Leveraging the BRICS Digital Partnership for Collaborative Digital Governance

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Abstract

As the global economy becomes increasingly underpinned by the digital economy, developing countries must grapple with the challenge of digitally transforming their economies while ensuring that no one is left behind. The BRICS countries - Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa - are at different stages of digital development and have adopted varying approaches to digital governance. However, the challenges of the 21st century require a joint approach to e-commerce, internet governance, and the challenges of a digitalising global economy. The *BRICS Digital Economy Partnership Framework*, launched in 2022, is a positive step towards a comprehensive digital governance framework. This framework promotes cooperation on various digital issues, including cybersecurity, data protection, and e-commerce. This policy brief examines how the framework can benefit the BRICS countries.

Keywords: Digital Governance, BRICS Digital Economy Framework, BRICS, Digital Economy

Key Challenges in Digital Governance for the BRICS Countries

Formed in June 2009, the BRIC grouping (Brazil, Russia, India and China) signifies an association of four non-western nations notably influential in economic and developmental matters in their respective regions. In September 2010, South Africa was included in the grouping, making it the BRICS. While yet to transcend into a supranational organisation, this collective is designed to intensify collaboration on economic, political, and developmental matters. After South Africa's inclusion in 2010, BRICS began to emphasise political and security issues alongside economic cooperation. The 2012 Delhi Declaration signaled, albeit quietly, security collaboration, but the 2014 Fortaleza Declaration, following the Ukraine crisis, notably prioritised peace and security. Successive summits and declarations have since underscored this focus.

It is against this backdrop that the BRICs, emerging economies at different development phases with large populations and growing digital sectors, that the BRICS are shaping their approach to digital governance, emphasising collective concerns such as digital sovereignty, cyber security and data protection (Belli, 2019; Belli, 2021; Ignatov, 2024). Nevertheless, each member of the BRICS has also adopted a unique approach to digital governance that reflects its specific economic and political priorities. For instance, Brazil has prioritised expanding its digital infrastructure and internet access to foster economic growth and social inclusion. Russia has emphasised the development of its domestic digital economy and protecting its national security interests in cyberspace. India has leveraged digital technologies to enhance public service delivery and stimulate economic growth. China has pursued a strategy of developing indigenous digital platforms. South Africa has focused on addressing the digital divide and promoting social inclusion through digital technologies. Their governance strategies have varying levels of success, complicated by their complex internal

challenges. Two of the most pressing challenges that all the BRICS countries have in common are: closing the digital divide and poor digital literacy.

Additional discourse on digital governance approaches, particularly in the BRICS, centers on the issues of access, affordability and net neutrality. The discourse on ensuring access to underserved populations, with an intersectional lens encompassing gender, disability, age, etc., is gaining momentum (Roberts, Hernandez, and Iff, 2021). As for net neutrality, or the neutrality of the internet, the approaches among BRICS nations differ, mirroring their respective domestic political landscapes (Vipra and Somayajula, 2023).

Table 1: Accessibility and Inclusivity in BRICS Countries, 2022

	Internet Penetrate Rate (in percentages)	Internet Inclusivity Index (points)
Brazil	77,87	79.9
Russia	83.43	30
India	48.7	50
China	75.6	No figures
South Africa	68.2	73.7

Sources: CETIC,2022; The Economist, 2022; Statista, 2022; CNNIC,2023.

India's rapid growth in internet penetration is a notable achievement, particularly given the country's large population. However, its relatively low ranking in Internet inclusivity suggests that challenges may be overcome in making the Internet more accessible and valuable to all population segments. In contrast, China's high internet penetration rate indicates that most of its population has access to the Internet. This is above the global average internet penetration rate. South Africa's score of 73.7 points in the inclusive internet index suggests that it is performing relatively well in terms of internet inclusivity. Overall, the data indicate that there has been significant progress in terms of expanding internet access and inclusivity within the BRICS countries. However, the overall statistics do not directly represent the urban-rural digital divide within the BRICS countries. However, it is a well-documented phenomenon that there is often a significant gap in internet access and usage between urban and rural areas, with urban populations generally having better access to the Internet and higher levels of digital literacy.

The Covid-19 pandemic further underscored the broader implications of digital inequality, where the lack of access to digital technologies hindered children in countries such as South Africa and India from accessing education. It also prevented individuals from participating in economic activities such as employment or banking. In essence, the digital divide makes digitalisation counterproductive. Despite the potential benefits of digital technologies for governments and citizens, the digital divide exacerbates existing inequalities, particularly in developing countries that have been grappling with these issues for years.

Closely linked to the digital divide is the issue of poor digital literacy in the BRICS countries. Digital literacy requires skills essential for citizens to navigate the digital world and access services such as education, banking, healthcare, and media; a lack of digital literacy can exclude individuals from the benefits of the digital world. These skills are essential for individuals to participate fully in the digital world. These skills range from basic tasks, such as using e-mail and social media, to more advanced skills, such as launching an e-commerce site and using technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) to improve business operations. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of governments to ensure that they create a policy environment that supports widescale accessibility. Governments in BRICS countries have recognised the importance of promoting digital literacy and providing training opportunities

to equip their workforce with the necessary skills to support the digitalisation of their economies and narrow the digital divide.

Table 2: Individual BRICS Countries Digital Literacy Programs.

	Program	Description
Brazil	E- Digital	Stresses the importance of educational and professional skills. Enhances literacy in digital technology, digital culture and computational thinking.
	Brazil Mais Digital	Online education program for capacity building in the information technology sector targeting youth (ages 16-25 years).
	Pronatec	New vocational training opportunities are disseminating digital skills.
Russia	Personnel and Education (2019)	Training is offered to government officials and employees of commercial firms. Students over 14 are trained in computer languages in some regions. A program providing citizens with IT education at a reduced cost. Various vocational trainings related to the digital economy are available to teachers, civil servants, school children and citizens.
India	PMGDISHA (2017)	It aims to bridge the digital divide across rural and urban areas. Seeks to provide digital literacy to 60 million people through 20-hour courses on basic digital services.
	National Digital Literacy Mission	Works to give at least one person per household crucial digital literacy skills. Various governmental departments and corporate partners have trained 110,000 people under this program. The curriculum covers accessing the Internet, using e-mails and social media, and e-commerce.
China	Five-year National Plan	Underscores the importance of boosting digital skills in education and training.
	National Action Plan (2025)	The Cyberspace Administration of China started it to improve digital literacy and skills. Targets 40 million people to get certificates and more than eight million people to receive titles of senior engineers by 2025.
	National Policy	Introduced to reduce the 'elderly digital divide' by helping elderly people develop skills to use information technology.
South Africa	National Digital and Future Skills Strategy (2020).	Seeks to foster digital skills from early childhood to adult training. Policies are in place to provide digital skills to workers in specific sectors, such as schoolteachers and government officials.

Source: Adapted from International Trade Centre (2022: 35-36)

Addressing the challenge of digital literacy requires governments to invest in providing their citizens with the necessary skills. However, many governments are already grappling with high levels of inequality and poor literacy rates, making this challenge more complex. For instance, despite its

relatively high score on the Internet Inclusivity Index and a considerable number of policies, Brazil still struggles with implementing policies that promote digital literacy, indicating that there may be room for improvement in preparing the population to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the Internet fully (OECD, 2020; da Silva, Zitkus and Freire, 2023). The situation is similar around the BRICS, specifically in South Africa (Moonasamy & Naidoo, 2022) and India (Lyons et al., 2020).

Towards a BRICS digital governance framework

The 14th BRICS Beijing Summit Declaration on Digital Governance and the *BRICS Strategy for Economic Partnerships 2025* are pivotal indicators of the evolving BRICS approach to digital governance. Central issues revolve around digital sovereignty, particularly data localisation (Ignatov 2024). Data protection and cybersecurity remain cornerstone issues, with BRICS nations bolstering cooperation to ensure harmonious digital policies (Ibid).

The *Beijing Declaration* underscores several pivotal aspects of digital governance:

The importance of digitalisation in education and development. Moreover, it applauds the Beijing Initiative of the BRICS Business Community and encourages the BRICS Business Council to enhance cooperation in various domains, including the digital economy; it further recognises the efforts and activities of the BRICS Women's Business Alliance (WBA) in intensifying BRICS economic and trade cooperation; and, advocates for strengthening institutional cooperation to facilitate post-pandemic economic recovery and encourages diversified cooperation to foster mutually beneficial economic connectivity. It also endorses digital transition to establish economic development advantages and spearhead green development to construct a sustainable future. The *BRICS Strategy for Economic Partnership 2025* outlines key digital governance initiatives:

- **Digital Transformation**: The strategy underscores the role of digital transformation in spurring economic growth and development, including the need for workforce and business skills development.
- **Digital Infrastructure Development**: The strategy advocates bolstering digital infrastructure and promoting digital technologies across sectors, including healthcare, education, and agriculture.
- **Regulatory Frameworks**: The strategy emphasises the need for harmonised digital policies among BRICS nations to protect personal data and enhance cybersecurity.
- **Digital Sovereignty**: The strategy reaffirms the significance of digital sovereignty, including the ability to process and store data within national jurisdiction.
- **BRICS Business Council**: The strategy encourages the BRICS Business Council to enhance cooperation in the digital economy, including promoting digital literacy among the business community.

While the BRICS countries still need to share a singular digital governance strategy, they are collaborating to address shared digital challenges and promote the responsible use of digital technologies. The BRICS countries face various common digital challenges, including cybersecurity threats, the need for robust data protection measures, the development of e-commerce regulations, and internet governance.

The BRICS countries launched the *BRICS Digital Economy Partnership Framework* in 2022. This strategic initiative acknowledges the transformative potential of the digital economy in driving modernisation, inclusive growth, and sustainable development. By promoting trade facilitation

through digital means and encouraging cooperation in the field of ICT, the framework aims to enhance port management, logistics, supply chain and trade facilitation work. Developing a shared understanding of a BRICS Model E-port Network[1] is one of the key initiatives under this framework. Additionally, the framework seeks to create an enabling business environment for investment in the digital economy and bridge the digital divide through investment in digital infrastructure. These initiatives reflect the commitment of BRICS members to leverage digital opportunities for sustainable development.

Including new members such as Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Ethiopia in the BRICS group carries several implications for digital governance, mainly due to differing views on critical issues like content regulation and data protection (Ismail, 2023; Ignatov, 2024). On the upside, this expansion allows for a broader range of perspectives, enhanced collaboration, and increased geopolitical sway. It could result in a more diverse and representative alliance, promoting cooperation on digital transformation, addressing the digital divide, and fostering inclusive digital governance policies.

By leveraging their collective expertise and resources, the BRICS countries are advancing their shared interests in the digital realm. Nevertheless, this effort comes to nought without a collective effort at addressing digital literacy and closing the digital divide beyond merely increasing infrastructure.

Conclusion

The BRICS countries must enhance their ability to collect and utilise data effectively and establish robust regulatory frameworks to generate and capture value within the digital economy. The Digital Economy Partnership Framework represents a critical initial step towards harnessing the potential of the digital economy for the benefit of the BRICS countries. However, developing a comprehensive digital governance framework with a primary focus on addressing the digital divide is imperative.

The population's need for more digital literacy is a significant obstacle to achieving digital inclusion. Education is fundamental to achieving inclusive and sustainable growth within society. In today's digital age, providing individuals with the necessary infrastructure and the skills to utilise it effectively is crucial.

The BRICS countries have an opportunity to work towards a shared digital governance framework to address these challenges and ensure that their citizens can fully take advantage of the opportunities provided by the digital world.

Recommendations

1. To achieve greater policy coherence and coordination in digital governance, the BRICS nations must **collaborate** and scale up their efforts, particularly around **data flows between their countries.**

2. **Investing in upskilling rural and marginalised communities** within the BRICS nations is crucial. Focusing solely on improving digital skills among urban populations will not suffice to keep pace with the demands of the global digital economy. Peer-to-peer knowledge exchanges and sharing of best practices should be leveraged to achieve this goal.

1 These ports use advanced technology to make moving goods in and out of the country more accessible and faster. The countries in BRICS are working together to share ideas and learn from each other to make their ports better. This will help improve trade and make it easier for people to do business with BRICS countries.

3. In line with Agenda 2030, efforts to bridge the digital divide must be scaled up, including **increased investment in infrastructure development** and financing BRICS digital infrastructure projects.

4. The BRICS nations should work towards achieving **interoperability of systems** to facilitate seamless integration and collaboration.

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