Forum: General Assembly Second Committee

Issue: Tackling the global digital divide

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Introduction

In the status quo, the unequal distributions of resources and abilities between countries remain a crucial issue. One major aspect of this wide range includes the concept of the "global digital divide". This division is not merely questioning the availability of the internet; it encompasses the quality of that access, the possession of skills necessary to utilize technology effectively, and the socio-economic dynamics that influence digital participation.

Internet usage is still prevalent among the developed nations as all the countries in the indicated list have internet usage rates above 90%. For instance, countries in the North American region and Europe boast of strong digital systems that enable citizens to take part in the new economy. On the other hand, there are many developing nations, and they have several difficulties, with varying internet connection ratios. This split can also be classified along the lines of socio-economic characteristics. They pointed out that the provision of connectivity is much more advanced in urban places than in rural settings. This is evident in many countries like India where some regions may experience high bandwidth but other millions of citizens in the rural areas the most basic access to internet. Additionally, inequalities secular as education also fuels the problem. Accessibility can also be based on such factors as income and education; people with low-income levels may not be able to afford to be connected to the necessary tools or have proper education to use technology.

The matters of digital divide are not only concerned with the access to technology but have a much farther reach. It affects economic growth, equity and quality of life. The more developed nations can thus proceed and leave the less developed ones behind if they do not close the digital divide. In this context, digital technologies are becoming agents of change in terms of innovation, productivity, and operational efficiency, but they could also act as tools for marginalizing entire societies. Moreover, this digital divide tends to create cycles of poverty and inequality. There are two fields which are closely associated with digital resources and the people who fail to utilize these resources in their life being limited in abilities to improve their circumstances. It contributes to the replication of restrictions and thus further entrenching socio-economic disparities. As the world becomes increasingly connected, addressing the global digital divide is essential to foster equitable growth, social inclusion and sustainable development worldwide, while also tackling crucial issues of resources, such as the disparities of education, technology and finance.

Definition of Key Terms

Digital divide

The gap or unequal distribution of access between countries, regions, communities or individuals that possess the ability to access modern Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), and those that don't or have limited access.

Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs)

A diverse set of technological tools and resources used to transmit, store, create, share, exchange or communicate information, including the internet, wireless networks, cell phones, computers, software applications and operating systems, video equipment and multimedia products, and social networking.

Network Bandwidth

The maximum rate of data transfer or the maximum capacity of a given network (wired or wireless communications link) to transmit data that occurs over one network connection. **Broadband** in telecommunication indicates a wide bandwidth.

Global connectivity

The interconnected network of economic, social, political and technological connections that link individuals, devices, systems and organizations across the world that was established in result of the advancements in transportation and technology.

Digital literacy

The basic skill or ability to understand and utilize ICTs confidently, safely and effectively to find, evaluate, create and communicate necessary information.

History & Developments

Emerging of the concept

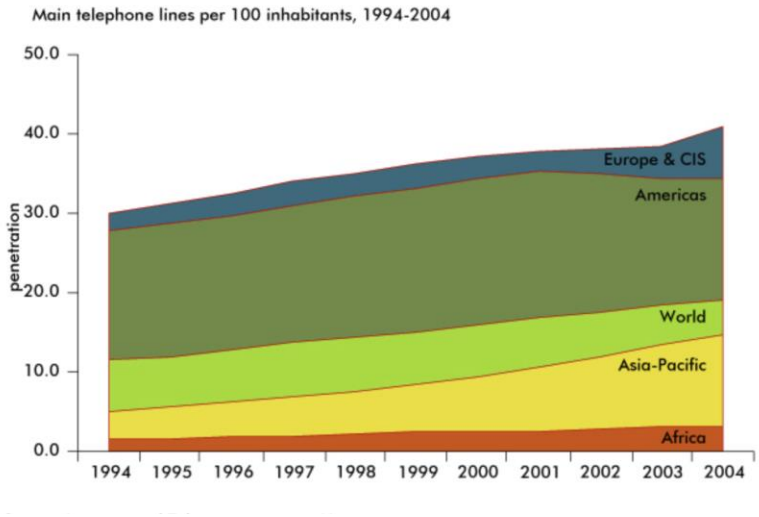

Figure #1: A map of the global digital divide in 2020 showing percentages of population with no internet access

In the late 20th century, the internet's proliferation caused concerns about the unequal access and distribution of technology. The concept of technological disparities and the term “digital divide” emerged in the 1990s in the United States to refer to perceived disparities in the use of computers and, subsequently, the Internet, information, and other technological resources. After being mentioned in a report of the US Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration in 1999, the term soon extended its boundaries when the focus shifted from individual access to the broader implications of global connectivity. As the proliferation of these fast-changing technologies expanded quickly, there were various countries that were unable to keep up with the constant changes.

Significance and its impacts

As the world develops its technological factors, technological access and resources related to ICTs have been an issue. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), approximately 45.2 percent of the world’s households do not have access to the internet. The digital divide is most pronounced at the cross-sections of inequality. Many individuals that are technologically unconnected reside in rural or remote areas that lack sufficient broadband infrastructure. Furthermore, millions of people are unable to acquire digital devices or internet connection. Those who lack regular and easy-to-access ICTs are locked out of the boundaries of the digital systems. Thus, limited internet access and insufficient digital literacy can exacerbate societal issues, leading to increased stratification, inequality, and the spread of misinformation.

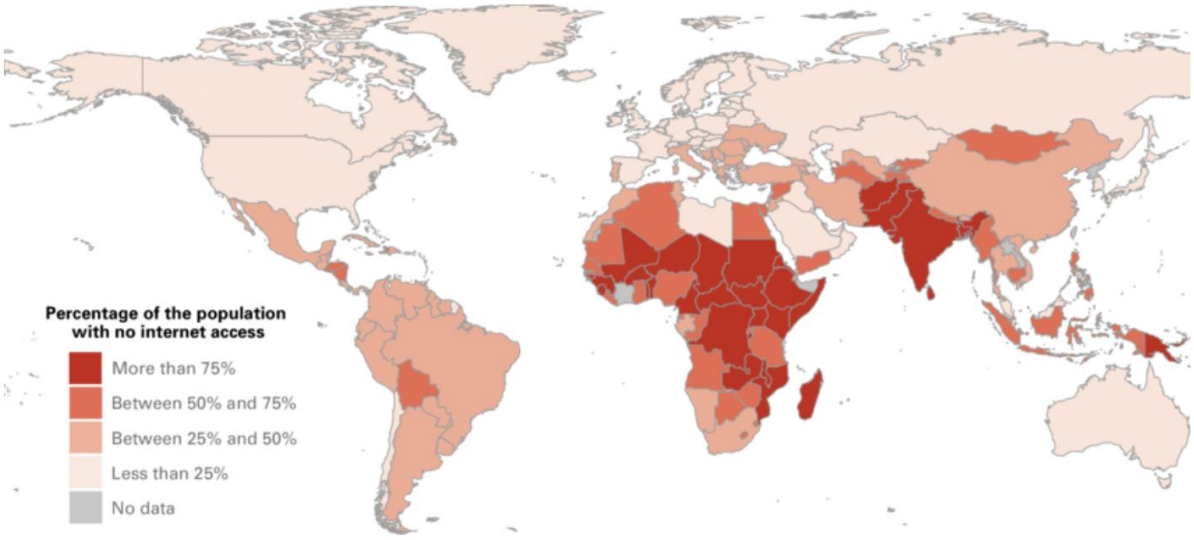

Figure #2: A map of the global digital divide in 2020 showing percentages of population with no internet access

Effects on social interactions

The global information divide has a significant impact on social relations by limiting how individuals connect, communicate, and participate in their communities. ICT services have become indispensable elements in modern social interactions, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter enhancing personal, professional, and business opportunities. These platforms facilitate communication and connectivity among friends, family, and even strangers, increasing social engagement between individuals and communities. However, an absence in accessibility of these ICTs increases isolation and disconnection. This lack of access creates disparities in information sharing, as disconnected individuals may rely on outdated sources, preventing them from engaging and participating in society. Moreover, ICTs provide users with opportunities to share their opinions and pass information thus helping many of them get informed on today's events and to get important updates from their respective groups or individuals. While harmful misinformation does exist on these platforms, ICTs are crucial particularly during crises such as the COVID pandemic. As a result, such lack of access to these tools is not only limited capability to engage in social interactions but also maintain social divide between those 'connected' and those 'unconnected', particularly in areas with differential connectivity. Overall, addressing the digital divide is essential for fostering an inclusive social environment and enhancing community cohesion.

Economic Impacts

Technology divide is an issue that impacts the economy's growth and proportional development by producing a disconnect between regions and individuals with varying levels of internet access and digital literacy. Countries with high levels of internet penetration and digital skills tend to experience accelerated economic growth, whereas countries with limited levels of accessibility would not experience high rates of economic development. For example, countries in North America and Europe use technology as a way of increasing productivity, development of employment opportunities, and innovation. On the other hand,

places that are infamous for low connectivity like Africa and South Asia fail to attract investors and compete globally in any industry. This again deprives local businesses of opportunities to penetrate the international market, perpetuating cycles of poverty.

Not only the businesses in economical market, but the global digital divide also poses serious challenges to economic opportunities for disconnected individuals and regions. People with low digital literacy struggle to get better-paying employment, especially when higher levels of automation and innovative technologies' incorporations appeared in society. Many job opportunities today require a specific degree of digital literacy, and most high-wage jobs mandate high levels of digital proficiency. Individuals that do not possess these digital skills lose their chance in these valuable job opportunities and are unable to contribute to the global digital economy. This results in high unemployment and economic stagnation in regions unable to integrate the full digital landscape and provide reliable ICT access, thereby exacerbating economic inequality and widening the gaps of disparity.

Creation of educational barriers

Lack of accessible ICTs also prevent children from accessing the internet at home, thus limiting their opportunities and educational outcomes. Reliance on digital technologies in education is increasingly common, with many students needing internet-enabled devices to complete homework, conduct research, or attend remote classes. Colleges and universities often require online applications, and students frequently use computers to research scholarships, prepare for standardized tests, and complete various educational tasks. Yet, many students lack access to the necessary devices and ICTs to engage with these digital educational resources, which can lead to struggles in enhancing their educational outcomes. Aside from this, it seriously decreases their academic potential, as well as possibilities to continue education and find a job in future. Therefore, it could be said that the low access in ICTs may also cause disparities in education.

Major Parties Involved

International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is a specialized agency for information and communication technologies (ICTs). This organization has been in operation since 1865, with the purpose of facilitating international connectivity in communication networks. The development of standards in the various utilizations of technology has been their efforts to create a better-connected world and to decrease technological disparities. The organization also works to bring digital connectivity through establishing a trusted, multilateral platforms to international agreements and standards, sharing knowledge, building capacity and working with members and partners to spread access to technology worldwide, while also increasing transparency in their actions. The ITU also worked with the UN to establish the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development to

accelerate the process of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to publish reports and recommendations to enhance global connectivity and reduce disparities in the utilization of ICTs.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

Established in 1965 by the United Nations General Assembly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is an agency that works on international development and aims to eradicate poverty and reduce inequality between different groups of individuals. Assisting countries in developing policies, leadership skills, partnerships and institutional capabilities to achieve the SDGs, the UNDP's global policies centered around poverty and inequality, governance, resilience, environment, energy and gender equality connects the countries to the knowledge, resources and networks they need to achieve developmental breakthroughs. In addition, the COVID-19 crisis, the UNDP has been attempting to bridge the digital divide in least developed countries (LDCs).

United Nations Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology

During the Age of Digital Interdependence, this office was established to identify the concerns that need improvement in cooperation or government, coordinate factors to address shared concerns, reinforce principles and norms developed in forums with relevant mandates for issues regarding technology. Specifically targeting the issues of communications and cooperations between the UN and the countries, the office was assigned to coordinate the digital technology related efforts within UN entities, improve communication and collaboration among technology experts within the UN, and promote partnerships to build and maintain international digital common resources that could be used to help achieve the SDGs.

Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE)

As the world's largest technical professional organization, the IEEE is dedicated to advancing technology for the benefit of humanity. With members from different countries and multiple branches in universities and local education systems, the IEEE publishes transactions, journals and magazines as well as managing conferences and events in various countries to increase awareness about technical topics locally and globally. The organization was founded in 1884 when the data communication systems started to speed up. As the world progressed into a more technologically developed society, the IEEE's fields of interest expanded well beyond electrical and electronics engineering and computing into areas such as other electronics, including ICTs.

Timeline of Events

Date	Event Name	Description

December 10-12th, 2003	Geneva Declaration of Principles (first phase of WSIS)	To discuss and affirm a shared vision on the global digital divide and announce the aim to make an inclusive and equitable Information Society with the ICTs centered on the people.
November 18th, 2005	Tunis Agenda for the Information Society	A conference to make a consensus statement of the World Summit on the Information Society (a result of the Geneva Declaration of Principles
May 1st, 2010	Establishment of the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development	Established as a joint initiative of multiple UN agencies and organizations such as the ITU and UNESCO regarding the issue of internet access
December 16th, 2015	A/RES/70/125	Assesses the outcomes of the World Summit on technology
May 29th, 2020	A/74/821	Discusses the current situation of digital cooperation with ongoing COVID crisis and provides recommendations
September 21st, 2020	A/RES/75/1	Recognizing the importance of technology as a fundamental global issue and pledging to "improve digital cooperation" to be able to maximize the benefits digital technologies can bring while curtailing risks
December 17th, 2021	A/RES/76/189	Information and communications technologies for sustainable development
July 25th, 2022~2023	A/78/62-E/2023/49	Discusses the outcomes of the World Summit and focuses on the implementation of data and digitalization developments across the world
July 25th, 2023	A/78/232	Resolution submitted by General Assembly focuses on the post-actions of COVID and the access of resources (including technology) for sustainable development
March 6th, 2024	World Bank Global Digital Summit 2024	The Summit showcases cutting-edge thinking, technology, and practical insights on a wide range of digital topics

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Different organizations have embarked on achieving the objectives to close the global digital divide with the overall goal of bringing equal usage of ICTs in the modern world. The most significant milestone was the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). This long-term conference was held in two phases, in Geneva in 2003 and Tunis in 2005. Government representatives, civil society and private sectors were brought together to address the challenges and opportunities presented using ICTs and the disparities between various regions. Minimizing the digital divide was the ultimate desired outcome of this conference. The summit, to establish a global framework for action, emphasized the importance of universal access to ICTs as a fundamental right of individuals, advocating for policies that promote equal opportunities to access ICTs for all. The principles of the Geneva Declarations were built on the specific commitments from participating countries to work towards bridging the digital divide, focusing on infrastructure development, capacity building and the promotion of local content. In addition to this, the Tunis Agenda elaborated on the goals of the first agenda and called for higher levels of international cooperation and multi-stakeholder partnerships. These cooperations were asked in need of investments for ICT infrastructures for developing countries and areas. The partnerships would be crucial in publicizing the access of the ICT through these infrastructures. The agenda also proposed the creation of process monitor mechanisms in solving the issue at hand, identifying the need for data collection and sharing. Moreover, the agenda process formed the Digital Solidarity Fund to implement projects intended to increase the use of ICTs by disadvantaged groups. This fund was meant to help source funds from government, private sector and civil society organizations to support interventions and funding initiatives aimed at increasing access to ICTs.

One of the following efforts is the Connect the Unconnected (CTU) challenges initiated by the IEEE. This initiative aims at embracing innovative thinking and participation in working towards building solutions that will physically connect the world's unserved communities with the internet. While the contests are driven by the CTU community of engineers, researchers, and technologists, the solutions proposed directly address the hard and unique connectivity problems of different regions and outliers, requiring the development of sustainable large-scale solutions. The initiative will emphasize community participation and stakeholders as its goal is to ensure that marginalized communities are targeted and served.

Another endeavor is the Global Digital Compact (GDC) launched by the UNDP. This effort seeks to bring together the governments, non-governmental organizations and market players to ensure that the increase in the uptake of ICTs is such that everyone stands to benefit from it. The role of the GDC is increasing digital inclusion, improving digital literacy skills, and fostering the right digital environments. Through the teamwork required to overcome barriers to access and inclusion required by the initiative, the effort aims to transform the digital environment and level the playing field for all stakeholders.

ITU is also involved in the proactive engagement of the digital divide alongside its role in the measurements. Each year, the ITU assesses the state of global connectivity, including the gender digital divide, to track who has access to ICTs and telecommunication networks. Their statement of mission of connecting the world is aligned with their desire to empower those that lack access to ICTs, ensuring that there are no underserved populations left behind in the quickening pace of digital transformation. The ITU also presents statistical data along with information about internet usage, mobile internet connectivity, and the readiness of populations to use the Internet. Through reports and statistics in news articles, the ITU continues to raise awareness about the digital divide and educates policymakers and stakeholders about the need for intervention in areas where to focus their efforts for maximum impact.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- 2003-2005 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)
    - 2003 Geneva Declaration of Principles
    - 2005 Tunis Agenda for the Information Society
- December 16th, 2015: A/RES/70/125
- May 29th, 2020: A/74/821
- December 17th, 2021: A/RES/76/189
- July 25th, 2022~2023: A/78/62-E/2023/49
- July 25th, 2023: A/78/232
- March 6th, 2024: World Bank Global Digital Summit

Possible Solutions

In addressing the issue of the global digital divide, many would say that infrastructure investment is the root of the concept of technological disparity. Therefore, **increasing the investment for infrastructure** is critical to bridge the global digital divide. Coordinated efforts on the part of governments, businesses, and international organizations can significantly enhance access in underdeveloped areas. To achieve this goal, the governments and organizations include expanding broadband networks, leveraging innovative technologies, and fostering public-private partnerships. Governments should prioritize high-speed internet, fixed wireless access, and providing connectivity to hard-reach areas, bypassing the limitations of traditional wired infrastructure. Engaging in partnerships between public entities and private companies can help facilitate resource mobilization and utilization of expertise, enabling more efficient infrastructure development. Furthermore, investing government money and grants to digital infrastructure development can encourage the construction of infrastructure, particularly in developing areas, for development banks and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to participate in the funding of development projects.

Digital literacy is a critical tool to prepare individuals and enabling them to utilize ICTs and engage in technological competency. **Establishing comprehensive programs to increase digital literacy among wider**

populations can help bridge the skills gap. Digital literacy should be promoted through educational programs implemented in schools, libraries and community centers, offering basic courses on the use of software, online research and digital communication. Curriculum development should focus on practical applications relevant to the community. These programs would be personalized to the specific individuals or regions and assist them in their abilities to utilize ICTs. Housing programs should also be directed to such vulnerable areas as women, elderly people or the families with low income to offer the requisite assistance to suit them. Collaborating with non-profit organizations to enhance these efforts in targeting a wider population while providing materials, mentorship programs and resources could enhance the efforts to closing the gap of digital literacy. These programs would act with a purpose to help individuals and communities that were previously 'unconnected' to keep pace with the fast-developing technological advancements and stay informed about new tools and platforms to maintain connection with the digital society.

Providing an availability of non-expensive devices helps towards achieving universal access. The ways to enhance device usability are to provide device subsidies and grants, recycle devices and create public access technology. Governments and organizations can provide grants for low-income families to buy computers, tablets and smart phones, making it a point that technology can be non-expensive. It's equally possible to persuade people and organizations to donate or recycle their old equipment to make a stock of renovated technology for the individuals and communities in need. Further investing in the setting up of publicly accessible technologies in public spaces can also enhance the accessibility of ICTs to the public and provide them with opportunities.

Lastly, **raising awareness within developed regions about the significance and the cruciality of the issue of the global digital divide** can help drive initiatives to close the digital divide. Organizations, such as those listed in the "Major Parties" section, hosting community educational forums for technology awareness along with skills development workshops can spur interest levels and increase interactions to create additional networking opportunities for communities and individuals. Actions for local, national and international policies for marginalized groups and those that lack access to the ICTs will generate solutions and funding on effort to bridge the digital gap.

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