



**Opening Statement by H.E. Bob Rae (Canada)**

**President of the Economic and Social Council**

ECOSOC Special Meeting on Artificial Intelligence

6 May 2025

Hi everybody. I'm delighted to be here. My name is Bob Rae. I'm the President of the Economic and Social Council. We're delighted to have all of you here for our Special Meeting on Artificial Intelligence.

I'm going to be joined on the podium in a minute by Under Secretary Amandeep Singh Gill, and we're really looking forward to a lively interactive discussion. As you can see, we've changed the makeup of the room. Our Economic and Social Council doesn't normally look quite as exciting as this, but we're delighted to be able to take advantage of what's available.

The theme that we want to set out this morning is: how can we make sure that artificial intelligence can be a force for good?

We're going to be having another meeting in Geneva in July under the leadership of the ITU to talk about this theme as well.

We think that at ECOSOC we have a responsibility to really try to encourage a conversation about AI and how we can make it work for everybody and how we can make sure that it's not just some sort of technological gimmick that everybody looks at with great fear that ends up enriching some countries and some people, a form of technology that transforms the way we do things and but doesn't really help to deal with the overarching problems and challenges we face in the world today – the enormous inequality that exists, the gaps between those who have and those who don't have, the digital divide that separates countries that have



access to technology and those parts of the world that don't. We're really looking at how we can build a greater knowledge of how to take advantage of AI for the whole system.

Of course, there are profound questions around ethics. There are important questions of recognizing that technologies in and of themselves don't have an inherent moral compass, and then we have to decide what to do about it. Can we have a system of governance and use of AI that actually empowers people? Or is it simply going to accelerate the exploitation of people that has so far gone unchecked?

There are people who think somehow that AI can be stopped, and I've got news for you: it can't be stopped. The notion that technological change is something that we can control by passing a resolution at the United Nations – no, that's not going to happen. This is a life force that goes well beyond the boundaries of this institution or any other institution.

This year at the UN, like every year – and my predecessor had a meeting in Santiago on these questions of trying to look at the relationship between AI and decent work – we've had many different conferences and discussions that go beyond the boundaries of the UN: the Hiroshima AI process, the global AI summits convened at Bletchley Park and in Seoul and London, and the AI Action Summit in Paris. They have all highlighted the urgency of making sure we can forge common principles, shared safeguards, and interoperable standards to guide the responsible development of AI.

The conversation that we're starting today under the auspices of ECOSOC will continue for the next several days at our Multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology, and Innovation for the SDGs. It will be an opportunity to carry on the dialogue that we have already started and will continue this week.



The clear thing I think is so important for us to say is that what AI is all about is not going to be determined by a handful of actors, no matter how powerful they may be. They're going to have to listen to the voices of the people and of their governments.

When the Gutenberg printing press was invented a few hundred years ago, we didn't have a United Nations, and we didn't have an organized discussion about what should be done with this new technology. Suffice it to say that the printing press transformed the world. It transformed literacy, it transformed people's sense of how they could put themselves at the center of the conversation. Arguably, in the field of theology and politics, nothing was more momentous than the discovery of the printing press and the books and literacy to which it gave rise.

I think we're now in the middle of an era when a new form of technology is going to have just as dramatic an impact as the printing press did, and yet we have the opportunity to perhaps be a little more knowledgeable about how we can unlock this potential.

There are countries that have done it right, countries that have really tried to make a difference in giving more and more people access to the technology and used it for the benefit of the SDGs, and there are countries that have got it wrong. So, we need to discuss among ourselves how we can get it right and how we can make sure that this extraordinary breakthrough in technological understanding can be used for the public good and for the benefit of all mankind.

With that, I'm going to ask Mr. Gill to say a few words. We've all appreciated his leadership here in New York, and we look forward to hearing his comments.

Thank you.