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UN DESA

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# Leaving no village behind

Around the world, four out of every five people facing extreme poverty live in rural areas. In cities, 5.3 per cent of people suffer extreme poverty, while this share climbs to 18 per cent for rural residents. The upcoming World Social Report 2021 examines the urban-rural divide and offers solutions to ensure that no village is left behind.

The growing rural-urban disparity is evident when it comes to access to education, health and other public services. People living in rural areas are also more likely to face human rights abuses, gender inequality, poor working conditions and indigenous land rights violations. In some countries, these inequalities give rise to rural discontent, polarization and unrest.

The current patterns of rural development are proving inadequate to protect the health of the planet. Many rural areas are affected by severe depletion, degradation and pollution of water and land resources. The continued loss of forests and wilderness further aggravates changes to the climate and increases the frequency of zoonotic

diseases, such as COVID-19. Climate change in turn is having more adverse effects on agriculture and rural economies, thus creating a vicious cycle.

To achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the international community needs to urgently reconsider rural development.

The new *World Social Report 2021: Reconsidering Rural Development*, to be launched on 20 May 2021, presents findings on how rural development can serve as a powerful driving force to achieve sustainable development. It calls for moving rural development to the centre of attention; for ending the rural-urban divide and inequality within rural areas; and for achieving rural development while preserving the environment.

The latest report shows that new digital and frontier technologies are creating opportunities for achieving these goals. What is needed now is that we seize this chance to achieve the long-standing goal of eradicating the rural-urban disparity, leaving no village behind.

Visit this website to access the World Social Report 2021 on 20 May 2021.

EXPERT VOICES

## Science lessons from the pandemic

Following a year of omnipresent charts, life-saving innovations and the world's fastest developed vaccine, is the world finally ready to listen to science? We asked the co-chairs of the 2021 Science, Technology and Innovation Forum: Permanent Representative of Latvia to the UN, Andrejs Pildegovičs, and Chargé d'Affaires of the Indonesian Mission to the UN, Mohammad Koba.

**Science has been our strongest weapon against COVID-19. What have we learned from this pandemic?**

**Andrejs Pildegovičs**: "The pandemic has clearly demonstrated that people need to be equipped with skills that help them navigate today's complex information environment and make well-informed decisions.

Hopefully we have also learned that we must do better at not only listening, but also acting on science to avoid crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic in the first place. Science informs us of imminent threats and ways to prepare for them. Our policies and actions must heed it."

**Mohammad Koba**: "I agree. The pandemic has taught us that policies which are not aligned with our scientific knowledge will be, sooner or later, cruelly verified by reality. Synergy between public policy and science will not only help us overcome the pandemic, but also lead to a sustainable recovery.

But the pandemic has also revealed a significant gap between the developed and the developing countries in their abilities, capacities and human resources to use science for addressing the pandemic. We need to mobilize support and strengthen international

cooperation to help developing countries overcome this unprecedented crisis through science."

**How are science, technology, and innovation driving progress on sustainable development?**

**Mohammad Koba**: "The digital technology is reshaping the world as we know it, offering developing countries a chance to leapfrog past the unsustainable models of old and straight into the digital world. For example, new technologies have fundamentally changed the way micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) conduct their business and interact with customers. Through e-commerce, and the expansion of digital economy, MSMEs are now one of the main driving forces for economic growth and poverty reduction in developing countries."

**Andrejs Pildegovičs**: "Digital technologies are having the same effect on the public sector. Digitalization is improving the effectiveness, accountability and transparency of public institutions and promoting inclusivity and participation. For instance, in Latvia an NGO-run public participation platform ManaBalss.lv – or "My Voice" – allows citizens to submit and sign initiatives that can then be deliberated by the Latvian Parliament – an institution that is an example of innovation itself. The Saeima, as parliament is called in Latvia, was one of the first legislatures in the world to introduce a fully remote system of operation, including e-voting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the potential of digitalization can only be truly unleashed if digital gaps in terms of connectivity and skills are properly addressed. These issues should remain high on the UN agenda."

**How can we expect the 2021 Science Technology and Innovation Forum to push the needle?**

**Andrejs Pildegovičs**: "This STI Forum should bring together stakeholders from all parts of the world and contribute to the cross-fertilization of ideas, networking, sharing of best practices and solutions for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. We need to bring together everyone, from innovators, private sector and academia, to major international organizations, civil society, women and youth. Only together, can we ensure that science, technology and innovation deliver for sustainable development in this Decade of Action."

**Mohammad Koba**: "The STI Forum is unique precisely because it brings together such a diversity of stakeholders. Only here, so many regulators, policy-makers and businesspeople rub shoulders with innovators, scholars and activists. All these players have the power to bring scientific innovation up to scale and advance sustainable development. I believe, this is the place where we can push our common agenda forward, particularly on strengthening international cooperation and increasing multi-stakeholder involvement – especially from the private sector.

Closing the scientific and innovation gap between developed and developing countries needs to be our top priority. To achieve that, we need strong political will, commitment and support, not only from the developed countries, but also international organizations and institutions, as well as the private sector."

Visit the website of the 2021 Science, Technology and Innovation Forum to learn more.

# 5 things you should know about the state of the economy

Is this the year we overcome the global economic crisis caused by the pandemic? Are our jobs in danger? Who has lost the most in the crisis and what can be done to recover? As UN DESA prepares to launch the mid-year update of the 2021 World Economic Situation and Prospects report, here are five things you need to know about the state of the global economy.

1. **The prospects for global growth have improved but the pace of recovery will differ across countries**

While economic output in the United States and China is expected to grow robustly and lift global growth, many developing economies are not expected to return to pre-pandemic output levels anytime soon. The pandemic is far from over for most developing countries where vaccination is advancing slowly, and fiscal pressures have intensified.

2. **The situation of the most vulnerable has become even more precarious**

Lockdowns and social distancing measures resulted in large job losses in contact-intensive and labour-intensive service sectors, which predominantly employ women. The pandemic has also exposed the vulnerability of informal employment, which is the main source of jobs in many countries and which offers less job security, social protection and access to healthcare.

3. **Global trade is in for a strong but uneven recovery**

Merchandise trade has already surpassed pre-pandemic levels, buoyed by strong demand for electrical and electronic equipment, personal protective equipment (PPE) and other manufactured goods. Trade in services remains constrained by restrictions on international travel. While exports from Asian economies have soared, exports from Africa, Western Asia, and the Commonwealth of Independent States has stalled.

4. **The COVID-19 crisis has inflicted more harm on women and girls**

This crisis disproportionately affected women, who suffered significant job and income losses, contributing to the worsening of gender poverty gaps. Burdened by increased home care duties, many girls and women gave up on schools, and the workforce altogether. Returning to school and work might take longer or may not happen at all for many of them, further widening gender gaps in education, income and wealth.

5. **Countries need to do more to address the uneven impact of the COVID-19 crisis**

There is an urgent need for countries to formulate better targeted and gender-sensitive policies to drive a more resilient and inclusive recovery from the crisis. Though on the frontlines of the pandemic, women have been underrepresented in pandemic related decision-making and economic policy responses. The severe and disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls call for more targeted policy and support

measures for women and girls, not only to accelerate the recovery but also to ensure that the recovery is inclusive and resilient.

*Photo Credit: UNDP/Guinea*



# We need a green revolution for technology

*By Daron Acemoglu, MIT Economics*

Automation and AI (artificial intelligence) are fundamentally reshaping our labour markets, yet they are often seen as problems of developed economies of the West. That is a mistake.

By allowing machines and algorithms to take over tasks previously performed by humans, these new technologies have reduced the labour share of income, negatively impacted employment and significantly increased inequality in many industrialized economies. But automation and AI are also impacting labour markets in emerging economies and will have a transformative effect in the decades to come.

When companies in the US or Germany introduce new robots, it does not only impact their own workers. Sometimes, it enables them to inexpensively produce parts that were previously imported from or offshored to developing economies. Recent research found that robot adoption in the US has negatively affected Mexican firms supplying the US market.

This impact will multiply with the spread of AI, which has started accelerating in the last five years. Although these technologies are touted as revolutionary and broadly beneficial, their effects on the developing world will most likely be very negative.

Almost all examples of rapid growth in the emerging world have come from countries utilizing their human resources effectively — often by exporting labour-intensive products manufactured cheaply and then moving up the value chain. In the age of AI, this will no longer be possible as workers in developing economies will be directly or indirectly competing against robots and algorithms in the industrialized world.

For much of the world, automation and AI are examples of inappropriate technology: they are developed in advanced economies to save on expensive labour by substituting it for machines and algorithms. But labour is precisely what the developing world is rich in.

The appropriate technology for countries such as Indonesia, India or Brazil would be one that makes their workers from diverse backgrounds — including those with limited formal schooling — more productive. Yet the current path of new technology, driven by tech giants in the West, strives to eliminate workers, not to complement them.

That path is not inevitable. As a broad technological platform, AI can be used to create new tasks for workers and increase their productivity in a range of activities. Even in periods of rapid automation, there are plenty of opportunities for using technologies to help workers and turn a profit.

Redirecting AI would generate major benefits for Western workers, who have seen their labour market fortunes tumble over the last four decades. But the real beneficiaries of such a change would be workers in the developing world.

The problem is that when tech giants determine the direction of AI research, workers in developing economies are not usually among their top priorities. This must change. But how?

The most important correction would be to include more voices when it comes to the future direction of digital technologies, especially AI. That means going beyond the current crop of experts and Big Tech executives and scientists, to include workers from industrialized and from developing economies.

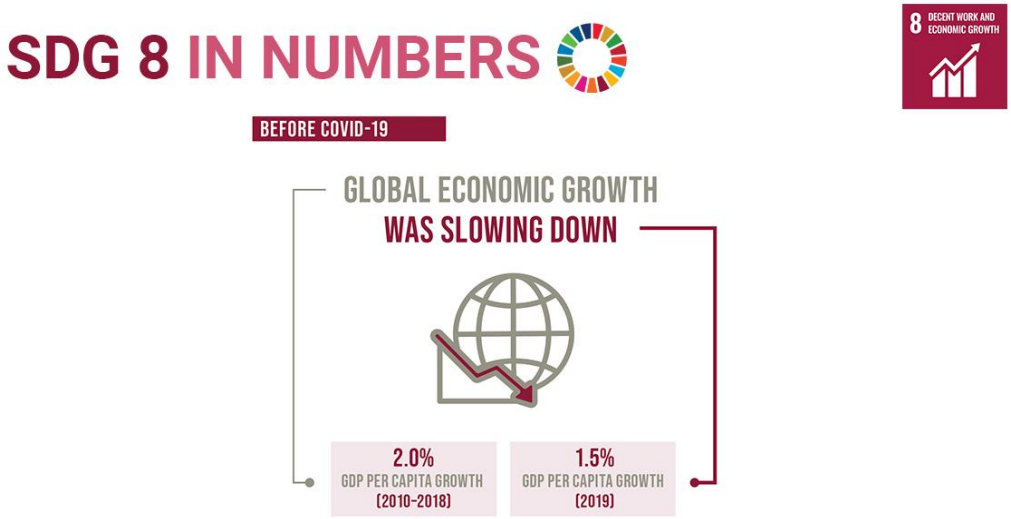
Democratic politics may ultimately make it impossible for the tech industry to ignore the voices of Western workers. But the much more numerous workers of the rest of the world will probably remain unheard. They need to coordinate and have a say in what is, incipiently, shaping their future as well. This is where organizations such as the UN could and should play a leading role. They can inform, coordinate and represent the workers of the world.

It is a tall order, but not an impossible one. We already saw it happen seven decades ago with agricultural technology. At the time, Western companies and governments were investing in hybrid varieties of seeds that were not appropriate for the geographic conditions of the developing world. This void was filled by the developing nations themselves who spearheaded the Green Revolution, reshaping agriculture and helping lift millions from poverty in many developing economies, most notably in Brazil, India and Mexico.

The Green Revolution benefited from the support of philanthropic organizations, such as the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, and efforts by some Western researchers, including Norman Borlaug who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his contributions to this effort. But ultimately, it was researchers in the developing world and a consortium of developing nations, who were at the forefront of understanding and inventing the technologies appropriate for their needs.

What the world was able to achieve for agriculture starting seven decades ago, we must try to achieve again today in the field of AI and digital technologies, even if the odds are stacked in favour of tech companies and against the workers of the world.

** The views expressed in this blog are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of UN DESA.*

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