

ECOSOC Bureau Meeting

1 February 2021

10AM (New York)

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Statement by Mr. Peter Major

Chair of the CSTD

Your Excellency, Ambassador Akram, President of ECOSOC,

Distinguished colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

As chairperson of the twenty-fourth session of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD), I am pleased to highlight the important contribution of our commission in the broader process of ECOSOC and HLPF.

The critical role of science, technology, and innovation (STI) in making progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is universally acknowledged. This recognition has been vividly brought to light in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where STI solutions have been deployed to fortify the resilience of communities worldwide. From the use of digital technologies such as artificial intelligence for contact tracing, telemedicine, and disease monitoring, to the application of genome sequencing for the development of vaccines, STI is our strongest deterrent against the virus' onslaught.

The outlook is now more promising in keeping the pandemic at bay, thanks to the diligent work of scientists, governments, private enterprises, academic and research institutions, and civil society organizations collaborating across different countries and regions. One of the key messages that the CSTD has been consistently advocating is that a systemic approach to STI policy, supported by a whole-of-government effort, is needed for successful development outcomes, not only during the pandemic but also in its aftermath.

For its twenty-fourth session on 17-21 May, the CSTD is addressing two themes that directly relate to the themes of ECOSOC and HLPF:

Theme 1: Using science, technology, and innovation to close the gap on SDG 3, on good health and well-being; and

Theme 2: Harnessing blockchain for sustainable development: prospects and challenges.

In addition, the commission also reviews the progress made in the implementation of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) outcomes.

These themes directly address fundamental challenges posed by the way digitalization is changing our societies and the continuous shocks we have been subject to, including the current health crisis, natural disasters and the effects of human induced climate change.

Data and digital technologies for health are transforming how health services are delivered and how health systems are managed. However, solid digital infrastructure and bridging the digital divide are pre-requisites for broad roll-out of digital health. And digital health faces unique challenges. Telemedicine, for instance, requires appropriate regulatory frameworks for authorization, integration,

and reimbursement. Many countries still need to develop and implement such frameworks.

A critical consideration is the need to temper the unintended consequences of digitalization and its implications for the resilience of social, cultural, and political institutions. For example, “infodemics” – the overabundance of inaccurate health information online – can make it difficult to access trustworthy and reliable guidance on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Turning to the blockchain theme, several challenges need to be overcome to ensure that these technologies contribute to sustainable development. One hope was that cryptocurrencies could increase financial inclusion. Currently, however, ownership of cryptocurrencies is highly concentrated; 95% of bitcoins are held by only 3% of all bitcoin addresses. Another concern is the high energy consumption of blockchain technology. Other challenges of blockchain include the appeal of cryptocurrency for criminal activities, privacy concerns and the development of adequate regulatory frameworks.

Pursuant to the provisions of General Assembly resolution 72/305 a high-level round table on the role of STI for a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will be held during the annual session of the CSTD in May. The session will identify ways to prioritize STI as part of national development strategies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the decade of action for delivery of sustainable development. It will also provide an opportunity for high-level policymakers to exchange experiences, lessons learned and best practices in applying STI in the achievement of the SDGs to be reviewed under this year’s theme of ECOSOC and HLPF.

Mr. President,

The CSTD offers member States a platform to explore ways of strengthening the science-policy interface at the national and global levels and better coordinate STI-focused international cooperation, including digital cooperation, in the spirit of multilateralism. It also playing a bridge building role to get countries to support each other in building national STI capacity. Apart from the long-standing technical assistance to member States to conduct STIP reviews, several capacity building activities have been launched recently under the auspices of the CSTD, covering issues such as earth observation technology for food security, research and training opportunities for young female scientists from developing countries and training on industrial and technological innovation practices.

It is our hope that the COVID pandemic will prompt the international community into action for scaling science and technology solutions in a way that will bring benefits to all people. We need member States to unite in solidarity to build an inclusive path for the achievements of the 2030 Agenda, and ensure that everyone, especially the poorest, can benefit from the ingenuity of science.

Thank you.