Time for Africa to step up its digital transformation

Africa could be playing a far greater role in the development of the global digital economy but it requires bold decisions if the continent is to influence global affairs, the global economy and the global imagination. This was the vision of economic change outlined in *The Economist's special Report on The African Century (May 2020).*

Along with addressing critical governance issues, the continent needs to drive its regulators to become enablers and move faster to change the laws to allow for tomorrow's economy, one based on mobility in vehicles, drones, smart grids, and cloud computing to name a few.

Three critical but inseparable elements are required to ensure the digital revolution is truly transformational.

"South Africa's digital transformation journey through creating an enabling environment towards a digital society to foster socio-economic growth."

1

First, the regulatory infrastructure must keep pace with the exponentially increasing use of technology.

2

Second, digital transformation must close the historic—and widening—gender gap.

3

And, finally, the physical infrastructure needs to be in place.

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Currently, the regulatory infrastructure is fragmented—as in South Africa—or non—existent—as it is across most of the continent, though there are moves to address this. Regulatory frameworks for governance and regulation of technology businesses must focus on facilitating adoption (including licensing and registration) and operate at a national and continental level. It also needs to balance public security concerns and the need to encourage innovation, economic development, and youth entrepreneurship on the other.

250 Mln +

There is an enormous digital divide. Approximately half the world's population have no access to the internet, and the majority of those are women in developing countries. The future is online, but more than 250 million fewer women than men have access to the internet, a critical requirement for social and economic participation, and so are excluded.

This digital divide refers not only to the unequal access to ICTs (i.e. the measure of market penetration) but also the use of ICTs by those on the socio-economic margins. The accessibility, availability, and affordability of ICTs—everything from mobile phones to payphones and the internet—as components of digital transformation depends, however, on government policy and the prevailing regulatory environment.

Governments need to establish regulatory frameworks that enable, for example, precision agriculture driven by agtech. The African Union report, *Drones on the Horizon: Transforming Africa's Agriculture*, calls for greater use of agtech to transform farming across Africa.

14/54

Yet, only 14 out of 54 African countries have drone regulations in place, many of which are obstructive, and even ban civilians from operating them. There is also the challenge of introducing and establishing certification and licensing standards. This lack of regulation and collaboration applies to most technology businesses.

"One of the challenges is that legislators and parliamentarians don't have the skillsets or a grasp of what digital technology is or what the 4IR is all about."

Aretha Mare, Co-Founder Impact Hub Harare Zimbabwe

She suggests a training programme to equip lawmakers with an "actual understanding of what it means…[as this would] help a great deal in shaping the policy process".

Such initiatives are already in place. For example, the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business runs an ICT policy and regulatory executive training programme for regulators, policymakers, and parliamentarians.

A key finding in the World Wide Web Foundation's report, *Is open data working for women in Africa?* was that there is "a closed data culture in Africa". It found that legislation and practices were not gender-responsive, and gender equality legislation was lacking or failing to address such inequalities.

373/375

The World Wide Web Foundation's report claims sex-segregated datasets on budget, health, and crime are not available as open data and that in sub-Saharan Africa, 373 out of 375 datasets are closed. Such datasets are needed to support the advocacy objectives of women. As it points out, however, "Efforts to fund open data initiatives, establish good data management practices, and implement Right To Information (RTI) reforms remain stagnant."

Last year, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the formation of the new Department of Communications and Digital Technologies (DCDT) which merged the Department of Communications and the Department of Telecommunications and Postal Services.

DCDT officially came into existence on 1 April 2020, and its mission is to lead "South Africa's digital transformation journey through creating an enabling environment towards a digital society to foster socio-economic growth".

This task requires greater collaboration to align and update governance systems and the regulatory environment.

Combatting cybercrime is a regulatory priority as few African countries—apart from South Africa—possess the legal and institutional structure to address it. The signing of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement offers the continent an opportunity to align regulations, policies, and procedures regarding the 4IR and accelerate participation in global value chains.

As The Economist reported, progress is not inevitable, nor will it be evenly spread. But it also is also adds that Africans overall are more optimistic about the long term future. Its younger generation just needs the tools to make that hope a reality.

Our Offerings

R360bn

With the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, the South African government has launched a massive infrastructure development programme - referred to as strategic infrastructure projects (SIP). It has identified 50 SIPs and 12 special projects with a total investment value of R360 billion.

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R4bn

In the digital sector, a R4 billion investment will be made into a space infrastructure Hub for National Development. The project will enable the development of satellite infrastructure, satellite-based augmentation systems, and earth observation satellites.

WAYNE LOWE
Managing Director
Strategic Communications
wayne.lowe@fticonsulting.com
+27 (0) 72 217 6852
FTI Consulting South Africa

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