

Geneva Research Lab for Digital Impact Academic Forum on Digital Impact

Theme: Advancing Digital Impact across Systems and Scales:
AI-Enabled Acceleration, Governance, and Collaborative
Dynamics

27 – 28 August, 2026

Venue: Campus Biotech, Geneva, Switzerland

Organizers:

Prof. Dr. Tina C. Ambos, Geneva Research Lab for Digital Impact (GRL), University of Geneva
Prof. Dr. Vivianna Fang He, School of Management, University College London

Call for Papers

[Submission Deadline: 22 May 2026](#)

Societal grand challenges, including the persistent digital divide, demand unprecedented coordination across countries, sectors, and institutional environments. Yet despite growing investments in digital connectivity, substantial uncertainty remains about how digital inclusion generates impact, how such impact can be credibly measured, and how successful initiatives can be scaled and sustained across diverse contexts.

While digital connectivity is widely perceived and acknowledged as transformative, its social, educational, economic, and health impacts often remain difficult to demonstrate empirically. Extant approaches to impact assessment frequently struggle with data constraints, institutional heterogeneity, and scaling dynamics, particularly in non-WEIRD contexts. As a result, policymakers, funders, and implementing organizations often lack robust evidence to guide investment decisions, policy design, and implementation strategies at scale.

Addressing digital inclusion, therefore, calls for socio-technical systems that enable data generation, learning, and accountability, as well as deliberate collaboration among diverse organizational actors (George et al., 2016). Organizations function as goal-directed systems of collaboration (He & Puranam, 2024), and multi-actor arrangements - such as public-private partnerships (Quelin et al., 2017), multi-stakeholder partnerships (Grimm, Ruehle & Reinecke, 2024), and ecosystems (Tatarinov et al., 2023) - have emerged as central mechanisms for mobilizing and coordinating collective action to address complex social challenges (Selsky & Parker, 2005).

At the same time, the effectiveness of these arrangements increasingly depends on how data obtainment, AI, and digital infrastructures are designed. Socio-technical design choices (such as data interoperability, platform architectures, algorithmic decision-making, and digital public infrastructure) shape how collaboration is organized and coordinated. They also determine what kinds of evidence that can be generated, which decisions can be supported, and whose interests are represented. These choices introduce fundamental trade-offs between standardization and local adaptation (Nambisan & George, 2024), inclusiveness and control (Chen et al., 2022; Li et al., 2025), and experimentation and legitimacy (Buckley et al., in press). As socio-technical systems, measurement practices, and collaborative arrangements interact, the long-term viability of global digital impact initiatives depends on how these elements are aligned. Prior research highlights the importance of role negotiation (Gulati et al., 2012), governance arrangements that balance flexibility with accountability (Ambos et al., 2020; Tatarinov et al., 2023), and the alignment of divergent goals and institutional logics through an ongoing process of contestation and legitimation (Reinecke & Ansari, 2021; Gümüşay et al., 2020). However, existing work has only begun to examine how technical architectures, impact evidence, and cross-sector collaboration interact in practice to enable or constrain the pathways through which digital impact initiatives are designed, scaled, and sustained.

Forum Purpose and Format

Responding to this challenge, the Academic Forum on Digital Impact brings together scholars and practitioner-researchers to engage in deep, problem-driven dialogue on how large-scale initiatives - such as global school connectivity¹ - can design and leverage socio-technical systems, generate credible evidence, and organize cross-sector collaboration to accelerate inclusive digital impact.

Organized by the Geneva Research Lab for Digital Impact (GRL) at the University of Geneva in collaboration with UNICEF's Digital Impact Division, the Forum is designed as a smaller-scale convening (approximately 40-50 participants). The emphasis is on depth over breadth, sustained interaction, and collective learning rather than parallel sessions or stand-alone showcases.

The Forum welcomes theoretical and empirical contributions that engage with the enablers, pathways, and outcomes of digital connectivity. Contributions should combine technical approaches or methodological rigor with practical relevance, and advance actionable pathways for measuring, governing, and scaling digital impact across diverse institutional environments.

The forum will feature keynote contributions from leading scholars whose work speaks directly to these challenges. The Forum aims to:

¹ <https://giga.global>

- Advance cutting-edge academic thinking grounded in real-world digital inclusion challenges
- Strengthen a committed, transdisciplinary research network around connectivity, digital public infrastructure, and impact measurement
- Generate actionable insights that inform ongoing and future work within GRL, UNICEF, Giga, and ecosystem partners

Tracks

The Academic Forum on Advancing Digital Impact is structured around three interrelated tracks, sequenced to enable cumulative learning and exchange across themes.

Track 1: AI and computational approaches for digital connectivity

Keynote by Prof. Dr. Esteban Moro (Northeastern University)

Core question: *How can the impact of digital connectivity be mapped, measured, and accelerated?*

This track focuses on the technical foundations that make large-scale digital impact possible. It explores data infrastructures, AI-enabled tools, and digital public systems that support connectivity planning, monitoring, evaluation, and decision making. It also addresses the measurement and evaluation challenge at the heart of efforts for digital impact. It focuses on original work (or substantial extensions of published research) where AI and/or computational approaches can generate advances towards measuring impact in digital connectivity, for all stages of the connectivity life cycle, from infrastructure planning to mapping the impact of connectivity.

Indicative themes include:

- AI-enabled mapping and monitoring systems
- Measurement of learning outcomes, health outcomes, and economic effects linked to connectivity
- Identification of underserved communities using technology and AI
- Geospatial AI for public buildings and infrastructure mapping and planning

Targeted outcome: Identification of novel, AI-enabled approaches for impact measurement and connectivity delivery, thus developing a shared understanding of credible and feasible impact evidence and methodological standards that can inform large-scale decision-making and acceleration.

Track 2: Governance and Pathways for Digital Impact

Keynote by Prof. Dr. Vivianna Fang He (University College London)

Core question: *How do system designs and governance of digital technologies enable or constrain digital impact?*

This track focuses on the design, deployment, and governance of digital technologies and infrastructures. It explores how socio-technical architectures - such as data infrastructures and digital public goods - shape access, accountability, power, and ethical outcomes. Contributions critically examine design choices, trade-offs, and governance arrangements across diverse institutional and cultural contexts.

Indicative themes include:

- Digital public infrastructure and digital public goods for education, health, and economic inclusion
- Responsible governance by design approaches
- Centralized versus decentralized and community-based technology models
- Ethical, epistemic, and governance challenges in digital system design

Targeted outcome: Identification of design and governance pathways through which digital technologies and infrastructures enable or constrain inclusive digital impact, clarifying how specific socio-technical choices shape access, accountability, power, and ethical outcomes across institutional contexts.

Track 3: Collaborative Dynamics and the Grand Challenge of Digital Impact

Keynote by Prof. Dr. Tobias Kretschmer (Imperial College London, LMU Munich)

Core question: *How are digital impact initiatives organized, coordinated, and sustained at scale?*

This track conceptualizes digital impact as a grand challenge requiring sustained cross-sector collaboration. It focuses on the organizational, relational, and institutional dynamics that shape whether digital impact initiatives move beyond pilots and endure over time. Particular attention is given to ecosystem coordination, procurement models, financing, and regulatory environments.

Indicative themes include:

- Ecosystem orchestration and partner role design (public, private, multilateral, and civil society actors)
- Procurement and contracting models for connectivity and digital services
- Policy and regulatory conditions enabling scale (i.e., infrastructure sharing, sectoral alignment)
- Financing, sustainability, and long-term capability building

Targeted outcome: Advancement of an integrated understanding of how cross-sector coordination mechanisms and institutional conditions shape the long-term sustainability and scale of digital impact initiatives.

Call for Contributions

The Forum welcomes contributions from scholars and practitioner–researchers who can bring substantive technical, methodological, or implementation expertise to shared digital inclusion challenges.

We particularly encourage contributions that:

- Engage directly with real-world data, systems, methods, or implementation problems
- Offer insights that are transferable across contexts, sectors, or scales
- Explicitly connect technical or methodological advances to practical decision-making
- Are open to discussion, critique, and collaborative refinement

Contributions may take the form of:

- Research papers or working papers
- Methodological or technical demonstrations anchored in a shared problem
- Empirical findings with clear implications for scaling or governance
- Conceptual contributions

The Forum is not intended for high-level overviews or isolated showcases without clear analytical or practical depth.

Submission Guidelines

Authors are invited to submit extended abstracts (4'000 words), outlining: 1) the core research question, 2) data, methods, or technical approach, 3) key findings and expected contributions, and 4) relevance to one of the forum tracks.

Submission should be made by **22 May 2026**.

About the Geneva Research Lab for Digital Impact (GRL)

The Geneva Research Lab for Digital Impact² (GRL) is a joint initiative of the Geneva School of Economics and Management at the University of Geneva and UNICEF's Digital Impact Division. GRL bridges rigorous evidence and action by connecting academic inquiry and real-world decision-making needs, and by developing the knowledge, tools, and collaborative frameworks that support more effective, equitable, and sustainable digital impact worldwide.

² <https://genevaresearchlab.org>

GRL's work is organized around three pillars:

- **Research for Impact:** We conduct fundamental and applied research to generate evidence on the enablers, pathways, and outcomes of connectivity and digital impact – laying the foundations for smarter strategies and measurable progress.
- **Learning for Change:** We translate evidence into clear, actionable insights and learning resources that strengthen capabilities, inform leadership, and support better decision-making across government and partner organizations.
- **Ecosystem Activation:** We bring stakeholders together across sectors to exchange perspectives, challenge assumptions, and turn shared evidence into coordinated action that accelerates collective progress on digital impact.

About UNICEF's Digital Impact Division

UNICEF's Digital Impact Division (DID) works to enhance UNICEF's global digital impact by promoting equitable access to information and services. It leverages technologies and capabilities that accelerate progress on UNICEF's goals, strengthen community resilience, and expand access to essential digital services and information.

UNICEF's Digital Inclusion (DI) programme supports governments and partners to improve equitable, affordable digital access for children, schools, and communities. The programme engages with regulators, operators, and public institutions to explore innovative approaches to connectivity, infrastructure governance, and digital public goods. Giga, a partnership between UNICEF and ITU, is a flagship initiative under DI with the goal of connecting every school to the internet. Giga combines school mapping (including satellite imagery and geospatial analytics) with tools that assess and visualize connectivity, creating actionable visibility on where access exists and where gaps persist. This evidence base supports governments and partners to prioritize investments and track progress over time. Beyond diagnostics, Giga acts as a financing and delivery catalyst. Once connectivity gaps are identified and investment pathways clarified, Giga works with governments to translate data into implementation, supporting the use of open-source approaches, strengthening policy and regulatory frameworks, and improving procurement design so that school connectivity is delivered at scale, affordably, and sustainably.

About Giga

Giga is a partnership between the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) supporting governments to connect every school in the world to the internet and every young person to information, opportunity, and choice. Established in 2019, Giga's open-source solutions have boosted connectivity efforts worldwide. Giga offers government connectivity solutions in school mapping, infrastructure modelling, and technical support in financing and contracting. Giga has supported increased access to connectivity for 14,500 schools, benefitting approximately 7.79 million students. Giga has mapped 2.1 million schools across more than 140 countries.³

³ <https://giga.global>