



Centre for  
MultiLateral  
Affairs

# Policy Brief

October 2025



**Beyond Basic Access: Addressing Uganda's Emerging  
Digital Participation Gap**

# Executive Summary

---

This brief outlines key findings from a research study conducted in Mukono and Wakiso identifying the systemic barriers that prevent people from achieving meaningful digital participation. The research concludes that digital inclusion in Uganda is profoundly shaped by intertwined economic, cultural, and political factors, necessitating a coordinated, rights-based governmental response.



## Key Barriers Identified:

**Economic:** Prohibitive costs of devices (smartphones -300,000 shs and above) and data, compounded by high import taxes, placing technology out of reach for low-income populations.



**Infrastructural:** Persistent rural-urban connectivity gaps, leading to “digital dark zones” with weak networks, slow speeds, and unreliable access outside of Kampala.



**Social and Cultural:** Entrenched gender norms and patriarchal systems limit women’s access and ownership, while online harassment and safety concerns drive women and marginalized groups to self-censor or withdraw.



**Governance:** Weak policy frameworks, insufficient public awareness of digital laws, and poor enforcement of digital rights protections leave users vulnerable to cybercrime and privacy breaches, exacerbated by outdated laws concerning emerging technologies like AI.



**Policy Imperative** Policymakers must move beyond merely expanding connectivity metrics to address the systemic barriers that shape participation, otherwise, digital transformation risks reproducing existing inequalities.



## The Challenge:

### Defining the Digital Participation Gap

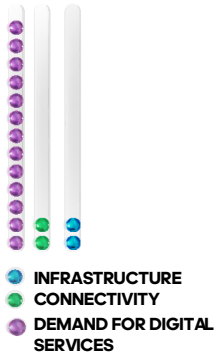
While Uganda has made notable progress in expanding internet infrastructure, with estimated penetration exceeding 60%, this masks a complex reality: a digital participation gap where many users are “barely online”. These individuals possess nominal access but are constrained from effectively leveraging digital systems for education, finance, or civic participation due to structural barriers.

#### 1. Affordability and Access as Limiting Factors

Affordability is a silent barrier that limits sustained use even after acquiring a device. Participants described quality smartphones an essential gateway to the modern digital world, as a luxury, often costing 300,000 shillings and above.



- The overall cost of internet access is considered prohibitively high compared to other regions.
- High import taxes imposed on devices further hinder affordability.
- Data bundles are consumed too quickly for meaningful activities, forcing individuals, particularly students, to choose between data and basic needs like food or sanitary towels.



## 2. Uneven Infrastructure and Connectivity Quality

A stark and persistent rural-urban divide exists in connectivity. While urban residents may rely on stable 4G coverage, rural areas, including Oyam, Dokolo, and Lira, are often considered “digital dark zones”. Inconsistency in network coverage leads to frequent call drops, slow internet speeds, and failed digital transactions, reinforcing the isolation of underserved areas and deepening existing inequalities.

## 3. Digital Literacy and Education Gaps



Owning a device is not synonymous with meaningful use. Many participants, especially older adults and those in rural communities, do not know how to use smartphones beyond making calls. This limited technical knowledge constrains their ability to leverage digital tools for e-commerce or government services and leaves them vulnerable to online scams and privacy breaches. Furthermore, the lack of a strong reading culture in Uganda, coupled with the dominance of English and other foreign languages in digital products, creates significant comprehension hurdles for non-English speakers.

## 4. Compounded Exclusion and the Gender Divide

Digital exclusion is not experienced uniformly; it intersects with other vulnerabilities, including poverty, disability, and rural residence.



- **Gender:** The gender digital divide is multi-layered. Women's access is often conditional on approval from male relatives, limiting privacy and autonomy. Women also face a heightened risk of online harassment, blackmail, and intimidation, leading to self-censorship and withdrawal from economic and civic platforms.
- **Disability:** Persons with disabilities (PWDs) encounter technical and financial barriers, as many devices and platforms are not disability-friendly, and physical infrastructure (like training area access) excludes them.

## 5. Policy and Governance Deficits

Uganda's digital governance framework is perceived as outdated and insufficient to handle fast-evolving risks, particularly concerning artificial intelligence (AI), data privacy, and algorithmic decision-making.

- There is a significant lack of public knowledge regarding digital laws.
- Weak enforcement mechanisms diminish the practical effectiveness of existing laws; law enforcement agencies often lack the necessary training and knowledge to handle digital evidence and cyber-related cases.



## Policy Recommendations and Intervention Frameworks

---

To effectively bridge the digital participation gap, the government, civil society, and the private sector must adopt an integrated, holistic strategy.

### I. Evidence-Based Policy Recommendations (Government Mandates)

- Recommendation Area: Regulate Costs and Subsidize Access

#### Specific Policy Actions

Implement policies to reduce the high cost of internet access and mobile data, recognizing it as a fundamental necessity. Explore mechanisms (e.g., subsidized pricing or regulated fees) to make smartphones and other digital devices more affordable to low-income populations.

- Recommendation Area: Expand and Standardize Digital Infrastructure

#### Specific Policy Actions

Mandate heavy investment in expanding internet infrastructure, including installing more fiber optic cables and establishing consistent, reliable network coverage across all regions, particularly remote and rural areas. Ensure stable electricity supply is prioritized, as power outages severely hinder access.

- **Recommendation Area: Strengthen Digital Rights and Online Safety Laws**

### **Specific Policy Actions**

Ensure robust enforcement of existing cybercrime laws and develop new regulations to address emerging threats like AI-driven issues, online bullying, and data misuse. Train law enforcement and judicial officers to handle digital evidence and cyber-related cases. Update outdated laws to keep pace with advancements in technology like AI and machine learning

---

- **Recommendation Area: Integrate Digital Literacy and Public Awareness**

### **Specific Policy Actions**

Integrate mandatory ICT and digital literacy into school curricula from an early age. Launch comprehensive public sensitization campaigns using diverse media and local languages to educate citizens (including adults and the elderly) on digital rights, online safety, and practical device usage.

---

- **Recommendation Area: Champion Inclusive Design and Content Localization**

### **Specific Policy Actions**

Establish mandatory inclusive design principles for all new digital tools and platforms, ensuring accessibility for PWDs through assistive technologies. Actively promote and fund the development of digital content in local languages to overcome linguistic limitations.

---

- **Recommendation Area: Establish a Coordinated National Strategy**

### **Specific Policy Actions**

Create a unified, integrated national digital transformation strategy, overseen by a central government body (e.g., Ministry of ICT), ensuring seamless collaboration across all ministries, agencies, NGOs, and private partners. Ensure dedicated, sustainable financing mechanisms are in place.

---

## II. Practical Intervention Frameworks (CSO and Partner Actions)

- **Intervention Area: Community-Led Connectivity and Device Access**

### **Strategy/Programmatic Action**

Encourage initiatives like MKOPA to improve payment flexibility and integrate financial literacy programs to help users manage device commitments. Address infrastructural challenges in public spaces by revamping internet cafes with reliable connectivity and modern devices.

---

- **Intervention Area: Localized Digital Literacy and Skills Training**

### **Strategy/Programmatic Action**

Establish peer-to-peer learning networks where digitally literate individuals guide others in fundamental smartphone usage, app navigation, and safety. Offer short, practical digital skills courses focused on everyday online tasks and business promotion, delivered in local languages using culturally relevant methods (e.g., educative comedy).

---

- **Intervention Area: Robust Online Safety and Support Systems**

### **Strategy/Programmatic Action**

Develop and publicize accessible reporting mechanisms, such as toll-free helplines or dedicated hot desks within local police departments, staffed by trained personnel, for reporting digital crimes and online harassment. Launch widespread community awareness campaigns to educate citizens on how to identify and avoid common scams, phishing links, and mobile money fraud.

---

- **Intervention Area: Inclusive Content and Representation**

### **Strategy/Programmatic Action**

Actively involve women, PWDs, and other marginalized groups in the design and development of digital tools and apps to ensure their specific needs are met.

Support programs that enhance women's economic participation by equipping them with skills to leverage technology for business and protecting them from digital theft.

---

- **Intervention Area: Strategic Partnerships and Sustainable Funding**

### **Strategy/Programmatic Action**

Foster robust multi-stakeholder partnerships involving government, NGOs, private sector, and local communities to scale up digital inclusion projects to different regions. Advocate for increased budgeting for digital initiatives at the local government level.

---



**The Centre for Multilateral Affairs (CfMA)**  
Plot 67 Bukasa Road Namuwongo  
**Email:** [info@thecfma.org](mailto:info@thecfma.org) **Web:** [www.thecfma.org](http://www.thecfma.org)  
**Mob:** +256782752198

