

INTERNET FOR ALL

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What benefits will accrue to the country, if the government provides access to high-speed internet to our entire population? Here are some illustrations.

A person suspected of having contracted Covid-19 residing in a remote village travels 600 kilometres to a city to get tested. The lab tells him to come the next day to collect the report. The person has two options, both of them costly — to stay overnight in a hotel or go back home and come again the next day to collect the report. If he had internet access in his village, the lab would share the report over WhatsApp — imagine the time and money saved at the national level and the alternative uses of such saving. Putting time and money saved to other uses means more income for the individual and a higher GDP for the country.

In fact, a significant proportion of the population faces health issues but does not have access to good healthcare services. Telemedicine can ensure good medical advice for residents of remote rural areas and smaller towns — some medical issues will be resolved online while others would need a visit to the doctor. Sound professional advice would motivate people to visit a doctor — many fatalities and health hazards will be avoided. The time and money saved would benefit everyone.

Thanks to Covid-19, we have discovered that imparting education online is possible. Some sources say that around 20 million children are out of school. The reasons include distantly located schools, poverty and child labour to name a few. The provision of internet facilities to such children, and the time flexibility that

online education allows, will give working children time to educate themselves. Properly implemented programmes would even educate adults — the dream of 100 per cent literacy could come true.

We are trying to establish universities in every nook and corner of the country. Even if we gather the financial resources to put up the infrastructure, we cannot have enough good teachers. This scarcity can be made up by teaching online from good universities in the main cities. Again, high-speed internet is required.

The largest share of the final price that the consumer of agricultural commodities like wheat pays, goes to the infamous middleman. Can we eliminate the role of the middleman? Yes! With access to internet and using a well-designed app, farmers can directly strike a deal with wholesalers and retailers based in towns, circumventing the exploitations of the middleman. Higher profit margins will motivate farmers to produce even more — thus contributing to poverty alleviation.

One of the few activities that have flourished during Covid is e-commerce. However, its benefits have accrued to only a small fraction of the population — those who have access to the internet. Like farmers, other rural women and men, who manufacture handicrafts, do not get a fair return on their skill and effort due to lack of access to markets. Access to the internet will allow such skilled people to directly approach wholesalers and retailers of handicrafts based in cities.

Pakistanis are already making a mark in freelancing and therefore IT-related exports are rapidly

increasing. With high-speed internet available to more people at home in smaller towns and remote areas, this activity and hence IT exports will increase significantly.

For more than seven decades, we have spent enough taxpayer money on brick-and-mortar projects with low returns — on school buildings that house cows not students, on hospitals that do not have doctors and on roads that do not see traffic. Provision of high-speed internet to all would be an investment with very high returns. The disruptions of AI having just begun, we can't predict all the benefits at this stage.

The PIDE Reform Agenda recommends 'internet for all' in the near future. To fulfil this aim, if the government has to sell spectrum (ie frequency) to mobile phone operators at a nominal price, this should be done. If this requires having 5G, that should become priority number one. If access requires bringing in more mobile phone operators, this should be ensured. The focus of all such efforts should be 'internet for all' and not revenue generation through selling spectrum at exorbitant prices.

Those who can afford to pay for the internet should be required to pay; those who cannot can be offered targeted subsidy. In the initial period, access to provision will call for expenditure — but this would yield returns, in the near and distant future, in forms known and unknown as yet.