

Chapter 15

Sustainable Development and the Digital Divide Among OIC Countries: Towards a Collaborative Digital Approach

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ABSTRACT

Undoubtedly, digital technology (DT) has revolutionised information and communications technology (ICT) base of the global economy, which has impacted tremendously the socio-economic, political, cultural and scientific development in the majority of the world's economies. The chapter examines "digital divide" in a broader perspective of information and communications technologies (ICTs) that encompass not only computers, but also telephone (line and cellular), television (TV), radio etc. It is an open secret that ICTs have played and will continue to play a pivotal role in sustaining economic development in the developed countries. Through ICTs, creating, storing and sharing enormous volume of information with relative ease in almost all the spheres of human endeavour have been made possible. The power inherent in ICT that can break up barriers and boundaries holding countries, continents and businesses miles apart can never be over-emphasized. Despite the attendant benefits of ICTs, there are still deep-seated ICT inequalities both within and among the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) member countries. This chapter investigates the depth of the existing digital divide among the OIC member countries and to unearth the possible obstacles. Finally, some policy recommendations have been offered towards the end of the chapter.

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INTRODUCTION

It has long been acknowledged that the global economy has largely been sustained by the generation and transfer of varieties of innovative knowledge in the economic, scientific, social, cultural, spiritual and political arenas. The availability of, and the easy access to voluminous information, made possible through information and communications technologies (henceforth referred to as ICTs), facilitate knowledge transfer within and across countries. This scenario far too often aids sustainable development. As sustainability takes the form of resilience, the constant generation, storing and sharing of development-related information and knowledge can boost the resilience of development efforts in the majority of the world's economies.

Through ICTs, the impediments associated with time and space are increasingly becoming less noticeable. This achievement has in large part laid the foundation for the coming into being of the so-called "global village." Globalization owes its existence largely to ICTs that have successfully broken up barriers and boundaries that hitherto held countries, continents and businesses miles apart. The prime intention in revolutionizing ICTs has been to scale up socio-economic, political, cultural and spiritual progress in the individual economies, and to enhance the overall global economic development. In spite of the attendant benefits of ICTs, there are still deep-seated ICT inequalities both within and among the world's economies and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) member countries are not immune to this saga. From equity perspective, the socio-economic development benefits associated with ICTs dictate that frantic efforts be mustered to bridge the existing digital divide.

Here, the OIC countries appear apt for study for the following three reasons. First, the majority of these countries is less developed or developing economies. Second, there has been a dire need to scale up social and economic development in

these countries so as to improve livelihoods for the majority of the people in these countries. And third, the need for development cooperation among the Islamic countries has blossomed into forming the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) about four decades ago. The development benefits that ICTs engender are known to all. Cooperation or collaboration has been in existence for the past three to four decades, yet there seems to be no much success story to tell about any progressive ICT development in the majority of the OIC countries. Furthermore, available literature shows that the digital divide is continuously widening with little sign of bridging among the Islamic countries; thereby forcefully bringing the so-called development cooperation or collaboration into disrepute. The questions arising from such digital scenario include the following:

1. What factors are exactly responsible for such an unfortunate digital scenario existing within and across the OIC countries? Lack of cooperation could be ruled out completely, as there won't be bodies such as OIC, Islamic Development Bank (IDB) etc.; and
2. Could it then be apathy on the part of member countries?

The chapter has explored the above raised questions and tried to locate the answers in the broader domain of (a) how accessible these ICT targets are to the people, (b) their usage (i.e. the ability to use them), and (c) empowering the people with ICT expertise by integrating them into the mainstream of the knowledge-based economy.

BACKGROUND

ICTs are increasingly becoming a gigantic force underpinning sustainable global economic development. The immense role of ICTs in the successful development stories of the World's developed economies is a case in point. The prin-

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