

INTERNET!

A DEVELOPMENT ENABLER

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The Internet has become an essential gismo to access public information and is a source to protect fundamental independence. Over the last two-decade, the number of Internet users globally has increased substantially. Access to the Internet world has the potential now-a-days to change the way people's lifestyle, mode of communication, activities trends, working structure and business market. Internet access is considered a development enabler by policymakers. Information and communication technology (ICT) access is still far from equal distribution, and many people have not yet benefited from the potential of the Internet. This intensifying digital divide is due to various reasons including lack of infrastructure, deficit of affordable amenities and essential digital skills required to get maximum benefits from the opportunities that Internet offers.

The world has been attacked by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has disturbed every sector of the economy. The education sector has also been affected, where the conventional education system cannot remain working and the educational institutions around the world started to look for an unconventional education system. In Pakistan an alternative online education system has been designed, to benefit each student at home but due to the unavailability of internet and quality of internet education has been severely affected. It seems very difficult to live without the Internet access during the crisis of pandemic. First year of the Covid-19 has many lessons to be learned that cannot be overlooked. As internet access had an unfathomable impact on the lives of people, providing many options to the people to work from home and continue their working, skills and education.

In Pakistan, the necessary infrastructure is lacking to conduct

online classes. It's time to build it! The Internet can give more children access to affordable education, and it will provide opportunities for businesses to excel. Current statistics reveal that only about 33 percent of households in Pakistan have the access to Internet. Many peoples in rural areas have poor access, or no access, to Internet service, and schools in rural areas often lack Internet access and ICT hubs. There are several issues that contribute to the relatively low number of Internet users; cost of internet is one of them and misconceptions are another big reason as some people consider social media as Internet only.

UNICEF and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimate that, two thirds of children of age group 3-17 still have no access to the Internet. In Pakistan, out of 80 million children of the same age group, only 11 million children have access to Internet. Gender gap with 7 million boys and 4 million girls making the situation more vulnerable. According to PSLM 2019-20, only 3.17 percent of children of age group 3-17 years used Computer / Laptop Tablet in last three months. Education indicators of Pakistan are also not satisfactory as from 2012-13 till 2019-20, Literacy rate is stagnant at 60 percent. In the last five years, school attendance of population 10 years and older has also been declined to 60 percent from 62 percent. Pakistan with 32 percent out of school children is among the top 3 countries in the world that have the highest number of out-of-school children due to socio-economic disparities. It is expected that due to Covid-19, this percentage will increase as education was technology dependent during the last whole year. Access to Internet along with the availability of devices is a big issue in Pakistan. Quality of education provided during the pandemic period is another issue that will be raised when the proper school resumed again. Children with disadvantaged backgrounds

suffered a lot due to access to Internet, affordability of devices and illiterate parents; since there was no one at home to guide the children during the pandemic.

In order to handle the above discussed issues, prompt action is required to counter this; we are facing digital divide as well which further deepening several other divides, e.g gender and economic inequalities. There is a time to launch Network Organizations like Internet Society with people-centered approach to handle the Internet standards, education, and policy development. This will push members for more Internet access across the country by increasing awareness about the benefits of Internet. More Internet users and affordable excellent quality Internet services in Pakistan will bring opportunities for distant learning, easy access to health and shopping services, increased productivity, and technological development. The future will be bright, if Pakistan can utilize and sustain the benefits of Internet for the people, it will unlock the human competencies and delivers the platform upon which an incipient digital economy can prosper. As the Internet and digital technologies have become more indispensable, it has also become more crucial to link the people who are being left behind.

Pakistan has also adopted Global Development Agenda, Sustainable Development Goal as Vision 2030, without making Internet accessible it is not possible to achieve the SDGs. More Internet access is required for the vision to become reality.

SDGs called for the universal and affordable access of Internet in developing countries by 2030 - a Goal that we are far from reaching.