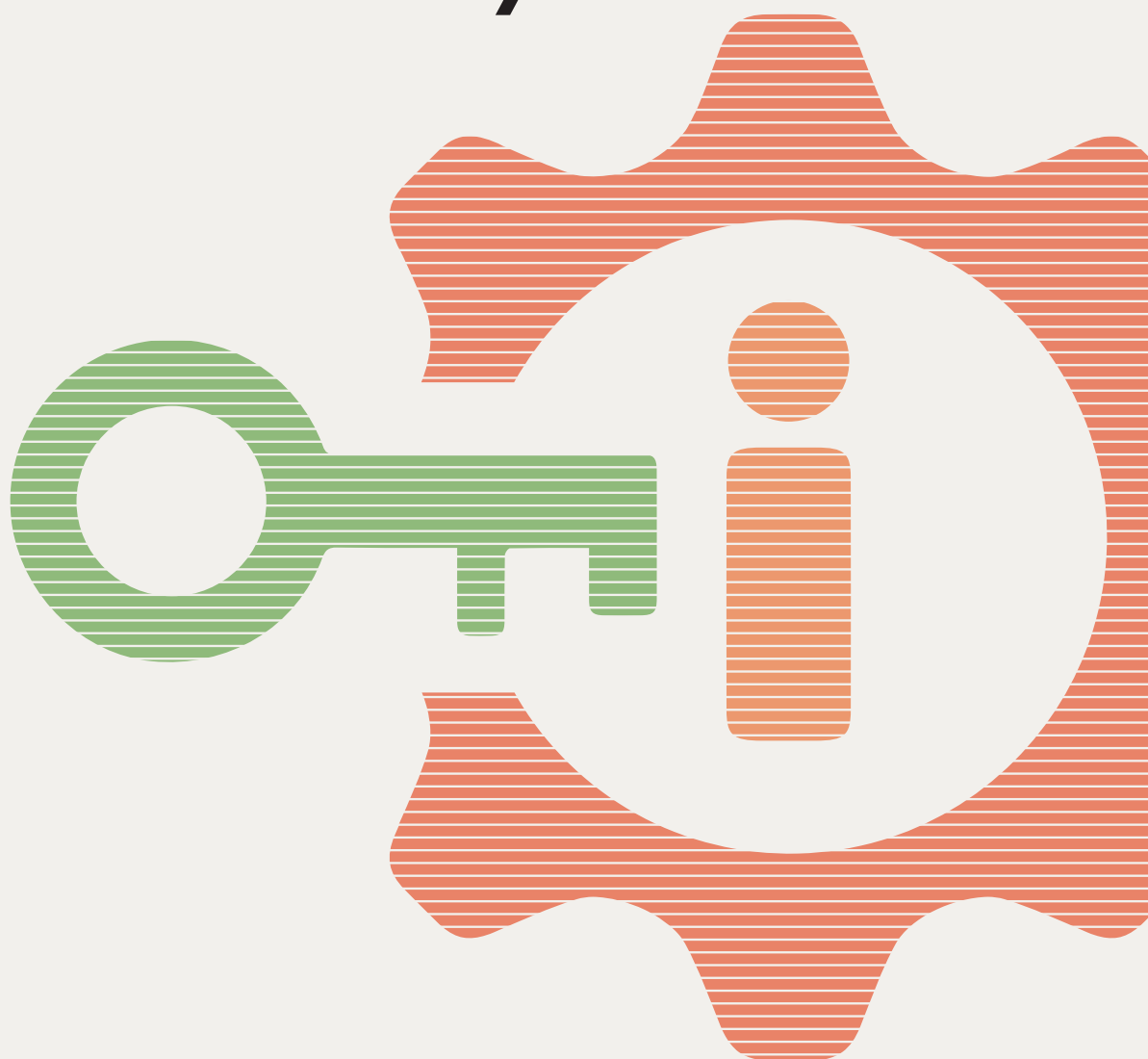


Development *and* Access to Information

2017

Executive Summary



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Access to information (A2I) is not an end in itself, but rather a driver of progress across the board. It empowers people and communities, laying the foundations for equality, sustainability, and prosperity. It provides a clear illustration of the rights-based, holistic approach to development taken in the 2030 Agenda.

At the national level, governments, businesses and philanthropists have long invested in access to information in a range of areas – public health, education, research, media, and institutions such as libraries. In 2015, the UN’s Member States made A2I a specific target under Goal 16 and also incorporated elsewhere in the 2030 Agenda. Yet investment is not always coordinated, and at a time of competing priorities, it is vital not only to maintain support, but to increase its effectiveness.

This report, the first of a series, sets out the contribution that meaningful access to information can make to development, with a particular emphasis on the focus SDGs at this year’s High Level Political Forum. It also strengthens the measurement effort around Goal 16 by establishing a basket of indicators and a baseline.

Future editions will continue to combine thematic analysis with the tracking of progress in order to show how access is advancing, and to identify where there are examples of good practice from which others can learn. This will provide governments, NGOs and other development actors with an effective tool for promoting meaningful access to information for all.

Dimensions of Meaningful Access to Information – Setting a Baseline

As a means of allowing people to find and share information, the Internet will undeniably be central to achieving Goal 16. Its architecture, crucially, not only opens new possibilities to apply and use information, but also invites users to develop and share their own expertise.

However, this promise can only be delivered if the necessary infrastructure is in place, and if people have the devices necessary get online. While half of the world’s population do have the possibility to get online, achieving Internet connectivity targets for 2020 remains ambitious, and affordability remains an important issue. Access via mobile devices is likely to play a major role in poorer countries, which has implications for the way in which information is accessed by their populations.

Nevertheless, access needs to be about more than computers and cables to be meaningful. Locally relevant content needs to be available, in local languages. Without this, there will be less reason to go online in order to learn or seek information. It is already clear that levels of use of news and similar sites remain lower in developing countries than in developed ones, where more local content is available.



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Moreover, it also needs to be legal to create and access information in the first place. The majority of the world’s Internet users still face restrictions to their freedom of expression and right to seek information, additionally, there is still a gender digital divide, due to a mix of cultural and skills-related factors.

Finally, even when there is physical connectivity and relevant content, this is meaningless if users are unable to apply it to real-world problems. They need the skills and attitudes necessary to find and use existing information, and create new information which they can share with their communities. Yet it is in the poorest countries that the ability to use productivity-enhancing digital tools is least developed.

In short, meaningful access to information requires four key elements:

1. Information and communications access infrastructure
2. A positive social context for use
3. Sufficient capabilities in communities and their members
4. A favourable legal and policy landscape

The set of baseline indicators provided in this report will help track progress in each of these fields over time.

Libraries: A Development Partner at All Levels

If adequately supported in terms of connectivity, resources and legal frameworks, libraries can make a real contribution to development by providing access to information. At the global level, they are the backbone of innovation systems, supporting the research that allows for better decision making in governments and in international organisations. At the local level, they provide a safe, community-focused space for users to access and put information to work in a meaningful way.

A common theme in the report is the importance of partnerships. Here too libraries have a role. Within government, implementation efforts across policy fields will need to be coordinated. Outside of government, research centres, businesses, local authorities, civil society, educators, engineers and technical experts will need to come together. Libraries can be an incubator for partnerships between different stakeholders at a local level, drawing on their own deep understanding of their communities' needs in order to deliver meaningful access to information.



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Access to Information and Key Sustainable Development Goals in 2017

The benefits of meaningful access in four of the focus SDGs at the 2017 High Level Political Forum are clear.

In the field of agriculture (SDG2), better information can support farmers throughout the cycle, from choosing which crops to grow, which techniques to use, and when and at what price to sell their products. As an often-isolated population, with strong local characteristics, the need to tailor access to needs is particularly important. With climate change leading to less predictable weather patterns, the gains in resilience and productivity that come from improved access to information will be essential for ending hunger.

Access to information will also improve decision-making on health (SDG3). At the global level, wider and easier sharing of medical research information has been a key pillar of the response to the Ebola outbreak. At the local level, investments in public health information have been shown to repay themselves many times over. Given the sensitivity of the subject, the safe space provided by libraries can prove indispensable for those who might otherwise be afraid to seek information or ask questions, in particular amongst more vulnerable communities.

Women in particular stand to benefit from improved access to information (SDG5), both in terms of taking their place as equals in economic and civic life, and in fulfilling more traditional roles in their families and communities. In many situations, they have not had the same educational opportunities as men, and need additional support in getting online and making use of the resources available. In male-dominated societies, libraries may indeed be the only place where they can access the technology and training necessary, as in the case of Chile's Infocentros.

Finally, access to information can contribute to more effective infrastructure and innovation systems (SDG9). With a growing number of active researchers in the world, and ever more powerful analytical tools, once information is made accessible it can become the raw material for new ideas, products and services. The experience of the Human Genome Project shows that openness is a driver of, and not a threat to, investment in innovation. Similarly, enhancing access to, and use of, information around infrastructure is providing solutions to congestion and poor quality of life in the world's cities.

In all of these areas, access to information can create a virtuous circle. An information-empowered society is better placed to create and share data which can further drive improvements in agriculture, health, economic empowerment, efficient infrastructure and innovation. But delivering meaningful access itself will need to be a team effort. Laws, regulations, investments and infrastructure will need to align, and global, national and local efforts will need to be coordinated. A well-supported library sector will play a major part in delivering success.



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