboarding, shooting methods, sound, editing, and lighting techniques to enhance their video quality. All this was accomplished using free software and budget-friendly smartphones. Migrants are now sharing and freely accessing knowledge in multiple languages through their [videos](#), and have created their own [channel on YouTube](#) (@fusioavenueofficial). They give voice to the voiceless as well as new opportunities to interact and support each other. The workshops also covered topics related to leveraging digital technologies for entrepreneurial purposes, social mobilization and community networking to increase the potential benefits for every participant ([watch what migrants thought about the training](#)). Training migrants in ways of sharing their knowledge and supporting them from afar using messaging apps has allowed them to start delivering workshops on online safety and security in their own communities, and in schools.

This engagement requires explicit mechanisms to be developed at all scales. In particular, it is essential for civil society organizations, governments and companies to engage with migrants and their representative organizations, to ensure that their experiences are fully represented in the development of policies and interventions relating to digital tech (not least with respect to digital privacy, surveillance, and cyber-security), both in countries of origin as well as those receiving migrants. Such engagement cannot be done solely through government-led online surveys and other quantitative means, but requires investment in more subtle and nuanced qualitative approaches to engagement. It is here that academics and civil society organizations, many with a deep understanding of the complex and hybrid character of migrant lives (both online and offline), can contribute to rigorous accounts of the needs of migrants. Intergovernmental organizations can then draw on these national grassroots experiences to develop global policy recommendations and practices.

## **Ensuring that migrants and their families have basic digital literacy skills before commencing their journeys**

One of the most important ways through which policy makers can help mitigate the potential harms of digital tech, such as identity theft, surveillance, sexual harassment, addiction, and abuse, is to ensure that migrants have appropriate skills and understanding before they migrate so that they can use digital technologies safely, wisely and securely. Unless this is done, the most marginalised will become relatively further disadvantaged, and will also be even more subject to these potential harms. This is particularly compounded when multiple dimensions of marginalisation, such as disability, gender and ethnicity are combined with migration. For example, a blind migrant woman from a minority ethnic community is much more likely to experience these harms through digital tech than is a well-educated, digitally experienced, migrant identifying as a man without any disabilities.

It is essential that the most marginalised migrants and their families are included in national training strategies to develop appropriate digital skills. Where the governments of sending countries also run training programmes for those involved in official migration flows, it is easy for them to include sessions on the safe, wise and secure use of digital tech. International agencies can also help to design templates of basic content for such courses based on existing known good practices that could then be adapted and localized for specific contexts. Companies could also consider adapting some of the training materials that they already provide, and make them freely available to migrants. One of the first things that many migrants do, either before leaving home or on arrival in a new country, is to purchase a smart-phone for their family members to speak with them while overseas, and so it is also crucial for family members of migrants to gain such training opportunities.

## **Conclusion: turning good policies into holistic practices**

Many well intended policies are never turned into effective practices. In conclusion, it is therefore worth reiterating the key recommendation that effective strategies for

implementing policies need to combine all these four elements (context matters, *and* no more apps, *and* working with not for migrants, *and* ensuring appropriate digital skills for all) in a holistic and multi-sector manner so that they can be implemented effectively on the ground in both countries of origin and host countries. Working together, international agencies can design and share evidence of good practices and templates, national governments can incorporate these into their programmes, and civil society organizations and companies can help with their design and implementation in local contexts on the ground. Above all, though, migrants and the organisations representing and supporting them need to be engaged in policy development and practical implementation for there to be any hope that the most marginalised of them may indeed benefit positively from their use of digital tech.

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## Partners

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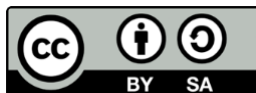
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