

Public-private partnerships hold the key to future development

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For Africa to not just survive the current pandemic, but to thrive, investment into digital infrastructure is inevitable. Much-needed digital infrastructure and the resulting digital transformation will be an enabler of rapid development across the continent, positively impacting the most vulnerable communities.



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While digital transformation is certainly not a new discussion, the Covid-19 pandemic has abruptly accelerated the need for digital adoption. There's an urgent need to invest in connecting communities and improving service delivery to citizens throughout Africa.

However, governments across Africa, and indeed globally, have budgetary restraints that have been exacerbated by the current pandemic, and digitisation requires significant investments to modernise the government sector and beyond. Public-private partnerships (PPP) will play a critical role in accelerating digital transformation. Africa's recovery must be digitally driven – the digital economy is the recipe for job creation, spurring innovation, boosting economic growth and supporting long-term competitiveness in the global digital economy.

Digital transformation needs an ICT infrastructure to succeed

To breach the current digital divide, governments alone cannot achieve ambitious targets. It will take a strategic and considered set of PPPs to achieve Africa's ambitions to compete in the digital economy.

A report by McKinsey & Company on Africa in the wake of Covid-19 suggests that the crisis could be a catalyst to help close the digitisation gap, accelerating digital transformation in sectors as diverse as financial services, retail, education and government. To unlock digital transformation, the public sector must be brought into the digital age, accelerating the rollout of digital IDs, signatures and registries, as well as implementing digital-friendly policies. But to positively impact inequality, citizens need access to the internet. There is more work to be done to create equal opportunities for everyone, including improving next-generation connectivity, particularly for rural communities.

The latest [Ericsson Mobility report](#) states that mobile data traffic in sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to grow by 12 times the current figures by 2025. Mobile broadband subscriptions are predicted to reach 72% of mobile subscriptions while LTE subscriptions are set to triple, increasing from 90 million in 2019 to 270 million in 2025.

E-commerce has also been growing quickly: online retailers in Nigeria, for example, have experienced a doubling of revenue each year since 2010. Despite this progress, most sectors of African societies and economies still lag behind the rest of the world in digitisation.

In 2016, the United Nations declared access to the internet to be a basic human right, yet in 2020 48% of the world's population lacks consistent access. ICT investment into mobile broadband is a crucial area for development. Internet connectivity across Africa is very low, and there's a need to use innovative ways to connect the unconnected and the underserved.

One way to expand digital services is to make use of TV White Space technology (TVWS). The sustainable nature of this type of spectrum use makes it very cost efficient to implement, which is extremely beneficial for rural, underserved and developing areas. With TVWS, people are now able to access the internet for less than 5% of the average household income, and projects such as Mawingu in Kenya, and Bluetown in Ghana are making a palpable difference to people's lives and livelihoods.

Policy development must be part of the conversation

Many governments have struggled with digital transformation. In some instances, red tape and outdated policies make it more challenging to implement digitisation goals. In recent Microsoft-EY research, businesses cite a lack of regulatory guidelines among their top three challenges to implementing AI. African governments have important roles to play in developing sound digital policies and stable harmonised regulatory environments that enable people and businesses to participate fully in the global digital economy.

The McKinsey & Company report suggests that governments can help by fostering an enabling environment for rapid digitisation by ensuring that all the key enablers are in place to support digital adoption. For example, governments and technology companies can make sure that data is affordable, while regulators can take steps such as allowing banks to

accept e-signatures.

With funding constraints and reallocation becoming an even more stark reality, governments are under pressure to normalise tax collection. Past inefficiencies in the process may well have been overlooked. Countries with vast informal and cash-based shadow economies wish to extend support to all their citizens; however, the support available can be severely hampered by issues with tax collection of existing businesses and individuals.

Some countries are taking the opportunity to offer support to informal SMEs in return for a commitment to register and become part of the regulated economy. This is often done by offering discounted rates in return for participation in the government's tax collection policy and laws. Enabling technology can help governments scale tax collection and manage it, predict fraud and support governments in their goals.

PPPs can serve to accelerate conversations around key country policies. In South Africa, Microsoft commissioned Research ICT Africa (RIA), a leading research institution, to author the white paper, "Paving the way towards digitalisation in Agriculture" in partnership with the University of Pretoria. The white paper was commissioned with the aim to identify opportunities within the agriculture industry and identify key regulatory and policy issues that the country needs to address in order to maximise the benefits of technology.

The final report could serve as a reference document that could be leveraged to identify appropriate policy priorities in order to truly transform agriculture across MEA countries.

Digitisation can improve citizens' access to services

More personalised digital services

With a booming young digital native population in countries across Africa, the call for more immediate and personalised digital services is growing. Historically, public service delivery across Africa has been characterised by backlogs, inaccuracy, slow response times and poor quality, leaving citizens feeling frustrated, but technology can directly impact operations in public services and improve the lives of citizens. Technology such as AI, IoT, quantum computing, blockchain, cloud technologies and other tools can improve response times and enable digital access to services, while driving important revenue sources for government in areas such as licensing and taxation.

Here, digital systems can help scale and manage online tax collection, predict fraud and deploy analytics for improved service delivery. In tandem with driving tech innovation, public-private partnerships can help unlock vital upskilling, reskilling and digital literacy initiatives for government employees that help drive what we refer to as tech intensity – the ability to not just adopt emerging technology, but to develop the capabilities to effectively use it.

Morocco is one such country that has harnessed the power of PPPs to drive digital transformation. Its Morocco 2020 Digital Strategy places the development of eGovernment services as a top priority.

Microsoft 4Afrika has backed the development of this eGovernment solution in Morocco through a partnership with Algo Consulting to develop the Wraqi platform, which uses IoT, biometrics and blockchain to digitise administrative services, document certification and notarisation. Platforms like this help provide secure, trusted services with full traceability of services – an important hallmark for eGovernment services.

In Egypt, public-private partnerships will help bring agriculture into the digital age by delivering real-time data for good agricultural practices, including intelligent water demand forecasting using AI, Cloud and mobile data, and connected farms that benefit from data collected using agriculture IoT devices. It's hoped that by enabling data protection between agricultural entities, the agricultural supply chain and data platforms can securely share data for greater benefit to everyone within that sector.

Public-private partnerships can form the cornerstone of a successful move to digitisation, and are an effective strategy for bringing together the resources and know-how needed to deliver on digital transformation goals.

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