Project Proposal

DigiBridge:

Empowering Youth through Specialized E-commerce Education to Bridge the Digital Literacy Gap and Accelerate Economic Development in Rural Areas – A Case Study on Cambodia

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Abstract

This project aims to address the critical issue of youth empowerment in the digital age. It centres on the persona of Dina, a young woman from Kratie Province, Cambodia, whose family business struggles to adapt to the digital economy due to a lack of digital literacy and resources. DigiBridge envisions creating a digitally inclusive society where every young person has the opportunity, skills, and access to participate fully in the digital economy. The project targets youth in rural areas, female youth, and youth engaged in the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), aiming to reduce poverty, promote quality education, and foster sustainable economic growth. By enhancing digital skills and promoting digital literacy, DigiBridge seeks to bridge the digital divide and foster economic growth. The program includes comprehensive digital literacy and skills training, specialised digital skills curriculum for e-commerce, marketing, and finance, and the establishment of support networks for youth like Dina. While the proposal uses Cambodia as an example case study, DigiBridge is designed to be adjusted and customised for implementation in different regions. With the support of private sector investments, government grants, and international organisations, DigiBridge aims to create a scalable model that can be adapted to various contexts, ultimately empowering youth like Dina and driving economic development in rural areas worldwide.

Our Team

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1. Introduction

Youth empowerment is one of the most prominent challenges today. The United Nations defines youth as people aged 15 to 24. However, there are no universally agreed definitions of 'youth' as other institutions, such as the African Union and UNESCO, expand the age range of youth to 35 years. Youth accounts for 1.2 billion people (16% of the global population) in 2023, and is expected to increase to approximately 1.3 billion by 2030. The United Nations also stated that more than half of the global population is under 30. Youth actually has enormous potential to promote economic and social change. However, this potential is frequently hampered by major barriers.

Poverty, unemployment, restricted access to school, the digital gap, digital literacy, and gender inequality are all significant challenges to youth empowerment (DBSA, 2024). These concerns are especially prevalent in underdeveloped countries, where about 85% of the world's youth live. About 60% of these young people live in Asia, with the remaining 23% in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Addressing these issues is critical for realising the demographic dividend and promoting inclusive and sustainable development.

It is indisputable that the era of Information Technology has taken off and incorporated into people's lives faster than the Industrial Revolution, in the mid-18th century, did. The use of smartphones, internet, digital market, and digital trade have become increasingly dominant in the modern trading dynamics in both the metropolitan and rural region. Many literatures have placed emphasis on the impact of the COVID-19 on youth in rural areas when it comes to describing the importance of equipping them with equitable digital accessibility adequate for commerce. Modern businesses, despite being small or big, find it necessary to adjust their business model with the rising digital technology, whether it's e-commerce or simple digital communication with their suppliers and buyers.

The pandemic highlighted young people's weaknesses in transitioning to a digital economy. The abrupt transition from traditional face-to-face contacts to digital commerce revealed huge disparities in digital literacy and readiness (IFAD, 2021). This lack of readiness has an impact not just on youth economic resilience, but also on their psychological well-being and hopes for the future (Shafi, 2021). The pandemic has revealed that youth in rural areas are not resilient to the digitised economy, and with the fast evolving information technological world, this will impact youth in rural areas in the long run.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report on a project aiming to improve Rural Development in Georgia in 2021, businesses in the rural region, including youth-owned businesses, are encouraged by the UNDP to integrate digital technology to ensure future resilience and sustainability, despite the lack of resources (UNDP, 2021).

Young women encounter significant challenges to empowerment. According to the International Labour Organization, young women in developing countries are frequently

unable to access training opportunities due to entry hurdles, prejudice in selection, and gender stereotypes. This gender difference exacerbates existing disparities and hinders young women's economic and personal development chances. While most of the private Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are family-run, 65% of them are owned by women.

There is a significant difference between youth in metropolitan areas and those in rural areas in terms of digital literacy. Youth in cities have greater access to digital education and resources, allowing them to respond more quickly to new challenges and economic dynamics. Choi (2020) showcased the case of businesses in Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia, which swiftly adapted by opening online stores on Instagram during the pandemic and benefited from the growth of online delivery services to maintain the momentum of their trade cycle. This was possible because those in the capital city were more digitally literate. In contrast, their counterparts in rural areas are often denied such opportunities, resulting in a growing digital gap.

Our solution seeks to solve these difficulties by providing specialised e-commerce education suited to the requirements of young people, particularly in rural areas. By providing digital skills to young people, including young women, we hope to close the digital literacy gap and boost economic development in rural areas. Our strategy focuses on ensuring equal access to upskilling and training, educating young people for equal work prospects, and closing the gender gap. This effort is critical not only for young people's economic empowerment, but also for long-term community development in an increasingly digital environment.

This proposal is based on the case study of Cambodia, using the persona of a youth living in the Kratie province of Cambodia. The Kratie Province, located in Northeastern Cambodia, presents a different situation from the capital in terms of economic development and digital literacy

2. Persona: Dina from the Kratie Province in Cambodia

A family in Kratie Province, rural Cambodia, has been running a small business from home, trading daily household essentials such as soap, rubber shoes, toothpaste, salt, sugar, etc., for almost four decades since the early 1980s. They have two children, a daughter and a son. Dina, the daughter, is the focus of our persona.

Their business model has remained traditional, involving buyers visiting the vendor daily and purchasing goods directly from the shop. Dina's parents, on the other hand, goto the provincial market weekly or daily to replenish the stocks. This cycle has continued since the start of the business, without considering any global health disruptions or the emergence of digital technology. However, things became grim when the COVID-19 pandemic spread in Cambodia. The lockdown and social distancing hampered their traditional business model, preventing them from travelling as conveniently as before.

The lockdown resulted in an abrupt decrease in customer traffic visiting the shop, drastically reducing the family's income. Moreover, the family could not easily visit the provincial market to replenish their stock on time, leading to difficulties matching the supply and demand dynamics of their business model. This resulted in hardship in coping with COVID-19 and the sudden shift in trading dynamics. Without any plans to incorporate digital methods to adapt to these changes, the family stuck to their traditional business model and waited for safety measures to be lifted.

The lack of digital literacy was the reason why Dina's parents were unable to adopt digital methods. The family hoped that the younger generation taking over their business would find solutions to this problem.

Dina hopes that in the future, small and medium-sized businesses in rural areas will not only be run by the older generation but also allow youth to take part in these roles. Dina believes that digital resilience and youth involvement in small and medium-sized businesses will enable economic resilience not only in Cambodia but also in other countries (Ek, 2024).

3. Digital Literacy in Cambodia

Cambodia is a developing country in Southeast Asia with a population of 16 million people. As of 2023, over 11.3 million people (67.5% of the population) are internet users, and there are 10.9 million social media subscribers (65% of the population), with the majority concentrated in the capital, Phnom Penh (Kemp, S. 2023 & Fenwick, S. 2022). The speed of the internet in Cambodia has improved rapidly in recent years. Mobile data offers a variety of network choices, such as 3G and 4G LTE (Chan, R. 2024).
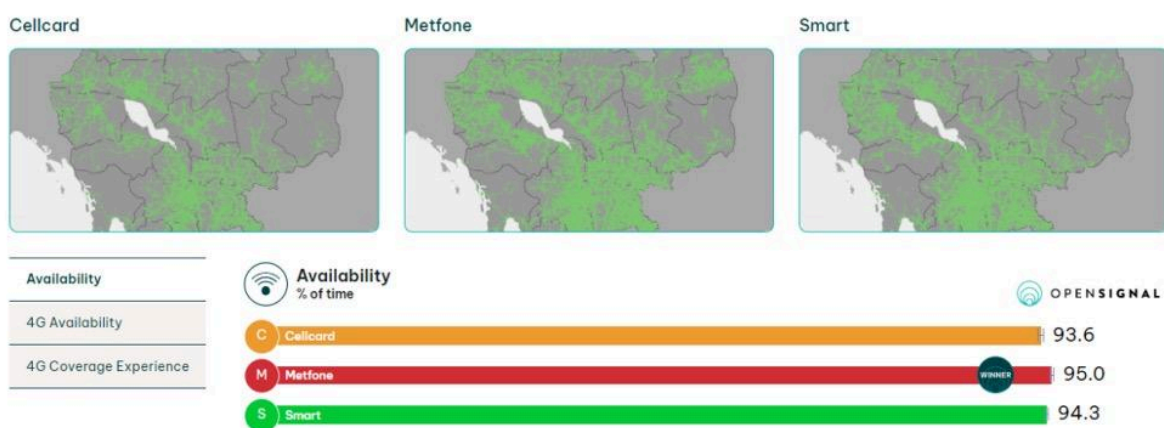

Figure 1: Mobile Internet Coverage in Cambodia (Source: Opensignal)

Despite these advancements in big cities across the country, Cambodians living in rural areas continue to face challenges in accessing digital information due to low levels of

digital literacy, inadequate digital services, and insufficient internet connectivity (Nimol, S. 2023). A research conducted by the ASEAN Foundation also stated that while internet and mobile phone penetration rates in Cambodia are high, only 30% of the population possess basic media and digital literacy skills (Carruthers, 2024).

4. Solution: DigiBridge
4.1 Project Introduction

DigiBridge is a comprehensive upskilling and training program designed to empower young people, especially those living in rural areas, with digital skills. To effectively enhance digital literacy and skills among youth, DigiBridge will integrate essential IT and software skills into the training curriculum. These courses will be taught in the national language to prevent language barriers. Specialised curricula will also be introduced, covering areas such as IT for Marketing, IT for E-commerce, and IT for Finance, tailored to each community's internet use and level of digital literacy.
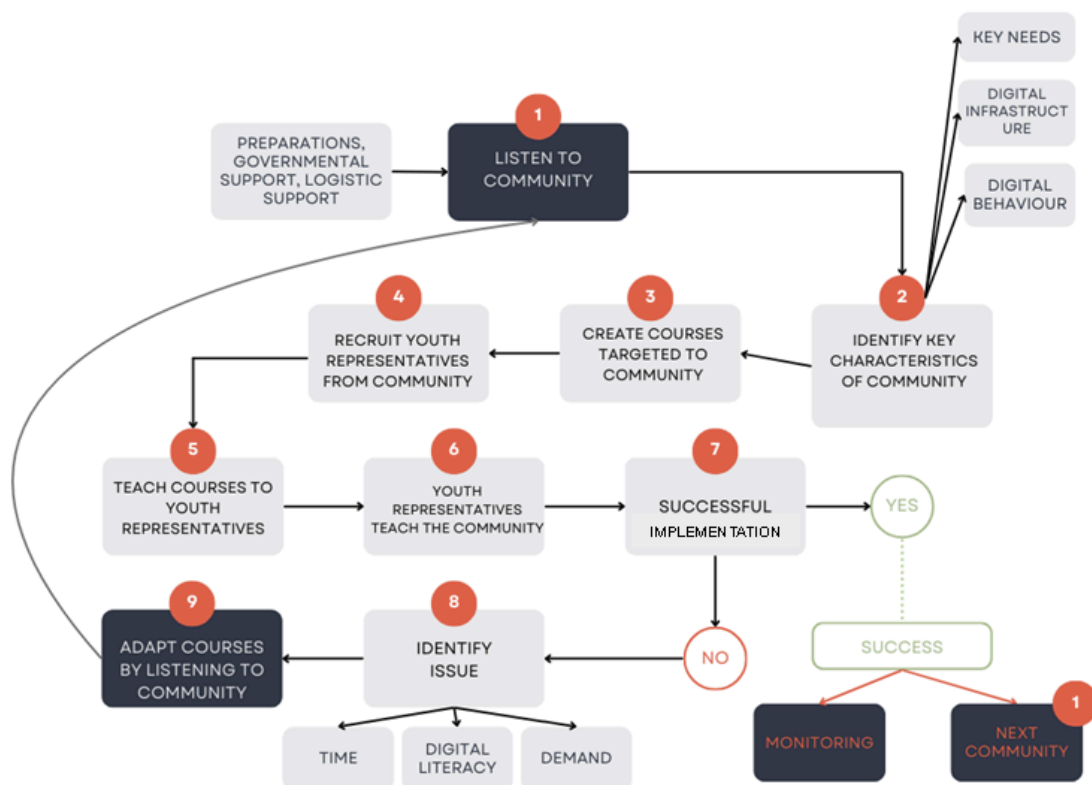

Figure 2: Project Flowchart

The curriculum of DigiBridge is customizable to the needs of the community. Before implementing DigiBridge in a community, the project team will first conduct observations and engage with the community to identify its core needs in terms of digital literacy training. After identifying the key characteristics of the community, curriculum and courses will be designed accordingly. The project team will then recruit youth representatives from the community to be teachers. Our concept is "from youth to youth." We will train these

youth representatives, who will then start teaching the community. Those who have received training will be encouraged to implement what they have learned, such as by opening their own online businesses. Once they open their businesses, the project team will continue monitoring, and then the project can be replicated in the next community. If the training participants are not successful in starting their own online businesses, the project team will identify the issues and re-adapt the courses based on the evaluation and reassessment of the community's needs.

For those lacking access to digital devices, high-speed internet, and formal education, community training programs will be established in schools and community centres. ICT devices already available in these locations will be utilised by training participants. Practical digital skills workshops tailored to local needs will be provided. To ensure safety, personal data protection regulations will be in place to protect youth participating in these training programs.

E-commerce training programs will focus on youth in micro, small, and medium enterprises, teaching them how to set up and manage online stores and providing resources for digital marketing and online sales. Support networks, including mentorship programs and partnerships with local e-commerce platforms, will be created to offer special incentives to youth entrepreneurs.

The program will ensure that young women are also included. Public awareness and engagement are critical to bridging the gender divide in digital literacy. DigiBridge will launch campaigns highlighting the benefits of digital skills and e-commerce, addressing gender disparities, and using success stories to inspire the community, particularly young women. Community engagement will be fostered through events, workshops, and seminars on digital topics, focusing on gender inclusivity, and creating online forums and social media groups for ongoing support.

4.2 Vision
Our vision is to create a digitally inclusive society where every young person, including young woman, has the opportunity, skills, and access to participate fully in the digital economy, leading to enhanced economic growth and improved quality of life.

4.3 Target Beneficiaries

Target Beneficiaries	Related SDGs	Description
Youth in Rural Areas	1.4, 4.4, 8.6	No Poverty - Aims to reduce poverty through enhanced income opportunities via digital and e-commerce skills. Quality Education - Promotes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities. Decent Work and Economic Growth - Fosters sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth.
Female Youth	5.5, 10.2	Gender Equality - Empowers young women by providing equal opportunities for education and employment. Reduced Inequalities - Reduces inequalities by addressing barriers faced by young women.
Youth Engaged in MSMEs	9.3, 12.6	Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure - Supports innovation and infrastructure development. Responsible Consumption and Production - Encourages sustainable business practices in MSMEs.
Youth with Limited Access to Education and Employment Opportunities	4.5. 8.5	Quality Education - Provides access to education and skill development. Decent Work and Economic Growth - Enhances employability and career prospects.
Youth Requiring Technical Support	4.a, 9.c	Quality Education - Offers foundational digital education to ensure inclusivity in digital literacy. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure - Promotes sustainable industrialization and fosters innovation.

4.4 Specialised Digital Skills Curriculum

Our specialised digital skills curriculum aims to equip participants not only with basic IT skills but also with the necessary skills to start their own online business after training. Those who complete our digital training programs will have the opportunity to take IT certification exams, certified by the country's Ministry of Economics and a partner ICT company. Certified individuals and those starting their own digital businesses will be eligible for further government support, including health insurance and maternity leave. This initiative will encourage young people to join our training program and start their own online businesses, knowing they will be eligible to receive support from the government as traditional company employees do.

The following table outlines examples of specialised digital skills curriculums designed to equip participants with the essential skills needed for modern business practices in the fields of marketing, e-commerce, and finance. Each curriculum is tailored to provide both fundamental and advanced knowledge, enabling participants to enter the workforce directly upon completion of the training programs.

Digital Skills for Marketing: This curriculum covers essential aspects of digital marketing, from understanding the basics to mastering advanced techniques. Participants will learn about social media marketing, SEO, content creation, email campaigns, and using data analytics to measure and optimise marketing efforts.

Digital Skills for E-commerce: This curriculum focuses on the skills needed to set up and manage successful online stores. It includes courses on e-commerce fundamentals, website design, product management, digital marketing strategies tailored for e-commerce, and customer service. Participants will also learn how to analyse e-commerce data to improve business performance.

Digital Skills for Finance: This curriculum provides comprehensive knowledge of financial IT systems. It covers topics such as financial data management, cybersecurity, financial software tools, online banking, and payment systems. Additionally, participants will explore emerging technologies like blockchain and fintech, equipping them with the skills needed to navigate the evolving financial landscape.

Digital Skills for Marketing	Digital Skills for E-commerce	Digital Skills for Finance
Introduction to Digital Marketing: Understand the basics of digital marketing, including online advertising, content	**Introduction to E-commerce**: Learn the fundamentals of e-commerce, including online retail strategies,	**Introduction to Financial IT Systems**: Gain a foundational understanding of IT systems used in the finance sector, including

creation, and audience engagement.	customer behaviour, and digital payment systems.	their roles and functionalities.
Social Media Marketing: Explore strategies for promoting products and services on social media platforms, focusing on engagement and conversion.	**Setting Up an Online Store**: Learn how to establish and manage an online store, from product listing to customer service.	**Financial Data Management**: Understand how to manage and analyse financial data for informed decision-making and compliance.
Search Engine Optimization (SEO): Study techniques to improve website visibility on search engines, driving more organic traffic.	**E-commerce Website Design**: Gain skills in designing user-friendly and efficient e-commerce websites.	**Cybersecurity in Finance**: Learn about the importance of cybersecurity in the finance sector and how to protect sensitive information.
Content Marketing: Develop skills in creating and distributing valuable content to attract and retain customers.	**Product Management**: Understand the lifecycle of product management, from development to market introduction.	**Financial Software and Tools**: Get familiar with software and tools commonly used in financial analysis and reporting.
Email Marketing: Learn how to craft effective email campaigns to engage customers and drive sales.	**Digital Marketing for E-commerce**: Explore digital marketing strategies specifically tailored for e-commerce businesses.	**Online Banking and Payment Systems**: Study the infrastructure of online banking and various payment systems.
Data Analytics for Marketing: Use data analytics to measure marketing performance and optimise strategies.	**Customer Service and Support**: Develop skills in providing excellent customer service and support in an online environment.	**Blockchain and Fintech**: Understand the basics of blockchain technology and its applications in financial technology (fintech).
	Data Analytics for E-commerce: Analyse e-commerce data to improve business performance and customer satisfaction.	

4.5 Implementation Roadmap
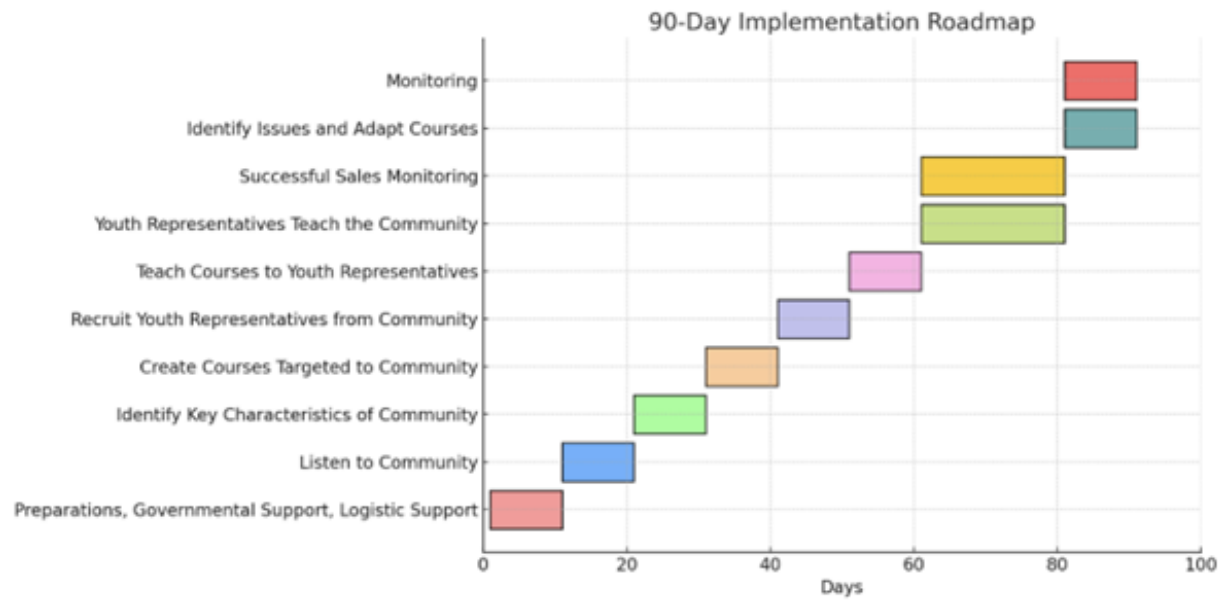
The duration of one project cycle is 90 days.

Figure 3: 90-Day Implementation Roadmap

Phase 0: Preparations Phase (Day 1-10)

Before our project begins, we need to first choose a community to implement the project. We also need to ensure partnerships and support from the government, school, and community centre.

Phase 1: Listening to the Community (Day 11-20)

Conduct initial meetings and quantitative as well as qualitative surveys to understand community needs, digital infrastructure, and digital behaviour. The survey will examine the digital literacy of the youth in the region and identify which MSMEs could benefit from the project.

Phase 2: Identifying Key Characteristics (Day 21-30)

Based on the survey, key characteristics of the community can be derived. This includes the key issues in the community, economic data, the digital infrastructure and internet access of individual households, and digital behaviour, such as information on whether and how individuals already use the internet and social media.

Phase 3: Course Creation (Day 31-40)

Create specific e-commerce courses targeted to the specific community. Our project team will use the derived information to create a curriculum catered to the needs of the community.

Phase 4: Recruiting Youth Representatives (Day 41-50)

We will select and recruit youth leaders from the community who will be trained to deliver the prepared courses.

Phase 5: Teaching Youth Representatives (Day 51-60)

Our team will conduct training sessions for the youth representatives to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to train the community.

Phase 6: Community Teaching and Sales (Day 61-80)

Youth representatives begin teaching the broader community. They will be responsible for giving training to their community members in community centres or schools.

Phase 7: Implementation (Day 61-80)

We will encourage training participants to implement what they have learned, such as opening an online store. The online store will be continuously monitored to measure its impact.

Phase 8: Evaluation and Adaptation (Day 81-90)

In the case of unsuccessful implementation or other unexpected problems, our team will re-evaluate the initial phase, identify the key issues, and adapt the courses based on community feedback. The cycle will repeat from here until the results are sufficient and in accordance with our expectations.

4.6 Funding

The program will not be fully funded by the government or the private sector alone. Instead, we will establish the DigiBridge Fund in collaboration with private ICT companies. These companies will be encouraged to contribute to the fund, receiving benefits such as tax incentives and tax holidays in return. We will also seek support from development banks like the World Bank and international organisations.

For the government sector, national and local governments often provide grants and funding opportunities for projects that promote digital literacy, education, and economic development. For instance, the Cambodian government, along with other Southeast Asian governments, frequently allocates funds to initiatives that align with these objectives. Additionally, international aid programs from countries such as the United States, Canada, and member states of the European Union can be significant sources of funding for projects in developing countries, particularly those that address educational and economic disparities. International organisations can also provide funding for sustainable development goals.

For the private sector, many large technology companies have established Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs that fund projects aimed at improving digital literacy and education. Companies like Google, Microsoft, and Facebook are known for their contributions to educational initiatives and could be approached for support. Additionally, local and international corporations often engage in CSR activities that promote community development and economic empowerment, presenting further funding opportunities.

4.7 Evaluation

To assess the needs of the community at the different stages of DigiBridge's implementation, we will ensure constant communication with training participants throughout the project. We will conduct monthly qualitative surveys to gauge how the community responds to DigiBridge. In addition to the surveys, we will open an online platform where recipients can leave comments anonymously. Our team will analyse the comments and adjust our program if recurrent complaints emerge. Our team will also regularly visit the community to discuss issues with training participants directly.

In addition, we will conduct quantitative surveys to measure and monitor our program's impact regularly. Regular data collection is crucial to better assess our program's economic impact on the community. Based on the results, we will establish a dialogue with the community to better understand DigiBridge's successes and challenges and how we can improve and address them.

4.8 Key Success Indicators

To evaluate the success of our projects and understand their impact on the communities, we will gather and analyse various key success indicators at the end of each project cycle. These indicators will help us compare different communities, assess our organisation's effectiveness, and quantify the overall impact of the DigiBridge program. The following key success indicators will be used to determine successful project implementation:

- **Participation Rate** (measured by the number of individuals taking DigiBridge courses).
- **Rate of Course Completion** (measured by the percentage of courses that have been completed).
- **Economic Growth** (measured by the overall increase in income or revenue generated by community businesses through both online and offline sales).
- **Digital Literacy Improvement** (measured by the number of certificates obtained within the community).

5. Stakeholders Analysis

A stakeholder analysis is needed to ensure that the interests of all involved parties are considered, facilitating effective project implementation and fostering stakeholder engagement. The stakeholder analysis for the DigiBridge project involves identifying key stakeholders, understanding their expectations, potential risks, and the benefits they could derive from the project.

Stakeholders	Expectations	Potential Risks	Benefits
Youth in the Community	• Willingness to fully engage in our project • Foster communication across the community's generations and with other youth	• Lack of interest in the project • Reluctance to share their experiences • Limited decision-making within the family unit	• Intergenerational and same-generation dialogue opportunities • Strengthen ties with families and the community • Prioritisation of family-led MSMEs • Can learn new skills or engage in dynamic and enjoyable business opportunities or higher education
Women and Marginalised Members	• Willingness to fully engage in our project	• Cultural or societal barriers • Language barriers	• Infrastructure development (e.g., child-care facilities) • Cross-cultural dialogue opportunities • Fostering empathy towards marginalised

			• communities • Valorization of local languages
Community's Cultural Centers	• Provide connection to the internet and computers • Easy access	• Lack of interest in the project • Incompatibility with other strategic allies	• Opportunity to participate in a project with various actors • Gain visibility and support outside of local barriers by participating in a project focused on youth empowerment • Promote itself in the community as an integrated and inclusive cultural centre
Private sector	• Interest in the project leading to long-term investments • Institutionalisation of the project • Provide means to scale the project to other contexts	• Lack of interest in the project • Reluctance to participate in the project	• Dialogue opportunities between a wide variety of stakeholders • Promote itself as an inclusive entity • Participate in the economic development of a rural area • Create job opportunities

6. Future Scaling-Up Plan

While the current proposal is drawn from the example of the Cambodian case study, DigiBridge aims to serve as a pilot program that, once proven successful, can be customised and adjusted for implementation in other regions around the world. The program will be scaled through a phased rollout, starting with regions that have similar conditions to the pilot location and gradually expanding to more diverse regions as the program is refined.

Customization is required for implementation in other regions. This includes undertaking detailed needs assessments in potential additional locations, including an awareness of local economic conditions, digital literacy levels, existing infrastructure, and cultural influences. Engaging with local governments, community leaders, educational institutions, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) will be critical in tailoring the program to the specific requirements and context of each region. The training curriculum will be customised to address region-specific industries, opportunities and languages, incorporating local case studies and examples to ensure relevance.

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