

WEBINAR

TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION REPORT 2021

Catching Technological Waves: Innovation with Equity

The Role of Civil Activism

Thursday, April 08, 2021
10 am – 11:30 am CEST / 1:30 pm – 3:00 pm IST

Background Note

Objective

The webinar will disseminate the key messages and recommendations of United Nations Conference on Trade and Development's (UNCTAD) *Technology and Innovation Report 2021*. It will focus on civil society organisations' role to influence the development, use, adoption and adaptation, of frontier technologies in developing countries and the required institutional and societal changes to ensure that these technologies accelerate the SDGs' progress while leaving no one behind. Civil society has the potential to act as a bridge and create a feedback loop between market, state and citizens, to foster innovation with equity. The webinar will serve as a platform for peer learning by discussing and disseminating inclusive innovation strategies that are being explored by civil society organisations, governments, development partners, and other stakeholders.

Background and Context

We live in a time of growing prosperity alongside growing inequalities. A global middle class has emerged, fuelled by rapid growth in emerging economies. At the same time, poverty is stubbornly persistent in many regions, and inequality within countries has increased in many developed and developing countries. Crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic lays bare and exacerbates these and other gaps.

UNCTAD's Technology and Innovation Report 2021 "*Catching technological waves: innovation with equity*" (<https://bit.ly/3rpHJNv>) critically examines the possibility of frontier technologies such as AI, robotics, and gene-editing widening existing inequalities and creating new ones. The Report argues that frontier technologies are essential for sustainable development, but they also could accentuate initial inequalities. Rapid advances can have severe downsides if they outpace the ability of societies to adapt or are designed without taking into account the unique realities, socio-political and economic contexts of different societies. The implications could be serious for developing countries – if poor communities and countries are either overwhelmed or left behind.

Strong and inclusive leadership will be critical to influencing how frontier technologies shape the world. Technology is rarely a solution on its own. Problems such as poverty, hunger, climate change or inequalities in health or education are inevitably complex and

multidimensional. Frontier technologies can bring transformative power to address many of those dimensions, but they need to be steered with an inclusive, sustainable, and equitable development compass and keeping an eye on unintended side effects, such as the risk of discrimination due to biased design of AI, and inequalities and ethical considerations of gene editing.

Vigorous citizen activism is needed to raise awareness and create a critical mass to ensure that society and institutions steer technological change towards sustainable and inclusive development. People and organisations should work together to identify mismatches between technological innovation and societal expectations and responses. Laws, regulations, and behaviour developed for previous technologies are usually ill-suited for radically new challenges. Due to both societal and institutional inertia, these changes have been slower and have lagged behind technological transformations. The combined efforts of civil society groups can lead to changes in regulations and laws and eventually trigger user and consumer behaviour changes to align design and usage of frontier technologies with societal goals.

About UNCTAD

UNCTAD serves as the secretariat of the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD), and as part of its programme on Technology and Logistics, carries out policy-oriented analytical work on the impact of innovation and new and emerging technologies on sustainable development, with a particular focus on the opportunities and challenges for developing countries.

About CUTS

CUTS International is a global research, public education and networking organisation working in various fields that include international trade, competition policy and law, economic regulation, consumer protection and sustainable development issues. From a humble beginning in 1983-84, the organisation now has three resource centres in Jaipur, one each in Calcutta, Chittorgarh and New Delhi in India and works at the international arena, especially in the developing world through its resource centres based in Kenya, Vietnam, Switzerland, Zambia, Ghana and USA.

About the South Centre

The South Centre is the intergovernmental organization of developing countries that helps developing countries to combine their efforts and expertise to promote their common interests in the international arena. It undertakes research and analysis oriented on various international policy areas that are relevant to the protection and promotion of the development interests of developing countries. The South Centre helps the countries of the South to develop common points of view and to work together on major international development-related policy issues.