



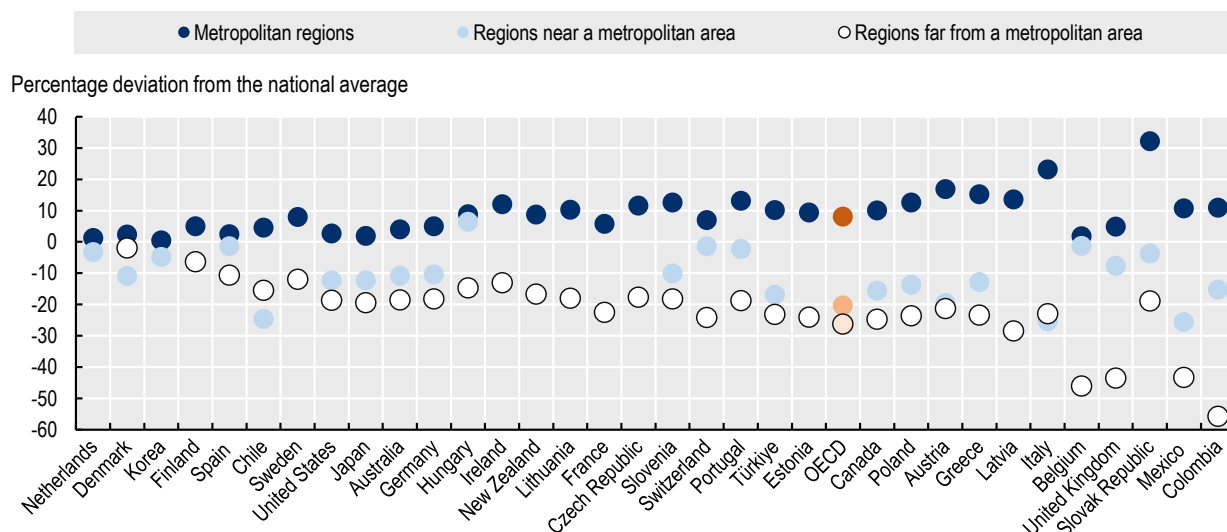
Building better societies through digital policy

- Digital transformation offers a path to economic growth and social well-being. However, divides in Internet access and uptake of digital technologies – across countries and regions, gender, age, income or skills – can perpetuate inequality.
- Online content sharing services, like social media, allow people to communicate, build communities and share knowledge. But the spread of harmful content, including misinformation and disinformation, can polarise society and undermine democracy.
- Digital technologies can help tackle environmental issues through accurate predictions and increased efficiencies, but can also mean increased energy use and e-waste.
- Policies should incentivise broadband investment, improve skills and foster trust while embedding digital technologies in a green transition and minimising negative effects. Better measurement – of digital divides, misinformation and disinformation online and the environmental impact of digital technologies – is necessary to understand trade-offs and improve policy making.

Digital transformation has altered societies, creating new ways to live, interact and work. There is great potential for digital technologies and data to enable us to live more sustainably and productively than ever before. But digital transformation also poses risks, and to make our digital future inclusive, trustworthy and sustainable, we must

use it carefully to build better societies. Three critical elements for this are addressing digital divides; fostering an online environment conducive to positive communication and debate; and harnessing digital technologies towards a sustainable future.

Gaps in fixed download speeds for users in OECD countries



The figure shows data for Q1 2022 and uses TL3 (small regions) classification. Source: OECD calculations based on Speedtest® by Ookla® Global Fixed and Mobile Network Performance Maps, <https://registry.opendata.aws/speedtest-global-performance>

Digital divides: Improving connectivity, skills and uptake of digital technologies for all

Digital transformation have accelerated in all OECD countries, but divides persist across geographies, incomes, ages, educational levels, and genders. As access to and use of digital technologies become increasingly essential for work, education, government services or social interactions, these divides can precipitate marginalisation.

Across the OECD, fixed broadband speeds experienced in rural and remote areas are, on average, 45% lower than in metropolitan areas. Disparities in the cost of communication services exist across OECD countries, and high prices – exacerbated by inflation – disproportionately affect the poorest households. People with lower levels of educational attainment are less likely to use advanced digital tools (like e-banking or e-learning) than those who benefited from better education. Finally, with respect to age and gender: in 2021, just 78% of people aged 55-74 in the OECD used the Internet, and over twice as many young men (aged 16-24) than young women could program.

To promote an inclusive digital transformation, policies should expand high-quality broadband connectivity, targeting existing gaps, as well as offer meaningful opportunities to equip everyone with the skills to use digital tools.

Combating misinformation and disinformation online

The Internet is a powerful tool to disseminate information worldwide, but it has also become a vehicle for the spread of harmful content. The use of algorithmic content curation can spread content at unprecedented speeds, complicating the identification of the sources of such ‘untruths’ along with efforts to limit their spread.

Harmful online content, including disinformation, misinformation and propaganda, contributes to social polarisation, undermines trust in democratic institutions, and negatively affects societies. For example, false, inaccurate, and misleading information hampered vaccination campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, over half of Europeans who used the Internet in the previous three months reported exposure to untrue or doubtful information on Internet news sites or social media, but only about a quarter checked the veracity of the information found online.

Digital literacy initiatives – focusing on cognitive, critical and technical skills – can help people identify false or misleading information and disregard it. Technologies can automate some processes to fight ‘untruths’ online, like content moderation and fact-checking, but their success and use remain contested. This underscores the

importance of content moderation developed in a multi-stakeholder process with independent oversight, including audits of moderation decisions. Transparency in spending on political advertising could help people identify instances of politically driven misinformation. Finally, better measurement of the type, scale and reach of misinformation and disinformation online is needed to form appropriate policy responses.

Green transition: Digital technologies as friend or foe?

Many countries have committed to reaching net zero emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050. Digital tools can aid the green transition by optimising energy management and consumption in a climate increasingly prone to extreme temperatures and weather events. Digital tools can also nudge consumers to make more sustainable choices.

However, digital technologies have an environmental impact of their own. Digital technologies emit greenhouse gases and require energy, water, and natural resources like critical minerals, throughout their lifecycle. A lack of repair or software support for older digital products, and low collection and recycling rates, lead to high levels of e-waste.

Governments should seek to maximise the contribution of digital technologies to the green transition. Policies should encourage the adoption of technologies with lower energy needs, focusing on renewable sources. However, more accurate and reliable measurements of total energy use and characteristics like recyclability and durability, are crucial to assessing the environmental impact of digital technologies.



Related ministerial sessions

- **Combating misinformation and disinformation online:** 15:30-16:45, 14 December 2022
- **The future of connectivity – investing in high quality networks:** 17:15-18:30, 14 December 2022
- **Digital technologies in the green transition: Friend or foe?** 9:30-10:45, 15 December 2022
- **Advancing inclusive digital societies – bridging digital divides and breaking down barriers:** 11:15-12:30, 15 December 2022



Further reading



OECD (2022), "Building better societies through digital policy: Background paper for the CDEP Ministerial meeting", *OECD Digital Economy Papers*, No. 338, OECD Publishing, Paris.