

We owe it to our children to bridge the digital divide

By [Simo Mkhize](#)

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The global pandemic, widely touted as a disruption event catapulting the world into a digital future, held a magnifying glass over the inequality fault lines in our society and in many instances made them worse. There will be no digital future for the majority of South Africans unless we build bridges, and fast.



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This country is no stranger to separation, to chasms between the haves and have-nots, which is why there should be absolute urgency to bridge the digital divide. Digital inequality is not regulated, but its effects will result in a society where some will continue to have access to a world at their fingertips, while the rest will be excluded and forced to watch from the sidelines.

For South Africa to reach its development potential, for millions of talented young people to become active participants in the new world, digital inclusion must be a priority. Digital inclusion, at a high level, is where everyone has access to and can use information and communication technologies.

[Deloitte recently quantified the effects of closing the digital divide](#) in the United States of America (USA). The USA and South Africa are at different developmental stages, but it begs the question: If something like a 10Mbps increase in download speed in 2016 would have resulted in 139,400 additional jobs in 2019 in the US, can we for a moment imagine what would happen in South Africa, which is coming from a far lower base?

There is no way around it – connectivity enables communities to enjoy economic growth. Perhaps the best analogy is imagining two parallel worlds: one world is connected, packed with information, fast, innovative, and competitive, while the other hasn't bought a ticket and can only watch as the train leaves the station: it is uncompetitive and has far more restricted access to information, which carries a cost premium due to its limited supply.



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If you could choose to live in one, which would it be? The one where your child can learn from anywhere, be exposed to the latest and greatest, and be confident enough to do business with anyone, anywhere? Or the world where your child is limited to ad-hoc connectivity, scarce physical resources, and will look for scarce jobs of any shape or form, limited by where they live and where they come from?

Most children in this country live in the second world, and that must change. Opportunity shouldn't be a dream; it should be a reality. Connectivity shouldn't be a privilege, if anything, it explains why the UN issued a non-binding resolution in 2016 that said, "the same rights people have offline must also be protected online". Being connected, and having access to information, should be within grasp of more people.

Access to knowledge and information should not be about class

Digital access should be a leveller, there's work to be done. During the hard lockdowns, schools closed, and millions of children were sent home. As painful as it is to acknowledge, the children of wealthier parents were able to switch to online learning fairly easily. Sure, it was an adjustment and came with various challenges, but by and large they had appropriate resources were connected to the internet, and interacted with teachers who also had the right tools to stay connected to stable, fast internet.

Many more went home without any of these resources. Their schools and teachers did not have the required connectivity access to online resources and were unable to beam education into the homes of equally talented children. This divide is unsustainable. Here we are, in 2021, perpetuating a legacy of inequality.

How, when the divide is so wide, do we tell our nation's children, our future leaders, to have an opportunity mindset and to dream big? How do we convince them that the fourth industrial revolution offers unimaginable opportunities for young entrepreneurs? Let's zone in a little: how do we convince them the matric exams this year are going to be okay?

This isn't new. The #DataMustFall protests were borne from this frustration and a broad sense that Wi-Fi is the preserve of the elite, a privilege for those that live in upmarket suburbs with access to public hotspots. R100 on data may be small fry to someone reading this, but if that data runs out before an assignment is submitted it could be catastrophic for a student working remotely.

Quality connectivity should be a given

The only way the digital divide will be narrowed is by taking practical steps to facilitate more people connecting to the internet. This is why Cell C has been championing its Network Strategy - to give its customers access to a quality, stable network at the best prices and value offers.

Cell C contends that the network becomes invisible to the customer when there is quality connectivity. Then, the primary interest shifts to value offers and the quality of service they receive. To achieve this, we are making good progress in decommissioning our physical radio access networks (RAN) to roam on partner networks. This will see customers enjoy like-for-like quality connectivity, while benefiting from the best prices and value. Companies must think out of the box to develop innovative solutions that have the people of South Africa at heart.

Making access possible

Finally, there needs to be access to the internet. Some of the biggest obstacles to broad connectivity have been a lack of area infrastructure, cost to the consumer, and contracts – which have tended to drive exclusion and are just not appropriate for price-sensitive customers such as irregular workers, grandmothers, single parents, or university students. Products need to provide an entry to the digital world for people who were previously excluded – they should provide good speed, be priced reasonably and fairly, and should not tie users into long-term contracts if they don't want that or exclude them if they don't qualify for contracts because of their employment status.

It's important to acknowledge that in the effort to deliver reliable connectivity, a good broadband LTE service provides a reliable substitute for fixed connectivity such as fibre. A remote worker or university student should not have to forego the ability to participate in meetings or interact with course material if there is no fixed infrastructure in that area, or if the price excludes them. Home Connecta Flexi makes access to fast, reliable connectivity affordable without contracts.

To change our world, we need practical solutions to immense challenges. Poverty, unemployment, and inequality won't necessarily be solved by providing an internet connection, but the door will be opened, and behind that door lies education, information and resources that are currently only the preserve of the privileged. This is a challenge to us all in South Africa to rise to and redouble efforts to change our world.

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