

The Pandemic and the Poor

Harnessing the Digital Revolution for a more Inclusive Economy

The COVID-19 pandemic is giving rise to the greatest economic reset in a generation. In this article, Peter Heslam argues that the booming digital technology (DT) sector offers the best prospects for ensuring the dignity and resilience of people in poverty.

Every day of this crisis sees more companies go bust, and those that survive fighting to keep their heads above water. As the restrictions ease, many established businesses are almost in start-up mode. In an article published by Bible Society, I have outlined the challenges and opportunities facing business as a result of the pandemic¹. It covers such issues as the environment, social solidarity, purpose in business, and the digital revolution. It is the potential of the last of these to address poverty that will be the focus of this short article.

The revolutionary nature of recent advances in digital technology has been confirmed by the pandemic lockdowns. Whole swathes of human life that used to be conducted 'in person' have shifted into virtual space. Online shopping,

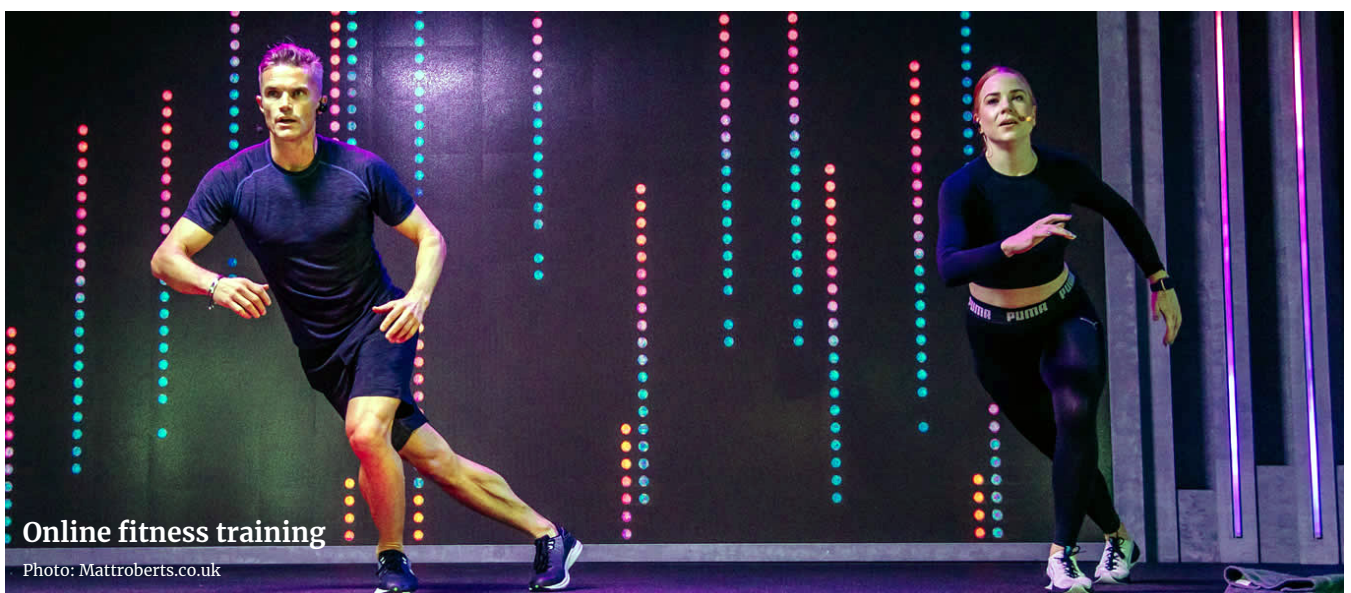
of course, has been around for years. But overnight many other forms of interaction have moved online, notably in the spheres of education, training, the courts, fitness, healthcare and organized religion. While the easing of lockdowns will bring some of this back into real space, much of the shift will remain.

Those with sufficient wealth have benefitted from this shift. They can be grateful that this pandemic has occurred at a time in human history when the revolution was sufficiently advanced to bring them daily benefits at a speed and scale that was unimaginable when the internet's inventor, the Oxford academic Sir Timothy John Berners-Lee, published the world's first website in 1990.

The beneficiaries do not only include the rich. All over the world, millions

of people born in dire economic circumstances have escaped poverty's grasp as a direct result of Sir Tim's invention. But what about those excluded from this revolution? Is there any hope that the huge boost the revolution has received from this pandemic will benefit them? As always in times of crisis, it is people in poverty who are suffering most from this pandemic. When the economy suffers, everyone suffers but the poor suffer the most.

The seriousness of the situation in poor communities can hardly be over-exaggerated. Whereas micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs) are the backbone of their economies, it is these enterprises that are bearing the brunt of the pandemic. As most of them are informal, they do not qualify for



government support and their workers have little recourse to state welfare when they lose their livelihoods². They often operate in conditions in which social distancing, hand hygiene, and the use of ventilators and of test, track and trace (TTT) procedures are well nigh impossible.

This leaves billions of people around the world facing a dreadful dilemma. Oksana Abbouda, who runs StreetNet International, an organization representing street vendors, sums it up well: 'they either have to put themselves at risk and continue their informal jobs, or put their families at risk because they are starving.'

Nevertheless, the digital revolution has allowed a huge amount of real-time, global interaction and collaboration designed to tackle such dilemmas. Public-private partnerships are proving particularly effective in providing innovative solutions. These include new e-payment systems in Cambodia, India, and The Philippines; and e-health services that allow a virtual network of around 4,000 volunteer doctors to be mobilized via a phone app, in Bangladesh. In Rwanda, five 'anti-epidemic robots' provided by ZoraBots are being used in Kigali to screen for COVID-19 at treatment centres and at the international airport. And the automated drone-based delivery service Zipline is delivering personal protective equipment (PPE), test kits, and one day (hopefully) a vaccine, to medical professionals in Ghana and Rwanda.

Making online connectivity reliable and affordable has to become a major priority for global collaborators, as

the potential is immense. Kenya, for example, has lost 80% of its exports of fresh flowers, yet 93% of the population have a mobile subscription. For them, digital technology represents the fastest, safest and most effective tool to fight COVID-19 and secure livelihoods. With the support of Unilever, digital platforms such as UJoin are seeking to help low-income Kenyan retailers. But for digital media to be inclusive it needs to become smartphone-compatible and to allow users low-data versions that keep browsing costs to a minimum.

Small shops in developing countries are often the main source of supply, thereby becoming contagion hotspots. But the Colombian brewer Bavaria has launched Tienda Cerca, a digital platform that provides customers with access to over 40,000 such shops across the country without needing to leave their homes. The company is collaborating with other companies to provide shop owners with bicycles and other equipment to make local deliveries.

Each of these initiatives is, of course, only a drop in the bucket. The World Bank estimates that the global economic recession will push 100 million people into extreme poverty. All this imperils the huge reduction in extreme poverty and increase in human development brought about since 1990, largely as a result of the contribution SMEs have made to economic growth.

In terms of providing a Christian perspective on all this, Pope Francis inevitably has the most commanding voice as leader of around 1.2 billion Catholics, the vast majority of whom are situated in the developing world. In

a recent widely publicised interview, he reflects some of the strength and weakness of Christian approaches to poverty. The following passage provides an example:

Every crisis contains both danger and opportunity. Today I believe we have to slow down our rate of production and consumption and to learn to understand and contemplate the natural world. We need to reconnect with our real surroundings. This is the opportunity for conversion. I see early signs of an economy that is more human.

This passage would be spot on, were it not for his call to slow down the rate of production and consumption, which will hurt the poor the most. What they need, as I hope this article indicates, is smart production and consumption that serves the needs of vulnerable people and habitats, including the environment³. But most of what the Pope says in that interview is worth shouting from the rooftops and reflects the hope Christians can and should have in the face of adversity.

This crisis is indeed an opportunity. Businesses all over the world need to reconsider their purpose and how they can serve the natural world, including human beings, by meeting the new and complex needs this pandemic has thrust before them. Pre-pandemic commercial practices that were unsustainable and inequitable need to be abandoned; in their recovery strategies, businesses need not so much to rebuild as to build back better. Only this can ensure the dignity and resilience of people in poverty and provide them with a means to escape their plight. 📺

1. Peter S. Heslam, 'God's Pandemic Rule and Redemption: Business and the Renewal of the Global Economy', published in *Transmission*, summer 2020. https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/content/explore_the_bible/bible_in_transmission/files/2020_summer/Gods_pandemic_rule_and_redemption.pdf
2. The International Labour Organization estimates that globally only two out of ten jobs are in formal employment.
3. For the environmental implications of the production and consumption of plastic, see Peter S Heslam, 'Message in a Bottle: Plastic's Prospects', *Faith in Business Quarterly*, 20.1 (2019), pp. 3-5.



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