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".