SDC
Digital Watch
Newsletter

D*i*PLO

With the busy autumn season ahead, we look back at the summer months which were marked by sustainable development events. In this issue, we share tech insights from the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), the report of the UN Secretary General's Digital Finance Task Force (DFTF), and the landmark 75th session of the UN General Assembly.

Round-up of top news on development, climate action, and food security

Data on the global government information technology (IT) spending for 2019–2021

UN at 75

A virtual commemoration in the shadow of COVID-19

DIGITAL FINANCE

Advancing citizen-centric finance in the decade of action?

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

Moving the needle on climate change - less for some, more for others

At the intersection of digitalisation and development

Development

- Tunisia's ministries of education, and communication technologies signed a memorandum of understanding to bring high-speed broadband Internet to schools.
- Chad will require CFA 452 billion to finance its newly released National Strategic Plan for Digital Development.
- The Nepal Telecommunication Authority (NTA) has announced the establishment of IT labs across 725 schools that aim to make schools more interactive and IT-friendly.

Food Security

- The fertiliser company Yara East Africa will develop a digital platform to improve access to fertilisers, farming information, and best practices for farmers in 22 African countries.
- The United Arab Emirates (UAE) launched the 'Agriota e-Marketplace', a blockchain platform with the aim to bridge the gap between the UAE's food industry and rural farmers in India.
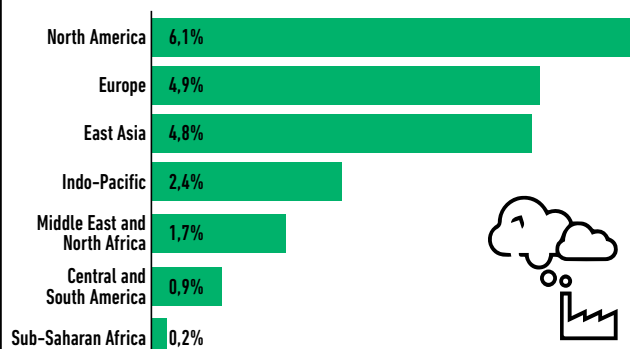
Climate action

- Deutsche Bank has developed a carbon dioxide (CO2) consumption app called GreenR to track clients' CO2 footprint and help them save money by raising awareness on their behaviour.

Gender equality

- The East African Community (EAC) launched the 50 Million African Women Speak Networking Platform (50MAWS), a digital platform that aims to empower women to take up business enterprises.
- The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF) have developed a project to enhance women's digital skills in the least developed countries (LDCs), including Burundi, Ethiopia, and Haiti.

Digital health

- The tech giant Google has announced its plan to invest USD$100 million in a digital health platform called Amwell in order to improve the delivery of health services.
- CureApp, a prescription medical device that helps smokers receive outpatient smoking cessation treatment, is the first digital prescription tool to be adopted in Asia.

Humanitarian

- The GSMA and the UN World Food Programme (WFP) partnered to improve the use of mobile money during global pandemics and natural disasters.

Regional decline in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2030 due to AI

Region	Value
North America	6,1%
Europe	4,9%
East Asia	4,8%
Indo-Pacific	2,4%
Middle East and North Africa	1,7%
Central and South America	0,9%
Sub-Saharan Africa	0,2%

Source: PwC

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been described as a game changer for climate change. However, a study conducted by the PwC indicates that this may not be the case for all. Research shows that AI is to have the biggest impact in North America and Europe where greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are expected to decline by 6.1% and 4.9%, respectively, by 2030. On the other hand, Central and South America (0.9%) and sub-Saharan Africa (0.2%) will experience the least reductions in GHG emissions due to AI, which comes as no surprise given that the adoption rate of AI technologies in these regions is much lower than in developed countries.

- The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Government of Switzerland, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) established the Humanitarian Data and Trust Initiative (HDTI) that aims to promote the protection and responsible use of humanitarian data.

Migration

- The Hello Hope app, developed by Turkcell, helps Syrian refugees to stay up-to-date with information on COVID-19.
- The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) launched an online gaming initiative called 'Reimagine the world like a gamer' to address the stigma around refugees and migrants.
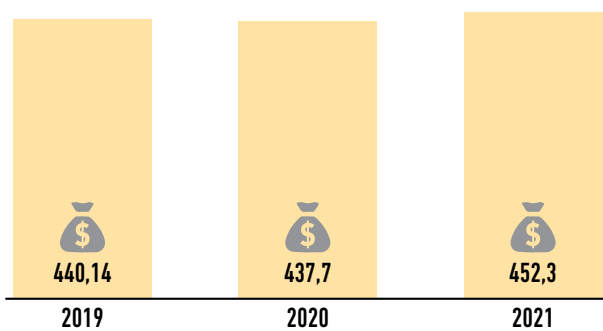
Water management

- As part of its environmental commitments, Microsoft pledged to become water positive by 2030.

E-governance

- In March 2021, India's Ministry of External Affairs, together with the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Griavances is planning to host a conference on e-governance for 54 African states in order to promote the advantages of digital platforms for public services in Africa.

IT spendings by governments from 2019 to 2021

2019	2020	2021
440,14	437,7	452,3

Source: Gartner

A study conducted by Gartner shows that the global government IT spending is expected to increase to USD$ 452.3 billion in 2021, which represents a growth of 3.3% in comparison to the foreseen amount of about USD$ 437.7 billion in 2020. The cost of government IT stood at USD$ 404.14 billion in 2019. The survey reveals that the largest portion of the government IT expenditure for the three-year period is dedicated to IT services, followed by IT software. The least funding is allocated to data centers and devices.

Sustainability in the limelight

People-centric digital finance

On 26 August 2020, the UN Secretary General's Task Force on Digital Financing of the Sustainable Development Goals (DFTF) launched a report titled People's Money: Harnessing Digitalization to Finance a Sustainable Future. Drawing on 18 months of work, the report tackles some of the catalytic opportunities offered by digital finance that could help advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The document identifies barriers and risks such as insufficient access to digital financial services, weak regulatory capabilities, data monopolistation, and other issues associated with digital finance. On the basis of these very barriers and risks, the DFTF proposed a set of recommendations, including a people-centric approach that attributes a central role to individuals by endorsing digital financial literacy programmes and securitisation of citizens' rights and capabilities through adequate consumer-protection mechanisms.

The DFTF also presented seven pathfinder initiatives, i.e, global and national projects that serve as illustrations of how the recommendations can best be achieved.

The report does not sufficiently address the role played by financial institutions and the tech industry that are together with governments, the major shapers of fintech policies at the national and international level. Moreover, while acknowledging the importance of making finance work for people, it does not suggest how to turn this proclamation into practice especially considering the weak role of citizens in comparison to the growing power of fintech platforms.

For further details, please consult DiploFoundation's overview of the report.⤴

Sustainable development and digital transformation: No match?

The 2020 edition of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) was for the first time held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Titled 'Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development', the HLPF brought together representatives from UN member states to turn the tide on global challenges in the decade of action, including poverty, climate change, and health, to name a few.⤴

Despite the fact that digital technology is oftentimes regarded as the 'invisible 18th sustainable development goal (SDG)', only 28 from the 90 analysed statements delivered at the general debate made mention of digital technology. This trend stands in sharp contrast to last year's event where almost twice the number of speeches (53) addressed the notion of digital transformation in the context of development.⤴ This year, the majority of statements on digitalisation were delivered by high-income countries (10), followed by upper and lower middle-income countries with 7 statements each. The topic was mentioned in only 4 speeches of low-income countries.

Developed countries highlighted the important role played by digital innovation in response to COVID-19, referring to online diagnosis, distance learning, and digital solutions for ensuring the continuity of public and private services. Developing countries, such as Malawi and Sierra Leone, highlighted the issue of digital divide which has become even more pronounced during the crisis.

To learn more about HLPF 2020, click here.⤴

UNGA 75: In the shadow of COVID-19

75 years after the signing of the UN Charter and the creation of the UN, the world is coping with challenges that were unimaginable back in the day.

On the occasion, the heads of states and governments met online to address the ongoing pandemic and raise concerns on other shared challenges exacerbated by COVID-19. Recognizing that the health crisis made the realisation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development more difficult, national delegations noted that for some, COVID-19 has accelerated the use of and access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), in particular, for younger generations and financially vulnerable communities. At the same time, it has contributed to the increase in negative trends associated with digital technology, such as the spread of fake news and misinformation, and online hate speech.

From a digital perspective, tech was addressed in 79 speeches. As per the *DigitalWatch taxonomy*⤴ (that categorizes digital issues into 7 baskets), the most mentions of digital issues were made by the European states (51), followed by South America (25) and Asia (22). Africa, Oceania and North America together tackled 22 digital issues.

Development was the most prominent basket in all regions, except Oceania and North America. The most common issues addressed by national delegations within this basket include the digital divide, access to broadband, and the environment and capacity development.

Please consult the DigitalWatch newsletter for more information.⤴