

# **The role of the Internet and international Internet-related public policy in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and possible future pandemics**

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In answering the question about the role of the Internet and international internet-related public policy in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and future pandemics, we must first look to the original purpose of the internet itself: communication.

Communication, simply put, refers to the sending and receipt of information verbally, through a written medium, visual cues or otherwise. We could therefore simply say that the internet is a network of computers which facilitates communication across the globe.

The role of the Internet and international internet-related policy is therefore based primarily on how communication networks (facilitated by them) can minimise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the wake of COVID-19 lockdowns resulting in the death of many businesses, pivots to online schooling slowdowns and loss of lives, countries and communities with access to the internet have had better chances of survival than those without. This has given rise to a number of policy issues which directly come as a result of (a lack of) access to the internet.

My contribution will focus on two areas I consider most relevant for the purposes of the consultation.

### **Misinformation Regulation**

Because access to the internet means access to communities and people all over the world, and the ability to send information of all kinds to them, it is no surprise that the misuse of messaging and social platforms through misinformation and disinformation campaigns is rife. As was the case during the 2014 Ebola crisis, where medical misinformation was shared via WhatsApp and Facebook to the older generation who are the most digitally vulnerable, misinformation of all kinds, has become something to be expected in periods of upheaval.

What is shocking is the unwillingness and/or inability of social media platforms to adequately address these issues fuelled by what appears to be a desire to maintain revenue and platform growth. Similarly concerning is the extent to which digital natives, I consider this to be a better term than Millennial or Generation Z because of the difference in the demographic in Africa, are just as vulnerable as their digital immigrant parents. This reflects a need for African governments to pay more care and attention to inoculating their population against online misinformation.

### **Further Decline in Gender Equality**

The Internet provides a platform for women to build networks and navigate oppressive, gendered situations. Through it, women have the ability to access sexual and reproductive healthcare which might often be denied them as well as the right to own their own businesses, attend schools, and participate in social and political discourse.

However, women who use the internet often find themselves becoming victims of online violence against women (OVAW). Some of these acts are merely cyber variations of already existing forms of gendered violence such as stalking, assault, and sexual harassment but others are completely novel such as deepfake pornography, revenge pornography and the use of internet shutdowns to clamp down on the rights of citizens.

Therefore, in periods of pandemic, what has been described as the shadow pandemic, violence against women often reaches epic proportions manifesting in both the use of the internet to attack and harass women and the denial of women's rights to access the internet. The latter might be due to unconscionable internet shutdowns or the prioritisation of the access of men or male children to the internet as a result of limited resources.

Whichever the case may be, not enough attention is being paid by governments to ameliorating these harms. Gender specific intervention is necessary to prevent a decline in the progress being made to achieve gender equality and equal gender representation across board.

### **Recommendations**

While these two are not the only internet policy issues brought to light by the pandemic, they are germane and incredibly important for improving and mitigating the conditions brought about by the pandemic.

Resolving these issues would require collaborations between regional and local bodies as well as private and public partnerships. It is not simply enough to pay lip service however, there is a need to revamp the international policy infrastructure to eradicate stalemates and provide practical, workable solutions to these issues in order that the purpose for the creation of the internet might be utilised for more useful purposes.