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ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT (CSTD)**

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Opening Session: CSTD 2020-2021 Inter-Sessional Panel Meeting

Opening remarks by

Isabelle Durant
Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD

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Opening remarks

Isabelle Durant, Deputy Secretary-General, UNCTAD

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

A warm welcome to this inter-sessional panel. We are meeting at a critical juncture of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have reached this juncture thanks to the virtues of science, the commitment of many stakeholders, collaborations and resources that have resulted in effective vaccines against coronavirus.

The development of vaccines is indeed a landmark occasion. At the same time, it raises important questions that we - at this Commission - have been asking over the past years: Questions about equity and access for all.

The two themes of this inter-sessional panel also contribute to this thinking:

- 1) Using science, technology and innovation to close the gap on SDG 3, on good health and well-being;
- 2) Theme 2: Harnessing blockchain for sustainable development: prospects and challenges.

Let me first say a few words on **Theme 1**.

Frontier technologies like digital health, gene-editing, space applications or blockchain have great potential to address health issues and accelerate progress towards SDG 3.

Data and digital technologies for health, or digital health, are bringing profound changes to how health services are delivered and how health systems are managed. Telemedicine, contact tracing, wearable health sensors or artificial intelligence in medicine are some examples. Digital health can bring advances on many fronts, such as improving the diagnosis of diseases or monitoring the impact of health-related policies and interventions.

More than 120 countries have national policies for digital health. I like to give you two examples from CSTD member states:

To attain universal health coverage, the Kenyan government is using e-services and the fact that mobile phone penetration is high. For instance, its digital health initiative provides mobile money transport vouchers for mothers to get free transport to give birth in health centers.

Latvia's Digital Transformation Guidelines 2021-2027, which are currently under development, will provide for data exchange between research institutions and for developing telemedicine.

Solid digital infrastructure and bridging the digital divide are pre-requisites for broad roll-out of digital health. But digital health faces unique challenges. Telemedicine, for instance, requires appropriate regulatory frameworks for authorization, integration and reimbursement. Many countries still need to develop and implement such regulatory frameworks. The social distancing imposed by COVID-19 could be a catalyzer for countries to develop appropriate frameworks. This week presents an opportunity to share experiences on building such regulatory capacity.

Now, let me turn to the **second theme** on harnessing blockchain.

A key feature of blockchain solutions is that they can reduce transactional complexity. For example, they can trace the authenticity of pharmaceutical products to minimize counterfeits.

Countries are exploring the potential of blockchain technology in diverse areas:

ESCWA member states, in partnership with other organizations, are considering the use of blockchain technology for the certification of PCR certificates at airports.

In Thailand, blockchain is being implemented in the railway's communications system to increase the accuracy of its itinerary and to enhance the security of high-value parcels shipped through its logistics network.

Several challenges need to be overcome to ensure that blockchain contributes to sustainable development.

One hope was that cryptocurrencies could increase financial inclusion. Currently, however, ownership of cryptocurrencies is highly concentrated; 95% of bitcoins are held by only 3% of all bitcoin addresses.

Another concern is the high energy consumption of blockchain technology. Some estimates suggest that it compares to the total energy consumption of some industrialized countries, like Ireland or Switzerland. Other challenges of blockchain include the appeal of cryptocurrency for criminal activities, privacy concerns and the development of adequate regulatory frameworks.

I would like to **conclude** with a few reflections on the way forward:

The importance of international collaboration to realize the potential of science, technology, and innovation in the pursuit of development goals is essential. COVID-19 or climate change do not recognize borders and cannot be combatted without global collaboration and solutions.

Ensuring that all of us, including the most vulnerable in our global community, have affordable and unrestricted access to technologies which support development requires scaling up of resources and coordinated approaches. The distribution and access to the new COVID-19 vaccines are a prime example.

Countries have implemented drastic lockdown measures to save human lives. These policies sparked debates over how to balance human lives and economic growth, but what is important is that we have embarked on a human centered approach. This should also inspire our actions for tackling environmental disasters and social inequalities which are a threat to global stability.

Finally, we need to ensure that the international cooperation and solidarity witnessed in the early days of the pandemic are strengthened and formalized to ensure longevity. I am convinced that cooperation and multilateralism remain the best approach to find inclusive solutions.

In this spirit, I want to wish you a fruitful week of debates and discussions, and thank all member states and organizations for their contributions to the materials provided for this session.

Thank you.