Social Forum

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"THE CONTRIBUTION OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION (STI) TO THE PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS, INCLUDING IN THE CONTEXT OF POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY."

DRAFT PROGRAMME OF WORK

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Contribution by Anita Gurumurthy, IT for Change

Excellencies and respected delegates,

At the throes of a new epoch that some commentators have called the age of the homotechnicus, we have with us marvelous tools to augment human intelligence. Yet, these tools have done little to grow the knowledge commons of humanity. If anything, the challenge of equity has never been so mind-boggling. Economic analyses point to a K-shaped recovery post the pandemic – reflecting the rapid growth of the digital sector – the rise and rise of Big Tech, and a deepening gulf between labor and capital share of income. Hunger and poverty remain painfully real, with the majority of those who are left behind, living in the Global South.

The digital revolution seems to be coterminous with a ruthless variety of inequality, and I would like to focus on this. As scholars point out, "A small group of people and machines learn, and the overwhelming majority of the world risks losing learning skills as intelligent chatbots spoon-feed us with (not necessarily reliable) answers.

Many artificial intelligence (AI) researchers highlight the difficulty in accessing the amounts of data required for AI models, limited data quality and storage capacity, lack of regulatory frameworks and policies, and funding challenges to develop local talent. Broadband connectivity is still a big issue despite the proliferation of mobile devices. In the name of 'data for development' we see an exodus of data from our farms, schools, hospitals, for so-called global AI models. The role of the state in enabling a people-centered, people-driven AI model for the Global South to build national capacity is completely undermined. With pressing concerns about digital infrastructure – not merely, connectivity, but beyond, in terms of cloud infrastructure and quantum computing – left totally unaddressed, Global South countries are forced into dependence on large corporations from two nations.

The de facto structures of digital innovation in this new bipolar order profiteer from and undermine human freedom and dignity and prevent the majority from participating meaningfully in scientific pursuit. The innovation paradigm of data and AI is thus built contra to the right to enjoy scientific progress. It is on autopilot towards a new form of colonization and exploitation.

A decisive shift is in order for a system-wide change: this is about recognizing that the human freedom to access digital and data technologies and the institutional design of the technological system to maintain its democratic architecture are two sides of the same coin.

How should we steer digital technologies in favor of equity, peace, and international solidarity? What would this entail? I have four submissions.

1. Decolonizing the data epoch means recognizing the material and epistemic infrastructures of data as integral to the idea of equality and non-discrimination. Diversity in datasets, removal of biases, and better representation – all of this is meaningless unless the production of knowledge through AI can be a distributed endeavor, with digital infrastructures controlled by local to global democratic institutions.

2. This brings us to the vital idea of public innovation ecosystems, which is my second submission – a new social contract to move the needle beyond corporate-controlled technologies and platforms is needed for people-led solutions. The language of alternatives cannot be reduced to some radical fringe that struggles to survive. It needs public finance and locally developed roadmaps for women scientists, youth innovators, and indigenous knowledge systems to find a central place in the AI universe.

3. My third submission is about the UN High Commissioner for Human Right's important observation that "to be effective, to be humane, – any regulation for AI – must be grounded in respect for human rights."

The risks in the form of lethal autonomous weapons are real. But AI is as quotidian as it is complex; its impacts are profoundly ordinary. The test for the human rights regime is hence about how limits can be set to guide the AI paradigm not only to deal with extreme risks, but to maximize the agency and autonomy of the most vulnerable and to respect people's relationship with their ecological systems.

4. This brings us to the fourth dimension – Today, human rights are being weaponized by the powerful for an expedient interpretation of ethics and rights. Privacy is sought to be secured not for expanding human freedoms or social choice, but to reduce so-called barriers for a predatory data market. Ethics dumping is commonplace in the AI economy, with the majority world vulnerable to data malpractices as powerful corporations navigate differences in legal regimes with alacrity.

Indeed, harmonized rules and standards are necessary in a fragmented world of data governance, but such harmonization is not about regimenting people or erasing pluralism. Equity in the data order implies an indivisibility of data rights – something that cannot be obtained without a broader agenda of structural justice that includes transformation of our trade, IP, taxation, and global corporate governance systems.

A right to development and cultural sovereignty perspective is urgently needed to do away with an unjust AI paradigm. Your excellencies, international solidarity at this conjuncture hinges on the idea of development as data freedom – to borrow from Prof. Amartya Sen's eloquent idea.

We may have the synthetic intelligence to augment human cognition, but we lack the force of public reason to claim the wizardry in data and AI for planetary flourishing. This is where we need to go.