President of ECOSOC's Special Session on AI

Opened Panel 1: Governance, AI, and the SDGs

International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

Presented by

Tomas Lamanauskas

Deputy Secretary-General, ITU

Trusteeship Chamber, New York

7 May 2024

Vice President Ivan Šimonović, excellencies, distinguished guests, panellists, ladies and gentlemen... Good afternoon.

I'm honoured to introduce and moderate today's discussion on artificial intelligence – where will be exploring what is the right AI governance that would enable AI to be harnessed for the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The astounding rise of AI has sparked intense policy conversations.

It's also rapidly working its way into our daily lives.

Generative AI – propelled to the public consciousness with the launch of Chat GPT nearly 18 months ago – triggered people's fears of a future dominated by machines, akin to scenes from "The Terminator."

But the evolving reality of AI is more complex. With appropriate guidance, ever more powerful AI systems can be part of a hopeful vision for the whole world.

But not without some challenges to address.

AI risks:

- Reports about AI use in warfare are obviously troubling.

- But misinformation, deepfakes, and systemic biases have become a serious risk in every society, all the time.

- Nearly half (about 45%) of AI systems perpetuate old-fashioned gender bias.

- And the potential for using AI systems to manipulate elections is scary – especially in a year when nearly half the world's population is voting.

- On top of those risks are AI's significant environmental impact.

Harnessing AI for sustainable development

- Focusing solely on risks overlooks the vast opportunities AI presents.

- Generative AI, for instance, could add approximately $4.4 trillion to the global economy.

- AI solutions could also help mitigate an estimated 5-10% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

- Power of AI can help transform healthcare, climate monitoring and disaster management, agriculture, road safety – these, by the way, are actually just a few areas on which we, ITU, have specific initiatives together with our sister agencies – WHO, WIPO, WMO, UNEP, UNDRR, FAO, UNECE and others.

AI divide

- In all those ways, AI can accelerate progress on the SDGs. But only if everyone can benefit from the power of it.

- And it brings us to another risk of the AI revolution – a risk of leaving a lot of people out of it due to the widening the global digital divide.

- And the risk is very real:

  o About 2.6 billion people, or one-third of humanity, still lack any Internet access.

  o AI economy and patents are concentrated in a handful of nations exacerbating this gap.

  o The AI divide has many more faces. This divide extends to digital skills, representation in AI datasets, as well as the acute AI policy divide. Nearly 60% of countries responding to the ITU survey had no AI strategy, while 83% lacked AI regulations.

- This is a key challenge that needs to be addressed if we are to harness AI for SDGs.

Establishing AI governance

- A lot is already being done, including by the UN family, which is working as one on this – preparing the world to embrace AI safely, inclusively, sustainably.

- Take as an example the Inter-Agency Working Group on Artificial Intelligence, which I have the pleasure of co-chairing with UNESCO's Assistant Director-General Gabriela Ramos.

- A UN System White Paper on AI Governance produced by this group and just last week endorsed and published by the UN Chief Executives

Board for Coordination identifies more than 50 existing UN instruments relevant to AI governance

      o   Those include broad normative instruments – like the AI ethics recommendations from UNESCO and human rights guidance from OHCHR and the Human Rights Council.

      o   And sector-specific instruments guiding AI use in healthcare, law enforcement, and more as well as protecting the rights of children.

ITU has published, or is currently developing, more than 200 technical standards applicable to AI.

Further work continues to refine the governance, first of all through the deliberations of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Body on AI as it prepares recommendations for international governance of these technologies in the lead up to the UN Summit of the Future in September – with the Global Digital Compact expected to be agreed as one of its key outcomes.

The AI governance discussions will also take place at year's AI for Good Global Summit, happening in Geneva from the 29th to 31st of May, bringing over 40 UN agencies together with a rich plethora of other stakeholders.

This year, we are dedicating a full day, 29th May, to AI governance.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to introduce our panellists for today's discussion, who are superbly placed to provide insights on how to ensure that AI governance enables to harness this powerful technology for SDGs:

      •   Her Excellency Ms. Carme Artigas, Co-Chair of the Secretary General's High-Level Advisory Body on AI.

      •   Mr. Eliot Minchenberg, UNESCO representative to the United Nations and Director of the UNESCO office in New York.

- Mr. Jim Balsillie, Founder of the Balsillie School of International Affairs, and former Chairman and co-CEO of Research In Motion – the firm that gave us the BlackBerry, arguably the first successful smartphone.

- And Mr. Karan Bhatia, Global Head of Government Affairs and Public Policy at Google.

I look forward to all their perspectives – and what I'm sure will be an engaging discussion.

##