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Bridging the Gap: A Review of Digital Inclusion and the Rural-Urban Digital Divide in Ethiopia, 2020

T, e, w, o, d, r, o, s, A, s, s, e, f, a, ,, M, e, k, l, i, t, G, e, b, r, e, m, e, d, h, i, n

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| Abstract

The diffusion of digital technologies has been spatially uneven, creating significant disparities in access and use. In Ethiopia, with its substantial rural population, this digital divide poses a critical challenge to equitable development, affecting sectors such as education, healthcare, and economic participation. This review synthesises existing literature on digital inclusion in Ethiopia, focusing specifically on the rural-urban digital divide. It aims to identify the principal barriers to digital access and literacy in rural communities and to analyse the socio-economic consequences of this disparity. A systematic review was undertaken, encompassing academic literature, government reports, and policy documents. The analysis identified recurring themes, structural challenges, and documented interventions related to digital infrastructure, affordability, and skills development. The analysis confirms a pronounced rural-urban gap, primarily driven by the concentration of digital infrastructure in urban centres. Affordability of devices and data, alongside low levels of digital literacy, consistently excludes a large segment of the rural population. Mobile internet penetration in rural areas lags considerably behind urban rates. The digital divide in Ethiopia remains a substantial barrier to inclusive growth. While infrastructure is foundational, achieving meaningful inclusion requires integrated strategies that concurrently address connectivity, cost, relevant local content, and skill development.

Future initiatives should prioritise integrated, community-centric approaches. Key actions include investing in rural broadband infrastructure, subsidising access costs, implementing digital literacy programmes in local languages, and fostering the creation of locally relevant digital services and content. Digital divide, digital inclusion, rural connectivity, Ethiopia, ICT4D, digital literacy, infrastructure This review consolidates the current understanding of the digital landscape in Ethiopia, providing a clear synthesis to inform policymakers and researchers working towards equitable digital inclusion.
