

2018 ECOSOC Thematic Discussion
“Leveraging new technologies for the SDGs”

Thursday, 19 July 2018, 3:00 pm
United Nations Headquarters, New York

Informal summary

The 2018 ECOSOC Thematic Discussion on “*Leveraging new technologies for the SDGs*” was convened during the ECOSOC high-level segment on Thursday, 19 July 2018. The Discussion brought together high-level government officials and experts to address emerging technologies and the next steps for harnessing their potential.

The Discussion was chaired by Her Excellency Ms. Inga Rhonda King, Vice-President of ECOSOC. It was moderated by Ms. Doreen Bogdan-Martin, Chief, Strategic Planning and Membership Department, International Telecommunications Union.

Highlights of the Discussion

- Digital technologies can be instrumental in accelerating progress towards the SDGs and reducing inequalities. The world needs the SDGs, and the SDGs need new technologies.
- New technologies, such as artificial intelligence, cloud storage and computing, the Internet of Things, 5G telecommunications, and others, have captured the world’s imagination. They can hold the answers to cure cancer, feed the hungry, combat climate change, bring about universal education, and address other difficult challenges. It is not a matter of if, but of how. Yet, with new technologies come new issues and challenges.
- Artificial intelligence (AI) is at the center of the debate over the role of new technologies. AI has the potential to transform many areas and impact every SDG, yet its use poses new technical, ethical, and socioeconomic challenges.
- Automation and more capable robots lead to new economic opportunities, but also impact existing jobs and wages. New technologies also raise issues of privacy, security, and the meaning and promotion of human rights in the digital world.
- Technology is also opening another digital divide within and between countries that can undermine the principle of leaving no one behind. Technologies are not risk free, and a rapid wave of change may deepen existing divides. This will have profound implications for inequality unless the needs of all countries and all segments of their population are addressed by technologies.
- Data is an increasingly important factor in production and competitive edge. The ability of firms to capture, generate, and analyse vast quantities of data about individuals and their activities requires a commensurate set of guidelines that govern how data is gathered and used.
- New technologies are becoming ubiquitous and affordable, which is promising for the future of the SDGs.

- Technologies are embedded with the values of the humans that created them. It is important that technology be developed with inclusivity in mind, incorporating the perspectives of users, stakeholders, and communities so as to consider the context and the status quo that will be impacted.
- Despite these risks, the potential good brought by new technologies is so great that humanity cannot afford to not use them. It is important that institutions and policies create the incentives for technologies to be pursued within common values and standards.
- Solving these challenges presents a real opportunity for global cooperation in a way that ensures inclusion, human rights, data rights, ethical standards and safety, and general alignment with development objectives. Some of the key questions that should be discussed and clearly defined include:
 - Governance: Who sets the rules and how should they respond to new challenges?
 - Privacy and identity: Who owns data? Who ensures its safe and correct usage? How to deal with the increasing risk of exploitation of personal data?
 - Transparency in algorithms and AI: How are algorithms used in sensitive issues (for example, policing and sentencing, or job selection). When should we be informed of the use of algorithms? How can we understand the decisions taken by algorithms? What are the data sources used?
 - Access and control: How do we ensure that new technologies are accessible and understood by everyone? How do we define the control and ownership of personal data and its associated "identity"?
 - Safety and security: How to create the rules to strengthen cybersecurity, the use of biotechnology and autonomous systems?
- As the example of Ghana illustrates, technology drives the implementation of policies, plans, and programmes in many countries. To support this, investment in research and development is important to motivate and direct resources towards solutions to issues of national concern and to contribute to global efforts.
- Developing technologies and innovation systems require building close and intense partnerships with research institutions, academia and private organizations. This is, in turn, a catalyst for sustainable job creation and growth.
- A useful starting point for many governments is a review of policies to address the gaps between policy formulation and implementation. This process can be supported by platforms in government agencies that foster innovation.
- The United Nations has a unique role to play in ensuring that institutions can be made fit for purpose when adopting new technologies so as to make their use effective, inclusive and responsible. It can serve as the forum for discussion and research into the role of new technologies in development. The UN is the appropriate forum for the global community to define how it should work together, plan and act together with common sense of purpose.

- The United Nations is a place where it is possible for all to think across stakeholder boundaries, to include the necessary broad range of perspectives and to reach common understanding. The UN system allows to mobilize the deep knowledge and commitment of participants to tackle the questions raised by new technologies.
- International cooperation to ensure the benefits of technology are shared by all is essential for realizing the 2030 Agenda. Cooperation involves norm-setting and defining ethical boundaries. Collective action needs to be taken now to ensure that results can be achieved by 2030.