

UNCTAD
TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION REPORT 2021
INNOVATION WITH EQUITY
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Speaking Notes

As I reflect on the key theme of the report – Innovation with Equity – certain thoughts come to mind:

- Digitalization is driving globalization at a breakneck pace. The virtual world is erasing national boundaries for better and for worse. For the developing countries, the experience of loss of sovereignty is real. Social media is pervasive, and governments can hardly control content. Nigeria can ban Twitter (as she did last week). But the fact is Nigerians are still using Twitter. Yet, no country can afford a lag in digitalization and digitalization continues unabated.
- Indeed, in Africa, countries have committed to the African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020 -2030) as a blueprint and master plan for transforming the continent's economy and societies. So, commitment to adoption of the emerging technologies is imperative for all nations including the developing countries.
- As I reflect on these developments, I come to appreciate the publishing of UNCTAD's *Technology and Innovation Report 2021* better. It touches on many important development issues that arise in the tracks of technological advancement today and the economic and socio-political consequences. The report elaborates on the inequalities between and within countries very pointedly; there are disparities in wealth and prosperity or rather deprivation and poverty, quality of life and well-being, and disparities in economic growth and opportunities.
- The disparity is not only between the developed countries and the developing countries. It is also within countries. The report talks about inequalities within China and India, which exacerbate the global outlook of inequalities. Inequalities in the access to technology within countries is also a reality. For example, it is estimated that only 26% of rural dwellers in Africa use the internet as against 47% of urban dwellers. The challenge of achieving equity between regions of development must also reflect within nations.
- It is why the UNCTAD Report is very important.
- The conceptualization of the elemental issues of inequities in relation to technology and innovation is very much on point. The analytical frameworks(s) and the approach to highlighting the issues are done with clarity and with deep insight. For example, there is the broad categorization of the technological phases – the Age of ICT and Industry 4.0. with the periods of installation and deployment and the tipping points. The key message in the analysis of the 11 new technologies that the report covered in Industry 4.0, is that developing countries must act fast and decisively. It is not only about catching up with an ever-advancing technological leaders – mostly Western countries with their ranks now joined by China and India and a few other countries – it is also about ensuring that the technological lag does not worsen within the countries.

- The ideal for developing countries to really close the technological gap is attaining the capacity of deployment of the frontier technologies given the enormous advantages of the frontier technologies. For example, the market size of frontier technologies by 2025 is \$3.2 trillion. However, the developing countries and especially Africa is still struggling in the installation phase of these technologies.
- The classic illustration of the struggle is how Africa is fighting the present COVID 19 pandemic and the utmost dependence of Africa on external sources for vaccines. The World Bank estimates that each month of delay in the provision of COVID-19 vaccines could cost Africa US\$ 14 billion in lost GDP. Internal capacity for vaccine production is the ideal solution.
- In recent times there have been some good news for the continent. For example, WHO is supporting the setting up of a “tech transfer hub”, which could make it possible for African companies to begin manufacturing mRNA vaccines – the advanced technology now used in vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna – in a relatively short time. The World Bank is also reported to be supporting vaccine manufacturing initiatives in countries such as Nigeria and Senegal. Other countries such as Ghana and Ethiopia also have vaccine production ambitions. Yet, there is need for getting to the tipping point of the frontier technology and then the rest will follow.
- Clearly, the Technology and Innovation Report 2021 has underscored the need for developing countries to consider the urgency of building capacity in the frontier technologies and begin the transition onto the path of serious technological development. The struggle to achieve equity in technological advancement must necessarily begin with themselves, and then help from outside will be meaningful and sustainable when it comes.
- SDG 17 is about strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing global partnerships for sustainable development. As the COVID 19 pandemic has demonstrated, no nation is an island and if the death knell tolls, it tolls for all. We need that global partnership that pulls the lagging nations up the frontier technology ladder, so that together, we can all confront the global challenges.
- Thank you.