

Bridging the Digital Chasm: Evaluating Youth Inclusion and Gender Parity in Malawi Vision 2063's Technological Transformation

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ABSTRACT

Malawi Vision 2063 places youth and women at the center of the country's ambition to become an inclusively wealthy, self-reliant, and upper-middle-income nation, as active and critical stakeholders rather than passive beneficiaries of national transformation. Yet the expansion of digital technologies occurs within a highly unequal socioeconomic and infrastructural environment. This paper examines whether Malawi's digital-infrastructure deficits in electricity, connectivity, and device ownership are producing a new, technologically mediated divide between an increasingly connected urban minority and marginalized youth and women. Employing Jan van Dijk's theory of access, the paper undertakes a qualitative desk-based analysis of government policy documents, national and international development reports, and relevant scholarly literature. The analysis finds that Malawi's digital divide is multidimensional and cumulative: limited electricity access and low household device ownership constrain material access before questions of skills or meaningful use even arise. Although MW2063's three pillars and its ICT-specific implementation targets provide a credible institutional foundation for digital transformation, the paper argues that without deliberate, gender-responsive, and youth-targeted investment in infrastructure and digital skills, technological leapfrogging risks reproducing and deepening existing socioeconomic and spatial inequalities. It argues that achieving gender parity and youth inclusion under MW2063 requires moving beyond infrastructure expansion towards an integrated approach that combines affordable access, digital capability development, participatory governance, locally relevant content, and safeguards for women and youth. It concludes with policy-relevant recommendations for aligning MW2063's implementation instruments with its stated aspirations for inclusive digital citizenship.

Keywords: *Malawi Vision 2063; Digital Divide; Youth Inclusion; Gender Parity; Digital Transformation.*

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary development landscape is increasingly shaped by digital transformation, which influences how people communicate, learn, work, access financial services, obtain public information, and participate in governance. For developing countries, digitalization is frequently presented as an opportunity to accelerate development by reducing transaction costs, expanding access to markets and information, improving public services and creating new pathways for employment and entrepreneurship. However, digital transformation does not operate independently of existing social and economic structures, where electricity, devices, connectivity, skills and purchasing power are unequally distributed; technological change can reproduce or intensify pre-existing inequalities rather than automatically overcome them (Heeks, 2022; van Dijk, 2019).

Malawi adopted a long-term development blueprint, Malawi Vision 2063 (MW2063), launched in 2020, which articulates the collective aspiration of transforming the country into “an inclusively wealthy and self-reliant, industrialized, upper-middle-income country” by the year 2063 (NPC, 2020). The Vision replaces the earlier Vision 2020 and is explicitly framed as a youth-centric agenda accompanied by the Malawi 2063 Youth Engagement Strategy, which states that youth are not merely beneficiaries of the Vision but are “active and critical stakeholders in the implementation of the three Pillars and seven Enablers of the MW2063” (NPC, 2025). Gender equality and women's empowerment are similarly foregrounded across MW2063's supporting instruments. The Government of Malawi and its development partners have identified women's economic empowerment and digital inclusion as cross-cutting priorities that must accompany the country's structural transformation (World Bank, 2021). MW2063 unfolds against the backdrop of an intensifying era of globalization in which digital connectivity has become a precondition for participation in trade, education, governance, and civic life. For late-industrializing economies such as Malawi, digital technologies are frequently framed as an opportunity for “leapfrogging”, bypassing the incremental, infrastructure-heavy stages of industrial development that earlier industrializers had to traverse, and moving directly to knowledge-intensive, digitally enabled production and service delivery.

MW2063's vision statement itself imagines “a digital, highly knowledge-based economy with a strong manufacturing industry” (NPC, 2020), and the country's first ten-year implementation plan (MIP-1) operationalizes this ambition through concrete ICT actions, including the establishment of a carrier-neutral Internet Exchange Point, a fiber backbone linking Malawi to submarine cable landing points in Mozambique, functioning ICT centers in every secondary school, free broadband to public and private universities, and a national community digital champions program to deepen digital literacy (NPC, 2021). Yet leapfrogging narratives can obscure a more uneven reality on the ground. The gap between those who can access, afford, and meaningfully use digital technologies and those who cannot, commonly termed the digital divide, or in this paper the “digital chasm”, is not simply a matter of whether a connection exists, but a multidimensional problem spanning physical infrastructure such as electricity and network coverage, the affordability of devices and data, the distribution of digital skills, and the availability of meaningful,

empowering opportunities to use technology once access is achieved. In Malawi, electricity reaches only a small share of the population and mobile and smartphone ownership remain heavily skewed by gender, geography, and income. This leads to a digital chasm that is likely to track and potentially widen pre-existing lines of marginalization rather than closing them.

This concern is sharpened by MW2063's own commitments to youth inclusion and gender parity. Youth inclusion in the Vision is understood not only as the target of skills and livelihoods programs, but as meaningful participation in decision-making structures, including the Pillar and Enabler Coordination Groups established to operationalize MW2063 across government, private sector, academia, and civil society (UNDP, 2023). Gender parity, correspondingly, is understood not merely as equal legal or nominal access to opportunity, but as substantive, measurable parity in participation, education, employment, entrepreneurship, and, centrally for this paper, in the ownership and use of digital technologies themselves. The central puzzle this paper investigates, therefore, is whether Malawi's technological transformation, as currently structured, is delivering on these twin commitments, or whether infrastructural inequality is quietly manufacturing a new axis of exclusion beneath the Vision's inclusive language.

The digital divide in Malawi cannot be understood as a single binary gap between the “connected” and the “unconnected.” Rather, it is what scholars increasingly describe as a multidimensional and systemic phenomenon, in which several interacting deficits such as energy, hardware, connectivity cost, literacy, and opportunity compound one another and are themselves embedded in Malawi's wider socioeconomic geography of rural poverty, gendered division of labor, and uneven urbanization. Disaggregating these dimensions is necessary before any assessment of MW2063's technological transformation agenda is possible. Limited electricity access is the most fundamental constraint faced by many, with Malawi's national electrification rated among the lowest in the world. Recent World Bank data put access at roughly 15.6 percent of the population in 2024, placing Malawi alongside South Sudan, Chad, the Central African Republic, and Burundi at the bottom of the global ranking. Other recent estimates place electricity access closer to 20–23 percent once off-grid and mini-grid solutions are counted ((ITA, 2026; Statbase, 2026). The disparity between urban and rural access is especially stark: roughly 62 percent of urban households have electricity, compared with approximately 5 percent of rural households (Freedom House, 2024, World Bank, 2024). Given that more than 80 percent of Malawians live in rural areas (DataReportal, 2025), the implication is that the overwhelming majority of the population including the youth lack the most basic precondition for sustained digital participation: a reliable power supply to charge a phone, run a computer, or keep a router online. This is consistent with the wider Sub-Saharan African picture, where the region accounts for a disproportionate share of the global electricity-access deficit and where electrification is not keeping pace with population growth (IEA, 2026).

Affordability of hardware devices presents a second barrier. Smartphone ownership in Malawi is estimated at between roughly 25 percent (Afrobarometer's nationally representative 2024/2025 survey) and 36 percent (industry estimates cited by the U.S. ITA, 2026), while computer ownership remains almost negligible, at around 10 percent of households (Afrobarometer, 2025). Even where mobile-

network coverage is available, and Malawi's mobile-network footprint is in fact relatively extensive, reaching 91 percent of surveyed enumeration areas, device ownership functions as a binding constraint on who can actually get online. More recent national survey also shows that mobile-phone ownership remains gendered, with 74% of adult men owning a mobile phone compared with 57% of adult women (Ntodwa et al., 1094). High connectivity costs further narrow the funnel. Malawi's internet penetration rate is variously estimated at between 18 and 28 percent, depending on the methodology and survey date (DataReportal, 2025; Freedom House, 2024; ITA, 2026). These figures remain among the lowest in Sub-Saharan Africa despite broadband network coverage reportedly reaching the majority of the population. This gap between coverage and use, a network that reaches an area but a population that cannot afford to use it, is a hallmark of what regional analysts describe as a “usage gap” rather than a pure coverage gap (Afrobarometer, 2025). The digital literacy gap is a further, distinct barrier. Malawi's adult literacy rate lies at approximately 62 percent, which constrains the population's capacity to navigate text-heavy digital interfaces, and this is compounded by low levels of formal digital-skills training (Freedom House, 2024). Afrobarometer's research finds education to be the single strongest predictor of regular internet use in Malawi, a stronger predictor than income, age, or location, underscoring that connectivity infrastructure alone cannot resolve the divide without parallel investment in skills (Ntodwa et al., 1094).

Finally, even where access, hardware, and skills are present, the availability of meaningful opportunities to use digital technology productively, such as generating income, civic participation, education, or entrepreneurship, remains limited in a labor market where the digital economy is still nascent. This is the least visible but arguably most consequential dimension of the divide, because it determines whether digital inclusion translates into tangible improvements in welfare and agency, or remains confined to passive consumption of entertainment and social media. MW2063 anchors its long-term aspirations in three mutually reinforcing pillars: Agricultural Productivity and Commercialization, Industrialization, and Urbanization. The Vision document explicitly sequences: agricultural transformation is intended to generate the surplus and foreign-exchange earnings that support industrialization, which in turn is expected to drive the urbanization that will host Malawi's future knowledge economy (NPC, 2020; World Bank, 2025). These pillars are underpinned by seven enablers, prominently including Human Capital Development, Effective Governance Systems, Enhanced Public Sector Performance, Private Sector Dynamism, Mindset Change, and Environmental Sustainability. These pillars are collectively meant to create the conditions, institutional, human, and financial, within which the three pillars can be realized (NPC, 2020). The vision provides a strong policy rationale to ensure that young people and women are not merely consumers of digital technologies but active participants in the country's technological transformation.

Digitalization is not a freestanding pillar of MW2063; rather, it is woven through all three pillars and several enablers as a cross-cutting instrument of transformation. Under Agricultural Productivity and Commercialization, digital tools are envisioned to raise farming efficiency and resilience through precision agriculture, digital extension services, and market-information systems. Under Industrialization, a “knowledge-based economy” anchored in science, technology,

and innovation is presented as a parallel track to manufacturing value-addition, with MIP-1 committing to expand business incubation, technology parks, and research collaboration between higher-education institutions and industry (NPC, 2021). Under Urbanization, the development of “world-class urban centers” is bound up with digital public infrastructure. This will include connectivity, digital government services, and smart-city-oriented planning, as Malawi's three cities and emerging urban corridors absorb population growth (World Bank, 2025).

This positioning of digitalization as an enabler across all three pillars is significant for the present analysis. For all the pillars to work, they require a foundation of digitalization and massive technology adoption. This means that the success of Malawi's technological transformation is not merely a matter of telecommunications policy but is structurally dependent on progress in agriculture and industrial policy, on the pace and inclusiveness of urbanization, and centrally on Human Capital Development as an enabler capable of equipping youth and women with the skills that digital participation requires. It follows that if the three pillars advance unevenly, the cross-cutting digitalization agenda is likely to reproduce the same urban–rural and gendered unevenness observed elsewhere in Malawi's development trajectory. In this case, the three pillars function simultaneously as the foundation for Malawi's digital ambitions and as a structural risk factor for uneven digital inclusion, which is precisely the tension this paper interrogates.

This paper is organized around the following research question: How does digital infrastructure inequality, specifically in electricity access, internet connectivity, and smartphone ownership, fuel a new digital divide between Malawi's connected urban population and its marginalized youth and women, notwithstanding MW2063's stated commitments to youth inclusion and gender parity? Three subsidiary questions guide the analysis: (i) how are the four dimensions of van Dijk's access model: motivational, material, skills, and usage access, differentially distributed across urban/rural, gender, and youth categories in Malawi; (ii) to what extent do MW2063's founding document and its first ten-year implementation plan anticipate and address these inequalities; and (iii) what policy adjustments would be required to align MW2063's technological transformation agenda with its inclusive aspirations.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

From the Digital Divide to the Digital Chasm

Early scholarship conceptualized digital divide as inequality in terms of a binary distinction between those who had access to computers and the internet and those who did not. (Norris, 2001), however, demonstrated that the divide operates across global, social, and democratic dimensions. van Dijk, (2019) further developed the argument by treating digital inequality as a cumulative social process in which inequalities in motivation, material access, skills and usage interact with existing socioeconomic inequalities. This approach is particularly relevant to Malawi because the possession of a device cannot by itself demonstrate meaningful participation in a digital society. In Heeks (2022) extends the discussion through the concept of adverse digital incorporation which reflects that people in developing countries may be incorporated into digital systems while still receiving disproportionately low benefits or carrying disproportionate costs. In this case, digital transformation can produce

new forms of inequality even when aggregate connectivity indicators improve. In Sen A (1999) capability approach provides a complementary perspective by reflecting that a resource becomes developmentally meaningful only when individuals have the substantive capability to convert it into valued functioning. In digital terms, a smartphone and data bundle constitute resources; the capability to use them to access education, financial services, markets, employment, health information or civic platforms constitutes a more meaningful form of inclusion. This distinction prevents digital inclusion from being reduced to infrastructure statistics.

Van Dijk's Theory of Access

The theoretical foundation for this paper is Jan van Dijk's theory of access, developed within his broader resources and appropriation theory of the digital divide (van Dijk, 2005, .van Dijk, 2019). Van Dijk's central intervention was to challenge early digital-divide scholarships with narrow equations of “access” with mere possession of a computer and an internet connection. Instead, he proposed a cumulative and recursive model comprising four successive types of access to digital technology: motivational access, material (physical) access, skills access, and usage access (van Dijk, 2005). The model is cumulative in the sense that each type of access is a significant precondition for the next. One cannot develop digital skills without material access, and material access is unlikely to be sought or sustained without prior motivation.

Motivational access

Motivational access refers to the attitudes, interest, and confidence that dispose of an individual to want to engage with digital technology in the first place. van Dijk, (2005) links weak motivational access to computer anxiety, negative attitudes toward technology, socially, and culturally constructed beliefs about who technology is “for.” People do not automatically adopt technologies simply because they become available, perceived usefulness, trust, social norms, fear of costs and confidence influence willingness to engage (van Dijk, 2019). Where digital skills and coding are gendered as masculine domains, or where technology is perceived as economically irrelevant to smallholder agricultural life, motivational access is systematically depressed among women and rural youth, independent of whether infrastructure is (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021). In Malawi, motivational barriers may be particularly important where people experience technology as expensive, unfamiliar or disconnected from immediate livelihood priorities.

Material or physical access

Material and physical access denotes the availability, the affordability, the possession of, or reliable access to, the hardware (computers and smartphones) and the network connection (electricity, mobile signal, broadband) required to use digital technology. (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019) emphasize that in the contemporary environment the first-level digital divide has shifted from simple connectivity toward inequalities in material access more broadly, the diversity, quality, and reliability of devices and the ongoing costs of maintaining hardware, software, and data subscriptions. This remains the most visible dimension of Malawi's digital chasm.

The 2025 internet-penetration estimate of 18% and the continuing gap in electricity access demonstrate that digital participation remains materially constrained (DataReportal, 2025; World Bank, 2024). The material dimension also

includes the affordability of smartphones and data which in Malawi device cost is identified as a leading barrier, demonstrating that network availability does not equal effective access (GSMA., 2026).

Skills access

Skills access encompasses the operational, informational, and strategic competencies required to use digital media effectively. This ranges from the basic ability to operate a device and navigate an interface, to the capacity to search for, evaluate, and apply digital information, to the strategic use of digital tools to achieve personal, economic, or civic goals (van Dijk, 2019). Van Dijk cautions that policy attention has historically focused disproportionately on operational skills training which focuses on how to switch on a computer or use an application, while under-investing in the strategic, critical skills that determine whether digital access translates into genuine empowerment (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021). Malawi has relatively low adult literacy rate, approximately 62 percent, and Afrobarometer's finding suggest that education is the strongest predictor of internet use. The skills-access deficit is severe and unevenly distributed by gender, geography, and socioeconomic status (Afrobarometer, 2025; Freedom House, 2024). UNDP's Digital Readiness Assessment for Malawi identifies affordability, digital skills and rural access among persistent constraints to inclusive digital transformation (UNDP, 2025a).

Usage access

Usage access is the final and, per van Dijk, an increasingly decisive layer of the model that concerns the frequency, diversity, and quality of actual technology use. There is a difference between using digital technology for basic entertainment and communication and using it for more consequential activities such as formal employment, education, financial services, or civic participation (van Dijk, 2005). van Dijk, (2006) terms this the "second-level digital divide," arguing that even as physical access gaps narrow globally, gaps in skills and, especially, in the diversity and purposefulness of use, persist or widen, producing a divide between "cans" and "cannots" that is masked by superficially converging connectivity statistics (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021). Usage inequality is now producing cumulative advantages where people with greater resources, skills, and networks can use digital technologies to acquire further resources and opportunities. In Malawi, UNDP's Inclusive Digital Transformation for Malawi programme explicitly targets women, youth and underserved communities through digital identity, civil registration, digital governance and digital-skills initiatives (UNDP, 2025b).

Van Dijk's model is particularly well suited to a study of Malawi's digital chasm for two reasons. First, it is explicitly cumulative; it captures why interventions focus on a single dimension. This means expanding mobile network coverage without addressing electricity access, device affordability, or literacy tends to yield disappointing results. Second, van Dijk's framework explicitly incorporates "personal categories" including age and gender and "positional categories" including education, income, and employment, as the social structures that determine the initial, unequal distribution of resources feeding into all four levels of access (van Dijk, 2005). This makes the model directly amenable to an analysis of youth and gender inequality, rather than treating the digital divide as a generic, ungended, age-neutral phenomenon.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, desk-based policy, and secondary data analysis design. Given the objective of evaluating the alignment between MW2063's stated commitments to youth inclusion and gender parity and Malawi's empirical digital-infrastructure landscape, the study triangulates two categories of secondary sources. The first category comprises primary policy documents including the Malawi 2063 Vision document (NPC, 2020), the first ten-year implementation plan, MIP-1 (NPC, 2021), the Malawi 2063 Youth Engagement Strategy (NPC, 2025), and associated guidelines for the Pillar and Enabler Coordination Groups (UNDP, 2023). These documents were reviewed through a directed qualitative content analysis, coding for references to digital infrastructure, ICT, youth participation mechanisms, and gender-responsive provisions, to establish what MW2063 formally commits to with respect to digital inclusion among youth and women.

The second category comprises recent nationally representative and cross-nationally comparable statistical datasets on digital access in Malawi and Sub-Saharan Africa, drawn from Afrobarometer's Round 10 survey and its dedicated 2025 report on Malawi's gender digital divide, Malawi's National Statistical Office data as reported by (Freedom House, 2024), the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report series (2025, 2026), World Bank/ESMAP electrification data, DataReportal's Digital 2025 country profile for Malawi, and International Labor Organization youth-employment estimates. These sources were selected because they represent the most current, methodologically transparent, nationally representative data available on the specific indicators: electricity access, mobile and smartphone ownership, internet use, and gender gaps therein, that the research question requires.

Van Dijk's theory of access provided the analytical framework through which the two categories of evidence were synthesized: statistical indicators were mapped onto the four levels of motivational, material, skills, and usage access, and policy provisions were assessed for whether, and how directly, they address each level. This approach is consistent with established practice in digital-divide research, which frequently combines document analysis of national digital strategies with secondary quantitative indicators to assess policy–reality alignment.

The study is explicitly conceptual and evaluative rather than based on new primary fieldwork or data; no original household survey, interviews, or focus groups with Malawian youth or women were conducted for this paper. References were made from the surveys conducted by other bodies and policy documents only. This is a deliberate scope decision appropriate to a policy-alignment assessment of this kind, but it is also considered a limitation that is addressed explicitly in the concluding section, together with recommendations for the primary, district-level research that would be needed to validate and extend the findings presented in this paper.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following discussion synthesizes the evidence gathered against each of van Dijk's four levels of access, drawing out at each level the implications for youth inclusion and gender parity under MW2063.

Motivational Access

The evidence gathered suggests that material realities shape motivational access. When digital technologies are perceived as expensive, unreliable, or unrelated to immediate livelihood priorities, adoption may be constrained even where network services exist. This does not imply that people lack interest in technology; rather, the perceived benefits must be considered against opportunity costs. (Heeks, 2022) suggests that the relationship between motivation and digital participation is shaped by structural dependence. As digital technologies become embedded in employment, financial transactions, education and public services, individuals may increasingly participate because non-participation carries economic and social costs. Many Malawian youths and women are not motivated to participate because of high cost of digital technologies. Malawi-specific survey evidence on motivational access, attitudes toward and interest in digital technology, independent of infrastructure, is limited, but the available proxies suggest cause for concern rather than complacency. (Afrobarometer, 2025) study finds that a large majority of non-users persist despite near-universal mobile network coverage points to barriers beyond mere unavailability. This report explicitly attributes part of the divide to factors that function upstream of physical access, including education and social norms (Afrobarometer, 2025). According to GSMA (2026) affordability is the leading barrier cited by men and women who are already aware of mobile internet alongside literacy and confidence-related barriers as more binding.

From an MW2063 perspective, the Vision's positioning of youth as “active and critical stakeholders” and its rhetorical emphasis on a future “digital, knowledge-based economy” could plausibly function as a motivational lever, if translated into visible, credible opportunities. However, the Vision document and MIP-1 contain comparatively few explicit measures targeted at building positive attitudes toward technology among women specifically. This represents a gap between MW2063's aspirational gender-parity language and its operational toolkit at the motivational level.

Material and Physical Access

Material access is where Malawi's digital chasm is most acute and most clearly documented. Electricity access nationally is estimated at between roughly 15.6 percent (World Bank, 2024) and 23 percent (ITA, 2026), figures that place Malawi among the five least electrified countries globally (Statbase, 2026). The urban–rural disparity is severe with approximately 62 percent of urban households having electricity compared with approximately 5 percent of rural households (Freedom House, 2024). However, over 80 percent of Malawians including a large share of Malawian youth, live in rural areas (DataReportal, 2025). This means that material access to the electrical grid alone excludes the majority of the population before any question of devices or connectivity arises. Device ownership compounds this picture with smartphone ownership stood at approximately 25 percent of adults in Afrobarometer's 2024/2025 survey. But there is a pronounced gender gap with men dominating at 74 percent compared with 57 percent of women owning mobile phone. The 17-percentage-point gap is described as having remained “virtually unchanged” over the past decade despite overall growth in ownership (Afrobarometer, 2025). Smartphone and computer ownership follow the same gendered, urban-biased, and education-biased pattern, being systematically more

common among men, more educated individuals, urban residents, and households that already have electricity (Afrobarometer, 2025). (Heeks, 2022) argues that inclusion within a digital system can remain unequal when disadvantaged users enter under conditions that limit the value they can derive from participation. This means that many youths might have the willingness to access digital technology, but issues of unreliable electricity and high-cost data bundles affect their participation, usage, and meaningful contribution.

MW2063's material-access response is more substantial than its motivational-access response. MIP-1 commits to concrete infrastructure investments including an Internet Exchange Point, a fiber backbone connected to regional submarine cable systems, free broadband to universities and selected public spaces, and expanded ICT centers in secondary schools (NPC, 2021). These are appropriately ambitious commitments, but the analysis suggests possible structural risks. First, flagship interventions such as university broadband and secondary-school ICT centers are institution-based and inherently more accessible to urban, in-school youth than to the substantial share of rural youth who are out of school or engaged in smallholder agriculture. Second, none of the reviewed digitalization targets are explicitly disaggregated by gender in the publicly available implementation documentation, creating a risk that aggregate progress toward national connectivity targets could mask, or even widen, the persistent 15–17 percentage-point gender gaps documented above. This can hinder meaningful participation and engagement of both marginalized youth and women, as the infrastructure targeted cannot accommodate all.

Skills Access

Skills access in Malawi is constrained by a foundational literacy rate of approximately 62 percent (Freedom House, 2024) and by (Afrobarometer, 2025) finding that educational attainment is the single strongest predictor of regular internet use, outweighing income, age, or location. Girls and young women continue to face higher rates of early school leaving and lower average educational attainment than boys and young men in many regions. This translates that this education–internet-use relationship functions as an indirect but powerful channel through which gender inequality in schooling is converted into gender inequality in digital-skills access. MIP-1's community digital champions program and its planned expansion of ICT centers and technology incubation hubs in higher-education institutions (NPC, 2021) represent Vision's principal skills-access interventions. Smaller donor supported initiatives such as Malawi Girls Can Code and targeted digital-training programs for women in the creative sector are reported to be making incremental progress (Afrobarometer, 2025). However, (Heeks, 2022) with his adverse digital incorporation argues that when users possess sufficient capabilities to enter digital systems but insufficient capabilities to exercise effective control over their participation or capture the value generated through it. He further argues that digital inequality should increasingly be understood through a production-centered perspective because users contribute data, labor, content, goods, and services to digital systems. Having digital skills determine whether young people and women can participate primarily as passive consumers or can use digital systems strategically to create income, access markets, build networks and produce knowledge. Lack of

such skills limits effective participation from the youths as they just consume what the systems offer without their voices included or heard.

Usage Access

Actual usage patterns in Malawi confirm the presence of a substantial “usage gap” layered atop the material and skills gaps already described. Despite mobile-network coverage reaching 91 percent of enumeration areas, only 26 percent of Malawians report using the internet at least a few times a month and 71 percent report never using the internet at all (Afrobarometer, 2025). The gender gap in usage has, notably, widened rather than narrowed over time: from a smaller differential in the mid-2000s to a 15-percentage-point gap by 2024, even as overall internet use has grown for both men and women (Afrobarometer, 2025). Separately, National Statistical Office data cited by (Freedom House, 2024) put men's internet use at 18.8 percent and women's at 16.1 percent as of 2023, illustrating how different survey methodologies and reference periods can yield materially different gap sizes but converging on the same directional finding of a persistent, non-trivial gender disadvantage in usage.

However, the focus should be on whether users are able to employ digital technologies meaningfully rather than enjoying what is being offered. (Heeks, 2022) adds the question of how value is distributed within systems by questioning how digital participation can consequently generate economic activity without producing proportional economic power. Users contribute attention, data, labor, and information, while those who control the systems convert such resources into value. The digital chasm in Malawi therefore has two dimensions: exclusion from digital systems and unequal incorporation into them. In addition to that, Sen A, (1999) added that resources available to individuals should expand their capabilities and the real opportunities they possess to achieve outcomes they have reason to value. In this sense, digital access should not be considered meaningful simply because an individual can connect to the internet or operate a digital device. According to him, meaningful access exists when individuals can convert connectivity into capabilities such as accessing education, finding employment, developing a business, accessing financial services, or participating in public decision-making.

The usage-access picture among the youths must be read alongside Malawi's broader labor-market context. Malawi's official youth unemployment rate is comparatively low by regional standards with approximately 6.8 percent in 2024, compared with a Sub-Saharan African average of roughly 10.7 percent (World Bank, 2025). However, this headline figure is widely understood in labor-economics literature to substantially understate youth economic precarity in informal, agrarian economies where underemployment and non-participation are more prevalent than open unemployment. ILO, (2024) found that nearly three-quarters of young workers in Sub-Saharan Africa are in vulnerable or informal employment. This suggests that even where Malawian youth are nominally “employed,” the digital economy envisioned by MW2063's industrialization pillar is not yet a major channel of youth livelihoods. This translates that usage of access, where it exists, is currently oriented toward communication and entertainment rather than productive, income-generating, or civic uses that would constitute the deepest form of digital inclusion.

The four-level analysis demonstrates that Malawi's digital chasm is genuinely cumulative in the sense that van Dijk's model predicts. They reflect

constrained material access, particularly electricity and device ownership, which sets a low ceiling on what skills and usage access can achieve even where motivation is present. Although, youths and women seem to be connected, it is important to appreciate how they use the digital technologies and if the technologies benefit them. The MW2063 must address issues of connecting the youths, giving them platforms to utilize available digital technologies for meaningful participation and benefiting. Digital usage must go beyond communication and entertainment by giving the youths and women a chance to enhance their capabilities and use technology for the benefit of the country and themselves.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined whether Malawi's digital-infrastructure inequalities, with focus on electricity access, connectivity, and device ownership, are generating a new divide between an increasingly connected urban population and marginalized youth and women, notwithstanding MW2063's explicit commitments to youth-centric, gender-responsive transformation. Applying van Dijk's theory of access to Malawi's founding Vision document, its first ten-year implementation plan, and the most current available national and regional digital-inclusion statistics, the analysis finds that the answer is largely affirmative. Malawi's digital chasm is multidimensional, cumulative, and structured along the same urban–rural and gender lines that characterize the country's broader development landscape, and it is not yet being closed at a pace or with the disaggregated targeting that MW2063's inclusive rhetoric implies. The three pillars of MW2063 provide, in principle, a coherent institutional foundation for digital transformation. MIP-1's concrete ICT commitments on an Internet Exchange Point, regional fiber connectivity, secondary-school ICT canters, and a community digital champions program, represent meaningful, appropriately ambitious steps at the level of material and skills access. However, the evidence reviewed indicates that these commitments are not yet matched by comparably explicit, resourced, and gender-disaggregated interventions at the motivational and usage-access levels. At the same time, rural, out-of-school, and female youth are not benefiting from institution-anchored investments to the same extent as their urban, male, and in-school counterparts. This calls for empowerment and equal access opportunities for both ends.

For this reason, the paper proposes several policy implications. To begin with, MW2063's implementation monitoring framework should adopt gender and age disaggregated digital-access indicators. Tracking should focus not only on aggregate progress toward internet penetration and device ownership targets but also on the size of the gender and urban–rural gaps to unmask persistent exclusion. Second, given that electricity access is the binding constraint underlying much of the material-access gap, off-grid and mini-grid renewable-energy solutions targeted at rural and peri-urban communities should be treated as core digital-inclusion infrastructure, not merely as an energy sector concern. Third, digital-skills programming should move beyond operational training toward strategic, income-generating, and civic-use skills that convert access into empowerment. Specific outreach to young women and out-of-school youth should be prioritized to build on existing small-scale initiatives. Also, youth and women's meaningful participation in the pillars and enabler coordination groups that govern MW2063's implementation should be tracked and

reported to ensure that the Vision's stated commitment to youth and women as active and critical stakeholders is realized in practice, not only in policy.

However, this study was identified as limited by its reliance on secondary data and document analysis rather than original primary research. The statistical estimates reviewed also vary across sources due to differing survey methodologies, sample frames, and reference years, highlighting a limitation that itself indicates gaps in Malawi's routine digital-inclusion data infrastructure. Future research should prioritize primary, district-level mixed-methods studies, including household surveys and qualitative interviews with youth and women in both urban and rural settings. This will help explicitly structure the work around van Dijk's four-level framework, to test and refine the patterns identified here and to generate the disaggregated evidence base that MW2063's monitoring and evaluation systems currently lack.

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