

Data has always been a crucial tool for alleviating poverty and fostering development. With the advent of “big data” (large data-sets, often from different sources and collected in real-time) and the internet of things (or IoT, a catch-all term for connected devices and sensors) the potential uses for digital information will only grow. Just think how much more efficient the distribution of anti-malaria or other medicines in Africa could become, if firms could sift through text messages to look for key words and then send the drugs to places where subscribers use the word “fever” a lot. Or how much easier it would be to determine somebody’s risk profile—and thus give her or him access to credit—by analysing a person’s mobile-phone records, something a few startups are already doing. Others use call-record data to model the growth of slums, so they can tell authorities where, for instance, public restrooms and other infrastructure is needed.

Yet as always, things are not that easy: several hurdles mean that progress in using big data for development will be slow. One is reliability: currently only the mobile-network operators (MNOs) provide a steady flow of reliable information. Another problem is the lack of a “data culture”, meaning the right skills and mindset to analyse what data becomes available. Privacy and data-protection, meanwhile, are not just rich-country issues. Sustainable business models have to be found: data donations and open-data projects such as Orange’s in Sierra Leone are great, but MNOs will only keep giving away valuable data if they can make money with them. And then, there are all kinds of technical and standards issues which mean that it is hard, for instance, to combine data from different sources.

To summarise: big data can be a great tool to foster development—but it is only one tool and it will take time. What needs to be done? One area is standardisation—which is where the ITU could help. A more ambitious project would be to create a “data platform for development”, which could serve, among many other things, to collect data, make it usable and allow startups and NGOs to experiment with it. The UN’s Global Pulse and the UN Foundation’s Mobile Hub are first steps in this direction, but more needs to be done to make big data really useful for development.