

Economic & Social Council- Research Report I

Addressing the Digital Divide: Combating Technological Inequality in an Increasingly Connected World.

Introduction to the Topic:

The digital divide has emerged as a pressing global concern, it highlights the significant technological inequality among individuals, communities, or even entire regions. It refers to the gap between those who can immediately take advantage of modern technologies—such as the internet, smartphones, and computers—and those who lack access to these resources.

Investopedia states, “In 2022, 80% of Europeans had internet access, compared with just 22% of Africans.” This proves to be damaging to specific regions, as a lack of access to technology deprives citizens from essential resources that may lead to wealth development. The digital divide, therefore, directly leads to wealth inequality. It does so by enabling digital resources to those who are already in a more favourable financial position.

Apart from wealth inequality this divide leads to more consequences such as innovation gaps, healthcare disparities and marginalization. Regions with limited digital access fall behind on adopting technological advancement that nurture innovation, this leads to an overall decrease in economic growth, due to a lack of opportunities for research and development that access to technology and overall connectivity can bring. Healthcare disparities can also arise and leave communities without needed health information and resources such as “telemedicine”, this refers to the use of digital communication to provide medical care and consultations remotely. Marginalisation is a significant consequence of the digital divide. The lack of access of digital tools isolates communities excluding them from the advantages of today’s technological world. They struggle to stay informed on current events, receive critical information and participate in discussions that shape society. It also limits there means to connect with others socially and professionally. This leads to social and economic inequalities while widening the gap between those who have access to technology and those that do not. Addressing these issues is beneficial to ensure no country is left behind in a rapidly advancing digital era.

Background information:

There are multiple aspects that shape technological inequality and exacerbate the digital divide. A significant factor is the existence of geographical digital deserts, where certain regions or communities have little to no access to technological services. Another significant

contributor is the affordability of these technologies, as high price points can place these resources out of reach for large segments of the general population, particularly in low-income areas. In addition to access and affordability, the digital divide is also influenced by the usability and relevance of technologies for individuals in specific communities. For instance, online content may be available only in languages other than the national or local language, or the content may not address topics that are meaningful or important to these communities. When technology does not effectively address everyday needs or is not easily understood by the masses, its benefits may be overlooked, leading to a lack of adoption by these individuals. This disconnect further increases the digital divide. Addressing this issue requires not only providing access to devices and the internet but also ensuring that technologies are relevant, comprehensive, and valuable to those who use it.

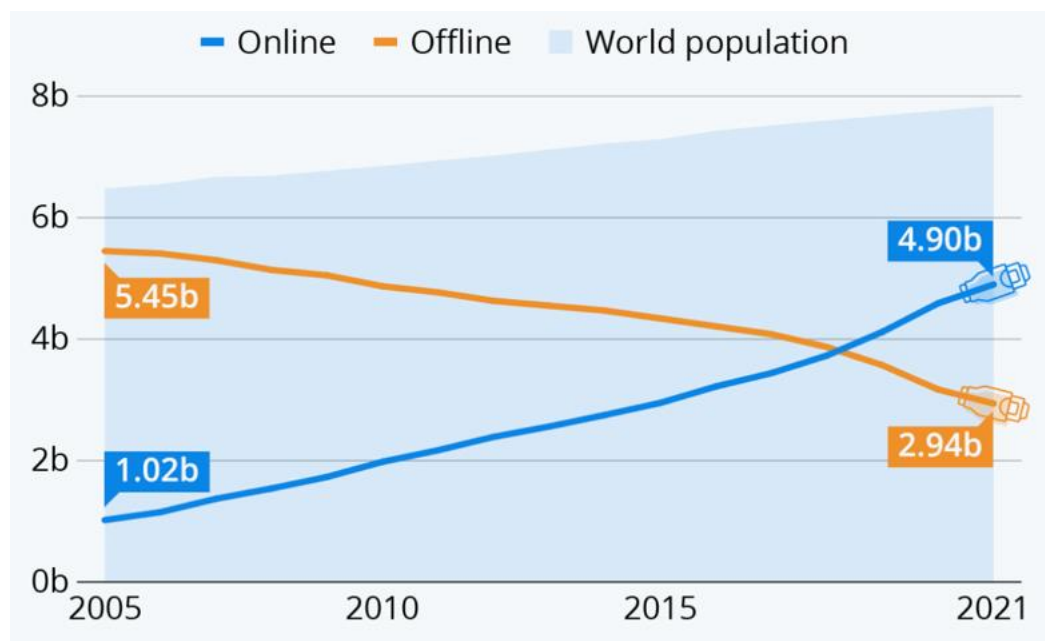


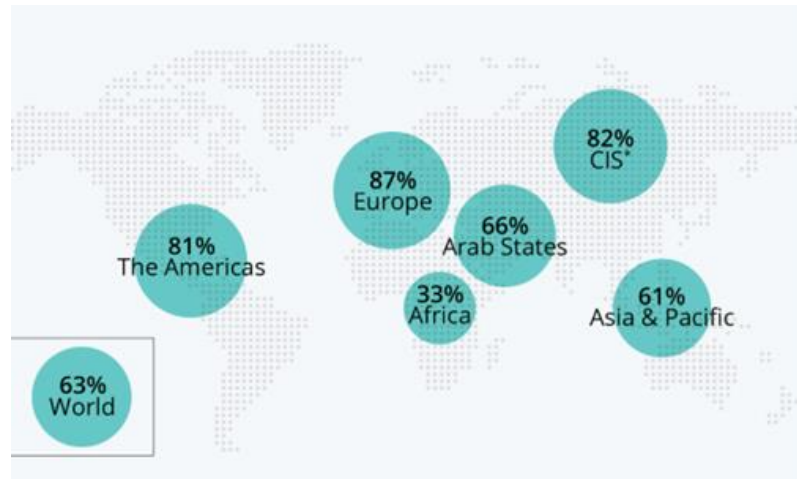
Figure 1.1- Disconnected: 2.9 billion People are Still Offline.

Data from the UN agency, International Telecommunications Union (ITU), suggests that 3 billion people have never had access to the internet. The ITU Secretary General Houlin Zhao mentioned that “while almost two-thirds of the world’s population is now online, there is a lot more to do to get everyone connected to the internet.” Access remains a challenge in developing countries, which composes of 96% of the world’s offline population.

However, the digital divide can also be seen in developed regions. There is a localized digital divide in these regions that note a difference in digital engagement between rural and urban

areas, with urban residents being twice as likely to use the internet compared to those in rural regions (76% versus 39%). While this divide may be more nuanced, it is crucial to recognize the great digital divide between developed and developing countries. As recently as 2018, internet users were still considered to be a global minority, with 3.7 billion online and 3.9 billion offline.

Figure 1.2-
World Wide
Estimate
individuals
internet in



The (Not So)
Web:
share of
using the
2021.

While access

to technology

has many advantages there can also be negative consequences to its usage. For one, excessive use of technology can lead to a decline in critical thinking and problem-solving skills, this because people get used to immediate answers rather than developing their own analytical abilities. Becoming attached to a screen can erode social connection and create a sense of isolation between communities.

Technology is an essential tool for modern life, its over usage can lead to negative consequences that undermine its benefits, nevertheless we should highlight the advantages it can bring to communities if used in a conscious and effective manner.

Focus of the Debate:

Delegates are encouraged to work towards establishing practical measures leading to a potential solution for diminishing the digital divide. The aim is to mitigate the impacts of the lack of access on local population, with a special concern for developing countries that tend to have a lower share of individuals with accessibility to technological devices and resources.

Past UN Actions:

The UN has already taken action to help bridge this gap between technology and people, they have done this through the following initiatives, frameworks and programs:

- Creation of an instruction playbook named “Addressing the Digital Divide”, consists of six main steps that public authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or communities can take towards taking action to address the digital divide. By

following the steps, the playbook aims to empower communities, bridge technological gaps and increase digital inclusion.

- ITU, specialized UN agency that incentivises global connectivity and digital inclusion, launched the **giga incentive** in collaboration with UNICEF. The program seeks to ensure that every school around the world is connected to the internet by 2030 providing students with equal opportunities.
- UNICEF began the **learning passport**, digital education platform for children with high quality tailored learning resources, aimed to ensure continuity in their education despite challenging circumstances such as living in remote or conflict affected areas.

Despite ongoing projects, the digital divide remains a pressing challenge. Communities continue to struggle with inadequate infrastructure, technologies at a high cost and limited opportunities to develop their digital skills. These barriers prevent countless individuals from taking advantage of the modern digital world this demonstrates the need for continuous investments and innovative solutions to ensure no member state is left behind in this rapidly evolving era.

Parties Involved:

This issue involves a variety of parties each playing a distinct role in addressing the matter at hand:

1. Governments: Policymaking and funding infrastructures that ensure equitable access.
2. Private Sector Organisations: Aid in technological development, infrastructure development and providing affordable services.
3. Educational Institutes: Promote digital literacy and creation of resources to help students bridge the gap.
4. Non-Governmental Organisations: Advocate digital inclusion and distribute technology to underserved communities.
5. Communities and individuals: End-users that may face barriers due to lack of resources and skills.

In addition to this, some UN member states are more affected than others due to socioeconomic and geographic disparities. The most affected countries are often those in the Global South, including regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and parts of Latin America.

Possible Solutions:

- Providing funding and programs aimed at helping developing countries provide basic commodities to their populations, allowing more room for technological advancement investment for these countries.
- Developing and implementing comprehensive programs designed to improve digital literacy skills across various populations, as well as groups most severely impacted by the digital divide, ensuring equitable access to technology and its benefits.
- Encouraging member states to maintain a high level of transparency regarding their digital development efforts and progress, facilitating open communication and information sharing with other nations, allowing for equal implementations.

Glossary & Key Terms:

- **Digital divide:** Unequal access to digital information and communication technology between individuals.
- **Developing countries:** A country with a relatively low standard of living, undeveloped industrial base and moderate to low Human Development Index. This index is a measure of poverty, literacy, education, life expectancy and other measurable factors for countries worldwide.
- **Non- Governmental Organisations:** A non-profit organization short for NGO that operated independently of any government, typically its purpose is to address a social or political issues.
- **ITU:** United Nations specialized agency for information and telecommunication, organization is composed of 194 member states.
- **UNICEF:** United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund. Established in 1946 to provide humanitarian and development aid to children and mothers in developing countries.
- **Urban Areas:** Areas that are highly dense in population and human structures.
- **Rural Areas:** Areas that are less populated and pose large agricultural lands.
- **Marginalisation:** Refers to the process by which groups, individuals, and communities experience reduced access to resources and opportunities within society.
- **Innovation:** Refers to the process of creating and developing new ideas that bring value or improve existing practices.

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