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BRICS+: Economic Inequality and IT Infrastructure Availability

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Abstract: This article examines a manifestation of the transformation in the global order—the expansion of the BRICS bloc into the "BRICS+" format—and the associated challenges and opportunities in digital development. The study aims to explore the relationship between socio-economic inequality and the availability of information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure in BRICS+ countries, with a focus on internet penetration, mobile communication development, digital literacy, and composite indices of digital accessibility. The analysis primarily covers the period from 2000 to 2024, contingent on data availability. The empirical framework incorporates international indicators, such as the ICT Development Index (IDI), internet penetration rates, connectivity costs, and e-government development metrics, cross-referenced with socio-economic profiles of the member states. The findings reveal that disparities in digital infrastructure correlate with macroeconomic gaps and exacerbate structural imbalances within the alliance, particularly between core BRICS nations and new participants. The study concludes that BRICS+ countries must formulate a coordinated digital policy to bridge the digital divide, ensure inclusive growth, and achieve sustainable development amid the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the global political and economic environment has changed markedly. Geopolitical competition has intensified, trade routes are undergoing reconfiguration, and countries face increasing pressure to adapt to emerging economic conditions and technological innovations. In this context, the BRICS countries are called upon to formulate a coordinated strategy that accommodates the diverse interests of all member states. Key areas of focus include the expansion of intra-BRICS trade, investment in cross-border infrastructure, collaboration in scientific and technological innovation, and the exchange of practices related to sustainable development. At the 2023 BRICS summit held in Johannesburg, it was agreed to extend membership to five additional countries: Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia. These nations formally joined the group on 1 January 2024. This enlargement marks a significant step in the institutional development of BRICS, with far-reaching implications for both global governance and the international economic system. BRICS+ facilitates the emergence of a multipolar world, empowering developing nations to shape international processes (Leonova, 2024). The bloc's expansion into the BRICS+ format may amplify its geopolitical influence, offering opportunities to establish more balanced and mutually beneficial cooperation while strengthening member states' positions globally (Denisova, 2022). BRICS+ reflects an objective manifestation of global transformation trends (Djebbouri et al., 2023). For BRICS, the inclusion of new members—contributing resources, markets, and geopolitical weight—is critical to sustaining the group's global relevance (Gouvea, 2023).

BRICS+ also unlocks novel avenues for economic collaboration among member states, fostering solidarity across the Global South and advancing economic growth, social development, and improved

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living standards in emerging economies (Lissovolik, 2024).

Although the BRICS+ framework offers considerable opportunities, it also confronts several structural obstacles. The participating countries operate under heterogeneous political regimes, follow distinct economic paradigms, and pursue divergent policy priorities, which together complicate the process of forging consensus on many agenda items. Moreover, external pressures—most notably trade conflicts and the imposition of targeted sanctions—further constrain the depth of economic collaboration and collective development progress (Lev et al., 2022).

Rapid advances in digital technology are reshaping economic, social, and cultural structures worldwide. While these innovations can boost productivity and broaden access to essential services, they simultaneously aggravate pre-existing gaps in digital inclusion. Within BRICS+, wide discrepancies persist in both overall economic capacity and the pace at which digital tools are integrated across sectors.

The present study therefore focuses on how the level of information-technology (IT) infrastructure—spanning physical assets such as servers, telecommunications networks, and data centres, as well as the supporting software environments—relates to patterns of digital inequality in BRICS+ economies. Core indicators include internet penetration, connection speeds, mobile-network reach, and population-level digital literacy. By assessing these metrics, the research maps commonalities and points of divergence in the bloc's progress toward digitally driven, sustainable growth.

A systematic survey of peer-reviewed literature, combined with the analysis of statistical data from authoritative international databases, brings into sharper relief the principal dimensions of digital disparity within BRICS+. The findings provide a basis for a set of policy recommendations aimed at narrowing the digital divide and advancing inclusive development. In doing so, this study addresses a notable gap in the academic record and offers a framework for future initiatives that seek to foster digital equity across the enlarged BRICS+ partnership.

Despite the strengthening of the macroeconomic positions of the BRICS+ countries on the world stage, the problem of social and digital inequality remains one of the most acute. Literature underscores the correlation between uneven ICT infrastructure provision—internet access, digital literacy, institutional support, and investments in the digital economy—and economic stratification, particularly in nations with high Gini coefficients, such as Brazil, South Africa, and India (BRICS, 2024).

Digital inequality exacerbates disparities in income, access to education, healthcare, and social mobility (Dorasamy & Kikasu, 2024). The heterogeneous impact of inequality on economic growth is empirically documented: in Brazil and India, it impedes growth, whereas in China and Russia, it partially stimulates growth, particularly in upper quantiles (Acheampong et al., 2023). Within the BRICS bloc, substantial internal disparities are evident across multiple dimensions, including gender, geography, professional affiliation, and education. These divergences contribute to asymmetric distribution of the benefits arising from digital transformation (Report, 2023). The Report emphasizes that member states not only exhibit high economic inequality but also face institutional complexities in addressing its structural roots, particularly in technology access, labor markets, and social infrastructure. This necessitates systemic policy reforms—spanning fiscal, digital, and social domains—to minimize opportunity gaps and disparities in quality of life.

ICT technologies hold potential to mitigate inequality by serving as channels for inclusion. In African nations, including South Africa, internet and mobile services reduce social divides when supported by robust institutional frameworks (Adams & Akobeng, 2021). In South Africa, internet access correlates positively with economic growth, though the link between ICT adoption and inequality remains statistically insignificant (Musakwa & Odhiambo, 2024).

Since 2022, the BRICS Digital Economy Partnership Framework has promoted collaboration on digital sovereignty, cybersecurity, and inclusion. However, BRICS+ countries continue to grapple with urban-rural digital polarization, gender and age disparities, and low digital literacy (Ayodele & Petla, 2024). Internet penetration rates range from 48.7% in India to 83.4% in Russia, reflecting profound digital inequality (Ayodele & Petla, 2024).

Internal disparities are further evident in regional disparities in digital infrastructure and service provision. Limited rural access to digital services exacerbates inequalities in education and employment (Morozkina, 2020), while insufficient policy coordination among member states undermines joint initiatives (Plyasova et al., 2023). Infrastructure remains a cornerstone of sustainable development but requires aligned institutional and financial backing (Shatskaya, 2022).

The impact of digital technologies on inequality extends beyond traditional ICT infrastructure. Artificial intelligence (AI), as a form of digital capital, not only automates processes but also risks entrenching structural inequality without inclusive policies (Lazanyuk, Shkvaria, & Eeberdiyeva, 2025). In BRICS+ countries, AI adoption drives demand for high-skilled labor, marginalizing low-income and undereducated groups. Addressing digital inequality demands collaborative strategies: joint AI initiatives, technology transfers, and cross-border redistribution of digital dividends.

The economic effect of digitalization depends on the political and institutional environment. Equitable access to digital resources, investments in human capital, and infrastructure development require enabling institutional frameworks (Sitnikova, 2023). Absent these, digitization may exacerbate existing inequalities, particularly in regions with high income polarization (Lazanyuk & Pugacheva, 2025).

The formally recognized prominent role of BRICS in the global economy does not automatically guarantee the reduction of digital and social inequality. On the contrary, the future of digital transformation in BRICS+ countries depends on their ability to ensure broad access to technology across all segments of the population and to implement effective instruments of digital policy (Dorasamy & Kikasu, 2024). ICT can serve as both a tool of inclusion and a driver of inequality. Success hinges on governance quality, institutional reforms, and systemic approaches to digital development.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs an integrated methodology that combines content analysis of official documents and legal frameworks with empirical data drawn from peer-reviewed academic sources. A cross-national analysis was conducted to diagnose dynamic and geographic trends across BRICS+ countries. This approach is further reinforced by comparative and statistical analyses to examine multifaceted dimensions of digital inequality. An index-based method was applied to aggregate quantitative assessments of digital infrastructure provision, enabling cross-country comparisons of ICT infrastructure development levels and the identification of structural disparities relative to macroeconomic indicators.

The following indicators were used as statistical data: GDP per capita (PPP, constant 2021 prices), BRICS+ countries' share of global GDP, Total unemployment (% of the labor force), ICT Development Index (IDI), Percentage of households with internet access, Cost of connectivity, Network Readiness Index, and E-Government Development Index.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

BRICS+ countries exhibit significant potential for digital economy growth, driven by diverse socio-economic and technological conditions. A key advantage lies in their young and demographically dynamic populations, particularly in India, Egypt, and South Africa. Younger generations demonstrate rapid adaptation to digital technologies, active engagement with online platforms, and entrepreneurial innovation across economic sectors. These dynamics fuel exponential growth in e-commerce, fintech, and mobile services.

To accommodate rising demand, BRICS+ governments are directing increased resources toward digital infrastructure. Current policy initiatives concentrate on broadening broadband access, strengthening mobile-network capacity, and introducing cloud-computing platforms. China's swift implementation of fifth-generation (5G) networks, in particular, is creating the technological base for more rapid digital transformation. Another competitive advantage stems from the scale of domestic markets: BRICS+ nations possess the capacity to pilot and scale digital products within their economies, creating opportunities for international market entry and the contextual adaptation of digital solutions to varied socio-cultural environments.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the BRICS countries have significantly increased their share of global GDP, which has doubled since 2000. The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily slowed the growth rate of this indicator. Notably, the expansion in the BRICS share of global GDP has been driven primarily by the economic rise of China. China's contribution increased more than threefold, from 5.72% in 2000 to 18.0% in 2023. India's share also doubled, rising from 1.65% in 2000 to 3.45% in 2023.

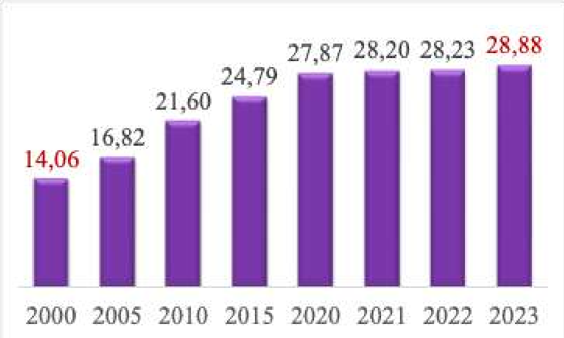

Figure 1: Share of BRICS countries' GDP in world GDP, 2000–2023, %.

Note: World Development Indicators (2025). https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators (accessed 10.04.2025)

In contrast, Russia's share has remained relatively stable at around 2% of global GDP. The shares of Brazil and South Africa declined slightly, amounting to 2.09% and 0.39%, respectively, in 2023. The newly admitted BRICS+ members collectively account for just over 2% of global GDP. This indicates that, despite their potential for economic growth and their relevance in international affairs, these countries still hold a limited position in the global economic system. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that BRICS, as a platform, aims to foster cooperation among emerging economies. The bloc's recent expansion reflects the broader aspiration of developing countries to play a more prominent role in the global economic and political order.

Table 1: GDP per capita at PPP (in constant 2021 prices).

Country	**2000**	**2010**	**2015**	**2020**	**2022**	**2023**
UAE	**92 547,23**	68 799,93	70 234,73	65 784,68	68 867,83	**68 577,54**
Russia	20 309,27	33 399,93	35 393,57	36 746,38	38 263,62	39 753,46
China	3 989,06	10 267,81	14 575,93	18 833,78	21 011,62	22 137,60
Brazil	14 005,35	18 062,16	18 357,07	17 327,52	18 554,05	19 018,24
Egypt	9 981,63	13 128,99	13 425,91	15 309,24	16 360,39	16 691,13
Iran	10 908,29	14 737,16	13 905,19	14 397,15	15 331,33	15 912,03
Indonesia	6 056,38	8 848,22	10 893,66	12 388,54	13 334,29	13 889,88
South Africa	11 197,51	14 182,33	14 559,47	13 266,79	13 777,19	13 690,39
India	3 099,50	5 059,28	6 488,15	7 399,53	8 544,69	9 160,06
Ethiopia	810,27	1 381,19	1 957,41	2 516,55	2 655,58	2 755,46

Note: World Development Indicators (2025). https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators (accessed 10.04.2025)

As shown in Table 1, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita based on purchasing power parity (PPP) serves as a key indicator for assessing the standard of living and economic well-being across countries. Among the BRICS+ nations—including both the original members and the newly admitted countries such as Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Indonesia—GDP per capita (PPP) figures vary significantly.

In the case of Brazil, GDP per capita (PPP) is relatively high compared to other Latin American countries but remains below the levels observed in advanced economies. Russia also demonstrates a comparatively high PPP level; however, it faces economic challenges stemming from international sanctions and shifts in domestic economic policy. India, while experiencing rapid economic growth, continues to report low levels of GDP per capita (PPP), primarily due to its large population and persistent socio-economic constraints. In contrast, China has shown substantial improvement in this indicator, driven by decades of sustained economic expansion. South Africa, despite its resource wealth and development potential, continues to grapple with structural issues, particularly pronounced income inequality. Among new BRICS+ members, divergent trajectories emerge: nations like the UAE exhibit relatively high GDP per capita (PPP), underpinned by hydrocarbon wealth and economic diversification, while others, such as Ethiopia, remain in developmental phases with lower baseline metrics—though their growth prospects remain promising. This heterogeneity underscores the complex socio-economic landscape of BRICS+. As integration and economic cooperation deepen among member states, we may anticipate shifts in these metrics, driven by concerted efforts to enhance economic conditions and elevate living standards across the bloc.

As illustrated in Table 2, aggregate unemployment in BRICS+ countries constitutes a multifaceted issue with intersecting economic, social, and political dimensions. Member states face varying levels and dynamics of unemployment, shaped by distinct national factors in each case.

Table 2: Total unemployment (% of total labor force).

Country	**2000**	**2010**	**2015**	**2020**	**2022**	**2023**
South Africa	22,71	24,68	25,15	29,22	33,27	**32,10**
Iran	11,70	13,68	11,17	9,69	9,09	**9,04**
Brazil	10,89	8,42	8,54	13,70	9,23	**7,95**
Egypt	8,98	8,76	13,05	7,97	7,34	**7,33**
China	3,26	4,53	4,65	5,00	4,98	4,67
India	7,62	7,65	7,63	7,86	4,82	4,17
Ethiopia	3,50	2,30	2,44	3,99	3,41	3,40
Indonesia	6,08	5,61	4,51	4,26	3,46	3,31
Russia	10,58	7,41	5,62	5,62	3,87	3,08
UAE	2,25	2,81	1,79	4,29	2,87	2,15

Note: World Development Indicators (2025). https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators (accessed 10.04.2025)

Brazil's unemployment has remained elevated, reaching 7.95 percent in 2023—a reflection of prolonged economic stagnation and persistent social constraints. Although the federal government has introduced job-creation schemes and fiscal stimulus measures, labour-market conditions remain challenging, particularly for younger cohorts.

By contrast, the Russian Federation recorded one of the lowest unemployment rates among BRICS+ members—3.08 percent in 2023—underpinned by the economy's sectoral structure and sustained labour demand in extractive and manufacturing industries. Even so, heightened geopolitical risks and the cumulative effects of international sanctions pose potential threats to employment stability.

India, meanwhile, presents a more intricate labour-market landscape that requires separate analysis. Despite its strong economic growth, youth unemployment remains a significant concern, reflecting underlying structural and demographic challenges in the labor market. While the national unemployment rate stood at 4.17% in 2023, systemic gaps in vocational training and insufficient formal job opportunities for its expanding workforce underscore structural labor market inefficiencies. Policy reforms in education and skill development are prioritized to address these disparities.

In China, unemployment also varies. While official unemployment figures suggest relatively low levels, the actual situation may differ, particularly among youth and in certain regions. China continues to undergo a transition toward a more high-tech economy, which demands new skills and greater adaptability from the workforce.

In South Africa, unemployment remains among the highest in the world—32.10%—with profound social implications. This challenge is rooted in the country's history, including the legacy of apartheid, as well as in structural economic issues such as inequality and unequal access to resources. The government has introduced programs aimed at reducing unemployment and promoting entrepreneurship; however, achieving substantial progress will require time and sustained effort.

Among new BRICS+ members, such as Egypt, face their own challenges in terms of unemployment. The government is struggling to cope with a growing population and the need to create jobs. Other countries, such as the UAE and Indonesia, have relatively low unemployment rates. Differences in employment and economic well-being are also reflected in the digital space, where the level of ICT infrastructure provision also shows a high degree of variability among BRICS+ countries.

As evidenced in Table 3, the highest scores in ICT Development Index (IDI) and internet service penetration are observed in the UAE, Russia, and China. These nations are characterized by advanced digital infrastructure, high urbanization rates, and strategic government policies prioritizing digital transformation. For instance, the UAE demonstrates near-universal digital inclusion, with 100% of households having internet access, 99.8% 4G mobile network coverage, and fixed broadband costs constituting a mere 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) per capita—a testament to its comprehensive digital ecosystem.

Table 3: Key indicators of ICT development in 2024.

Country	The ICT Development Index	Internet service availability and coverage indicators			
		1	2	3	4
UAE	97,5	100	100	99,8	0,7
Russia	90,6	90,4	86,6	92,6	0,7
Brazil	82	80,5	80,2	92,4	3,1
Iran	82,2	78,6	79,5	81	-
China	85,8	75,6	81,2	99,9	0,5
South Africa	83,6	74,7	75,3	98,5	3,9
Egypt	76,8	72,2	73,2	98	2,8
Indonesia	82,8	66,5	86,5	96,5	6,1
India	-	55,9	76,3	98,8	2,79
Ethiopia	39,8	16,7	19,4	33	16,3

1 - Individuals using the Internet, %

2 - Households with Internet access at home, %

3 - Percentage of population covered by at least a 4G/LTE mobile network

4 – Fixed broadband Internet basket price (% of GNI per capita)

Note: Author. (2025). From Measuring digital development – ICT Development Index 2024, https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/idi2024/

In contrast, countries such as India, Egypt, and particularly Ethiopia exhibit significant deficits in basic digital service provision. Ethiopia, for example, reports only 16.7% household internet penetration, while broadband costs soar to 16.3% of GNI per capita—the highest among BRICS+ nations. This disparity is closely correlated with Ethiopia's low GDP per capita (see Table 1) and infrastructural development constraints. India, despite a positive trajectory in digital service adoption, continues to lag in household internet coverage (55.9%), which constrains the scalability of digital innovations and equitable access to emerging technologies.

Table 4: Dynamics of digital indices (2020–2024): Networked Readiness Index and E-Government Development Index.

Country	Networked Readiness Index			E-Government Development Index		
	2020	2024	Change, %	2020	2024	Change, %
Brazil	50,58	55,2	9,13%	0,7677	0,8403	9,46%
Russia	54,23	55,74	2,78%	0,8244	0,8533	3,51%
India	41,57	53,63	**29,01%**	0,5964	0,67	11,97%
China	58,44	68,7	17,56%	0,7948	0,8718	9,69%
South Africa	45,26	47,8	5,61%	0,6891	0,8616	**25,03%**
UAE	64,42	62,79	**-2,53%**	0,8555	0,9533	11,43%

Iran	43,91	45,51	3,64%	0,6593	0,6564	**-0,44%**
Egypt	42,56	44,42	4,37%	0,5527	0,6699	21,20%
Ethiopia	23,49	29,6	26,01%	0,274	0,3111	13,54%
Indonesia	46,71	53,84	15,26%	0,6612	0,7991	20,86%

Note: Author. (2025). From Portulans Institute, Network Readiness Index https://networkreadinessindex.org/countries/ and UN E-Government Knowledge Database, https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Data-Center (accessed 13.04.2025)

Cross-referencing digital metrics with unemployment rates (Table 2) and GDP per capita (PPP, Table 1) reveals an inverse correlation: nations with lower socio-economic indicators consistently lag in digital advancement. Limited internet access and technological deficits exacerbate existing inequalities, undermining digital public service delivery, constraining online education, and eroding labor market competitiveness.

These disparities in digital infrastructure not only mirror current economic conditions but also institutionalize long-term inequality pathways. In countries with constrained digital accessibility—such as Ethiopia, India, and Egypt—high connectivity costs and low internet penetration render technologies inaccessible to marginalized populations. This restricts opportunities for online education, e-government engagement, e-commerce participation, and remote employment, disproportionately affecting youth, women, and rural communities, thereby deepening social stratification.

Conversely, digitally inclusive economies like the UAE, Russia, and China exhibit greater resilience to such challenges. Affordable connectivity, ubiquitous mobile and broadband coverage, and robust digital ecosystems facilitate widespread participation in the digital economy, enhancing labor market access, educational mobility, and financial inclusion. This underscores digital infrastructure's role as a critical lever for mitigating inequality—provided it is reinforced by institutional frameworks, human capital investments, and equity-driven social policies.

Thus, the obtained results confirm that achieving the goals of sustainable and inclusive growth in the BRICS+ countries is impossible without eliminating the digital divide and equalizing the conditions for access to IT infrastructure. This requires concerted efforts at the level of the integration association, including in the form of joint strategies, technology transfer and mechanisms to support digital inclusion.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study confirms that digital infrastructure provision across BRICS+ nations is markedly heterogeneous, mirroring their macroeconomic disparities. By employing index-based methodologies and cross-referencing metrics such as GDP per capita, unemployment rates, ICT Development Index (IDI), and internet accessibility, persistent digital asymmetries within the bloc have been delineated. Countries with high digital penetration and low connectivity costs exhibit greater potential for inclusive growth, while those with infrastructural constraints and elevated digital barriers face exacerbated social inequality.

A major contributing factor to digital advancement is the increasing support from government institutions and investors for the development of technology and startups. Many governments offer tax incentives, targeted grants, and entrepreneurship programs that foster a favorable environment for innovators. This trend is evident in India, which provides robust startup support, and in Brazil, which is experiencing dynamic growth in the fintech sector.

Sustainable digital development also depends heavily on international cooperation and knowledge exchange among BRICS+ countries. Collective initiatives enable the dissemination of advanced technologies, the adaptation of successful practices, and the equalization of digital access levels. Joint projects in areas such as e-government, digital literacy, and technology transfer may play a particularly important role in bridging the digital divide both between and within member countries.

The analysis further underscores that BRICS+ socio-economic structures are characterized by entrenched internal inequalities. Key drivers include the tax system, wealth concentration, labor market disparities, and educational polarization. Countries with the lowest levels of digital capacity—such as Ethiopia and India—are particularly vulnerable to the exacerbation of these imbalances. Access to the internet, digital services, and online education is becoming a decisive factor for social mobility.

The results of the digital development indices further reveal heterogeneous dynamics. While countries such as India, Indonesia, and Ethiopia show steady progress across key digital metrics, others are experiencing stagnation or even decline. This underscores the need for continuous adjustment of digital policy and careful consideration of the social context in the implementation of technological initiatives.

BRICS+ countries currently face numerous complex challenges, which are increasingly difficult to address without modern tools and technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and the Internet of Things. The integration of AI and digital solutions can contribute to additional GDP growth and improve the efficiency of decision-making, particularly in education, healthcare, and social support. However, it is essential to ensure equitable access to such technologies across all social groups.

Thus, in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, digital infrastructure is emerging not only as a technological foundation but also as an instrument of social justice and economic development. The formation of a coherent digital policy within the BRICS+ framework is a necessary condition for the sustainable and balanced development of all participating countries.

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