

# Digital Divide in Latin America and Opportunities for South Korea-Spain Cooperation

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## I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted, and in some ways, exacerbated, the already extremely complicated aspects of the Latin American continent: poverty, the wage gap between men and women, the lack of healthcare facilities capable of dealing with the emergency, and, not least, the latent issue of lack of digitalization in the region. The closure of schools, in fact, used as a tool to contain the spread of the virus, has brought to light the need to strengthen (in some cases even initiate) and spread high-speed internet access as an essential tool for the improvement of the digital education system, the creation of a digitalized public administration, and ultimately socioeconomic development.

This is the context of South Korea's current, but in fact already well-structured, interest in

contributing, through triangular cooperation with Spain, to the digitization of Latin American countries. This goal is also possible thanks to the very good relations between South Korea and Spain, which are, among other things, the result of a perhaps common and shared vision of the government's ethical values and development plan. The two countries have in fact similar parameters: both are defenders of international law, share democratic values and moreover South Korea is the third Asian country in terms of trade for Spain, after China and Japan (See ICEX 2022).

But above all, Spain's interest is to promote strategic cooperation especially in the digital field and renewable energy and tourism (which has had constant ascendancy).<sup>1</sup> Another particularly important element is the cul-

\* This paper was prepared in affiliation with the KIEP Visiting Scholar Program. The opinions expressed in this paper are the author's own and do not reflect the views of KIEP.

<sup>1</sup> In less than a decade, the number of Korean tourists visiting Spain each year has multiplied by more than 10. If in 2010

tural connection that exists between the two countries, as shown by the future opening of the Instituto Cervantes in Seoul in 2023, which seeks to respond to the growing demand for Spanish language learning in South Korea, the Asian country with the highest number of DELE exam candidates per capita (EFE 2022).

## II. Digital Divide in Latin America

As a result of the irretrievable spread of the virus, in March 2020 and the months that followed, the majority of Latin American countries found themselves facing long quarantine periods, during which most social and public services were interrupted due primarily to an impossibility of their governments to cope with the emergency while maintaining active public services such as schools, offices or private businesses. With regard to education, they opted to close schools and, later, following the European wake, reactivated classes in digital mode.

A joint report by CEPAL and UNESCO in August 2020 highlighted how, in the face of the socio-political upheaval that the world was experiencing, Latin America itself was almost completely unprepared for the new needs. However, despite these efforts, as in the case of many processes of change, Latin American countries are unevenly prepared to face this

crisis by taking advantage of digitalization. Although the region has made significant progress in reducing the gaps in access to the digital world in recent years, particularly thanks to the massification of mobile connectivity, there are still considerable gaps in effective access to the digital world, which has profound implications for the opportunities of digitalization in the region. This has profound implications for the opportunities and participation of the new generations, both in terms of the mere possibility of alphabetization and in terms of the possibilities that follow at the level of social ascendancy.

Proceeding to a more general analysis, as highlighted by the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSMA 2021), 93% of Latin Americans have broadband network coverage, but about 38% of them still do not use it. And people's use of the Internet is mainly related to personal and social communication. In addition, preliminary estimates by the International Labor Organization indicate that, at the worst moment of the crisis, in the second quarter of 2020, some 23 million people teleworked in the region. This represents between 20 and 30% of the wage earners who were actually working. Before the pandemic, that figure was less than 3% (Maurizio 2021: 2). And these statistics are affected not only by policies decided at the institutional level, company flexibility, but also the individual computer

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almost 43,000 Koreans arrived in Spain, in 2019, the last effective year for tourism before the outbreak of the health crisis, there were 630,000. In this prospect we insert the program The Spain-Korea Mutual Visits Program 2020-2022 that seeks to strengthen a series of cultural-touristic aspects between the two countries as part of a broader and more detailed strategy. Cfr. LA MONCLOA, 2021.

skills and the possibility to own a stable and secure connection at home.

Thus, we can grasp that there are two types of breaches in Latin America: the gap of structural inequality that exists and persists, and it is in this sense if digitization is not accompanied by effective policies, it can be an element that aggravates inequality; and the other gap is the digital skills, which remain scarce in the region, with which despite having access to digital services, the use of these could be confined to basic uses.

### III. Korea-Spain Cooperation and Future Scenarios in Latin America

In a recent virtual meeting held between the Real Instituto Elcano and the Korean Council of Latin America and the Caribbean, emerged the will – actually it had already arisen from a series of former meetings and agreements – to strengthen the goals of Korea-Spain cooperation to implement the use of technology. Both South Korea and Spain want to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the pandemic to boost digitalization and improve the sustainable economy in Latin America.

South Korea and Spain can complement each other in digital cooperation. Broadening the horizon, we must point out how the European Union, which has several projects with numerous geographical areas of the planet, is instead weak on the pragmatic level of development

collaborations with Latin America. This condition, however, could be revised as early as 2023, when Spain will hold the presidency of the Council of the European Union. Indeed, it represents the strongest link with Latin America, by virtue of historical past and linguistic connection. Even more, Spain could represent the tie between Asia and Latin America by establishing a rather interesting triangle.

The establishment of the EU-LAC Digital Alliance in 2022, will constitute a framework for digital engagement with the region and this could, subsequently, benefit highly technologized countries such as South Korea. Ultimately, Spain can be the access point for the effective implementation of digital cooperation in LAC, together with South Korea, but also an opportunity for South Korea itself to strengthen multilateral cooperation currently extended, only to a few countries.<sup>2</sup>

### IV. Conclusion

Although currently there are no projects already implemented, it seems important to emphasize the optimistic prospects arising from the future South Korea-Spain-Latin America triangle. In particular, it is interesting to understand how fruitful the strategy pursued by South Korea and Spain may prove to be, inserting themselves not on the sidelines of domestic financing but as major investors in an as yet untapped sector that could have many ethical aspects, contributing to the improvement of the lives of many Latin Americans.

<sup>2</sup> We refer, for example, to the Korea-Latin America startup joint venture partnerships formed through *Born2Global*.

However, it should be noted that an advancement in the technological condition and reduction of the digitization gap within Latin America also needs improvement in a set of domestic policies. For example, during the pandemic some Latin American governments eliminated VAT on mobile subscriptions. Interesting practices can be extracted from examples like this,

but they must be maintained over time. It is also necessary to increase the dialogue between the private and political sectors, a tax policy that will encourage consumers to take on home and mobile subscriptions, as a plan to stimulate the expansion of the digital spectrum. All these should form the basis for the future digital fabric of Latin America. **KIEP**

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