

RUSSIA AND THE WORLD WIDE WEB: TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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The term “sustainable human development” has come to be accepted in the development economics literature as an expansion of human capabilities, a widening of choices, an enhancement of freedoms, and a fulfillment of human rights [2, p xxi].

Fundamental concept of the sustainable human development approach developed by a Nobel prize laureate Amartya Sen and strongly advocated by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is a concept of human capabilities – the range on things that people can do or be in life. The most basic capabilities for human development are to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources and social services needed for a decent standard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community. Human development paradigm is concerned with building up human capabilities by investing in people and empowering them [2].

In the sustainable human development framework technology becomes a mechanism for promoting human development. Today information and communication technology (ICT) is a vital tool of the sustainable human development and growth.

The purpose of the article is to analyze statistics and trends and characteristics of the use of internet technologies in Russia. This research paper is an outcome of the author’s participation in the World Wide Web Index Project carried out by Oxford Economics and World Wide Web Foundation. The Web Index will be the world’s first multi-dimensional measure of the Web and its impact on people and nations. It will cover a large number of developed and developing countries will allow for comparisons of trends over time and benchmarking performance across countries¹.

The importance of internet and ICT in general for human development has been recognized recently when in July 2011 United Nations declared internet access a human right [3]. In Russia in 2011 57,9 mln citizens or 43% of the total population were connected to internet and used it [4]. Minister of IT of the Russian Federation Igor Schegolev gives a higher figure: 70 mln internet users in the end of 2011. Internet connectivity grows rapidly: up from 41 mln users in 2008. In 2011 28% of Russian population accessed internet via mobile devices. 71% of users in Russia search for information on the web, 57% visit social networking sites and 53% read news online. Via the web people also communicate with each other (by e-mail and Skype), read books, watch films and even learn foreign languages.

As an essential part of the everyday life internet should be accessible to all. However, disabled people: people with hearing and visual disabilities, people susceptible to seizures and people with learning disabilities (dyslexia) do not have adequate internet access. Although a special standard (GOST) for accessibility of internet for the blind exists in our country since 2007 and a special GOST for accessibility for people with dyslexia is in force too, as of today in Russia internet is not adopted for the disabled. From 275 thousand blind people that live in Russia only 12% use internet. This percentage is slightly higher for the other groups of disabled. Recognizing the importance of the World Wide Web for sustainable human development President Medvedev in November of 2011 gave an order to the government to develop and implement accessibility standards for invalids [7]. Many large companies such as Microsoft, ABBYY, Code Factory, etc already produce special applications for the disabled for their programs: Windows, Lingvo, VoiceOver. To improve internet access for the disabled in several cities of Russia (i.e. Stavropol, Saint Petersburg, Vladimir) public libraries with internet access have been opened.

Internet helps to build up basic human capabilities: education and health. Access to the web created a new type of learning: distance learning. In Russia there exists a special internet portal www.edu.ru with curricula for primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Materials include course programs, study guides, books and useful links and are grouped by subject and education levels. Total number of materials exceeds 25 000. This website is visited by 100 thousand people daily! [5]. Internet is also used for searching information about foreign universities, programs that they offer, and application procedures.

In health and healthcare the World Wide Web offered numerous possibilities: from disseminating information about epidemics and rare diseases prevention to online registry. Numerous sites are devoted to HIV/AIDs epidemics (hivrussia.ru, stopspid.ru), hepatitis B and C (hepatitu.net), and influenza (gripp.ru). Ministry of Health and Rosstat also publish extensive statistics on health (mortality, morbidity, life expectancy) that is available online. Finally, in big cities patients can schedule an appointment with a doctor online (i.e. zdravnsk.ru in Novosibirsk). Access to health and educational online resources greatly improves quality of life of an average Russian citizen.

There are, of course, other services available via the net, that we cannot cover here, such as, for example, job search or e-commerce. However, a subject that we feel we must discuss is a political mobilization via internet since political mobilization is a way of empowerment without which no sustainable human development is possible.

In 2010 researchers at Harvard University prepared a report on RUNet politics and political mobilization in Russia [1]. According Bruce Elting and his colleagues Internet is an important political tool in Russia. All large parties have their own websites and most of them are updated on a daily basis. Party programs and leaders’ speeches are available on these websites and the forums are actively used to attract supporters and voters. All kinds of opposition (liberal, nationalist, etc) are present in the web. Most of the public discourse takes place in Livejournal and some other blogs. Recently networking services have become a tool for mobilization – for example, invitations to a meeting on Bolotnaya Ploschad in December, 2011 were sent via Facebook. Although government officials state that the web in Russia is not censored arrests of some

¹ More about the project at <http://www.webfoundation.org/projects/the-web-index/> – date of access 05.03.2012

journalists and political activists that published online cast doubts on these statements.

Finally, human development has to be sustainable. Sustainable development was coined by Brundlant Commission of the UN in 1987: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Internet challenges the sustainability principle. It is the fastest growing source of CO₂ emissions to the atmosphere: it doubled from 2002 to 2006 [6]. However, internet also brings opportunities for resource saving. For instance, electronic textbooks limit deforestation and e-government helps to improve business efficiency and save electricity by downsizing government sector.

In conclusion, in our society today ICTs and internet in particular are increasingly becoming a gigantic force underpinning sustainable global economic development. However, but the links between ICT and sustainability must be further explored.

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