Development and Access to Information

2024

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Foreword by Vicki McDonald

Welcome to the 2024 Development and Access to Information report.

The report comes just after the half-way point in the United Nations 2030 Agenda, providing an opportunity to look back on how well the world is doing against the Sustainable Development Goals, and importantly prompts a refocus of efforts.

It is apparent that success is far from guaranteed. The need to mobilise all factors – and all actors – is clear. The report underlines that progress towards access to information is uneven and incomplete, with advances in internet connectivity not matched by those in equity or rights.

This report highlights the need for a renewed focus on knowledge and information for all, not least in the Pact for the Future due to be agreed in September.

As in the previous editions, I acknowledge that this is the opportunity to share insights from experts outside of the library field. I chose 'Stronger Together' as the theme of my IFLA Presidency. I see a key element of this ambition is how we work more effectively with our friends, allies, and everyone who also understands the power of knowledge to deliver positive change.

I am grateful to all those who have contributed to making this a real example of partnership, focused on building understanding of why we need to focus on providing meaningful access to information for all. And of course, then, why a strong, broad and effective library field matters.

I also extend my gratitude to Stichting IFLA Global Libraries, whose financial support made this report possible.

Foreword by Glòria Pérez-Salmerón

Welcome to the 2024 DA2I report!

I am very happy to be sharing this latest edition of the Development and Access to Information report with you, made possible through support from Stichting IFLA Global Libraries (SIGL).

The Report is a valuable part of efforts to deliver on the mission of SIGL to leave the library field stronger. Through our grant-making, we work to make it possible to achieve more, realising their potential as a global network.

Of course, this isn't just something that matters for libraries, but for the world as a whole! In my term as IFLA President, I chose the theme 'Libraries, motors of change', based on my conviction – and my experience – that libraries can be accelerators of progress in our communities and societies.

This is because of the power of information – and access to it – in enabling sustainable development.

Importantly, this is not something that can be taken for granted! Information has always been crucial for communication, innovation, and enabling better decision-making at all levels.

And it is only becoming more important, as digital technologies take a growing role in our lives, as the need for innovation to address global challenges increases, and as the time left to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals shrinks.

I hope that this report will support libraries globally, and at all levels, in underlining both the importance of ensuring meaningful access to all, but also in setting out how vital they are in achieving this.

Introduction

This report is the third in the series of Development and Access to Information (DA2I) Reports, produced by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions in partnership with the Technology and Social Change Group at the University of Washington. As was the case in previous editions, IFLA's work is here is made possible by the support provided by Stichting IFLA Global Libraries.

This report comes out just under 10 years on from the Lyon Declaration[1], signed by over 250 organisations globally, which underlined the importance of access to information for development. The Declaration urged decision-makers to recognise how essential information and knowledge are for progress towards any policy goal – including of course what would become the 2030 Agenda. It also stressed – crucially – that access to information and knowledge is not something that can be taken for granted. A concerted, coordinated approach is needed, mobilising all relevant actors – not least libraries.

In some ways, this message clearly found its way into the text agreed by Heads of State and Government in September 2015[2]. Twenty of the 169 targets established in the Sustainable Development Goals framework directly or indirectly refer to some aspect of access to information. There is, in effect, a strong instruction to governments at all levels, as well as other stakeholders, to take this seriously.

Yet in other ways, the Framework falls short, not providing a clear means of assessing how close we are to delivering on the promise of meaningful and inclusive access to information. Without this, inevitably, attention risks being focused elsewhere, with the risk of addressing the symptoms rather than one of the key causes of slow, unsustainable and/or unbalanced development.

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[1] https://www.lyondeclaration.org/
[2] United Nations (2015), Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

This is the task that the DA2I initiative takes on, using a basket of indicators which help track progress across the four pillars of access to information identified: connectivity, equity, skills and rights.

This selection, explained more fully in the introduction to the original report[3], critically seeks to underline that access to information is more than just the practical possibility of getting online, but also the rights, social context and skills to make the most of it. In other words, internet access is a necessary, but absolutely not a sufficient condition for individuals and communities to have the information and knowledge they need. Technological solutions are not enough on their own, and a focus uniquely on these will not lead to success.

Progress towards access to information, as understood here, is where internet connectivity and other possibilities to discover knowledge can be turned into real development outcomes. This happens because there are the skills to understand, use and create, the rights to read and to express yourself, and the possibility for all members of societies to benefit and engage.

So where do we stand, halfway through the 2030 Agenda? The clear conclusion coming from the DA2I indicators is 'not where we should be'.

Impressive progress in bringing more people online in many areas – particularly, in lower-middle income countries. However, we are still far from universal connectivity, and moreover forward steps here have not been matched by progress on ensuring rights or equity. Advances towards gender equality have stalled, and there are worrying trends on civil, political and internet freedoms.

Indeed, the data chapter paints a picture of a world where the promise of technological tools for internet access is simply not being delivered. Instead, failures to address inequalities mean that women and others continue to enjoy fewer opportunities, while governments and other groups are more likely to restrict what people can do with information.

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[3] Garrido, M. & Wyber, S. Eds. (2017) Development and Access to Information. International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions: The Hague, https://da2i.ifla.org/da2i-report-2017/

In other words, short-term thinking, a failure to invest seriously in upholding rights, and illiberal impulses around information and knowledge risk becoming blockers. What will allow for progress here, in contrast, is a more coherent, complete approach to access to information that incorporates action on equity, rights and sills.

Our other chapters – two global focused on questions around open science and open government, and four regional perspectives from Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, Asia-Oceania and Latin America and the Caribbean – echo and build on this insight.

They all underline deep concern about the state of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals at their halfway point. Moreover, while looking at the question of the place of access to information in the 2030 Agenda from very different angles, they all emphasise similar solutions: a need to step back and invest in the legal and practical infrastructures necessary for everyone to turn the possibility of access to information into real life changes.

While it may be no surprise that this report (given its coordinators) highlights that libraries represent just such a practical infrastructure, it remains powerful to see recognition of this by a wide range of experts, coming from very different geographical and professional perspectives.

With over 2.5 million institutions worldwide, libraries have a strong track record of delivering meaningful access to information, from local communities to within the United Nations itself. Moreover, with a focus on delivering on the needs for their communities and the individuals that make them up, they bring a rights-based, long-term focus to their work, as well as the flexibility required to leave no-one behind. Yet their potential too often remains unrealised due to a variety of (often easy to resolve) factors[4].

The different chapter authors therefore set out the case, eloquently and persuasively, for updating perceptions of libraries, looking to integrate them fully into development planning, and activate their potential. In doing so, governments and stakeholders at all levels will help accelerate a trend inside the library field to focus ever more strongly on the positive impacts libraries and librarians can have on societies.

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[4] IFLA (2024), Trend Report Update 2023, https://repository.ifla.org/handle/123456789/3233

Despite the worrying – even alarming – situation today, there are opportunities. There is a strong focus on the importance of knowledge in the first draft of the Pact for the Future, which has the mission to redefine how the multilateral system goes about achieving its goals. Depending on what happens in the months leading up to its agreement – and subsequently in its implementation – the Pact could lead to a renewed focus on information and knowledge, and how to ensure that it is not only accessed, but also applied in order to deliver change. In this the UN can lead the way for its Member States, and in turn societies and communities everywhere.

This report, hopefully, will support advocacy by all those who want to see this happen, and so for meaningful access to information to realise its potential as an essential development accelerator.

Executive Summary

The 2024 edition of the Development and Access to Information Report comes soon after the half-way point in the implementation of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and in the context of the preparation of the Summit for the Future.

As such, it is both a chance to look back at trends to date, but also to look ahead at the place of access to information in both the drive to deliver on the Agenda, and more broadly to deliver on the potential of the multilateral system as a force for security and progress.

Following the model of the two previous editions, the Report provides an assessment of progress towards the goal of providing meaningful access to information for all as an essential enabler of development. This comes both from the perspective of the set of indicators tracked by the DA2I project since it was first developed in 2016, as well as that of experts from wide range of geographical and professional backgrounds.

Across these contributions, the core message is that progress on internet access is far from being matched by progress in turning this into real-world development outcomes. Far too often, people have the technology, but do not have the skills, or legal or social possibilities to make the most of the internet and the information and knowledge it can offer.

Addressing this will take a renewed effort to invest in all the steps of the cycle that connects knowledge and information and change at the global, regional, national, local and individual levels. A common theme is the role of libraries – and library and information professionals – in this.

The report is made up of the following chapters:

The **Introduction** provides a refresher on the framework that underpins the Development and Access to Information report. It highlights the contrast between the many references to access to information and knowledge in the 2030 Agenda, and the lack of a clear means of measuring progress towards this. The DA2I report helps to fill this gap in our understanding of this situation, while concerted approaches to enabling access – not least through activating libraries – offer a means of helping to ensure that access to information accelerates development.

The **Data Chapter** [1] is prepared by Maria Garrido and Doug Parry of the University of Washington Information School, United States and Matias Centeno of the National Institute of Agricultural Technology, Argentina. This offers a snapshot of where the DA2I basket of indicators stand at the halfway point in the 2030 Agenda. There has been major progress in bringing people online in lower-middle income countries, but less so in the poorest. More worryingly, there is little if any progress towards gender equality, and protection for civil, political and online rights has been more likely to decline than improve. In short, while a positive scenario is possible, this is far from the case for many, undermining the potential to turn access into change. The chapter also points to the DA2I regional reports, which allow readers to dive much further into specific national and regional trends.

The chapter by Dr Albert Byamugisha focuses on access to information in **Sub-Saharan Africa,** and in particular Uganda. He sets out the many different ways in which access to information can support development, and how the Ugandan government has sought to take a joined-up approach to making sure that this happens. The chapter highlights the work of libraries in particular, while arguing that more still can be done in the region, both to activate libraires and ensure that technology brings benefits to all.

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[1]The Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) at the University of Washington Information School explores the role of digital technologies in building more open, inclusive, and equitable societies. TASCHA is a nexus for multidisciplinary research whose work has helped international organizations, governments, civil society organizations, and public libraries in the United States and more than 50 other countries.

Dr Ariel Vercelli's chapter looks at the situation in **Latin America and the Caribbean**. She too echoes the message that there is great potential for technology to enable change, but that this cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, a failure to act could lead to concentrations of information and data which risk disadvantaging regions like Latin America and the Caribbean and their populations. What is needed, rather, is an approach to information governance focused on community needs and ownership, with libraries having a strong role to play.

Ambassador David Donohue offers the **European** perspective in his article, drawing on his experience in negotiating the original 2030 Agenda. He draws a strong line between information and knowledge and success in delivering the SDGs, both individually and collectively, as well as in engaging people in their delivery. Libraries in Europe, he notes, can make a wide variety of contributions, from supporting better policy making to helping ensure that no-one is left behind.

Dr Lawrence Surendra discusses the situation in **Asia-Oceania**, setting out how the region can still seize the potential of better use of knowledge and information as accelerators of development, while being realistic about what can be achieved through technology alone. Furthermore, even where favourable laws are in place they are too often undermined in their implementation. Finally, he calls strongly for a fundamentally different approach to use of knowledge in the UN and government, with partnerships with knowledge institutions offering a powerful way forwards.

Melissa Hagemann offers a global perspective, focused on how progress on **open science** contributes to the wider goal of the DA2I initiative by working to generate an accessible and relevant research commons. However, a healthy, inclusive and high-performing open science ecosystem is not a given, and in particular needs a strong focus on ensuring that everyone is able to participate, that there are community-led infrastructures, and that there are tools for upholding quality. Work on open science, too, benefits from being a wider strategy for access to information for development.

Finally, Dave Banisar looks at the access to information from the perspective of possibilities to view and use information held by **governments and companies**. He sets out how this can support the achievement of a wide range of other policy goals, as well the right to participate more broadly in public life. Key threats include a slowing of progress in passing and enforcing right to information laws, a failure to extend obligations to major private sector actors, and under-investment in gathering statistics and other information in the first place. Once again, effort to address these will be more powerful still in the context of a wider strategy on access to information.

Data shows struggle to meet commitments in 2030 Agenda

Maria Garrido & Doug Parry, University of Washington Information School, USA
Matias Centeno, National Institute of Agricultural Technology, Argentina
Daniel Rekshan, Data Systems Developer, USA.

Meaningful access to information:
"The rights and capacity to use, create and share information in ways that are meaningful to each individual, community or organization."

In our quest for more socially and economically inclusive societies, the right of access to information looms large. The contemporary age offers unparalleled opportunities to harness the power of information exchange, creation, and use to address poverty, inequality, and myriad other societal challenges. Yet, the pursuit of an inclusive information society faces multifaceted challenges that hinder progress towards a sustainable and resilient global path. Deep-seated social and economic disparities pose significant obstacles to inclusive connectivity, digital literacy, and affordable technology access. Additionally, emerging and dynamic challenges such as security and privacy concerns, the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, and restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and political rights around the world further complicate the landscape. In this complex context, the imperative to safeguard and promote the right to information for all is more urgent than ever before.

Central to our exploration is the recognition that access to information extends beyond mere availability. A rights-based approach emphasizes not only access but also the ability to comprehend, utilize, and disseminate information effectively. This holistic perspective underscores the interconnectedness of human rights and the pivotal role of information in advancing societal progress. We argue that the right to information affects all other rights as well, for human rights are all interdependent and indivisible.

In the third edition of the Development and Access to Information report, we examine the evolution of meaningful information access halfway through the UN 2030 Development Agenda. Information access is a fundamental driver of many of the goals in the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, yet many countries are struggling to make progress. Statistical indicators of freedom and gender equity — two pillars of meaningful access to information — show decline and stagnation midway through the Agenda put forth in 2015.

Summary of findings at midpoint of the UN 2030 Agenda: Connectivity, Gender, and Freedom

Our analysis tracks the progress of 29 selected indicators of social development from the adoption of the UN Agenda in 2015 to 2022 or the most recent available data. The data shows that while most countries have steadily brought more people online, progress towards gender equity has been meager, particularly in low-income countries, and freedom and human rights have regressed.

More of the world is online: Sixty percent of the world was online in 2022, compared with 40 percent in 2015. Across all regions, there has been significant progress in connectivity indicators, with the most substantial gains from Northern African, Southern Asian and Western Asian countries.

There is little progress on gender equity: On the surface, data shows a slight improvement in many gender equity indicators across the globe since 2015; however, two important caveats are needed to contextualize these findings. First, most data on gender equity indicators is from 2020 or older, with few countries reporting data for 2021 or 2022. Secondly, progress is still inadequate. For example, though women's participation in science and politics has increased globally, it's only a 1 and 2 percentage point increase, respectively.

Freedom is on the decline: Civil and political freedoms have decreased in most regions, notably in North Africa, Southeast Asia, and Southern Asia, with civil rights such as freedom of expression and association experiencing the greatest decline. Political pluralism and governmental effectiveness have also diminished. In the Freedom in the World scores, 102 countries scored lower in 2022 compared to 2015, while only 28 countries saw improvement. Global internet freedom mirrored this trend, with 45 out of 70 countries scoring lower and only 21 showing improvement. The most significant declines in internet freedom occurred in regions where political and civil freedoms have deteriorated.

Methodology: We compared baseline data from 2015 with data from 2022 or the latest available, weighted by country's population. The analysis is presented by income group (using the World Bank categories), region (from the UN SDGs regional groupings), and finally down to a country level where data is available. We use select indicators in this chapter to paint a picture of the progress (or lack thereof) towards inclusive connectivity and meaningful access to information. Our analysis is limited in some cases because many countries lack updated data, particularly for gender equity indicators.

Explore the data in the DA2i Regional Dashboards

Connectivity

The Connect2030 agenda established a set of targets for internet population and households with internet access. We use that as a benchmark to measure progress for this set of indicators.

In 2022, roughly 60% of the world's population used the internet, a dramatic increase from 40% in 2015. But note that context is important when assessing these numbers. All regions except Southern Asia, South-Eastern Asia, Oceania, and Sub-Saharan Africa have achieved **Target 1.2:** *"By 2023, in the developing world, 70% of individuals worldwide will be using the internet."* Less than a third of people in Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania are online, and overall, 2.7 billion people remain offline.

CONNECTIVITY | PROGRESS FROM 2015-2022

PROGRESS BETWEEN 2015–2022

TOTAL NUMBER OF GLOBAL INTERNET USERS	INTERNET USE AS A PERCENTAGE OF WORLD POPULATION	PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH INTERNET ACCESS	COST OF MOBILE BROADBAND AS A PERCENTAGE OF MONTHLY INCOME
+2.3b	+20%	+19%	-1%
5.3 billion	60%	58%	2.3%

Technology & Social Change Group, University of Washington
Source: ITU, 2022

1. Internet population growth: Key highlights

- Northern Africa, Southern Asia, Southeast Asia, and Western Asia experienced the highest growth in internet population between 2015 and 2022.

- Southern Asia, Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Oceania will not achieve **Target 2.3:** *"By 2023, in the developing world, 60% of individuals will be using the internet."*

- Lower-middle-income countries experienced the most progress in internet population growth.

Internet population in 2022 by country income

2015   2022

Low income

Lower-middle income

Upper-middle income

High income
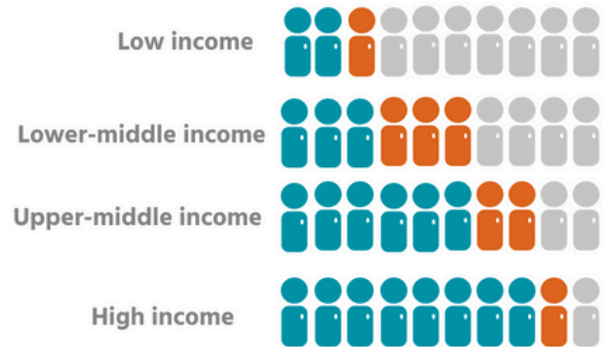
Internet population growth by region, 2015-2022

2015   2022

Region	2015	+growth	Total
World	40%	+20%	60%
Developed regions	79%	+8%	87%
Caucus & Central Asia	52%	+15%	67%
Eastern Asia	52%	+20%	72%
Latin America & the Caribbean	55%	+18%	73%
Northern Africa	42%	+30%	72%
Oceania	24%	+6%	30%
South Eastern Asia	30%	+26%	54%
Southern Asia	16%	+23%	41%
Sub-Saharan Africa	15%	+13%	28%
Western Asia	52%	+25%	77%
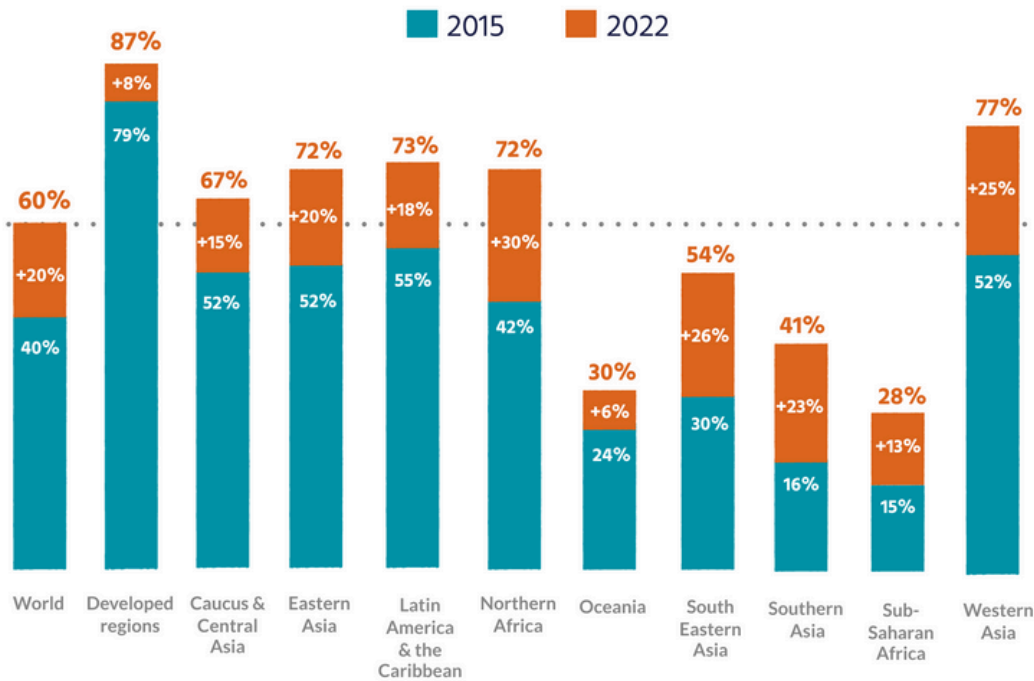
The world is behind in achieving Target 1.2 of the Connect2030 Agenda

60%   10%   70% of individuals worldwide using the internet

Target 2.3 Connect 2030: By 2023, in the developing world, 60% of individuals will be using the internet

1.2 Countries with the most and least progress in internet population growth

- 44 countries are behind **Target 2.3: "***By 2023, in the developing world, 60% of individuals will be using the internet.***"**

- 35/46 least developed countries are behind target **Target 2.4**: *"By 2023, in the least developed countries, 30% of individuals will be using the internet."*

2 billion

Still offline

Most growth in internet population
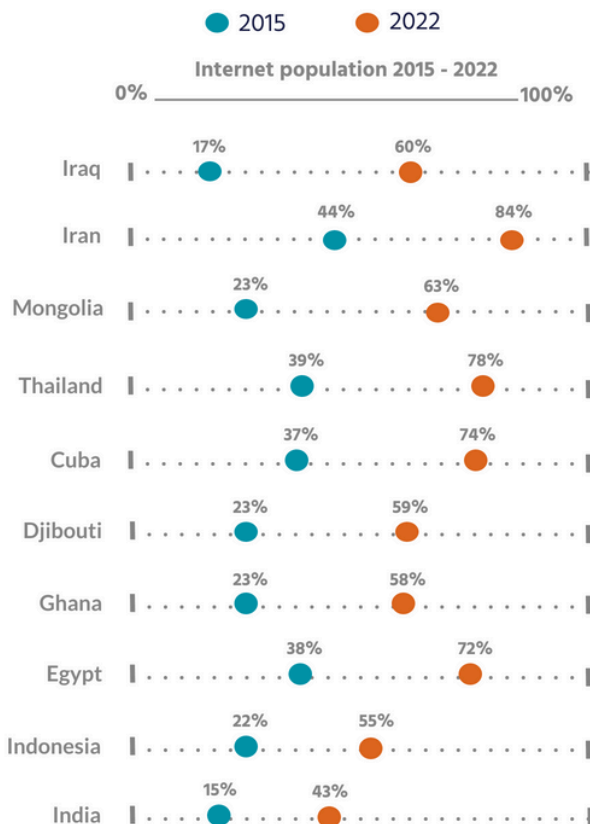
	2015	2022

Internet population 2015 - 2022

0% ——————————————— 100%

Country	2015	2022
Iraq	17%	60%
Iran	44%	84%
Mongolia	23%	63%
Thailand	39%	78%
Cuba	37%	74%
Djibouti	23%	59%
Ghana	23%	58%
Egypt	38%	72%
Indonesia	22%	55%
India	15%	43%

Least growth in internet population

	2015	2022

Internet population 2015 - 2022

0% ——————————————— 50%

Country	2015	2022
Malawi	6%	10%
South Sudan	3%	6%
Guyana	34%	37%
Tonga	39%	42%
Papua New Guinea	8%	11%
Yemen Rep.	24%	26%
Congo Rep.	8%	9%
Comoros	8%	9%
Eritrea	1.1%	2%
Somalia	1.8%	2%
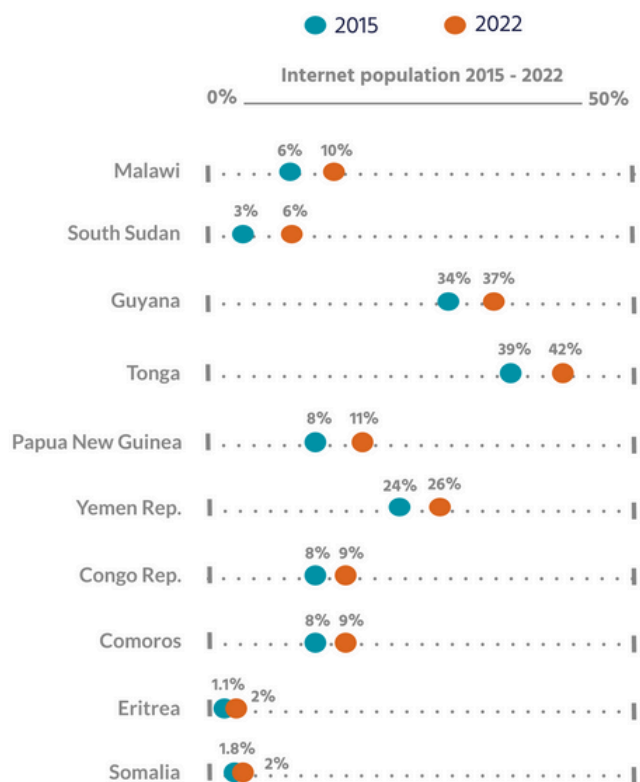
Technology & Social Change Group, University of Washington
Source: ITU, 2022

2. Affordability of mobile broadband as a percentage of monthly income: Key highlights

- **Target 2.6** states that *by 2030, broadband cost should not be higher than 3% of monthly income.* All regions have achieved this benchmark except for Oceania, where the cost of mobile broadband represents 6.4% of monthly income, and Sub-Saharan Africa, where it represents 9%.

- Sub-Saharan African countries experienced the biggest drop in mobile broadband as a percentage of income: from 16% to 9% as a regional average. However, despite notable strides in reducing mobile broadband costs, the region is still home to countries with the highest mobile broadband costs globally.

59
countries are behind Target 2.6, including 32 of 45 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

30%
of monthly income is the cost of mobile broadband in Congo, Guinea Bissau, and the Central African Republic

Mobile broadband cost as a percent of GNI per capita

Legend: ■ 2015 ■ 2022

Target 2.6 Connect 2030: By 2023, broadband mobile services should not cost more than 3% of monthly income

Region	2015	2022
World	4%	2%
Developed Regions	1%	.7%
Caucasus & Central Asia	2.1%	1.9%
Eastern Asia	1%	.5%
Latin America & the Caribbean	3.1%	2%
Northern African	1.2%	.9%
Oceania	6%	6.4%
Southern Asia	1.6%	1.5%
Southern Eastern Asia	1.1%	1%
Sub-Saharan Africa	16%	9%
Western Asia	4%	1.8%
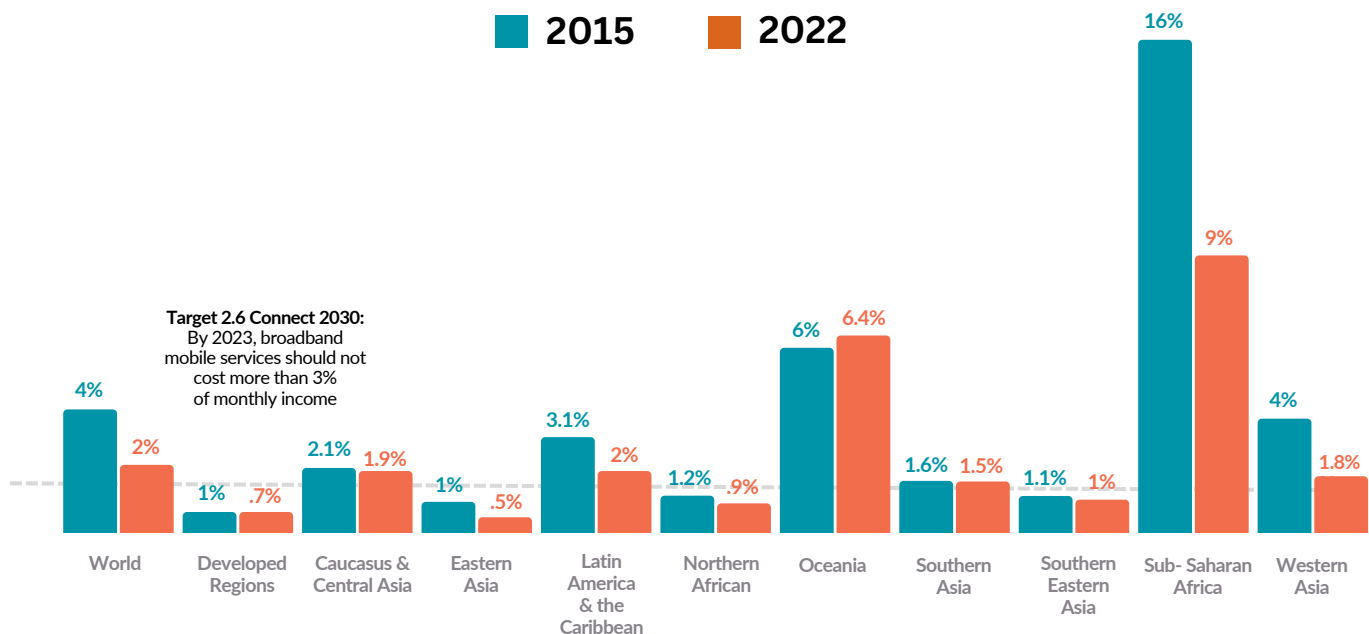
Technology & Social Change Group, University of Washington
Source: ITU, 2022

Gender Equity

Progress on gender equity remains limited. While data suggests a modest improvement in many gender equity indicators worldwide since 2015, two key considerations are necessary for a comprehensive understanding:

1. The majority of data on gender equity indicators is from 2020 or earlier, with limited reporting for 2021 or 2022, thus providing an incomplete assessment of the pandemic's impact and progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 5, achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.
2. Advancements remain insufficient; for instance, while women's participation in science and politics has marginally increased on a global scale, the increments are merely 1 and 2 percentage points, respectively.

GENDER EQUITY | PROGRESS FROM 2015-2022

● PROGRESS BETWEEN 2015–2022

WOMEN USING INTERNET	YOUNG WOMEN NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR TRAINING	WOMEN IN SCIENCE	WOMEN IN POLITICS
+6%	+2%	+1%	+3%
52%	32%	37%	22%

Technology & Social Change Group, University of Washington
Source: ITU, 2022; UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2022
Images: Freepick.com

2.1 Gender digital equity

- The world is behind achieving the Connect 2030 **Target 2.8,** which aims to achieve gender equality in internet usage and mobile phone ownership by 2023.

- In Latin America and the Caribbean, more women than men are using the internet, making it the only region to achieve gender parity in internet use.

- In low-income countries, 4 out of every 5 women were still offline as of 2022.

Gender digital divide

▲ Progress 2015 - 2022

56%   52%

▲6%   ▲6%

259 million more men than women using the internet
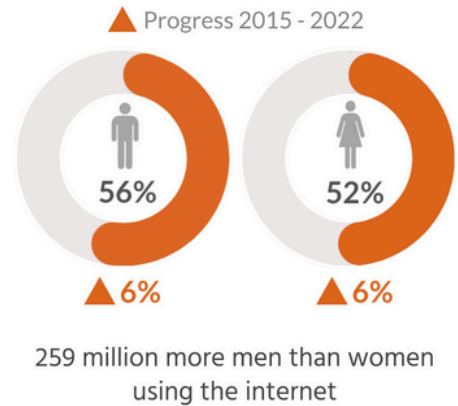
Gender digital divide by region

● Internet population by sex, 2022   ▲ Percentage change, 2015-2022

Developed Regions
87%   85%
▲7%   ▲7%

Caucasus & Central Asia
82%   81%
▲11%   ▲13%

Eastern Asia
93%   91%
▲11%   ▲9%

Latin America & the Caribbean
71%   73%
11%   ▲15%
▲

Northern Africa
72%   66%
▲25%   ▲23%

Southern Asia
27%   18%
▲3%   ▲3%

Southern-Eastern Asia
57% 28%   51%
▲26%
▲

Sub-Saharan Africa
17%   12%
▲3%   ▲1%

Western Asia
84%   73%
▲10%   ▲19%
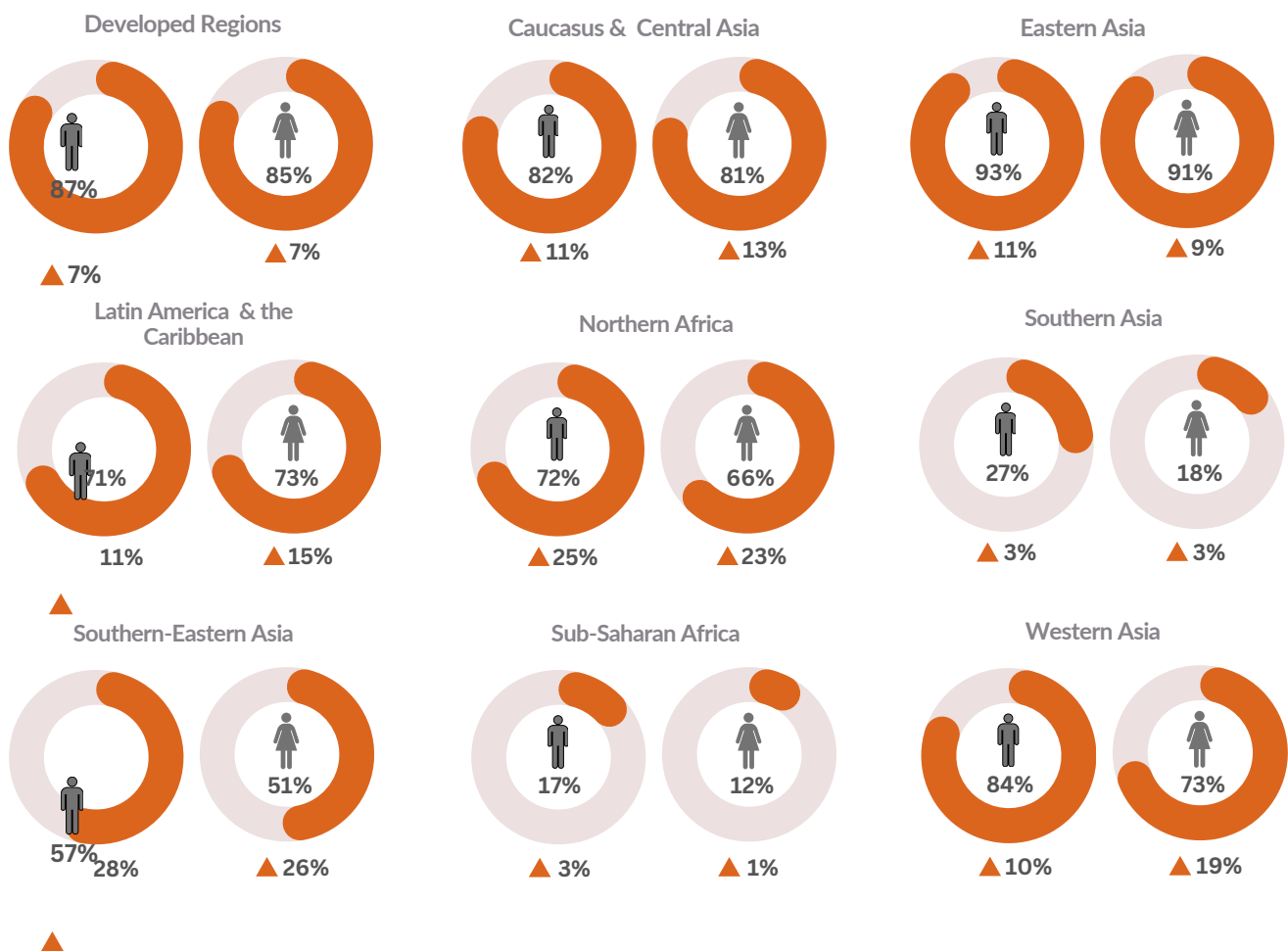
No data available for Oceania.

Technology & Social Change Group, University of Washington
Source: ITU, 2022

2.2 Employment, training, and educational opportunities for young people

Creating an enabling environment where women and men have an equal standing in the labor market directly impacts the potential for economic growth, combats different forms of inequality, and allows for more equitable social development.

The global proportion of youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET) has risen by almost 3%. While the increase for young women was smaller at 1% compared to nearly 3% for young men since 2015, young women are three times as likely to be NEET as young men.

NEET

	2015	2022
NEET Female	30%	31%
NEET Male	13%	15%

Young people not in education, employment or training, 2015-2022

NEET Male   NEET Female   ▲▼ % Change 2015-2022

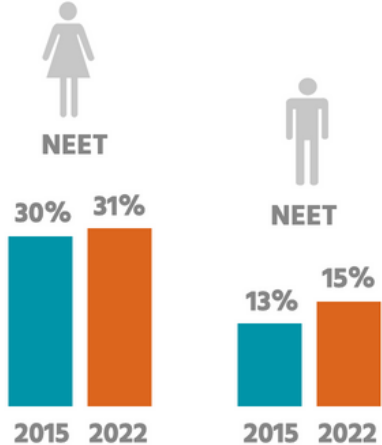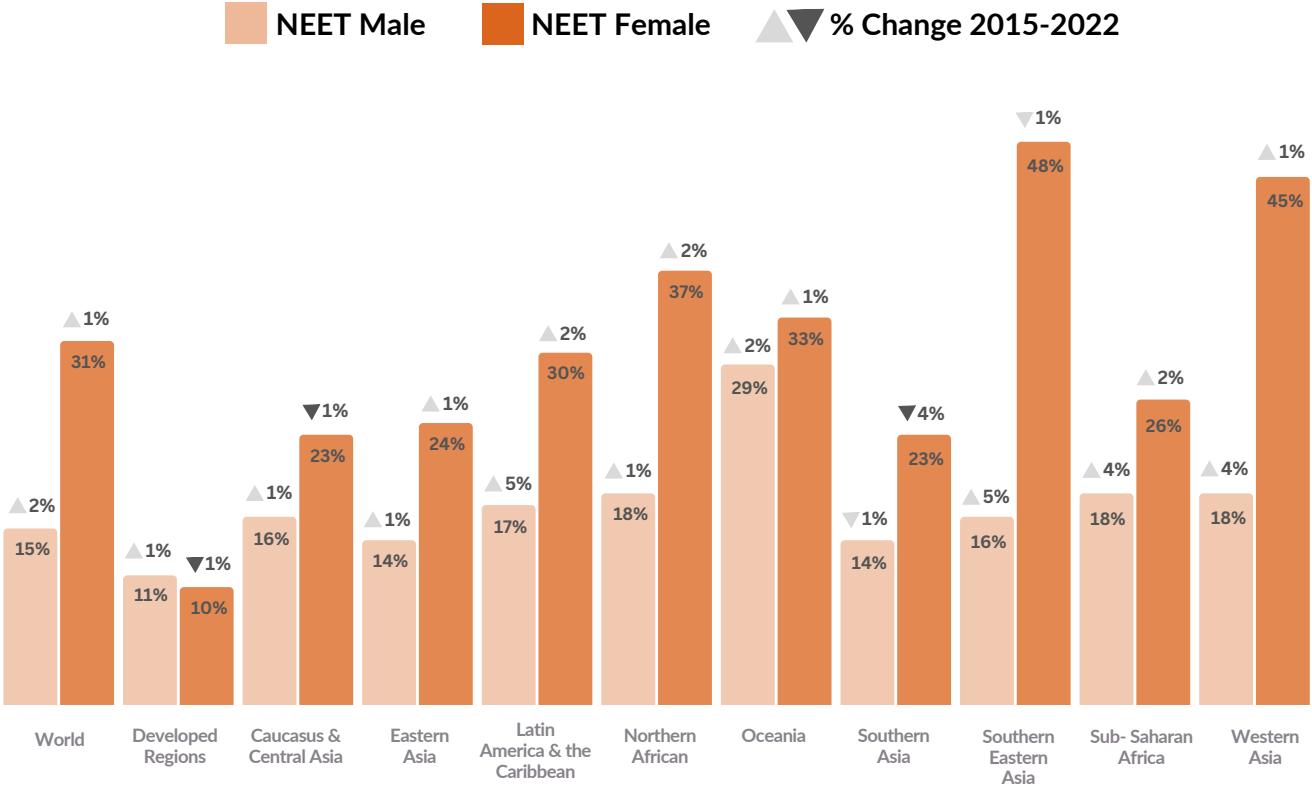| Region	NEET Male	% Change	NEET Female	% Change
World	15%	▲2%	31%	▲1%
Developed Regions	11%	▲1%	10%	▼1%
Caucasus & Central Asia	16%	▲1%	23%	▼1%
Eastern Asia	14%	▲1%	24%	▲1%
Latin America & the Caribbean	17%	▲5%	30%	▲2%
Northern African	18%	▲1%	37%	▲2%
Oceania	29%	▲2%	33%	▲1%
Southern Asia	14%	▼1%	23%	▼4%
Southern Eastern Asia	16%	▲5%	48%	▼1%
Sub-Saharan Africa	18%	▲4%	26%	▲2%
Western Asia	18%	▲4%	45%	▲1%

Technology & Social Change Group, University of Washington
Source: ILO, 2022

Freedom

Freedom House's Freedom in the World index measures progress in political rights and civil liberties worldwide. It evaluates rights such as those to electoral participation and government accountability, and civil liberties, such as freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.

Civil and political freedoms have diminished worldwide, with notable declines in regions including North Africa, Southeast Asia, and Southern Asia. The decline in civil rights, particularly freedom of expression and association, is accompanied by a decrease in political pluralism and effective governance. In 2022, 120 countries scored lower on the Freedom in the World index compared to 2015, while only 51 showed improvement. A similar trend is observed in global internet freedom, with 45 out of 70 countries scoring lower and only 21 improving. These declines in internet freedom are most significant in regions experiencing erosion of political and civil liberties.

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD | PROGRESS FROM 2015-2022

● PROGRESS BETWEEN 2015–2022

FREEDOM AGGREGATE SCORE	CIVIL RIGHTS	POLITICAL RIGHTS	FREEDOM ON THE NET
-7 pts	-5 pts	-2 pts	-5 pts
46	**25**	**20**	**40**
0 (Least free) - 100 (most free)	0 (Least free) - 60 (most free)	0 (Least free) - 40 (most free)	0 (Least free) - 60 (most free)

Technology & Social Change Group, University of Washington
Source: Freedom House, 2022

3. Freedom in the World

- The Freedom in the World score measures freedom on a scale from 0 to 100, with 0 representing less freedom and 100 representing more freedom. Between 2015 and 2022, the global average freedom score decreased from 52 to 48 points, indicating a significant decline.

- In total, 120 countries scored lower in 2022 compared to 2015, whereas only 51 countries scored higher.

- Southern Asia, Eastern Asia, and Northern Africa experienced the biggest declines in freedoms over this period.

51

countries showed increasing freedom scores from 2015-2022

120

countries showed declining freedom scores from 2015-2022

Freedom in the World scores, by region

2015   **2022**

More Free
100

Region	2015	2022
World	52	48
Developed Regions	80	77
Caucasus & Central Asia	24	20
Eastern Asia	20	12
Latin America & the Caribbean	71	67
Northern African	32	25
Oceania	75	77
Southern Asia	67	56
Southern Eastern Asia	56	50
Sub-Saharan Africa	38	37
Western Asia	22	21

0
Less Free
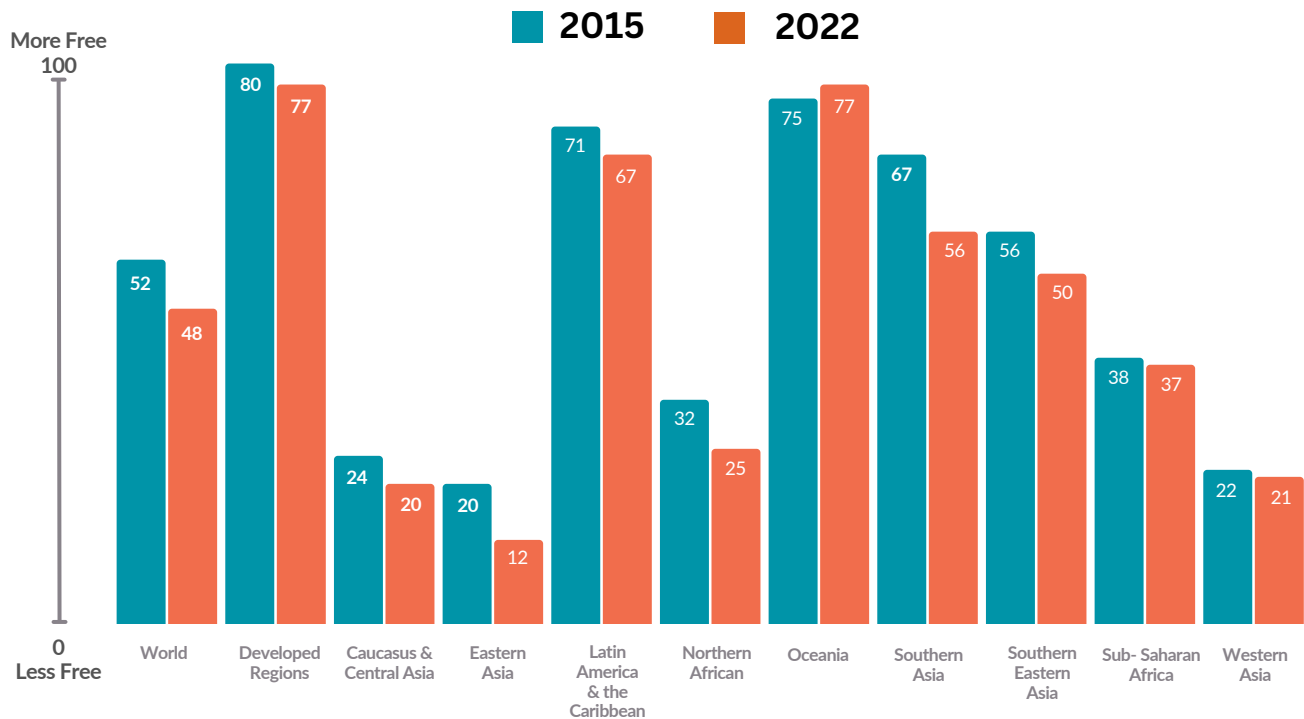
3.1 Freedom in the world losses and gains by region and countries

In each region, aside from Oceania, more countries showed declines in freedom scores rather than increases. In the developed regions group, encompassing 46 countries, a significant 70% witnessed a decrease in their overall freedom score. This trend is particularly concerning, as many of these countries are recognized as mature democracies.
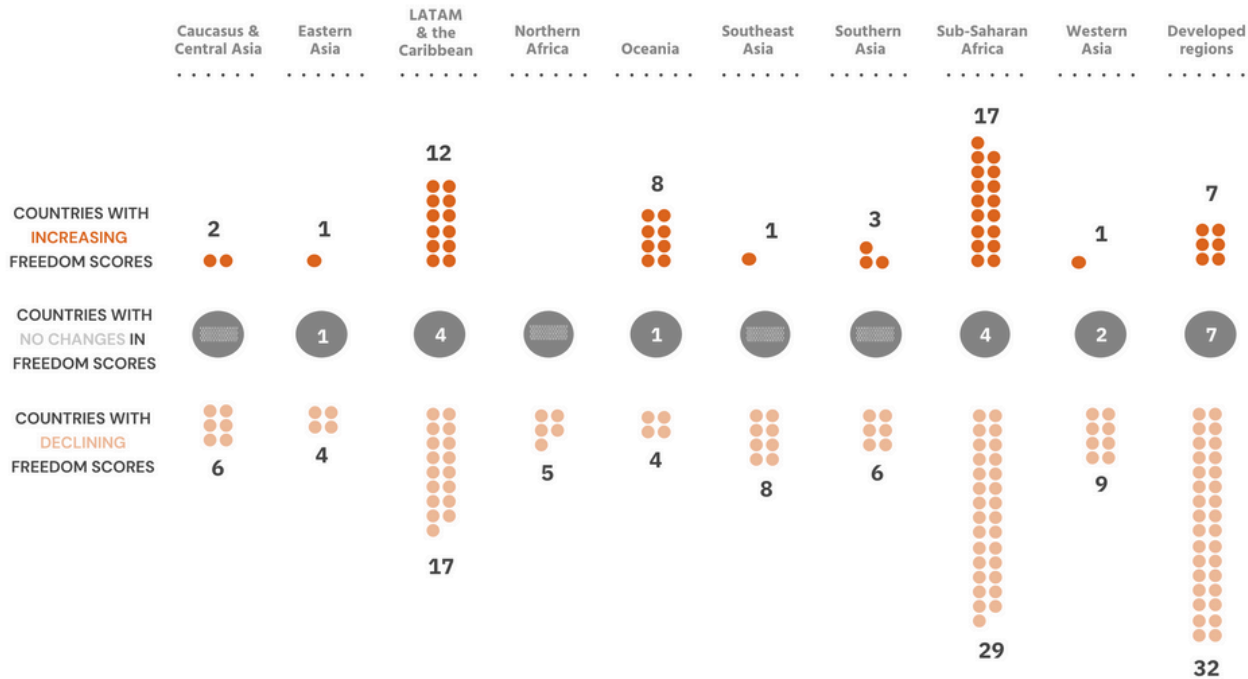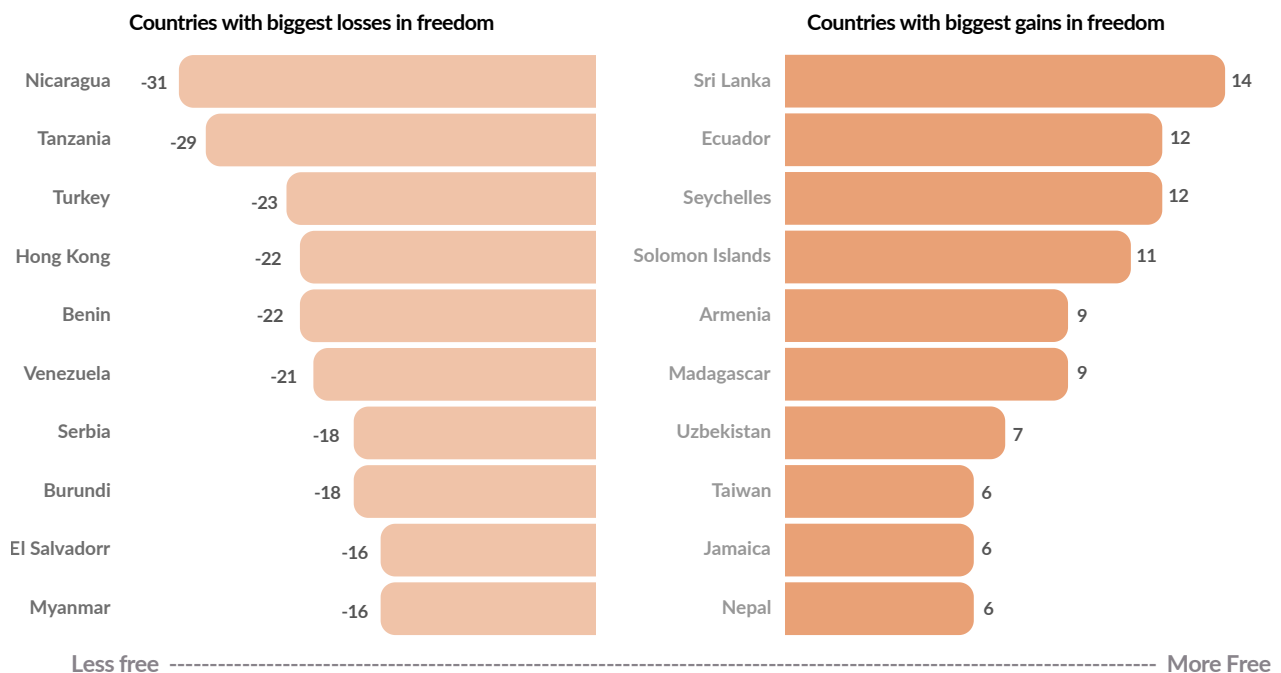

Largest losses and gains in freedom scores, 2015-2022

Countries with biggest losses in freedom

Country	Score
Nicaragua	-31
Tanzania	-29
Turkey	-23
Hong Kong	-22
Benin	-22
Venezuela	-21
Serbia	-18
Burundi	-18
El Salvadorr	-16
Myanmar	-16

Countries with biggest gains in freedom

Country	Score
Sri Lanka	14
Ecuador	12
Seychelles	12
Solomon Islands	11
Armenia	9
Madagascar	9
Uzbekistan	7
Taiwan	6
Jamaica	6
Nepal	6

Less free --- More Free
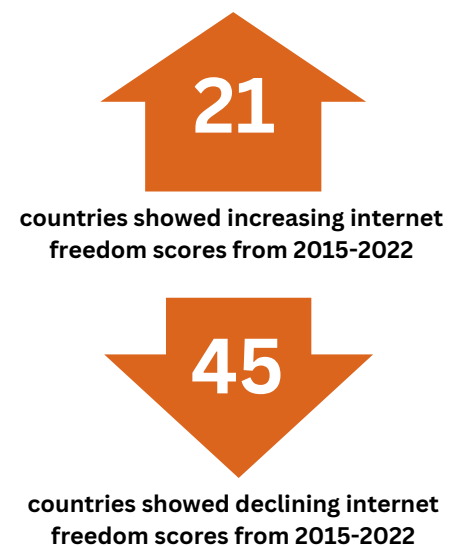
3.2 Civil and political rights

- Civil and political freedoms have declined across almost all regions, with North Africa, Southeast Asia, and Southern Asia experiencing particularly pronounced drops.

- The decline is most notable in civil rights, particularly in freedom of expression and association. Furthermore, there has been a decrease in political pluralism and the effectiveness of governments worldwide.

Largest losses and gains in civil and political rights 2015-2022, by region
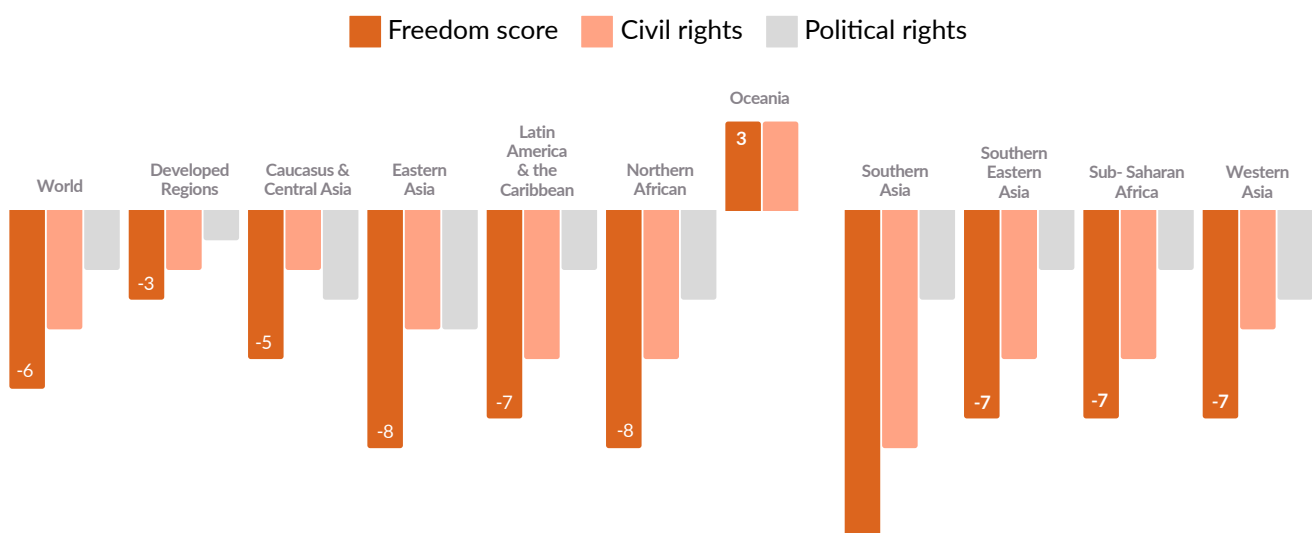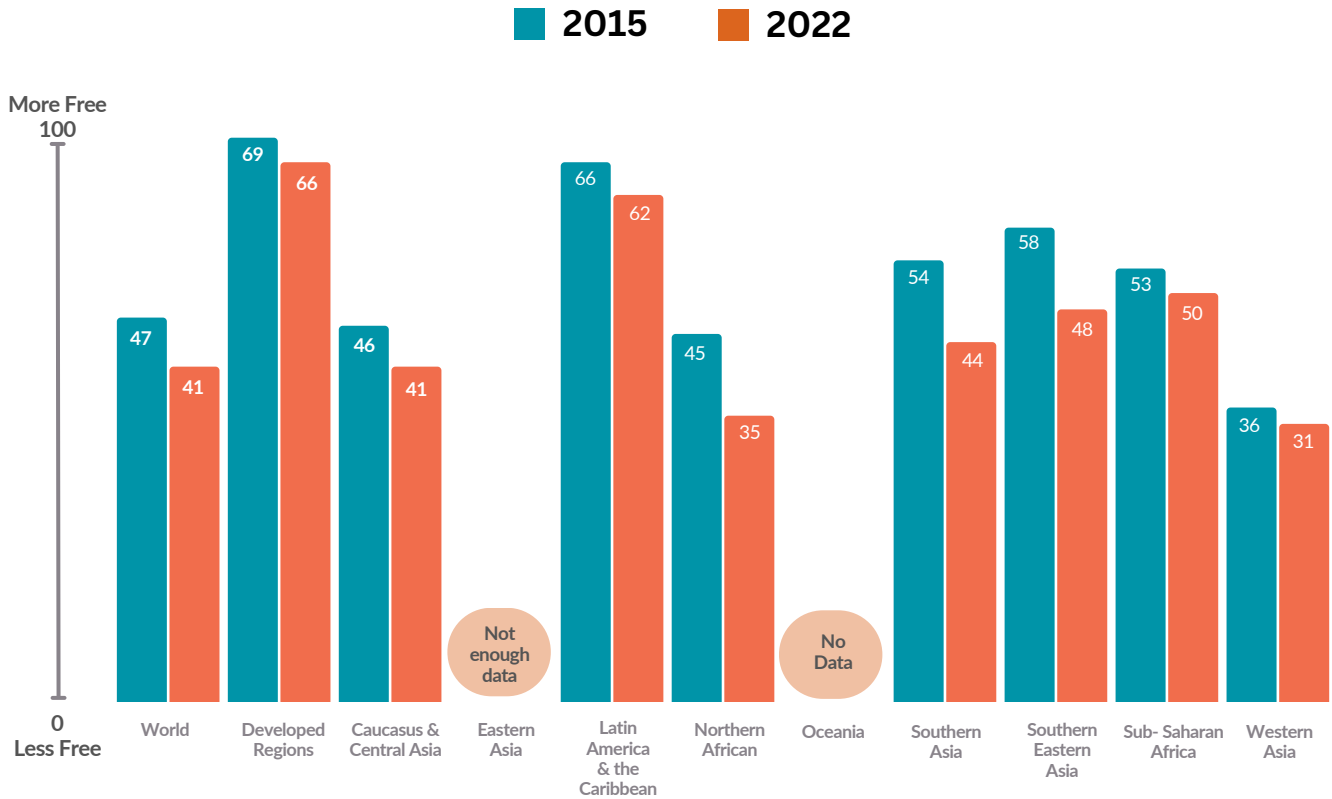

3.3 Freedom on the Net

- Global internet freedom declined in 2022 for the 12th consecutive year.
- Of the 70 countries where Freedom House measures Freedom on the Net, 45 showed declining scores since 2015. Only 21 countries showed improvement in their score in the same period.
- The steepest drops in internet freedom were concentrated in the same regions where political and civil freedoms have been eroded.
- Northern Africa, Southeast Asia, and Southern Asia experienced the biggest losses in internet freedom.
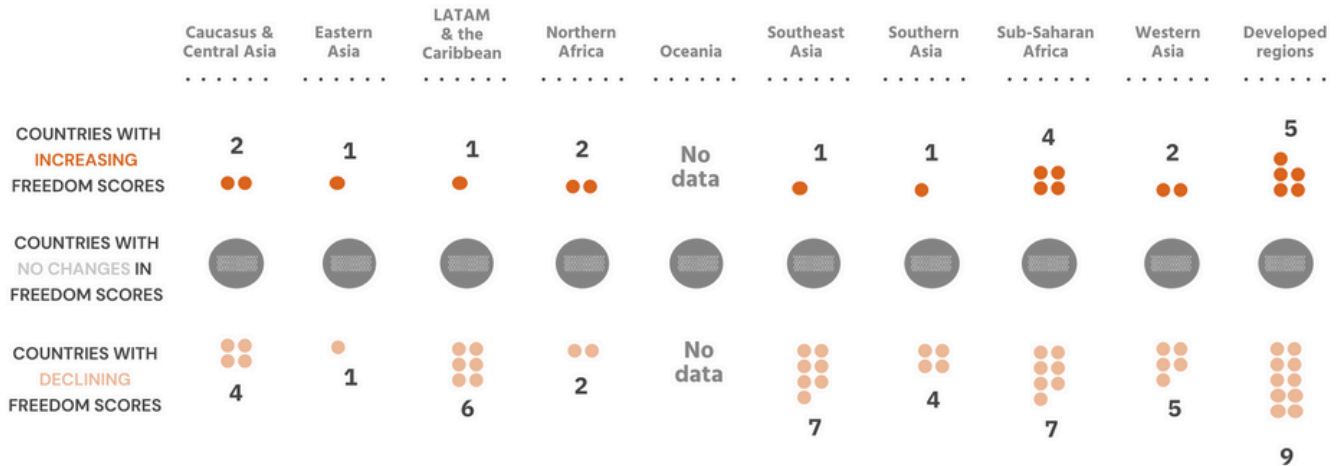
21
countries showed increasing internet freedom scores from 2015-2022

45
countries showed declining internet freedom scores from 2015-2022

Freedom on the Net scores, by region

■ 2015   ■ 2022

More Free
100

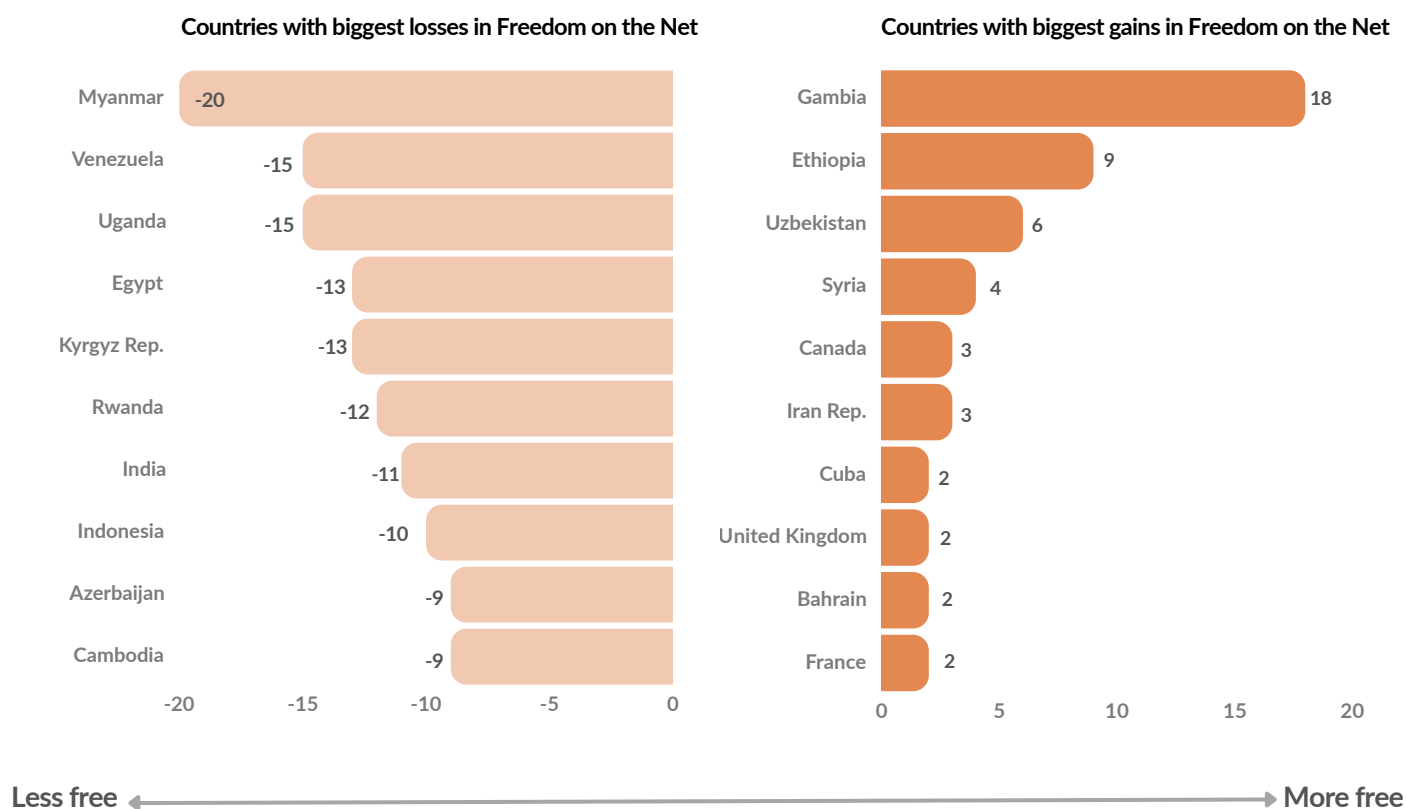| Region	2015	2022
World	47	41
Developed Regions	69	66
Caucasus & Central Asia	46	41
Eastern Asia	Not enough data	
Latin America & the Caribbean	66	62
Northern African	45	35
Oceania	No Data	
Southern Asia	54	44
Southern Eastern Asia	58	48
Sub-Saharan Africa	53	50
Western Asia	36	31

0
Less Free

- Across nearly every region, more countries showed declines in Freedom on the Net scores rather than increases.

Losses and gains in Freedom on the Net, by region

	Caucasus & Central Asia	Eastern Asia	LATAM & the Caribbean	Northern Africa	Oceania	Southeast Asia	Southern Asia	Sub-Saharan Africa	Western Asia	Developed regions
COUNTRIES WITH INCREASING FREEDOM SCORES	2	1	1	2	No data	1	1	4	2	5
COUNTRIES WITH NO CHANGES IN FREEDOM SCORES										
COUNTRIES WITH DECLINING FREEDOM SCORES	4	1	6	2	No data	7	4	7	5	9

Technology & Social Change Group, University of Washington
Source: Freedom House, 2022

28

Largest losses and gains in Freedom on the Net, 2015-2022

Countries with biggest losses in Freedom on the Net

Country	Value
Myanmar	-20
Venezuela	-15
Uganda	-15
Egypt	-13
Kyrgyz Rep.	-13
Rwanda	-12
India	-11
Indonesia	-10
Azerbaijan	-9
Cambodia	-9

Countries with biggest gains in Freedom on the Net

Country	Value
Gambia	18
Ethiopia	9
Uzbekistan	6
Syria	4
Canada	3
Iran Rep.	3
Cuba	2
United Kingdom	2
Bahrain	2
France	2

Less free ← ——————————————————→ More free

Conclusion

As TASCHA and IFLA wrote in their 2019 DA2i report, "Meaningful access to information is essential for the empowerment of individuals, the effectiveness of policies, and the accountability of governments. When everyone can enjoy it, it is a driver of sustainable development across all of its dimensions. When it is absent, insufficient or unequal, opportunities are missed, decisions are poorer, and progress is stifled."

Midway through the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, key indicators show that the world is falling short of its goals. While we are on track to achieve connectivity for most of the planet by 2030, this connectivity is coming at a time when measurements of gender equity have stagnated. It also comes at a time when civil and political freedoms are declining, stifling free and meaningful access to information.

The role of information and its contribution to development in Africa: Uganda's Perspective

Dr Byamugisha Chapter

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Introduction

There are many definitions for information, but generally information means the knowledge communicated or received concerning a particular fact or circumstance. To have meaningful access to information, one must be able to identify, retrieve, and use it effectively. Information is a source of power and influence; without it, one is akin to being blind (Hwang & Jeong, 2023; Dosso, et al., 2023). Information systems and technologies have almost reached commodity-like status, becoming as ubiquitous and significant as labour and other traditional factors of production (Sigov, et al., 2022; Nair, et al., 2021).

The phrases that "knowledge is power" and "information is power" have become common idioms (Boumis & Dean, 2023).Around the world, knowledge is power, and information is vital to development; in Africa in particular, it has emerged as a potent instrument for advancement in a number of fields. Information is crucial for development, fuelling communication, decision-making, and innovation. It's particularly important in the globalised world and can accelerate progress towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Today, the UN considers high-speed internet (broadband) a basic human right (Kelly & Satola, 2023; Graber, 2023). Of course, progress towards quality education is a key SDG, and ICTs are powerful tools for improving information access and quality and subsequently for improving education. However, a significant connectivity gap exists in many countries, including Uganda, between cities and rural areas (Seuyong, 2023). Therefore, it can be deduced that despite their potential, ICTs haven't fully reached these areas, hindering their contribution to education and other SDGs.

Overall, information and ICTs are essential for development, but closing the digital divide is crucial to ensure everyone benefits from their potential (Deganis, et al., 2021; Zhao, et al., 2023). Although major tech companies are investing heavily in information technology, shaping the global landscape and impacting development, Africa still faces challenges in accessing information, particularly in sub-Saharan regions with limited internet access.

The role of information in achieving the world development agenda

As noted above, information is increasingly recognized as a critical driver of sustainable development, playing a crucial role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015.

For example, it has improved decision making for poverty reduction (SDG 1) in areas such as:

1. Environment and climate change:
   - Monitoring and prediction: Data analysis and Earth observation technologies can provide valuable insights into climate change patterns, deforestation, and other environmental challenges (IPCC, 2022).
   - Disaster risk reduction: Early warning systems and information sharing can help communities prepare for and respond to natural disasters more effectively, as demonstrated by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction's work (UNDRR, 2023).

2. Governance and transparency:
   - Open data and e-government: Open access to government data and online platforms can increase transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in decision-making processes, as argued in a World Bank (2022) report.
   - Combating corruption: Information and communication technologies can be used to track public funds, monitor activities, and expose corrupt practices (Transparency International, 2023).

Specific cases for Uganda

1. **Mobile Money and financial inclusion:** The rise of fintechs in Uganda has seen the rise of platforms such as Mobile Money on MTN Uganda, Wave, School Pay, and Airtel Money. This allows access to financial services, facilitates business transactions, and bolsters economic activity (Asongu & Nwachukwu, 2016).

2. **E-commerce and market access:** Online platforms connect African producers directly to consumers, bypassing intermediaries and expanding market reach (World Bank, 2023). An example of such is Jumia Uganda, which is based on Jumia Nigeria. This empowers farmers, artisans, and small businesses to compete globally and generate higher income (Aker & Mbiti, 2010). The picture below is an example.

3. **Education and learning:** Information technology opens access to educational resources and online learning platforms (UNESCO, 2023). This improves educational attainment, expands the knowledge base, and empowers individuals to pursue further education and career opportunities (Trucano, 2013). In Uganda, almost all universities have some form of online learning platform.

4. **Health care and public health:** Telemedicine and mobile health applications allow health-care professionals to reach remote areas, improve diagnosis and treatment, and provide vital information on disease prevention and public health campaigns (World Health Organization, 2020). Uganda is home to Rocket Health Uganda, which is a telemedicine service provider. In the picture below, a man is delivering medicine to a patient in a rural area in Uganda.

5. **Empowering women and girls:** Information access empowers women and girls through access to education, financial services, and awareness about their rights and opportunities (UN Women, 2023). Mobile camps bring ICT skills training to communities in Uganda, promoting gender equality and contributing to overall social development (GSMA, 2019).

Source : https://www.eifl.net/events/mobile-camp-brings-ict-skills-training-communities-uganda

Strengths of the Uganda strategy

1. Strong commitment from the government to use information for development, as seen in the creation of a national ICT programme delivering a range of policy goals and a dedicated SDG Secretariat to coordinate, monitor, and evaluate SDGs in the country.

2. Multistakeholder approach: Working together with local government agencies, the commercial sector, and civil society organizations guarantees a wider range of viewpoints.

3. Emphasis on communication and raising awareness: Projects such as the "Tondeka Mabega" campaign and the provision of educational materials aid in increasing public knowledge of the SDGs.

4. Expanded coverage of mobile networks: It's good to see a rise in broadband access and mobile phone subscriptions.

Challenges

Notwithstanding the potential created by information access, numerous obstacles still exist, including:

1. Digital divide: As the ITU's Measuring Digital Development report points out, unequal access to technology and internet connectivity can worsen preexisting inequities and limit opportunities for marginalized populations (ITU, 2023).

2. Data privacy and security: As the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report emphasizes, worries about data privacy and security might impede the exchange and utilization of data for development objectives (WEF, 2023).

3. Lack of a national framework for digital literacy: According to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report, the impact of digital interventions may be limited by a lack of skills and expertise to use information technology effectively (UNESCO, 2023).

Libraries: architects of progress on Uganda's SDG journey?

Libraries, which are frequently underappreciated, act as quiet leaders in Uganda's quest for growth and accomplishment of the Sustainable Development Goals. They play a crucial role in empowering individuals and communities by acting as information, literacy, and innovation hubs, advancing progress towards numerous SDGs.

Bridging the information gap:

Libraries break down information barriers by providing vital services to underserved populations. This improves progress towards SDG 4 (quality education) by supporting lifelong learning and equipping people with the skills they need to deal with real-world problems (Dada, 2016).

Empowering communities:

Libraries are important for SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) because they provide safe, inclusive platforms for discourse, skill development, and community participation (Ashwill & Norton, 2015). Women and marginalised groups benefit the most from increased access to knowledge and networks (Abata-Ebire, 2018).

Driving sustainable solutions:

Libraries help to achieve SDGs 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and well-being), and 13 (climate action) by curating knowledge on agriculture, health, and environmental practices. Using library services, farmers may increase yields, families can receive access to critical health information, and communities can learn to address environmental concerns (Bradley, 2016).

Collaboration is key:

IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, emphasizes the importance of partnerships between libraries, government, and NGOs to maximize impact. Initiatives such as EIFL's Public Library Innovation Programme offer funding and training to strengthen library services in developing countries like Uganda (IFLA, 2023).

Conclusion

Information is the foundation of growth, enabling individuals and communities to address complicated issues and create a better future. Libraries in Uganda are quietly emerging as development architects, bridging the digital divide, encouraging innovation, and propelling the country towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

They empower individuals and communities by providing important resources such as books and internet access, as well as safe spaces for dialogue and skill development. Women and other marginalized groups benefit the most. Libraries organize knowledge in crucial areas such as agriculture, health, and environmental practices, allowing communities to find long-term solutions to local issues. However, issues such as the digital gap, data privacy concerns, and inadequate new literacy frameworks threaten to limit the influence of ICTs.

Recommendations

1.   To completely realize the potential of libraries, Uganda must prioritize addressing the digital divide, investing in data protection, and developing digital literacy skills. Uganda can use information and ICTs to empower its inhabitants, accelerate progress towards the SDGs, and create a more sustainable and equitable future by leveraging the power of libraries and tackling obstacles.

2.   Policymakers should focus on creating an enabling environment that encourages investment in information infrastructure and promotes the equitable distribution of its benefits.

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The Role of Open Access to Research in Delivering Development

Melissa Hagemann Chapter

Within the broader framework of Development and Access to Information, Open Access to Research (OA) aims to make all scholarly journal articles not only openly available to read, but to contribute to as well, so as to create a global research commons. Today 49% of research published across all fields is open access.

Open access was first defined by the Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI) in 2002 as the "free availability on the public internet, permitting any users to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of these articles." A year after the release of the BOAI, the nascent movement began advocating for public access to publicly funded research. As predominantly a grassroots movement, national and international coalitions formed, largely led by library organizations, calling for public access to taxpayer funded research. Such calls resonated with policymakers with national OA policies first being adopted in 2008. In 2022, the United States Office of Science and Technology Policy issued new guidelines which will provide free, immediate, and equitable access to all federally funded research. This applies to both peer-reviewed publications as well as underlying scientific data. And last year, the Council of the European Union, under the leadership of the Swedish Presidency, called for "immediate and unrestricted OA in publishing research involving public funds."

In parallel to the development of government policies, private research funders are playing a critical role in making their research openly available. Established in 2015, the Open Research Funders Group is a partnership of 26 leading philanthropic organizations committed to the open sharing of research outputs. Their members, including the Gates Foundation, the Wellcome Trust, and the Arcadia Fund, are at the forefront of adopting progressive policies and working with their grantees to ensure that the research they fund is made openly available.

However, as highlighted in new recommendations to mark the 20th Anniversary of the BOAI, "OA is not an end in itself, but a means to further ends. Above all, it is a means to the equity, quality, usability, and sustainability of research." While almost half of all research published is openly available, it was never the goal of the founders of the movement to develop new systems that would make research openly available to read, while at the same time creating new barriers for authors to publish. And the barriers to publish, including Article Processing Fees (APCs) and the current academic incentive structure, are not impacting authors evenly. Today there is growing recognition that OA publishing models that rely on APC's paid by authors are neither equitable nor sustainable. Researchers, including those early in their careers, as well as those in the Global South, often lack the financial resources necessary to pay APCs, thus making it difficult to publish in APC funded journals. However, there is no need to import the troubled APC publishing model to the Global South, for many regions, including Latin America, have long supported non-commercial OA infrastructure through which scientific publication is managed by academic institutions. Indeed, the majority of OA journals throughout the world do not rely on APCs. Of the roughly 20,000 OA journals published in 130 countries in 80 languages, approximately 6,500 require APCs.

The current incentive structure for academic researchers promotes a focus on research with limited societal impact and represents another distinct barrier to equitable publishing. The current system relies heavily on the Journal Impact Factor (JIF) as the primary parameter with which to compare the scientific output of individuals and institutions. The myriad problems with the JIF, and the reliance on such metrics by universities and funding bodies, have created barriers to the further adoption of OA. Much energy within the OA community is now focused on developing new incentives which will reward openness and transparency. Work in this area is being led by the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), the Higher Education Leadership Initiative (HELIOS), and the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), among others.

The critical role that opening research can play in addressing global challenges was shown during the pandemic. In the early days of the outbreak of COVID-19, the Wellcome Trust and science leaders from around the world called on publishers and researchers to make "all peer-reviewed research publications relevant to the outbreak immediately OA, or freely available at least for the duration of the outbreak." Many have concluded that "OA to COVID-19 research quickly became the new normal for biomedicine, with available findings directly impacting the development of treatment protocols and vaccines."

Following the model that worked well for COVID-19, the OA community has come together to call for OA to all research on climate science and biodiversity through the Open Climate Campaign. This model could be applied to other global challenges, specifically those included in the Sustainable Development Goals, which are essentially 17 global challenges facing humanity. Recent research found that while 79% of COVID-19 papers published between January 2020 and December 2021 were OA, only 55% of papers related to SDGs were openly available during the same time period. Shockingly, 45% of research published on climate science and biodiversity are locked behind paywalls, and as we saw with COVID-19, to address the world's greatest challenges, research needs to be open.
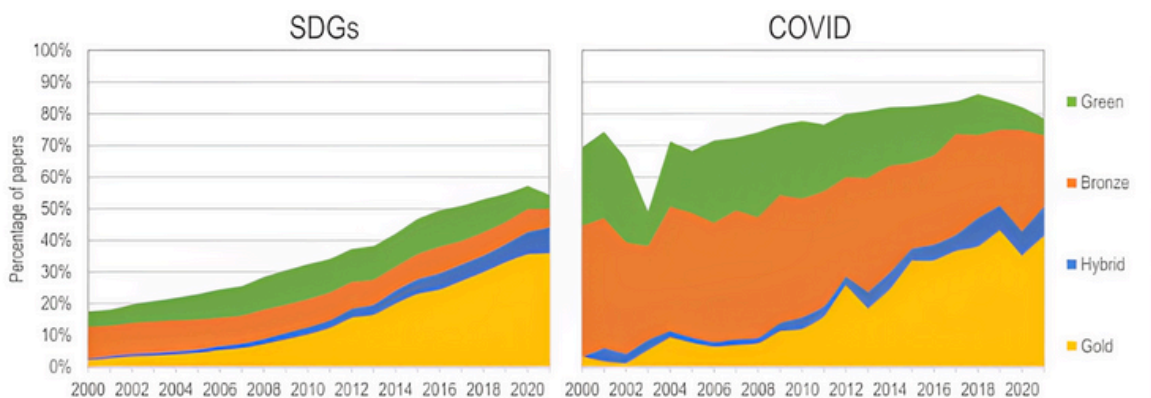
Percentage of open access for SDG-related (left) and COVID-related (right) research papers, by open access type, 2000-2021. Much more COVID-19 research relative to SDG-related research is open access. Image from Contrasting the open access dissemination of COVID-19 and SDG research, Vincent Larivière, Isabel Basson, Jocalyn P. Clark. bioRxiv 2023.05.18.541286
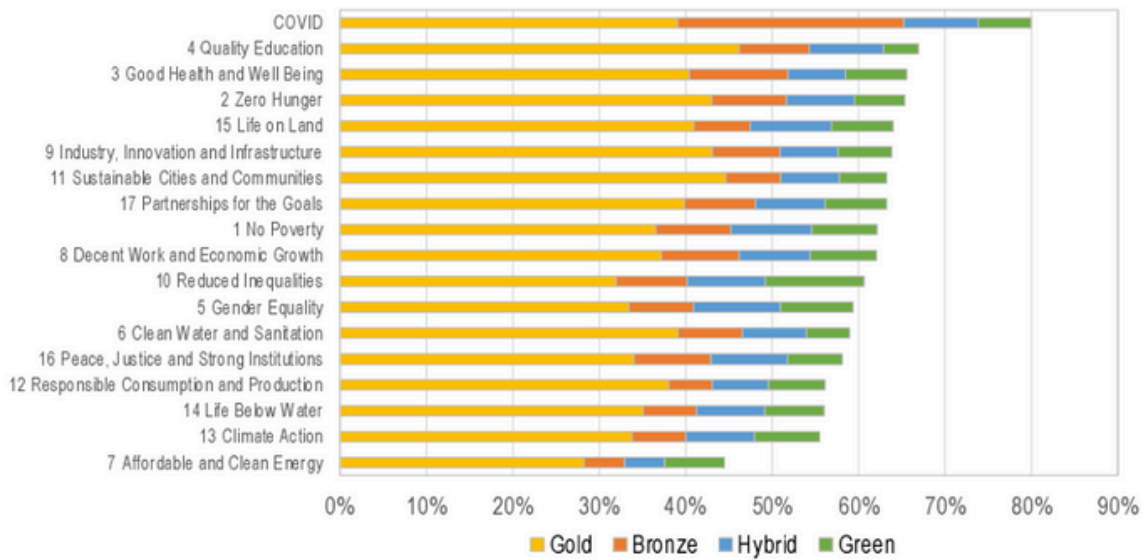
Figure 2 Number of papers by SDG and for COVID-related research, by access type, 2017-2021. Dimensions.ai database.

Over the past twenty years, OA has contributed to unlocking a wealth of critical information. Paired alongside steps to improve access to information for development, including digital inclusion, library connectivity, skills training, and, importantly, progressive copyright reform, the global OA community will continue to play a vital role in sharing knowledge and empowering societies.

The importance of ensuring access to information for sustainable development

David Banisar Chapter

At the halfway point of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Goals appear to be faltering across multiple areas and it seems probable that a majority of the targets are not going to be achieved in time. There are particular problems with Goal 16 on "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions," which is intended to provide for improved governance in a cross-cutting manner across all of the goals. The UN only deems two of the 12 targets in SDG 16 to be progressing, although neither is likely to be fully achieved by 2030. Surprisingly, but somewhat deceptively, one of those is access to information.
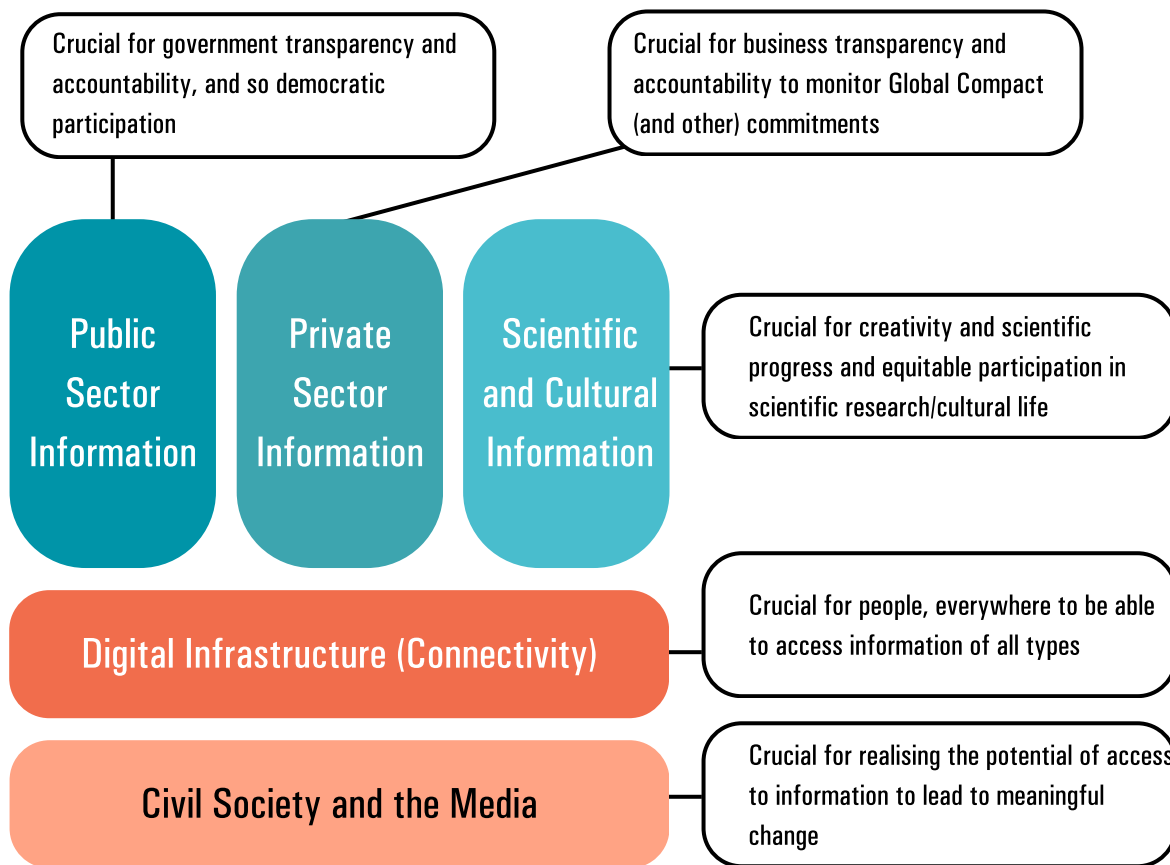
Access to information for development

Access to information in the context of sustainable development should be broadly imagined. It was included in the SDGs because it is considered to be a crucial factor in the achievement of the Goals. As the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, Irene Kahn, recently wrote, access to information is a "driver for sustainable development."[1]

As has been widely recognised internationally, it is the right of individuals to be able to demand information, data and other recorded materials possessed by public bodies and some private bodies and the obligation of countries to take necessary measures to ensure this access. This has also been recognised as an enabler for other social, economic, and cultural rights, including the rights to health, education, water, and a healthy environment, and for protected groups including the disabled, women, children and indigenous populations.

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[1] UN Office of the High Commissioner. (2023). A/HRC/53/25: Sustainable development and freedom of expression: why voice matters — Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5325-sustainable-development-and-freedom-expression-why-voice

Access to information also includes open access to scientific knowledge and cultural heritage. Finally, access to internet and digital spaces as means to access and share information is recognised as the modern mechanism to facilitate it, while an active and healthy civil society ensures that there are people ready and able to draw on it to ensure accountability.

Crucial for government transparency and accountability, and so democratic participation

Crucial for business transparency and accountability to monitor Global Compact (and other) commitments

Public Sector Information

Private Sector Information

Scientific and Cultural Information

Crucial for creativity and scientific progress and equitable participation in scientific research/cultural life

Digital Infrastructure (Connectivity)

Crucial for people, everywhere to be able to access information of all types

Civil Society and the Media

Crucial for realising the potential of access to information to lead to meaningful change

One of the most important roles of access to public information is facilitating informed and meaningful participation. Disadvantaged communities and individuals cannot effectively engage on an equal basis if information crucial to their making knowledgeable decisions on how to achieve their needs is not available to them. This participation can be limited, for example, when there is no or low access to modern communications, given their indispensable role in enabling discussion.

Information is also crucial for the accountability of decision-makers; it is necessary for communities to ensure that resources such as financial support, health care, and educational funds are fairly allocated and reaching those who need them. It is also key for journalists and civil society organisations to identify misgovernance, corruption and illicit financial flows that seriously hinder development in countries across the world.

Much the same can be said about information from businesses, whose actions have a huge impact on the lives of individuals and communities. Meanwhile, access to scientific information is essential to drive development globally, with particular dividends —under the right business models — to make science truly global in terms of the questions it addresses, the people undertaking it, and those who benefit.

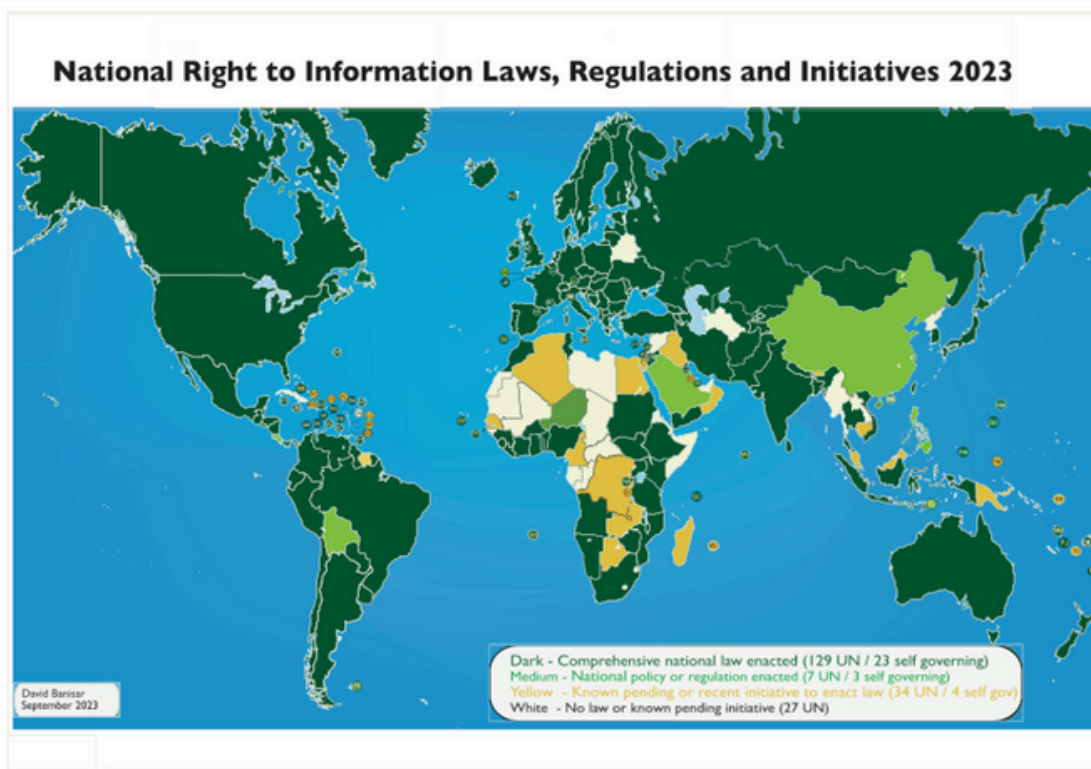## Uneven progress in establishing access rights in law

In the SDGs, the UN Member States agreed to build in access to information as a mechanism for countries and their peoples to be able to monitor progress from top to bottom. Data on progress is collected by national statistical agencies and international bodies. The UN system collects (or at least attempts to collect) the data on all the targets and indicators and publishes them annually. With the cooperation of stakeholders, countries and some subnational bodies also produce "Voluntary National Reviews," which are discussed at the annual High Level Political Forum.

The SDGs also commit countries to ensuring access to information for their people. Target 16.10 specifies that states will "ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements." Indicator 16.10.2 monitors the "Number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information," with UNESCO leading on collection and analysis.[2] Other targets and indicators monitor related issues such as public participation and open budgets, as well as mobile and internet connectivity. Access to information can also be found in other targets on health and the environment.

[2] UNESCO. (2022). To recovery and beyond: 2021 UNESCO report on public access to information (SDG 16.10.2). https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380520

The target has been moderately successful in encouraging countries to adopt laws. While laws guaranteeing access to (public) information have been in place for many decades in some northern countries, it was not until the 1990s that a large number of countries adopted such laws. A major impetus was the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which called for access to information, public participation and access to justice.[3] Since 2016, more than 20 countries have adopted such laws or policies, with the SDG target likely a factor in at least some of those decisions.

Today, 136 countries have enacted comprehensive right to information (RTI, also called Freedom of Information or Open Government) laws or national regulations, covering approximately 90 percent of the world population. Around 30 countries have pending legal initiatives. At the same time, many countries have adopted proactive open data laws and policies to promote access and reuse of data for both accountability and economic development.

National Right to Information Laws, Regulations and Initiatives 2023

Dark - Comprehensive national law enacted (129 UN / 23 self governing)
Medium - National policy or regulation enacted (7 UN / 3 self governing)
Yellow - Known pending or recent initiative to enact law (34 UN / 4 self gov)
White - No law or known pending initiative (27 UN)

David Banisar
September 2023

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[3] UN General Assembly. (1992). A/CONF.151/26 (Vol. I), Principle 10.
https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_2
6_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf

However, the number of countries that have adopted laws has slowed considerably in the past few years, and it is unlikely that all of the nearly 60 countries that have not adopted laws will have met their commitment to implement SDG 16.10 by 2030.[4]

A focus solely on access to information held by the public sector is perilously narrow. It is necessary to ensure the right of access applies to all key parties in the global economy, especially large private and state-owned companies. Private bodies hold crucial information about the environmental and human rights impact of their activities and supply chains.

There has been limited progress on information held by private bodies. A handful of national RTI laws, mostly in Africa, specifically recognise a right of access to information held by private bodies when it is needed to protect rights. Many countries have laws requiring companies to give the public information on environmental and health risks from the hazardous substances they use in their operations.

International instruments such as the UN Global Compact also recognise that this right should extend to the private sector. After initially publishing information voluntarily, companies are increasingly being required to collect and publish information on their operations' impacts on climate, human rights, and other issues. In some countries, such as Norway, individuals have the right to demand information from any large domestic or international company regarding its human rights practices.

Looking further, other areas such as open access to scientific knowledge have gained interest in recent years, but action is often focused on conditionality around public funding rather than involving the detailed legal structures that RTI laws have in most countries.

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[4] TAP Network. (2023). Halfway to 2030 report on SDG16+. https://www.sdg16now.org/table-of-contents/#part2

Considering cross-cutting conditions worldwide, ICT access has become widespread. An increasing number of countries have recognised it as a fundamental human right[5] or like Brazil adopted comprehensive laws setting out protections. Meanwhile, there are concerns, as acknowledged by the UN High Commission for Human Rights, that legal protections for civil society organisations and journalists have been weakened, leaving them less able to use access to information to drive change.

[5] Borg Psaila, S. (2022, 7 September). Right to access the Internet: the countries and the laws that proclaim it. https://www.diplomacy.edu/blog/right-to-access-the-internet-countries-and-laws-proclaim-it/

Problems in accessing information in practice

The indicator for 16.10.2 also calls on states to implement laws or policies guaranteeing access to information. However, the progress of countries adopting laws has not translated into access to information fully being available. It is fair to say that no country is fully open and there are significant barriers to access to information globally. Among the problems: the laws in many of countries are inadequate, with excessive exemptions and inadequate appeals mechanisms;[6] even if there is good legislation, there often remain cultures of secrecy that ignore legal obligations; and many bodies lack adequate resources to collect, organise, and disseminate information. In its 2021 monitoring report, UNESCO noted problems with recordkeeping and emphasised the need for oversight bodies and networks to promote SDG monitoring.[7]

The publication requirements for private bodies have not necessarily increased public knowledge. Often companies only publish limited information, which often presents an overly positive view, buried deep in corporate reports. Greenwashing — making misleading claims of environmentally friendly activities to minimize public criticism — is also common.[8] This has led to the imposition of greater binding regulations by national bodies and international ones such as the European Union.

Even statistical data is limited in many countries. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries are struggling to maintain their statistics, especially relating to gender and environment and climate.[9] A lack of this data will make progress on the SDGs even more difficult. Data collection for the SDGs itself is quite limited, with a majority of the indicators in SDG 16 only having partial coverage.[10]

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[6] Centre for Law and Democracy. (n.d.). The RTI rating. https://www.rti-rating.org

[7] UNESCO. (2022). To recovery and beyond: 2021 UNESCO report on public access to information (SDG 16.10.2). https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380520

[8] UN High-Level Expert Group on the Net Zero Emissions Commitments of Non-State Entities. (2022). Integrity matters: Net zero commitments by businesses, financial institutions, cities and regions. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/high-level_expert_group_n7b.pdf

[9] Open Data Watch. (2023). Open data inventory 2022/23. https://opendatawatch.com/publications/executive-summary-open-data-inventory-2022-2023/

[10] TAP Network. Halfway to 2030 report on SDG16+. Ibid.

Further, there is a growing trend toward restrictions on civic space across the world.[11] Access by itself is not sufficient. It needs civil society and journalists to be able to freely gather the information and disseminate it. Communities must be able to discuss it and organise. And it needs mechanisms to ensure that the information can be used to effect change.

There are also problems with online access. According to the ITU, more than 30 percent of the world population has no access to the internet. Further, there is a significant digital divide regarding access to high-speed internet as well as substantial gender and age gaps.[12] There is also increasing use of internet shutdowns, affecting the entire local or even country network in repressive states, which can substantially impact development, as well as human, economic, social, and cultural rights.[13] 1,200 were reported between 2016 and 2023.[14] The shutdowns in 54 countries since 2019 have cost their economies an estimated $50 billion.[15]

[11] CIVICUS. (2020). CIVICUS monitor: Tracking civic space. https://www.civicus.org/index.php/what-we-do/innovate/civicus-monitor

[12] ITU. (2022). Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2022. https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/facts-figures-2022/

13] UN Office of High Commissioner. (2022, 13 May). Internet shutdowns: Trends, causes, legal implications and impacts on a range of human rights. A/HRC/50/55. https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=a%2Fhrc%2F50%2F55

[14] Access Now. (2023). Who is shutting down the internet in 2023? A mid-year update. https://www.accessnow.org/publication/internet-shutdowns-in-2023-mid-year-update/#join-us

[15] Top10VPN. (2023). Government internet shutdowns have cost $50 billion since 2019. https://www.top10vpn.com/research/cost-of-internet-shutdowns/

Conclusion

Access to information is crucial as a tool to promote fairness and accountability in sustainability. However, much more needs to be done to incorporate it into the SDG framework. Public and private bodies should be required to make more information and data about their activities available with adequate mechanisms to ensure access and accuracy, and to provide the possibility for people to act on it.

Libraries, access to information and artificial intelligences in Latin America and the Caribbean

Dr. Ariel Vercelli Chapter

INHUS - CONICET / FH-UNMdP

Introduction: access to information, digital technologies and development

In 2015, the member countries of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and defined 17 goals, known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),[16] and several indicators aimed at assessing their results. In 2023, the United Nations launched a mid-term assessment of the progress of these goals and, as can be seen in Figure 1, the results were alarming (UN, 2023: 8). The report, citing data as of June 2023, analysed each of the goals and showed that more than half of the world's population is "falling behind." Although some SDGs have made progress, others show slow progress or even worrying setbacks (poverty, hunger, equality, climate). The report calls for urgent action before the 2030 Agenda becomes a pipe dream or, worse, the epitaph of the world that could have been (UN, 2023).

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[16]The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are global and complementary: 1) end poverty; 2) zero hunger; 3) health and well-being; 4) quality education; 5) gender equality; 6) clean water and sanitation; 7) affordable and clean energy; 8) decent work and economic growth; 9) industry, innovation and infrastructure; 10) reducing inequalities; 11) sustainable cities and communities; 12) responsible production and consumption; 13) climate action; 14) undersea life; 15) life of terrestrial ecosystems; 16) peace, justice and strong institutions; and 17) partnerships to achieve the goals (UN, 2023).

The poor mid-term results and the world going through a polycrisis (pandemic, climate change and wars) forced UN think tanks to rethink the strategy and bet on an intensive use of digital technologies that would allow them to accelerate results (infrastructure, connectivity, digital literacy). Between 2023 and the beginning of 2024, several reports and strategic plans were published by different UN agencies in which radical ideas and solutions were proposed to keep pace with the 2030 Agenda. Specifically, to achieve the SDGs, these agencies projected the need to move forward on rapid and effective transitions based on (a) universal access to information for all and (b) the intensive use of artificial intelligence (AI). The following sections describe both proposals and analyse how libraries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) can be allies in achieving the SDGs. The text also presents recommendations aimed at improving the relationship between libraries, access to information, and AI in LAC.

Evaluación del progreso de los 17 Objetivos basada en las metas evaluadas, 2023 o datos más recientes (porcentaje)

Legend:
- Meta alcanzada o en vías de alcanzarla (green)
- Progreso razonable, pero es necesario acelerarlo (yellow)
- Estancamiento o retroceso (red)
- Datos insuficientes (grey)
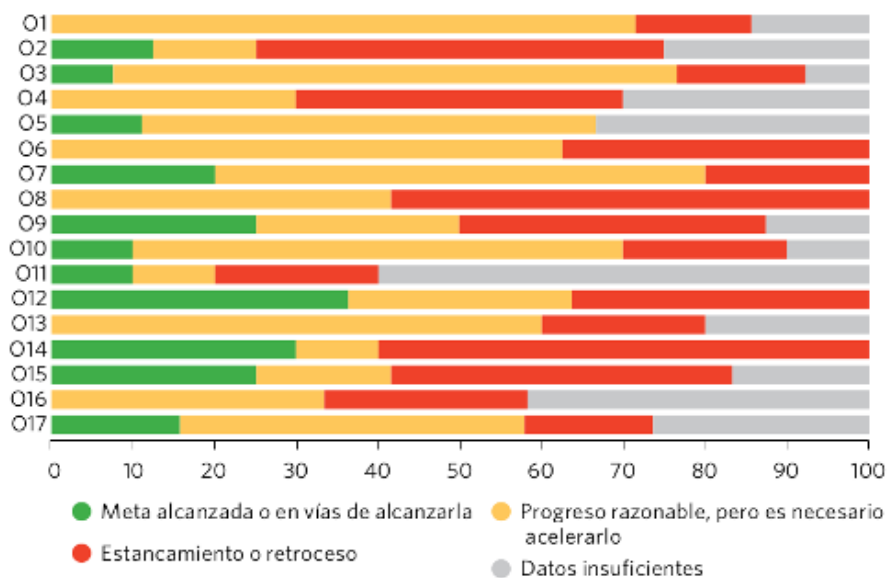
Universal access to information for all

In our societies information is ubiquitous, transformative and vital to everyday life. In United Nations documents, it is presented as an indispensable requirement for achieving the SDGs[17] and, hence, supremely important to the right of universal access to information. Indeed, beyond its historical recognition as a human right,[18] universal access to information is also defined as the ability of every person, community or organisation to use, create and share information (IFLA, 2017, 2019). Its relevance for the United Nations can be seen, among others, through the strategic plan of the Information for All Programme (2023-2029), where its strategic priorities[19] articulate access to information[20] and the 2030 Agenda (IFAP, 2023). In turn, the exercise of this right/capacity requires technological infrastructure (telephone, computer, connection), social, legal-political conditions and personal/community capacities. In this regard, in LAC, both internet connectivity (ITU, 2023; World Bank, 2023) and the number of countries that protect universal access to information (UNESCO, 2019; ECLAC, 2022) have increased.[21]

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[17]Goal 16, "Peace, justice and strong institutions," Target 10, states, "Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements" (UN, 2023).

[18]The universal right of access to information (freedom of information, right to information, right to know) is part of the right to freedom of expression and is recognised in human rights instruments, including Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights (Pact of San José) (1969). Specifically, and with similarities in their wording, it is recognised that the fundamental right to freedom of expression also encompasses the right to seek or receive information and ideas and to impart them, regardless of frontiers, by any means of expression.

[19]IFAP priorities include: 1) information for development, 2) information literacy, 3) information preservation, 4) information ethics, 5) information accessibility, and 6) multilingualism in cyberspace. The strategic plan understands that libraries, archives, museums, etc., can be allies in bridging information gaps and ensuring effective access to information (IFAP, 2023).

[20]IFAP understands that universal access to information can contribute to the SDGs and expresses in its strategic plan that it will focus on the achievement of SDGs 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 16 and 17 (IFAP, 2023).

[21]In LAC, the adoption in Escazú, Costa Rica, of the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2022) also stands out. It regulates the rights of access to information on different environmental issues: among others, natural resources, biodiversity, land, climate change and resilience.

However, beyond these indicators, there are other problems in the region regarding the link between information and development. Specifically, during the COVID-19 pandemic and its preventive isolation measures, it was observed that the increase in connectivity and time online was also accompanied by an unprecedented concentration of information and data[22] (personal and population) in a handful of technology corporations and northern states (Axon Partners Group, 2022). These asymmetries only increased in 2023: Information/data traffic on the internet was dominated by U.S. and Chinese companies (Cloudfare, 2023). Only 6 percent of data centres are located in LAC, and for the most part, they belong to northern companies (Minnix, 2024). This scenario poses major challenges for the right/capacity of universal access since, beyond LAC governments, these information/data flows are managed by technology corporations from developed countries. Information/data extractivism[23] and its hyper-concentration can deepen inequalities in the region and even paralyse SDG 10.[24]

First recommendation: The right/capability of universal access to information, in addition to the public information managed by the States, should also reach the private-public-comunity data managed by technology corporations. It should be complemented, as appropriate, by the human right to protection of personal and population data.

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[22]Data means a discrete set of information that may, for example, contain numbers, text, images or sounds that, under certain conditions (control, format, storage, laws, etc.), can be used for analysis, calculation, inference, application or training.

[23]Information/data extractivism can be characterised as the collection, processing, archiving and overexploitation of the online lives of users of technological devices (computers, mobile phones, smart TVs, video game consoles, etc.) by technology corporations and states. Everything of current or future value is extracted: information, personal/population data, browsing routines, preferences, consumption, meta- and macro-data, images, goods and intellectual works. Digital extractivism, like material/environmental extractivism, is characterised as predatory, compulsive, illegal (or para-legal), in violation of human rights and with unforeseen consequences for democracies (Vercelli, 2021).

[24]Goal 10, "Reduce inequality within and between countries," Target 2, states "By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status" (UN, 2023).

The intensive use of artificial intelligences to achieve the SDGs

Artificial intelligences are generating profound changes in our societies. They have been part of our daily lives for years: they are omnipresent, powerful, opaque and often invisible to the human eye (Vercelli, 2023). AI are driving radical changes in information/data access and knowledge management (AI Advisory Body, 2023). Machine learning makes it possible to train AI from algorithms and data and improve decision-making without human intervention (Ridley, 2022). Several UN agencies understand, as with information/data, that AI is a key enabler for achieving the SDGs. However, experts highlight that despite their benefits, AI represents a latent danger. They are technologies that, far from being neutral, transparent or universal, are developed for profit and are not characterised by guaranteeing universal access to information or being oriented towards protecting human rights. In fact, their massive and uncontrolled uses by the state is favouring the emergence of new and serious problems.[25] One of them, perhaps the most complex, is that AI may end up deepening current inequalities: that is, that their benefits, far from serving humanity and the common good, may be concentrated, privatised and appropriated only by a reduced and privileged list of states, corporations and individuals (AI Advisory Board, 2023). The great challenge with these technologies, central to achieving the SDGs and in particular SDG 10, is whether their capabilities can be used to create free, inclusive, sovereign and development-oriented devices for LAC countries and other regions most in need. Latin America must avoid an AI divide and help reverse the low technological development of the Global South: at the moment, LAC only contributes 2.66% of articles on AI in scientific journals (Maslej, et al., 2023) [26]. The AI gap, added to the already known digital and development gaps, could further complicate the 2030 Agenda in LAC.

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[25]These problems include asymmetries in access and use of technologies, digital divides, false neutrality, monopolies, massive and systematic violation of the human right to privacy and personal data protection, data extractivism, algorithmic biases, discrimination, fake news, disinformation, autonomous weapons, etc.

[26]Global percentages: 47.14%, East Asia and Pacific; 17.20%, Europe and Central Asia; 11.61%, North America; 6.93%, Unknown; 6.75%, South Asia; 4.64%, Middle East and North Africa; 2.66%, Latin America and Caribbean; 2.30%, Rest of the World; 0.77%, Sub-Saharan Africa (Maslej et al., 2023: 33).

Second recommendation: Seek to ensure that public institutions (e.g., libraries, museums, archives, galleries) develop specific AI that protects diversity and human rights, that develop locally through free, open and community-based solutions, and that seek to install their own infrastructure and reduce the costs of machine learning.

Final thoughts: libraries, information and artificial intelligences

For centuries, libraries have functioned as a public-community brain of our societies. Historically, one of libraries' missions has been to meet individuals' and communities' needs for access to information and knowledge, overcoming commercial, technological or legal impediments (IFLA-UNESCO, 2022). For this reason, libraries are in a position to make a significant contribution to achieving the SDGs and this seems to be the understanding of several UN documents. UNESCO's recommendations on the ethics of artificial intelligence propose, in paragraph 100, that Member States encourage libraries (as well as museums, galleries and archives) to use AI to enhance their collections and provide users access to their databases and knowledge bases (UNESCO, 2021). Similarly, **previous IFLA reports (2017, 2019) have also emphasised that libraries, access to information and digital technologies are critically linked to achieving the SDGs. Advances in AI** represent endless possibilities for libraries, museums, archives and galleries. They allow them to enhance their information acquisition, preservation, organisation and literacy capabilities for users and communities (IFLA FAIFE, 2020). AI offers users the ability to read books, write texts, translate them, create images, play games, access all kinds of knowledge, and, among other things, help people with motor, sensory or vision impairments. In addition, as information and knowledge management centres, public libraries can help their communities address issues of bias and misinformation.

To achieve the SDGs in a timely manner, it is critical for libraries and other public institutions to develop (or collaborate in the development of) public-community AI.[27] Countries and regions with freely available data, information, knowledge and culture will be better equipped to achieve the SDGs (IFLA-UNESCO, 2022). In this regard, in addition to technologies, public policies and planning are needed in LAC.

Third recommendation: Develop specific AI for libraries, and other public institutions such as museums, archives and galleries, based on data-driven institutional models, seeking the urgent updating of information science university careers in LAC and a greater inclusion of librarians in UN expert groups on AI.

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[27]In addition, it is necessary to avoid the privatisation and appropriation of information/data that has a public-community character. Similar points are present in free software, open educational resources, open/public data and, among others, AI "of" Indigenous peoples (González Zepeda & Martínez Pinto, 2023).

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Public Libraries and the sustainable development goals

David Donohue Chapter

In 2014-15, as Ireland's Ambassador to the United Nations, I co-chaired the UN negotiations that culminated in the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals.   The SDGs and the wider 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were — and are — the most ambitious programme for global progress ever devised. In September 2015, this new agenda was agreed by all UN member States, who committed themselves to working for its full achievement by 2030.

2023 marks the midway point in the lifespan of the SDGs. Leaders from all 193 countries recently came together at a special United Nations summit to review the progress made to date, to renew their commitments, and to set a fresh set of priorities for the remaining seven years to 2030. While the world's scorecard on SDGs implementation is well behind where it should be (due in particular to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war), a strong global consensus remains that the SDGs are the indispensable roadmap as we rebuild from the pandemic and grapple with a multiplicity of other crises and challenges.

Action to achieve the SDGs is a matter for policymakers at all levels: global, regional, national and local. Implementation involves a collective effort by governments, the private sector, civil society, academia, the research community and many other stakeholders.

If those responsible are to take the right kind of decisions, they must have access to a knowledge base that will keep them fully informed across an extraordinarily wide-ranging and complex set of issues. What is required by policymakers under each heading is scientific evidence that is rigorous, timely and comprehensive. Not only is each Goal in itself a subject requiring vast knowledge and expertise, but the interactions between, and across, all of the Goals represent an entirely new challenge.

This is an integrated agenda that involves countless interconnections across the 17 Goals and 169 targets. There are also several cross-cutting themes and priorities that can only be addressed effectively on the basis of in-depth information and analysis. The most prominent of these is the pledge made by all countries to target in particular the needs of the poorest and most disadvantaged communities, "leaving no one behind" and endeavouring to "reach the furthest behind first."

It was always clear that, to generate data on the scale required, national statistical offices would play a crucial role. But beyond that, policymakers would need to rely on the world's institutions of knowledge and learning to identify, and fill, the many gaps which would inevitably reveal themselves. To be true to the demands of a uniquely broad agenda that every country would be implementing, information and data would be required that would be universally available, easily accessible and on a similarly broad scale. On the one hand, therefore, information is needed to enable decision-takers to plot the right way forward; and on the other, information is needed to meet the needs of the general public and ensure the necessary political support for this unprecedented global work plan.

This is where public libraries have an essential contribution to make. Available to everyone regardless of background or status, they are repositories of comprehensive data on all issues relevant to the SDGs. They support a wide range of activities inspired by the SDGs: basic knowledge-gathering about the Goals and their purpose and scope; education and teaching; advocacy around the Goals; detailed monitoring of the progress being made; and the facilitation of research and innovation based on them. The information about the SDGs that public libraries supply comes, of course, in a wide variety of formats, with digitised and online data playing a steadily growing role.

Access to information is a fundamental human right. It facilitates, furthermore, the delivery of many other rights. The provision by public libraries of information on all aspects of the SDGs is an absolutely indispensable public service. Particularly with the free internet access they provide in many countries, libraries are helping in a very real way to deliver the promises relating to human rights and equality that are made in the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.

Libraries are key stakeholders for implementation of the SDGs. They offer a wide range of products and services that promote the achievement of each of the Goals. The very epitome of recycling, they are well positioned to disseminate knowledge widely, whether through books, CDs, DVDs, e-books or digital magazines. And they facilitate the exchange of learnings and best practices, within and between countries, that we have all agreed are indispensable for implementation of the SDGs.

In my country, and in my part of the world, public libraries are proactive partners that contribute actively through a range of initiatives to public understanding of the challenges and opportunities represented by the SDGs. They help ordinary citizens to see how they can make a difference, at a personal and local level, in terms of implementation of the SDGs.   In the process, they also strengthen universal literacy, citizen involvement, inclusivity and national ownership of this agenda.

In Ireland, public libraries have created collections and reading lists around the SDGs, with individual Goals showcased each month. They have held hundreds of workshops on climate action, sustainability and other SDG-related issues. There have been events to highlight the SDGs to the public and to schools and programmes that support achievement of the Goals and targets while also raising awareness of the 2030 Agenda more generally. All libraries have taken part in the country's national SDGs awareness weeks. Many have incorporated the SDGs in their own strategic plans. Ireland's current national library strategy includes, for the first time, a focus on sustainability and climate action and on actions that will help the country to achieve the SDGs. It shows how almost all of the SDGs will be supported and it maps commitments to 31 of the SDG targets. Public libraries have been included in the Irish Government's current National Implementation Plan for the SDGs.

Irish public libraries have been particularly active in highlighting the significance of Goals 2, 3, 4, 5, 13 and 16 (the latter with its emphasis on public access to information and the transparency and accountability linked to this). In support of Goal 2, for example, they have partnered with national health initiatives on a project designed to engage 50,000 people directly in a food growing programme. Growing kits were made available through 300 library branches across the country, and 50 "library ambassadors" were appointed to create momentum for the campaign at the local level.

In support of Goal 3, a national health initiative focussed on public libraries gave people access to a collection of health-related books and other reading materials. Under Goal 4, a library-based campaign promoting literacy and well-being led to tens of thousands of people joining library digital services for the first time. (Goal 4, with, inter alia, its pledge to "promote lifelong learning opportunities for all," to provide safe and inclusive learning environments, and to ensure that by 2030 all youth and a substantial proportion of adults would achieve literacy, has of course very direct implications for libraries worldwide).

What opportunities are there to strengthen further the contribution of libraries to achievement of the SDGs? And what challenges do we face in this area?

At the heart of SDGs implementation is the concept of mutual learning and support. It would be very useful to share best practices among those countries who have recognized the potential of libraries from the outset and are making great strides in this area. There should also be greater investment in skills training for library staff, particularly digital skills as the volume of digitally available information expands rapidly and this becomes increasingly the medium of choice for library users. Improvements in digital infrastructure and resources for libraries are also needed. Digital inclusion, ensuring that marginalised and disadvantaged groups have digital skills and access, must be prioritised. In many European countries, a number of minority groups, such as vulnerable migrants and asylum-seekers, are experiencing continuing social exclusion, and therefore discrimination and a denial of basic rights, because of their lack of digital skills.

Looking more broadly at the European landscape, one has the impression that, while there is no doubting the contribution to be made by European public libraries to implementation of the SDGs, the performance under this heading across European Union member States has been a little uneven. Political commitment, the capacity of national statistics offices, and the resourcing of public libraries vary from one country to another, and much of the potential remains untapped.

Many of the substantive challenges presented by the SDGs are continuing. While information and data for individual Goals and targets may be plentiful, there is often less to show regarding the interconnections between one area and another and the impact one target can have, positively or negatively, on the achievement of several others.

These challenges of multidimensional evaluation are particularly acute when it comes to assessing how a country is doing in relation to the pledge to "leave no one behind." Disaggregated information spanning many categories of disadvantage is needed for measurement of this cross-cutting commitment. Libraries and knowledge institutions are not always equipped with what they require to facilitate such assessments. There may also be significant gaps between individual EU member States in this respect.

To sum up, access to information is indispensable for implementation of the SDGs. Worldwide, public libraries are providing such access, to policymakers and experts and to the ordinary public. In Europe, a number of countries recognize the key role of libraries and are exploiting it fully. However, performance in this respect is uneven across the EU.   There are also challenges in terms of digital access, resources and training and in the ability to mobilise the multidimensional data needed for assessments of, for example, the commitment to "leave no one behind."

Development and Access to Information

Professor Lawrence Surendra Chapter

SDGs: Where do we stand?

Humanity has not only survived many perilous times, but also retained its humanity. In the past century, we have seen two world wars, the Vietnam War, the unending Afghan tragedy, fascism, apartheid and genocides, not to mention the dangers posed by climate change. A terrible, meaningless war goes on in Europe with no end in sight. Democracies are threatened, yet humankind lives in hope, and aspirations for a better future remain. The UN Sustainable Development Goals launched in 2015 were part of humanity's aspirations for a just, sustainable and peaceful world. However, at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Global Sustainable Development Report submitted to the 2023 High-Level Political Forum makes this candid statement: "Progress to date, at the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda, is far off track and projections show that the world will not achieve the SDGs by 2030" (emphasis added).

Countries of the Asia and the Pacific (Oceania) regions, especially Small Island States and Least Developed Countries, show a consistent lack of progress with regard to the SDGs. What is the scenario for progress on the UN's 2030 Agenda? A glimpse of the progress on SDGs can be gleaned from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs' "SDG Acceleration Actions," which cover "initiatives voluntarily undertaken to accelerate the SDG implementation by governments and any other non-state actors — individually or in partnership. Any new effort or new action that builds on existing efforts (scaling up, new phase, etc.) related to the achievement of one or more of the 17 SDGs or that addresses the interlinked nature of the 2030 Agenda could be considered an SDG Acceleration Action."

The "SDG Acceleration Actions" briefing document of 19th August 2022 had the following interesting findings. "A total of 387 Acceleration Actions have been published. The majority of actions (76%) aim to address multiple SDGs leveraging interlinkages, while 24% of initiatives focus on addressing one SDG. Of the 387 registered actions, SDG 17 has mobilized the largest number, followed by SDGs 13, 1, 5, 6, 4 and 16. With regard to geographical location of initiatives, 38% of registered actions come from Europe; 20% from Africa; 19% from Latin America and the Caribbean; 13% from Asia and the Pacific; and 10% from West Asia (Middle East)." Further, "In terms of country breakdown by GDP (ppp [purchasing power parity]), 48% of submissions are from high-income countries, while 43% [are] from middle-income countries and 9% from low-income countries. There is a scope for mobilizing more SDG Acceleration Actions from the least developed countries (LDCs), small island developing States (SIDS) and post-conflict and fragile states as they account for 10%, 1% and 11% of total actions published, respectively. Governments have submitted the majority of SDG Acceleration Actions (32%), followed by civil society organizations (31%), UN entities (15%) and the private sector (12%)." Interestingly, 48% of submissions are from high-income countries. The Asia-Pacific region has only 13% of actions. Relevant to this contribution is that SDG 17, Partnerships, has mobilized the largest number of actions.

In the context of "access to information," it is relevant to note that the "right to information" has clearly increased the ability of citizens to access and use information to ensure accountability and transparency in governance. Governments are constantly finding ways to block the right to information. However, the concept of a "right to information" has definitely taken root in more and more countries. According to UNESCO, since 1991 there "has been increased legal recognition of the right to access to information." "While in 1991 only 12 countries were equipped with laws guaranteeing the rights of citizens to access government information, this number rose to 40 countries in 2009, culminating in 126 countries in 2019. Besides the availability of official information, free and independent journalism is a major factor in producing information for the service of humanity" (Source: UNESCO World Press Freedom Day 2021 Concept Note).

Access to information and meaningful access to information

The "right to information" need not necessarily mean the "right to know." Not only is there a lack of clarity between the "right to information" and the "right to know," there is confusion around data and its use in relation to information and knowledge about SDGs. There seems to be an implicit assumption that ICTs and data can increase transparency and accountability, but in reality this is not the case. The Development and Access to Information 2017 report already flagged issues related to overreliance on ICT indicators. To this we must add the worsening digital divide faced by almost all developing countries. We flag these ICT concerns because increasingly organizations in the UN system are using the presence of data on the internet as a kind of substitute for access to information.

Internet, data connectivity and the "right to information" are made meaningless in the face of governments increasingly resorting to internet shutdowns. For example, India has a law promising the "right to information," yet it also has the dubious distinction of being the country with the highest number of days with internet shutdowns globally. However, within India there are significant variations. Southern states such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu witnessed only one day of internet shutdown while Kerala had none. The differences between states within India also reflect the quality of governance and the degree to which disinformation is prevalent, often indicating deficits in governance. Such deficits cause states in that part of India to resort to internet shutdowns.

On the positive side, it is also important to take note of the fact that organizations such as Access Now (https://www.accessnow.org/) are working to protect human rights and democracy by fighting against internet shutdowns while defending the rights of people to freely access the internet. In assessing progress regarding development and access to information, the notion of "information" itself needs scrutiny and should be viewed through prisms such as "knowledge as a public good" and "information and knowledge as common property resources." Space does not permit us to elaborate on the latter. Information may contribute to knowledge, though it also has a perverse role, especially in the context of the ubiquitous internet and social media, where disinformation leads to distortion and degradation of knowledge. One victim of such disinformation is climate change science, which endures deliberate sceptical discussions around climate change.

Reporting progress on SDGs

Voluntary national review (VNR) is the mechanism the UN uses for tracking progress on the implementation of the SDGs. VNRs are a soft accountability and progress monitoring mechanism of the 2030 Agenda in the UN system. Countries choose their own method of doing VNRs. Often the VNR is used to project what they have achieved in relation to SDGs rather than the actual state of affairs, be it hunger, poverty or employment. Generally, information is from state sources and not from any independent agency that can look critically at the actual achievements. This tends to prevent the VNR from presenting a factual picture of progress toward achieving the SDGs. This presents a serious challenge to the UN and non-state actors. In some large countries, it may embarrass the government if the numbers of participants in SDG-related surveys are revealed. Often, they represent a small fraction of the population. Some governments' reporting on SDGs leans toward PR and advertising, with flashy publications showing progress while hiding the actual state of affairs. Information and knowledge regarding the SDGs at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda is still low.

If we take the UN's Sustainable Development Report and look at a few countries in Asia to get a snapshot, we get the following results. In terms of policy, in the case of India: 1) the government has not issued an official statement endorsing the implementation of the SDGs; 2) there is no integration of SDGs in sectoral plans, nor is there an overarching strategy; 3) central or federal budgets do not mention the SDGs; 4) on the positive side, there is monitoring of SDGs implementation; and 5) there is a designated lead unit within the Indian government. Thailand, on the other hand, scores a "yes" for all five policy indicators. This is also true for Indonesia. Both Thailand and Indonesia are part of ASEAN, and efforts are made within ASEAN as an intergovernmental organization to integrate SDGs in their policy frameworks. Not all countries, especially in the Pacific, provide information on policy with regard to SDGs. If one takes the UN ranking of countries on progress toward the SDGs, 16 UN-ESCAP countries figure in the top 101: Japan at 21, Korea at 31, Thailand at 43, Vietnam at 55, Fiji at 57, Bhutan at 61, China at 63, Singapore at 64, Kazakhstan at 66, Maldives at 68, Uzbekistan at 69, Indonesia at 75, Malaysia at 78, Sri Lanka at 83, Nepal at 99, and Bangladesh at 101.

Despite national reports projecting "achievements," there is much to be desired between the reports and ground reality. A multifaceted renewable energy innovator and social entrepreneur, Harish Hande of SELCO, who through his interventions in Renewable Energy has contributed much to sustainable development (especially in areas such as energy and health), has a piercing question in the contexts of "reports." He asks, "How come the fatigue of keep churning reports with no concrete end goals not hit institutions?" He posed the question in the context of the World Bank churning out reports, but it could equally be applied to governments and some UN agencies in relation to the 2030 roadmap. Reports do not reflect process. There is hardly any understanding of the difference between "knowledge as stock" and "knowledge as process." One can also add "knowledge as flow" to these concepts. "Flow" and "process" reflect an interactive relationship with information and knowledge. Reports often reflect "stock," not "process," and have little to do with the mechanisms for "flow" of knowledge. These considerations are very relevant in the context of the 2030 Agenda and development and access to information.

Information access poses many conceptual, process-related and systemic issues for the SDGs and the 2030 roadmap. There are multiple issues of systemic failure, but one major issue that is of great relevance to organizations like IFLA is "knowledge management" and "knowledge sharing" in the UN system. It is an issue I have flagged many times at expert group interactions held under UN auspices in relation to the 2030 Agenda. A very useful and seminal report in this regard is the Joint Inspection Unit report of 2016 on "Knowledge Management in the United Nations System," prepared by Petru Dumitriu (JIU/REP/2016/10). The report addressed the critical gaps and failures in the UN system in addressing and dealing with knowledge management. We are not aware of how many of the report's recommendations have been implemented. The report very importantly flags the distinctions between data, information and knowledge and how this is not adequately appreciated within the UN system.

Some of the key findings of the UN JIU 2016 report are cited here: 1) there was little understanding of what "knowledge" means in the United Nations system; 2) the concept of "knowledge management" was perceived differently by different organizations; 3) there was no common approach, either conceptual or practical, to adopting a conscious and systematic knowledge management policy within any given organization or in the United Nations system as a whole;

5) the UN Secretariat presents no vision but only fragmented and isolated concerns for knowledge management, despite early recommendations by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS); 6) the OIOS thematic evaluation report found that only four of the 26 departments of the United Nations Secretariat had an explicit policy or strategy for organizing and sharing knowledge; 7) the OIOS emphasized the critical role that cross-organizational collaboration and peer interaction plays in knowledge management and knowledge sharing; 8) the importance of connecting staff with each other's ideas, insights and experiences; 9) the role of knowledge management strategies; and 10) the insufficient use of technological infrastructure for knowledge sharing.

The JIU report "found that knowledge management would be an important contribution to the implementation of the new holistic and collaborative approach on which the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is based. Indeed, knowledge can break down silos and be the most natural integrative factor system-wide and for all the stakeholders in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda."

It went on to say, and I see it important to cite here: "The United Nations is not just an honest broker and facilitator for donors and recipients of development assistance. The United Nations is a catalyst and a disseminator of knowledge. Knowledge management can be used as a tool for promoting interdepartmental, system-wide and multi-stakeholder collaboration. The present report contains information on good practices and initiatives in the area of knowledge management that can be utilized to improve access to knowledge and to bring together the inputs of the various stakeholders involved in sustainable development activities."

For organizations such as the IFLA, this recommendation from the report is very useful for future actions:

"The Secretary-General of the United Nations should identify, analyse, and promote those knowledge management initiatives and innovative actions taken outside the United Nations system by non-governmental organizations, private sector entities and academia, which can be coalesced at a system-wide level in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (paragraph 260)"

IFLA in partnership with academic institutions must engage the UN in a dialogue to ensure that progress on the 2030 Agenda and roadmap can be accelerated by leveraging knowledge management and sharing as a major catalyst through collaboration with a wide range of organizations and initiatives. In India, "right to information" as a movement resulted in provisions in law for this right. So too, through IFLA and its network, "Development and Access to Information" for the 2030 Agenda and roadmap must become a movement.

By way of a conclusion

Interestingly, as noted earlier in the UN-DESA Acceleration assessment, SDG 17 (Partnerships) has mobilized the largest number of SDG Acceleration Actions. Partnerships can not only promote greater awareness and knowledge of the SDGs but also advance their implementation. At the same time, we are aware that "knowledge management" and "knowledge sharing" in the UN often falls short. It is equally important to note that discussions regarding knowledge management revolve around industrial and corporate organizations, which are most preoccupied with it. We need to revisit and look at knowledge management from the perspective of organizations that function from normative perspectives, agendas or mandates. This applies to the UN as well as library and information acquisition and sharing organizations such as IFLA. Knowledge sharing can be a major accelerator in improving progress and implementation of the SDGs. Knowledge management and sharing can be a key accelerator in the Asia and Pacific countries, including Central Asia, in achieving progress on the SDGs with regard to development and access to information, resulting in a more positive picture.

In a very interesting and excellent article in Library and Philosophy (e-journal) published by the University of Nebraska, "Understanding Knowledge Sharing Behaviours of Library Professionals in South Asia," Abinash Deka and Subaveerapandiyan A use survey tools and "a descriptive quantitative method" to produce some insightful observations and analysis on knowledge sharing. Their study involved 175 library professionals from academic libraries of all South Asian countries to gauge the knowledge sharing behaviour of academic librarians.

The results overall were positive with more than 75% showing a personal inclination to share knowledge. Close to 80% considered the use of internet, intranet and extranet to be very important in knowledge management and sharing. These positive responses needed to be leveraged as accelerators for the SDGs. There is potential for similar knowledge sharing environments in the Pacific (Oceania) Region, where small island states stand to gain much from cooperation with larger and more endowed states such as Fiji, Australia and New Zealand.

Some private universities in Asia, for example the Shiv Nadar University in India, have made great strides in tracking and providing information on the SDGs with a dedicated focus on Sustainability (https://snu.edu.in/sustainability/). This may be due to enlightened leadership such as the vice chancellors who lead these institutions. Endorsing what private universities are doing should not mean indirectly decrying publicly funded universities for not engaging in such activities. One has to recognize the huge disparities in funding, academic strength and student composition between private universities and publicly funded universities in countries like India in particular and South Asia in general. The situation is more or less comparable to a de facto apartheid system in education. Wealthier people, akin to "whites" in an apartheid system, go to well-funded private universities with huge resources. Students from mostly rural and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, like the "blacks" in an apartheid state, go to state-funded universities starved of resources. There is a huge scope for organizations such as IFLA and private universities to partner with state universities and leverage knowledge sharing and knowledge management approaches to promote the SDGs. This could be a great catalyst and accelerator for advancing the UN SDGs.

Finally, organizations such as IFLA should recommend that the UN Secretary General establish special rapporteurs for knowledge partnerships, sharing and management in relation to the UN SDGs and development and access to information.

Conclusion and Postscript

As this report has underlined repeatedly, the world remain a long way from a situation where everyone is able to fulfil their rights – and their potential – through meaningful access to information. For all of the investments made in bringing people online, the development dividend from this will only be realised if connectivity is accompanied by steps to advance equity, skills and rights. Activating libraries at all levels, arguably, represents a key part any comprehensive effort in this space.

Clearly, the 2030 Agenda still has 6 years to run, and the focus must be on delivering what is in there rather than trying to redraft or redefine it. While there clearly is an interest in ensuring that what comes next truly recognises the importance of information and knowledge, it is too soon to give up on the Agenda we have today.

Nonetheless, the introduction already alludes to the Pact for the Future which is due to be formally agreed at the Summit of the Future later this year. The Pact – and the Summit – is essentially focused on how to realise the full potential of the UN system to solve problems. In effect, it focuses not on the 'what' but on the 'how' of multilateralism.

The zero draft of the Pact – and key elements of the preparatory work for this – already indicate not just a welcome recognition of the importance of knowledge and information for development, but also that this needs management in order to deliver on its potential.

Elements of the Pact – the proposed Global Digital Compact and Code of Conduct on Information Integrity, as well as the UN 2.0 programme and progress towards the World Social Summit in 2025 – touch on important elements of meaningful access to information as understood in this report. Each of these promises to bring us closer to a world where access to information is powering inclusive, sustainable development.

The question now is whether, both in its agreed version, and in its implementation, the Pact can deliver on its ambition to transform how the world works towards a better future.

Biographies
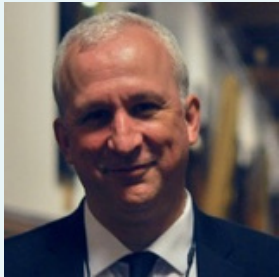
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