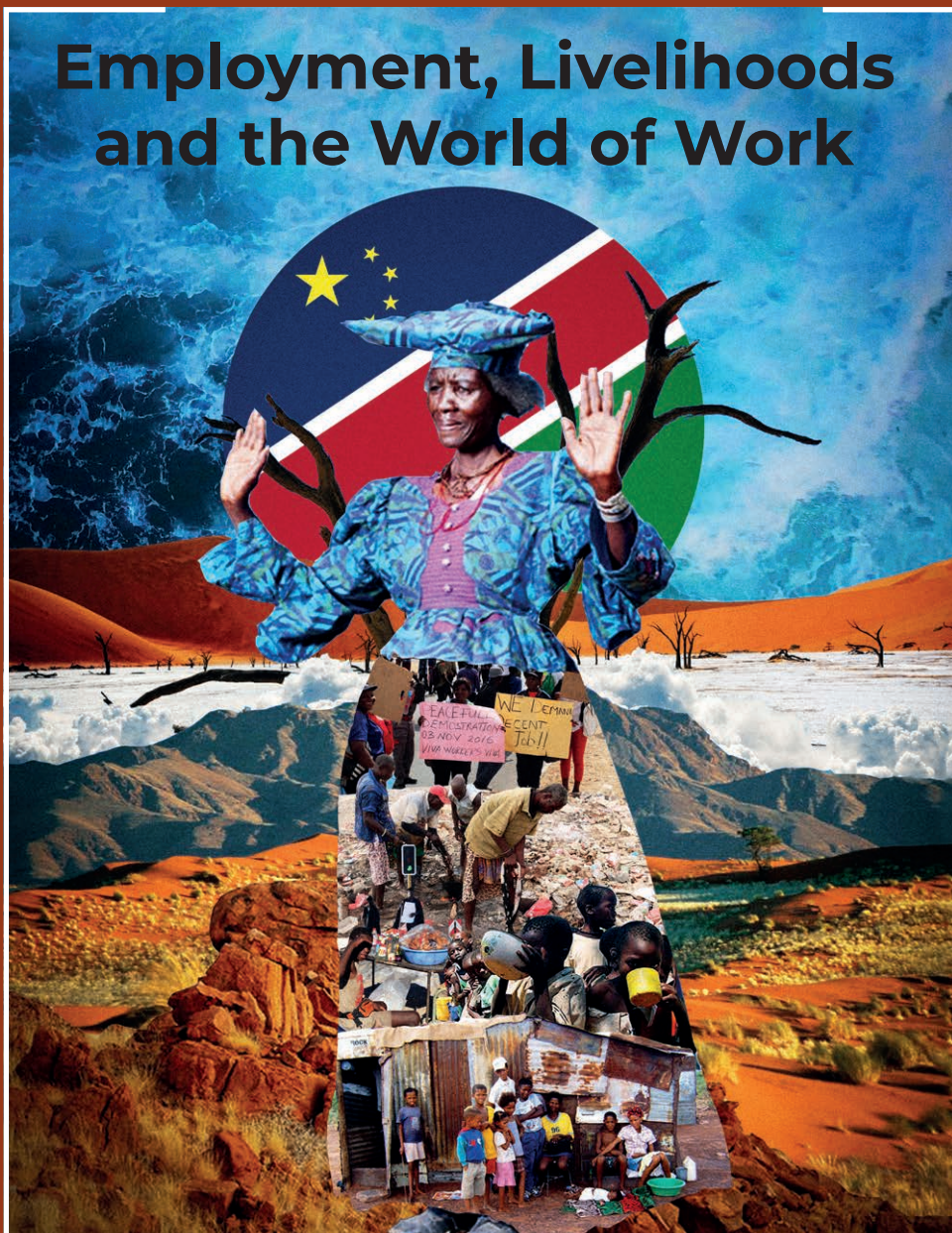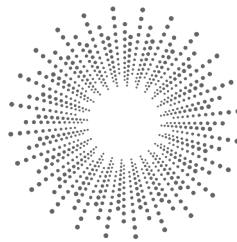# Employment, Livelihoods and the World of Work

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Inclusive and Universal Access to the Internet and Digital Technologies: The Right to Access Public Goods and Improved Livelihoods in Namibia

Dickson Kasote

Access to the internet and digital technologies is increasingly recognised as a human right for all citizens, not just a preserve of the elite or privileged strata of society. It is a necessity in today's digital economy, with an estimated 70% of new value created over the coming decade expected to be based on digitally-enabled platform business models (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Sustainable and inclusive development demands that technological development be inclusive and socially just. It is a lever to access employment, public services, productive assets, financial services, skills and education, and enable entrepreneurial ventures and income-generating activities. In other words, it grants access to public goods and is the basis of livelihoods. Inclusive access to information and communication technology (ICT) and the digital platforms and services it underpins can improve the quality of life and livelihoods of all citizens, including the youth, women and girls, people with disabilities, and other systemically excluded groups.

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 9: "Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation" (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.) entails significantly increasing access to ICT and providing universal and affordable access to the internet. ICT serves as a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable development, while ensuring universal access to the internet unlocks the transformative potential of ICTs for all citizens. As highlighted by Souter, MacLean, Akoh, and Creech in their 2010 study, sustainable development is inconceivable without global communications and knowledge exchange. The closer we consider today's communications channels, the more aware we become of the paramount importance of the Internet to the flow of information and knowledge around the world.

The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms acknowledges that internet access has increased rapidly across the African continent (AfDec, 2014). Internet access grants a

voice and visibility to millions who use social media and digital platforms to engage in political, governance, social and economic issues.

Namibia's internet penetration rate is still limited, and stood at 51.0% of the total population in 2022 (Datareportal, 2022). This is still one of the best internet penetration rates in Africa, but there is a rural-urban divide, as internet access in Namibia is mainly concentrated in urban areas. The major towns in Namibia generally have very good broadband speed available that allows easy access to services and information. In rural areas, as shown by various reports, access to the internet and ICT is marginal. Some rural areas have limited or no access to the internet. Class divides also translate into digital divides. Low-income households and some individuals in informal settlements in major urban areas often have no or limited internet access.

Equity concerns around universal internet access are not just limited to affordability. Connectivity should also be meaningful. Achieving meaningful connectivity is dependent on:

- **The right speed**: Users need sufficient download speeds to access multimedia and other applications that constitute a full internet experience.
- **An adequate device:** Users should be able to both produce and consume content online. Mobile-only access is not the same as access via a laptop or desktop, because a full physical keyboard is better suited to content creation and productivity.
- **Enough data**: Lack of data should not stand in the way of individuals fully using the internet-based applications they consider important.
- **Regular connection**: If a user can only connect to the internet once in a while, it is less likely to be a meaningful tool for them.

Digital platforms can be leveraged to secure employment, access services, and improve livelihoods. Although information on the application of digital technologies for livelihoods promotion in Namibia is scant, we can learn from examples elsewhere.

Climate change is affecting Namibian communities in various ways, including flooding of habitats, inability to grow food due to protracted droughts, and other unprecedented natural phenomena that threaten to increase the number of 'climate refugees'. In some cases, communities are caught unprepared for climate-related disasters despite early warning systems and other mechanisms that

are in place to reduce disaster risks. A significant cause of this, amongst others, is a lack of access to information – a situation which could be addressed by promoting universal internet access.

ICT has been employed in community-based disaster risk management in the group of countries collectively referred to as 'small island developing states', and in other African countries, and has proven to be effective in promoting the involvement of potentially affected communities in disaster risk management at the local level. This includes community assessments of hazards and the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of local action for disaster risk reduction (UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, n.d.), enabled by the provision of internet-based real-time information. This has been credited for improving the chances of surviving the impact of climate change for community members and promoting climate adaptation.

Agrarian communities with internet access are learning new climate-smart agricultural methods and accessing drought-resilient crop varieties that can help them adapt to the devastating impact of climate change on food security and livelihoods – and ultimately on peace. For instance, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization disseminates easily followed videos on different digital platforms, educating communities on crops such as millet that are drought tolerant and resilient in harsh conditions that can be adopted to ensure yields during droughts. Advancing access to digital technologies and the internet can improve livelihoods and promote inclusive and sustainable development especially for women, as studies have shown that women produce 70% of Africa's food (Odiwuor, 2022).

Namibians, just like citizens of other countries who have access to the internet and are digitally literate, are using digital technologies in business and in the search for employment. Platforms such as LinkedIn, a business and employment-focused social media platform with more than 900 million users, have revolutionised job searching and hiring across sectors. Websites and social media platforms such as Facebook are being used to engage with clients and advertise vacancies, so that potential employers can quickly find job seekers and vice-versa on these platforms.

Other areas in which ICT is being used is in education and skills development. The internet is a source of equitable, quality education and lifelong learning. For example, Rwanda's Smart Classrooms initiative, which provides students with hands-on learning, is contributing towards

the country's transformation from an agriculture-based economy to a knowledge-based one.

ICT is being used to advance access to healthcare services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, AI (artificial intelligence) was used in some advanced healthcare systems to detect infection, monitor treatment, track individuals, forecast cases and mortality rates, develop vaccines, and help scale down the workload of healthcare workers (Chandra et al., 2022). Some of these uses of technology can be leveraged in Namibia to improve healthcare services. The first step could be to ensure that every citizen, irrespective of their locality and socioeconomic status, has access to the internet and is thus able to receive information on healthcare services available to them. This will be one critical step towards ensuring a healthy livelihood for all.

Although Namibia has one of the best internet penetration rates in Africa, it still has far to go to achieve the goal of universal access. Meaningful access is still constrained by high costs, inadequate devices, low broadband speeds, and limited or no internet coverage. The urban-rural and social class divides that predicate so many forms of exclusion also shape internet access in the country. Inclusive, universal and meaningful access to the internet and ICT is a basic right that,

when realised, will enable improved access to information, income generating capacities, job searches and health services. It is therefore imperative that Namibia achieves its goal of universal broadband access by 2025, as set out in the Harambee Prosperity Plan II.

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