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Information and Communications Technologies as an Instrument to Leverage the Millennium Development Goals

The Development Challenges

Despite real progress on some fronts, there remain dramatic disparities in levels of human development: one in five of the world's people live on less than one dollar per day and one in seven suffers from chronic hunger. The international community has responded to the pressing need to address this state of affairs at the United Nations Millennium Summit held on 5 September, 2000, at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. It agreed on the key development goals to be reached by 2015: halving the number of people living in poverty, providing universal primary education, improving health and sanitation, combating HIV/AIDS, enhancing the empowerment of women, and reversing the loss of environmental resources.

This consensus reflects not only the necessity of addressing poverty and other human needs, but also an emerging sense that the international community is at a crossroads in the development process. The unprecedented pace and scale of global flows in information, products, capital, people and ideas, if properly harnessed, offer the potential to create new opportunities for those who have thus far been excluded from gains in human development. But the same forces could also actually widen the gap and trap developing countries, especially least-developed countries, in a perpetual spiral of poverty and exclusion.

For Africa, however, achieving these goals presents itself as a most challenging task. The contemporary African experience is characterised by mixed trends. While some countries continue to take major economical and political strides, several continue to be plagued by famine, drought, disease and political crisis. All over the continent, however, Africans are taking charge of the definition and management of their development. Fortunately, there is great willingness by the international community and African organisations to assist Africa to achieve its self-defined sustainable development goals.

The current debate on the importance of access to ICT and its value in addressing global development disparities is part of this wider discussion on the potential benefits and risks of globalisation. This is because ICT is itself a key enabler of globalisation: the level and pace of global flows in physical and intangible assets have been dramatically boosted by the ability to connect vast networks of individuals across geographic boundaries, at negligible marginal cost. This relationship between ICT and globalisation makes ICT interventions critical to development policy.

Industrialised nations that have a high degree of ICT penetration also experience high levels of wealth and human development. However, there is still considerable uncertainty about the nature of the relationship between ICT and development in the developing world. Recent efforts launched by the international community—including the G8 Digital Opportunity Task Force (Dot Force) and the United Nations ICT Task Force—directly recognise the urgent need to harness ICT to contribute

to the achievement of development goals. These efforts are significant, not only because they seek to develop strategies and initiate innovative and effective action on the ground, but also because they represent and encourage new forms of collaborative interaction among government, private sector, multilateral, and non-profit organisations.

ICT is not a Goal but a Tool for Development

Debate regarding the effectiveness of using ICT to help achieve development goals arises not only around questions concerning the evidence in support of a relationship between ICT and development, but also more substantially from inherent doubts about the relevance of ICT to achieving sustainable development and fears that investment in ICT will draw resources away from traditional development goals.

ICT can be a powerful tool for development, both because of its inherent characteristics and the mounting empirical evidence that suggests it can, in fact, contribute a great deal to development goals. It can do so at both the micro and national levels by increasing the effectiveness and reach of development interventions, enhancing good governance and lowering the costs of service delivery. Moreover, the right complement of targeted ICT interventions has the potential to play an even more substantial role in accelerating a sustainable dynamic of social and economic development in developing countries.

It should be clear from the outset that ICT is not a panacea for the problems of the developing world. Social and economic development is dependent on many factors, which should be addressed through an overall development strategy. Factors such as political stability, macroeconomic governance, transparency and accountability of national and local administrations, the rule of law, physical infrastructure (for example, clean water and energy), and basic literacy should also be addressed in an explicit manner, and ICT should not be seen as a substitute. However, the integration of ICT into overall national development strategies can help facilitate implementation, expand scope and coverage, and increase the results for most of these factors. Moreover, development

goals cannot be achieved by government efforts alone. The involvement of civil society and the private sector is crucial.

Need for Strategic Partnerships

Given the scale and complexity of the challenge and the need for a multi-pronged response that can fill gaps and address market failures, few developing countries can be expected to succeed on their own in bridging the digital divide. There is a need for strategic partnerships at the local, regional and global levels that can bring together all stakeholders around well coordinated actions to stimulate a new development dynamic, using ICT as an enabling tool to empower the poor so that they can participate productively in the new global economy.

At present there are many initiatives and activities at all levels and in all regions of the world attempting to address the digital divide. Diversity of effort is vital, since one size does not fit all. At the same time, the cumulative impact of diverse initiatives would be greatly enhanced if we could strengthen synergies, *ensure complementarities*, promote mutual awareness, that is, if one could more effectively support, replicate and scale up practices at work.

The key element here is the involvement of all sectors and stakeholders—not only in the design of strategies, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in their implementation—in such a way that each has specific roles and responsibilities. Strategic partnerships are required to aggregate the capabilities and resources to address the pervasive market failures in developing countries and to create win-win situations for the various sectors and stakeholders involved. The government and the private sector are complementary to achieve this objective—each is dependent on the cooperation of others to accomplish its goals.

A new form of collaboration and coordinated action between public, private, civil society and international organisations is needed. There is an urgent need to build upon, and go beyond, existing

partnerships to redefine roles and responsibilities at the global, national, and local level.

Heads of government should provide the necessary leadership to confront existing barriers and promote innovative solutions. National and international private industry should work closely together to adopt, adapt and develop technologies to meet the unique needs and challenges of the less fortunate. Civil society should be a critical player and help assure that ICT is used in a way that targets and addresses specific development goals and priorities. A strong vision, which can be used to build consensus on national priorities and secure the commitment of all players involved, is vital to the success of national ICT initiatives.

Moreover, it is necessary to handle space and pressure to address resistance, create ownership, and devise incentives for change. A multi-stakeholder task force can thus work to align the goals, incentives, roles and responsibilities of diverse stakeholders and provide win-win opportunities. Without this sort of alignment, partnerships will not be sustainable and results will fall short of expectations for all involved.

Close coordination is another aspect to take into consideration in order not only to prevent duplication of efforts, but also to achieve positive synergies. Cross-fertilisation of ideas, multiple uses of ICT infrastructure and facilities, and a re-direction of available resources to crucial and under-funded areas are examples of the gains to be realised from forming this new type of collaboration and coordinated action between public, private, civil society and international organisations.

The successful design and implementation of a strategy focused on ICT as an enabler of development requires the formation of national and international collaboration involving all stakeholders. For instance, at the international level, both the G8 Digital Opportunity Task Force (Dot Force) and the UN ICT Task Force¹ have made substantial contributions to furthering the understanding of the role of ICT in the development process. Through sharing best practices, promoting dialogue, highlighting success stories, and building consensus on the new agenda, national and international strategic collaborations are crucial ingredients to help countries harness the benefits of ICT as a development enabler.

The Engine for Change has to be the Private Sector

The analysis of ICT initiatives targeting key development imperatives suggests that while individual ICT interventions can have a positive impact on social and economic development outcomes, many initiatives experience barriers to scalability and sustainability under current conditions.

The first lesson learned from past experience in developing countries is that ICT solutions should be built to last. Initiatives that are planned and managed using a business model are likely to be more sustainable and have a more substantial impact. Initiatives need to include mechanisms for growth and replication into their operating models from the outset, so as to offer scalable and sustainable solutions.

Secondly, initiatives should be driven by user demands, identified and realised through direct participation and ownership. Experience from many initiatives demonstrates the importance of designing initiatives to be demand-driven and locally owned. Technology imposed on a community of users who have not independently identified a need for it is unlikely to flourish.

Thirdly, initiatives should be sensitive to local conditions and limitations. Technology employed should be affordable, physically accessible, easy to use and maintain, and flexible enough to accommodate user demands for new services. Similarly, initiatives demonstrating a capacity to embrace adaptive and flexible solutions are more likely to be sustainable.

Finally, initiatives should be explicit about their development goals and how they will directly impact the target population. Initiatives that clearly identify development goals within the needs and context of the target population are more likely to develop effective operating models and deliver tangible results.

These four lessons suggest that ICT interventions focusing on development goals must address a variety of interrelated dimensions to secure an enduring impact. But what is important to note is that those lessons constitute key core competencies that private sector companies use in their day-to-day operating lives. While grassroots

entrepreneurial activity is to be universally encouraged, the potential impact of these ICT interventions would be far greater had they been conceived in conjunction with private sector companies. Pursuing ICT interventions in this manner would enable the creation of synergies that stand-alone initiatives cannot achieve by themselves. In fact, there is no doubt that private sector companies could be a great asset to ICT initiatives in developing countries.

Nevertheless, the interests of key stakeholders must be broadly aligned with each other and with the goals of the intervention. Identifying or engineering win-win situations is critical to securing lasting commitment from all necessary parties, including participation from the local community, private enterprises, non-government organisations, multi-lateral organisations and governments. Strong public and private institutional support and leadership are required to maintain commitment and alignment from all parties. This requires clear vision and direction, defined roles and responsibilities for all partners, adequate funding, sufficient technical and administrative means, and integration with existing local institutions.

In fact, successful initiatives not only have effectively coordinated efforts in different areas, they have leveraged the synergies created by the *complementarity* of aligned ICT interventions. For this reason, we at the UN ICT Task Force consider not only that the private sector is the engine for change, but also that public-private partnerships under the aegis of the UN is the best way to ensure successful initiatives through the development of top-notch 'ICT for development' strategies.

Recent e-Initiatives

As a contribution to the global effort, many initiatives have been carried out to help mobilise, focus and coordinate action by developing a strategic approach to harnessing the benefits of ICT for sustainable development.

Digital Opportunity Task Force

The Dot Force was created under the Okinawa Charter on the Global Information Society, by the G8 Leaders at the Kyushu-Okinawa Summit in July 2000. Through a nine-point action plan—the Genoa Plan of Action—and several implementation teams, the Dot Force has created a number of processes in each of the priority areas of the Genoa Action Plan.

A number of projects have been or are in the process of being implemented in areas such as networks of expertise on access and connectivity, human capacity building, local content, and national and regional e-strategies.

United Nations ICT Task Force

The UN ICT Task Force is a United Nations endeavour that aims at fully incorporating representatives from public and private sectors, non-profit organisations, and civil society as equal members. The Task Force's membership includes some of the world's most prominent business leaders as full-fledged members whose decision-making powers is equal to that of the representation of governments and multilateral organisations. Each member offers a unique perspective and expertise from his or her respective field. Through this system of collective input, the Task Force has already achieved a common understanding on priorities and tasks, as well as on the most effective modalities for achieving the goals set out in its mandate.

World Economic Forum

The World Economic Forum benefits from the contribution of the world's most important corporations and aims at creating partnerships among all leaders of society on major world concerns. It constitutes a platform where a selected 'team' analyses and articulates global issues, where task forces are formed and projects and initiatives launched.

Global Business Dialogue on e-Commerce

Since its creation in January 1999, GBDe has represented a major step forward in the establishment of a comprehensive approach to electronic commerce issues, both by delivering a wealth of information through its website and databases and by connecting and coordinating major stakeholders in the field.

The GBDe Steering Committee is divided into three regional hubs (Americas, Asia/Oceania, Europe/Africa) and focuses on eight key areas: consumer confidence, cyber security, convergence, digital bridges, e-government, intellectual property rights, trade and taxation. It has become a significant tool and a leading private sector voice on e-commerce policy and e-commerce related areas.

Global Information Infrastructure Commission

The GIIC Commission is a non-governmental initiative that, with the support of leaders from developed and developing countries, aims at fostering private sector leadership and enhanced private-public sector cooperation in the creation of an improved information infrastructure. Key focuses for the Commission until now have been education, health-care and e-Government. Projects have been launched in these areas, drawing on the expertise of participating GIIC companies, and with the goal of providing a blueprint of strategies for other ICT stakeholders in the private or public sector.

Conclusion

We all know that in order to have tangible results, the private sector has to commit significantly and invest financially.

The past years have been devoted to analyses and studies on assessments and best practices. There is now a degree of maturity in the

understanding of the issues. The question is now how to move ahead to the next phase.

The level of advancement in Information and Communications Technologies takes the lead in determining the level of development in this day and age. Although the information and technological revolution is spearheading the creation of the Global Village, it is also pushing away rural and least developed societies and cultures more into their isolated margins. This trend can be reversed through the use of ICTs in achieving development goals. By partnering private, public and civic organisations, ICTs can be mobilised to achieve economic development in Africa in many significant and profound ways. One is through enhancing connectivity to rural communities, therefore giving them a heard voice. Another is through extending Microcredit (among other financial services) to small entrepreneurs and giving them an opportunity to expand and solidify their business. The range of which ICTs can enhance development is endless, and it extends beyond economic growth to cover other social aspects, such as health and education.

Governments also have to show their willingness to make a commitment to mainstream ICT into development operations. A specific proportion of their official development assistance (ODA) budget could be allocated to ICT in order to increase development effectiveness (for example, in education, health, e-government, transparency).

If the G8 and the rest of the developed nations do so, and major private sector initiatives can be effectively put together and pushed forward, national governments in developing countries will be encouraged to do the same. We will then have a strong message for the years to come, and a real basis for making breakthroughs with public-private partnership serving as platforms for sustainable actions and as agents for change and long lasting development.

NOTES

1. For further information about the UN ICT Task Force, see Chapter Five. More information is available on the website: www.unicttaskforce.org