Chapter Two

From G20 Brazil 2024 to G20 South Africa 2025: Unpacking the Digital Economy Themes – Comparisons and (Dis)continuities

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Abstract

The G20 in 2025, being hosted by South Africa, takes place in the context of various geopolitical fractures and conflicts. It brings the potential of a Global South agenda into the final year of the Southern nations hosting the event, and for the first time incorporates the African Union (AU) in the G20 in a hyper-competitive world with little policy space for middle power nations. The Digital Economy themes have gained prominence in recent years at the G20, with a dedicated working group focusing on key issues - digital access, equality, and AI governance, safety, innovation, and sustainability, while ensuring robust regulation to prevent societal harms. This chapter focuses on the G20 Digital Economy themes of Brazil in 2024 - and its (dis)continuities as South Africa hosts the G20 in 2025.

Keywords: Digital Economy; South Africa; Global South; G20

Introduction

The global Covid-19 pandemic crisis was one of the gravest global disasters of century. A combination of rapid globalization, inequalities of the trade system, offshoring, outsourcing, rapid

urbanization and borderless world of travel and commerce and lack of investment in health systems ensured a 'warp like' spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Humanity was presented with unique opportunity to co-operate with the United Nations (UN) around a common crisis. Sadly, leading powers and nation states rapidly descended into the most rabid nationalistic forms of Covid-19 vaccine nationalism and selfishness, especially with regards to the Covid 19 vaccine development and distribution, entrenching geopolitical divides. The globalization model developed as espoused by elite forums like the G20, G7, World Economic Forum (WEF) was exposed in core areas from supply chains to labor mobility and exploitation, and the erosion of the development agenda.

In his speech to the WEF 2021 virtual conference on 27 January 2021, President Cyril Matamela Ramaphosa, made a heartfelt appeal to wealthy nations not to hoard Covid-19 vaccines and free it up for the South. For a leader of a leading African economy, and South Africa as member of the G20 and BRICS to plead in this manner, shows emphatically the stark unequal power relations of the rich North vis a vis the precarious position of the South. Despite appeals for patent exceptions in this global health emergency, pharmaceutical corporations profiteering intensified, and even - while receiving mega subsidies worth billions of dollars, 80% of Covid vaccines were produced and hoarded for nations of the North, while the Global South was denied any technology transfer, leaving the majority of the world's population unvaccinated

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), officially known as Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets out a clear agenda for global sustainability. Spearheaded by the United Nations through a deliberative process involving its 193 member states, as well as global civil society, the goals are almost a blueprint of the 'Future We Want' by the UN member nations. All these goals are highly dependent on the skills we develop for the labour market.

In this context, the WEF's 2021 publication, Covid-19: The Great Reset, co-authored by the CEO WEF's Dr Klaus Schwab

is timely as it provides thought-provoking expert insights on the varying and structural impacts in a Covid world order and contours of a global post Covid economic recovery. The authors propose that the global pandemic presents a new opportunity to institute a new policy narrative that integrates social thinking, and this needs a 'radical rethink' on key issues ranging from new green pathways to reform of the Bretton Woods institutions. (Schwab and Malleret, 2020)

1. 4IR and AI - Panacea of Paradox?

The report further elucidates that options to boost growth performance and economic recovery are better known (i.e. addressing basic distortions), yet new approaches will have to be found as the manufacturing-led development model, so crucial for job creation has higher barriers to entry, and competition intensifies with the adoption and dissemination of the Fourth Industrial Revolution(4IR).This is a critical statement from the WEF as the erosion of manufacturing capacity especially in the South in general and Africa in particular will mean the path towards normal industrialization of the Kuznets-type mode - structural transformations through manufacturing, the engine room for job creation - will face insurmountable headwinds as the tools and processes of the 4IR (robotics, AI, IOT), penetrate economic, public sector, and industrial recovery programs. The report has a sobering assessment:

> In the pre-pandemic era, new artificial intelligence (AI)-based technologies were being gradually introduced to automate some of the tasks performed by human employees. The COVID-19 crisis, and its accompanying measures of social distancing, has suddenly accelerated this process of innovation and technological change. Chatbots, which often use the same voice recognition technology behind Amazon's Alexa, and other software that can replace tasks normally performed by human employees, are being rapidly introduced. These innovations provoked by necessity (i.e. sanitary measures) will soon result in hundreds of thousands,

> and potentially millions, of job losses. As consumers may prefer automated services to face-to-face interactions for some time to come, what is currently happening with call centres will inevitably occur in other sectors as well. "Automation anxiety" is therefore set for a revival, which the economic recession will exacerbate. The process of automation is never linear; it tends to happen in waves and often in harsh economic times, when the decline in companies' revenues makes labour costs relatively more expensive. (Schwab and Malleret, 2020, p.43).

These sobering observations suggest some kind of 'Covid-19 4IR' austerity' order emerging post 2022, with social sectors - especially labour should expect in the coming months and years ahead. It is a textbook case of the 1980s Thatcherite dictum 'There is No Alternative' TINA. The report further points to a dystopian reality awaiting workers everywhere and especially for Africa:

> In emerging and developing countries (particularly those with a "youth bulge"), technology runs the risk of transforming the "demographic dividend" into a "demographic nightmare" because automation will make it much harder to get on the escalator of economic growth. (Schwab and Malleret, 2020, p.44).

This emerging 'demographic nightmare' scenario enabled by the displacing character of 4IR technologies is especially concerning for the development agenda of African countries where the youth bulge was seen as a powerful engine and source of human capital to propel African nations towards industrialization, growth and social development. In this short term, this scenario is now less feasible in the post-Covid recovery scenario, with restructuring resulting in job losses and investments in education systems for a 4IR era is a long-term project.

The WEF's Covid-19: The Great Reset report does a detailed assessment on all components – economics, politics, technology, labour, climate change, gender and environmental impacts. It does acknowledge and promote a social market-

social democratic model and calls for a 'social compact' economy, inclusive of stakeholders.

An interesting observation is that in this latest report the WEF and World Bank 2024 reports – those bastion and cheerleaders of free market globalization over four decades, are now reviewing their orthodox economic stance, with the acknowledgment of the need for a developmental model and social investments in addressing the public health crisis and economic recovery (Schwab and Malleret, 2021).

Emerging middle power nations like South Africa, India, Brazil face a multitude of developmental realities. It is in this context of areas of globalization and inequality that a new developmental and inclusive model is required. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and online learning platforms have been a boon that allowed professional classes to continue work. However, on the other side of the digital divide and 'dirt tracks' blue-collar workers, poor students, rural folk and SMME's have largely been excluded, partly due to our unaffordable data rates and uncoordinated national program to provide broadband and teacher training for the public education system. Sadly, current ICT policy-regulatory disconnect and dominance of telco mobile operators create distorted market and price outcomes, with implications for social welfare. The real challenge for our basic and higher education system going forward will be manifold: new organizational readiness for online learning, capacity building for administrators, new forms of pedagogical training for teachers, investing in Learning Management Systems (LMS) and restructuring the TVET college system to upgrade learners for the technology enabled global economy.

2. Can the G20 move from a mainstream globalized model to a more socially inclusive model?

As more of our everyday lives become digital – from paying bills and reading news to contacting companies and services, keeping in touch with your friends and family, and even voting – it has

become crucial to include everyone in the online world. But the meaning of digital inclusion keeps on changing and with it also the set of skills that are necessary to be 'digital' (Jaeger et al., 2012). What type of skills do people need to 'be digital' today? Is access to the internet enough, or do people need to understand how the internet works as well? Which kind of training programmes should be developed? Should there be one type of skills and training programme or different ones that cater to people from different backgrounds and needs (able-ism, age, education, gender, race, religion)? With the automation of many jobs, how can we foresee what skills will be needed for future work? These questions have been occupying the private sector and policy makers, and as more tasks become automated and digitalised, addressing them becomes ever more crucial.

Technology is one of the main reasons why incomes have stagnated, or even decreased, for a majority of the population in high-income countries: the demand for highly skilled workers has increased while the demand for workers with less education and lower skills has decreased. The result is a job market with a strong demand at the high and low ends, but a hollowing out of the middle. This helps explain why so many workers are disillusioned and fearful that their own real incomes and those of their children will continue to stagnate. It also helps explain why middle classes around the world are increasingly experiencing a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction and unfairness (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2016).

Leading MIT economists, Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2016) argue that the fourth industrial revolution "could yield greater inequality, particularly in its potential to disrupt labor markets. As automation substitutes for labor across the entire economy, the net displacement of workers by machines might exacerbate the gap between returns to capital and returns to labor. As automation substitutes for labor across the entire economy, the net displacement of workers by machines might exacerbate the gap between returns to capital and returns to labor. On the other hand, it is also possible that the displacement of workers by technology will, in aggregate, result in a net increase in safe jobs. We cannot foresee at this point which scenario is likely

to emerge and history suggests that the outcome is likely to be some combination of the two"(https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrialrevolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/).

3. The 4IR trilemma- trapped between jobless growth, de-industrialization and inequality

With the advent of the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) discourse going mainstream, flowing from northern circuits of the Davos WEF and G20, it has also found its way into daily discourses of the South, posing challenges for policy makers and social partners – labour, community and gig workers. A poignant feature is the rapid rise of micro-workers (professional workers without formal employment), which is morphing into a new 'precariat class'; and together with the concomitant mass lay-offs in the manufacturing industry has created both a vulnerable, industrial, blue-collar' proletariat and a new, vulnerable, 'white collar' services precariat. New Schumpeterian modes of technology disruption have again created new waves of opportunity – instability.

The rise of Uber aptly symbolizes this new wave of disruptive business models, monetization of new apps – sucking in local labour/drivers, automobiles, fuel, - into its system, with no concomitant social investment in terms of healthcare, pension or accident insurance for Uber drivers. Many nations and city states have responded differently. For instance, China with its data development and on data transfer model, Uber has failed and Chinese owned hailing companies have thrived. In cities of London and Berlin there has been protracted regulatory changes to push Uber towards recognizing workers as employees, with social benefits.

Shortly after his attendance at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos in 2018, South African President Ramaphosa announced at the State of the Nation (SONA), the creation of the PC4IR. Through the Commission, technologies would be used to elevate SA's developmental agenda in line with Vision 2030. The PC4IR consists of leaders from academia, business and

civil society. It began its work in May 2019, combining research and stakeholder engagements to generate a comprehensive perspective of SA's current conditions and prospects in the 4IR. Since its inception, the PC4IR has discussed the opportunities that will enable the country to craft a shared 4IR future. It has also looked at the factors that prevent SA from moving forward. These discussions have included international benchmarking. The intention is to gain insights into how PC4IR can provide a framework to position SA in the global 4IR landscape.

By contrast the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Commission on the Future of Work (2019) put forward its core recommendations about a developmental role for the state as well as inclusion and protection of workers and unions despite the global context of 4IR technocentrism. President Ramaphosa also happened to co-chair the ILO's Commission on the Future of Work. In many ways, South Africa's complex and complicated pathways and policy approaches to the new digital economy and 4IR are rooted in the contestations of 4IR narratives, values and discourses such as those of the World Bank/WEF on one hand and the ILO and union networks on the other. policy makers and leadership across the domains of government, business, labour and society.

The advent of the 4IR within global elite formations (WEF, G20 and World Bank) is a continuation of 'informational capitalism' and 'space of flows' as described in Castells' critical information theorization and as the highest forms of a new imperialism (Harvey, 2013). Even progressives within mainstream institutions, such as Professor Joseph Stiglitz (2009) have come to acknowledge information power asymmetries and deep-seated challenges. By applying a 'Knowledge for Development' discourse, albeit within the reformist agenda of the World Bank they suggest that the knowledge society discourse has varying perspectives, experiences and impacts, especially for the South and Africa.

These have major implications for economies, with potential for mega wealth creation but also disrupting standard everyday modes of life and work as we know it.

4. G20 Southern Presidencies - Continuity of Change pathways?

The G20 is the elite global governance forum. It is one of the few multilateral platforms capable of shaping major international public policies and agenda-setting initiatives. Originally established as a response to the recurrent financial crises of the 1990s – culminating in the global financial crisis of 2008 – the G20 has since broadened its agenda considerably mirroring those of the UN in tackling the 'big global issues' of climate change, AI and digital economy and peace and security. Most G20's foundational references are the United Nation SDGs and various UN agreements; but the G20 as an elite forum has convening power for agenda setting which feeds into UN processes.

However, many global social justice movements have decried that the G20, while a prominent global forum, faces several critiques. They argue that its exclusive nature undermines democratic participation and that the G20 has not effectively addressed pressing global challenges like climate change and economic inequality and digital dystopias. Additionally, the G20's effectiveness is questioned due to a lack of accountability and its inability to translate ambitious statements into concrete action. Some also argue that the G20's focus on the interests of the powerful nations marginalizes the concerns of the those on the lower rung of the Global South, and in the current geopolitics, actually weakens existing multilateral organizations such as the WTO and UN entities.

5. United Nations Global Digital Compact

This year's G20 Digital Economy working group comes at a time of major challenges of the global digital economy. the global call for regulation of social media giants, and Big Tech, t the need for promoting digital equality and literacy etc. It is in this context that, on 22 September, the United Nations adopted the Global Digital Compact (GDC), a set of fundamental principles and recommendations to create an "inclusive, open, sustainable, fair, safe and secure digital future for all".

The GDC is built on foundational principles, including human rights online, safe and secure digital environments, and digital innovation for sustainable development, among others. Aspects such as the protection of privacy and freedom of expression, addressing threats of misinformation, and improving transparency and accountability among online social media companies are included in its recommendations (www.un.org.-global-digital-compact).

In many ways the UN GDC themes have shaped South Africa's 2025 Digital economy themes and program priorities.

The "Knowledge Society" has been adopted by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (2003) within its established policies. In an interview published in the last issue of "A World of Science", the quarterly newsletter of UNESCO's Natural Sciences Sector, Abdul Waheed Khan, the Organization's Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information explains how information and knowledge can contribute to development in a world where 80% of people still lack access to basic telecommunication tools (UNESCO, 2003).

6. International Telecommunications Union ITU Global Symposium for Regulators

The ITU still remains the core global telecommunication coordination forum representing all nation states. Over the years it has led on the information society debates, and in recent years its innovative Global Symposium for Regulators GSR has been lauded as setting the information regulation framework. At the launch of the ITUs best practice guidelines

> With one-third of humanity still offline and women and other vulnerable groups on the wrong side of the globe's digital divides, GSR-24 and the Best Practice Guidelines highlight the innovation, trust, and inclusivity that we need in the policy and regulatory environment," "With change being the only certainty facing regulators and policymakers, we must work together to pursue regulatory approaches to leverage transformative technologies such

as AI, promote the space economy, encourage innovation, and support climate action and the UN Sustainable Development Goals" (ITU Secretary General Doreen Bogdan-Martin, ITU GSR, Kampala, June 2024),

7. Brazil's Digital Economy DEWG working group themes in 2024

Brazil's presidency of the G20 under President Lula lasted until 18 November 2024. The key priority issues were rooted in Brazil's deep commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals SDGs. They are:

1. The fight against hunger, poverty and inequality
2. The three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental)
3. The reform of Global Governance with focus on IFIs and WTO.

Throughout the year, more than 100 working meetings and task forces that make up the G20 were held, both face-to-face and virtual, at the technical and ministerial levels, in the host cities of the five regions of Brazil. The goal was to decentralize activities, transforming the G20 into a more accessible and representative forum, with a broad-based Social Forum S20, and culminating in the G20 Leaders' Summit, on November 18 and 19, 2024 in Rio de Janeiro, with the presence of the leaders of the 19 member countries, plus the African Union and the European Union.

7.1. Brazil's G20 Digital Economy priority themes in 2024 were:

Connectivity, as a significant part of the world's population remains disconnected from the digital environment. The challenge of connecting people living in rural and remote areas remains relevant, as well as providing digital abilities to those with access to the internet;

Digital Government, which is about improving the relationship between governments and their citizens, providing high-quality public services and seizing the opportunities of the digital economy. These require secure digital public infrastructure, reliable and inclusive. This topic must be addressed with a focus on the components of digital identification and data sharing;

Integrity of information, since the ubiquity of global digital platforms has reshaped the mass communication landscape, transforming economic, social, cultural, and political interactions around the world;

Artificial Intelligence, as the intense debates, which are mainly focused on generative models and issues of ethical and responsible use, are not deep enough in relation to issues arising from the concentration of capacities, datasets and infrastructure in a few actors. That concentration does not reflect the diversity of linguistic, cultural, racial and geographical contexts.

Context of Information development in Brazil

Brazil has made notable strides in expanding internet access over the past decade. According to the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee, as of 2022, approximately 83% of the Brazilian population had internet access. This figure represents a substantial improvement from previous years, indicating a positive trend towards greater digital connectivity. Despite this progress, stark inequalities persist. Rural areas, particularly in the North and Northeast regions, lag significantly behind urban centers in terms of internet penetration and quality. A study by the Regional Center for Studies on the Development of the Information Society (CETIC) found that only 41% of households in rural areas have internet access, compared to 89% in urban areas. (www.wsa-global.org)

The work of the Task Force also connects to the debate initiated by the UN in 2024 regarding technology governance aligned with the SDGs. The focus on data governance and AI is present in the Global Digital Compact, adopted by Member States at the Summit of the Future (SoF) last September. Thus,

the G20 has the opportunity to invest in policies aligned with the SDGs through a shared agenda, while catalyzing domestic actions aimed, in this moment, at the Global South.

The Brazilian Presidency forms the Troika alongside India and South Africa, setting an agenda that addresses the inequalities and injustices arising from technologies produced in the Global North. Under Brazil's leadership, the group has been able to advance important topics such as information integrity, DPI, and AI, as well as invest in meaningful connectivity so that citizens have effective access to the Internet and its benefits.

Throughout the Brazilian presidency of the G20, AI has repeatedly been brought up as a priority issue. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was particularly vocal about the need for advancing AI that is attuned to Brazilian culture, language, and social demands. This culminated in the delivery of the Brazilian Artificial Intelligence Plan, in August of 2024.

In light of this momentum on AI, and the perceived fragmentation of the discussions surrounding it – and related areas such as data governance – the T20's task force on Inclusive Digital Transformation has worked towards building bridges between different groups for finding common positions on the topic. Understanding the G20's role in agenda setting and the encouragement for social participation led by the Brazilian Presidency, the task force actively collaborated with other engagement groups to provide actionable policy recommendations on AI.

This resulted in the launch of the São Luís Declaration, which presents consensual perspectives on AI among four G20 engagement groups: Civil20 (civil society group); the L20 (labor sector group); the T20 (research centers and think tanks group); and the W20 (women's group). Before the São Luís Declaration, the T20 and C20 had already issued a joint statement on economic, environmental, and digital areas, including addressing principles for AI. Culminating from a six-month process of negotiations, which included an in-person meeting, the São Luís Declaration represents a milestone for the plural

construction of policies on AI, by outlining a shared vision of its future within the G20 framework.

The Declaration's recommendations are informed by two complementary perspectives: data justice, which addresses global power asymmetries in data use and promotes equitable AI governance; and an intersectional approach, to ensure that AI systems protect rights. These approaches prioritize the protection of vulnerable groups, especially women and girls, increasingly at risk of technology-facilitated gender-based violence. The recommendations touch on issues such as the development of a collaborative position on data governance within the G20, strategies for promoting decent work and climate justice, the need for rights and risk-based approaches to AI regulation, and better coordination among international bodies on the subject.

7.2. Brazil's programs in addressing internet connectivity and digital literacy

Brazil has a range of program intervention in meeting connectivity goals. The *Programa Internet Para Todos*, a government effort aimed at bringing high-speed internet access to remote and underserved regions. By partnering with local municipalities, this program used satellites to provide connectivity to communities that traditionally lacked internet access. The *Projeto Telecentros.BR*, launched by the Ministry of Communications in collaboration with states and municipalities. This project established community telecenters in underserved urban and rural areas, offering free internet access and computer training programs. A *Conecta Biblioteca* project transforming public libraries into centers of digital and social inclusion by training librarians (Gustavo Pello).

In assessing Brazil's social inclusion policies, it is important to note that Brazil has made significant gains in social development, expanding the social development and economic transformation.

Digitalisation has played an important role as core infrastructure and service at all levels in government and

society to achieves its objectives and with the advent of AI it is prioritizing the potential of AI in industrialization, agriculture as well as developing robust regulation AI and societal impacts.

7.3. Brazil's G20's focus on privacy and consumer protection for Digital Public

Infrastructure

Brazil Think 20 working group on Digital Economy were wide ranging and policy briefs covered a range of issue under the G20 themes. and can foster inclusive and sustainable digital transformation, it can also have harmful impacts. Within Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), frameworks the need for robust consumer protection given the ubiquity of DPI. In this context, Professor Luca Belli, a Brazil T20 academic expert elaborated:

> These risks are disproportionately present in the Global South, where significant populations lack meaningful connectivity, and regulatory frameworks and institutional capacities may be incipient. For example, digital payment methods that only function online can deepen financial disenfranchisement for those without internet. Additionally, scams, fraud, and data malpractice are ongoing risks, especially to women, low-income and rural populations, and other communities with lower rates of digital and financial literacy. It is concerning that large-scale DPI has been implemented in countries without prior regulation of financial services nor information communication technologies. Abuses of DPI-dependent identification, payment and data-sharing mechanisms that can arise without comprehensive frameworks of standards and protections are dangerous to consumers. (Belli et al, Brasil T20, 2024)

8. South Africa's G20 Digital economy priorities in 2025

The South African Presidency of the G20 comes at a time of increased international focus from Trump 2.0 trade wars, multiple conflicts and the climate crisis and lack of Development finance. In this context, the digital economy, particularly its instrumental role in development and economic and social reconstruction following the COVID-19 pandemic, with the Africa Union AU participating effectively for the first time. Generally, it follows the Brazilian 2024 themes on Digital economy, but with some refinements.

Under the banner of 'Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability', South Africa's G20 leadership frames itself as people-centred, development-driven and attuned to the poly-crisis confronting the global order.

During the pandemic, governments relied on accurate data and connected digital platforms to manage public health responses and social support. South Africa's Covid response was sub-optimal given multiple challenges around access, the lack of connectivity to rural areas and health centres as well as lack of usability of systems and data-sets.

According to Rennie Naidoo:

> The problem is that these digital systems are not neutral. Nor are they equitably distributed. We must push for African inclusion in global AI governance, including at the standards-setting and ethical oversight levels. Across much of the continent, digital infrastructure is fragmented. Data travels through cables and servers governed by foreign jurisdictions. Cloud platforms are owned mainly by a small group of global providers. Cyber security frameworks are often imported wholesale and are ill-suited to African realities. This is not just about access – it's about control. Digital sovereignty means more than localisation. It is about strategic autonomy – that is, the capacity to build, govern and protect our digital systems on our terms. (Rennie Naidoo, 23 May 2025, IT Web)

At the first Digital Economy Working Group DEWG meeting in February 2024, Solly Malatji, Minister of Communications and Digital technologies explained that:

> The recent United Nations (UN) Summit of the Future and its Global Digital Compact (GDC) set out objectives, principles, commitments and actions for a new global digital cooperation that will lead to more equitable and just outcomes. In 2025, the 25th review of the foundational framework for global digital cooperation provided by the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) outcomes is a pivotal opportunity for global action to strengthen and broaden efforts towards an inclusive digital economy and society that is people-centred and that meets the development aspirations of the international community. (Solly Malatsi, DEWG meeting no 1, 7 February 2025)

The South African G20 Presidency follows a sequence of the southern countries that have provided leadership to the G20. The focus will be to harness the transformative power of digital technologies to bring about inclusive development for all. We will also continue to consider the importance of having suitable frameworks to guide their adoption of new technologies in a way that will optimise their benefits and limit potential harms.

In this context, South Africa looks forward to building on the achievements of past presidencies, focusing on the following key issues:

- Connectivity for inclusive digital development
- Digital public infrastructure and transformation
- Digital innovation ecosystems: unleashing the potential of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)
- Equitable, inclusive, and just artificial intelligence (AI)

The following were the priorities

Priority 1: Connectivity for Inclusive Digital Development

Deliverables

- Workshop on modernising statistics and sustainable financing models
- Paper on regulatory, business, and community strategies to ensure the provision of connectivity as the foundational requirement for effective social and economic participation of citizens.
- Drawing on international experiences, develop a framework for analysing and measuring the socio-economic impact of, and funding models to achieve universal and meaningful connectivity through the connecting of government institutions and piloting the implementation of this framework to connect the unconnected.

Priority 2: Digital Public Infrastructure and Transformation

Deliverables

- A virtual workshop on applications of DPI from G20 members and others, as well as a research or survey document providing an update on the different experiences and initiatives in DPI implementation globally and drawing on key learnings.
- Development of possible instruments to support DPI implementation, such as a readiness self-assessment tool and roadmap, and DPI blueprints that reflect regional context for the development of sector-specific DPIs.
- Templates for cost-benefit analysis, among other tools, to measure benefits to the citizens and government in designing citizen-centric digital services using DPI.
- Guidelines on Integrated Governance Frameworks for Equitable DPI.

Priority 3: Digital Innovation Ecosystems and Unleashing the Potential for MSMES

In terms of deliverables the priority on digital innovation seeks to boost South African nascent tech start up ecosystem creating localized solutions that can scale.

Deliverables

- A showcase of MSME innovation in the ICT event for MSMEs from G20 members, working with the other government departments. It will speak to economic development, local solutions, and higher-value employment in the digital economy.
- A workshop on digital innovation ecosystems, drawing on international best practices and expertise.
- A future-orientated paper on MSMEs and digital innovation ecosystems
- Workshop on strategies, programmes, and initiatives for digitalising MSMEs and encouraging participation in the digital economy.

Priority 4: Equitable, Inclusive and Just Artificial Intelligence (AI)

In terms of South Africa's commitment to an inclusive AI, in line with its themes of socially inclusion and solidarity principles and rooted in the UN Pact for the Future and the UN GDC.

- Workshop on AI and inequality
- Toolkit to reduce inequalities connected to the use of AI
- Guidelines for access to data for MSMEs and researchers, and promoting data sharing with and by the public and private sectors
- Workshop on generative AI and its evolving ability to produce high-quality deep fakes at a lower cost, and the impact on information integrity, and consideration of possible recommendations.
- Draw on international experience to identify key elements of strategies, policy and regulatory frameworks to assist countries to respond to AI.

However, South Africa road to equity and access in Digital transformation faces several structural, economic and global trade and economic headwinds.

International knowledge partners to include: the ITU, UNESCO, UN Development Programme, UN Industrial

Development Organisation, OECD. Local Knowledge Partners are also being identified.

Conclusion: Confronting the Unique African structural economic conditions and 4IR vulnerabilities

Given the diversity of country, policy and cultural contexts in Africa, a crucial challenge is how to generalise findings from one country to other African contexts. Typically, national policies are formulated in the absence of evidence, but even where they are evidence based, often little impact analysis is done. Where impact or evaluation studies are conducted, the findings are normally unique and specific to the country context. Finding ways of conducting empirical policy review and impact studies that provide effective learning for other countries is needed; perhaps these are better modelled on qualitative best practices and case study methodologies than quantitative economics-driven approaches. From a more individual – but no less important – perspective, there is even less known, especially about the impacts. For instance, despite the fact at least one million workers in Africa are currently doing crowdsourced and micro-work, little is known about their experiences. This applies even more to the more formally employed digital labourers.

Given Africa's very high economic inequality in the labour market, with the relative shortage of high skills versus the over-supply of un-/semi-skilled labour, individual digital labour issues right across the spectrum are likely to be much more pronounced than in the developed world. Research is needed among highly skilled IT professionals to assess the unexpected and negative consequences of their privileged position in the market (such as overwork, lifework balance, quality of life, burn-out). But perhaps more importantly, research is needed on the impact of outsourcing and impact-sourcing to African countries and offshoring away from African countries on individual's wellbeing, ideally using a partly qualitative and overall, more holistic approach than just economic measures.

As yet, the G20 in 2025 is a work in progress with only some continuities from Brazil's G20 Digital economy agenda which had a much deeper and more dynamic engagement with Labour 20 and Civil 20 thus ensuring broad based civil society participation and ownership that ensured a progressive AI development agenda rooted in sustainability, inclusivity, safety and governance for the public interest.

Will South Africa follow suit?

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