

# ACCESS WILL TRANSFORM THE WORLD

*Information and communication technologies are driving development through innovation in education, health and banking. But to achieve the full benefit, we must seek universal access.*

 by Houlin Zhou



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Information and communication technologies [ICT] are at the forefront of innovation, delivering well-documented benefits for businesses and development: improving access to key services including education, government services and healthcare, and helping in the fight to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Their rapid proliferation – from 1985, when 600 million people around the world had access to a fixed telephone and the Internet was still in its infancy, to today, when there are 7.1 billion global mobile subscriptions and 3.2 billion Internet users worldwide – has transformed how we interact with the world.

ITU has long believed that all three pillars of sustainable development – economic development, social inclusion and environmental protection – are strengthened through ICT. The newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] note the catalytic role that they will play in achieving the ambitious targets: “The spread of information and communication technologies and global interconnectedness has great potential to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies.”

The achievement of all 17 goals will be accelerated through ICT, and their ubiquity elevates the impact of development efforts. Smart cities help to reduce energy consumption



and greenhouse gas emissions. Disaster relief efforts are accelerated through life-saving technologies. And public services are easily accessed through e-government applications.

Yet there is a persistent divide that significantly impedes global development. Though mobile phone proliferation is high, with 97 subscriptions per 100 people, 4 billion people remain offline in the developing world. This mobile access gap impedes broader social and economic development in affected countries and, above all, it undermines the potential for local populations to seek innovative solutions to address their own development issues.

Innovation is happening across Africa in multiple sectors, from agriculture to education, to health and banking. Developed in Kenya, m-Pesa, a “mobile money” application, has given millions of people their first access to banking services. Today, over 18 million Kenyans have access through their mobile device. E-education platforms offer access to learning materials for the roughly 21 million African children who do not attend school. M-health innovations are revolutionizing access to healthcare in remote communities, preventing non-communicable diseases, tracking outbreaks such as Ebola, and improving maternal health.

Innovative ICT solutions have the power to transform the world by 2045, but only when we truly connect the world will we see the positive impact that they have in delivering services to those who need them most. Making ICT universally available will create new opportunities, help to protect the environment, and achieve the sustainable development that will transform our world. ■