

UN STI Forum May 5-6, 2022
Roundtable - Emerging science, frontier technologies, and the
SDGs – perspectives from UN system and science and technology
communities

Written Intervention
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Inclusive and deliberative forms of TA as a counterweight to corporate dominance.

At a time when the world is experiencing unprecedented erosion of biological and cultural diversity, the STI Forum must acknowledge that transnational companies are too dominant a force in society's response. Corporations are often pushing un-tested new technologies onto the market, supported by states that do not want to fall behind in the international race. Often, the knowledges of Indigenous peoples and local communities, especially women, provide concrete and effective answers to the biodiversity, climate and food crises of humanity.

In order to create an appropriate legal framework for these new technologies, we need transparent systems to monitor and assess their potential advantages and disadvantages. This is called technology assessment (TA).

If one were to go by the promises hyped in the media, one would conclude that our future will inevitably be shaped by technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), genetic engineering (GE) and manipulation of the Earth system (geoengineering). In reality, however, these are all examples of technologies that are already being released, or prepared to release onto the marketplace before they have been assessed for their potential risks to society and the environment. To a large extent they are also a product of scientism - the blinkered belief that science alone, and technologies derived from it, can solve humanity's problems.

In the 1990s, for example, proponents of GE claimed that this technology could feed the world and reduce the use of toxic chemicals. Thirty years later, more than 800 million people are malnourished and more toxic synthetic chemicals are circulating in our food, our bodies and our environment than ever before. They are at particularly high levels when genetically modified crops are used. These are effects that had already been predicted in the early development stages of GE. Yet society has been, and continues to be, denied almost any opportunity to subject genetic engineering to a systematic TA process.

TA allows existing technologies to be evaluated and lessons to be learned from the past. However, it is most effective when it examines various options for the future in advance. In this way, harmful effects can be anticipated and prevented even before new technologies are introduced. Because once they are introduced to the global market, industry argues that monitoring their impacts is too costly. The more established a technology becomes, the more difficult it becomes to monitor or control.

The best TA approaches also ensure that diverse knowledges and perspectives are included in policy-making at an early stage of technology development, usually using a deliberative public forum. Participants can propose alternative solutions to the problems that, according to its proponents, the new technology will solve.

If we fail to build such inclusive and accountable TA systems, decisions about risky technologies are effectively in the hands of billionaires, big business and their lobbies. Bill Gates, for example, is calling on the world to follow his company's example and become "net" carbon neutral by 2030. His plan involves handing over control of our ecosystems to digital business platforms and introducing geoengineering techniques around the world.

The world's policymakers seem increasingly inclined towards such risky approaches to tackling climate change, even though there is currently no evidence that they would work at all. The root cause of climate change - a fossil fuel-based industrial production and consumption system - would remain untouched by geoengineering, so climate change would almost certainly continue to accelerate.

Meanwhile, John Deere, Bayer and other agricultural mega-corporations are part of projects to digitise the Earth's ecosystem down to the last detail, replacing agricultural and fisheries workers with precision robots and new chemicals. They strategically promote any technology, no matter how far-fetched, to maintain the status quo that suits their interests.

Ten years after UN's Technology Facilitation Mechanism was first conceived, current environmental and equity crises are proof how poorly we have been served by past policies based on corporate hype. Genuine sustainable governance must prioritise inclusive and deliberative forms of TA in the years ahead, so that decisions about the future of humanity are made critically and responsibly.