**Keynote speech by UNDP Resident Representative Alessandro Fracassetti**

**World Summit on Information Summit (WSIS) Session: Harnessing AI for Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab Region**

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***As prepared for delivery***

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here today to discuss how we could best leverage artificial intelligence to advance the Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab region.

The latest SDG Progress Report indicates that the world is significantly behind in achieving these goals.

Only 15 % of the SDGs are on track, progress towards 50% is inadequate, and 30% have stalled or reversed. In real terms, this means that today, 2.2 billion people lack access to safe water and hygiene; 3.5 billion lack access to safely managed sanitation5; roughly 3.3 billion live in environments highly vulnerable to climate change6; and 750 million are facing hunger.

Can AI accelerate progress towards the SDGs, enhance decision-making, and drive innovation? In a recent statement to the EcoSoc, Deputy SG Amina Mohammed said that applied safely, AI can and must accelerate progress towards the SDGs. This is not a future dream but today’s reality, the DSG said adding that AI is already optimizing energy use, improving medical diagnostics, monitoring biodiversity, expanding educational opportunities — and so much more.

According to a 2024 study by Mac Kinsey, while AI will affect all SDGs, it has a particularly high potential to make a difference for five: Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3), Quality Education (SDG 4), Climate Action (SDG 13), Affordable and Clean Energy (SDG 7), and Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11).

Scientific breakthroughs have increased the effectiveness of AI at pattern recognition, prediction, and creation. This progress has coincided with a rapidly growing number of successful AI deployments, but there are still challenges to scaling their use for addressing the SDGs

For one thing funding is still limited and geographically biased towards some areas rather than others. According to Mc Kinsey apart from funding, the biggest barriers to scaling AI continue to be data availability, accessibility, and quality.

And yet AI has already demonstrated the truly game-changing potentiality it holds by contributing to the truly remarkable effort from the global community to develop effective vaccines within a year of the virus first being detected.

According to the World Economic Forum, the US company Moderna was among the first to release an effective COVID-19 vaccine thanks to the use of AI to speed up development. AI algorithms and robotic automation helped them move from manually producing around 30 mRNAs (a molecule fundamental to the vaccine) each month, to being able to produce around 1,000 a month.

For malaria, a handheld lab-on-a-chip molecular diagnostics systems developed with AI could revolutionize how the disease is detected in remote parts of Africa.

Yet these technologies also pose grave risks.   they can displace jobs, exploit gaps in global governance, and exacerbate bias, discrimination and misinformation.  And they can do so on a monumental scale.

As the D-SG pointed out, our task is to harness this powerful technology to accelerate sustainable development, while mitigating its harms.  This means accountability for those who create AI systems and for those that use them.  The power, speed and impact of AI is truly global, and accountability must be part of the package.

In the Arab region, the situation is particularly concerning, with many SDGs lagging behind.

If current trends and conflicts continue, it is likely that the region will fail to meet any of the SDGs by 2030.

So can AI hold the potential to be a game-changer in this context? As we said, when applied efficiently and ethically, AI can drive inclusive and sustainable growth, transforming sectors such as health, education, climate change, water, food, and energy, and ultimately improving lives and livelihoods.

This is by no means a far away dream.

Over the past two decades, the Arab region has experienced a tremendous surge in digital connectivity.

According to Price Waterhouse Cooper, the Middle East is expected to gain 2% of the total global benefits of AI by 2030, equivalent to US$320 billion.

Internet users have increased to 327 million, with internet penetration rising from 28.8% in 2012 to 70.3% in 2022.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated this digital adoption, prompting urgent digital transformation efforts. Governments in the region are prioritizing digital technologies while addressing the digital divide to ensure no one is left behind.

Despite these advancements, however, there is a significant digital divide in the region.

Many countries have rapidly adopted new technologies, but others remain at the initial stages without clear AI strategies.

This digital divide is also marked by unequal access to the internet and disparities in ICT utilization, bandwidth distribution, and demographic divides, including gender, urban-rural, and accessibility for people with disabilities.

About 30% of the population remains offline, with women, rural inhabitants, the elderly, and persons with disabilities being disproportionately affected.

These disparities hinder the widespread adoption of ICTs and pose significant barriers to digital transformation and the successful implementation of digital government initiatives.

Bridging this digital divide is crucial for unlocking the full potential of digital transformation in the Arab region.

This requires comprehensive efforts to promote inclusivity and ensure equitable access to digital technologies for all segments of society.

For **UNDP**, collaboration among international organizations, the private sector, and governments is essential to harness the benefits of technology and promote inclusive and responsible digital solutions.

For example, UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States launched a Digital for Sustainable Development (D4SD) initiative that leverages digital technologies to achieve SDGs in the region.

Under this initiative, we are developing an **AI for Sustainable Development (AI4SD)** platform, where we are working on building an AI-empowered platform as the foundation, developed to bridge the information gap and empower the region.

This platform is well-positioned to tackle the region's data scarcity issue comprehensively and substantially contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals.

In terms of partnerships to leverage AI for Sustainable Development, UNDP RBAS signed two agreements on AI and in relation to AI4SD, [one is with the HE's Office of AI](https://eur03.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.undp.org%2Farab-states%2Fpress-releases%2Fuaes-ai-office-signs-agreement-undp-enhance-adoption-artificial-intelligence&data=05%7C02%7Cyasmine.hamdar%40undp.org%7Ca3cd73e4ee2b4e54577808dc66f2316c%7Cb3e5db5e2944483799f57488ace54319%7C0%7C0%7C638498437612637052%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C0%7C%7C%7C&sdata=eivu%2FWAVhmoBXg4Ez50neY6IResJsz1dZyIyYR9mTD4%3D&reserved=0), which aims to promote artificial intelligence and benefit from it to accelerate progress towards achieving sustainable development goals, exploring the necessary factors and requirements for developing and utilizing artificial intelligence and digital ecosystem in the Arab region and beyond.

The [second MOU is with MBZUAI](https://eur03.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.undp.org%2Farab-states%2Fpress-releases%2Fmbzuai-and-undp-partnership-advance-use-artificial-intelligence-sustainable-development&data=05%7C02%7Cyasmine.hamdar%40undp.org%7Ca3cd73e4ee2b4e54577808dc66f2316c%7Cb3e5db5e2944483799f57488ace54319%7C0%7C0%7C638498437612645619%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C0%7C%7C%7C&sdata=LgFPZJnBcHEtzXv1NsV8V6w4ps5kjHhzdKft%2FH34KEA%3D&reserved=0), a leading AI university in the UAE, in which the university becomes the founding knowledge partner for the UNDP’s AI for Sustainable Development Platform (AI4SD).

UNDP Arab States also signed a main MOU on AI skills, technology, and government exchange with the UAE Prime Minister’s office, represented by H.E. Mohammed Al Gargawi, and our Administrator Achim Steiner.

Recently, UNDP and AICTO signed a strategic partnership to leverage digital technologies for sustainable development across the Arab region.

In Egypt, UNDP has been working closely with the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology for over 20 years, fully supporting its digitalization efforts.

Recognizing the importance of building and developing human capital, we have worked with the Ministry to build the capacity of 1,000 ICT professionals per year prioritizing women in remote and marginalized areas.

Additionally, we have supported the modernization and upgrading of over 2,800 Egypt Post offices and enhanced the capacity of more than 36,000 employees through comprehensive training in areas such as financial inclusion, governance, digital transformation and anti-money laundering.

Through our fruitful collaboration with the Technology, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center (TIEC), we have established two innovation clusters with world-class partners (Plug & Play, 500 Global), trained more than 140,000 entrepreneurs, created 31,000 jobs and supported the freelancing of more than 9,000 young men and women.

One of our joint projects is the Applied Innovation Center, which aims to enhance the technical and institutional capacities of AIC, positioning it among the top national applied R&D entities in emerging ICT technologies.

The goal is to help solve strategic problems and build capacity through hands-on training in real-life projects.

The AIC Director for the ICT Ministry will present this initiative as a case study later today.

During the pandemic, we helped develop the first AI-powered platform in Africa and the Middle East to assist Egyptians with disabilities in accessing reliable information in sign language.

AI in Egypt has been growing rapidly ever since, with the country making significant strides in this field.

According to the 2022 report on government AI readiness, Egypt ranked second in Africa after Mauritius, moving up 55 places on the Government AI Readiness Index to 56th out of 172 countries.

Egypt is also hosting various events to explore the potential of AI in its economy, reflecting the high priority the government places on AI.

This rapid growth of AI and the digital ecosystem in Egypt promises a future filled with exciting opportunities.

In conclusion, AI is not just a tool but a transformative force that can propel the Arab region towards the 2030 Agenda.

However, this transformation demands careful, ethical implementation and robust partnerships.

Only by working together, we can ensure that AI drives positive change, bridging gaps, and creating opportunities for all.

Thank you.