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5 ways universal internet access could transform Africa

Image: REUTERS/Akintunde Akinleye

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For centuries, most people in the developing world have been confined by parameters defined by a privileged minority who have disproportionate access to information, tools and traditional networks of influence. This elite have been able to use this access to wield control over large groups of people. In most cases on the African continent, this distribution of power has led to oppression and often regression.

It is imperative that we evolve our approach to address local, regional and even global challenges, not through "smarter" ideas, but through a complete departure

from the notion that good intentions, skills or knowledge are the necessary ingredients for a minority to better cater for the larger majority than they could do for themselves, if adequately empowered to do so.

The African continent needs a new model that recognizes that sustainable progress and optimum results can only be obtained when everyone is in a position to be active contributors to their community, economy and world. #internet4all is about shifting the paradigm of how sustainable progress and prosperity is achieved, by empowering people to do more for themselves, in all aspects of their lives. This paradigm shift is at the heart of the transformative nature of the internet.

The #internet4all campaign aims to interrogate flawed models of reality that see internet and the digital revolution as "useful" at best, and "interesting" at worst. Beyond interrogation, #internet4all aims to transform "business as usual", to bring about a change that recognizes the power of leveraging the internet to achieve accelerated and inclusive socio-economic prosperity for all Africans. We believe there are five pertinent areas in which this can happen.

Image: International Telecommunications Union

1. Enhancing agricultural productivity

The World Bank reports that a mere 10% increase in broadband access correlates to at least a 1.38% increase in GDP growth. For Africa, where agriculture employs approximately 65% of the continent's labour force and contributes a third of the GDP, there are immense gains to be achieved. Internet access could help educate farmers on enhanced agricultural practices, could improve outputs and income levels, would widen access to financial services such as credit, and could contribute to improved market transparency. Innovations like Esoko in Ghana and Manobi in Senegal address market price transparency, reduce lags in product delivery, and are in many cases able to boost farmers' income by more than 40%.

2. Financial inclusion for the remote and financially illiterate

With a large proportion of unbanked individuals comes great opportunity for leapfrogging traditional financial services and developing African solutions. There have already been several success stories. In 2013, 3% of Kenya's GDP flowed through M-Pesa, the Kenyan mobile money platform, extending financial inclusion to

nearly 20 million Kenyans. In Zimbabwe, Econet reported that $3.1 billion's worth of transactions flowed through the Ecocash platform in 2015, creating employment for 35,000 Ecocash agents. Use of internet reduces transaction costs, providing more disposable income for those who need it the most. At the same time, e-commerce could broaden the reach of African retail businesses, by lowering barriers to entry through increased access to information, technology and markets.

3. Relevant academic and professional education for Africa's demand

The internet offers additional or alternative opportunities for those who otherwise cannot afford or access quality classroom-based learning, such as people with disabilities, those challenged by geographical circumstances, or women who are unable to because of gender-based impediments.

Online learning bridges gaps by providing access to accredited, contextual and consumer-centred educational resources, and offering universal choices, allowing Africans to be globally competitive. Achieving universal internet access significantly equalizes the learning environment, as broad access creates an environment where income will not be the major factor determining what and how a person may learn.

4. Leapfrogging less efficient healthcare solutions

Universal internet access offers Africa the opportunity to educate the required health workforce, and "leapfrog" traditionally labour-intensive and geographically-specific healthcare models. Greater use of internet technologies opens up opportunities for services such as remote diagnosis and prevention education, which could result in savings of up to $188 billion by 2025. Internet technologies help make health systems more efficient by automating processes, allowing for electronic record-keeping, improving accuracy in data collection, and empowering rural communities through better distribution of health information.

In Kenya, AMREF is using internet-based applications in e-learning and remote training to address the life-threatening shortage of health workers in Africa. It allows nurses to upgrade their qualifications and receive information on new healthcare practices online. This is particularly successful in reaching nurses in remote areas, without needing to spend on bricks-and-mortar training facilities.

5. e-government services encourage adoption and private sector investment

Opportunities for automating revenue collection could deliver productivity gains in the region of $10 billion to $25 billion in Africa. The Kenyan Revenue Authority made it compulsory for all citizens turning 18 to register for their tax number online, eliminating any option to use the traditional paper-based system. South Africa moved several government services online, including car registration, driver's license renewal, and most successfully, tax filing, which resulted in more than 99% of tax returns filed electronically in 2011.

Moving government services online broadens access to government services at a lower cost. Furthermore, using these digital services as best practice is a powerful way to encourage the improvement of private sector services and opportunities.

The Global Shapers Community believes Africa's leaders have no option but to recognize the transformative power that rests within the widespread provision and adoption of the internet. Addressing the remaining barriers to connectivity will deliver an invaluable return on investment for governments, industry, economies and the continent as a whole.

The three authors are part of the Global Shapers Community.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and not the World Economic Forum.

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