



*A message by*

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# eTrade for all Leadership Dialogue

**Connecting the Dots  
for more Inclusive Development**

**eCommerce  
Week**



# Data, Development, and Disaster

Given the way much of the world has depended on the Internet since COVID-19 emerged as a threat, one might imagine that the benefits of the Internet would be obvious to everyone. Even the direct response to the health emergency highlights the importance of the Internet. In another age, dissemination of new research or the latest data was slow and laborious. But during the pandemic, it became obvious why the Internet is the greatest tool for human collaboration yet devised. Researchers were able to collaborate using the very latest information, and vaccines to a completely new virus that nobody had ever seen were ready in an astonishingly short time. The latest information about conditions in far-flung parts of the world was readily available, which allowed people to make adjustments quickly. That facts about supply chain disruptions could be communicated so easily meant that alternatives could be found faster than in a prior age. And of course, for many people, it was a lifesaver to be able to undertake commerce a tall while still isolating to prevent the spread of disease. The Internet has proven itself to be an excellent tool to support and maintain human development.

Of course, as we know, access to this excellent tool is unequal. As even quite early review has demonstrated <sup>[1]</sup>, those who started the pandemic with poorer access to digital tools were still further disadvantaged by COVID-19. Tools that can support human development will only help if people can actually use them. Those without access are twice deprived, because they not only miss out on the tools to address present challenges, but they also miss out on the very tool that can help make the future brighter.

## **Since we have known all this for some time, it is bitterly ironic that we see today so much effort being spent on making access worse. It happens at multiple levels:**

- Various sanction regimes impede interconnections to sanctioned countries and economies (and consequently, their populations).
- Just as troubling, governments adopt or maintain regulations that make interconnections more difficult or more expensive. That means we sacrifice the surest way we know to improve development-supporting infrastructure to the interests of current incumbents and current controls.
- Attempts to control data flows, whether in the name of sovereignty, citizen protection, or commercial advantage, are imposed in ways that makes the Internet more fragile while making permanent the advantages enjoyed by large incumbents.

The reason for this irony is that we have forgotten, if we ever knew, the paradoxical strength of the Internet. Because it is a network of networks, it is technically robust. Each network is independent, designed to solve the technical problems that the particular network operator faces. Each network that connects to the Internet adds more to the Internet's strength, exactly because of the diversity of interests, goals, and design purposes of each network.

## But this technical robustness comes at a price: everyone participating needs to be able to depend on certain critical properties that enable the Internet to work:

- An accessible infrastructure with a common protocol
- An open architecture of interoperable and reusable building blocks
- Decentralized management and a single distributed routing system
- Common global identifiers
- A technology-neutral, general-purpose network

## In order to get the Internet we want, there are also enabling conditions that allow it to thrive:

- **An open Internet** needs easy and unrestricted access, without restrictions on use and deployment of Internet technologies, but with collaborative development and governance.
- **A globally-connected Internet** needs unrestricted reachability and available capacity.
- **A secure Internet** needs strong guarantees of confidentiality and integrity for the information, devices, applications, and services found on the Internet.
- **A trustworthy Internet** requires reliability, resilience, availability, accountability, and privacy.

These basic strategies, which the Internet Society calls “the Internet way of net-working,” are the ones that have given us the Internet. But erosion of them is also what could allow us to lose the Internet. If we adopt laws, regulations, or business practices that tend to erode these critical properties or the enablers of the Internet, we will not merely lose a little bit of functionality. The shadow of “splinternet” is not that we wind up with a few networks that are operated according to national or regional cultural and political control. Instead, splinternet is the prospect of various online services, separated by geography or some other classification, that do not connect reliably with one another at all. The prospects for economic and social development in such cases are much worse. We would give up exactly the benefits of the Internet that COVID-19 highlighted so dramatically.

And that is why it is vital that we must keep the Internet way of networking in mind in order to achieve data and digitalization for development. Prospects for human development are better with the Internet than without it. Governance strategies must always be embraced after careful assessment of the impact on the Internet. If we do not beat back the drift towards splinternets, we will not have data for development, but self-imposed disaster. That is why we must keep working to ensure that the open, globally-connected, secure, and trustworthy Internet is for everyone.

## References

[1] Ian Litchfield, David Shukla, and Sheila Greenfield. *Impact of covid-19 on the digital divide: a rapid review*. *BMJ Open*, 11(10), 2021.