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Poverty rate in Africa and information access

The case of the Internet

Information is key to basic survival in society. No civilization ever left that out in its existence. In fact, those who had greater access to information were known to have been more successful in war, infrastructures, commerce, and trade. However, we're not living in the ancient times, and this fact brings both relief and worries. Relief because there are greater and more advanced infrastructures put together these days to transmit information. Worries because even at this point of development around the world, these infrastructures aren't accessible to most people for one reason or the other. And this is exactly the case of the Internet in Africa today.

Although in a country like Nigeria, majority of the citizens live in urban areas, there is still a sizable number of rural dwellers. As at 2016, rural population in Nigeria was reported at 51.4%.¹ It does not also help that the mere mention of *rural dwellers* brings extreme poverty and disadvantage to the mind of the average Nigerian. This is because, among other things, rural dwellers don't have the privilege of certain infrastructures when compared to the urban dwellers. Hence, while we're complaining that Internet penetration is low in the country, in the rural areas it is at an all-time low, even unavailable in most areas.

You can't deny that just like every other human being, the rural dwellers have

information needs. They need information about agriculture, health, trade and commerce, scholarships, and more. The education system in the country is not designed to fill this gap. Most students are merely passengers of a system that wants to fill them with half-baked Mathematics and English Language and get rid of them after Senior Secondary School. The only option this group of people have is seeking out information on their own, and poor funding has made it hard for public libraries to thrive as they should.

Now, their last resort is the Internet—but, where can they get that? If signals are not entirely nonexistent in a rural area, data is too costly to buy. If a personal computer is not too costly to buy and maintain, the closest cybercafé is many kilometres away. This problem keeps recurring, and, sadly, hardly is anything being done. The politicians have proven that they can't be trusted. So most of the rural dwellers have given up and are now being deprived of vital information that could pull them out of poverty.

The second issue, which I consider very relevant in the discussion of ways in which

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access to information affects poverty rate, is Internet governance. This is a case that transcends country or region, but involves the entire continent. Internet governance is mostly viewed as a foreign subject by some African governments, while many other governments don't get to even look into it until their tenures expire. All they're aware of is the existence of the Internet. This has created room for more informed countries to trample on the rights of less-informed countries, while these less-informed countries go on making laws and taking actions that turn the Internet upside down. An important case is the Internet shutdown in a part of Cameroon, which lasted for close to three weeks.²

Most African governments are complacent on the issue of Internet governance. Worse still, academics and stakeholders in the Internet debate in Africa are hardly talking about it. Granted, a few conferences and forums such as the Internet Freedom Forum (IFF) in Nigeria have been held on the continent, but the complacency of most governments on the continent is making matters worse on the continent. Digital rights remain an abstract case on the continent, such that in a country like Nigeria, there's currently no legislation protecting the citizens' rights to the Internet. Hence, overzealous individuals and groups supposedly acting at the behest of the government can easily overpower and muzzle online sources of information that they believe to be against them.

The more information is policed in such a way, the less of it goes out to the public. If less information goes out, it'll surely not get to some vital populations that need them. It's true that the poor enforcement of Internet governance, which is currently plaguing us on the continent, is a manifestation of the wrong laws that certain countries have enacted. In that vein, a citizen in Nigeria can be denied the right to the Internet if they identify as LGBT. This goes a long way in affecting the individual's health, career, and chances of legal representation, and can even lead to poverty.

African governments and private stakeholders can start by focusing greater attention on rural areas, installing Internet infrastructures there as needed, and making sure that they're effectively used. In partnering with governments (whether state or federal) it is important for these private stakeholders to have total control of the funding being used for these projects so that they don't go into the wrong hands. Also, to make the project effective, both parties need to conduct proper surveys in these rural areas to ensure that the size of Internet infrastructures in areas match the number of people who need them. This is to avoid a scenario where less is given where more is needed and vice versa.

More importantly, organizations and expert groups such library associations should put measures in place to educate and orientate African governments on Internet governance. They can do this through training academics, government agencies, and other stakeholders on the matter. Where necessary, they should urge international bodies such as the United Nations to punish erring and less concerned governments to bring them up to speed in this issue, which involves the well-being of the people.

Although progress has been made concerning the poverty rate in Africa, more must be done to ensure that it's a thing of the past. Access to information is one way through which empowerment can take place and the power of the Internet here cannot be overemphasized. Hence, the Internet needs to be made easily available to all groups, no matter the cost.

Notes

1. "Nigeria—Rural Population," *Trading Economics*, 2017, accessed July 15, 2018, <https://tradingeconomics.com/nigeria/rural-population-percent-of-total-population-wb-data.html>.

2. Kieron Monks, "Cameroon goes offline after Anglophone revolt," CNN, 2018, accessed July 17, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/03/africa/internet-shutdown-cameroon/index.html>. ❧