

UN moves towards a technology early listening system

Addis Summit creates a Technology Facilitation Mechanism including a multi-stakeholder forum to discuss technology issues, including risks and opportunities of emerging technologies for the UN's 2015–30 Sustainable Development Goals.

UN Member-States meeting in Addis July 13 – 16 in the third conference on Financing for Development have agreed to establish a UN Technology Facilitation Mechanism that will include an interagency task team working in collaboration with 10 representatives of civil society, the private sector and the scientific community appointed by the Secretary-General; an annual intergovernmental meeting with multi-stakeholder participation from all sides of the Technology debate; and an online forum for information sharing and cooperation.

In a four-year process that began with preparations for the Rio+20 Summit in June 2012, the G-77 and China – led by Brazil, India and Egypt – has overcome strong opposition from rich countries (led by Japan, USA and UK) to establish a mechanism in the UN to address issues in technology development, transfer and diffusion. The decision paves the way for a badly needed early warning system on the impacts of new technologies. The agreement reached in Ethiopia this week strengthens earlier UN support to establish a Technology Bank for Least Developed Countries that will enable technology decisions and capacity building. The Technology Facilitation Mechanism will be launched at the UN Summit on the post-2015 development agenda in New York in September. The deal struck in Addis will be implemented as soon as adopted by the UN General Assembly and the multi-stakeholder forum may convene next year as well.

Opposition to the proposal championed by the G-77 came from OECD concerns that there would be greater pressure on them to finance technology transfer through a new UN body. The US, UK and Japan are opposed any move to address intellectual property rights (IPR) at the UN. These countries and their companies are also opposed to a UN forum scrutinizing the socioeconomic and environmental implications of emerging technologies.

In countering corporate resistance, ETC Group and civil society partners in the Women, Indigenous Peoples and NGO major groups pointed out that global scientific research now exceeds \$1.6 trillion per year and many economists concur that at least 80% of economic growth since the 1980s has been due to new technologies. At the same time,

more than half of all companies surveyed believe their own capacity to manage technologies is inadequate and several studies have argued that at least half of all jobs are now threatened by technological advances such as synthetic biology, robotics and artificial intelligence. European delegations found it difficult to oppose the new technology forum since 17 European states, as well as the European Union, have parliamentary offices for independent Technology Assessment. By contrast, most countries in the global South – especially Least Developed Countries lack any capacity for technology assessment.

ETC Group proposed the creation of a technology assessment capacity in the UN in the lead up to the 2012 Rio Summit. At that time, the proposal was backed by the G-77 and China and a few OECD states such as Sweden and Norway. The Summit concluded with a surprisingly strong call for technology assessment from local to global levels warning that new technologies could pose significant health and environmental risks.¹ Following Rio+20, ETC Group worked with the Women's Major Group in closely monitoring negotiations at the UN in New York. The decision to establish the Technology Facilitation Mechanism reached in Addis marks a major breakthrough and is regarded by most governments to be one of the most significant outcomes of the negotiations. In the negotiations in New York leading up to Addis, France played a critical role brokering the final decision, along with Brazil. As host to the climate change conference in Paris this December, France sees the importance of addressing technology assessment.

Neth Daño, ETC's Asia Director who is at the Addis conference, is, however, quick to point out that the decision is far from perfect. The resources for implementation are being cobbled together out of existing budgets and will inevitably be inadequate. She warns against efforts to reduce the mechanism into a marketplace for business to sell new technologies to developing countries. Nevertheless, Daño agrees that the creation of an annual space at the UN in which governments, civil society, industry and academia can openly debate technology issues is a real breakthrough.

It is appropriate that this decision arises from Rio+20 that was critical of the threat of new technologies to damage lives, livelihoods and the environment. 20 years earlier, at the original 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, the UN endorsed the Precautionary Principle and called for careful assessment of new technologies. A year later, under US pressure, the UN kneecapped the UN Centre for Science and Technology for Development as well as the UN Centre for Transnational Corporations – the only two bodies in the UN system that could advise developing countries on their technological choices and on the multinational corporations that control many technologies. In effect, on the eve of the Knowledge Economy, the UN and the global South lost their access to information. The decision this week could finally lead to the reconstruction of a UN early listening system.

Silvia Ribeiro, ETC's Latin America Director, who attended most of the negotiations in New York leading up to Addis adds that the work to establish effective global and participatory technology assessment has just begun. For the Technology Forum to

work, it will be vital for social movements and civil society organizations in general to not merely monitor the global discussions but to work at the national and regional levels providing an early warning system to match the UN's new technology initiative and to engage national governments and regional parties in establishing similar fora. ETC Group has been talking with national and regional civil society partners about the need for such fora on every continent but especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Now that the UN has created this new forum, it is up to civil society and social movements to make it truly effective through national and regional action, says Ribeiro.

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For further background information please see *Moving Beyond Technology Transfer. The Case for Technology Assessment* at <http://www.etcgroup.org/content/moving-beyond-technology-transfer-case-technology-assessment>.

ⁱ 275. We recognize the importance of strengthening international, regional and national capacities in research and technology assessment, especially in view of the rapid development and possible deployment of new technologies that may also have unintended negative impacts, in particular on biodiversity and health, or other unforeseen consequences. The Future We Want. UNCSD 2012 Outcome Document at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/thefuturewewant.html>