

UN chief pushes for greater benefits from new technology, as he launches digital experts panel

A high-profile group of tech experts has been assembled at the request of United Nations Secretary-General [António Guterres](#), tasked with putting the benefits of digital technology to more effective use, while also protecting against unwanted or unexpected negative impacts.

“This is the first such panel of its kind – and will be comprised of women and men at the frontiers of technology, public policy, science, and academia,” Mr. Guterres told reporters at UN Headquarters in New York.

The Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, which is to be co-chaired by US philanthropist Melinda Gates and China-based Alibaba founder Jack Ma, will have 20 members in total and include leaders from industry, civil society and academia, said the UN chief, announcing the panel on Thursday.

Mr. Guterres noted that digital technology is changing economies and societies “at warp speed” and the scale and pace of change is “unprecedented.”

“But the current means and levels of international cooperation are unequal to the challenge,” he said. “I see the United Nations as a unique platform for dialogue in our digital age.”

The Panel will map trends in digital technologies, identify gaps and opportunities, and outline proposals for strengthening international cooperation.

The initiative comes after approximately a year of consultations involving his team and more than 120 Member States, industry and civil society.

Representing the body on behalf of the UN Secretariat, Executive Director and co-chair, Ambassador Amandeep Gill, said that the UN chief wanted to avoid the “competitive” approach to digital issues that currently impacts on discussions around trade, data and security.

“That competitive spirit, that mindset, could pervade this domain and does impede the potential of digital technology to contribute to the achievement of the goals of the Agenda 2030 on sustainable development,” the Ambassador said.

Amid the increasing influence of digital technologies in everyday life, from cyber-attacks to fears of election-tampering, Ambassador Gill highlighted the “urgent” need to address the potential effects – positive and negative – on people’s social, economic and human rights.

“You see a certain proliferation of initiatives,” he said. “I think that shows you that the timing is right, that there is a feeling that this should be addressed urgently. And it’s not just Member States who are saying this,” he added, saying that leaders in the industrial sector had told him that “it’s time that someone at this level takes this initiative, to begin a global policy discussion on the increasingly digital world that we are living in.”

Acknowledging the panel’s “modest” budget and administrative support, Ambassador Gill – who also chairs an expert group at the UN examining emerging technologies in the area of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems ([LAWS](#)) – said that its impact would be maximised by its cross-cutting approach.

“You cannot look at ‘web 3.0’ without looking at blockchain or without looking at AI (Artificial Intelligence),” he said. “So, our hope is that through this discussion of these various digital domains, the business models, the opportunities and the risks and the unintended consequences in terms of human rights, in terms of privacy, in terms of subversion of democracy, we are able to come out with some common principles...of strengthening cooperation across borders.”

In line with the panel’s nine-month mandate, its members will meet twice; first in New York in September during the [UN General Assembly](#), and then in Switzerland next January. There will also be opportunities to consult with civil society.

Geneva would be a suitable venue for the 2019 event, Ambassador Gill said, underlining the opportunity there of consulting with several UN agencies already based in the Swiss city that had specialist knowledge of digital issues, including the International Telecommunications Union ([ITU](#)).

The Ambassador said the panel would involve “deep and substantive” work that will result in a report that serves as “a reference for future digital discussions”.

[UN forum spotlights cities, where struggle for sustainability ‘will be won or lost’](#)

Although cities are often characterized by stark socioeconomic inequalities and poor environmental conditions, they also offer growth and development potential – making them central to the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development and a main focus of the third day of the United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Wednesday.

Through the inherently integrated nature of urban development, the [11th](#) Sustainable Development Goal ([SDG](#)) impacts a wide range of 2030 Agenda issues from sustainable consumption and production to affordable and clean energy along with health, sustainable transportation, clean water and sanitation. Basically, life on land.

According to the UN, cities are where the struggle for global sustainability “will either be won or lost.”

“Urbanization is one of the most [important issues](#) when it comes to sustainable development,” Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director of UN-Habitat, told journalists on Wednesday.

“We must make sure we do it right if we are to achieve the SDGs and move towards a world where we see an end to poverty, the protection of our planet and everyone enjoying peace and prosperity,” she added.

While SDG 11 pledges to make cities and human settlements safe, inclusive, resilient and sustainable by 2030, local and national authorities are making uneven progress towards achieving that goal, according to the UN.

A new [report](#) by UN-Habitat and partners tracking SDG progress since their 2015 adoption coincides with the first review of SDG 11 at the HLPF.

At the current rate of expansion, over 700 cities will have populations of more than one million by 2030.

Cities are the spaces where all SDGs can be integrated to provide holistic solutions to the challenges of poverty, exclusion, climate change and risks – *UN-Habitat Executive Director*

While cities can be powerhouses of economic growth and development, without proper planning and regulation, they could, among other things, suffer soaring levels of poverty, crime and pollution, says UN-Habitat.

“Cities are the spaces where all SDGs can be integrated to provide holistic solutions to the challenges of poverty, exclusion, climate change and risks,” affirmed Ms. Sharif.

Leilani Farha, UN Special Rapporteur on [adequate housing](#), told the HLPF that although there are no global homeless statistics, “housing conditions are fraught.”

She underscored that some 6 billion people are inadequately housed worldwide and that close to 900 million people are living in informal settlements and encampments in both the global North and South.

“If we do not find housing solutions, no State will be able to meet their Agenda 2030 commitments because without access to adequate, secure and affordable housing there is no equality, there is no end to poverty, to health and well-being, to sustained access to education, to employment,” she

added.

Historic Step

Meanwhile in the afternoon, New York City took the distinction of becoming the first city in the world to report directly to the international community on its efforts to reach global benchmarks in addressing poverty, inequality and climate change by 2030.

Among other accomplishments, its Voluntary Local Review (VLR) showcased significant achievements in cleaner air and water, record job and wage growth, and tripling the number of children in free pre-Kindergarten.

“We encourage cities and communities to join the urgent discussion about what is working on the local level, and how we can address the shared challenges that remain on the way to reaching the Global Goals,” said Penny Abeywardena, NY Commissioner for International Affairs.

Moreover, Mayor Bill de Blasio declared Wednesday, 11 July 2018, as Global Goals Day in New York City, to welcome HLPF participants and express local solidarity with efforts worldwide to achieve the goals.

Applauding the Mayor’s leadership and New York on the SDGs, [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) noted that the UN recently launched the Local2030 platform for cities and local governments to pursue new pathways for low-emission growth and climate action, poverty alleviation and inclusion of the most vulnerable residents.

“This Voluntary Local Review is a first step towards such progress and I urge other cities and local governments to follow suit,” he said.

[Nicaragua: Guterres deplores loss of life, attacks against Catholic Church](#)

Deeply concerned about the continuing and intensifying violence in Nicaragua, United Nations [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) on Wednesday deplored the loss of life in the protests and the attack against Catholic Church mediators in the National Dialogue.

“The Secretary-General recognizes the important mediation role of the Nicaraguan Catholic Bishops Conference, “said a [statement](#) issued by his Spokesperson.

Media reports from the region suggest that Nicaraguan bishops and clergy were attacked by armed groups on 9 July as protest in the Central American country continued.

The Secretary-General urged all parties to respect the role of the mediators, to refrain from the use of violence, and to fully commit to participating in the National Dialogue in order to de-escalate violence and find a peaceful solution to the current crisis.

In early July, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [called on](#) the Nicaraguan authorities to "take real steps" to prevent further loss of life in the country.

[Visiting North Korea, UN relief chief spotlights funding shortfall to meet humanitarian needs](#)

The United Nations is seeking to raise \$111 million to meet humanitarian needs in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), where millions of people face malnutrition, a shortage of medicines, and lack of access to safe drinking water, the Organization's top relief official said on Wednesday.

"There is a humanitarian need, we can meet it and we can tell people a convincing and persuasive story about how their money is used if they provide us with more funds," said Mark Lowcock, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, at a press conference held in the country's capital, Pyongyang.

During the visit, he was able to see first-hand both progress that has been made on the humanitarian front and the persisting challenges.

"There are though large numbers of people who still need assistance; there is a significant problem of malnutrition with something like 20 per cent of children stunted because of malnutrition which impairs their life chances," he said.

Mr. Lowcock also said that about half of all children in rural areas of the country are not drinking safe water. "Too much of the water is contaminated, which is a cause of disease and threatens the development of too many children," he said.

He also noted that there is a shortage of drugs and medical supplies and equipment, making it very difficult for medical authorities to meet the needs of all the people "in a way that would pass basic humanitarian thresholds."

He said that North Korean authorities are "keen to work with humanitarian agencies and are open to additional humanitarian assistance, and are also keen to deal with humanitarian issues separately from political dynamics."

According to the Needs and Priorities Plan published by the UN a few months ago, \$111 million is needed to meet humanitarian needs in the areas of health, water and sanitation, and food security for about 6 million people.

“One of things I will be doing when I return to New York in talking to the Member States of the UN is trying to draw people’s attention to the very real humanitarian challenges here, and to say to them that the UN has good programmes, which can save lives, and we have better access across the country for UN staff than we have had in the past,” he said.

[Rohingya cannot become ‘forgotten victims,’ says UN chief urging world to step up support](#)

Painting a grim picture of villages being burned to the ground and other “bone-chilling” accounts he heard from Rohingya refugees who fled violence in Myanmar, the UN chief has called on the world to answer their calls for help with real action.

“Small children butchered in front of their parents. Girls and women gang-raped while family members were tortured and killed,” United Nations [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) said Tuesday in a *Washington Post* opinion piece, adding: “Nothing could have prepared me for the bone-chilling accounts.”

The continuing plight of nearly one million Rohingya refugees driven from their homes in Myanmar was the focus of Mr. Guterres’ trip along with Jim Yong Kim, the President of the World Bank Group, [during a visit last week](#) to Bangladesh – the country where they have found safe-haven.

Since late August 2017, widespread and systematic violence against Myanmar’s mainly-Muslim minority Rohingya, has forced hundreds of thousands to flee their homes in Rakhine state for Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar area, just across the border.

Prior to that, well over 200,000 Rohingya refugees were sheltering in vast, makeshift camps in Bangladesh as a result of earlier displacements.

In his *Washington Post* opinion piece, the UN chief recalled one Muslim man he met who broke down in tears, describing how his eldest son was shot dead in front of him.

The man’s mother was brutally murdered and his house was torched to ashes. He then took refuge in a mosque but was discovered by soldiers who abused him

and burned the Koran.

“These victims of what has been rightly called ethnic cleansing are suffering an anguish that can only stir a visitor’s heartbreak and anger,” continued Mr. Guterres.

“Their horrific experiences defy comprehension, yet they are the reality for nearly one million [Rohingya refugees](#).”

The Rohingya have suffered a pattern of persecution – lacking even the most basic human rights, starting with citizenship – in their native Myanmar.

The Secretary-General explained that systematic human rights abuses by Myanmar’s security forces over the past year were “designed to instill terror in the Rohingya population, leaving them with a dreadful choice: stay on in fear of death or leave everything simply to survive.”

While [Bangladesh](#)’s resources are stretched to the limits, wealthier countries are closing their doors to outsiders.

“The Government and people of Bangladesh have opened their borders and hearts to the Rohingya,” Mr. Guterres said, adding that such compassion and generosity “show the best of humanity and has saved many thousands of lives.”



UNHCR/Caroline Gluck

A Rohingya boy walks up steps in a rain-damaged section of the Chakmarkul refugee settlement.

A global response needed

A [Global Compact on Refugees](#) is being finalized by UN Member States, seeking to ensure that, among other things, front-line countries, like Bangladesh, are not alone in responding fleeing waves of humanity.

Meanwhile, the UN and humanitarian agencies are working flat-out alongside the refugees themselves and host communities to improve conditions.

“But far more resources are desperately needed to avert disaster and to give fuller expression to the principle that a refugee crisis calls for a global sharing of responsibility,” stressed the UN chief, pointing that only 26 per cent of an \$1 billion international [humanitarian appeal](#) has been funded.

This shortfall means that malnutrition prevails in the camp, access to water and sanitation is iffy, refugee children are missing basic education and inadequate measures are left to alleviate the [monsoon risk](#).

“Makeshift homes hastily built by the refugees on arrival are now threatened by mudslides, requiring urgent action to find alternative sites and build stronger shelters,” he detailed.

Mr. Guterres spoke of his visit to Bangladesh, saying “the Rohingya people need genuine assistance.”

The crisis will not be solved overnight, yet the situation cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely.

Unless the root causes of the violence in Rakhine state are addressed comprehensively, hatred will continue to fuel conflict.

“The Rohingya people cannot become forgotten victims. We must answer their clear appeals for help with action,” concluded the UN chief.