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Editorial

# BRICS and Digitally Just and Inclusive Futures

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Editors

As the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) countries gather for the 2023 Summit in August 2023, they are confronted with the task to deepen economic cooperation in line with the BRICS Economic Partnership Strategy. Key to this is the building of a BRICS-wide digital economy that enables inclusion and dynamism. They see themselves as committed to driving digital transformation, harnessing opportunities and mitigating challenges they face in regard to digital technologies. They recognize the importance of digital inclusion and connectivity as economic growth and social development drivers. Initiatives such as India's Digital India program, China's Belt and Road Initiative, and South Africa's National Integrated ICT Policy emphasize expanding digital infrastructure and improving access to bridge the digital divide (Kaplinsky, 2017).

The BRICS countries see innovation and digital entrepreneurship as crucial to stimulate economic growth and inclusion. For example, iFood is a Brazilian food delivery platform that connects restaurants and customers through a mobile app. It offers a wide range of cuisine options and delivery services, revolutionizing the food delivery industry in Brazil. Yandex is a Russian multinational technology company that offers a variety of digital services, including a search engine, mapping and navigation, ride-hailing, food delivery, and online advertising. It is often referred to as the "Russian Google". Takealot is an e-commerce platform in South Africa that offers a wide range of products, including electronics, clothing, home appliances, and more. It provides a convenient and reliable online shopping experience, delivering products directly to customers' doorsteps. China's focus is on technology-driven industries such as artificial intelligence and e-commerce (Nayak, 2019).

There is also an effort to link systems of innovation across BRICS land. For instance, China's Digital Silk Road initiative promotes digital connectivity and cooperation among BRICS countries and beyond using infrastructure development, technology transfers, and knowledge sharing to promote digital cooperation and exchange (Wang, 2019). BRICS countries have established mechanisms for digital cooperation, such as the BRICS Innovation Cooperation Action Plan and the BRICS Digital Economy Cooperation Framework. These platforms facilitate collaboration in areas such as digital innovation, data protection, cybersecurity, and digital skills development (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2021).

Individual countries have a lot to gain from efforts to improve innovation in economic development, especially the developing side of BRICS: South Africa, India and Brazil. These economies suffer the disadvantage of high socio-economic inequality, stubborn problems of unequal economic

development within them, high levels of poverty and attended ills. Their own efforts to overcome these are critical, but they will not be enough without harnessing international cooperation to further reinforce their own interventions.

Yet, to make headways the BRICS must confront and resolve such challenges as follows:

- **Digital Divide and Inequality:** Despite efforts to bridge the digital divide, BRICS countries face challenges related to unequal access to digital technologies, disparities in digital literacy, and socioeconomic inequalities. Addressing these disparities is crucial for ensuring inclusive digital futures (Kaplinsky, 2017).
- **Data Governance and Privacy:** As digital economies expand, issues of data governance, privacy, and cybersecurity become increasingly important. BRICS countries need to develop robust policies and frameworks to safeguard data privacy, protect digital infrastructure, and ensure trust in digital ecosystems (Wang, 2019).

The digital economies of BRICS countries present significant market opportunities. With a combined population of over 3.6 billion people, these nations offer vast consumer markets and potential for digital business expansion (Nayak, 2019). BRICS countries have the ability to turn this potential into reality for these people for whom BRICS represent a spark of hope. They also play a significant role in shaping the digital futures of other nations, especially those they relate with through the BRICS Outreach initiative since 2013, and to the global community broadly. Through promoting digital inclusion, innovation, and collaboration, they can help build momentum towards digitally just and inclusive futures.

In this edition, we feature papers that deal with various questions facing BRICS including digital technologies. The hope is that the papers stimulate debate on such various subjects as public health and well-being, public education, regional integration, economic value chains, ideology and women empowerment.

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