

Investing in assistive tech is a smart choice for governments, say experts

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You may not be aware of it, but assistive technology (AT) is everywhere. If you're using glasses to read this article, then you're using AT. If you used text-to-speech tools at work today, a ramp to get into a building, or

subtitles to watch TV, then you have used AT.

AT refers to assistive products such as wheelchairs, glasses, hearing aids, prosthetics, screen readers and their related systems and services that enable people to live independent lives. It helps children to go to school and learn, adults to earn an income, and everyone to access the opportunities they deserve, to live healthy, fulfilled lives.

Most people will need AT at some point in their lives and many will use AT throughout their entire life. Some require AT due to disabilities, while many people need to rely on AT simply as they get older. Access to these products is our human right.

However, as few as 3% of people in some [low-income countries](#) can access the AT they need, compared to 90% in high-income countries, according to a 2022 report by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF. This means that there are millions of children missing out on an education and adults unable to make a living, because they can't access the assistive technology they need.

To date, AT simply hasn't received the attention it desperately needs. The WHO/UNICEF report called out the huge gap in access and underlined the benefits of AT, including its return on investment. It highlighted the desperate need for investors, policymakers and governments to address the issue.

While we are seeing a growing momentum towards more action, it is far from enough.

So why has this gone unaddressed? One of the key problems is fragmentation: AT cuts across all sectors including health, education, livelihoods, humanitarian responses, aging, and disability. As such, it often falls between the cracks, with no one feeling real ownership of the

issue.

The routes to access AT are also highly variable. In high-income countries, how easy it is to access the products might depend on your local services. For those in low-income countries, the pathways are even fewer and farther between.

Often, it is left to the family to find the funds to buy the appropriate products, which can be far too expensive. A reliance on charity and well-intentioned but misguided donations, instead of coordinated and systemic efforts to increase access to AT, has dominated this field.

Currently, one billion people are missing out on the opportunities to participate in everyday life that AT affords.

US \$100K difference

We must now prioritize investment in these technologies and make them more available around the world, especially in the global South.

Investment makes economic sense. Research shows that investing in just four assistive technology products ([hearing aids](#), prostheses, eyeglasses and wheelchairs) would yield a return on investment of 9:1. For a child in a low- or middle-income country, access to assistive technology can also make a difference of US \$100,000 in their lifetime income.

While developing countries face some of the most acute inequalities regarding access to assistive technology, they are also a key part of the solution. We must be collaborative in our approach, bringing in industry and governments of low-income countries to tackle the problem.

Developing countries are endowed with abundant talent, natural resources and innovation, and there are already budding AT hubs across Africa and Asia in cities like Nairobi and Bangalore. Under the right

circumstances, these hubs can be drivers of local industry, manufacturing and distribution, but are largely overlooked, underfunded and unrecognized as important contributors to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and job creation. Investing in such innovation hubs and other assistive technology start-ups is a smart choice.

By incorporating AT into the manufacturing agenda early, we can also quickly achieve change. Certain developing nations are already well-positioned to bring the manufacture of AT products and repair services closer to their end-users. For instance, Kenya's Naivasha Special Economic Zone has strong potential. The availability of affordable power, coupled with cost-effective labor, could help AT companies reduce the production costs of their products, making them more affordable for users and governments.

International trade partnerships, such as the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), further offer strong potential. Such partnerships could help facilitate consolidation of markets and standards across continents and could lead to more efficient AT distribution channels, increasing accessibility for users.

But to realize all this, we first must raise greater awareness of [assistive technology](#). That's why ATscale, Innovate Now and several other global health and development organizations are joining forces with the private sector to call on policymakers and governments to accelerate investment into AT and create long-lasting change.

June 4 marked the first ever World Day for Assistive Technology. We use the day to speak up for everyone who needs access to AT and demand action from those in a position to make a difference. AT has been swept under the rug for too long and we hope you'll join us both in working towards a better, more equal future for all.

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