**Internet inclusion in Sindh**

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With the recent flooding in Pakistan, it has been made clearer than ever that infrastructure in Sindh is severely lacking. Despite being the third biggest province in Pakistan, and having the having the second largest population and economy, Sindh is extremely behind in terms of infrastructure.

Specifically the more rural parts of Sindh, which are sparsely populated, lag behind urban Sindh. The main form of infrastructure in Sindh is its extensive road network, which totals to 25,383km of road throughout the province, roughly 21,000km of which are black topped. Even these roads are in poor condition, partially due to a lack of maintenance, but mainly due to repeated natural disasters, such as the recent flooding, that degrade the roads.

There is also a serious lack of internet infrastructure. In January 2021, internet penetration in Pakistan was 54 per cent, meaning that almost half of the population does not have internet access. Out of that 54 per cent, 76 per cent live in urban areas. Developing internet infrastructure in Sindh would have significant benefits in improving education, raising growth, and reducing gender inequality.

Lack of education is a big problem in Pakistan. Throughout the country, 22.8 million, or 44 per cent of children, ages 5-16 years are not in school, according to the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM) from 2020. In Sindh, 55 per cent of the population has never attended school, and on the national level 60 per cent have never attended school.

In rural areas the numbers get worse; 58 per cent of children in rural Sindh are not in school, whereas in urban areas 29 per cent are not in school. Improving internet infrastructure in these areas would help reduce the number of people without any education. One of the main benefits of the internet is the sheer amount of information it grants people access to, including websites and companies devoted to giving free education, with Khan Academy being a prime example. Access to information is very important in Pakistan as 94 per cent of the youth do not have access to a library, so the internet could be their only option for free access to information. Investment in internet access is also proven to have benefits in students’ performance.

A study by Rice University in 2020 found that increased spending on internet access was linked to higher graduation rates as well as higher scores on standardized tests. The same study also showed that after a $600,000 increase in spending on a school district’s internet access, there was an increase of $800,000 to $1.8 million in the students’ cumulative incomes over the course of their lifetimes.

With 60 per cent of its population under 30 years of age, one of Pakistan’s greatest assets is its young population. This young population is so important because it provides great opportunity for social, economic, and political progress. While it does have great potential, a population that is this young also poses problems for Pakistan if it is not dealt with properly and provided with opportunities. As noted in a UNDP report from 2018, if the country provides the youth with education, employment, and meaningful engagement opportunities, they can serve as catalysts for Sustainable Development Goals.

Another key benefit for promoting internet inclusivity in Sindh is its impact on economic growth. A study by Monash University that involved studying one trillion internet connections showed that there is a strong correlation between internet penetration and economic growth. In this study, it was shown that countries with high or saturated IP per capita levels, such as Denmark and Norway, also had higher growth rates. A reason for this correlation is that having internet access opens many avenues for businesses and companies. For example, online shipping, for which internet access is required, can expand a company or business’ ability to sell products.

Marketing is also much easier over the internet, as it is very easy to buy ad space through Google or social media and reach thousands of people. This is important for Pakistan; many people could be provided training on digital skills that could help them to start businesses or companies that could eventually lead them out of poverty.

Finally, internet inclusivity would reduce gender disparities. Pakistan ranks 135th on the world Gender Inequality Index, and according to the PSLM, only 49 per cent of women in Pakistan are literate, compared to 70 per cent of men. In the 2018 election, 12.5 million more men voted than women, and only four percent of female candidates won seats in the National Assembly. Ensuring that women and girls have access to the internet and other digital technologies such as phones and computers is key to their economic and social empowerment. These digital technologies can offer ‘leapfrog’ opportunities for women and help close the gender gap by giving women the opportunity to earn additional income, increase their employment opportunities, and gain access to knowledge and information.

Expanding and investing in internet infrastructure in Sindh would bring many benefits to a region that has long suffered from lack of basic infrastructure; it could drive economic growth, increase education rates, and reduce inequality. Concrete policy action is needed to expand internet access and enable a digital transformation that will enable economic growth and help bridge the gender divide.

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