

ICTS FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABLE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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CONTEXT

Over the last two decades, from the Earth Summit in 1992 to Rio+20, sustainable human development has become ever more critical in global development policies to ensure that the needs of future generations are not forever compromised by the choices made today. For UNDP, this translates into the belief that human capacity is enriched when, along with decent standards of living and better services, people have fair and equitable governing systems and is able to participate actively in local, regional and national governance processes where decisions affecting them are made.

In this same period of time, the development playing field has been changing due to the new emerging economies, collectively labeled BRICsⁱ, allowing these countries to become

important actors in global socio-economic, political and governance issues. This shifting global geo-political dynamic is starting to impact the evolution of development assistance, widening the playing field, rapidly changing global economic dynamics, and fostering new bi-lateral and multi-lateral cooperation.

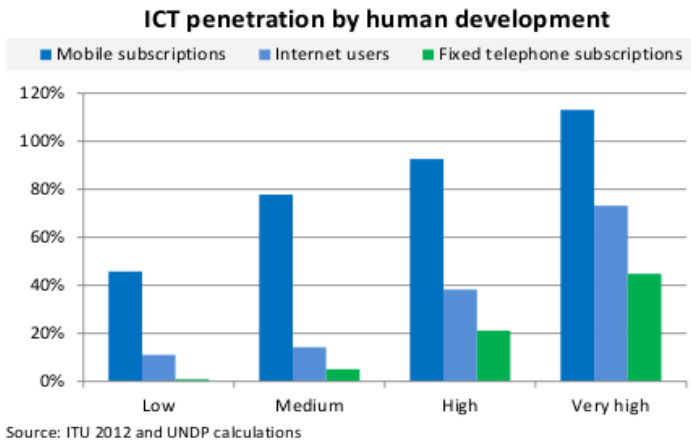
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On the information and communication technologies (ICTs) side, the last decade has witnessed the rapid diffusion of mobile technologies which has put digital devices in the hands of billions of people. The latest estimates suggest that there are over six billion mobile subscribers globally, and around 80% of them are in developing countries. This has well surpassed Internet diffusion, which after 20 years is still only available to 2.5 billion, most of whom are in developed countriesⁱⁱ. Figure 1 shows the difference between mobile penetration and Internet penetration, and how mobiles are now in the hands of at least 50% of the population in low HDI countries. Mobile expansion has been complemented by the emergence of social media platforms which can help users to reach millions if not billions of people in real-time. Social media is innovative because it is user-driven, with content generated and distributed in real-time by motivated individuals, reaching millions of people around the world. It also provides quasi-free access and some platforms have achieved global notoriety for having close to one billion users.

UNDP recognized early on the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to support development, and integrated them as a catalytic component of the sustainable development agenda right after the 1992 summit. Indeed, UNDP pioneered important work in this area by bringing together innovations in ICTs to foster both sustainable human development and the participation of non-state stakeholders in the processⁱⁱⁱ.

By the same token, broader access to ICTs was recognized as one of the 18 targets in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) identified in 2000^{iv}.

Figure 1. ICT penetration by human development



Today, as we are working towards a post-2015 development agenda, the role that ICTs can play in addressing traditional development challenges needs to be revisited. Several of the MDGs targets agreed on in 2000 will not be reached by 2015 – for example the goals related to maternal health and mortality. In addition, there is the need - and the demand - to make the post-2015 process more open and participatory. Considered together, the potential for ICTs to play a role in moving both forward is critical to ensure long-term commitment and sustainability of development initiatives. What is crucial today is to find new and innovative solutions for tackling core development problems. And it is here where ICTs can make a real difference in the broader sustainable human development agenda.

CORE ISSUES

The recent global economic crisis and ever-growing demands of climate change have added new challenges for developing countries in achieving the MDGs, requiring broader global cooperation and greater innovation. While ICTs offer broad innovative potential, and are certainly key to disseminating other kinds of advances, development agendas are still struggling to effectively harness them. And this is indeed one of the core issues that need to be addressed today.

First and foremost, ICTs are a means to an end, a catalyst for human development, and not ends in themselves. Consider MDG target 18 on ICT access, which may actually be achieved by 2015, ahead of other seemingly more critical targets. Yet access alone will not necessarily drive forward other development priorities – and actually, it may even compete with them in some instances.

Second, ICTs are a constant source for innovation which today is taking root in developing countries. Social entrepreneurs and NGOs are taking matters into their own hands and providing new solutions to local development issues, in direct response to local demands and needs. Service delivery for marginalized and most vulnerable populations is starting to take off and enhance social inclusion.

And third, new ICTs can undergird participatory and collaborative processes by giving voice to the voiceless and potentially making them part of key policy and decision-making processes. New streams of interactivity and feedback, such as with crowdsourcing and social networks, are offering people new opportunities to voice their needs and be part of decision and policy-making processes via ICTs.

What new ICTs really offer is more possibilities for human-centered social innovation, which offers people greater autonomy and individual agency to improve their lives. People no longer have to rely only on governments, the private sector or donors to address local development gaps.

For example, social media, in combination with mobile technologies was indeed important during the “Arab Spring” for leveraging public opinion and mobilizing core groups of people who were able to help foster broader political change. Whereas people used to have to knock on doors and send leaflets around to generate support for a gathering, nowadays armed with a mobile phone, users can reach out to each other, to their communities, to their governments and to the world using information gateways provided by social networks.

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If strategically deployed as enablers, ICTs are important catalysts for social innovation that can help improve governance, foster local solutions that meet the needs of local populations and support sustainable human development in the post-2015 development agenda.

However, ICTs are not a panacea. Many mobile initiatives do not scale up, for instance, and cannot be easily replicated in all contexts. It is here where policy development and forging multi-stakeholder partnerships are essential for accelerating the achievement of internationally-agreed development targets.

PRIORITIES AND INTERVENTIONS

ICTs potential in the 21st century is to transform the way we do business, how we interact with each other and with public institutions, and how we engage in political affairs. The following represent several possibilities for how ICTs can help us achieve critical international development goals and overall sustainable human development:

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1. Effective public service delivery

There are now a plethora of ICT solutions and applications being used to modernize and transform public service delivery institutions and foster transparency and accountability. ICT solutions are enhancing and transforming basic service delivery in health, agriculture and education among others.

ICTs can also help stakeholders to better represent their priorities and needs, and at the same time assist governments and development partners to more effectively respond to these demands. ICTs thus help inform and guide decisions on public development investments by bringing supply and demand together, which in turn helps ensure those decisions are targeted towards the most critical gaps and thus have greater impact.

2. Enhancing inclusive participation

ICTs can open up new channels for dialogue and consultation between stakeholders and government by providing more avenues through which engagement is possible. By offering a broader set of communication channels, governments can reach far more people for dialogue and consultations, while historically marginalized communities in turn can find new opportunities for influencing public policy and decision-making processes affecting their lives.

For instance, both old and new ICTs such as mobiles and radios have been essential in expanding access to knowledge and information, in improving the delivery of key services to people who need them most, and in enabling the participation of the poor and marginalized in public governance processes.

3. Open government & access to information

Participation, accountability and transparency are the cornerstones of open government initiatives such as the *Open Government Partnership* (OGP). ICTs can broaden access to public information such as budgets, laws and policies, and data, and enable more transparency and government accountability. ICTs can substantially reduce the cost of production, reproduction and distribution of public information and public

data, while at the same time provide new channels of communication for stakeholders to disseminate information on a global scale.

In turn, social innovators can act as *infomediaries* for those sectors of the population with no access to ICTs, providing public information and data tailored to the needs of local communities and offering open data applications that can present complex data in simple formats to help others meaningfully participate in public deliberations.

4. Fostering social innovation

More and more social entrepreneurs in developing countries are deploying innovative solutions for mobile phones that cater to local needs and challenges – everything from improving vote monitoring to mobile banking services in hard-to-reach locations. And these innovations are now diffusing throughout the world, generating new jobs and livelihoods. Platforms such as Ushahidi and MPesa, for example, have become truly global successes and are being used and replicated in many countries.

5. Empowering women and youth

When it comes to ICT access, both women and children still struggle to have the same access as men, even though between women and youth, they constitute much of the world's population - half of the world's population is now 24 years old or younger and the vast majority live in developing countries. A recent report indicates that women are 21% less likely to own a mobile phone than men, and many lag behind in the skills needed for employment and navigating modern services, further widening the information, knowledge, and opportunity divide. ICTs require that complementary policies explicitly addressing gender and youth inequalities are in place.

On the other hand, the potential of mobile technology and social networking platforms for advancing development and innovation in the hands of women and youth is great. ICTs can enable better health care delivery through remote consultations, entrepreneurship through access to pricing information, extension services and mobile banking, education and learning through on line resources, and participation in decision-making processes through better public information and access to public processes. Women and young people are the natural champions of long-term sustainable development policies and programmes and their participation in these processes is crucial^v.

6. Tackling crisis response and conflict prevention

New ICTs, particularly mobiles, allow for the rapid sharing of information for early warning and early response, as well as for more precise monitoring of conflicts, crisis and the environment. As conflict management tools, mobile technologies have helped establish networks of communication and crisis mapping systems, using crowdsourcing applications for instance. This in turn has helped governments to build national conflict response infrastructures and to better manage the prevention of social and political confrontations.

7. Confronting the challenges of climate change

And even though ICTs are said to generate about two percent of carbon emissions, they are also part of the solution. New ICT solutions such as cloud computing, smart cities and smart grids and meters provide the basis for green urban planning and green public administration, for improving water management systems and effective e-waste management, as well as for green supply chains. ICT solutions can also provide the platforms to monitor climate change and the requisite *infostructure* to generate and maintain the complex models that scientists use to manage climate change and adaptation.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ BRIC traditionally stands for Brazil, Russia, India, and China, although the list also includes other small- to medium-sized economies, such as Vietnam, South Africa, and sometimes Mexico and South Korea.

ⁱⁱ See: UNDP. 2012. Mobile Technologies and Human Empowerment: Enhancing human development through participation and innovation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Right after the Earth Summit, UNDP launched the Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) to enhance collaboration and communication between stakeholders via the Internet, still in its infancy. After this, UNDP began over a decade of pioneering work on ICT for human development, while promoting innovative collaboration among stakeholders. See "Learning from the Sustainable Development Networking Programme", UNDP, 2012.

^{iv} Human Development Report 2001 "Making Technologies Work for Human Development" at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2001/>.

^v For instance, see a recent study by CTA (www.cta.int) showed that at least in Africa, young women demonstrate the most eagerness to adopt Web 2.0 and social media. See: <http://www.web2fordev.net/component/content/article/1-latest-news/196-africa-young-women-most-eager-adopters-of-web20-and-social-media-a-study-by-cta>

PHOTO CREDIT

Photo: Girl with mobile phone, Egypt.
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