

Measuring digital development

Facts and figures

2021



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The base map for this infographic is based on the UNmap database of the United Nations Cartographic Section.

Foreword



An estimated 4.9 billion people are using the Internet in 2021, according to latest estimates in this 2021 edition of *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and figures*. That means that roughly 63 per cent of the world's population is now online – an increase of 17 per cent – with almost 800 million people estimated to have come online since 2019. Internet penetration increased more than 20 per cent on average in Africa, in Asia and the Pacific, and in the UN-designated Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

It is clear that ICTs and the Internet have been vital in helping maintain continuity in business activity, employment, education, provision of basic citizens' services, entertainment, and socializing. Digital platforms and services have enabled countless innovations that helped mitigate the health, social and economic costs of the tragedy, and build resilience against future crises.

With most of the 17 Global Goals thrust sharply off-track by the force of the emergency, the pandemic has highlighted – and exacerbated – the crippling cost of digital exclusion. Achieving universal meaningful connectivity has become a matter of the utmost urgency if we are to meet the SDGs by the end of the decade.

We cannot close the digital divide if we cannot measure it. And we cannot connect the unconnected if we do not know who they are, where they live, and why they remain offline – nor can we measure the success of our policies to bridge the gap.

Through a set of unique and timely statistics, ITU's *Facts and figures* sheds light on the multiple facets and evolving nature of the digital divide and takes stock of the progress towards closing it.

While the access divide is close to being bridged, with 95 per cent of the world's population now living within range of a mobile broadband network, important blind spots remain. Close to 30 per cent of Africa's rural population still lacks mobile broadband coverage.

And even though the vast majority of the world's people *could* access the Internet through mobile broadband, less than two thirds actually do. The statistics reveal a connectivity 'grand canyon' separating the digitally empowered from the digitally excluded, with 96 per cent of the 2.9 billion still offline living in the developing world.

Drilling down to country level also affords a more nuanced picture. Location plays a big part: our figures reveal that the share of Internet users in urban areas is twice as high as in rural areas. There is also a generational gap – 71 per cent of the world's population aged 15-24 is using the Internet, compared with 57 per cent of all other age groups. And gender remains a factor: globally, 62 per cent of men are using the Internet compared with 57 per cent of women. While that digital gender divide has been narrowing across all regions, women remain digitally marginalized in many of the world's poorest countries, where online access could potentially have its most powerful effect.

Closing the digital divide will mean much more than simply getting everybody online. As digital platforms and services become ever-more sophisticated, the digital divide is increasingly defined by people's ability to make *meaningful* use of connectivity. This ability in turn depends on myriad factors, one of which is, of course, affordability.

The Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development set a target for 2025 stipulating that entry-level broadband services should cost less than 2 per cent of monthly gross national income per capita. In almost half of the economies for which data could be obtained, that target has not yet been met.

Another important factor is digital skills, with a lack of skills preventing many from getting online at all, while compromising the ability of others to get the most out of devices and services. Poor digital literacy also exposes people to risks linked to the 'dark side' of connectivity: cyberattacks, scams, fake news, or harmful content.

With its hard evidence and global reach, ITU's *Facts and figures* serves as a powerful advocacy tool in efforts to put digital development at the top of the agenda of policymakers and the global development community.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'D' followed by a series of loops and a final horizontal stroke.

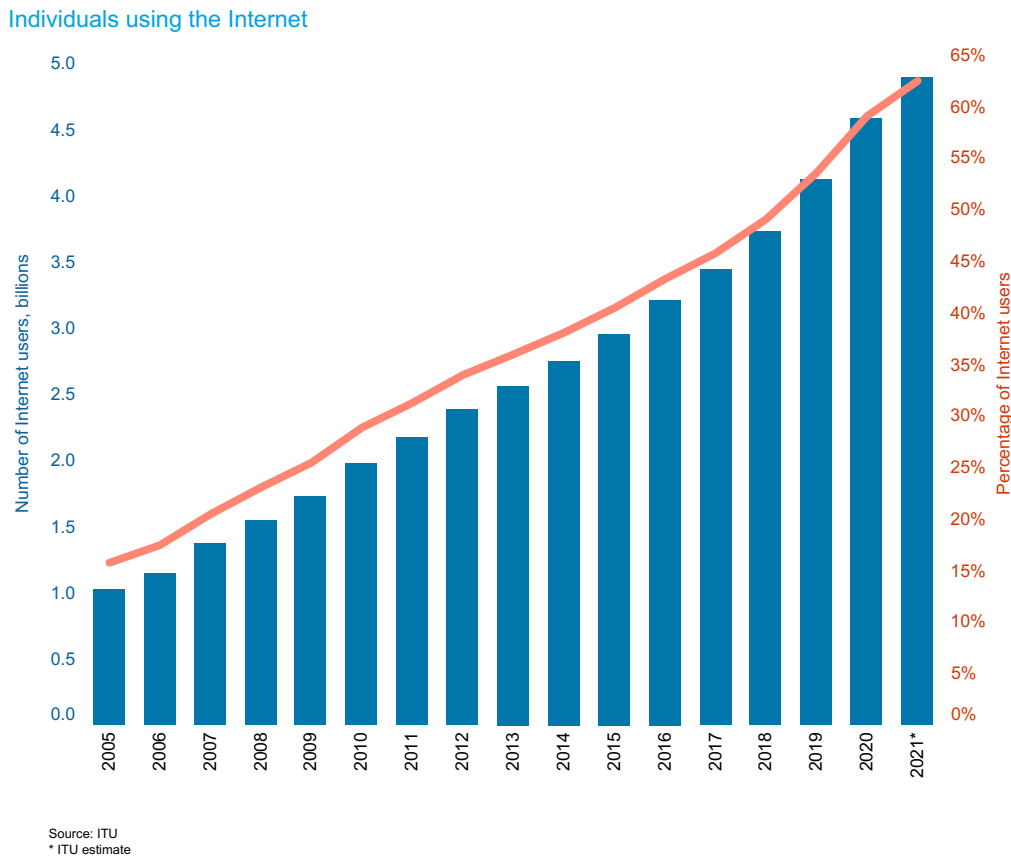
Doreen Bogdan-Martin

Director, ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau

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Internet uptake has accelerated during the pandemic



The Internet has long been a source of countless opportunities for personal fulfilment, professional development and value creation. With the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become a vital necessity for working, learning, accessing basic services and keeping in touch.

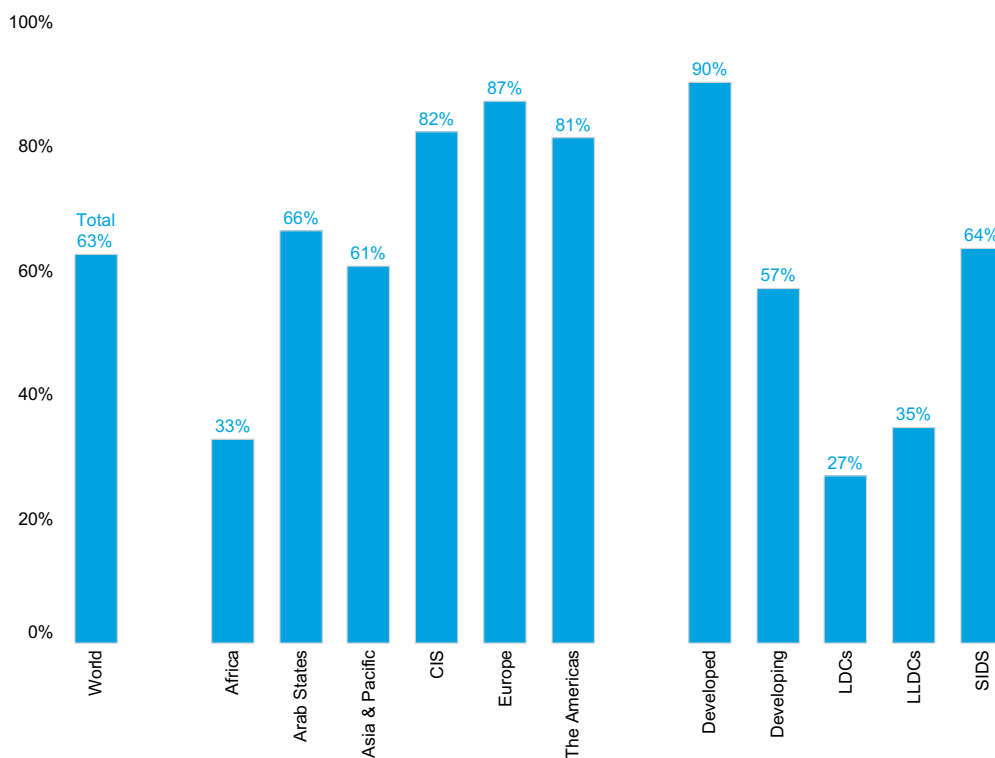
The latest ITU data show that uptake of the Internet has accelerated during the pandemic. In 2019, 4.1 billion people (or 54 per cent of the world's population) were using the Internet. Since then the number of users has surged by 800 million to reach 4.9 billion people in 2021, or 63 per cent of the population.¹

Nonetheless, this means that some 2.9 billion people remain offline, 96 per cent of whom live in developing countries. Those who remain unconnected face multiple barriers, including a lack of access: some 390 million people are not even covered by a mobile broadband signal (see below).

In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, the number of Internet users grew by 10.2 per cent, the largest increase in a decade, driven by developing countries where Internet use went up 13.3 per cent. In 2021, growth has returned to a more modest 5.8 per cent, in line with pre-crisis rates.

¹ See "Methodology" below for information about how estimates were produced.

Percentage of individuals using the Internet, 2021*



Source: ITU
* ITU Estimate

Between 2019 and 2021, Internet use in Africa and the Asia-Pacific region jumped by 23 per cent and 24 per cent, respectively. Over the same period, the number of Internet users in the least developed countries (LDCs) increased by 20 per cent and now accounts for 27 per cent of the population. Growth has been necessarily much weaker in developed economies, given that Internet use is already almost universal, at more than 90 per cent.

This growth differential has contributed to a modest narrowing of the divide between the world's most and least-connected countries: for example, the divide between developed economies and the LDCs went from 66 percentage points in 2017 to 63 percentage points in 2021.

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