



2026

SOUTH AFRICA DATA GOVERNANCE SNAPSHOT

1.0 Country Context

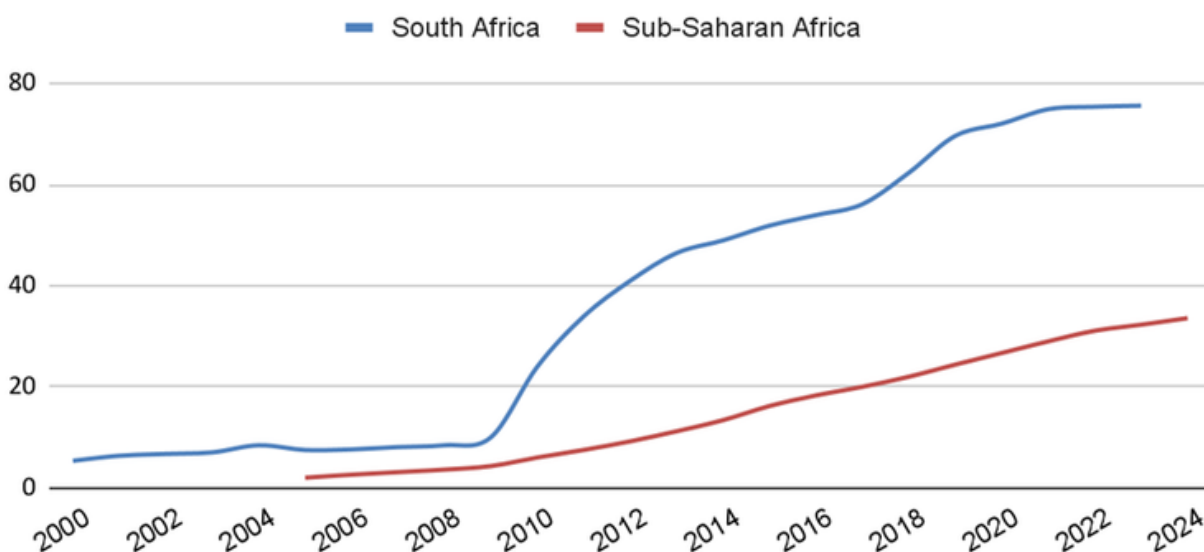
South Africa ranks as [Africa's largest economy](#) and maintains strong global economic integration through G20^[1] and BRICS^[2] membership. The country's economic foundations were established through protective industrial policies, institutional support structures, and state-owned enterprises that developed critical infrastructure and productive capacity. South Africa also stands out as one of the continent's leading innovation hubs. In the [Global Innovation Index](#) 2025, the country ranked 2nd among 32 economies in Sub-Saharan Africa, showing relatively strong performance in areas such as research institutions, financial markets, knowledge production, and technological readiness. This position highlights the country's comparatively maturing innovation ecosystem.

Internet penetration in South Africa reached approximately [70% by 2019](#), reflecting steady progress in expanding digital access across the country. This growth was supported in part by the National Broadband Policy, [South Africa Connect](#), which set out to expand broadband coverage to rural and underserved communities while improving the affordability and quality of internet services. By prioritising infrastructure rollouts, spectrum allocations, and partnerships with private telecommunications providers, the policy sought to reduce long-standing connectivity gaps between urban centres and peripheral regions.

Figure 1: Internet Penetration Trends: South Africa vs Sub-Saharan Africa, 2000–2024

Rise of Internet Adoption rates in South Africa compared to Sub-Saharan Africa

Individuals using the Internet (% of population)



Source: Author's computation using data from WDI (2026)

^[1] [The Group of 20](#)

^[2] [Now comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates](#)

South Africa has also introduced several policy initiatives aimed at positioning the country within the evolving global digital economy. In April 2019, the government established the Presidential Commission on the Fourth Industrial Revolution ([PC4IR](#)) to develop a national strategy for emerging technologies. The commission was tasked with identifying policy priorities and recommending measures to support the adoption of technologies associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Since then, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has featured prominently in national policy discussions, with digital transformation increasingly reflected across sectoral strategies and economic policy frameworks.

In 2021, the government launched the [National Digital and Future Skills Strategy 2021–2025](#) to expand access to digital skills and ensure that citizens and the workforce are better prepared for participation in the digital economy. In the same year, South Africa implemented its principal data protection legislation, the Protection of Personal Information Act ([POPIA](#)), strengthening the country's legal framework for personal data privacy. More recently, on 17 April 2025, the government amended POPIA and the Promotion of Access to Information [Act](#) to further improve the institutional framework supporting digital governance and the adoption of emerging technologies.

These efforts have helped position South Africa as one of Africa's key digital hubs, supported by relatively strong institutions, innovation capacity, and policy frameworks. However, the country's digital progress continues to face structural constraints, including [uneven connectivity](#), [high data costs](#), and [electricity shortages](#). These bottlenecks weaken the impact of otherwise robust digital policies and institutions, limiting the extent to which digitalisation translates into inclusive growth and sustained economic competitiveness.



2.0 Digital Adoption

Digital adoption is surging in South Africa, especially among urban and middle-class populations with smartphones and reliable internet access. The country boasts of some of the continent's highest [digital adoption rates and internet coverage](#), promising to unlock opportunities in education, healthcare, employment, and civic participation. South Africa also demonstrates strong digital infrastructure capacity relative to African peers, with [180 mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants as of 2024](#) and median mobile internet speeds of 49.71 Mbps. Internet penetration reached 74.7% nationally in 2024. However, disparities in access and affordability present policy challenges for achieving equitable digital inclusion across demographic and geographic segments.

[A study in rural Eastern Cape documented infrastructure gaps](#), 52.3% of residents lacked internet access, 38.5% cited affordability as the primary barrier, and 66.2% reported insufficient digital skills. Cost barriers remain substantial, with mobile data averaging \$1.81 per GB (or up to \$5.29/GB for certain packages), positioning South Africa as comparatively expensive within the African context. The cost barrier poses an especially urgent challenge. South Africans, like many across sub-Saharan Africa, face exceptionally high prices for digital services. South Africans pay up to [85 rand \(\\$5.29\) per gigabyte of data](#), equivalent to nearly four hours of work for minimum wage earners. This stands in stark contrast to approximately [\\$1.53 per gigabyte in North Africa and \\$2.47 in Western Europe](#). Given the country's lower income levels, internet access remains out of reach for millions.

Despite these access disparities, South Africa achieved a [UN E-Government Development Index ranking of 40th globally in 2024 \(up from 65th in 2022\)](#), the highest in Africa. This positions the country in the "very high" EGD index category, reflecting strong performance in online services, telecommunications infrastructure, human capital indices, and institutional readiness that contrasts with persistent connectivity and affordability challenges at the household level.

However, the country carries a [long legacy of systemic inequality](#), and its digital growth reflects this divide. A [recent study in rural Eastern Cape](#) revealed that 52.3% of residents lacked internet access, 38.5% cited affordability as the primary barrier, and 66.2% reported insufficient digital skills. While nearly 75% of households nationally have some internet access, rural areas lag far behind urban centres in terms of access to digital infrastructure.

Addressing these disparities will require policy responses that extend beyond infrastructure expansion to include affordability, digital skills development, and coordinated governance across levels of government. While South Africa has introduced several digital policy initiatives, including the [National Digital and Future Skills Strategy](#) and the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), gaps in implementation and coordination continue to limit their effectiveness. Fragmented responsibilities across national, provincial, and local institutions have slowed progress in closing access gaps, particularly in rural and underserved communities. As a result, despite relatively strong digital infrastructure and institutional capacity, ensuring equitable digital participation remains a central policy challenge.

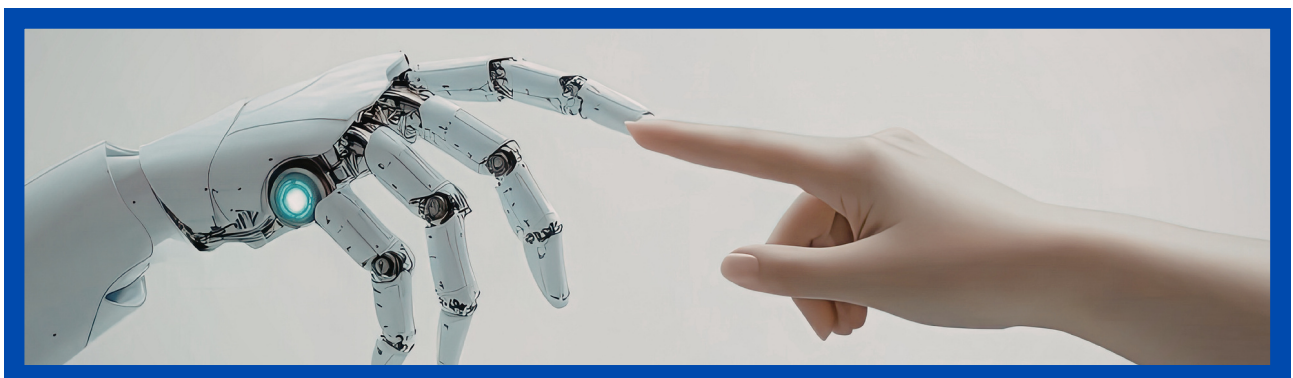
3.0 Recent Digital Development

South Africa ranks 3rd with a score of 0.69 among 43 African countries on the [CSEA Digital Preparedness Index](#), placing it in the top percentile on the continent. This strong performance highlights South Africa's leadership in digital enablers, driven by a robust business dynamism, infrastructure, and skills. Behind only Mauritius and Seychelles, South Africa's position reflects excellence in key dimensions like ICT adoption and e-participation, positioning it as one of the continent's digital uptake frontrunners. Major digital developments in South Africa include:

Advances in AI policy and ecosystem development

South Africa took measurable steps toward formalising its approach to artificial intelligence governance in 2024–2025. The [National AI Policy Framework](#) was released for public comment in October 2024 by the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies, outlining principles to guide future AI development, including an emphasis on ethics, human-centred design, risk management, and alignment with existing data protection laws (POPIA). This framework seeks to foster coordination across sectors, encourage research and development, and build institutional capacity for AI governance, even though a dedicated AI Act has yet to be enacted. In 2025 stakeholders continue to engage with the framework, with events such as the [AI stakeholder forum](#) launched by the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies, which emphasised inclusion and sustainability in the evolving AI ecosystem. These developments indicate a shift in AI governance from conceptual discussion toward structured policy engagement, though legislative and enforcement mechanisms remain a work in progress.

In March 2025, the South African Cabinet approved the [Digital Transformation of Government Roadmap](#), a structured plan to modernise public-sector service delivery and data interoperability over two phases. Phase 1 is running from March 2025 to February 2027, and Phase 2 is from March 2027 to February 2030, with the aim of establishing a single, trusted digital channel for citizens and businesses. As part of advancing this roadmap and aligning with global digital governance movements, South Africa joined the [Digital Public Goods Alliance](#) in September 2025, committing to collaborate on open-source digital tools and standards that can improve interoperability, inclusion, and public value while reducing vendor lock-in risks. These steps signal a policy shift toward coordinated digital public infrastructure and international cooperation, even as implementation across government entities will require sustained institutional commitment to achieve the roadmap's objectives.



Digital infrastructure and investment momentum

In 2025, South Africa continued to attract major global investment into its digital infrastructure, highlighting growing confidence in its digital economy. In July 2025, [Visa](#) opened its first Africa data centre in Johannesburg, a 1 billion rand (about \$57 million) facility. Around the same period, [Microsoft](#) announced an additional investment of 5.4 billion rand (about \$296 million) in AI infrastructure and digital skills development, including funding for technical certification exams for 50,000 individuals to build capacity in high-demand digital skills. These investments demonstrate an expanding base for data processing, cloud services, and AI capacity that support both private sector innovation and broader digital ecosystem growth.



National initiatives to improve digital literacy and inclusion

Alongside policy and infrastructure developments, South Africa has also made progress on digital literacy and inclusion. In October 2024, the [South African Digital Literacy Day](#) was established to promote digital skills, media literacy, and safe online practices through collaboration between library services, education organisations, and UNESCO initiatives. The second annual observance in [October 2025](#) brought together learners, community members, and stakeholders to participate in interactive sessions on coding, cyber safety, and emerging technology use. Institutionalising this national awareness day signals increased focus on building digital competence at community levels, particularly among youth and underserved populations, as part of the broader digital inclusion agenda.



4.0 Digital Governance in Place

South Africa's digital governance framework is anchored on a legal structure that seeks to balance innovation with the protection of individual rights. The Protection of Personal Information Act ([POPIA](#)) establishes clear rules for the lawful processing of personal data, including consent requirements, purpose limitations, data minimisation, and safeguards for cross-border data transfers. The [Cybercrimes Act of 2020](#) complements this framework by criminalising unlawful access to data, cyber fraud, and interference with critical information infrastructure. These laws position South Africa among the more formally developed data protection countries on the continent.

Digital governance outcomes are shaped by other sector regulators, [ICASA](#) which regulates the telecommunications infrastructure through which data flows, and the [Competition Commission](#), which increasingly addresses digital market concentration and platform dominance, and data-driven market power. This multi-agency structure reflects the depth of South Africa's digital regulatory ecosystem, but it requires sustained coordination, clear mandates, and enforcement capacity to remain effective as the digital economy continues to expand.

Regionally, as a signatory to the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection ([Malabo Convention](#)), which provides a common framework for data protection, cybersecurity, and electronic transactions across Africa, South Africa aligns with continental and global norms. Through South Africa's ([POPIA](#)) alignment with global data protection standards such as the EU General Data Protection Regulation ([GDPR](#)), the country is positioned to support and shape interoperable data governance in the region and across borders.



Table 1: Key Data Governance and Regulatory Indicators in South Africa

Data Regulation Indicator	South Africa's Status
Privacy and Data Protection	Present
Data Breach Notification Requirement	Present
Data Protection Institution	Present
Cross-border Data Flow Restrictions	Present
Cyber Crime	Present
Consumer Protection Law	Present
Electronic Transaction Regulation	Present
Status of Malabo Convention	Signatory

Key challenges remain in balancing strong protections with enabling innovations. Compliance costs pose a serious burden, while rapid growth in digital platforms, artificial intelligence applications, and cross-border data flows is testing the adequacy of existing governance tools. Continued policy refinement, clearer regulatory guidance, and sustained institutional learning will be essential to ensure that South Africa's digital governance framework remains both protective and enabling in a rapidly evolving digital economy.

Source: Author's computation

5.0 Summary of Key Indicators

Table 2: South Africa's Performance Across Core Digital Preparedness and Development Indicators, 2025

Panel a: Digital Preparedness Indicators

Digital Preparedness Indicator	Rank in Africa (43 countries Assessed)	Score
Digital Preparedness Index	3rd	0.69
Education and Skills	4th	0.65
Infrastructural Readiness	2nd	0.81
Business Dynamism and Environment	5th	0.77
Regulatory Framework and government effectiveness	10th	0.72
Macroeconomic Fundamentals	3rd	0.55

Panel b: Digital Development Indicators

Digital Development Indicator	Rank in Africa (47 countries Assessed)	Score
Internet Speed, Mbps	10th	47.35 Mbp
Fixed telephone subscription per 100 people	1st	135
Internet Users (% Population)	6th	74.7
Households with internet (% Population)	7th	75.3
E-Participation index	2nd	0.84
E-Government Index	18th	0.45