The Future of Knowledge Sharing for Development in a Digital Age: Delivering an open and fair digital society.

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Rachel Playforth *introduces a new report on how digital technologies might contribute to or damage development agendas in the coming years. Through scenario development planning, the project investigated the landscape of developing countries in the digital age and how practitioners and policymakers might best respond. None of the scenarios below represents the most desirable outcome, but by working backwards from an ideal future, participants were able to develop key strategies for positive change.*


Over the next 15 years, developing countries are likely to experience sweeping changes in how states and societies engage with knowledge. These changes hold the potential to improve people's lives by making information more available, increasing avenues for political and economic engagement, and making government more transparent and responsive. But they also carry dangers of a growing knowledge divide influenced by technology access, threats to privacy, and the potential loss of diversity of knowledge.

In 2014, the Institute of Development Studies conducted a horizon scanning research project to look at digital technologies and their potential impact on development, focusing on sub-Saharan Africa, over the coming 15 years. Using Foresight methods – a range of horizon-scanning tools and approaches based on scenario development – this research gathered knowledge and insights from a range of people working with digital technologies representing different perspectives: development agencies, government, librarians, ICT professionals and the private sector. Through interviews and two workshops, in London and Centurion, South Africa, participants identified key drivers of change and developed scenarios for different futures.

Foresight methodology, especially the creation of scenarios, allows us to creatively imagine various futures while taking account of the evidence we already have. Our four scenarios extrapolate existing trends and drivers along two axes to their logical conclusions 15 years from now:
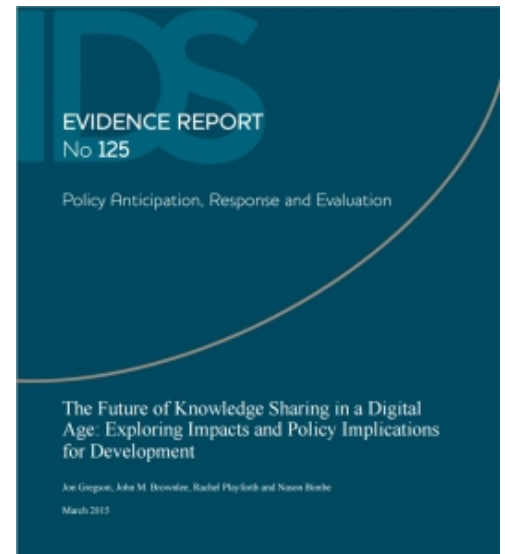
Figure 1: Scenario matrix: knowledge vs resources
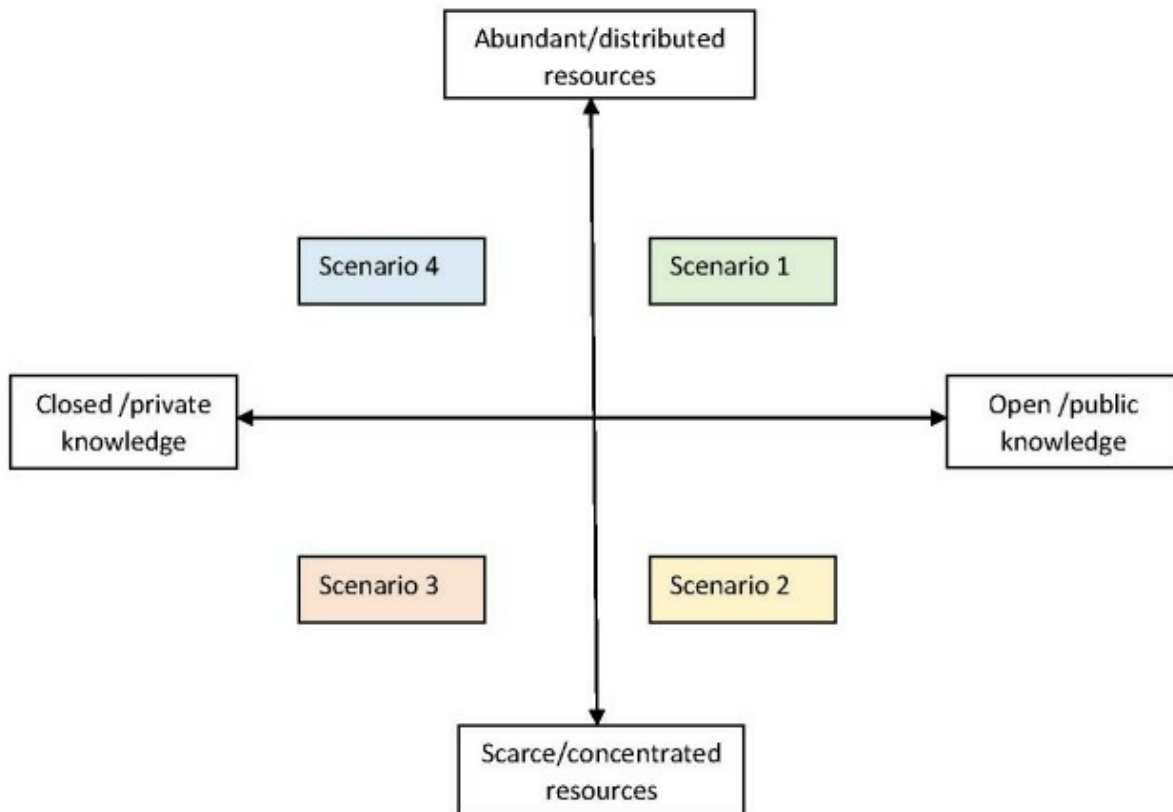
- **Scenario 1 ('Regulated Abundance')** is a world of abundant assets and relatively dispersed ownership, where knowledge is openly available but regulation and surveillance are pervasive.
- **Scenario 2 ('The Good, the Bad and the Ugly')** is also a world of freely available knowledge but in a context where many important assets are scarce and ownership of these assets is relatively concentrated.
- **Scenario 3 ('Ignorance is Bliss?')** is also a world of resource scarcity and concentrated ownership but where access to knowledge is tightly managed and controlled.
- **Scenario 4 ('The Digital Dambusters')** combines tight management and control of knowledge with abundant assets, with ownership distributed relatively widely.

None of these extremes represents the most desirable outcome, but by combining some of their characteristics our workshop participants developed a 'preferred scenario', an ideal future for digital knowledge sharing. We then worked backwards to formulate strategies and policies to help realise that vision.

So what might the world look like in 2030?

Who would have thought it possible, back in 2015 when they were drafting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), how much could have changed for the better in 15 years? Here are some of the key characteristics of the 'preferred scenario' for 2030:

- Internet is now seen as a basic right, and even the poor have a minimum allocation of internet access. This was accomplished largely through the pursuit of prudent policies based on a few principles that were agreed on globally and implemented by national governments, and crowdsourced feedback mechanisms that enabled citizens to hold the international community to account for delivering an open and fair digital society. For researchers, government policy and implementing bodies, and development practitioners, openness also includes access to research documentation, datasets and government records.

- An Africa-wide repository of locally-produced research automatically harvests documents from universities and research institutes throughout Africa, making them easily available and searchable. A pan-African research body administers the system, and has set up a peer review system that ensures the quality of materials in the repository. In addition, under this research scheme, African national governments have implemented policies to incentivise publishing in the repository. The result has been a marked rise in local contributions to literature on local development, which has improved the quantity and relevance of development-to-development efforts, and helped to set new agendas for both research and development.

- Information and data scientists, librarians and knowledge intermediaries play a vital role in this pan-African research council and its repository system. New documents and data sets are being produced in heaps, and information professionals are needed at all levels to make sure that they are all easily searchable and discoverable. They are also a much used resource to help guide people to the information they need.

- Technology has also made education more widely available. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have not totally changed the education business model, but have become one of a number of important approaches in helping to increase access to good education. The availability of information and knowledge has also made it easier for students to find what they need even in remote areas. Most importantly, new models of knowledge sharing have enabled more African researchers to contribute to global online education systems, joining the ranks of globally famous online lecturers that previously came exclusively from Western universities. In addition, governments have prioritised capacity to use all the knowledge available at all levels of education.

Some worry that life and society nowadays are too much about data. That we are blind to problems that resist 'datafication', and much less able to find solutions. True, citizens insist that the algorithms that determine so much of our life must remain transparent, so that civil society groups can monitor the thoughts and values that go into crafting them. But as they get more and more sophisticated, sometimes it feels that we are being asked to trust that the computers have our best interest in mind. Mostly, though, it seems that the 'opt out' talk is about a discomfort with the amount of data we each produce and the potential for our data to someday fall into the wrong hands. Even though most people believe that government policies toward privacy, transparency, and data use are working well for now, it is good that these worries can be freely aired and discussed.

For more detail on trends, drivers and policy recommendations to achieve this scenario, read the full report from IDS: The Future of Knowledge Sharing in a Digital Age: Exploring Impacts and Policy Implications for Development. A short policy briefing is also available: Knowledge Sharing and Development in a Digital Age

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About the Author

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