UNLOCKING UGANDA'S DIGITAL POTENTIAL:

Strategies for Expanding Affordable Internet Access and Digital Literacy

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Highlights

Significant Digital Divide: Only 5.7% of Ugandans have Internet access, with rural and marginalized communities facing the greatest disparities.

High Costs as a Barrier: The high cost of Internet equipment and services remains a major obstacle, particularly in rural areas and among low-income groups.

Gender and Regional Gaps: Internet usage among women (8.2%) and in the western region (6.3%) is notably below the national average, highlighting significant inequalities.

Dominance of Social Networking: Social networking accounts for 84% of Internet use in Uganda, while business, education, and other productive uses remain limited.

Recommendations for Improvement: The brief advocates for expanding infrastructure, subsidizing Internet access and ICT equipment, reducing the cost internet per GB by 50%, promoting digital literacy, and implementing gender-inclusive initiatives to bridge these gaps.

5.7% of Ugandans have Internet access

Executive Summary

Uganda faces significant challenges in expanding Internet access, with only 5.7% of the population connected. The digital divide is pronounced between the urban and rural areas, and at the regional level where western lags behind the eastern region at 1.8% and 6.1% respectively. High costs of ICT equipment and Internet services, coupled with low digital literacy further hinder the adoption and access to Internet services. Moreover, Internet usage among women at 8.2% is below the national average of 10.3%[1]. To bridge this gap, Uganda needs to subsidize Internet access, expand ICT infrastructure, promote digital literacy, enhance connectivity, and implement gender-inclusive policies in the access and utilization of ICT services. By addressing these issues, the country can harness the Internet's potential for improved governance and service delivery.

Introduction

The Internet has profoundly reshaped modern society, emerging as a critical tool for transforming how governments deliver public services and engage with their citizens. As highlighted by the UN E-Government Survey[2], Internet adoption is considered essential for enhancing service delivery, transparency, and accountability in public administration. Recognizing these benefits, the Ugandan government has made significant investments in infrastructure, policies, and strategies to promote Internet accessibility

1 https://www.nita.go.ug/sites/default/files/2022-12/National%20IT%20Survey%20Report%202022%20-%20Final.pdf

2 UN E-Government Survey 2020

and effectiveness, aiming to leverage its potential for sustainable development[3]. These strategic advancements encompass various domains, including e-health services, online education, remote work solutions implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, and progress in e-commerce and financial inclusion.

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The Internet has eased access to information and enabled citizens to pursue greater accountability in governance. Likewise, it has given the government new ways of engagement with citizens and collection of feedback on service delivery. Platforms like the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) online tax filing and payment systems make tax payment and accessing tax information easy for citizens, the government website (www.budget.go.ug) which issues vital information such as budgets, expenditures, policies, and reports, thus increasing transparency and making this information available to citizens, journalists, and civil society organizations.

Internet subscription in Uganda increased by 1.2 million between January 2023 and January 2024, there are 2.6 million active social media users identified in January 2024, with Facebook having 2.6 million in early 2024, 711,600 users on Instagram, 1.3 million users on LinkedIn, and 638,800 users on X[4]. Online activism has been gaining momentum, with notable campaigns like the "walk to work" campaign led by Dr. Kizza Besigye in 2011[5]. In 2017, the Pads for Girls campaign, spearheaded by Dr. Stella Nyanzi, successfully collected millions of pads benefiting around 2000 school-going girls and left a positive impact on their education. In 2023, Dr. Jimmy Spire Ssentongo initiated a series of online exhibitions like the #KampalaPotholeExhibition, and the #UgandaHealthExhibition. The Speaker of the Uganda Parliament Anita Among commended the #UgandaHealthExhibition and urged public servants to accept the feedback in good faith and improve accordingly. President Yoweri Museveni also directed the Ministry of Finance to release UGX 6 Billion for emergency road repairs in the city[6]. However, in 2024 the Speaker has strongly condemned the #UgandaParliamentExhibition spearheaded by AGORA – a civil society organization that spearheaded the parliament exhibition and refused to entertain any debates regarding whatever was exposed. These events highlight the power of social media and online platforms for citizens to voice their concerns regarding government service delivery, corruption, and misconduct.

This policy brief builds upon extensive research conducted by Evidence and Methods Lab (EML) between November 2022 and May 2024. EML undertook the research project to investigate the potential of Internet usage in enhancing service delivery to promote transparency and accountability within Uganda Government's Ministries, Departments, and Agencies.

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Key Findings

This section highlights key findings related to Internet access, affordability, usage patterns, and barriers in Uganda.

Digital Divide and Affordability

Limited Access: The national Internet access rate stands at a mere 5.7%, indicating a significant digital divide. This disparity is further pronounced across regions, were the western region lags behind with 6.3% Internet usage as compared to the eastern region with 9.7%, both regions falling below the national average. As expected, urban areas have higher Internet access rates at 23% as compared to rural communities with a 5% Internet access rate.

*The national Internet access rate stands at a mere **5.7%**, indicating a significant digital divide.*

Cost as a Barrier: The high cost of ICT equipment and services is the primary reason for households lacking Internet access. This financial barrier disproportionately impacts rural communities and perpetuates the digital divide. While most individuals, both in rural and urban areas, strive to keep their monthly Internet expenses low (0-10,000 UGX), a subset still spends over 100,000 UGX, highlighting the significant cost burden for the users.

3 https://www.nita.go.ug/reports/national-it-survey-2018-final-report

4 https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda

5 https://oda.oslomet.no/oda-xmlui/bitstream/handle/10642/9903/Activism%20as%20political%20action%20in%20Uganda.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

6 https://cipesa.org/2024/03/online-activism-is-moving-the-dial-on-social-accountability-in-uganda/

Affordability for Inclusive Development:

Research by Surfshark in 2022 ranked Uganda 116th out of 117 countries in Internet affordability. Ugandans have to work 510 times longer than Israelis to afford the most economical 1GB package, which costs only 5 seconds of work monthly for Israelis. Additionally, Internet costs in Uganda are higher than in neighboring East African countries like Kenya and Tanzania[7]. Affordable Internet access is crucial for inclusive development since high costs can hinder access to essential services like education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and social engagement, particularly for underserved groups.

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Usage Patterns and Barriers

Mobile First: In Uganda, about 11 million people, or 23% of the population, access the Internet using mobile phones, even though mobile broadband covers 75% of the population (35 million people) as of 2020. This disparity in Internet access and usage disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, including the poor, women, rural communities, the elderly, and Persons with disabilities[8].

Urban-Rural Divide in Usage: Internet usage is more prevalent in urban areas at a 23% rate compared to rural areas at 5%. This highlights the need for targeted interventions to bridge the urban-rural digital divide.

Disparity in Internet access and usage disproportionately affects vulnerable groups

Gender Gap: Internet usage among women stands at 8.2% below the 10.3% national average, indicating a gender gap in access and usage of Internet services.

Dominance of Social Networking: In Uganda, 84 percent of Internet users utilized it for social networking, while 40 percent used it for Internet-based telephony and 20 percent for academic purposes. Only 17 percent of users accessed the Internet for business activities[9].

7 https://www.independent.co.ug/uganda-Internet-most-expensive-in-world/

8 https://www.uncdf.org/article/7859/closing-the-growing-digital-skills-gap-in-uganda

9 https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/09_2021Uganda-National-Survey-Report-2019-2020.pdf

Key Barriers to Access and Use: Beyond cost, several other barriers hinder Internet usage in Uganda. These include among others; the lack of basic digital literacy and skills, personal preferences, security concerns, the perception that the Internet is not a basic need

Policy Recommendations

Enhance Affordability

Subsidize Internet Access and ICT Equipment: The government should Implement suitable subsidies or financial incentives to reduce the cost of Internet access and ICT equipment, particularly for the poor, the rural populations, women, elderly, and persons with disabilities. This could include tax breaks for Internet Service Providers, tax reduction on mobile devices, and on equipment used for ICT infrastructure development.

The government should Implement suitable subsidies to reduce the cost of Internet access and ICT equipment

Introduce Affordability Programs: UCC should design and implement programs that make Internet services more accessible through encouraging telecom companies and internet service providers (ISPs) to offer tiered data plans with affordable options for low-income users, and establishing publicly accessible Internet hubs in underserved communities. These hubs would provide free or low-cost Internet access, devices, and digital literacy training thereby helping to bridge the gender and rural-urban gaps. Additionally, this would help to reduce the cost of monthly Internet per GB by 50% from (0-10,000 UGX) to (0-5,000 UGX).

Expand and Improve Infrastructure

Invest in Broadband and Mobile Networks: The government should prioritize public and private investments to expand broadband and mobile network coverage, particularly in underserved rural areas. It should leverage public-private partnerships to accelerate infrastructure development and share costs.

Enhance Local Connectivity: The government should address last-mile connectivity challenges by investing in internet network that reaches remote and underserved areas. This could include exploring innovative solutions like wireless technologies and satellite Internet.

Ensure Reliable Electricity Access: The Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development should recognize that reliable electricity is essential for Internet access. The government should invest in expanding the national power grid and explore alternative energy solutions like solar power to provide electricity in off-grid areas.

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Foster Digital Literacy

Launch National Digital Literacy Campaigns: The government should design and Implement nationwide campaigns to improve digital literacy across all demographics. This can be done by developing and delivering context-specific digital literacy training programs through a multi-channel approach, including integrating digital literacy into the national school curriculum, establishing programs in accessible community centres to cater to diverse learning needs, and leveraging online platforms for flexible and scalable training options. The government can as well partner with private sector organizations to take advantage of their expertise and resources to offer knowledge and digital tools.

Promote Gender Inclusivity

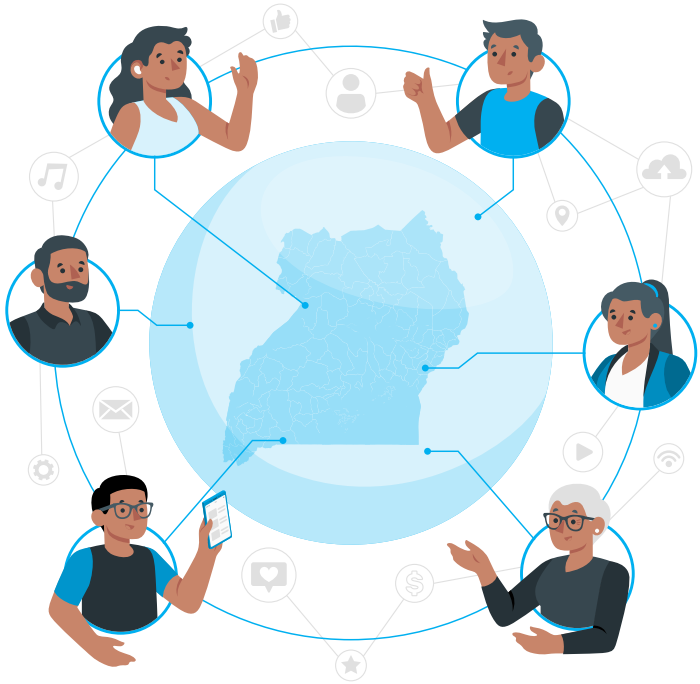
Promote Gender-Inclusive Internet Access: The government should implement targeted initiatives to empower women and girls, ensuring equitable access to technology through tailored training, affordability programs, and efforts to dismantle socio-cultural barriers such as early child marriages that force girls out of school, unequal access to education in STEM fields which are male dominated and considered a "no go area of study" for girls.

The government should implement targeted initiatives to empower women and girls, ensuring equitable access to technology

Conclusion

While the Internet holds immense potential for transforming Uganda's development trajectory, the current state of access and usage is far from optimal. Addressing the digital divide, reducing costs, and enhancing digital literacy are crucial steps to unlocking the full potential of the Internet for inclusive growth, improved governance, and enhanced service delivery. By investing an additional 5% of the general national budget in digital infrastructure, digital inclusion, research and development, and implementing targeted policies, can increase the population of mobile Internet users to 30%, further bridging the digital gap, driving financial inclusion through digital finance solutions, promoting the benefits of digital rights and information access among Ugandans and contributing to GDP growth.

Addressing the digital divide, reducing costs, and enhancing digital literacy are crucial steps to unlocking the full potential of the Internet for inclusive growth



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