

UNESCO SCIENCE REPORT

The race against time for smarter development

It is striking how development priorities have aligned over the past five years. Countries of all income levels are prioritizing their transition to digital and 'green' economies, in parallel. This dual transition reflects a double imperative. On the one hand, the clock is ticking for countries to reach their Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. On the other, countries are convinced that their future economic competitiveness will depend upon how quickly they transition to digital societies. The UNESCO Science Report's subtitle, 'the race against time for smarter development', is an allusion to these twin priorities.

This seventh edition of the report monitors the development path that countries have been following over the past five years from the perspective of science governance. It documents the rapid societal transformation under way, which offers new opportunities for social and economic experimentation but also risks exacerbating social inequalities, unless safeguards are put in place.

The report concludes that countries will need to invest more in research and innovation, if they are to succeed in their dual digital and green transition. More than 30 countries have already raised their research spending since 2014, in line with their commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals. Despite this progress, eight out of ten countries still devote less than 1% of GDP to research, perpetuating their dependence on foreign technologies.

Since the private sector will need to drive much of this dual green and digital transition, governments have been striving to make it easier for the private sector to innovate through novel policy instruments such as digital innovation hubs where companies can 'test before they invest' in digital technologies. Some governments are also seeking to improve the status of researchers through pay rises and other means. The global researcher population has surged since 2014.

The Covid-19 pandemic has energized knowledge production systems. This dynamic builds on the trend towards greater international scientific collaboration, which bodes well for tackling this and other global challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss. However, sustainability science is not yet mainstream in academic publishing, according to a new UNESCO study, even though countries are investing more than before in green technologies.

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