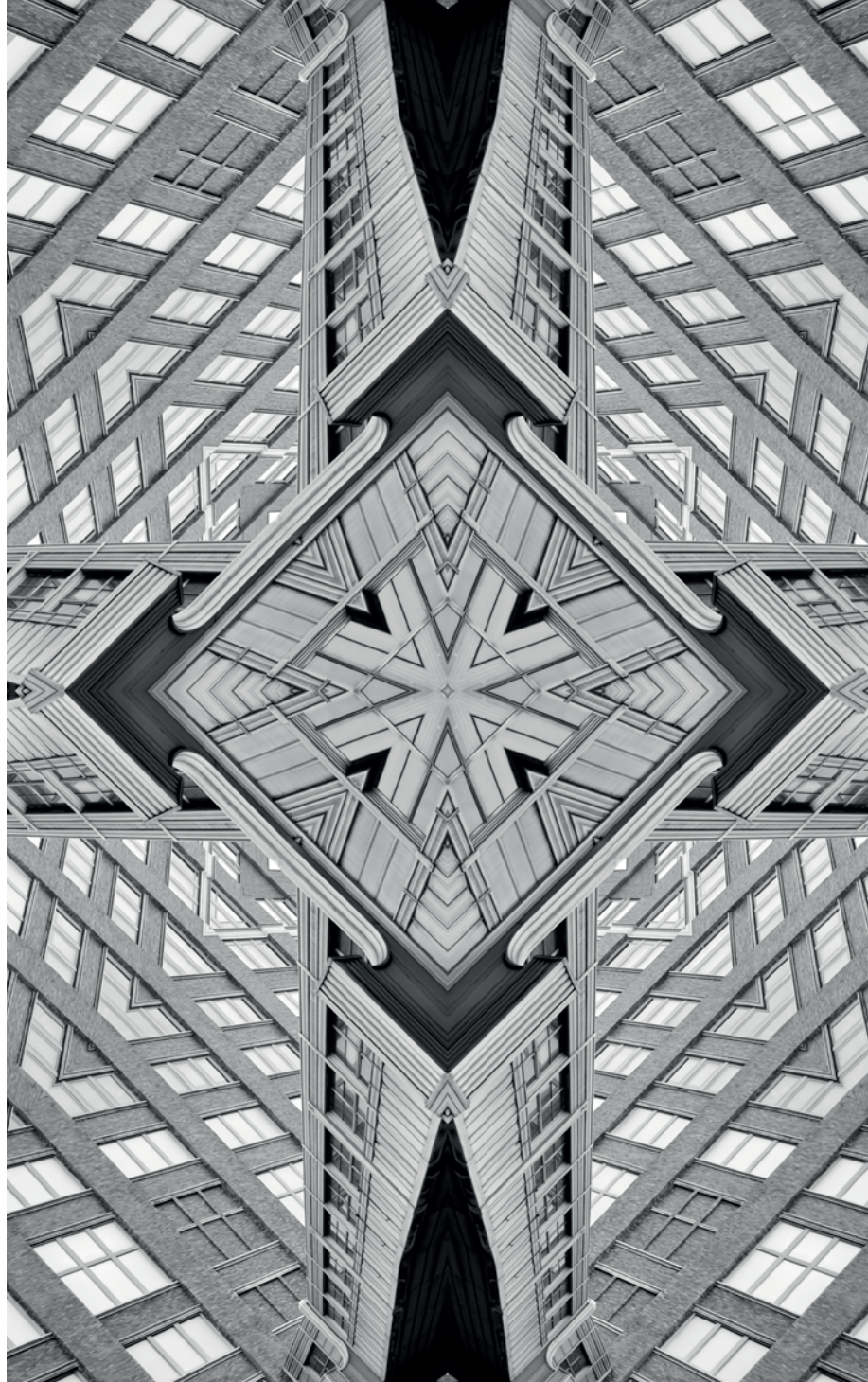


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Brief

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Balancing Development and Digital Harms: Assessing the BRICS Digital Agenda

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Abstract

BRICS has made strides in developing a digital agenda that promotes the use of digital technologies for development while trying to counter digital harms. The grouping has prioritised areas such as agritech and digital agriculture, technology for education, digital health, technology for climate action, and the use of data to further the development agenda. Additionally, bridging the digital divide, promoting cybersecurity, and furthering the right to privacy have been key priorities. This brief traces BRICS initiatives over the years and presents an overview of its digital agenda. It also recommends four key areas that BRICS could focus on in the future.

BRICS member countries have made advances in their digital economies by leveraging new technologies, supporting the growth and development of digital services and platforms across sectors and industries, and implementing conducive policies and regulations. The BRICS countries are home to 40 percent of existing internet users¹ and are responsible for about 30 percent of the global export of goods related to information and communication technologies (ICTs) and about 11 percent of digitally deliverable services.² The expansion of the grouping³ led to an increase in the share of exports and the number of internet users. The group now accounts for a 45.2 percent share in global population, with a 36.7 percent share in global GDP and a 23.3 percent share in global merchandise trade.³ Therefore, digital cooperation has emerged as an integral part of the BRICS agenda.⁴ BRICS has acknowledged that digital solutions and technology are vital to promoting sustainable development and achieving economic prosperity. However, technology has its share of challenges and issues.

This brief examines the BRICS digital agenda to assess how the grouping has balanced the use of digital technologies for development and the potential digital harms that may arise from unprecedented digitalisation. It recommends that BRICS prioritise four key areas—cybersecurity, digital payment solutions, responsible Artificial Intelligence (AI), and digital public goods—to further the use of technology for development while minimising digital harm.

a On 1 January 2024, Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Ethiopia joined BRICS.

Tech for Development in BRICS

Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in an integrated and holistic manner has been a key theme in BRICS convenings. BRICS leaders have consistently highlighted the importance of the 2030 Agenda and committed to sustainable development in its three dimensions (economic, social, and environmental). While each BRICS member country has a unique approach to sustainable development based on its historical development path and socio-economic characteristics,⁵ the grouping has achieved consensus on key cooperation areas for sustainable development.

The grouping's leaders consider the digital economy and the adoption of digital technologies as key elements and important tools to support strong, balanced, and inclusive growth and achieve the 2030 Agenda. They have recognised that the internet plays a critical role in promoting different aspects of development⁶ and that ICTs have the potential to support economic progress and social inclusion.⁷ Such technologies provide tools for the effective functioning of different stakeholders and enhance opportunities for global partnerships towards sustainable development.⁸ ICTs can improve e-governance, targeted delivery of benefits, and financial inclusion.⁹

The BRICS countries have prioritised the “use of digital and technological solutions to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”¹⁰ and acknowledged the significance of digital solutions, such as AI and big data, for promoting sustainable development. BRICS prioritised the use of data for development during India's presidency in 2021. During China's presidency in 2022, the BRICS Forum on Big Data for Sustainable Development was established to strengthen and develop big data research to further the SDGs.¹¹ The need to intensify engagement within BRICS on “data for development” was also discussed during Russia's BRICS presidency in 2024.¹² BRICS has also discussed the specific applications of technology-based solutions for implementing the 2030 Agenda, including agriculture, education, health, climate, and data for development.

Agritech and Digital Agriculture

BRICS recognises the role played by digital solutions in improving agricultural efficiency and farmers' incomes.¹³ Indeed, digital agriculture has been a critical area for cooperation in the grouping,¹⁴ and it has recognised the importance of deploying ICTs and science-based agriculture solutions¹⁵ to support stable global agricultural growth and the SDGs.¹⁶ The BRICS Agricultural Research Platform was established in 2016 to strengthen cooperation among member countries in developing and deploying technology solutions in agriculture.¹⁷ Further, a key thematic area of the *Action Plan 2021-2024 for Agricultural*

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Cooperation of BRICS Countries is “promoting digital agricultural solutions through technology innovation for achieving SDGs”.¹⁸ The Action Plan also proposed joint research and development for efficient technology solutions to increase production, cooperate in digital technologies, develop a joint Agricultural Research Platform, and exchange agriculture technology to improve farmers’ incomes.¹⁹

Technology for Education

The BRICS countries have acknowledged the importance of utilising digital technologies in promoting education. Education ministers of the BRICS countries have previously noted that the COVID-19 pandemic fast-tracked the application of digital technologies in education.²⁰ Accordingly, the BRICS leaders have committed to supporting the digital transformation of education and technical and vocational education and training²¹ to ensure greater accessibility and equity and provide quality education.²² BRICS is also exploring opportunities for “BRICS digital education cooperative mechanisms” to develop a smart education system and support the digital transformation of education.²³ In 2024, the BRICS countries proposed enhancing cooperation by organising workshops for promoting digital education for the BRICS member states.²⁴

Digital Health

The BRICS leaders have highlighted the need to leverage the strength of ICTs to develop innovative solutions around healthcare²⁵ and strengthen digital health infrastructure to prevent and respond to future health crises. In 2021, the Indian presidency organised the BRICS Digital Health Summit,²⁶ where participants discussed the “relevance of digital health to attain sustainable development goals”.²⁷ The delegates agreed on the importance of digital health solutions, especially in light of the pandemic. It was decided that emerging technologies such as AI, machine learning, the Internet of Things, 5G, and other digital health innovations could help strengthen health systems to make them more resilient. Health-focused digital technologies could support surveillance, disease prevention, information management, and treatments. The XIV BRICS Health Ministers’ Meeting in 2024 agreed on the importance of knowledge and technology sharing to improve the availability of and equitable access to medical countermeasures.²⁸

Technology for Climate Action

BRICS has considered improving technological and innovative cooperation to create conditions that support sustainable investments in the energy sector while enhancing transport technologies and clean energy technologies to reduce emissions.²⁹ There has also been support for digitalisation and the use of advanced technologies to reduce greenhouse gases³⁰ and develop low-carbon technologies.³¹ Additionally, there have been discussions around leveraging technology to address climate data gaps³² and using ICTs to develop energy-efficient devices.³³ The BRICS Environmentally Sound Technology (BEST) platform was established in 2015 to facilitate the sharing of information and best practices related to environmentally friendly technologies.³⁴ BRICS considers access to new and advanced technologies to be necessary for reducing the impact on the environment. At the 2024 Kazan BRICS Summit, the leaders agreed to strengthen cooperation on technology solutions that contribute to the removal of greenhouse gases.³⁵

Use of Data for Development

During India's presidency, the BRICS leaders noted that the proper use of data could guide policy responses at all stages of crises and stressed the importance of the effective and efficient use of data for development and for furthering the 2030 Agenda.³⁶ The leaders highlighted the need to support cooperation around space technologies for environmental protection, climate solutions, disaster prediction and relief, and other challenges³⁷ and promoted digital technologies for developing robust multi-hazard early warning systems and advance forecasting to improve disaster resilience and reduce risks.³⁸

The BRICS Forum on Big Data for Sustainable Development was established in 2022 to discuss the importance of strengthening cooperation around big data for sustainable development. Participants noted the use of big data in five key areas: "Food Security and Poverty Alleviation, Digital Economy, Sustainable Urban Development, Climate Actions and Disaster Reduction, and Biodiversity Conservation".³⁹ The BRICS countries have also encouraged their space agencies to cooperate in the area of remote-sensing satellite data to support economic and social development across their territories.⁴⁰ The grouping has also called for "fair, inclusive and equitable governance of data" that is essential for unleashing the potential of digital economy and data governance.⁴¹

BRICS has also acknowledged the challenges arising from the growth of and reliance on digital technologies⁴² and stated the need to preserve the internet “as an instrument of peace” and “prevent its use as a weapon”.⁴³ Several “new and emerging, traditional and non-traditional challenges”⁴⁴ have emerged due to rapid digitalisation. Concerns around the digital divide, cybersecurity, privacy, and mass surveillance have been incorporated in the grouping’s dialogues. BRICS has also expressed concerns about the use of ICTs by terrorists⁴⁵ for transnational organised crimes and for developing offensive tools.⁴⁶

The Digital Divide

Technology can influence the production of goods and services, thus impacting people’s incomes. Therefore, it is important to implement appropriate policies to ensure that the benefits of technological solutions are reaped while limiting their potential harms.⁴⁷ The BRICS member states are at different levels of digital development⁴⁸ and capacity with regard to ICTs,⁴⁹ and this digital divide must be appropriately addressed⁵⁰ to ensure the shared benefits of digitalisation.⁵¹ The BRICS leaders have emphasised the need to ensure that policies are implemented to bridge this digital divide.⁵² Further, BRICS has noted the importance of expanding universal access to digital communication,⁵³ developing open digital content to address the digital divide,⁵⁴ and using innovative and inclusive solutions⁵⁵ to establish modalities and approaches to promote equitable and inclusive access to digital resources. The grouping’s education ministers have also aimed to deepen cooperation in improving the digital infrastructure and training processes to support digital literacy and develop skills to reduce the digital divide.⁵⁶

Cybersecurity in BRICS

Amid increasing digitalisation, cybersecurity has become a major concern for the grouping, with an increase in the number and sophistication of malicious use of ICTs.⁵⁷ In 2013, the BRICS leaders highlighted the importance of contributing to and participating in “a peaceful, secure, and open cyberspace”⁵⁸ and the need for “universally accepted norms, standards and practices is of paramount importance”⁵⁹ for the security of ICTs. Subsequently, in 2015, the Working Group on Security in the Use of ICTs was established to support practical cooperation and discuss security challenges in the use of ICTs.⁶⁰ At its first meeting, the working group discussed intra-BRICS cooperation on responding to cybersecurity incidents; developing international norms, principles, and standards; sharing information and best practices; and establishing joint research and capacity-building projects.⁶¹

BRICS has highlighted the need for “international cooperation and universally accepted norms and principles of international law”⁶² and the “establishment of internationally applicable rules for security of ICT infrastructure, data protection and the Internet that can be widely accepted by all parties concerned”.⁶³ The leaders have discussed cooperation in combatting cybercrimes and the need for a universal, legally binding agreement on cybersecurity, identifying the United Nations (UN) as the appropriate forum to develop such an instrument.⁶⁴ In 2020, at the meeting of the BRICS Anti-Drug Working Group, India raised the issue of the misuse of the darknet and other advanced technologies for drug trafficking. It also called for real-time information-sharing among BRICS nations.⁶⁵ BRICS conducted the first cybersecurity drills under the BRICS Rapid Information Security Channel⁶⁶ in 2024, which focused on joint cross-border cyber exercises and different aspects of the internal security systems of financial institutions.⁶⁷

Other Concerns

BRICS has condemned practices such as mass electronic surveillance and data collection as such activities violate the sovereignty of states and human rights, particularly the right to privacy.⁶⁸ The grouping has also taken a strong position in developing internationally accepted data-protection rules.⁶⁹ More recently, BRICS expressed the need for deeper cooperation to ensure transparency and accountability in promoting AI. It also highlighted the risks associated with using AI, including bias and possible manipulation.⁷⁰ BRICS is also promoting information exchanges and cooperation on AI⁷¹ towards preventing and combatting the misuse of new technologies, including cryptocurrencies, for illegal and terrorist purposes.⁷²

BRICS has been actively cooperating on using digital technologies for sustainable development and reducing potential digital harms. With its expanded membership, the grouping can expand these efforts in four key areas.

Cybersecurity

Ensuring and promoting a safe and secure cyberspace is important for the growth of the digital economy as cybersecurity plays an integral role in improving trade and using technology for development. Cybersecurity is a key area of cooperation for BRICS, and the leaders have highlighted “the importance of establishing legal frameworks of cooperation among BRICS States on this matter”.⁷³ However, the grouping’s efforts have not resulted in any substantive international framework. Some members of the BRICS+ grouping have bilateral arrangements on cybersecurity.⁷⁴

The Budapest Convention on Cybercrime is currently the only binding global instrument on this issue. Among the BRICS+ countries, only Brazil and South Africa are party and observer to the convention, respectively. The UN Convention against Cybercrime was adopted by the General Assembly in December 2024 and will be open for signatures in 2025 and will enter into force only after being ratified by the 40th signatory.⁷⁵

Russia and India are considering partnering to support digital economy initiatives for the BRICS+ expansion,⁷⁶ but the absence of an international framework may impede the sector’s growth. As such, BRICS+ must take concrete steps to establish multilateral frameworks on cybersecurity. It also needs examine the threat posed by the darknet, particularly in terms of combatting drug trafficking, tackling cybercrimes, and countering terrorist organisations’ activities.

Digital Payment Solutions

The BRICS countries have endorsed the use of local currencies to bolster economic ties and promote seamless trade transactions.⁷⁷ With major global oil producers joining BRICS+, it was a natural transition to adopt local currencies for trade amid payment systems being “used as a weapon of political and economic pressure”.⁷⁸ However, experts suggest that domestic currency trade is disincentivised without adequate financial infrastructure and due to high transaction costs.⁷⁹

BRICS has been considering creating a blockchain-based payment system to increase its role in the international monetary system.⁸⁰ While this creates an immediate imperative for developing and adopting digital payment solutions, it can also spur greater financial inclusion and help in the fight against poverty. The payment system could also be used to support the SDGs. Such technology-based solutions could help reduce the cost of financial services and increase the accessibility of such services.⁸¹ Moreover, even as BRICS countries strive towards digital payment systems, they must focus on improving digital and financial literacy. Strengthening cooperation on the use of payment systems and financial technologies was one of the key priorities under Russia's presidency in 2024,⁸² while one of the priorities of Brazil's BRICS presidency is promoting trade and investment by developing efficient payment systems.⁸³

Responsible AI

Cooperation on responsible AI is at a “nascent stage” in BRICS.⁸⁴ Under India's presidency in 2021, the grouping discussed the importance of AI in addressing the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸⁵ There have also been discussions about the importance of AI for sustainable development and the need for technical cooperation in this area.⁸⁶ Developing responsible and trustworthy AI and minimising possible risks and harm have been key areas of discussions, along with calls for developing a common governance approach for the ethical and responsible use of AI.⁸⁷


In light of the increasing integration of AI in economic and social development,⁸⁸ BRICS has recognised the need to enhance intra-BRICS dialogue and policy exchanges on AI and work towards an effective global governance framework.⁸⁹ In the Kazan Declaration 2024, leaders discussed the need to enhance BRICS cooperation to facilitate AI capacity building in developing countries. Further, a study group on AI was established under the BRICS Institute of Future Networks.⁹⁰ BRICS countries have also implemented several presidency-led initiatives, such as a Center on AI development by China and the Russian AI Code of Ethics.⁹¹ However, these have not been taken up as BRICS initiatives.

The use of responsible AI governance for development purposes is among the priorities of Brazil's upcoming BRICS presidency.⁹² AI presents a valuable opportunity to further development impacts while posing major risks to privacy, biases, information manipulation, and impacts on the workforce. Developing responsible AI framework can help guide countries to unleash the potential of AI for development while minimising harms. Further, a common AI framework can enhance cooperation between different stakeholders in the BRICS countries, including governments, businesses, startups, and academia.

Digital Public Goods

Digital public goods (DPGs) are critical levers for advancing the SDGs.⁹³ A focus group on DPG was set up during the 7th BRICS Communications Ministers' Meeting in 2021 to formulate further collaboration and recommend the way forward.⁹⁴ Despite the world being off track to achieve the SDGs by 2030 following the COVID-19 pandemic, DPGs have extensive potential to accelerate the progress of the SDGs. With its successful implementation of the digital public infrastructure, especially during the pandemic, India can offer a DPG model that can be emulated across the BRICS countries.

BRICS has been using digital initiatives to promote development while balancing potential digital harms. While the success, longevity, and continuity of such initiatives may differ, the key elements of technological coordination have remained similar despite the grouping's rotating presidency and the different priorities of member countries. Its expansion will strengthen BRICS and provide new momentum. This may be the opportune time for the grouping to take the lead in the global digital agenda.

The BRICS nations can initiate a number of actions to ensure that the grouping stays ahead in harnessing the benefits of technology. The BRICS countries possess a wide range of technological expertise, and their collaboration can promote the sharing of knowledge and experience in the ICT domain.⁹⁵ Consensus on topics such as the definitions of DPGs and the development of a cybersecurity instrument, which is escaping agreement globally, will catapult the grouping and allow it to demonstrate its leadership in the “technology for development” agenda. Such collaboration can enhance member countries' digital capabilities and fortify their position in the global digital economy. While there is some disagreement among member countries about how to approach some of these technologies, the opportunities offered by these technologies should create an imperative for the BRICS+ countries to overlook these disputes. 

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