UNITAR Orientation Course on the Economic and Social Council (10 January 2024)

Presentation on the Multistakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs (STI Forum), by Richard Alexander Roehrl, Senior Economic Affairs Officer, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Slide 1: Technology Facilitation Mechanism

Thank you. It is a great pleasure and privilege to join you here today. My name is Richard A Roehrl. At the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, I lead work on science and technology for the SDGs.

My division has been the custodian of the Rio process on sustainable development since the Earth Summit in 1992. This culminated in the adoption of the SDGs as part of the 2030 Agenda in 2015.

To support SDG implementation, the 2030 Agenda also created the UN Technology Facilitation Mechanism, or TFM, which I have had the privilege to co-found and head. The same mandate is duplicated in the Addis Ababa Agenda (A/RES/69/313). It underlines the importance attached to it by Member States.

The respective paras (§70 and §123) provide unusually detailed guidance – on all the TFM components shown here. One of the components is the Multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs, or STI Forum, as it is commonly referred to.

Several UN General Assembly resolutions, on STI, on ICT and on the impacts of rapid tech change provide further guidance and by design, leave little room for interpretation.

As a good UN officer, I could basically read out what the mandate says and stop here. But instead, let us take a quick step back to appreciate why this Mechanism and its Forum is so unique.

[Big picture]

The "Future we want", the outcome of the Rio+20 Conference (A/RES/66/288) of 2012 not only privileged the science-policy interface function of the HLPF, but it also brought back science and

technology discussions to UN headquarters after a break of decades during which discussions had been bogged down in IPR and tech transfer controversies.

But without some kind of agreement on science and technology, agreement on the SDGs would have likely also been impossible.

Following Rio+20, a series of GA consultations explored options – some of them much more ambitious and operational than what ultimately became the Technology Facilitation Mechanism in 2015.

The result? A veritable avalanche of science & tech-related meetings and initiatives across the UN system ever since.

Most importantly, the new Mechanism became an important entry point not only for organized science and engineering communities, but also for interested individuals.

This makes the Mechanism and its STI Forum rather unique - and different to other ECOSOC Forums, Commissions and meetings.

So, the Mechanism, what does it actually do?

Think of it as the highest pinnacle in the UN global architecture on science & technology for sustainable development. It is where the many activities of UN system and all stakeholders come together and partnerships are forged.

What does the Mechanism do? As the name implies, it "facilitates" collaboration and partnerships – for sharing information, experiences, best practices and policy advice among all relevant stakeholders. This includes Member States, civil society, private sector, scientific and technological communities, UN entities, and others.

It also supports tech transfer - through knowledge sharing, capacity building, and matching of technology providers with users.

Participation has continuously increased and widened.

The Mechanism comprises four components:

Firstly, the *IATT* – formally known as the Inter-Agency Task Team on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs. It brings together 47 UN entities. More than 100 expert staff volunteer their time to work together in 10 dedicated work streams.

This ranges from a pilot programme and partnership on national STI4SDG roadmaps, to policy analysis and research on emerging science and tech futures, as well as awareness raising on gender in STI. IATT also mobilises science-policy briefs and perspectives from experts, enabling them to propose issues to be put onto the UN agenda.

The second component is the *10-Member-Group* of High-level Representatives of Civil Society, Private Sector, and Scientific and Technological communities. The Group is appointed by the UN Secretary General, for two years at a time. It is more than an advisory group. It mobilises engagement of experts and stakeholders. The Group works closely with the IATT on joint outputs.

Thirdly, the *Multi-stakeholder Forum* on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs. Every year, this Forum brings together governments with thousands of science and technology stakeholders. Many of them are new to the UN.

This ranges from young, engaged scientists, to start-ups, to world-renowned experts. In fact, it includes an unusually high number of young women from developing countries.

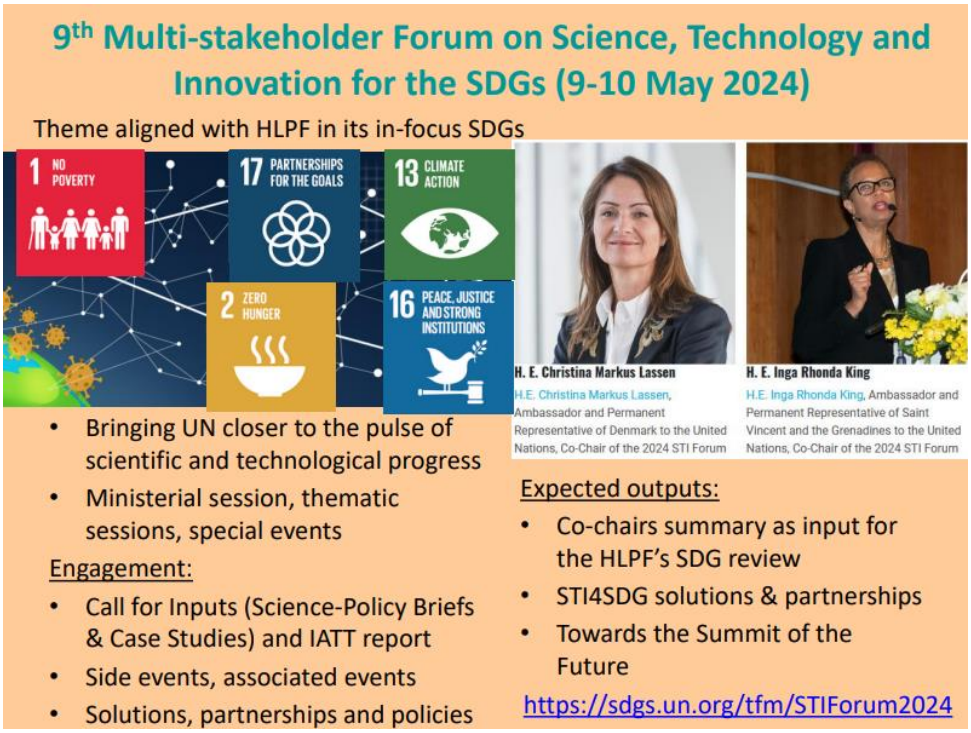
The Forum is not a negotiating body. However, its co-chairs summary is a mandated input to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and its annual SDG review.

IATT and 10-Member Group jointly organize this annual Forum. The President of ECOSOC convenes it. The 10-Members typically lead substantively and moderate the sessions.

Fourth, the *online platform 2030 Connect*. It provides one-stop-shop access to technology and knowledge databases of an increasing number of UN and non-UN organizations. It is also a place where solutions brought to the Forum can be made available to wider communities.

As you can see, the STI Forum follows a particular kind of approach - a truly one-UN and multi-stakeholder way of working.

Slide 2: STI Forum 2024 *[9th STI Forum]*



Let's delve a little deeper.

The next STI Forum, the 9th, will be held in in-person format from 9 to 10 May 2024. As in previous years, it is expected to be complemented with sessions in hybrid and fully virtual format to allow wider participation, especially by young people.

As mandated, the President of ECOSOC has appointed two Forum co-chairs. This year, these are H.E. Christina Markus Lassen, PR of Denmark to the UN, and H.E. Inga Rhonda King, PR of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to the UN (which you can see on the slide). They provide overall political leadership, engage Member States, and rally support for the Forum.

[Themes and topics]

The STI Forum has always been aligned thematically with the HLPF and the SDGs in-focus. This year this will be SDG 1 on eradicating poverty, SDG 2 on hunger, SDG 13 on climate action, SDG 16 on peaceful societies, access to justice, and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, as well SDG 17 on means of implementation, including partnerships.

But it is important to note that the Forum has worked cumulatively since its inception. This means, each Forum builds on the achievements and insights of the earlier ones.

It also means that the next Forum will likely delve deeper into more specific and cutting-edge science and tech issues within each SDG. Earlier Forums already provided broad reviews of all SDGs.

Also, much of the discussions at the moment revolve around issues of new energy solutions, e-mobility and climate change, as well as digital technologies and AI.

Both IATT and the previous 10-Member-Group have already had weeks of consultations in preparation for the Forum. You all will be able to hear more during the first briefing to Member States by the Forum co-chairs in March.

[Format]

By mandate, the Forum is limited to two days. In the past, it included high-level opening and Ministerial sessions, thematic sessions, special events, and side events. We also had innovators competitions and exhibitions to showcase technology solutions.

Governments have an informal space at the Forum to discuss national STI plans, roadmaps, and various emerging science and tech issues. Every year, the TFM has issued its findings on the impacts of rapid technological change, based on a wide range of perspectives.

As I said, there are no negotiations and no need for consensus. In fact, the value added is in the different perspectives; in the exchanges on solutions and issues of concern – which more often than not lead to tested new ideas and initiatives.

[Expected outputs]

What are the expected outputs? As I mentioned, every STI Forum has aimed to showcase STI solutions, ranging from on the ground technologies and innovations all the way to ideas for national and even global STI policy. Partnerships have been born and nurtured by the Forum - directly and even more so indirectly.

As I said, the Co-chairs' summary of the Forum is a GA-mandated input to the HLPF in support of the SDG review. This will be a special year – with the Summit of the Future. Since much of the Secretary General's vision for a modern UN 2.0 refer to science and technology themes, we expect the co-chairs summary to also inform Summit of the Future.

The 10-Member-Group which concluded their work last autumn had outlined their STI for 2030 and beyond and what would need to be put in plac4e in terms of high-impact initiatives to make a real difference. I expect the incoming 10-Member-Group to build on concretize some of these ideas.

[Engagement]

How can stakeholders engage?

This is essential. The Forum is really about the global science-policy interface. The original idea was to bring the UN closer to the pulse of "technological progress" – a progress that happens at mind-boggling speed in labs of universities and tech companies. For governments and the UN alike, this progress has become increasingly difficult to track, understand, let alone steer.

Most speakers in the Forum have been scientists, engineers and innovators. They engage with each other, with Member States, and UN system. There is no clear hierarchy.

Interest from STI communities has been much larger than what we have been able to accommodate. Thousands of stakeholders, some of which themselves represent networks of thousands, have engaged with us.

They have provided hundreds of science-policy briefs. They have engaged in the UN innovation competitions, demonstrated solutions, recommended policies and forged partnerships. They have organized side events and associated events on particular themes, communities or regions.

This volunteer work is testament to an enormous unmet supply of interested experts from around the world. They want to contribute their expertise and skills to the UN's efforts to address the great global issues.

Maybe this should come as no surprise. After all, the UN provides a more inclusive space for highlighting work from developing countries, and research funders in the Global South have been very active in sustainability science.

It is also part of a longer global trend. By the Rio+20 Conference in 2012, scientists finally emerged as the largest group of stakeholders!

Such engagement by scientists is quite amazing. They volunteer their time to make a positive impact – even in the face of fundamentally different goals of science vs. politics.

I would argue that by design the STI Forum is more inclusive than most other UN Forums, but practical constraints abound. For one thing, the TFM remains primarily based on volunteer work. Even the core mandated functions don't have regular budget funding.

This has always been a huge challenge for the participation of developing countries.

[Frontier science and tech issues discussed in STI Forums]

Finally, one key insight from past STI Forum discussions has been that new technology, - biotech, AI, and nanotech - are vital for all kinds of SDG breakthroughs. They progress at accelerated, exponential rates – so rapid in fact that it remains unclear whether traditional institutions and regulators are able to cope.

The STI Forum has been a UN space where it has been possible to discuss these issues in good faith - despite their dual use nature and despite geopolitics.

[Conclusion]

In conclusion, the Technology Facilitation Mechanism and its STI Forum are among the most prominent and most open new UN entry points for engagement by scientists, engineers and tech entrepreneurs. It follows an entirely new one-UN way of working.

This model has allowed discussions on politically highly sensitive issues and opened new avenues for all UN Member States, including those that may feel that they are being left behind in the latest scientific-technological revolution.

Of course, much more needs to be done. Given the insufficient SDG progress, some believe it is now time to consider some of the more ambitious options for technology facilitation that were discussed by the GA in 2013 and 2014. I leave this up to your judgement.

Ultimately, our current work is essentially a volunteer operation and utterly underfunded. It is only what it is, because of the dedication of everyone involved.

I hope you enjoyed this presentation. I encourage you all to get involved. I believe it is a worthwhile endeavour.

Thank you.