

- The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres spoke in 2020 of the need for a “new social contract for a new era”. He described digitalisation as one of two seismic shifts that would shape the 21st century, the other being the climate change. Both, he contended, could widen inequalities even further unless urgently addressed on a planetary scale.
- This **digital inequality paradox** - that as more people are connected, digital inequality is being amplified. This is not only between those online and those offline (as is the case in a voice and basic text environment), but between those who have the technical and financial resources to use the Internet ‘productively’ or even to prosper and those who are barely online.
- **Public data SDG’s, data – digital substitution**: Despite potential of access to mobile phones and the Internet to improve livelihoods, lives and life opportunities very patchy demand-side, disaggregated data on gender and digital inclusion and equity.
- **atchy gender data for evidence-based digital policy** formulation – not disaggregated, descriptive statistics can be misleading, microstudies extrapolated for countries and regions.
- pandemic highlighted **need for digital substitution** to mitigate the devastating effects of the pandemic and lockdowns - **systematic and quality digital data collection that is granular, accurate and comparability (crisis opportunity)**
- without reliable data, there little way of knowing **the progress being made towards the SDGs** and the ICT sub-targets that underpin them making it impossible to assess the progress
- **Diversion of donor, research and policy agenda** from regulation of affordable, universal access to **(global) digital public goods** (internet) to advanced tech advanced technologies of big data analytics, ML and AI (4IR) is exacerbating digital inequality paradox
- In African countries surveyed by Research ICT Africa digital substitution during the COVID-19 pandemic widened inequalities between those who had internet access prior to the pandemic Many low- and middle- income countries have broadband coverage of over 90%, but have Internet penetration rates below the critical mass estimated to be 20% of the population
- **Not just supply-side infrastructural issue**: Many low- and middle- income countries have broadband coverage of over 90% but have Internet penetration rates below the critical mass estimated to be 20% of the population. access and use challenges relate more to the demand-side factors -awareness, affordability, digital literacy on the consumption side and digital skills, financial access on the labour and production side
- Women concentrated amongst those marginalised, so general universal strategies/design to bring people on-line (eg. reduction of handset prices) are likely to benefit them.

- But **impact of strategies aimed at affordable and improved quality of access needed to assess impact** on women and other marginalised communities eg. COVID- spectrum and mandatory pricing reductions (tensions between access (investment) and price (affordability))
- Dealing with structural inequalities reflected in and compounded by digital inequality requires **transversal policies, not siloed, sector strategies** e.g. at heart of any access strategy should be education.
- **(Global – Internet, data) digital public goods (infrastructure/spectrum) governance** needs to be extended from current commercial supply-side valuation of resources to demand-side valuation (common pool resources, spectrum commons, data lakes ).
- **POLICY CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS:** While structural inequalities will only be addressed through more fundamental economic and social transformation, there are some systemic issues that can be redressed through policy intervention.
- At the very least it will require the regulation of global digital public goods such as spectrum, Internet, and data to ensure access to the means of communication and production and a system of governance to mitigate against the associated risks.
- To promote more equitable and just outcomes, economic regulation (as well as other regulatory arrangements) is necessary to enable more even distribution of the opportunities arising from the data economy, not only the prevention of harms to democracy and development.
- Awareness about the value of data for socio-economic development and its ability to contribute to the realisation of the UN SDGs has become increasingly prevalent.
- Digital and data public infrastructure – integrated broadband network infrastructure, the data and services level and applications such as digital identification and payment systems – can only be realised at the national level because of the global governance of global digital public goods.
- Even if privately provisioned, the state needs, through public interest policy and regulation, to ensure equitable access to public digital infrastructure so that what should be common infrastructures does not serve a small elite segment of the population.