

The State of Digital Inclusion in Africa:

Challenges and Disability Inclusion as a Solution

Unlocking digital services can transform the lives of disabled people in Africa, opening doors to education, job opportunities, civic engagement, and greater independence, ultimately enhancing their overall well-being. Yet, according to the [2021 Mobile Disability Gap Report](#) by the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA), only 16% of people with disabilities (PWDs) on the continent use the internet.

In a panel titled [Technology and Disability](#) at the Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa (FIFAfrica), several barriers were outlined regarding why the digital inclusion of PWDs remains a persisting issue on the continent. Barriers to progress include high illiteracy rates among this group, high poverty levels that hinder access to smartphones and assistive technologies (e.g. screen readers), low digital skills, and the inaccessibility of digital products and services across the continent. These barriers are often sustained by a lack of inclusive and equitable distribution of digital inclusion efforts to most marginalised communities.

Why is Digital Inclusion Important?

Digital inclusion, as defined by the [National Digital Inclusion Alliance \(NDIA\)](#), refers to activities required to provide all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, with access to and skills to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), even as they evolve. In a world that is more digitally connected than ever, digital inclusion plays a significant role in fostering global participation and collaboration towards increased economic development. In a paper [measuring the impact of the internet on economic growth](#), it was found that the more participants a country or continent has with access, the higher its chances for economic development. According to the same paper, a 10% increase in internet users increases GDP per capita growth by 8.04%.

The global move towards digital inclusion has seen several strategies created to help countries reach their goals. One such strategy is [the Fourth Industrial Revolution \(4IR\)](#), which builds upon the Digital Revolution or the 3rd Revolution. With the 3rd Revolution, the goal was to increase access to and adoption of digital technologies such as mobile phones, social media, and the internet. The purpose of the 4IR, on the other hand, is to build on these available digital technologies to improve industries and societal development through innovations in critical areas

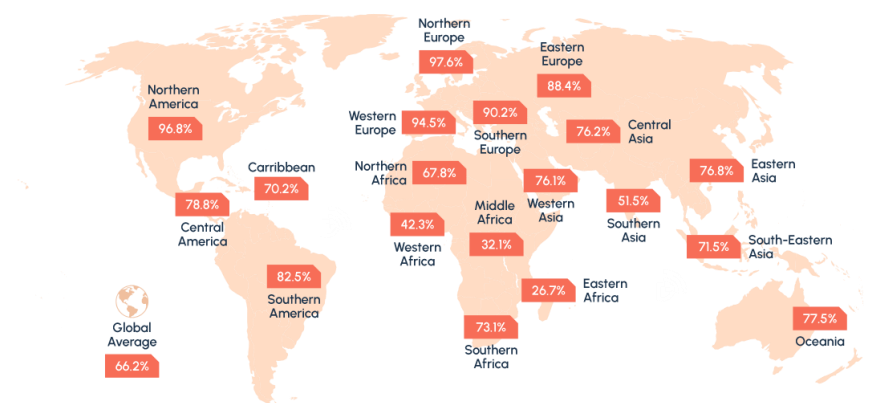
such as artificial intelligence (AI), internet of things (IoT), big data and analytics, cloud computing, and cyber-physical systems.

Understanding this premise reveals the impact of digital inclusion on a country's technology sector's ability to innovate, compete, and exist sustainably. For countries that have achieved a certain level of success with the 3rd Revolution, adoption of 4IR-related innovations and startups becomes easier. In Africa, however, the region with the highest population of people without internet access (over 860 million people), technology adoption is limited to the few with access. When most people in a place lack primary access to the internet or digital skills, innovating in more advanced areas could be limited or slowed by market size, thus affecting success potential. Digital inclusion is, therefore, necessary to attain technological growth. Along with investments in startups, becoming more intentional about bringing more Africans online should be a major focus area in this sector.

Digital Inclusion in Africa

Africa accounted for only [13% of the total global online presence in 2021](#), an increase from 4% in 2009. The [World Bank also reported](#) only about 36% of the African population has access to the internet. These numbers remain significantly low compared to the global average of 66%. [The following image from Data Reportal](#) shows internet adoption rates across the different regions of the world. Eastern Africa (26.7%), Middle Africa (32.1%), and Western Africa (42.3%) present the lowest numbers.

**Internet Adoption: Individuals using the Internet
as a Percentage of Total Population**



Source: DataReportal

The State of Disability Digital Inclusion in Africa

In Africa, there is no current data on the state of disabilities on the continent or laws or policies governing the digital rights of persons with disabilities. So, while the digital world continually advances, they trail behind their peers due to the absence of digital inclusion efforts that account for their unique needs. This lack further reduces their access to education, work, and a means of income, leaving them in poverty.

Here are some facts on the state of digital accessibility on the continent:

- [Less than 10% of all children with disabilities under the age of 14 are in school](#)
- continent-wide.
- Of
- [Africa's 1,274 universities](#)
- , only the
- [University of Pretoria in South Africa is publicly known to support inclusive learning](#)
- . In 2021, it made its digital courses accessible to all students regardless of their abilities or disabilities, responding to the need for online education during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- While developed economies have legislated policies enforcing digital rights and access for citizens, such as the
- [European Accessibility Act](#)
- no other African country except
- [Kenya has an accessibility - ICT products and services - guideline](#)
- .
- Only a handful of apps and websites in Nigeria are accessible to PWDs, according to a recent
- [survey of some blind and visually impaired people in the country](#)
- .

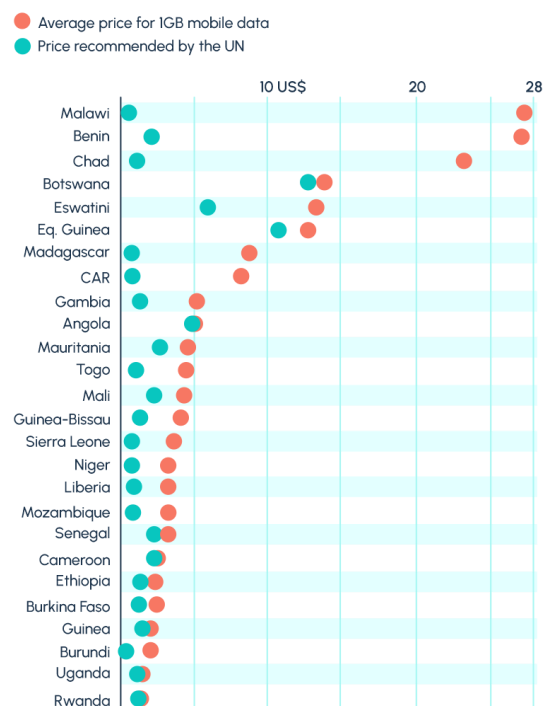
Worldwide, people with disabilities face several barriers to independence and economic empowerment. In Africa, the situation is worse due to the absence of reliable data on specific issues, cultural and religious beliefs that result in children with disabilities being hidden or shunned, and a lack of solid policies enforcing inclusion for PWDs in all sectors of society, including the digital world.

Challenges to Improving Internet Penetration in Africa

Although internet penetration has improved over the decades, challenges remain on the African continent that hinder its wider adoption, including factors such as

- High cost of mobile data—
- [According to this report](#)
- , mobile data is more expensive in only America compared to several parts of the African continent. In Malawi, the country with the most expensive data costs in Africa, people could spend up to \$70 monthly to go online—more than the United Nations' recommendation for mobile data rates to gross national income per capita.

Huge gap between affordable and real prices



Source: DW

- **Digital literacy rates—A**
- [GetBundi report on Nigerian graduates](#)
- revealed that 85% of Nigerian graduates have little to no digital skills beyond their use of social media. In today's world, where digital skills are essential for numerous jobs, many young people in Nigeria face disadvantages due to a lack of access and training.
- **Poor digital infrastructure—**

- this includes unstable power supply, unstable internet connection, and the fact that
- [175 million people on the continent live in areas that do not yet have mobile broadband coverage](#)
- . For those living in areas with broadband coverage, the report showed that 44% still did not use the internet, and only 49% did so from a personal smartphone.

These numbers highlight why internet penetration is still a predominant issue on the continent. It is important to note that this issue is prevalent in rural areas and among low-to-middle-income groups, as well as [within the disabled community, which makes up as much as 20% of Africa's population](#). The digital divide in Africa requires more intentional efforts and solutions to bridge the gap and improve internet access and use. An important aspect of digital inclusion is improving accessibility, ensuring that digital platforms are available and entirely usable by people with disabilities across the continent. 65 million are within primary and secondary school age and account for more than half of the children out of school, according to [this 2018 report from the World Bank](#).

Solutions to Drive Digital Accessibility

To improve this situation, the bulk of the work lies on the government not only to create laws that require digital platforms and processes to be accessible but also to enforce these laws, recognising [the layers of benefits in fostering an inclusive society](#). There is also a need to invest in mandatory and inclusive primary and secondary school education programs for PWDs and schemes to empower them with the digital skills needed to compete globally. An organisation like [AccessTech](#), a digital literacy training institution for blind people in Nigeria, is [partnering with the Nigerian Ministry of Communications and Technology to include visually impaired people in its three million technical training programme](#).

Moving forward, African governments need a different outlook and approach to developing the African tech sector. So far, the focus has been on startups. However, the industry is an ecosystem of different players. Increasing digital participation closes the existing digital gaps by bringing more people online, subsequently increasing innovation and market size for digital or tech startups. India's [2015 Digital India Initiative](#) is an example of a government's effort to improve digital inclusion across different areas of the country. By prioritising accessibility, African countries can help close digital gaps and create more inclusive ecosystems where people with disabilities can thrive.

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