

2020 High-level Political Forum

Are we leaving no one behind in eradicating poverty and working towards the 2030 Agenda (including what COVID-19 is telling us about inequalities and the weaknesses in our social systems)?

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Input from Anriette Esterhuysen, Chair IGF MAG - Lead discussant

The pandemic has demonstrated the value of the Internet. But it has also exacerbated the effects of the digital divide. For example, during the pandemic some children have been able to use digital tools to continue learning, and interact with teachers and friends. But those without access to these tools have in most cases had little to no access to schooling. Differences in access to technology are producing a new pandemic-related educational divide that will be with us for years to come.

This illustrates what Alison Gillwald of Research ICT Africa describes as the “digital inequality paradox”¹. As more people use advanced tools and technology, overall inequality tends to increase, not decrease. Especially in countries which already have high levels of inequality. In other words, technological advances often amplify digital inequalities. In the words of Dr. Gillwald: “until fundamental inequalities offline are addressed they will be replicated and even amplified online. In fact, as technology evolves from voice to data services and Over the Top platforms, Internet of Things and Artificial Intelligence – digital inequality is amplified. This we refer to as the digital inequality paradox. While connectivity is clearly a precondition of digital inclusion, connectivity in a data environment, on its own, does not redress digital inequality as more people are connected, digital inequality is increasing.”

Another pandemic related example would be the availability of web-based public health information, and efforts by governments to address misinformation. Those – including primary healthcare service providers - who do not have access to the devices and bandwidth needed to gain access to this information, are doubly at risk of being influenced by misinformation spread on social media that they don't even have direct access to.

To change this trajectory, **digital policy and planning should start with people, rather than with technology, and give full consideration to offline social and economic inequality.**

1 Keynote Address at the 2019 African Internet Governance Forum by Dr. Alison Gillwald of Research ICT Africa, N'Djamena, 11 September 2019 - <https://researchictafrica.net/2019/09/11/keynote-address-at-the-african-internet-governance-forum-by-afriigf>

Governments should try to avoid being distracted by current ‘hot topics’ such as the so-called 4th industrial revolution, or blockchain, or cybersecurity - at the expense of addressing basic digital equality. This is not to say these are not important issues, but unless greater digital equality has been achieved, investment in specific aspects of digitisation is unlikely to contribute meaningfully to social and economic development.

Digital development policy and planning also needs to be holistic and multi-disciplinary. It should recognise the transversal impact of ICTs on all sectors. It should prioritise five main outcome areas:

- 1) *Enabling universal affordable access to the Internet.*
It should acknowledge market failure; make strategic public investments in infrastructure and create an enabling environment for local actors to develop their own connectivity solutions
- 2) *Developing the institutional and human capacity.*
This should happen across sectors and disciplines and throughout the public sector - which will enable countries to respond on an ongoing basis to situations of crisis, and to new digital challenges and opportunities as they emerge. And to do so in a way that is integrated with broader economic development.
- 3) *Assuring the freedom of expression and association needed for people to make creative and effective use of those technologies.*
- 4) *Open government approaches to information and communications.*
Rather than fear misinformation, and respond with efforts to control and restrict online content or shut down the Internet, governments can use digital channels to provide reliable public information, increase transparency and make their efforts towards accountable and transparent governance in this time of crisis visible.
- 5) *Environmental sustainability and climate change.*
This is not an afterthought. As developing countries invest in digital infrastructure, they have the opportunity to do so in a manner that makes use of renewable energy and that minimises potential harmful impact on the environment.

Thank you.