Bridging the digital divide

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Henna Ahsan | 10th April, 2025

The expansion of Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure in Pakistan marks a strategic step toward digital inclusion, yet adoption rates remain uneven and low, especially in remote and rural districts.

Despite targeted interventions through public-private initiatives to extend broadband and telephony services in such remote areas, actual utilization lags due to governance and systemic challenges.

Limited electricity access, inadequate digital literacy, and low awareness of ICT's economic potential continue to undermine progress.

These regions, with substantial populations engaged in agriculture and small-scale enterprises, offer significant opportunities for technology to enhance productivity and livelihoods.

The situation in capitals is also not too encouraging, ICT adoption in Lahore is 38%, in Karachi it's about 37%, in Peshawar 29%, and in Quetta 30%.

Further, there are areas where these adoption scores are too low and even zero in some districts like Awaran and Shaheed Sikandar Abad in Balochistan.

Similarly, when it comes to digital literacy (ICT literacy can be defined as the ability to use ICT tools effectively to perform various tasks, solve problems, and communicate in a digital environment) it is also very alarming, even in Islamabad, only 10% of people are digitally literate.

In terms of internet quality, Pakistan's ranked 198th, with average mobile internet download speed in Pakistan is 19.59 Mbps, while broadband internet averages 15.52 Mbps (World Population Review).

Although Universal Service Fund (USF), a ministry of IT and Telecommunication's sub entity, projects aim to increase reach of telecom and broadband services to the unserved and underserved areas of Pakistan through public private partnership, the situation is still not very appealing.

Hence, acknowledging this critical role of technology in today's era, E-Pakistan stands as a key pillar of the government's URAAN Pakistan initiative.

It will serve as a transformative blueprint for the nation's future, designed to harness the power of digital technology to accelerate sustainable economic growth, enhance governance, and promote social inclusion. By digitizing public services, streamlining processes, and expanding digital access, E-Pakistan aims to empower citizens, foster transparency, and position Pakistan as a competitive player in the global digital economy.

In a rapidly evolving global landscape, digital transformation is no longer a choice but a necessity, and the URAAN provides the strategic direction to bridge Pakistan's digital divide, empower youth with future-ready skills, and foster innovation across sectors.

Further to this, the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), one of the country's top think-tanks, is organizing the 38th Annual General Meeting & Conference with the main theme of 'URAAN Pakistan: Growth through Digital Transformation'.

This initiative is in recognition of the significance of the ICT issues Pakistan is currently facing and how streamlining these issues could contribute to the nation's development and help in achieving the URAAN Pakistan goals.

The conference will provide a national forum to coordinate policy, research, and innovation around the objective of digital adoption, with the ambitious goal of accelerating Pakistan's growth towards a trillion-dollar economy by 2035.

Policymakers, economists, business executives, and tech innovators will convene at the conference to determine the best methods to integrate digital technologies into important domains, including governance, energy, education, finance and trade.

Through high-impact panel discussions, technical sessions, and papers being presented by global experts, the conference will foster actionable insights tailored to Pakistan's unique challenges.

It will also highlight critical themes like AI in education, fintech-driven financial inclusion, smart cities, and reskilling for the digital workforce. By facilitating collaboration and honoring groundbreaking research, URAAN will not only raise awareness but will actively shape the policy discourse required to transition Pakistan into a competitive, inclusive, and innovation-driven digital economy.

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