

UN chief urges top digital tech panel to come up with 'bold, innovative ideas' for an 'inclusive' future

In his appeal to a UN panel led by philanthropist Melinda Gates and Alibaba founder Jack Ma, [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) called on its members to reflect on the risks and benefits of our digital age – the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution.

“We need new thinking and innovative ideas to harness the benefits and manage the risks of this digital age,” he said via video-link, while urging the [High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation](#) to reflect on how technology could accelerate the [2030 Agenda on sustainable development](#).

High-level panel a relative 'rarity'

Created at the express wish of the UN chief in 2018, the high-level panel is a relative rarity – only 20 or so have been convened in the organization's more than 70-year history.

The panel's diverse membership – which includes US internet pioneer Vint Cerf, and South Korea-based digital marketing mastermind Sophie Eom – fulfils the UN chief's wish to include input from industry and the private sector, as well as governments, academia, civil society and inter-governmental organizations.

The discussions will result in a final report, to be published in the summer.

“This is truly an exciting and critical moment,” Mr Cerf said. “We just marked the 70th anniversary of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), and 50 per cent of the world is now online. Today, we are challenged to induce responsible behaviour in the digital age.”

Another original feature of the panel's work is its mission to be inter-disciplinary and hear “from all four corners” of the globe, to better understand the priorities and ideas of UN Member States, private sector companies, civil society organisations, academia and tech communities, said spokesperson Anoush Tatevosian.

“It's not just about artificial intelligence, data privacy or internet governance, it's about the intersection of these things,” she explained. “The problem today is that these issues are often discussed in their separate corners.”

Online call for contributions reveals demand for inclusivity

The Panel's online [call](#) for contributions, which is open until 31 January 2019, has already yielded close to 100 written submissions from 33 countries.

Of the ideas analysed so far, most highlighted “inclusivity” as the most important value for the digital age, Ms Tatevosian said.

Since July 2018, Panel members have met more than 2,000 individuals and convened seven virtual discussion groups on topics such as inclusive development, data, human rights and human agency, along with digital trust and security.

In addition to visiting US Silicon Valley and technology hubs in China, Israel and India, members have also met policymakers in Paris, Beijing, Brussels, Berlin, Washington, Delhi and Astana and participated in digital policy events including the Web Summit, the Raisina Dialogue in India, and Africa e-Commerce Week.

Digital age challenges ‘among key issues of our time’

Also meeting in Geneva, the [Global Commission on the Stability of Cyberspace](#) heard that the global debate around international security and information and communications technology (ICT) had evolved into a wider discussion about development and human rights, after a first General Assembly resolution in 1998.

Renata Dwan, Director of UNIDIR, the UN Institute for Disarmament Research, hosted the discussions, and said that after being on the agenda for several decades, “what we’ve seen is really the discussion around what cyber-stability means and for whom it means something, really expand”.

“We’ve seen the debate that started about State behaviour and responsible State behaviour has really become a much wider discussion about the role of the private sector, the role of communities, of regions, of cities, and indeed of individuals – and how to develop space for rights, for equity, for development and for access that enhances development of all”, she added.

We’re at the point of asking ourselves, ‘will emerging technologies contribute to peace overall or will they undermine it?’ – UN’s
Fabrizio Hochschild

Participating at both the cybersecurity event and the high-level panel, Fabrizio [Hochschild](#), UN Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Coordination, explained that initial hopes for digital technology had given way to a more cautious assessment.

“After years of unbridled optimism – justified optimism – surrounding the development of digital technologies of cyberspace, we now have come to the sober realization that those positive developments carry downsides,” Mr. Hochschild explained.

He added: “We’re at the point of asking ourselves, ‘will emerging technologies contribute to peace overall or will they undermine it? Will they generally further access to sustainable development or will they further inequality? Will they facilitate respect for human rights or will they

provide new tools to those who wish to contain or violate the realization of human rights?’”

Such questions reflect the Secretary General’s belief that the challenges posed by the digital age are one of the key issues of our time – “next to climate change, next to dealing with inequality,” Mr. Hochschild said, before noting the “absence” of international mechanisms that could prevent digital flashpoints from escalating.

“Some 30 States have the capacity to defend themselves and those capacities are daily being built up”, he explained. “But where does that leave the other 163 countries that don’t have such a capacity, or the financial means, or political means to defend themselves?”

Suggesting that the digital sphere “amplifies existing inequalities”, the UN official noted that among the most pressing challenges are tackling the lack of internet access in the world’s poorest nations – where fewer than one in five people has regular electricity – and addressing a large and growing digital gender gap.

“In 2019 it is shocking that the number of women who access the internet is 10 per cent lower than men,” Mr. Hochschild said. “In developed countries it’s 33 per cent lower, and the worst thing is, those statistics are getting worse, not better.”

[Crucial medical supplies airlifted to north-east Syria to meet ‘desperate need’](#)

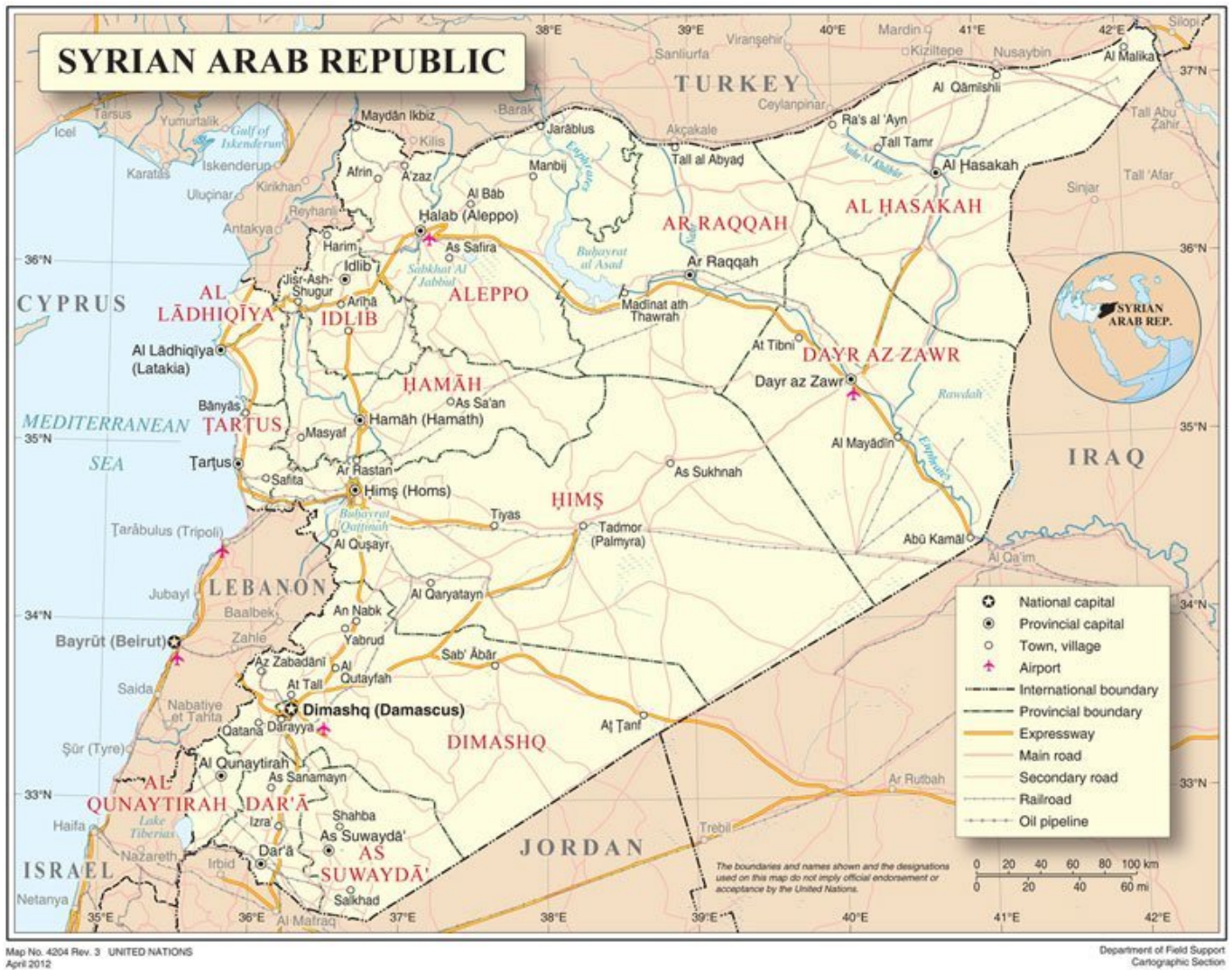
To bolster childhood vaccination efforts, the airlift contained 140,000 vaccines against polio, tuberculosis, tetanus, hepatitis, and MMR vaccines for treating measles, mumps, and rubella.

“In addition to strengthening hospitals and health care centres, we are focusing on supporting the vaccination of children in north-east Syria, where vaccination coverage rates remain critically low”, Ms. Hoff explained.

The medical aid will be distributed to hospitals and primary health care centers in the three north-eastern governorates of Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor.

“The health system in all three governorates has been badly disrupted, and the situation is compounded by the high numbers of internally displaced people living in dire conditions in camps and settlements”, she underscored.

The first shipment, on 8 January, contained 20 tonnes of essential medical provisions.



UN Department of Field Support/Cartographic Section

United Nations map of Syria, 2012. Click [here](#) to enlarge.

[Nigeria: Armed conflict continues to uproot thousands, driving up humanitarian need](#)

Since November, more than 80,000 Nigerians have been forcibly displaced due to ongoing violence in the north-east, adding to two million people already displaced by violence, or forced across the country's borders as refugees, the UN humanitarian coordination office ([OCHA](#)) said on Tuesday.

In 2018, relief organisations had estimated that 7.7 million required urgent life-saving assistance but a recent upsurge in clashes between non-state armed groups and the Nigerian military is forcing UN agencies and their partners to reassess the needs on the ground. A 90-day plan is in the works to ratchet up the response – especially across the worst-affected state of Borno – to meet the immediate needs of an estimated 312,000 men, women and children.

The UN and its humanitarian partners also expressed concern about the potential implications of increased violence and insecurity surrounding the upcoming presidential elections, scheduled to take place on 16 February, which could lead to potential new displacements and hamper humanitarian operations in some locations.

Since 2009, the north-east of the country has been in the grip of a civil conflict triggered by armed opposition groups. The conflict has now spilled over borders across the whole Lake Chad region, resulting in widespread displacement, violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, and protection risks for increasing numbers of civilians – all adding up to one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

In addition to the 1.8 million displaced within Nigeria as a result of the conflict, the violence has led many families to flee over the border into neighbouring Chad, Cameroon and Niger. To date, about 200,000 people are estimated to be Nigerian refugees or asylum seekers, living in those countries.

The UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), sounded the alarm on Tuesday over a recent new influx of Nigerian asylum seekers and refugees in Chad. Since 26 December, when the town of Baga on the Nigerian side of the Lake Chad, was attacked by a non-state armed group, around 6,000 have been forced on the run. Many of them paddled for three hours across the water to arrive in the lakeside Chadian village of Ngouboua, some 20 kilometres from the Nigerian border.

UNHCR and the Chadian authorities are carrying out registration and pre-screening of new arrivals to evaluate their needs. An overwhelming majority of the new arrivals are women and children and, according to initial information, about 55 per cent of them are minors.

The UN is urging all parties to the conflict to protect civilians as well as civilian construction and infrastructure, and to uphold international human rights and humanitarian law.

[**New UN bullying report calls for**](#)

'safe, inclusive' schools for all children

UNESCO's report, [Behind the numbers: ending school violence and bullying](#), released on Tuesday at the 2019 Education World Forum in London, reveals that nearly one-in-three boys and girls have been bullied at least once at school over the last month, and a similar proportion have been affected by physical violence.

Overall, says the report, physical bullying is the biggest problem in most regions, but in North America and Europe, psychological bullying is the most common, followed by sexually-related bullying.

Online and smartphone bullying on the rise

Physical bullying is more common among boys, while psychological bullying is more prevalent among girls. Meanwhile, online and mobile phone bullying is on the rise. Children perceived as different in any way from the norm, are the most likely to be bullied, with physical appearance being the most common cause followed by race, nationality or skin colour.

Bullying must be addressed because it significantly effects children's mental health, quality of life and academic achievement, the report states.

Frequently bullied children are nearly three times more likely to feel shunned and more than twice as likely to miss school. Their educational-outcomes decline, and they are more likely to leave after finishing secondary school.

Not all bad, some progress made

Despite the gravity of the problem, some countries have made significant progress towards reducing, or containing, school violence and bullying.

"We are greatly encouraged that nearly half of countries with available data have decreased rates of school violence and bullying" said Stefania Giannini, UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Education. "This proves that through a combination of strong political leadership and other factors such as training, collaboration, reporting and monitoring, we can alleviate the climate of fear created by school bullying and violence."

UNESCO-recommended measures to lower school violence and reduce bullying:

- A commitment to a safe, positive school and classroom environment.

- Effective reporting and monitoring systems.
- Evidence-based programmes and interventions.
- Teacher training and support.
- Support and referral for affected students.
- Student empowerment and participation.
- Better political leadership.
- Robust legal and policy frameworks.

The UNESCO report is one of the UN educational agency's contributions to the 'Safe to Learn' campaign, an initiative focused on ending violence in schools, so children can learn, thrive and pursue their dreams.

It brings together data from a range of global and regional surveys, covering 144 countries and territories in all regions, yielding the most up-to-date and comprehensive evidence on school violence and bullying.

"All children and young people have the right to safe, inclusive and effective learning environments", concluded Ms. Giannini.

[Hopes for Palestinian State hit by 'facts on the ground' : senior UN official](#)

The possibility of establishing a "viable, contiguous Palestinian state" has been "systematically eroded by facts on the ground," Nickolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, briefed the Security Council on Tuesday, ahead of the quarterly open debate on the Middle East (Israel/Palestine).

Mr. Mladenov began his downbeat assessment by detailing the extent and growth of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank: the UN's long-standing position on settlements, he reminded the Council, is that they are illegal

under international law and “an obstacle to peace.” Recent examples include plans for over 3,000 housing units in West Bank settlements, and government plans to legalize several illegal outposts. At the same time, said Mr. Mladenov, Palestinian-owned structures have been demolished and seized across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, with authorities citing a lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain, as justification.

The foundations of a future Palestinian state are also being threatened by internal divisions, exacerbated by decades of occupation, and hopes for genuine intra-Palestinian, he added, are “fading by the day,” as the gap between Gaza and the West Bank widens. The early January arrest by Hamas of dozens of Fatah members in Gaza, was described by Mr. Mladenov as “particularly alarming,” and a “very serious blow to the reconciliation process.”

It is ordinary Palestinians, said the Special Envoy, who are bearing the brunt of the suffering, and the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains “desperate” : economic growth is insufficient to keep the Palestinian economy afloat, and the UN is working with the Palestinian Authority to address some of Gaza’s most pressing needs, such as maintaining an electricity supply, delivering essential medicines and implementing cash-for-work programmes.

The Special Envoy’s briefing was delivered on the same day that senior UN officials and NGO partners called for a halt to plans to forcibly evict several Palestinian refugee families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem, part of the occupied Palestinian territory. In a statement, the officials said that forcible transfer is a “grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention,” and called on the Israeli authorities to “cease settlement construction, and abide by their obligations as an occupying power under international humanitarian law and international human rights law.”

Mr. Mladenov wrapped up his briefing with a warning that the Palestinian Question risks descending into endless conflict and the steady rise of radicalization on all sides, and that, within the current political landscape, those seeking to bridge the gap between Israelis and Palestinians are being undermined.

You can find more information on the Middle East open debate [here](#).