BOOK REVIEW

Fast-Forward Progress, Leveraging Tech to Achieve the Global Goals, Final Report

How Information and Communications Technology Can Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals – ICT & SDGs, Final Report

The Internet has been very useful in providing development professionals with free documents that not only provide intellectual rewards but also guidance, instruction and challenges for moving constructively ahead in such areas as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). One of these is *Fast-Forward Progress, Leveraging Tech to Achieve the Global Goals, Final Report*, ITU, 2017. This can be found at: https://www.itu.int/en/sustainable-world/Pages/report-hlpf-2017.aspx.

This is a collection of contributions by leaders in 29 UN programmes, specialised agencies and international organisations that focuses on various SDGs ranging from Health (Goal 4) and Gender Equality (Goal 5) to Climate Action (Goal 13). It includes contributors from UNICEF, UNFPA, ITU, UN Women, and others. It addresses the potential role of information and communication technologies in meeting the SDGs. It starts with the observation by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that "The impact and implications of the digital revolution are becoming more evident with each passing hour". The report focuses on examples of how the UN and other international agencies are adopting and adapting ICTs to maximise their impact in helping communities and people in need.

The document consists of 17 chapters that parallel the 17 SDGs. It starts with a chapter on "Ending Poverty in all its forms, everywhere". Contributed by the UN Development Programme, it discusses how ICTs are enabling poverty reduction, including the role that "big data" can play in reaching those people "furthest behind", and in understanding better who and why they are left behind. Citing a project in Uganda, the chapter shows how uses of big data are

contributing to a better understanding of gender biases "and ultimately inform policy measures to address poverty".

In another chapter, UNICEF addresses "how ICTs can help the world overcome the barriers that stand between millions of children and education" and specifically help meet SDG 4. In this chapter, authored by Anthony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director, the opportunities and challenges are made clear. He contends that while there are approximately 250 million children, who leave schools without ever learning how to read, write and do simple arithmetic, "ICTs can help us reach these left-behind children".

Readers of this report can learn various ways nations have responded to the call for reaching the Goals. One example that Lake cites is in the Sudan "where the Can't Wait to Learn initiative uses solar–powered [computer] tablets and interactive, self-paced software to help out-of-school children access the official Sudanese primary-level mathematical curriculum".

William Lacy Swing, Director-General of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), offers a chapter dealing with SDG10, Facilitating Orderly, Safe Regular and Responsible Migration and Mobility of People, a vital issue in today's world. He addresses the importance of advancing the socio-economic well-being of migrants and the need to deal with "the mobility dimensions of crises". Noting that ICTs are playing a role in migration, both positive and negative, he reports that IOM is developing a mobile phone application (MigApp) "to help migrants make informed decisions about migration by increasing two-way communication between IOM and users". This is designed to offset the large amount of misleading and unreliable information currently being accessed "by people on the move".

Other authors from UN organisations and World Wildlife International such as UN Women, the ITU, WHO, UN Habitat and others identify many issues that confront reaching the Goals, but each also identifies ways that progress can be made. As the title suggests, "leveraging tech" is among the solutions.

A second document is in two parts. First is: *How Information and Communications Technology Can Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals – ICT & SDGs, Final Report*. This is a study that was researched, compiled and written by collaborators from Columbia University (USA), Sweden's Ericcson, Mobile for Development (GSMA), Sustainable Engineering Lab, Centre for Policy Dialogue, and the International Telecommunications Union. Professor Jeffrey D. Sachs, Head of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, was the lead author. A partner piece has the same main title but carries the subtitle: *Key Research Insights: Summary*. We treat them together as "the report".

The report starts with the assertion that the SDGs "are definitely 'stretch' goals that will require a transformation of societies that is far deeper and faster than in the past. If they are to be achieved, these goals must leverage existing and widely deployed technologies, such as broadband [technologies}". Mobile technology is especially identified as having a major role in the transformation. The report says that

"Mobile subscriptions in Africa have gone from almost no subscribers in 2000 to around 900 million today [2017]". The report notes that mobile phones have already allowed for "dramatic breakthroughs" in such cases as e-finance and e-health, overcoming long-standing gaps in access to facilities such as bank branches and clinics. The report indicates that in many parts of the world today, ICTs are enabling transformation of the most expensive public services such as education and health care, and they also advance low income countries' economies such as agriculture, trade/ecommerce, and transportation.

The report suggests that there are five major ways in which ICTs can dramatically speed the uptake of SDG-supporting services. One is by rapidly spreading access to ICTs. Data reveal that this is happening: the spread of mobile phones, computers, the Internet, and social media has been "the fastest adoptions of technology in human history". Mobile subscriptions went from a few tens of thousands in 1980 to around 7 billion subscriptions in 2015. Facebook users went from zero in 2004, the year Facebook was launched, to 1.5 billion users in mid-2015. Third generation and above mobile broadband coverage worldwide will go from almost 1 billion subscribers in 2010 to 7.7 billion subscribers in 2020 – covering roughly 90 percent of the world's population. Smartphones will go from near-zero subscriptions in 1999 to 6.1 billion subscriptions in 2020.

The second way is that ICT can speed the uptake would be to markedly reduce the cost of deploying new services. In healthcare, for example, ICT makes possible a greatly expanded role for low-cost Community Health Workers (CHWs), enabling many diagnoses and treatments to be made at the community level when CHWs visit house-holds – rather than at high-cost facilities. In education, ICT enables students to access quality online teaching even when no qualified teachers are locally available; and online finance allows individuals to obtain banking services even when no banks are present. Readers can explore in the report three additional ways ICTs can speed the uptake of SDG-supporting services.

The case studies in *Final Report* highlight the many practical hurdles that confront effective large-scale implementation of areas such as e-health, m-health, m-commerce, e-education, and smart energy services. One case: in the early stages of the Connect to Learn project in Uganda and Kenya, where the mission was to address the lack of universal access to quality education with emphasis on marginalised people, especially girls, a lack of ICT and pedagogical skills in the beginning proved to be significant barriers to ICT integration in classrooms. The report identifies lessons learned in this case, and a brighter outcome occurred in future applications of Connect to Learn. The "Lessons Learned" sections of a variety of the case studies presented in Final *Report* provide a valuable resource for many, from government and NGO leaders to university students.

The main policy conclusion reached in the *Summary* was that governments need to ensure that the entire public sector, including service delivery in health, education, and infrastructure,

is fully supported by high-quality ICT infrastructure. Furthermore, "the first job of every government is to place the SDGs alongside current realities and the current pace of change". Governments will find, the report concludes, that, with few exceptions, the Business-as-Usual trajectory is insufficient to achieve the SDGs by 2030. Thus, government leaders must engage in a "back-casting process" to ask what it will take to achieve success. They need to go from the target in 2030 to the steps that are needed today.

The *Final Report* is available free at: https://www.ericsson.com/assets/local/news/2016/05/ict-sdg.pdf. The *Summary* is at: http://unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ICTSDG_InterimReport_Web.pdf. These documents would provide a valuable resource for discussions and seminars in headquarters and classrooms.

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