# Internet inclusion and its transformative power in Africa

By Kevin South
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The recently released Internet Inclusive Index: Bridging Digital Divides report - commissioned by Facebook and compiled by *The Economist* - gives South Africa the number one ranking on the African continent, and 71st globally, for internet inclusivity and access to broadband at every level of society.

The Index evaluates a total of 86 countries and their inclusivity in terms of availability, affordability, relevance and readiness. It also aims to measure progress in closing the digital gap and explores the opportunities available to developing nations to leapfrog over their legacy infrastructures and ensure total access for every citizen.


Kevin South, head of CX & Digital at Seacom

## But what does this mean for our country?

Well, for a start, it illustrates that South Africa has come a long way since internet access was first introduced 20 years ago. When compared to fully-developed regions with higher levels of availability of broadband due to an above average national income, our developing nation, and the continent as a whole, is making strides. We're consistently evolving from a technological point of view and ensuring more Africans are connected reliably and affordably.

## Seizing opportunities

With improved infrastructure and better connectivity, Africa has recently seen a boom in digital commerce. Activities that were once restricted to the offline sphere, such as communication, banking and shopping, have become part and parcel of our online presence.

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This is good news for sectors like education, where local and international e-learning institutions have begun to flourish, equipping both students and educators – even those in rural communities – with relevant digital literacy skills.

The Western Cape Education Department's 20-year plan is to bridge the digital divide at a school level, using digital resources to upgrade learning, while e-learning provider, learndirect South Africa, is encouraging educators to advance themselves by participating in activities like keyboard skills, environmental conservation, leadership skills and even learning new languages. These are just two examples of how the Internet is rapidly enhancing individuals' capabilities, society and, in turn, national economic potential.

If the Digital in 2018 report, released by global digital agencies We Are Social and Hootsuite, is anything to go by, Africa has a bright future when it comes to digital transformation. The report reveals that the continent has seen the fastest growth rates globally in terms of Internet penetration, with the number of Internet users increasing by more than 20% this year compared to 2017.

## Overcoming challenges

As much as there's been promising growth in Internet inclusivity, South Africa still faces several persistent challenges. Despite more affordable smart phones and mobile data plans, the cost of connectivity is still considered high in relation to the average monthly earnings of locals.

While it is public and government opinion that the responsibility to increase network coverage and decrease data costs rests on the shoulders of local Telcos, mobile networks and Internet Service Providers, it is essentially up to all public, private and business stakeholders to diversify access and optimise costs.

Access to free or low-cost public Wi-Fi in both urban and rural settings is one of the ways in which we can increase the availability of internet services and tap into economic benefits. Project Isizwe, for example, has aided the City of Tshwane in developing 803 free Wi-Fi spots; and the Botswanan government is currently rolling out free Wi-Fi zones in rural communities and urban areas. These ventures illustrate the potential of combined private-public programmes to instil the basic human right of broadband access (as passed by the United Nation Human Rights Council in June 2016).

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Imagine an inclusive world with affordable, quality Internet for all – where every street, public square, restaurant, university, library and public transport system has reliable, fast broadband access. The possibilities would be endless. With access to a whole world of resources and markets, economic development would thrive; digital literacy would create a strong foundation for educational advancement across society; and even fundamental sectors like healthcare would be bolstered by the rapid knowledge-sharing and networked interconnectedness provided by online access.

The future is a promising one – one in which governments and private enterprises will continue to utilise empowering technologies and innovative strategies to cultivate and broaden Internet access services across all societal levels. This will, in turn, uplift nations and the African continent as a whole, benefitting everyone who lives within its borders.

View the Internet Inclusive Index: Bridging Digital Divides report.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin South is head of CX & Digital at Seacom

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