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Sustainable Development Goals in IS Research

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Special issue editorial

Sustainable Development Goals in IS Research

Opening the agenda beyond developing countries' research

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> *"The Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, and peace and justice." (UN.org)*

The 17 UN Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to unite the world around problems and not regions or countries. This ambition opens the door for a new understanding of the IS discipline beyond the current division around developing and developed countries research (Watson et al. 2021) and global North and South (Sahay et al. 2017). While context has proven to be important in IS research (Davison and

Martinsons 2016; Elbanna and Idowu 2021), a wider global consideration of this context could be fruitful in taking local context and connect it to others so problem sharing becomes more visible and solutions get more sustainable.

The development, implementation and use of IT form the foundation of publications in IS journals. They reflect numerous variations over that theme leaving room for methodological and theoretical plurality. However, so far there has only been a limited focus on the SDGs in IS research (Watson et al. 2021). Taking the 17 SDGs seriously in IS research opens up opportunities to go beyond the traditional focus on organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Indeed, IS research has a rich tradition of focusing on organizational perspectives related to how IT can improve organizational performance, strengthening their competitive advantage and position in the market and optimize their supply chain etc.; often with the purpose of stimulating economic activity. These concerns are not always compatible with the spirit of the 17 SDGs that invite to take a multiple and more complex perspective that balances the demands of the SDGs. In addition IS Research has also been occupied by the study of individuals and in particular their capacity to optimize their work-practices and performance using IT. While this focus on optimization of performance can be good for productivity and individual gain it is not necessarily well aligned with the spirit of the SDGs.

The colorful 17 SDG campaign has entered the public space with its pin strategically placed at the jackets of decision makers around the globe. Each SDG addresses central aspects of private and public life; productive jobs, sustainable cities, resilient individuals, inclusive communities, just societies, fresh air, clean water and cool world to name a few (Robert et al. 2005). The emerging digitalization of organizations and society has also put onus on IS researchers to address this changing paradigm in terms of responsible use of ressources and its consequences on sustainability (Karki and Thapa 2021).

Initiatives addressing the SDGs are mushrooming and yet we have not seen a massive body of related literature in Information Systems research. The articles included in this special issue point to key existential topics that demonstrate how technology can make a difference at the level of the individual, communities and society. Food, health and work are all fundamental aspects of human existence across the globe. With inspiration from the 17 SDGs colleagues have shown how IT can unfold crowdwork in a new way of working defined as a paid, digital platform-enabled work based on crowdsourcing model, how RFID can reduce food waste, and how IT can support health and well-being.

In the first paper Elbanna and Idowu (2021) argue that crowdwork in existing literature narrowly considered its direct and immediate economic impact on individual

workers, overlooking its broader sustainable impact. Their study goes a step further and adopts a wider sustainable development approach to examine the relationship between crowdwork and the sustainable development of the workers and communities involved. It questions whether crowdwork contributes to the sustainable development of workers, and if so, how? An inductive research approach is adopted, and rich qualitative data was collected benefiting from a unique access to crowdworkers. The study reveals that crowdworkers develop three types of skills in the process of crowdwork namely: domain, platform and business skills. It highlights that these developed knowledge and skills are transferred from crowdworkers to other workers and other work settings. Furthermore, it traces and identifies the process through which crowdworkers develop and transfer these skills and knowledge and categorises it into three stages of Reactive Exploitation, Proactive Expansion, and Transfer. The study concludes that this process contributes to a more sustainable human resource development not only for the crowdworkers involved but for others as well contributing to the sustainable social and economic development.

In the second paper Kumar et al. (2021) present a technology-enabled public distribution system (PDS) for a developing economy that faces significant leakages and misplacements. The paper explores the quantitative benefits of the integration of Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) with Blockchain Technology (BT) in the Indian Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). A mathematical formulation has been proposed to identify the potential benefits of adopting such technologies to minimise the social costs of both human suffering (deprivation cost) and the economic costs associated with it. Secondary data pertaining to the PDS has been analysed to gain insights into the extent of leakages of food grains from the system and the probable benefits of using these technologies in addressing them. The findings of the study reveal that the adoption of the Blockchain-based framework can significantly reduce the overall leakages and eliminate ghost demand from the system. Also, the study recommends the usage of Blockchain technology for information sharing in a secure, scalable, traceable, and transparent environment to address the institutional independence and accountability over the entire TPDS process.

In the the third paper Iqbal and colleagues (2021) discuss the issues related to the well-being of ageing society. They highlight how the global demographic change implies that a lot of research and practical work is needed to guarantee well-being and quality of life for the ageing society. They present initiatives that are aimed to support this endeavour in the Decade of Healthy Ageing, 2020-2030, a global collaborative, multisectoral action led by the World Health Organization (WHO 2020). The initiative addresses the promotion of good health and well-being and empowering lifelong

learning as well as fostering health care innovation that is responsive to the needs of older adults, their families and their communities.

It is our hope that this special issue on the SDGs serves as an inspiration to IS colleagues around the world and it is our ambition that the special issue is seen as an invitation to contribute to this important agenda were we trust that IS scholars have much to contribute with in future research.

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