

Digital Transformation for Greater Inclusion and Rights

By James Thurston, Vice President for Global Strategy & Development, G3ict

1. Good morning. I am James Thurston, Vice President for Global Strategy and Development for G3ict, the Global Initiative for Inclusive ICTs. G3ict was formed as an international NGO in December 2006 at time of adoption of the CRPD by the United Nations General Assembly. Our mission is to promote the accessibility of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as per CRPD requirements. Our approach is to work through multi-stakeholder programs & collaboration with Civil Society, Government & Industry. Among other things, we work with governments around to create and implement ICT accessibility and digital inclusion policies and programs to support the technology aspects of the CRPD. We manage the international ICT accessibility professional society (IAAP), and hold an annual conference, m-Enabling, that will be next week in Washington, DC and that each year convenes more than 700 professionals and leaders from around the world to discuss and share best practices on technology, the CRPD, and inclusion. And we manage the Smart Cities for All global initiative that is working to make sure that cities that are using technology, and they all do, are inclusive of everyone, including persons with disabilities.
2. At G3ict, we absolutely believe that technology can, and must, support the empowerment and inclusion of persons with disabilities. But we also see in our research, analysis, and daily work that the deployment of technology assets can also make the digital divide for persons with disabilities worse, not better. At G3ict, we also believe that good policies, programs, and tools can help ensure that the global digital transformation we are all experiencing every day can also lead to greater inclusion and support the rights within the CRPD. Let me explain.
3. As we all know, there is today a digital transformation happening in all sectors of society. We are all using technology in more and more ways and throughout our day – from the moment we wake up until the moment we fall asleep and even while we are sleeping. There are more than 8 billion mobile subscriptions in the world. That is more than there are people. There are more than 50 billion IoT (internet of things) devices connected to the internet. No longer just our phones and computers, but our bikes, our scooters, our refrigerators, our watches. Everything is connected. Importantly, 70% of youth today are online. That is worldwide, across the global north and south. We truly have now a generation of digital natives.
4. And we see this digital transformation happening in key sectors that are core to the CRPD and a focus of our work at G3ict. We see a digital transformation happening in education, in courts and justice systems, in elections and political processes, in cities worldwide where most people live and that provide so many services (including transportation, public safety,

- and emergency preparedness. All these sectors are increasingly deploying technology – in classrooms, in courts, in voting booths, on public transportation, in e-government services.
5. For example, we know that global market for technology in cities, purchased by and used by cities across all their services that we all use, will reach more than \$2.5 trillion in the next few years. That is an enormous investment in technology by cities that is redefining how we as people engage with our city services and with each other. We are seeing a similar digital transformation in courts. According to a study by the American Bar Association (ABA), 55% of trial lawyers in the United States use technology in the courtroom, including 33% to access evidence and key documents. That is up from 28% in 2014. The same ABA study shows that in the United States in 2017, 22% of courtrooms provided touch screens, compared to 16% just the previous year. We are seeing similar movement to technology in courts in Brazil, the UK, and Argentina, the UAE, and more. We see similar digital transformations, move to using technology, in education, in workplaces, in transportation, etc.
 6. But is this global digital transformation working for everyone? I think many of us know the answer to that. It is not. Each year, G3ict does a global survey and analysis of how well countries around the world are doing at implementing the technology aspects of the CRPD. From that analysis, called the DARE Index, we know that just 40% of countries around the world have government websites that are accessible. From the work of our Smart Cities for All global initiative we know that cities today, smart cities using technology, are actually making the digital divide worse not better. We surveyed more than 250 experts worldwide and they told us today that smart cities are not using ICT accessibility standards and they are failing persons with disabilities. That could mean things like a smart city's transportation apps are not providing maps and graphical images with alt text. Or it could be that the city's digital payment systems time out too fast for persons with cognitive disabilities. Last year, we partnered with IDA to survey its members about access to justice and technology in courts. Maybe many of you participated in that survey. 85% of the IDA members who responded to the survey said that today persons with disabilities do not have equal access to justice and the majority said that courts in their countries do not use technology to assist persons with disabilities. In many ways, technology is a barrier to justice, for example information may not be available in accessible formats and justice system personnel may not be trained in accessible technology.
 7. But we also know that the growing deployment of technology assets into every aspect of our lives does not have to make the digital divide worse. In fact, when the digital transformations of schools and courts and cities are done well – they absolutely can help close the digital divide. For example, there are global standards that define accessibility means for every kind of technology and every kind of disability. But governments still are not aware of and using those standards. There are also great policy approaches that governments can adopt, like procurement policies similar to Section 508 in the US and the European Procurement Directive in the EU, that governments can adopt to require that they only buy accessible technology. In the U.S. government, at the national, state, and city levels, buys more than 40% of all the technology sold. So, if governments, including in all your countries, say they will only buy accessible technology it has an enormous impact. Your purchasing power can influence the technology market.

8. Let me finish by saying that the good news is that there are steps that industry, civil society, and government can take to make sure that technology deployments, that the global digital transformation works for everyone. At G3ict and Smart Cities for All we have created a range of tools to help national governments, cities, courts, schools, and others make sure that they technology solutions they are buying and deploying work for everyone, including persons with disabilities. Many of our tools are available in multiple languages. Our Smart Cities for All Digital Inclusion Toolkit is available in 10 languages. I would encourage you to look at G3ict.org and Smartcities4all.org for guidance and tools to bring together government, industry, and civil society to make sure that technology is not only not making the digital divide bigger but to apply technology in innovative ways to solve longstanding inclusion and accessibility challenges.