

Just How World Wide is the Web? Rwanda, Digital Inequality and the G20

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Executive Summary

With the Future of Work being one of the G20's priorities of the Buenos Aires summit in 2018, this policy brief discusses this year's African Union representative, Rwanda, and the country's relationship with digitalisation. It also examines the G20's commitments and suggests how improved communication with developing nations such as Rwanda – something of a regional powerhouse in digital policy – could strengthen G20 commitments to end digital inequality.

Digitalisation: bridging inequality, or widening the gap?

Self-service check-outs at supermarkets, self-service check-ins at airports: digitalisation is all around us, and experts [disagree](#) on just how far this automation will change the global workforce. The one thing they do agree on is that it will be altered irreversibly, and that this is not necessarily a bad thing. For nations with little or no natural resources to speak of, technology offers a rare opportunity to exploit and export, provided the right infrastructure is in place.

Indeed, [research](#) suggests that as digitalisation and broadband penetration increase, a nation's GDP will significantly improve. If harnessed correctly, Industry 4.0 and a digitalised world could have unprecedented benefits for developing countries. If not, global inequality could worsen substantially.

The perils are bad enough for the richer countries: [OECD](#) research, for example, suggests that the jobs most at risk of automation are also those least likely to be in up/reskill training. This creates a need for policies incentivising in-work training across all sectors, or risking a workforce out of touch with the skills its nation needs. For developing countries, the stakes are much higher. If we are to take the research suggesting the benefits digitalisation has on GDP along with the [total percentage of people offline worldwide](#) (60 per cent, compared to just 15 per cent in the EU) it is clear that if digitalisation is not achieved worldwide then the gap between rich and poor countries will not lessen, but widen.

Thus, if the vast potential that technology offers a nation like Rwanda is to be reached, a gargantuan effort needs to be made covering all bases, perhaps most importantly worldwide digital infrastructure and digital education. With its commitments to ensure a [fully connected world by 2025](#) and to use [digitalisation to reduce inequality](#), it is imperative that the G20 brings in guest nations like Rwanda and Senegal.

Rwanda: an unlikely digital champion

Having started the millennium as one of the most impoverished nations in the world with next to no digital infrastructure, and recovering from its infamous [genocide](#), Rwanda's journey towards a [consistently growing economy](#) and forward-thinking attitude towards technology is something of an unlikely fairy-tale. Indeed, there is a tendency within sections of Western media to assume Rwanda's remarkable growth is little more than a result of their immensely low starting point. Yet even more often than this, its economic successes will always be overlaid by critical commentary on its [authoritarian leadership](#).

But amid the pessimism, real strides towards digitalisation are being made by Rwanda. In 2000, President Paul Kagame launched Vision 2020, consisting of four 5-

year stages to achieve [full digitalisation](#). Although the government is currently a [long way off](#) its own targets, remarkable steps have been made towards this vision. From 2002 to 2013 Rwanda moved from [25,000 internet users to 1.2 million](#) (albeit a small percentage of Rwanda's population of 12.2 million), an internet user growth rate 20 times the world average, and four times that of Africa as a whole.

Some reports suggest this number has since risen to [5.6 million](#). This has been made possible by vast public investment, leading to over 4500km of fiber optic broadband connecting the nation's 30 districts. As impressive as this is, it should not be overstated and is far from complete: more private investment is needed, which is a challenge for a nation with such a tragic, turbulent and impoverished a history as Rwanda's. This issue of attracting investment to improve digital infrastructure in poor regions is one of the G20's greatest challenges, and one to which the group has [previously alluded](#), but failed to offer concrete solutions.

If Rwanda is not quite a perfect blueprint for achieving digitalisation in a developing nation, the country's policy successes can certainly provide a foundation for thinking about the issue. As recently as November 2018, Rwanda became the [first African nation to establish an eWTP hub](#). This

agreement between the Rwanda Development Board and the Alibaba group aims to promote public-private dialogue, opening up the Alibaba marketplace and its 500 million consumers to Rwandan SMEs. This is part of the aforementioned Vision 2020, and more specifically it is the fourth five-year stage: to improve digital skills and enhance digitalisation in the private sector and within communities.

Elsewhere, the Rwandan government has created [open spaces](#), such as the kLab, to encourage young entrepreneurs and start-ups, and it has begun to roll-out a ['one laptop per child'](#) policy. Digital policies are already entrenching themselves in every sector of Rwandan society, and they are attempting to spread this across Africa, with [two key](#) summits being held in Kigali over the last decade: Connect Africa in 2007, and Transform Africa in 2013. If the G20 members are serious about using digitalisation to tackle global inequality, it is crucial that Rwanda has the opportunity to play a key role.

G20: all bark without bite?

With the important digital crossroads in which we find ourselves, it is no surprise that digitalisation has increasingly become a feature in G20 agendas: last year saw the first meeting between ['digital economy ministers'](#), and in Argentina, for

the first time, it has been made a priority under the 'Future of Work' stream.

It is worth noting, before we look at previous work done by the G20, that the group's achievements on digitalisation are few and far between, with lots of targets being set – such as internet access for all by 2025 – without bona fide commitments. Just one [commitment](#) has been made regarding digitalisation in the workplace: a rather vague promise to 'harness' technology to reduce inequality, made in 2017.

Key to the success of this commitment will be the roll-out of the [G20 Repository of Digital Policies](#), set up by this year's meeting of 'digital economy ministers'. It is a platform created to support policymakers design and implement digitalisation policies, especially those related to skills for the future of work. Ultimately, it is a communication device within which G20 countries can share their policy actions, and their successes and failures.

It is important that not just G20 members and their guests are included, but also countries around the world, in order to truly use digitalisation to reduce inequality. Used properly, the Repository could enable developing countries to implement Rwanda-inspired policies, or those inspired by other digitally successful

nations. For the future of work priority to be counted a success, it is integral that this repository is included in the communique.

A further achievement of the G20 worthy of mention came in 2016, with an endorsement of the aforementioned eWTP. With Rwanda arriving at the summit fresh from becoming the first African nation to establish an eWTP hub, this provides an initial entry to the Repository, and an encouraging suggestion for other developing nations. A further positive step made by the G20 is that of the Africa Partnership, approved in the Hamburg communiqué, for which a summit between various African leaders, including Kagame, was held in [Berlin](#) this year. As part of this, seven nations - including Rwanda and fellow G20 guest Senegal - put forward individual policy priorities for Investment Compacts, aiming to mobilise private investment.

Looking to the future

Although the positive agenda set out by Argentina has found itself sidelined by the circus that is global politics, genuine strides regarding the Future of Work are littered throughout the G20 Leaders' Declaration. Making strong commitments on digital policy dialogue and education, it is important that as we move towards Japan in 2019 that the Future of Work and

digitalisation remains a priority. Despite these positives, the [Leaders' Declaration](#) has a marked lack of reference to digital inequality between developed and developing inequality, and there is no suggestion of input from nations such as Rwanda and Senegal with experience of implementing digital policies in poorer nations.

Widespread use of the Digital Repository is perhaps the most important step to take over the next year, and the leader's endorsement of it offers a brief glimpse of optimism as to co-operation over ending digital inequality. How accessible the Repository is, and whether it will be a platform for genuine dialogue or simply a Google Drive to upload policies to is unclear, but it at least provides a foundation to share successful policy implementations and moves towards a more nuanced approach, as opposed to the international community's previous approach that saw digital policy as monolithic.

An example of this is the insubstantial appreciation of differences in digital culture in different regions. [OECD research](#) on G20 economies, for instance, shows that although South Africa performs third lowest of the G20 in terms of fixed broadband subscriptions, it is much higher on machine-to-machine SIM cards,

reflecting a trend common across the continent of mobile-based banking.

Recognition of these regional nuances within the Repository will allow for relevant policy discussions for different nations, rather than a single vision of what 'digital infrastructure' means. The leader's declaration does allude to this in point 6, endorsing the [Menu of Policy Options for the Future of Work](#), which it suggests will take into account individual circumstance. Implemented alongside the aforementioned Repository, a foundation for policy suggestions and dialogue, unique to different regions and circumstance, appears to be taking shape.

Furthermore, positive commitments have been made regarding digital education and institutionalising 'learning to learn' within schools. It is here, however, that the Leaders' Declaration falls short. Without incentivising, or at least encouraging, reskill and upskill training, current skill sectors face the possibility of becoming out of touch with their nation's needs.

The greatest gap in the declaration is tackling global digital inequality, and it is clear that Rwanda's successes in terms of increasing access to technology across a developing nation have not been acknowledged. Even from the 'family

photos', Kagame is [confined to the fringes](#), and there is not a single mention of the need for worldwide digitalisation, nor the risk of increasing global inequality.

Furthermore, without incentivising private investment into digital infrastructure, even in rural areas, commitments such as the 2017 promise to 'harness' technology to reduce global inequality are essentially meaningless. Although it is important, it is not enough for digitalisation to simply remain a priority: it must refocus on digital inequality, and pay greater attention to the achievements of the developing world. Hopefully the Digital Repository is a step toward this.

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