



Special meeting of the Economic and Social Council on Harnessing Artificial Intelligence for the Sustainable Development Goals

7 May 2024

INFORMAL SUMMARY

Introduction

The [Special Meeting of the Economic and Social Council on “Harnessing Artificial Intelligence for the Sustainable Development Goals”](#) took place on 7 May 2024 in the Trusteeship Council Chamber at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The President of the Economic and Social Council, H.E. Ms. Paula Narváez, and the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ms. Amina Mohammed, opened the meeting followed by two panel discussions, on “Governance, Artificial Intelligence and the SDGs” and on “Real-Life Examples of AI Contributions to the SDGs”.

Closing remarks were delivered by H.E. Mr. Bob Rae (Canada), Vice-President of the Council.

The speakers included senior officials from the UN system, companies developing and deploying AI, entrepreneurs, a representative from the Business and Industry Major Group, and representatives from Member States.

In support of the Special Meeting, ITU together with Slalom Element Lab and UN DESA organized a special hands-on [AI for Good Lab](#) on 8 May, featuring demonstrations using AI being deployed to advance the SDGs. The Lab also served as a bridge between the ECOSOC Special Meeting and the STI Forum.

Opening

At the opening of the Special Meeting, the **Deputy Secretary-General** emphasized the critical role of artificial intelligence (AI) in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and called for a balance between [AI’s benefits and ethical use](#), ensuring that no one is left behind in the digital transformation. While acknowledging the benefits of AI, such as optimizing energy use, improving medical diagnostics, monitoring biodiversity and expanding educational opportunities, the Deputy Secretary-General also highlighted risks associated to this technology, including job displacement, global governance gaps, bias, discrimination, and misinformation. The Deputy Secretary-General emphasized that [responsible governance, accountability, equitable access, infrastructure, skills development and collaboration](#) are essential for harnessing AI’s potential while mitigating its harms. The concept of “[Data commons](#)” was highlighted as an example of responsible development.

The **President of the Economic and Social Council** emphasized that the meeting’s focus on AI governance and on concrete examples of the use of AI to advance the SDGs provided a crucial opportunity for [exploring the convergence between AI and sustainable development](#). The President of the Council stressed the importance of finding a [balance between promoting innovation and effectively addressing ethical considerations](#), and noted that the discussions formed part of a broader conversation on these matters, including consultations on the [Summit of the Future and the Global Digital Compact](#), as well as the recent



resolution adopted by the General Assembly on *Seizing the opportunities of safe, secure and trustworthy artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development*¹.

Panel 1: Governance, Artificial Intelligence, and the SDGs

The panel was chaired by **H.E. Mr. Ivan Šimonović (Croatia)**, Vice-President of the Council, and moderated by **Mr. Tomas Lamanuskas**, Deputy Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Panelists featured **Ms. Carme Artigas**, Co-Chair of the Secretary General's High-level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence; **Mr. Eliot Minchenberg**, Director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Office in New York and UNESCO Representative to the United Nations; **Mr. Jim Balsillie**, retired co-CEO of Research In Motion (Blackberry) and Founder and Chair of the Centre for International Governance Innovation; and **Mr. Karan Bhatia**, Global Head of Government Affairs and Public Policy at Google. **H.E. Ms. Maritza Chan**, Permanent Representative of Costa Rica to the United Nations, and **Ms. Shea Gopaul**, Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York for the International Organisation of Employers (IOE) and co-Chair of the Business and Industry Major Group, participated as discussants.

Speakers highlighted the [significant challenges in regulating AI globally](#), including finding the right balance between innovation and regulation, standardizing regulations across different countries with various legal norms, keeping up with the rapid pace of technology advancement, addressing ethical and societal implications, and overcoming the lack of technical expertise and capacity in many countries. A [global governance deficit](#) was identified, with a significant distance between those who develop and apply technology and those who are responsible and accountable for it. Moreover, the necessity of promoting [solutions that facilitate international cooperation](#), with the United Nations acting as a platform for fostering global dialogue and cooperation on AI regulation, technical standards, interoperability, and ethical and risk management frameworks, was underlined. Adopting a [risk-based proportional approach](#) to regulation, to ensure data access for innovation while promoting international cooperation on technical AI standards, was discussed. The need to [build capacity and technical expertise](#), especially for the Global South, was reiterated, including training programs, knowledge sharing, technical assistance, and enhancing data processing capabilities and cloud computing capacities. Speakers stressed the urgency of developing [monitoring and reporting mechanisms](#) to provide updates on the latest developments and scientific consensus on opportunities and risks. There were calls for [international partnerships to scale AI solutions responsibly and inclusively](#) across global challenges like climate action and economic inequality.

The discussions delved deep into the complexities of AI governance and its ethical dimensions, and how to address them in harnessing AI to advance the SDGs. The [transformative potential of AI](#) across various sectors was emphasized while, at the same time, [acknowledging the challenges and risks](#) associated with its deployment. These risks include misinformation and disinformation, deepfakes, systemic biases, the potential for manipulating elections, and warfare use. Understanding the [economics that underpins AI and data governance](#) and recognizing that related public policy decisions entail [strategic considerations with widespread impact](#) were deemed crucial to safeguard national security and protect and enhance citizen welfare in the digital era, enable fair access to new factors of production, and comply with international commitments under various treaties and agreements. [Governments were urged to invest in responsible AI development and governance](#), so to make sure that the potential of AI to advance the SDGs can be harnessed, leaving no one behind.

¹ [A/RES/78/265](#)



Ethical governance of AI emerged as a central theme, with discussions around the need for robust frameworks that ensure **AI development respects human rights** and promotes **fairness, transparency and accountability**. Speakers further emphasized the importance of ethical guidelines and readiness assessment methodologies to help countries and companies navigate the complexities of AI deployment and its social implications. UNESCO's role in shaping global dialogues around the ethics of AI, including its "*Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*" adopted in November 2021, was underscored in this regard. There was a **call for updating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights** to address digital age realities.

The risk of **AI exacerbating existing inequalities** due to the widening global digital divide was highlighted. Governments were urged to ensure that everyone has access to AI and that technology doesn't leave out a significant portion of the global population. The transformative potential of AI in the labor market and the need for creating **reskilling opportunities** and a culture of **continuous learning** were discussed. The role of **social dialogue** and partnerships between the public and private sectors were seen as crucial for harnessing AI's potential responsibly and inclusively.

Member States highlighted the need for **integrating ethical frameworks** for AI governance **within national strategies**, emphasizing safety, inclusivity, and **public service enhancement**. Several countries discussed their approaches to AI regulations, underscoring the importance of safety and ethical considerations before AI deployment, including rigorous tests prior to widespread adoption, highlighting a proactive approach to governance. Member States further illustrated how AI is being harnessed to **address and mitigate social inequalities**, including to enhance healthcare access, optimize social service delivery and improve public administration efficiency.

Panel 2: Real-Life Examples of AI Contributions to the SDGs

The panel was chaired by **H.E. Mr. Akan Rakhmetullin (Kazakhstan)**, Vice-President of the Council, and moderated by **Mr. Amandeep Singh Gill**, the Secretary General Envoy on Technology. Panelists featured **Ms. Rola Dashti**, Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA); **Ms. Celeste Drake**, Deputy Director-General of the International Labour Organization (ILO); **Ms. Ligia Noronha**, Assistant Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) New York Office; and **Mr. Roberto Moris**, Assistant Professor at the Catholic University of Chile (UC Chile) and Director of the Regional Assisted Integrated Administration Project of the Santiago Metropolitan Region. **H.E. Mr. Luke Goh**, Second Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Singapore, and **Mr. Jorge Alberto Serra**, CEO of VISIION, participated as discussants.

The discussions showcased concrete examples of the **practical applications of AI** in a variety of contexts, demonstrating the technology's broad capabilities and the critical importance of tailored AI solutions for specific regional and global challenges. The dialogue provided a synergistic understanding of how AI can significantly advance the SDGs through governance, ethical application, and targeted solutions across multiple domains. Speakers emphasized the establishment of **global standards**, like the Global Digital Compact, to ensure that AI's integration into societal frameworks is balanced and equitable. The discussions highlighted the necessity of **international cooperation** and **capacity building** to enable effective implementation of AI solutions across countries at varying stages of technological development and adoption.

On the practical application front, **AI's role in environmental sustainability** was notably prominent. Speakers detailed AI's utility in enhancing resource efficiency, supporting circular economies and managing renewal



energy systems, while also contributing to significant advancements in environmental monitoring, including tracking and analyzing global greenhouse gas emissions. AI's role in providing **real-time data** to farmers for better resource management, optimizing water use, and improving crop yields was discussed as a key factor in not only boosting agricultural productivity but also supporting sustainable practices that contribute to environmental goals. However, **AI's environmental impact** would also need to be addressed.

Moreover, speakers discussed AI's impact on **urban development** and demonstrated how AI is being leveraged to **address uncertainties**, foster **inclusive territorial management** and **accelerate decision-making** processes, while also **tackling misinformation**. The importance of building **institutional technological infrastructures** grounded in collaborative learning and continuous improvement was emphasized. It was noted that the establishment of **robust ethical and legal frameworks**, **agile operational models** and **expert advisory councils** were key elements in this regard.

Economic and social impacts were also thoroughly discussed. **AI-driven projects**, including AI-powered data, a policy support hub and a policy assistant tool aimed at **optimizing domestic financing** for development and **improving policy formulation through data-driven insights** in the Arab region, were presented. Additionally, the use of AI in **labor inspection**, which is key to enforcing labor laws and has a critical role in eradicating forced child labor and promoting a safe and secure working environment, was highlighted. The discussions also emphasized the importance of providing **training** to promote full ownership of the process and achieve the **upskilling** necessary for success. They also emphasized the importance of keeping humans heavily involved in helping identify and tackle potential biases in AI applications.

Public health and **education** were also prominent topics, where AI's potential to transform these sectors was illustrated through initiatives aimed at personalizing education and improving healthcare delivery systems. Moreover, the potential of AI in **risk prediction** and **timely intervention** in **healthcare** as well as **gender-based violence** was discussed. AI can be a critical enabler in shifting visions from reactive to **predictive strategies** promoting a proactive approach to social protection and justice, as it can identify patterns, enable early case detection, predict risks, and facilitate **timely interventions**. Speakers shared experiences of using **innovation sandboxes** to explore ways to apply generative AI across government agencies and enterprises to facilitate the development of AI solutions. The importance of continuing to **build trust** and confidence for the responsible development of AI, including by adopting **adequate safeguards and guidelines**, as well as **sharing of relevant experiences** among policymakers and regulators as well as advance **capacity building** programs was highlighted.

Member States discussed how AI can be strategically deployed to advance national and global agendas, emphasizing the need for careful governance, the pursuit of social equity, and the practical benefits of AI in addressing the challenges related to sustainable development. The implementation of AI to **tailor educational resources** to individual needs and **optimize healthcare services** was highlighted, as was the use of AI to **enhance agricultural efficiency**, **environmental sustainability** and **disaster management**.

Closing

In his closing remarks, **H.E. Mr. Bob Rae (Canada)**, Vice-President of the Council, highlighted the transformative potential of AI and its capacity to significantly impact the global economy, societies and human wellbeing as well as the risks associated with AI, such as its ability to influence our thinking and to impact intelligence, global event response, privacy and human dignity. The Vice-President warned of the risk of AI further increasing inequality and stressed the need for policies that empower individuals so



that the fundamental objective of the 2030 Agenda of leaving no one behind is achieved. He advocated for the use of the international system to assist countries in developing national strategies. He also emphasized the role of ECOSOC in promoting international cooperation, convening and facilitating discussions among all relevant stakeholders towards the development of a nimble, realistic model of global governance that can respond to the pace of technological change. In this context, the Vice-President supported the continuation of AI as a priority in the Council's agenda.

Recommendations and proposals

In addition to the ideas highlighted in the summary, the following recommendations and proposals were made during the meeting:

- The need for a balanced approach that considers ethical dimensions, promotes equitable benefits, and fosters international cooperation to fully realize AI's potential in achieving the SDGs.
- The importance of building capacity and technical expertise, especially in developing countries, and strengthening coordination of UN system entities.
- Call for ethical and responsible AI governance frameworks that prioritize human rights, equity and sustainability while promoting transparency, responsibility, inclusivity and representation in AI development and in decision-making.
- Update the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to address digital age realities.
- Ensure the correct, ethical and incremental application of AI in bridging the gap between the current social situation and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda objectives.
- Meaningful inclusion of the perspective of women at all levels of the development of AI and other emerging and frontier technologies.
- Users to be actively involved in the development of AI applications.
- Encourage training and upskilling opportunities to fully harness the benefits of AI. Equally important is the need to keep humans directly involved in the process to identify and mitigate potential biases in AI applications.
- Establish a Digital Stability Board to support national approaches to increase regulatory cooperation and coherence on best practices, and structurally address the need for fair diffusion of AI.
- Strengthen the global digital cooperation and global governance.
- Encourage the Global Digital Compact to address the impact of technological development, including AI, on peace and security, human rights, gender equality and development as well as foster a safe and equitable development, deployment and use of AI technologies.
- Attract investment in AI to enable more accessible and affordable digital solutions for all people, including those in rural areas, and thus contribute to closing the digital divide.