

The pandemic has clearly highlighted the acute need for better, more affordable digital connectivity in Africa. Have our leaders learnt the right lessons from this horrific event?

# Digital connectivity is a human right

The Covid-19 pandemic has once again demonstrated the immense power of digital connectivity, as billions of people around the world flock to the 'information superhighway' to run their businesses virtually, hold meetings, trade, shop, study and keep in touch with loved ones.

Unsurprisingly, the internet has provided a lifeline for nearly every aspect of the human psyche...but only for those who have access to it.

If there is one lesson to learn from the impact of this pandemic, it is this: like access to clean water, digital connectivity must be deemed a basic human right.

Africa's young people agree - nearly eight in ten (79%) view wifi connectivity as a fundamental human right, according to the most comprehensive survey of African youth published in February, weeks before Covid-19 brought the world to its knees. I'm sure if that survey was conducted today, the response would be very close to 100%.

Unlike the rest of the world, however, Africa's technological ecosystem was woefully unprepared for the crisis of the pandemic.

We must see now that those excluded from the ability to access all that the Digital Revolution

affords will be silent no longer. What was once an existential challenge, is now a threat to African security made palpable; an issue our leaders can no longer ignore.

The vast digital inequality between Africa and the rest of the world cannot be tolerated or sustained and Covid-19 has expedited the call to action on good governance here.

Africa's leaders must not hold back our next generation, including many largely living under the poverty line or throughout our continent's diverse rural communities, as these populations can form a significant economic driver of developing African countries.

It is in our power to encourage digital inclusivity as a priority across nation and intra-national mandates. We must drive technological investment to rural areas and create policies that support equal access for all.

## Storms of history

While most countries around the world are under lockdown or facing severe restrictions, with all of us struggling to minimise the human costs and left to only estimate the devastating economic costs of the pandemic, Covid-19 has caused

## IVOR AT LARGE

Ivor Ichikowitz



Right: A young businessman using wifi and his laptop to work on the move in Pretoria, South Africa

particular uncertainty and outright fear about the future of an African continent that experienced seismic social, political and financial pressures long before its outbreak.

Yet despite our unparalleled ability to weather the storms of history - and no doubt this crisis will be included in that anthology - the pandemic has also marked a watershed in inequality unheard of since the dawn of the continent's independence.

No question, Africa has made great strides in the development of its economy. Ten years ago, the continent was estimated to have had as much fibre in the ground as a small European country.

Unparalleled demand forced this picture to change dramatically. The continent has since demonstrated the fastest growth in internet usage over the past decade, the foundations of our coming digital revolution becoming much more evident.

From the agricultural use of drones in Mozambique to solar irrigation systems in Niger, from digital production in South Africa, to e-commerce (critical when considering the World Health Organisation flagged cash as a conduit for the spread of the coronavirus), we

are perpetually embracing innovative technologies to bolster our socioeconomic trajectory.

Today, the demand for greater connectivity that I speak of, long an issue for Africans to access the very same opportunities for education and market inclusion that have broken out across the developed world, has skyrocketed. Covid-19 has only intensified it.

The next generation are no longer satisfied with the digital divide that exists with the rest of the world. They now wish to carry the torch in ushering in the digital economy with determination and enthusiasm. However, there is clearly much work to be done to take this great potential to fruition

and the pandemic has, very publicly, expedited the urgency.

The onus of responsibility so too falls on the private sector. The startlingly high cost of internet access (in certain cases as expensive as \$35 per gigabyte of data) – means that affordable internet connectivity is well out of reach for many Africans.

**‘Connectivity’ is a right, in my view, that young African men and women are prepared to fight for, if they have to.**



Compounding the matter, connectivity speeds across the continent are widely recognised as falling well below the global minimum standard.

This is frankly, unacceptable. Here and now, at the precipice of Africa’s Covid-19 recovery and at the dawn of its Digital Revolution, there is a clear opportunity for governments to fast-track the regulatory processes that our policy leaders have failed to move on for years; a moment for the private sector to step up to the market opportunities presented by conquering Africa’s connectivity challenges.

For today’s leadership to continue to fail to do so may jeopardise our stability tomorrow. The right to ‘connectivity’ is a right, in my view, that young African men and women are prepared to fight for, if their voices are once again not heard and they deem it necessary to do so.

No question, every industry, every worker wants to return to work. We must clearly balance how we do so with the utmost efficacy and how we do so safely so as to avoid a recurrence of the pandemic.

### **Time to look inwards for inspiration**

This is not exclusive to Africa. Today’s global economic downturn will alter assumptions and realities in every time zone. Labour markets will change, and so too will old patterns. However, with a youthful, entrepreneurial generation now coming into their own, I am hopeful that Africa will provide the basis for new growth, and even leadership.

Even in the darkest moments of this pandemic, the time will soon come for all of us to start charting a path out of the depths of despair. It is how we chart that path in Africa that our next generation will be watching.

Now is the time for Africa to look inwards for the inspiration it needs to get through this global crisis; to take hold of its brighter, digital future ahead.

Be warned: the ‘Digital Revolution’ will take a far more literal shape if our leaders choose to continue to discount the voices of the disconnected.

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