<u>Remarks for H.E. Mr. Collen Vixen Kelapile</u>
<u>President of the Economic and Social Council</u>

<u>On the Occasion of the</u>
<u>Side Event: @From Commitment to Action – Presenting AI</u>
<u>Solutions for the SDGs</u>

<u>18 February 2022</u>

1. I thank my dear colleague the Permanent Representative of Slovenia, Boštjan Malovrh, and the Permanent Mission together with the International Research Centre on Artificial Intelligence under the auspices of UNESCO for inviting me to participate at this important event -- which expands our conversation on how we can meet demands and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

2. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has reversed progress on many Sustainable Development Goals. As a result, there are genuine concerns about a lost development decade in some countries.

3. But despite the setbacks, recent meetings of ECOSOC and the General Assembly have shown that Member States and other stakeholders agree that the 2030 Agenda remains the framework for recovering from the pandemic. Our response and recovery should help us move back onto a trajectory to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

4. This therefore calls for transformative efforts and policies. It also calls for mobilizing all available resources and innovations such as Artificial intelligence and machine learning, as well as realizing their promise for building a more sustainable future.

5. According to a recent study, AI could help us achieve 79 % of the SDGs[1], therefore emphasizing the need to embrace it to fast track the realization of the Goals.

6. AI can play a big role to support effective policy and decision-making in a world of complexities. As we might all be aware, achieving sustainable development requires constant balancing of numerous interlinkages and trade-offs that we must tackle simultaneously. This is because the challenges and answers differ greatly based on the development context. Strides in scientific knowledge and technology have greatly improved our understanding of the challenges we face and provided solutions. But we have often struggled to implement holistic systems thinking. Artificial intelligence can be one of the tools we need, leveraging vast data sets and modeling to ensure that we find context-specific solutions that integrate economic, social and environmental aims and allow us to realize the SDGs.

7. Furthermore, AI solutions are already bringing concrete improvements in many areas addressed by the SDGs. For example, AI shows significant promise in addressing some of the trade-offs in food systems. It can improve efficiencies in production, reduce waste and freshwater use, replenish soils and allow for offering of advice to small farmers at a scale that would be impossible through traditional outreach systems.

8. AI robotics is also enabling more efficient production, with technologies like crop harvesting robots and AI-enhanced drones. Those can, for example, precisely and safely inspect crops to identify harmful infections and pests.

9. For sustainable urban development, traffic cameras and AI algorithms enable real-time intelligent traffic signal controls, making traffic flow smoother, reducing travel times and congestion and environmental impacts of transport in many advanced cities around the world.

10. Water utilities and government bodies can use AI to build smart water systems. These include efficient infrastructure for water management that

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[1] https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-019-14108-y

can adapt to changing conditions for ensuring efficient use of water, resilience to weather events, timely repairs of leaks and reduced pollution and runoff. In this way, AI models can bring holistic solutions to problems that have previously been tackled manually.

Excellencies and Distinguished Colleagues,

11. The COVID 19 pandemic has not only highlighted the importance of technology, but also exposed the high level of digital divide. Therefore, for the promises of AI to be realized, we need to ensure that the solutions are available and can be implemented around the world, including in developing countries.

12. AI innovations and deployment often require reliable data sources, infrastructure and vibrant innovation ecosystems, which may not always exist in the poorest countries. We need to ensure that countries around the world have the support they need in order to truly reap the benefits of these leaps in human ingenuity.

13. While we embrace the use of AI to stir attainment of SDGs, we need to be cautious that we do not as a result have negative impact on the attainment of some SDGs. The fast development of AI needs to be supported by the necessary regulatory insight and oversight for AI-based technologies. We must ensure that our solutions pass all the safeguards for transparency, privacy and safety. We must remember that algorithms are not automatically unbiased and that some algorithms run the risk of replicating and even amplifying human biases, if left unchecked. One way of remedying this is to ensure that we have a more diverse AI-workforce that pays special attention to questions of inclusion and bias.

14. As a result, the Secretary-General's roadmap on digital cooperation can help to effectively mobilize international cooperation for AI and spur efforts by all actors for advancing a safer, more equitable digital world, and a brighter and more prosperous future for all.

15. ECOSOC and the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development, as well, have an important role to play in mobilizing AI for realizing the SDGs while addressing potential negative impacts.

16. ECOSOC Multi-Stakeholder Science, Technology and Innovation Forum (STI Forum) is the space to share knowledge and showcase the many innovations that have the potential to be scaled up and shared across regions, notably applications of AI for SDG implementation.

17. The next session of the Forum, which will take place on 5 and 6 May will create a platform to further deliberate on these matters. It will also allow governments and all stakeholders to reflect on their critical role in guiding and regulating cutting-edge technologies.

18. Previous Forums have also highlighted the critical role of technologies, including AI, in accelerating progress on health and essential dimensions of human wellbeing and called for ensuring equal access and support to developing countries in using AI for sustainable development.

19. Through the Technology Facilitation Mechanism launched together with the 2030 Agenda, support is provided through pilot capacity-building initiatives and facilitation of the adaptation and adoption of SDG knowledge and sustainable technologies, especially in Least Developed Countries.

20. As President of ECOSOC, I am committed to ensuring that the 2022 STI Forum delivers new advances and renewed cooperation in mobilizing AI for the realization of the SDGs while addressing risks.

21. I encourage UNESCO, the International Research Centre on Artificial Intelligence, the Tech Envoy and the United Nations at large to continue their collective efforts to support the international community in ensuring that AI delivers for the SDGs.

Thank you

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