POLICY BRIEF

Bridging the Digital Divide: A Big Tent Approach

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Digital Transformation

Abstract

The disparities in access to education, employment and health were exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the need for policies to bridge the digital divide[1]. In response, the significance of digital public service utility has increased. This paper focuses on bridging the divide, offering policy recommendations based on a rhetoric "Big Tent" approach, where relevant stakeholders are brought under an integrated platform to address the challenges of 60% of the population across the Global South who lack access to e-government services[2].

The Global Digital Public Infrastructure Repository was proposed in G20 Brazil 2024, but the operational model with an integrated system to address the local digital public service delivery requirements is absent. Therefore, this paper through the big tent approach proposes a Digital Public Infrastructure Council, to support a unifying stage in collaborating with the established policy and field operations of the AU, BRICS and ASEAN, to meet the growing demand for financial inclusion and equitable digital access in the Global South.

With interoperable ICT interventions and market infusion, the paper proposes projections to accelerate access to tele-medicine by 30%, access to employment by 40%, provision of digital identities to over 850 million people and a reduction in carbon emissions up to 4% by 2030.

By utilising open and reusable technology frameworks, the DPIC would promote SDGs by eliminating structural and gender bias. The proposed DPI platform, guided by universal and uniform coherent tools, would reach the 'last mile citizen' for an effective public service delivery system. The approach taken in this paper aligns with the G20's agenda of sustainable development and inclusive economic growth. It highlights successful e-governance initiatives across India, Russia, Brazil, France, South Africa, and others to establish a precedent for these policy recommendations, demonstrating the transformative capability of inclusive DPI. To conclude, this paper presents an evidence-based approach to 'Bridge the Digital Divide', ensuring this transformation is equitable, sustainable and inclusive through financial collaboration with the New Development Bank (NDB).

Keywords: DPIC, education, NDB, employment, SDGs, public service delivery, ICT

This paper proposes the Digital Public Infrastructure Council as a necessary institutional innovation to address the pressing disparities and unlock the potential of digital public infrastructure to drive inclusive development

[1] "As COVID-19 Exposes Global Disparities, Closing Digital Gap Key for Achieving Sustained Equitable Growth, Speakers Say as Social Development Commission Begins Annual Session | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases," February 8, 2021. https://press.un.org/en/2021/soc4890.doc.htm.

[2] Mahendru, Apoorva, Mayurakshi Dutta, Pravas Ranjan Mishra, and Amitabh Behar. "Inequality Report 2022: Digital Divide." Edited by Amit Basole, Pooja C, Rosa Abraham, Apar Gupta, Anthony Kamande, Amitabh Kundu, Priyanka Sarkar, Anandita Bishnoi, and Pankaj Anand, 2022.

Diagnosis

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the global digital divide, exposing long-standing inequalities in access to digital technologies, particularly in the Global South. While digital services became the backbone of healthcare, education, and employment during the pandemic, millions in rural and underdeveloped regions were left behind, exacerbating socioeconomic disparities. This divide is more than a technological gap; it is a social and economic fault line that limits opportunity and reinforces systemic exclusion. The urban, educated elite are able to capitalise on digital advancements, while rural communities and informal workers are frequently sidelined from national digital ecosystems[3]. This bifurcation poses a critical challenge to achieving the SDGs and realising equitable digital transformation.

Despite the increasing global awareness of the need for robust digital infrastructure, nations in the Global South are disproportionately burdened. Many are spending up to twice as much relative to GDP on digital public infrastructure compared to countries in the Global North, while often navigating sovereign debt crises[4]. The lack of coordinated governance and financing models makes it difficult to design, deploy, and sustain inclusive digital public services.

DPI, understood here as government-provided shared digital systems that enable essential functions such as identity, payments, and data exchange, may offer a solution[5]. However, for DPI to achieve its full potential, it must be co-designed with

[3] The United Indian. "Rise in Technology: A Benefit for the Educated or a Disadvantage for the Poor?," n.d. https://theunitedindian.com/news/blog?rise-of-technology&b=387&c=2 .

[4] Bandura, Romina, Madeleine McLean, and Caroline Smutny. "Approaches to Digital Public Infrastructure in the Global South," October 15, 2024. https://www.csis.org/analysis/approaches-digital-public-infrastructure-global-south

[5] The United Indian. "Rise in Technology: A Benefit for the Educated or a Disadvantage for the Poor?," n.d. https://theunitedindian.com/news/blog?rise-of-technology&b=387&c=2 .

values of inclusion, interoperability, and scalability at its core. Without universal access and governance framework based on the aforementioned values, DPI risks replicating existing inequalities and failing the very populations it aims to empower[6].

While initiatives such as India's Aadhaar and Brazil's Cadastro Único have demonstrated some pilot transformation of DPI, its potential is yet to be fully realised. These models require adaptation to local contexts and consistent governance support to scale globally. While there is a comprehensive study map of DPIs[7], there is still an absence of a unifying Council with an operational framework. To meet this demand for financial inclusion and equitable digital access in the Global South, the need for a DPIC arises, thereby mitigating the challenges of countries with no clear roadmaps or support structures[8].

The T20 platform has acknowledged the need for inclusive DPI, as outlined in the Brazil Summit 2024. However, the lack of institutional mechanisms to coordinate mechanisms to support design, implementation, assessment and sustainability. DPI has created fragmented ecosystems, where countries pursue digitalisation in silos; given the case of privacy and data rights of individuals. This paper proposes coordinated efforts globally to share best practices which provides an opportunity for collaborative innovation[9].

In this context, there is an urgent need for a Digital Public Infrastructure Council (DPIC) to serve as a global, multilateral platform for DPI governance and also

[6] Digital Public Infrastructure," n.d. https://www.gatesfoundation.org/our-work/programs/global-growth-and-opportunity/digital-public-infrastructure.

[7] https://dpimap.org/dpimap

[8] TF05 Inclusive Digital Transformation," n.d. https://www.t20brasil.org/en/tf/5/tf05-inclusive-digital-transformation .

[9] Approaches to Digital Public Infrastructure in the Global South | CSIS," n.d. https://www.csis.org/events/approaches-digital-public-infrastructure-global-south.

facilitate cross-border learning, funding, and collaboration. South-South cooperation is particularly crucial here.

The DPIC shall coordinate with institutions like AU, BRICS, and ASEAN to tailor implementation strategies to regional requirements. Without a governing framework mechanism, the current digital divide in accessing infrastructure continues to grow, as public digital goods remain underfunded or poorly deployed[10]. A Council anchored in principles of equity, sustainability, and interoperability can help steer global digital transformation in a more inclusive direction.

Recommendations

1. Immediate establishment of a Digital Public Infrastructure Council (DPIC).

To address the structural disparities identified in the diagnosis, this policy paper recommends the immediate establishment of a Digital Public Infrastructure Council (DPIC). The DPIC should be constituted as a multilateral governance body of stakeholders including non-governmental and local bodies which supports, guides and coordinates the financing, development and implementation of interoperable and inclusive DPI.

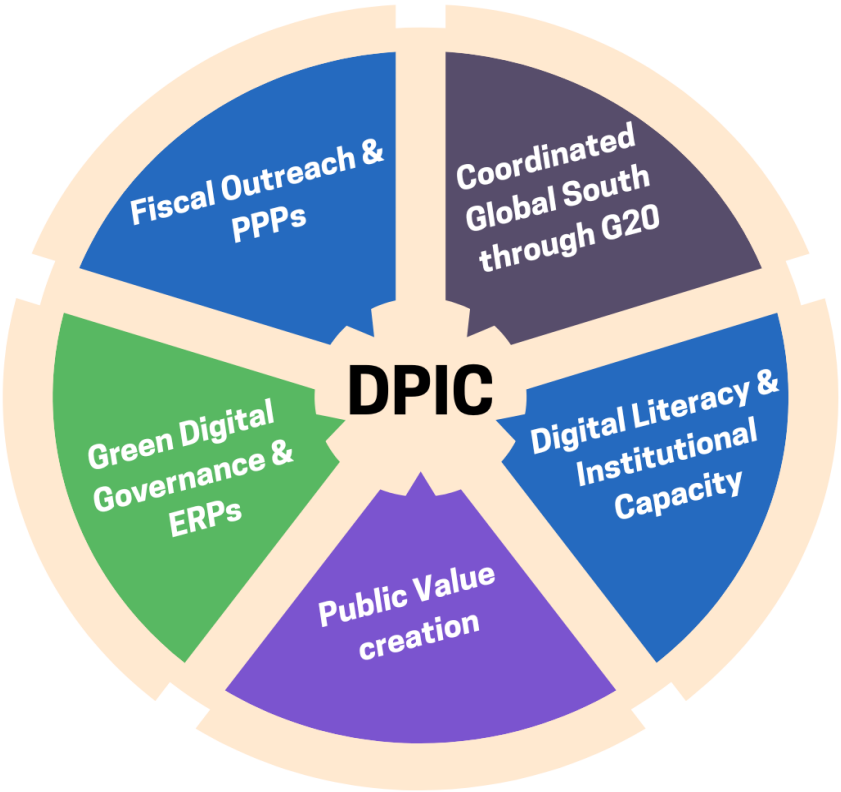
The DPIC shall be operationalised under the G20 leadership as a self-sustaining multilateral platform responsible for setting interoperable digital standards, facilitating financial partnerships, and guiding country-specific implementation of DPI systems. The proposed Council may initially be co-chaired by India, South Africa, and Brazil - countries recognised for their pioneering roles in scalable DPI

[10] Approaches to Digital Public Infrastructure in the Global South | CSIS," n.d. https://www.csis.org/events/approaches-digital-public-infrastructure-global-south.

initiatives. India may stand out as a natural host for the DPIC headquarters, given its success in rolling out Aadhaar, UPI, and DigiLocker, which collectively serve over a billion people and have drastically reduced transaction costs and identification barriers.

The DPIC shall adopt a rotating chair model to ensure inclusivity and shared leadership, particularly from regions with underdeveloped digital ecosystems.

Figure 1: Key Pillars for the establishment of DPIC



- **Public Value Creation: Inclusive & Interoperable systems**

Additionally, drawing on Mazzucato's concept of public value creation[11], the DPIC should ensure that digital infrastructure delivers benefits beyond short-term

[11] "Digital Public Infrastructure and Public Value: What Is 'Public.'" UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, March 11, 2025. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/publications/2024/mar/digital-public-infrastructure-and-public-value-what-public-about-dpi.

service provision. DPI systems should be designed not only to meet immediate governance needs but also to strengthen governments' long-term ability to innovate, deliver services, and respond to citizens. In this broader understanding of sustainability, digital systems must help build resilient institutions, promote inclusive participation, and support the long-term digital maturity of the Global South. The DPIC can play a critical role in harmonising legal frameworks, ensuring cross-border compatibility, and encouraging countries to adopt open APIs and reusable digital platforms.

Our primary research, with inputs from the Gates Foundation,[12] concludes that a well-structured DPI can increase access to financial systems by up 80% and reduce gender gaps in banking access by 20% in countries where DPI systems are implemented inclusively. The DPIC shall therefore establish minimum inclusion benchmarks and performance indicators targeting access to justice, financial inclusion, and gender equity.

- **NDB: Fiscal Outreach**

It is proposed that DPIC may collaborate with the New Development Bank (NDB) as a primary funding platform and also regional investment platforms to mobilise both concessional and blended finance.

Private companies and philanthropic organisations, through Public Private Partnership (PPP) model, can contribute capital investment, social impact fund and technological expertise, while the public sector ensures equity and long-term sustainability[13]. For example, private sector involvement in India's Aadhaar system

[12] Digital Public Infrastructure," n.d. https://www.gatesfoundation.org/our-work/programs/global-growth-and-opportunity/digital-public-infrastructure.

[13] Totm_Sysadmin. "Are Public-Private Partnerships Viable Options for National Digital Identity Infrastructure?" TOTM Technologies, March 26, 2024. https://totmtechnologies.com/public-private-partnerships-for-national-digital-id-infrastructure/#:~:text=With%20PPPs%2C%20private%20companies%20invest,to%20address%20various%20societal%20needs

and Morocco's biometric ID rollout demonstrated PPPs can enhance system efficiency and scale with reduced government financial burden.[14]

To ensure impact and integrity, the Council should publish standardised PPP procurement frameworks that prioritise open-source development, interoperability, citizen-centric design, and robust data governance.

- **Digital Literacy for the Marginalised and Institutional Capacity**

DPI must address the systemic barriers faced by marginalise communities to ensure inclusivity. To mitigate challenges of inclusivity, the DPIC shall prioritise context-sensitive digital literacy strategies, implementing Digital Literacy Training Programmes (DLTPs)[15] that consider gender, local languages and content, accessibility, and connectivity gaps. These programmes should extend beyond basic ICT skills to include digital financial literacy, cyber safety, and basic para-medical education[16]. Collaborations with regional universities, civil society organisations, and digital hubs can facilitate the development of inclusive curricula, thereby reaching the 'last mile citizen'.

To assess the effectiveness of these initiatives, the DPIC shall incorporate equity-focused monitoring and evaluation frameworks, utilising disaggregated indicators for gender, geography, and disability inclusion. These efforts align with G20 South Africa's 2025 priority on inclusive digital transformation, ensuring that digital access serves as a tool for empowerment rather than exacerbating inequality

[14] Gonzalez, Bianca. "Public-private Partnerships Pose Opportunity for DPI and National Digital ID Initiatives." *Biometric Update | Biometrics News, Companies and Explainers*, March 27, 2024. https://www.biometricupdate.com/202403/public-private-partnerships-pose-opportunity-for-dpi-and-national-digital-id-initiatives.

[15] Choudhary, Heena, and Nidhi Bansal. 2022. "Barriers Affecting the Effectiveness of Digital Literacy Training Programs (DLTPs) for Marginalised Populations: A Systematic Literature Review". *Journal of Technical Education and Training* 14 (1): 110-27. https://publisher.uthm.edu.my/ojs/index.php/JTET/article/view/10586.

[16] Afzal, Arfa, Saima Khan, Sana Daud, Zahoor Ahmad, and Ayesha Butt. 2023. "Addressing the Digital Divide: Access and Use of Technology in Education". *Journal of Social Sciences Review* 3 (2):883-95. https://doi.org/10.54183/jssr.v3i2.326.

- **Strengthening Accountability and Measuring Impact**

The DPIC can integrate a robust Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) framework to track progress against key indicators such as SDG acceleration, gender inclusion, financial access, and carbon footprint reduction. Transparent public reporting and cross-country audits can be institutionalised to uphold the spirit of cooperation and accountability.

This framework could draw on G20's existing accountability frameworks and incorporate region-specific targets. For instance, access to e-government services could be benchmarked annually, with a target to reduce the number of digitally excluded individuals in the Global South by 30% as supported by UNDP.

- **Integrating ERP and Green Digital Governance**

The DPIC should promote the adoption of government Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems by integrating them into national DPI frameworks. ERP systems streamline public administration by unifying functions such as budgeting, procurement, HR, and citizen services into a centralised platform. This integration reduces duplication of efforts, minimises manual errors, and enables real-time governance data monitoring, which significantly enhances policy responsiveness and service delivery. For example, India's e-Governance initiatives, which incorporated ERP principles, reported a 40% increase in administrative efficiency and faster citizen grievance redressal.

In tandem, the DPIC can champion green digital governance by promoting paperless workflows, cloud-based platforms, and digital-first services in government operations. Encouraging virtual public consultations, e-signatures, and digitised record-keeping not only increases administrative transparency but also reduces resource consumption. These practices could contribute to 4%

reduction in carbon emissions globally by 2030[17]. Furthermore, mandating energy-efficient data centres and promoting green procurement standards within DPI deployments would strengthen environmental sustainability goals aligned with the G20 agenda.

Final Reflections: Conclusion

The establishment of the DPIC under the auspices of the G20 South Africa outcome would mark a paradigm shift not only in employment generation but also in entrepreneurship and global digital governance. It would empower the Global South by bringing stakeholders under one big tent, reduce duplication of digital development efforts, and ensure that DPI becomes a universal enabler of equity, inclusion, and growth. By embracing these recommendations, G20 leaders would address today's pressing digital gaps and build a resilient digital ecosystem.

[17] https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/06/digital-public-infrastructure-will-be-key-to-meeting-sustainability-goals-here-s-why-amnc23/

Annexure

List of Abbreviations

API	Application Programming Interfaces
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
DLTP	Digital Literacy Training Programmes
DPIC	Digital Public Infrastructure Council
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HR	Human Resources
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
NDB	New Development Bank
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
PPP	Public Private Partnership
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UPI	Unified Payments Interface

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