Digital divide – how widespread is inequality in the digital world?

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The number of worldwide internet users has increased tremendously over the last few years (see figure). In 2014 around three billion people were “online”. The divide in terms of internet access is greater than for mobile telephony: while an average of 78% of the population in ICs had access to the Internet, it was just 32% in DCs. In LDCs, more than 90% of the population was “offline” (Sub-Saharan Africa: 83%).

In 2012, almost half a billion people lived in areas with no mobile network signal. DCs are also trailing far behind in terms of the expansion of mobile broadband connections that enable internet access (21% versus 84%).

Internet access is often reserved to towns and cities

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There are a number of reasons for the huge gap with regard to internet access, such as poor or no data connections. Although connecting coastal regions by means of an undersea cable, such as in Africa, has made a big difference over the last few years, there is still a lack of regional and international transmission lines, especially in land-locked countries and rural areas. Quick broadband connections are often only available in urban areas. There is less incentive for the private sector to link up rural areas (there are few and primarily low-income users over a large area), and therefore growth in the number of connections is far slower in rural areas than in large urban centres. However, there is great potential for digital networking to include hitherto disadvantaged groups, e.g. by providing access to financial services through mobile banking or delivering high-quality healthcare by means of telemedicine.

Socio-economic barriers slowing down the use of ICT

Participation in the digital world does not just rely on a country’s technical infrastructure (“connection to the network”), but also on political and socio-economic factors such as internet freedom, income, age, education and gender. There are still fewer women with access to the internet than men (DCs: -16%, ICs: -2%). Furthermore, language barriers can hinder the use of digital media. Around 90% of internet content is created in ICs and around 70% of the pages are only available in English. Ease of use and local content are an advantage, especially in DCs. This is demonstrated by the success of M-Pesa – the mobile payment system developed in Kenya is available in local languages and does not require internet access. The fact that some of the costs are extremely high represents another barrier: fast mobile network connections in DCs are around six times more expensive than in ICs. Additional structural problems such as unstable energy supply make it even more difficult to use ICT.

Conclusion

Digital media have grown at terrific speed over the last few years, even in developing countries. However, a divide still exists in many areas and the need for infrastructure investment is huge. Therefore new innovative financing approaches are required. At the same time, issues such as the regulation of telecommunication markets and the reduction in user barriers must be tackled in order to make digital media accessible and affordable for as many people as possible in developing countries. Development cooperation can play an important role in this respect.

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* ICT includes all technical devices and applications that can digitally execute, process, store and transmit information, such as fixed line networks, mobile telephony, Internet, radio, software and satellite systems.