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**A CALL FOR SOCIAL
JUSTICE IN A DIGITAL
ECONOMY**



A CALL FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN A DIGITAL ECONOMY

With approximately 200 million humans, Nigeria accounts for 47% of the West African population and has one of the largest populations of youths in the world. In commemorating the 'World Day of Social Justice with the theme, 'A Call for Social Justice in a Digital Economy', it can be easily concluded that the digital economy brings about a lot of opportunities but also the risk of people being left behind as there is a lack of competency or capability in digital literacy.



Social Justice and the tenets of ActionAid

Social justice is about equity and fairness in the society, ensuring that the rights of people are protected in all fairness, rights as humans, access to basic amenities without discrimination, participation in governance without marginalisation, equity irrespective of status, gender, colour, race, or tribe. In recent times, poverty has been redefined to encompass hunger, malnutrition, limited access to education, basic facilities, social discrimination, exclusion as well as limited participation in decision making. These anomalies are what social justice tries to address.

The struggle for social justice is a reality and the work done by ActionAid Nigeria in more than 22 states in the Federation focusing on women and youth, vulnerable populations, etc. is centred on issues of social justice. The intersection between ActionAid's work and the theme for the World Day of Social Justice submits that no one is left behind. Access to digital tools and skills, education, social protection is compulsory for every youth in the country irrespective of location or level of education. However, the digital economy has made us to realize that so many people are left behind, the education system being a prime example of this lacuna as access to technology for educational purposes is at an all-time low and limited to the wealthy, urban schools of learning.



Social justice in the digital economy: Analysing the policy direction in Nigeria

Nigeria is a country with little or no dearth of policies, laws, legislations, etc. The overarching policy in terms of digital economy is the National Digital Economy Strategy, a 10-year strategic plan. The idea of the strategy is to accelerate the development of Nigerian digital economy, desirable of being in tune with the global world. Some of the pillars in the strategy include developmental regulations; digital literacy and skills- youth inclusion; solid infrastructure- development of fixed and mobile infrastructure; service infrastructure- built around services, digital support and provision of robust platforms; and soft infrastructure which is strengthening public confidence in the use of digital technologies.

Despite this document, no policy can thrive in isolation. For the digital economy to succeed, the intersections between policies and or laws must be considered. One good example is the education policies currently in place in Nigeria. According to National Bureau of Statistics, in its second quarter report of 2020, 57% of 100 million youths between the ages of 13-35 are unemployed.

The education system has to be reimagined and innovative curriculum developed to be relevant in the global space. The policies around education must necessarily be reviewed in order to adapt with the current realities; it should anticipate that the large part of the population currently in its system would sooner or later move to Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) environment or business spaces and into the current reality of digital economy. It should prepare the young population to be functional and relevant in the digital economy. Regulations from NITDA, Nigerian Office of Trade Negotiations, National Communication Commission, need to be developed and put in place to protect the SME environment, taking into consideration, the budding digital economy. Other policies that intersect with the National Digital Economy Strategy that ought to be reviewed include the Gender Policy and the Nigerian Youth Policy. Interestingly, the National Digital Economy Strategy does not convincingly speak to the concern of youth inclusion as it should state exactly the processes of inclusion.





Social justice in a digital economy: Opportunities and Challenges for Youths, PLwD and Women in Nigeria



Digitalisation and the digital economy have an impact on all categories of persons; especially the youth, physically challenged persons and women. Despite digitalisation, there's little or no access to social justice and without affordable and available access, the widening gap is scary. Although the internet can be seen as the catalyst for development, creation of new jobs, wealth and innovation, access and affordability are essential in ensuring inclusion. While broadband is a key enabler to harnessing the digital economy transformation, significant bottlenecks limit the growth of internet speed in Nigeria, one of which is lack of infrastructure.

Studies have shown that 63% of young people that are male are likely to show digital education. Thus, the difference in opportunities in the digital space between male and female is important and needs to be adequately addressed. Additionally, there is need for social inclusion and for young people to be allowed to participate in decision making.

There are many reported cases of sexual harassment of women within FCT inside public transportation and thus far, there are no effective channels of seeking redress to bring perpetrators to book. The digital economy can be leveraged upon for prompt response and quick intervention in order to curb this menace.



SDGs perspective to digital economy



The Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan is a 4 year plan that looks at entrepreneurship, education, employment, equality and rights for young people. The intendment of the plan is to work in tandem with the National Youth Policy of Nigeria to ensure that young people are adequately prepared to achieve the SDGs. In order to succeed, education is paramount. However, Nigeria's budget for education is a paltry 5.6% of the total budget in a world where Artificial Intelligence, robotic learning, etc. is now the order of the day. For Nigeria to compete on the global scale, it is important to leave no one behind and this can be achieved only through education and the political will to re-imagine the economy to fit the future.

Young people should be adequately prepared for the digital economy by providing access to better broadband services, digital tools, and internet for learning. Electricity is a challenge to digital economy; power supply is key to drive the digital economy forward. Youth in the informal sector should have access to the right digital services, access to funding to scale up business and government support which is essential for social entrepreneurship.

There should be a clear framework both at state and national levels that give a trajectory of targets or mechanisms to achieving the SDGs while incorporating strategies on the interconnection between the digital economy and other sectors.

An example is the idea of streamlining agriculture with information technology where the mind-set of the youth can be influenced to participate in the sector successfully.

Conclusion

Currently, about 15% of the national GDP is gotten from the digital economy. Digital entrepreneurship has the capability to become an engine of digital transformation in Nigeria and set the country on a new growth trajectory. When there is access, availability and affordability to digital tools, social inclusion will be ripe, thus lowering administration cost, increasing trade and investment and leading to development.

It is of absolute importance for youths to make unambiguous demands by advocating for changes in deficient policies after identifying and internalizing such policies in order to be the drivers for a successful economy. Social media can be leveraged upon to expand the civic space and influence policy making. Digital labour law should be developed to ensure that people are not extorted overtime. There should be in place adequate monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure that the funds given to youths through social interventions are utilized appropriately by youths who will be responsible enough to return such funds.

COMMUNIQUE ISSUED AT THE COMMEMORATIVE WEBINAR FOR WORLD DAY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE HELD ON SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 20TH, 2021

Preamble

ActionAid Nigeria in collaboration with Danish International Development Agency-DANIDA through Youth Digital Engagement (YDE) Project thought it expedient to organise an online interactive event to commemorate the 'World Day of Social Justice with the theme: 'A Call for Social Justice in a Digital Economy.' The one-day webinar had as its panellists Tunde Aremu (Policy, Research, and Influencing Manager, PLAN International Nigeria); Zainab A. Lawal (Community Development Practitioner, CODE); Joshua Alade (National Coordinator, Nigeria Youth SDGs Network) and Ene Obi (Country Director, ActionAid Nigeria) as the host of the webinar. The aim of the webinar was to foster dialogue on actions needed to overcome digital divide and protect labour and human rights in the modern era of digital technologies.

Observations

Following the presentations and interactions, the following were observed:

1. The digital economy brings about a lot of opportunities but also the risk of people being left behind as there is a lack of competency or capability in digital literacy.
2. Poverty has been redefined to encompass hunger, malnutrition, and limited access to education, basic facilities, social discrimination, and exclusion as well as little or no participation in decision making. This is what social justice is trying to address.
3. The current education system of Nigeria does not anticipate what will be required of the bulging population to be functional and relevant in the digital economy as Nigeria's current budget for education is 5.6% of the total budget in a world that has gone unto artificial intelligence, robotic learning.
4. The education system has emphasized the wide gap between people despite the advent and use of technology as the problem of access and connectivity still arises.
5. The consistent widening gap between the poor and rich is a cause for concern as there is no affordable and available access to digitization which ought to ordinarily ensure access to social justice for all.
6. The workspace is gradually shrinking as small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are losing steam due to lack of adequate skills to enable them to adapt successfully in the digital economy.
7. Cyber security is a budding issue and concerns like fake news and phishing attack affect the confidence in the use of digital tools.
8. There is the challenge of surveillance capitalism globally where the privacy of people is invaded. However, Nigeria's response to this scourge is rather politically motivated than citizen focused.
9. Although, there is no dearth of apposite policies in Nigeria, however, most policies are not implemented, or they do not adequately provide or capture the essential solutions needed to advance the society.
10. The overarching policy in terms of digital economy which is the National Digital Economy Strategy does not convincingly speak to the concern of youth inclusion as it should state exactly the processes of inclusion in the digital economy.
11. There are reports of women who have been sexually harassed in public transportation systems. However, there are no sufficient platforms for effective reporting for prompt response and the digital space have not been harnessed to battle this problem.
12. Power (electricity) is a challenge to embracing digital economy.



Recommendations

1. There is need for our educational ecosystem to be reinvigorated and innovative curriculum developed for relevance in the global space. Digital tools for learning must be embraced as the conventional form of education alone will not be relevant in the emerging digital economy.
2. The internet should be seen as the catalyst for development, creating new jobs, wealth and driving innovation. Youths have the opportunity to invest in their education through the internet without studying abroad. We recommend that internet should be liberalised, creating more access even for rural dwellers.
3. There is utmost need for access, availability, and affordability to digital tools for social inclusion and economy growth. This will in turn reduce drastically administrative costs, increase trade and investment which lead to development.
4. There is need for drastic sectoral policy reviews, especially on education and the National Digital Economy Strategy.
5. Infrastructures need to be put in place to ensure that there is an enabling environment in which digital policies will thrive.
6. Social media can be leveraged upon to expand the civic space, e-governance and influence policy making.
7. The intersections between the digital policy and existing laws that can drive the digital economy need to be considered as the success of digital economy cannot be isolated.
8. Progressive regulations by NITDA, Nigerian Office of Trade Negotiations, and National Communications Commission are necessary to protect the SMEs from being put out of the labour space by multinationals or foreign companies and ensure a level field playing ground. This will tame the gale of unemployment.
9. Youths in the informal sector should have access to the right digital services, better broadband services, and access to funding to scale up businesses. Thus, government's support for social entrepreneurship is necessary for such businesses to scale up and impact their community.
10. SMEs need to adapt to the current reality and harness the digital space adequately for their businesses.
11. Even, with the laudable idea of social interventions, there must be in place adequate monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure that the monies are being utilized appropriately by the youths who will be responsible enough to return such (revolving) funds.
12. There is need for improved power supply as it is key to drive the prospects of digital economy.
13. There is need for social inclusion and young people ought to be allowed to participate in decision making.
14. There is need to develop a digital labour law to regulate working hours and ensure that people are not extorted over time. Casualisation of labour under any guise is criminal.
15. Digital entrepreneurship has the capability to become an engine of digital transformation in Nigeria and set the country on a new growth trajectory. Thus, there is need to harness the digital space.
16. There is need for youth to leverage on relationships and make their voices heard, placing unambiguous demands on the government, and advocating for their rights.
17. The last but not the least is critical. Relevant MDAs must address the wide digital literacy gap that excludes the poorest from the benefits of the digital world.



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