Use of 'Big Data' in development highlighted at UN Headquarters meeting

Assistant Secretary-General Robert Orr. UN Photo/Evan Schneider

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The era of 'Big Data' presents the United Nations with an historic opportunity to better support and protect populations through analysis of digital information, according to a new report launched today at UN Headquarters in New York.

Produced by UN Global Pulse, the report – *Big Data for Development: Opportunities and Challenges* – explores how data from social media and other sources can yield information about

population well-being, including responses to job losses, changing food prices and other economic indicators.

"Global Pulse's mission is to help us seize this historic opportunity to improve how we combat hunger, poverty and disease – getting there, however, requires first building awareness of the opportunity in both the big data community and the development community, forming strategic partnerships, developing innovative approaches, and demonstrating their potential to change outcomes," the Assistant Secretary-General for Policy and Planning, Robert C. Orr, said at the report's launch, which included a round-table discussion.

"Today's new whitepaper is a critical milestone in this journey. As you will hear, there is no longer any question of whether or when data science will be applicable to the work of the United Nations. It's about how," he added.

As the global conversation progresses, Mr. Orr noted, the benefits for the UN in learning how to effectively harness data becomes increasingly clear.

Big Data is now "front page news," he told the round-table discussion, with its potential reaching even the least accessed corners of the globe. He cited the example of UN officials visiting the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya recently, where they found widespread use of cell-phones, particularly to access social media sites like Facebook.

Analysis of the data or digital patterns those cell phone users are producing could yield important information about the way the UN's services are impacting them, he said, adding, "Clearly there are opportunities that we have not yet realized."

Global Pulse's research, as detailed in the report, demonstrated that social media chatter can be an early indicator of spikes in unemployment in countries such as the United States and Ireland, and that the price of food commodities mined from websites closely matches the official Consumer Price Index in six Latin American countries. The work, a collaboration with several data research companies and institutions – such as Jana, SAS and Crimson Hexagon – also showed how Tweets related to the price of rice in Indonesia mirrored food price inflation statistics.

"Essentially this paper lays out the opportunity for global development," Global Pulse's Director, Robert Kirkpatrick, said at the launch.

Assistant-Secretary General Orr emphasized that the work represented in the report was just the tip of the iceberg of what is possible. He added that the Global Pulse needed system-wide support to continue its efforts, especially because time is of the essence.

The UN Global Pulse initiative functions as an innovation lab, bringing together expertise from inside and outside the UN to learn how the latest advances in data science and technology can yield new insights for decision-makers and improve resilience to the impacts of fast-moving socio-economic crises.

Its implementation strategy includes working with Member States to establish a network of 'Pulse Labs' to explore the potential of new sources of data and scale up successful approaches. Indonesia and Uganda are setting up the first two labs in Jakarta and Kampala – with the one in Jakarta opening in September this year, with funding provided by Australia.

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