

# Empowering digital futures: youth-led initiatives for inclusive digital transformation in Bangkok

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## Abstract

This paper presents a youth-led perspective on inclusive digital transformation in Bangkok, drawing on real-world insights gathered through participatory discussions, expert interviews, and collaborative activities at the 2025 Bangkok Global Youth Leadership Forum. As group leader of the Digital Transformation team, the author synthesizes findings from case studies on Thailand's 5G infrastructure rollout, the proposed development of a unified digital government services platform, and initiatives to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in embracing digital tools. Using a qualitative methodology grounded in group reflections, industry dialogues, and hackathon collaboration, this research explores how youth-driven innovations and multi-sector partnerships can address persistent digital inequalities and promote equitable access to technology. The study contributes to scholarship on digital development by highlighting the importance of co-creation, community engagement, and localized solutions in national digital transformation agendas.

**Keywords:** digital transformation, youth leadership, inclusive technology, SMEs, digital policy, Thailand

## Introduction

In an increasingly digitized world, the promise of technology to bridge development gaps remains both a global ambition and a local challenge. In Bangkok, Thailand's capital and a major urban hub in Southeast Asia, efforts to digitally transform public services, business ecosystems, and educational institutions are evident through policies such as Thailand 4.0, the Digital Economy and Society Development Plan (Ministry of Digital Economy and Society (MDES), 2022), and the national 5G Master Plan (National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), 2020). Yet, as with many rapidly evolving digital landscapes, progress is often uneven. Certain populations-such as the elderly, informal sector workers, rural communities, and women-led SMEs-continue to face structural barriers to access, affordability, and digital literacy (Deloitte Thailand, 2023; Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), 2023).

This paper emerges from a unique setting: the 2025 Bangkok Global Youth Leadership Forum, where young changemakers from around the world converged to exchange ideas, co-create solutions, and engage directly with policymakers. As the group leader of the Digital Transformation team, the author facilitated interdisciplinary discussions, led community research, and steered the team to win the forum's hackathon competition on digital innovation. These experiences provided a rich empirical basis to interrogate the meaning and practice of inclusive digital transformation in Bangkok's urban context.

## Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

To guide the inquiry, this study is anchored on the following research questions:

1. How can youth-led forums influence digital policy-making and implementation in Thailand?
2. What are the practical challenges and opportunities faced by marginalized communities in accessing and benefiting from digital transformation initiatives in Bangkok?
3. What participatory models and strategies can enhance inclusivity, scalability, and sustainability in digital transformation efforts?

This study contributes both academically and practically to the discourse on digital transformation. Academically, it offers a rare empirical account of how youth participation, when embedded in policy discourse, can shape transformative digital agendas. It bridges the gap between digital infrastructure development and human-centred governance models.

Practically, the study proposes actionable frameworks—such as youth-led digital literacy campaigns and university-SME partnerships—that are scalable, contextually grounded, and policy-aligned. The findings can inform government ministries, educators, development agencies, and grassroots organisations striving to ensure that digital advancement leads to equitable social progress.

By highlighting the unique role of youth as co-creators, not just consumers, of technology policy, the study enriches the broader agenda of inclusive and participatory digital transformation in Thailand and across the Global South.

Digital transformation refers to the process of integrating digital technologies into all areas of an organization, fundamentally changing how it operates and delivers value to stakeholders (McKinsey & Company, 2024). It encompasses more than just adopting new tools or platforms; it involves rethinking business models, reshaping institutional processes, and promoting a culture that embraces innovation, agility, and user-centered thinking. According to the World Economic Forum (2023), successful digital transformation requires a whole-of-society approach, involving not just government and the private sector but also civil society, academia, and communities. UNESCO (2022) further emphasizes that digital transformation must also prioritize inclusion, particularly for vulnerable populations and learners affected by digital divides.

Bangkok, as Thailand's economic and political hub, has become central to the country's digitalisation agenda. National strategies such as Thailand 4.0 and the Digital Economy and Society Development Plan (DEDP) position the capital city as a launchpad for smart government services, digital health, and innovation ecosystems. The Ministry of Digital Economy and Society (2022) highlights initiatives such as nationwide 5G rollout, e-government integration, and digital startup accelerators. However, while these developments mark progress, structural gaps persist, particularly for SMEs, rural communities, and marginalized populations.

## Youth Engagement and Participatory Innovation

## Challenges of Technological Determinism

## Conceptual Framework

### Identified Gaps in the Literature

1. A lack of empirical studies on the impact of youth-led digital interventions in real-world policy settings.

2. Limited representation of marginalised groups such as SMEs, informal workers, and non-Thai speakers

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This study seeks to address these gaps by documenting a live case of youth-led policy engagement during the Bangkok Global Youth Leadership Forum, and analysing how its outputs contribute to inclusive and locally responsive digital innovation in Thailand. This approach mirrors similar initiatives such as the ASEAN Youth Digital Summit (2022), where young leaders in Vietnam and the Philippines co-developed digital literacy frameworks for rural communities. Likewise, Africa's Youth Connekt initiative has shown how peer-led innovation hubs can influence national ICT strategies through participatory design, reinforcing the value of youth as policy co-creators rather than passive beneficiaries.

This study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in participatory action research (PAR), allowing for a rich exploration of how youth engagement can influence inclusive digital transformation. Conducted within the framework of the 2025 Bangkok Global Youth Leadership Forum, the research draws upon experiential data, collaborative design activities, and intercultural dialogue among stakeholders from the government, private sector, academia, and civil society.

The study is structured around a case study approach, focusing on three major initiatives discussed and developed during the forum: the national 5G rollout, the development of a unified digital government platform, and the proposed student-led digital mentorship model for SMEs. These initiatives serve as bounded units of analysis, examined through the lens of youth perspectives and participatory governance.

Participants were pre-grouped by the organising committee of the Bangkok Global Youth Leadership Forum based on thematic interest areas. The Digital Transformation team comprised 11 youth delegates (aged 20–35) from various ASEAN and African countries with backgrounds in digital policy, education, entrepreneurship, or civic innovation. This pre-selection ensured thematic relevance and interdisciplinary representation.

To identify experts, the team employed a purposive strategy following forum presentations. Digital transformation stakeholders were selected based on their contributions during plenary speeches and breakout sessions. Further, the team partnered with faculty at Southeast Bangkok University to connect with local digital professionals. This collaborative outreach allowed the research team to engage with 6 key informants, including government officials, industry experts, and university-affiliated researchers.

Multiple sources of data were used to ensure triangulation and depth of analysis:

1. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Three structured FGDs were conducted among the Digital Transformation team members, exploring perceptions, personal experiences, and collective visions for digital inclusion.

4. **Reflective Journals:** Daily journals maintained by the researcher and select participants captured the evolution of thought, intercultural interactions, and moments of learning and challenge.

Thematic coding was used to organise and interpret the data. NVivo software supported the identification of recurring themes, such as digital equity, co-creation, trust in technology, and youth agency. Categories were inductively derived and validated through peer debriefing sessions held after the forum. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise participant demographics and engagement trends. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Anonymity was assured in all data representations. Cultural sensitivity was observed throughout, with multilingual support provided in interviews and group discussions.

Through collaborative design thinking sessions, participants analyzed the fragmentation of Thailand's

Drawing inspiration from Rwanda's Irembo platform, the team developed a wireframe prototype for a unified Thai e-government portal. Features included a language toggle for ethnic minorities, voice-command support for the elderly, and a one-stop dashboard for managing personal and business-related documentation. Feedback from MDES representatives noted that the proposal's mobile-first approach aligned with Thailand's rising smartphone penetration rate, which currently stands at 96.2% according to the Department (2023).

The model was designed to include modular training in platforms like Facebook Shops, Line Pay, Shopee, and basic inventory software. Entrepreneurs expressed interest but voiced concerns about continuity and accountability. As a response, the project embedded a feedback and tracking mechanism, with student mentors evaluated through a performance dashboard and SMEs encouraged to rate their experience monthly.

### Key Finding 1: Digital Transformation as a Unifying Theme

## Key Finding 2: Winning Innovation – Gamified SME Training App

Tier 1 (1-week course): Foundational skills with basic incentives.

Tier 3 (6-month engagement): Advanced skills and government-issued certificates to build SME credibility. Participants would earn incentives such as marketing discounts, recognition badges, and partnership offers. Tech SMEs could advertise within the platform using SME-generated content, supporting sustainability through a revenue-sharing model. The app was also designed to track participant progress and offer tailored content based on needs, ensuring relevance across SME sectors.

Judges, including industry experts and company founders, offered critical yet encouraging feedback during the mentorship and pitch phases. They praised the idea for being locally adaptable and highly feasible within Thailand's socio-economic context. Compared to other pitches, the judges noted that this project had clearer pathways to implementation and a stronger focus on behavioral engagement. Forum participants, including those from the climate-focused teams, also expressed enthusiasm, acknowledging that the app could complement sustainable business models by enhancing digital visibility.

The hackathon's structure, including iterative ideation, mentor-led feedback sessions, and pitch presentations, was instrumental in shaping the final proposal. Daily strategy check-ins and open feedback loops enabled participants to refine and align their concept with practical implementation scenarios. The collaborative environment fostered trust, creativity, and shared ownership of the final pitch. Team members noted that the time-bound format, combined with access to local and international mentors, significantly improved the clarity, feasibility, and scalability of the idea.

## Youth and Intercultural Collaboration

A network analysis of contributions during group sessions showed balanced participation, with each member contributing an average of 2.4 strategic ideas and 3.1 evaluative comments per session. This demonstrated not only high engagement but also intercultural trust-building. The process itself became a case study in digital citizenship and inclusive decision-making.

This study explored the transformative role of youth in shaping inclusive digital policies and practices through their participation in the Bangkok Global Youth Leadership Forum. Drawing on collaborative activities, expert engagements, and intercultural reflections, the research confirms that youth-led co-design processes enhance the quality, relevance, and scalability of digital transformation initiatives. When young people are not only consulted but also empowered to contribute meaningfully to strategy development, they become catalysts for inclusive digital innovation.

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For instance, while the forum revealed broad support for Thailand's 5G policy, participants noted a significant gap between infrastructure rollout and its usability at the grassroots level. Although 5G services are now relatively affordable and widely available in urban areas, many participants highlighted that access to 5G-compatible devices remains limited, particularly among low-income users. Several youth and SME representatives shared that the cost of upgrading their mobile devices was prohibitive, making it difficult to fully leverage 5G technology.

### Key Recommendations:

- ### Limitations and Future Research:

By offering practical, evidence-based models and a participatory framework, this research contributes to the broader movement toward inclusive digital transformation anchored in youth agency, cultural responsiveness, and collaborative governance.

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