

Thematic review of the SDGs at HLPF 2017: Input on cross-cutting issue of information and communication technologies (ICT) for development by the Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development

The Partnership on Measuring Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Development was launched in 2004 to improve the availability and quality of internationally comparable ICT statistics. The Partnership is currently made up of 14 partner organizations: International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), The World Bank, United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability (UNU-IASS), UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), UN Economic and Social Commission for Latin America and Caribbean (ECLAC), UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), EUROSTAT, UNEP Secretariat of the Basel Convention (SBC), International Labour Organization (ILO).

This note provides inputs to the 2017 HLPF on the contribution of the Partnership towards the 2030 Agenda in general, and particularly for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and respective targets that are most related to ICTs, following the template, inspired by the report of the Secretary-General on global follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/70/684).

a) Assessment of the situation regarding the principle of "ensuring that no one is left behind at the global level"

The 2030 Agenda recognizes that "The spread of information and communication technology and global interconnectedness has great potential to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies". Broadband Internet access and use in particular are enablers of the digital economy, and can be a tool for inclusive and sustainable development. In this sense, developing country access to the Internet through mobile networks has grown, and prices continue to drop. In 2016, 84 per cent of the global population was estimated to be covered by 3G mobile broadband signal, up from 45 per cent in 2011. However, digital divide persists between developed and developing countries, between larger and smaller enterprises, and between urban and rural areas within countries, especially in low-income countries. Least developed countries in particular are being left behind, as for most people in lower-income countries Internet access is still limited and not affordable. ITU data show that fixed broadband prices can be 3 times higher in developing countries than in developed countries, and mobile broadband can be twice as expensive. Yet mobile networks are also their only access to the Internet, and Africa is the region with the lowest mobile broadband penetration.

In this context, more and better statistics on access to and use of ICT can inform policies to reduce the digital divide. However, while available data on ICT infrastructure is generally good, statistics on access to and use of ICT by households and enterprises from developing countries are scarce. Data to inform policies in areas such as ICT in education, e-government, international trade in ICT goods and services, and e-waste also need further development.

b) Identification of gaps, areas requiring urgent attention, risks and challenges

While none of the SDGs focuses exclusively on ICT, four of them explicitly mention ICTs: Goal 4 (target 4.b), Goal 5 (target 5.b), Goal 9 (target 9.c) and Goal 17 (target 17.8). However, to measure the contribution of ICT to sustainable development, the SDG monitoring framework will not produce sufficient information. For example, with relation to target 9.c, the mobile population coverage indicators do not monitor whether individuals are actually using those networks, the affordability aspect, nor the access and use of the Internet by the productive sector.¹ Apart from the access and affordability, other challenges that limit Internet use in LDCs are low levels of ICT literacy, a scarcity of local content, and lack of trust. Related indicators to measure the contribution of ICTs to sustainable development should be considered in addition to the indicators in the SDG monitoring framework. In particular, additional ICT indicators would be useful to measure progress towards SDGs 1, 2, 8, 13, and 16. In total, the Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development has identified 30 targets that would benefit from additional indicators to the impact of ICT in progress towards sustainable development.

For example, countries could produce data to evaluate progress in the usage, affordability, and quality of mobile broadband, as mobile phones have allowed the poorest to become connected, and are increasingly tools for entrepreneurship, empowerment, and even financial inclusion. Similarly, data on barriers to ICT use, or reflecting progress in the ICT skills of individuals and enterprises or the availability of relevant Internet content, will help evaluate policies aimed at translating improved access and use into growing the positive impact of ICT on livelihoods and its contribution to poverty eradication. To further reinforce this, the Partnership is setting up a Task Group on ICT and the SDGs, which will develop a thematic set of ICT indicators for the SDGs.

c) Valuable lessons learned on eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity

Access to the Internet by individuals and enterprises, in particular by micro and SMEs in LDCs, can improve access to services and resources that support goals and targets other than 9.c, such as ending poverty (Goal 1.4), women's empowerment (Goal 5.b), innovation (Goal 8.3), financial inclusion (Goal 8.10), integrating value chains (Goal 9.3), and enabling exports (Goal 17.11). Policy-making and monitoring of these goals must take into account access to and use of ICT as enabling tools. The Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development can continue to support the production of official ICT statistics and indicators that will enable follow-up of SDG implementation.

¹ Target 9.c is to "significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020." The chosen indicator to measure this is "percentage of the population covered by a mobile network, broken down by technology."

d) Emerging issues likely to affect the realization of poverty eradication and achieving prosperity

Agenda 2030 needs high-quality, timely and disaggregated data to enable policymakers to make the right decisions for sustainable development. International organizations and Governments will need to leverage new data sources and the private sector, including big data and the concept of the “Internet of things”, to ensure that relevant information on ICT indicators included in the SDGs are produced and made available.

ICTs are increasingly necessary for the delivery of services and will be particularly critical within the context of the 2030 Agenda. Failure to acknowledge the transformative power of ICTs would not only lead to the widening of digital divides but could also aggravate inequalities in all development domains.

ICT for development is both a cross-cutting and multi-stakeholder issue. Stakeholders include the ministries in charge of ICTs, the regulatory authorities and national statistical offices, as well as the private sector. In addition, new data sources have emerged such as big data, data produced by machine-to-machine, or by the “Internet of things”. For example, mobile phone data can uncover poverty trends in developing countries and thus help shape poverty alleviation measures.

Governments and international organizations need to consider how this information can support the implementation of the SDGs, and collaborate with data producers in the private sector to leverage such data. New capacities and skills will be needed by national statistical offices in order to mine these new data sources. The use of big data will also entail addressing data protection, privacy and security, as well as protocols for data-sharing between private sources and national statisticians.

e) Areas where political guidance by the HLPF is required

The HLPF might wish to encourage countries to recognize, monitor, and share best practices on how ICTs are key enablers of the various sustainable development goals.

The HLPF might also wish to refer countries to the proposal by the Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development to the SDG monitoring framework and encourage them to consider producing the Partnership's core indicators when measuring progress in the implementation of specific goals and targets, as well as the thematic indicators the Partnership will be producing.

f) Policy recommendations on ways to accelerate progress in poverty eradication

To measure the extent to which ICT access and use help reduce poverty and improve livelihoods, more indicators need to be considered to reflect affordability, the inclusiveness and quality of access to ICT, in particular mobile broadband, the level of Internet use by individuals, disaggregated population groups, and enterprises disaggregated by size and productive sector.

Developing countries currently lack sufficient, good quality data to plan, monitor, and evaluate ICT for SDG policies. To increase the availability and quality of these data, efforts to strengthen the capacity of national statistical systems in producing ICT statistics must be increased. The need for official ICT statistics will become even more pressing as the 2030 Agenda is implemented.

Measuring ICT for development within the implementation of the SDG monitoring framework will require considerable effort on the part of national statistical offices and international organizations, in mobilizing resources needed to reinforce national capacity and coordinating at the international level. National coordination and close cooperation will be essential between key stakeholders involved in the production and use of ICT statistics.

In addition, development partners will need to expand their support to technical assistance, in particular financing the production (data collection) of baseline ICT statistics and training the producers and users of such statistics (policymakers, regulatory authorities on telecommunications and the private sector).

The dynamic nature of technology necessitates the regular revision of related indicators. The Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development should continue to review and update its list of ICT indicators, cooperate in developing new indicators and related methodology and contribute to the statistical development of countries by offering capacity-building assistance.