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A new report from a United Nations agency says that 47 percent of the world's people now use the Internet — an increase from just one year ago, when the same agency estimated that just over 43 percent of the global population were Internet users. However, the study, released Tuesday by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), also discovered serious geographic and economic disparities in who uses the Internet.

The 2016 Measuring the Information Society Report found that 79.1 percent of Europeans were Internet users, for example, the highest of any geographic region in the world, followed by 66.6 percent of people in the Americas and the Commonwealth of Independent States (a regional organization comprised of a number of former Soviet Republics, including Russia). But on the other end of the scale, only 25.1 percent of African citizens are using the Internet, the report found, compared to 41.6 percent of Asia and 41.9 of Arab states.

Contrasting from country to country, the disparity in Internet users can be especially stark. Iceland had the highest levels of Internet use, with 98.2 percent, followed closely by a number of northern European nations such as Luxembourg (97.3 percent), Norway (96.8 percent) and Denmark (96.3 percent).

But in some countries, Internet users were a tiny fraction of the population. Just 2.2 percent of Niger's citizens are Internet users, the report estimated, followed by Chad (2.7 percent), Guinea-Bissau (3.5 percent) and Congo (3.8 percent). The ITU was unable to estimate Internet users in some countries, including the restrictive regimes of North Korea and Eritrea.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the report found that richer countries tend to use the Internet more than poorer nations. Eighty-one percent of the population in developed nations were Internet users, versus just 15.2 percent of the population of the least-developed countries. In the United States, 74.6 percent of the population use the Internet — a high figure internationally, but lower than in many other wealthy nations.

There are now 3.9 billion people in the world who do not use the Internet, the study found, and in addition to being poorer, they tend to be disproportionately less educated, rural, elderly and female. The report suggested that "broader socio-economic factors" — in particular education levels — may need to be addressed if the United Nations wants to reach its target of having 60 percent of the world's population online by 2020.

In its report, the ITU also looked at a number of other variables in access to the Internet. It found that, despite the fact that more than half of the world's people were not Internet users, 84 percent of the global population lived in an area where mobile-broadband is available. One problem may be access to Internet-enabled devices — in some low-income countries, between 20 and 40 percent of the population still does not have a phone.

In a country such as South Sudan, there are just 23.9 mobile phone subscriptions for each 100 people, the ITU found. In Burundi, only 1.2 percent of households have a computer. The report also noted that cost can be a factor for Internet access in many countries – a fixed-broadband plan with a minimum of one gigabyte of data per month corresponds, on average, to more than 60 percent of gross national income per capita in the world’s least-developed countries.

The ITU’s annual Measuring the Information Society Report uses a variety of these indicators to create an index for information and communications technology (ICT) around the world. The agency found that South Korea topped the index for the second year in a row, with the rest of the top 10 filled out by two other Asia-Pacific countries and seven European countries.

Overall, there was an improvement over the last year’s index, with some countries, including St. Kitts and Nevis and Burma, dramatically improving their ICT development over the last year. However, others languished: Chad and Niger came in 174 and 175 respectively this year, swapping their positions last year at the very bottom of the table. – *The Washington Post*



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