

Comments on the Synthesis-Report of the Secretary-General on the Post-2015 Agenda

IT for Change (www.ItforChange.net)
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We would like to commend the Secretary-General's report on *The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming all Lives and Protecting the Planet* for pushing the SDG¹ process to move towards even more ambitious goals, and its proposals for some promising, specific initiatives. We think that the report presents a good, overall picture of where the world stands today, the directions it needs to go towards, and what would it take to reach there. The report can however be further strengthened; which we understand is the purpose of seeking comments on it.

This document specifically comments on the elements of the report that pertain to ICTs² and data.

(1) In the few instances where ICTs are mentioned in the report, they are included among other technologies. Their specific need and context with regard to sustainable development has not been elaborated, nor is any clear exhortation or initiative provided, in this regard. We do understand that there are numerous technologies, from agriculture, to household to industrial, which are extremely important for the many purposes that inform and drive this report. In that sense, ICT is just one of the many technologies. However, the role of ICTs today in transforming social systems and structures in practically all areas, from media, education, social organizing, governance, business, health, and transportation, to energy conservation, urban planning and community development, must also be seen at another, more general, level. ICT is a paradigmatic social technology with immense transformational force today. When the key 'watchword' of the Secretary-General's report is 'transformation', it would not be appropriate to miss the specific part that ICTs can, and will, play in any such transformation, and the corresponding role of the UN, member states and other development actors in this regard. ICTs must be seen and treated as a 'universal enabler' and should be provided as a universal service, and in a manner that ensures a level playing field for all, with regard to the new digitally enabled social systems and structures. It should be used for decentralizing power and institutions instead of centralizing them, as often happens. ICTs should consciously be integrated in all development efforts, with due attention to core principles of openness, decentralization, horizontalisation, transparency and participation.

We hence suggest adding language like that proposed below, to the report.

“ICTs are today becoming universal enablers and transforming social systems and structures in all areas. For this society-wide transformation, and the advent of what has been called as the information society, to be such that it is just, equitable and provides dignity and social justice to all, and is sustainable, a few necessary conditions must be met. ICTs should be made available as a universal service, basic ICT literacy as well as higher capabilities should be ensured for all, and the architecture of ICTs should be open and equitable to provide a level playing field for all, instead of becoming a means and platform for even greater inequality, exploitation and injustice.”

It is also suggested that within the new initiative in the form of a global platform proposed under **Para**

1 Sustainable Development Goals

2 Information and Communication Technologies

125, an *additional objective of this platform be mentioned as “(d) explore, map and suggest means for employing ICTs for sustainable development, both at a macro and community level”*.

2. We welcome the call to “*develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that go beyond gross domestic product...(and are)... squarely focused on measuring social progress, human well-being, justice, security, equality, and sustainability... (and) the multi-dimensional nature of poverty...*” (**para 135**). Such complex measurements are much more possible today than ever before, due to the big data possibilities, that the report discusses in subsequent parts. We would like the Secretary-General to **announce a new initiative to develop such non GDP based measurements of progress, employing the big data possibilities** that are generally outlined in the path breaking report *A World that Counts: Mobilizing the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development* prepared by the Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group on the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development. Such a composite non GDP measure, as well as sub measures, of progress are one of the most important requirements for sustainable development today.

3. The report rightly recognizes the very important part that big data is set to play in our societies, including for understanding and measuring various social phenomena. We welcome the call for acquiring '*data literacy*' and the need to strengthen national and international statistical capacities; especially the call for “**building of a global consensus, applicable principles and standards for data**”, which is one of the most urgent tasks if the so-called data revolution has to be harnessed for public good. Also commendable is the setting up of a 'comprehensive programme of action on data' under the UN Statistical Commission along with a Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data and the World Forum on Sustainable Development Data. **These initiatives directed at harnessing big data for the public good can help redefine the area of big data and data revolution** where, currently, the main paradigm is that although the sources of data collection are largely public, it is mostly used as a highly valued commercial resource in private hands.

In this regard, we would like the report to go beyond discussing big data as a kind of neutral resource, to mention the issue of both its possible misappropriation, mostly from a public resource to private, as well as misuse, for instance, for mass surveillance and other forms of social control. **It must be recognized that the main source of big data today is the digital footprint of private and social activities, that largely take place in privately owned digital spaces. Such private ownership, or misappropriation, of most digital spaces frames the possibilities of use of a big part of data for public purposes (or not).** It is therefore required to both;

(1) specifically promote public and community or peer-to-peer platforms for gathering and employing big data (a need partly expressed in the call in the report to set up 'a web of data innovation networks'), and;

(2) develop standards, guidelines and policies about data collection, ownership and use (which is indeed called for by the report). **Providing specific mention in the report about the possibilities of misappropriation of public data for private profit and its misuse for surveillance and social control would help ensure that big data does not get seen simply as a neutral resource, that always serves good purposes.**

We suggest the addition of a para in the report, to the following effect:

“In a digitally enabled society, big data is a major opportunity if it is properly employed for public good. However, such a use cannot be taken for granted, and needs to be directed

through appropriate public actions, including necessary policies and programs. Specifically, public data systems should be further strengthened; community partnerships be developed for public interest data systems; guidelines and policies be developed regarding data collection, use and ownership; and, it must be ensured that data pertaining to public issues and that which is collected from the public is available for public uses, and not proprietized. Such data should also be protected against misuse by public authorities and should be subject to appropriate oversight mechanisms as has been called for by the recent relevant resolutions on privacy of the Human rights Council. ”