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EU needs connectivity to reach SDGs

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Europe needs connectivity if it is to reach its sustainable development goals, writes Charles Ding.

Charles Ding | ***Photo credit: Huawei***

If countries worldwide are to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, they will need contributions from stakeholders from every walk of life, not least the information and communications technology (ICT) sector. The UN's vision of a fairer, greener planet inspired my company, Huawei, to commission a study exploring how digital technologies can help EU countries achieve the SDGs.

The EU ICT-Sustainable Development Goals Benchmark - which builds on the methodology behind a global benchmark Huawei published earlier this year - scores and ranks the 28 EU countries based on the maturity of their ICT sector and achievements on six of the SDGs.

Sweden (84.7), Denmark (84.2) and the UK (83.4) came out as leaders of the benchmark, demonstrating the best combined performances in ICT and sustainable development. Bulgaria (67.3), Cyprus (67.1) and Romania (64.1) scored lowest.

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The report looks at different initiatives, large and small, where ICTs are contributing to the SDGs in Europe.

Examples include Germany's plans to connect 40,000 schools to high-speed broadband (SDG 4: education for all), the mHealth Hub, launched by the European Commission which aims to help member states incorporate health solutions into mobile devices (SDG 3: health and wellbeing), the use of wireless sensors to detect whether waste bins are full or not, which will reduce CO2 emissions from waste trucks (SDG 13: climate action) and Natural Cycles, a contraception phone app that informs women of their fertile days using a precise algorithm to determine ovulation (SDG 5: gender equality).

Such case studies demonstrate that, while all new digital technologies – the cloud, the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence, big data and advanced analytics - can help advance sustainable development, high-speed broadband will be the key to achieving breakthrough progress in Europe.

If the EU can address areas where its performance has been lagging behind, such as increasing connectivity levels and high-speed network coverage, improving the digital skills of the population and bridging the digital divide, further social and economic progress are likely to follow.

The European Commission is tackling these issues through several high-profile policy initiatives. The digital single market strategy, adopted in 2016, aims to place the EU at the forefront of Internet connectivity. But more needs to be done if it is to become an ICT leader - and show the way in advancing the SDGs.

Our report makes several recommendations, including the need for more targeted EU and national policies, new Public-Private Partnerships promoted by EU institutions driving purposeful deployment of ICT, and increasing digital skills among the general population.

If aligned with the 2030 Agenda, ICTs will help address many of the most challenging SDGs, from managing infrastructure and tackling climate change, to improving health and addressing gender inequality. What it needs is coordination.

About the author

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