DEVELOPMENT AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION 2019

QUALITY EDUCATION • DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH • REDUCED INEQUALITIES • CLIMATE ACTION • PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

DA2I

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Access to information – understood as the rights and capacity to use, create, and share information in ways that are meaningful to each individual, community, or organisation - drives development. The Development and Access to Information (DA2I) report not only provides evidence of this contribution, but also offers a framework for assessing progress toward its delivery.

The report is aimed at policy-makers and all others invested in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It serves to inform debate, making the case for access to information as a development accelerator – a factor that can unblock progress across a variety of areas. It focuses in particular on the unique role of libraries providing this access, and so in advancing positive change.

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A first look at trends since 2015

A key feature of the report is the set of indicators associated with the different pillars of access to information. These pillars reflect a conviction that internet access is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for meaningful access. In effect, connectivity needs to be complemented by skills, favourable social and cultural context, and a legal framework that favours freedoms.

Connectivity itself is an area of progress, both as concerns "landline" and mobile internet, as well as internet usage. There have also been useful steps toward universal affordability. Nonetheless, there remains a huge amount of work to do in order to ensure that everyone can get online. Moreover, in addition to issues related to cost and lack of infrastructure, a growing gender digital divide is particularly alarming, given the fear that this could reinforce offline inequalities.

Elsewhere, levels of education are rising, although they remain insufficient in many countries and regions, suggesting that many people still lack the skills they need to make the most of the internet. Meanwhile, freedom online (and offline) is in decline, meaning that even where people can get online and engage with content, this content may be subject to restrictions.

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The enduring power of libraries

Effective libraries can make a major contribution to progress, however. While they rely on connectivity and fundamental rights to fulfil their missions, they in turn support internet access and the enjoyment of freedoms. Moreover, they have a unique role in reaching out to all members of the community, as well as dedicated staff with knowledge and skills.
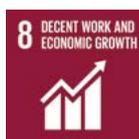
Through this combination of characteristics, libraries continue to prove themselves. Their activities –providing access to information and the skills to use it – can provide multiple dividends: greater individual autonomy, better decision-making, and support for research and innovation. This, arguably, makes them a great example of a development accelerator, in line with the concept outlined in the UN Development Programme's Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support initiative.

Applied access – the contribution to the SDGs in focus in 2019

The report's guest chapters focus on five of the SDGs in focus in 2019. These contributions highlight the role that access can play in achieving these Goals.

Dr Katarina Popovic's chapter on SDG 4 (quality education) stresses the role of access in making the connection between opportunities and beneficiaries, as in the case of adult education. It also underlines the need to reflect on skills that may be hard to measure, but that have real impacts on life chances. For these, the physical spaces and support provided by libraries and educational institutions are vital.

SDG 8 (decent work and growth) is the focus of a chapter by Stefania Lapolla Cantoni, setting out the benefits that connectivity can bring in the fields of employment and financial inclusion. It notes that efforts to develop internet connections should be accompanied by skills in order to ensure that everyone can benefit from access. High-quality information is also essential for governments in order to monitor progress against commitments made.

A chapter by Professor Tim Unwin considers SDG 10 (reducing inequalities), arguing that there needs to be more emphasis on promoting digital equality as opposed to simply maximising growth. Universal affordable connectivity should be the goal, associated with an offering of information that meets the needs of all members of society, giving even the most marginalised groups the ability to empower themselves.

Karl Falkenberg, in his chapter on SDG 13 (climate action), draws on his experience of regional and international discussions around appropriate responses. He stresses the importance of information, not just as a basis for decision-making, but also as a means of bringing people around to the need for action. This is as applicable at the global level as at the local level.

Civic engagement and the governance of information are the theme of Dorothy Gordon's chapter on SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). She underlines growing concerns that the way in which the internet itself is governed can risk distorting the information available to people, with significant consequences for citizens. This situation risks departing from the model of open and inclusive knowledge societies promoted by UNESCO.

Implications for the 2030 Agenda

The 2019 edition of the Development and Access to Information report repeats and reinforces the message of the first edition – that governments should take a concerted and coordinated approach to promoting access. Without this, they will only ever achieve suboptimal outcomes.

It also implies the need for global approaches in order to facilitate cross-border access to information, and to ensure that the governance of the internet itself continues to serve the interests of users. In parallel, the indicators the United Nations uses to gauge progress could usefully be adapted to reflect the reality of access to information, given that this is referred to more or less explicitly 20 times in the SDGs.

Finally, the report emphasises the power of libraries as motors of change, providing efficient and equitable venues for giving everyone the meaningful access to information that they need.