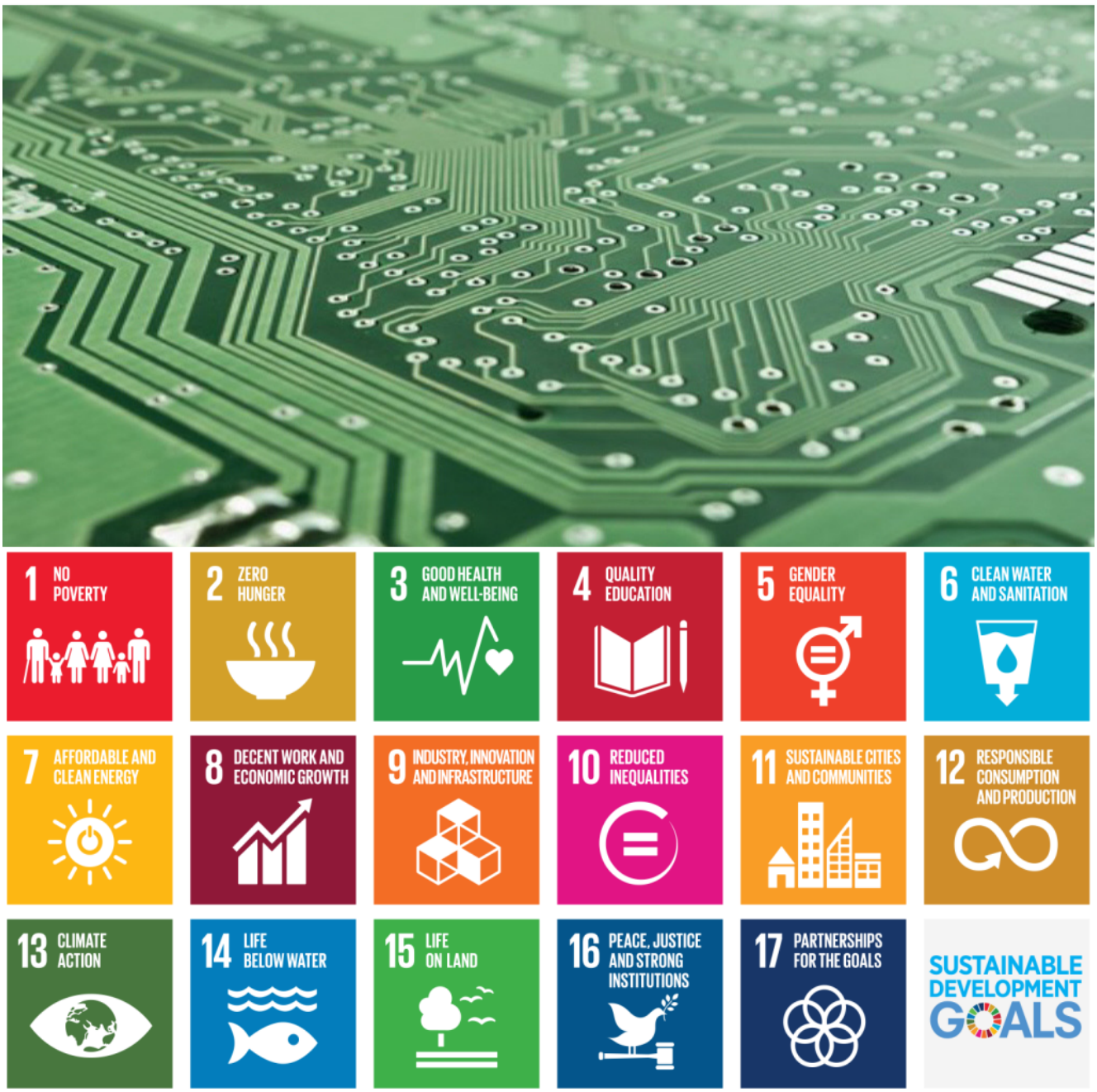
Using Digital Technology to Improve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Delivery



by David Fellows and Glyn Evans[1]

The SDGs

The United Nation's SDGs present an array of complex social, engineering, medical, scientific and managerial challenges for member states set in different contexts and mostly requiring very significant investment, organisational capacity and community involvement. Nations have made commitments to this agenda and it is accepted as guiding the key purposes of international development work worldwide. It is a hugely ambitious enterprise yet we suggest that current development work could be more successful.

The need for a powerful learning system

At a general level perhaps the greatest challenge is the creation of a learning system that is powerful enough to develop and distribute relevant knowledge and an understanding of how that knowledge can be best applied in the very different circumstances that exist across the world. As SDG performance criteria are finalised and adopted a report by ESCAP makes it clear just how difficult it is going to be to make a real difference.

We are not suggesting a great deal of organisation to create this necessary learning system. We propose a loose system of networking between experts based on digital communication. This would enable advice to be made available to community-based projects with greater levels of expertise being made available to the development of major programmes and projects. It would also facilitate feedback on project progress and performance. The use of digital technology would also improve the public information base and support public engagement.

Learning system features

The basis of this networking would be a digital communication system that would be largely self-driven by those in the field and a support network that will evolve around them. Key aspects of this digital communication system are illustrated below.

At national and local level:

- *Provide* feedback on progress made at local level within the country
- *Request the public to identify key factors to be taken into account when designing SDG initiatives*
- *Seek feedback on the regulations required to support SDG initiatives*
- *Engage in shared learning (perhaps amongst scattered populations) between ordinary people who are trying to cope with SDG challenges on limited resources*

At regional level:

- *Undertake shared research programmes*
- *Share experiences of adapting recognised approaches to particular circumstances*
- *Improve monitoring techniques*
- *Share monitoring and advisory services*
- *Encourage the development of problem-solving support networks*
- *Undertake peer reviews of projects and governance*

arrangements

At international level:

- *Build worldwide expertise to address fundamental scientific, engineering, economic, social and implimentation challenges*
- *Identify and promote successful strategies and initiatives*
- *Recognise issues for which effective solutions remain elusive*
- *Create networks capable of addressing significant and urgent challenges*
- *Develop modeling tools to help design solutions*

Supporting technology would include:

- *Websites including chat rooms, website messaging, on-line data monitoring and*
  online questionnaires
- *Video-conferencing for expert dialogue and advisory sessions*
- *Cloud-stored databases and shared document development*
- *Email for public interactions(newsletters), dispatch of documents,*
  technical & administrative correspondence and technical update circulars
- *Learning management systems to support training programmes that*
  develop skills and expertise
- *Application software to assist the gathering of performance data*
  including the collection of data from administrative

sources (ESCAP Report ibid: page x)

- *Text messaging and social media for public dialogue*
- *Massive open online courses to raise general awareness*

In general such a system would require relatively unsophisticated technology dependent only on fairly low level digital communication. Expert dialogue would tend to benefit from good connectivity at reasonable bandwidth to support video conferencing although this is not absolutely essential. Proprietary software is readily available for most of these applications although bespoke monitoring, modelling and assessment tools could be created as the approach gained traction.

Examples from around the world

Our blog 'An International eCollaboration Route to Public Service Reform'
(also published by the Australian National University's DEVPOLICYBLOG in July 2017) considers the diverse power of digital communication technologies. Examples of this technology used in ways relevant to this proposition are, as follows:

1. An example of 'Shared Learning' is set out in the UNESCO publication Digital Services for Education in Africa. UNICEF has reported that in Vietnam 40% of children in rural areas used the internet for educational purposes, rising to 62% in urban areas.

2. Communities of practice have already been established in

Canada for green climate purposes

3. Social media has been used by PFMConnect for the past three years to raise public awareness on public financial management and governance topics reaching significant numbers of people in more than 50 countries.

Conclusion

This is not a system requiring heavy oversight and regulation. We seek cultural change to the way programmes and projects are developed. A more inclusive approach at expert and community level could be usefully supported by major development agencies and could become a requirement on contractors. For instance, these proposals could help the Green Climate Fund which appears to be heavily engaged in process issues at the expense of shared innovation.

Is it time to experiment with change?

End note

We should be pleased to discuss the ideas in this piece with those who believe that they may have relevance to their situation.

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[1] *David Fellows is a specialist in public financial management and digital government reform and is a director of*

PFMConnect. He is a recipient of the Swedish Prize for Democratic Digital Service Delivery. Glyn Evans is the Vice President of the Major Cities of Europe IT Users Group and former CIO of various major cities.

Digital Government in Developing Countries

Posted by David Fellows and Glyn Evans[1]

With the aid of development partners, developing countries are making commitments to maximise the use of digital technology. The ICT industry is right behind them. In these reforms, digital technology is being represented as the principal transformative medium of government. But to think of “Digital

Government" as necessarily transformative, almost an end in itself, is misguided. Governments should be primarily concerned to provide their services and engage with electorates in the most cost-effective way. Digital technology may or may not have a role in that process.

Here are some of the fields in which digital technology has demonstrated that it has a potential role to play in developing countries:

- Transparency and public engagement
- Basic public service delivery in the fields of health and education
- Public safety and security
- The collection of tax and non-tax revenues
- The management of population growth in urban areas
- The sustainability and development of rural communities
- Skill shortages throughout the economy
- Economic diversification
- Measures to combat corruption
- Resilience to natural disasters

We do not accept, however, that the answer to any of these challenges is necessarily a massive investment in digital technology, say a 'digital city' or a fully integrated expenditure, revenues and payments system.

Many developing countries are not well positioned to make sustainable progress with digital technology in huge multi-faceted programmes requiring vast initial expenditure. This form of development may do little more than provide substantial fee income for international consultancies and software developers. Once the consultants are gone and system

design faults surface, client needs change or in-house staff are poached by others, then the facilities that promised so much may become more of a hindrance than an advantage.

Things may not even get that far. Without governments having sufficient staff with the necessary technical skills, digital systems may never be properly configured and the client may be left with a partially implemented system. Nevertheless, it is surprising how many such projects are specified and funded. Problematic factors are sometimes acknowledged without being fully taken into account.

We suggest that an evolutionary approach to digitally-enabled reform offers a more realistic way forward. The process should start with an analysis of the operational imperatives for improvement. This requires the following ten-point strategy:

1. A clear vision for future service delivery and the developing relationship between citizens and the government
2. A thorough assessment of internal resources (skills, knowledge, staffing commitments and budgets) required to support the implementation of reform and new ways of working
3. An overhaul of management philosophy and governance arrangements
4. The identification of mechanisms to address relevant gaps in capacity including improvements in the recruitment and training of in-house staff and encouragement of local firms to upgrade their ICT capacity incrementally to support public service digital applications (multinational collaboration for the professional development of public servants and the improvement of governance and working practices are

addressed in previous blogs)
5. An examination of the various options by which change can be achieved
6. A robust approach to investment appraisal
7. An assertion of priorities based on sound information and analysis
8. A clear strategy to deliver project sustainability (including security)
9. The identification of the benefits sought and how such benefits are to be achieved, and
10. A relentless focus on benefits realization accompanied by the modification of working methods to rectify performance shortfalls.

This approach is based on our past work, which we can illustrate with examples of two completed major projects, as well as our experience in developing countries.

The first example in Knowsley, one of the UK's most deprived areas, was one of the world's first "smart city" projects, started in 1997. It featured public information systems, electronic application forms, payment facilities, public feedback on quality of service, schoolwork support, an interactive liveability learning application for mentally challenged young adults, digital enablement schemes and public availability of PCs in libraries and community centres.

The second project in Birmingham, the UK's largest metropolitan municipality was probably the largest digitally-enabled change programme ever undertaken in a European city. It included the digitisation of procurement, HR (including performance management) and accounting practices, providing managers with accurate, real-time information, and digitising customer contact and the fulfilment management of customer

requests, resulting in customer satisfaction improving by 20 percentage points. The entire change programme realised revenue savings of £100 million a year.

These examples suggest that it is possible to make significant reductions in the risk to both funders and recipients of digital-enabled developments by:

- Preparing an organisational readiness analysis and development strategy as set out above
- Establishing the necessary roles and finding the right people to fill those roles
- Monitoring and evaluating progress, and
- Responding with operational modifications as necessary to achieve the desired outcomes, and as technological advances offer fresh opportunities.

Some developments will not necessarily require state financial or operational support. Private sector encouragement may be sufficient. For example, physical planning that offers confidence to developers or infrastructure standards that support the public use of digital technology.

In our view, a challenging reform agenda demands a flexible approach, cool judgement and realistic timescales. Those in positions of responsibility should take steps to avoid being found friendless and trapped by the expectations and largesse heaped upon them.

[1] *David Fellows is a director of PFMConnect Ltd, a management consultancy specialising in financial, digital and engineering services for developing countries. He is a winner*

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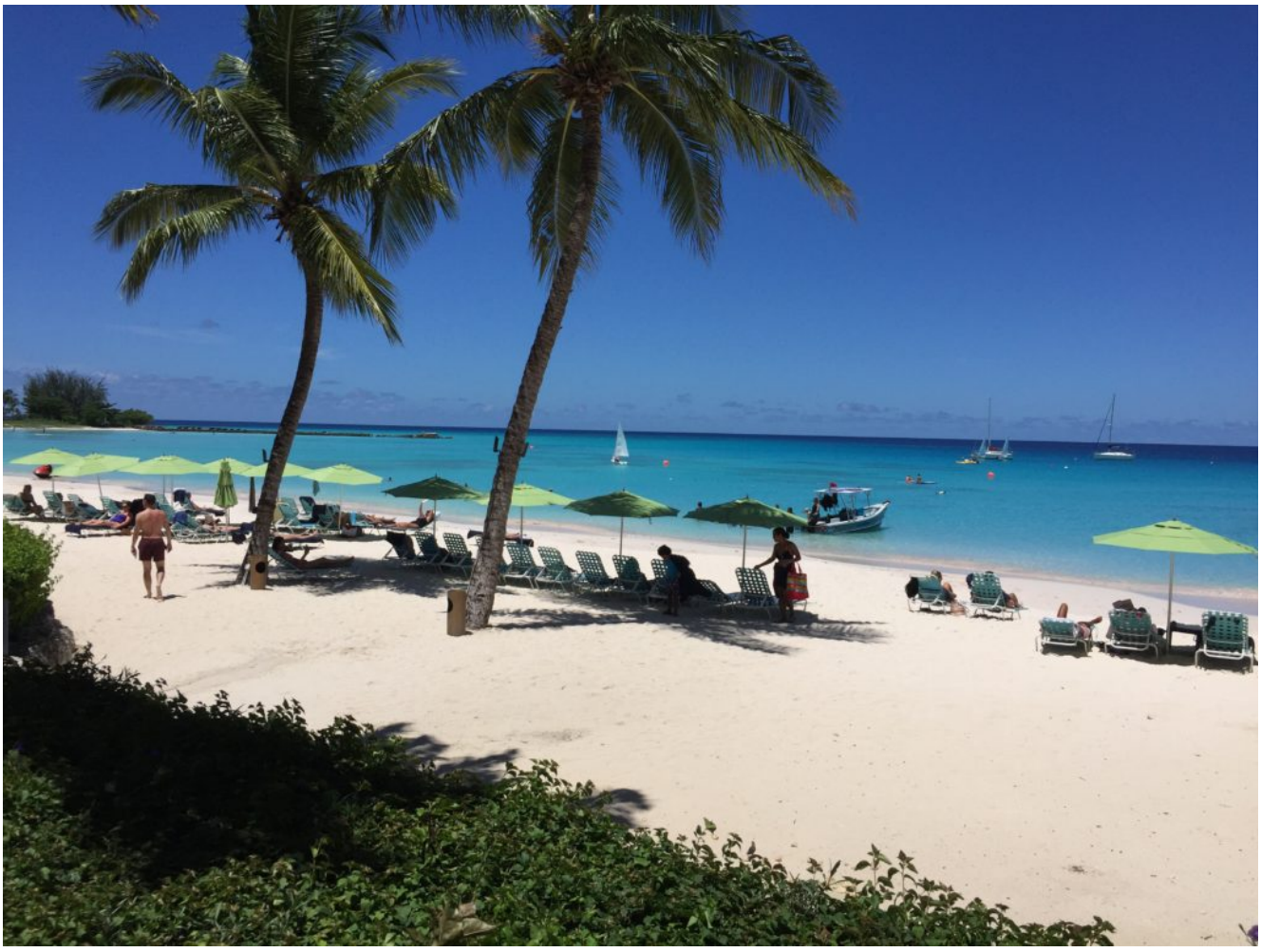
Understanding Small Island Developing States' economic challenges (Update 1)



Small island developing states' economic challenges

Economic challenges faced by small island developing states (SIDS) are frequently greater in magnitude than those faced by larger states. Economic and financial risks often represent a considerable portion of the most significant risks confronting SIDS.

IMF Article IV reports

The International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s regular Article IV consultations conducted usually annually with those small island developing states (SIDS) who are members of the IMF result in the preparation of Article IV reports which provide country analyses of recent economic and public financial management trends, forward economic forecasts and documents the respective economic management challenges that they face.

IMF SIDS members

Which SIDS are members of the IMF? Here is the list of SIDS that are currently members of the IMF:

- Antigua and Barbuda
- Bahamas
- Barbados
- Belize
- Cabo Verde

- Comoros
- Curaçao
- Dominica
- Dominican Republic
- Fiji
- Grenada
- Guinea-Bissau
- Guyana
- Haiti
- Jamaica
- Kiribati
- Maldives
- Marshall Islands
- Mauritius
- Micronesia
- Nauru
- Palau
- Papua New Guinea
- Samoa
- Sao Tome
- Seychelles
- Singapore
- Sint Maarten
- St Kitts and Nevis
- St Lucia
- St. Vincent and Grenadines
- Solomon Islands
- Tonga
- Trinidad and Tobago
- Tuvalu
- Vanuatu

Access SIDS Article IV reports

The most recently published International Monetary Fund (IMF)

Article IV reports as at 22 April 2020 for **all SIDS** can be accessed by clicking on to the country groups below:

- Article IV reports for SIDS countries A-C
- Article IV reports for SIDS countries D-H
- Article IV reports for SIDS countries J-P
- Article IV reports for SIDS countries S
- Article IV reports for SIDS countries T-V

N.B. Reports for Aruba, Curacao and Sint Maarten are also provided although they are not formal IMF members but participate as part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The latest Article IV reports for Antigua and Barbuda (2016) and St Kitts and Nevis (2018) are unavailable as both governments have not given approval for the release of these reports (which they are entitled to do).

Interested in other SIDS' issues?

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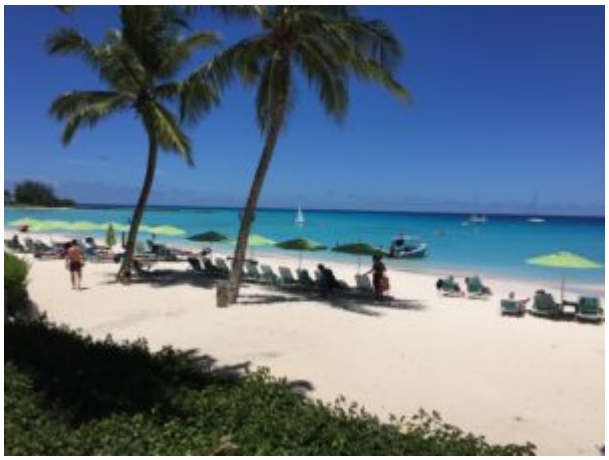
Understanding Small Island Developing States’ economic challenge



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- Haiti
- Jamaica
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- Maldives
- Marshall Islands
- Mauritius
- Micronesia
- Nauru
- Palau
- Papua New Guinea
- Samoa
- Sao Tome
- Seychelles
- Singapore
- Sint Maarten
- St Kitts and Nevis
- St Lucia
- St Vincent and Grenadines
- Solomon Islands

- Tonga
- Trinidad and Tobago
- Tuvalu
- Vanuatu

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