**Chief Executives Board
for Coordination**

High-level Committee on Programmes
Intersessional meeting (virtual)
29 July 2020

Report of the High-level Committee on Programmes on its virtual consultation on the ethics of artificial intelligence

I. Introduction

1.   The thirty-ninth session of the High-level Committee on Programmes of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), which had been scheduled to be held on 6 and 7 April 2020 at the headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris, was cancelled as a result of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The envisaged agenda for the session had been structured to advance the Committee's work in support of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development Goals by 2030, including a discussion on the ethics of artificial intelligence to be led by UNESCO. In view of the cancellation, the Chair of the Committee, Guy Ryder, Director-General of the International Labour Organization, requested the Secretary of the Committee to support the respective lead entities in continuing the individual workstreams in a virtual format. Subsequently, the Chair, in consultation with UNESCO, decided that the workstream on the ethics of artificial intelligence would be the focus of a virtual intersessional Committee meeting prior to the fortieth session.

2.   Accordingly, the Committee's consultation on the ethics of artificial intelligence was convened by UNESCO on 29 July 2020 in a virtual format. During the meeting the Committee also received a brief update on the follow-up to the CEB-endorsed United Nations system-wide strategic approach and road map for supporting capacity development on artificial intelligence to promote synergies and coherence between the workstreams.

3.   In his opening remarks, the Chair welcomed participants to the first all-virtual Committee meeting, held between regular sessions, on the topic of the ethics of artificial intelligence. He noted that the global pandemic had forced the Committee, and the wider United Nations system, to adapt rapidly to new ways of working. He recalled that, along with the future of work and the future of learning and education,[1] artificial intelligence was an area in which the Committee had shown leadership and forward thinking through its system-wide strategic approach and road map for

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[1] See CEB/2019/1/Add.2 and CEB/2019/1/Add.4.

supporting capacity development on artificial intelligence,[2] which had been endorsed by CEB in 2019.

4.   Underscoring that the primary purpose of the virtual meeting was to advance the Committee's work on the ethics of artificial intelligence, the Chair noted that in the COVID-19 context, artificial intelligence was being deployed by countries in response to the pandemic, as well as in many other applications. While artificial intelligence systems could be of great service to humanity in responding to the crisis and beyond, they were not value neutral and raised fundamental ethical and human rights concerns.

II.   Ethics of artificial intelligence

5.   Turning to the main item, the Chair recalled that during the General Conference of UNESCO held in November 2019, member States had mandated UNESCO to support a multi-stakeholder, multicultural, multidisciplinary and pluralist consultative process of elaborating the first global standard-setting instrument on the ethics of artificial intelligence in the form of a recommendation, for possible adoption by the forty-first General Conference of UNESCO, to be held in 2021. A first draft version of the recommendation, prepared by an Ad Hoc Expert Group appointed by the Director-General of UNESCO, had been published in May 2020 and was undergoing extensive multi-stakeholder virtual consultations. The Chair also mentioned that UNESCO, as a Co-Champion of Recommendation 3C on artificial intelligence, had been working closely to ensure synergies with the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation.

6.   The Chair noted that in keeping with its function as a think tank and a catalyser of ideas, and in order to ensure strong ethical and human rights guardrails for artificial intelligence, the Committee provided a platform to develop a joint United Nations system input on the draft recommendation. During that meeting, the Committee was to discuss and approve the United Nations system-wide contribution to the Ad Hoc Expert Group as prepared by the Committee's artificial intelligence ethics drafting group,[3] under UNESCO leadership. The Committee would also begin to frame a discussion around United Nations system action on the ethics of artificial intelligence, based on the related proposals prepared by the drafting group, with a view to deepening its deliberations during the Committee's fortieth session.

A.   United Nations system-wide contribution to the Ad Hoc Expert Group on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence

7.   In her role as moderator, the Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences of UNESCO, Gabriela Ramos, recalled in her introductory remarks that UNESCO was elaborating the first global standard-setting instrument on the ethics of artificial intelligence in the form of a recommendation. If adopted by the General

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[2] See CEB/2019/1/Add.3.

[3] The following entities, departments and offices participated in the drafting group: UNESCO (lead), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Labour Organization, the International Organization for Migration, International Telecommunication Union, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, Global Pulse initiative, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, and Office of the Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Preparations for the Commemoration of the United Nations 75th Anniversary and the Secretary-General's Road Map for Digital Cooperation.

Conference of UNESCO in 2021, it would be the first global normative instrument to address the ethical developments and applications of artificial intelligence. She noted that the recommendation was only a starting point and provided a framework in which to address ethical concerns related to artificial intelligence – including privacy and data protection, gender and racial biases, increased digital exposure by populations at risk and the increase of disinformation – and stressed the importance of capacity-building and policy support to ensure its effective implementation. The moderator reiterated that the contribution, which represented the collective expertise of the United Nations system on the issue of artificial intelligence, was expected to provide input for the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group to consider when revising the first draft text of the recommendation in September.

8.   In the subsequent discussion, the Committee members thanked UNESCO for the wide consultations and inclusive process, recognized the effort of the Committee's drafting group and voiced their general support for the draft input to the Ad Hoc Expert Group. Committee members also provided comments and suggestions on aspects of the draft recommendation that could be strengthened or amended to be reflected in the United Nations system's contribution.

9.   Several members recommended that the text be more ambitious in its aims. That would include making bold proposals and being more assertive in suggesting that a stronger international legal framework was needed to ensure justice and the protection of human rights in the digital age. Also emphasised was the need to make the ethical principles and policy actions referenced in the draft recommendation more targeted and tangible, while already considering how to approach possible trade-offs between conflicting principles. In that regard, social dialogue was suggested as a way to agree on which ethical principles should be prioritized. Members further recommended including definitions or providing explanations of the terminology used in the draft recommendation (such as ethics and artificial intelligence), as ambiguity could become an obstacle to effective and coherent implementation. However, the moderator noted that some terms were not easy to define and might not have internally acceptable definitions within the United Nations system, which was especially true for the notions of artificial intelligence and ethics and might therefore risk detracting from the focus of the recommendation. Moreover, clear and accessible language would be key for translation across countries and cultures.

10.   The Committee welcomed the fact that the draft included recognition of the particular situation of developing countries. While members highlighted differences within and between countries regarding digital divides, they also stressed the importance of addressing the diversity of countries in terms of development, access and use of artificial intelligence tools, in particular, in relation to their capacity to regulate and govern artificial intelligence at the national, regional and global levels. While information and communications technology capabilities were advancing rapidly within developing countries, that was not always the case for artificial intelligence technology. In that regard, Committee members underlined the urgent need for institutional capacity-building on artificial intelligence.

11.   Committee members highlighted the importance of addressing the challenges faced by vulnerable groups, such as migrants, displaced persons, women, children, and youth. They recognized the need to ensure that artificial intelligence tools were used to protect the rights of people and also noted that the proper use of artificial intelligence technology could support the inclusion of all people in societies and communities. It was noted that young people had an important role to play in realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly on digital issues, and should be considered as key stakeholders.

12. In view of the vulnerability of children, a member suggested that the draft recommendation be strengthened with concrete suggestions and references based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In reflecting on rights-based approaches, explicit consideration should be given to the specific rights of children, recognizing that they would have greater exposure to artificial intelligence over the course of their lives, and their development would be mediated and filtered by artificial intelligence through the information received, the opportunities afforded, the services received, and by the overall impact of their unique physical and psychological attributes.

13. Committee members proposed strengthening the focus on women, including the recognition of gender bias in artificial intelligence and automation. If the technologies were not developed and applied in a gender-responsive way, they would likely reproduce and reinforce existing gender stereotypes and discriminatory social norms. More women and gender-diverse groups, including persons from different ethnic origins, should be involved in the design and deployment of artificial intelligence tools. Gender equality, diversity and inclusion should be reinforced to ensure that everyone could benefit equally. The importance of including transgender and non-binary people was also stressed.

14. Members suggested making the draft recommendation more ambitious with regard to governance, particularly in relation to the rights of individuals and privacy concerns, as well as data, transparency, regulation and safeguarding systems. Governance, which should also be focused on ensuring that artificial intelligence is inclusive, should apply to the entire life cycle of artificial intelligence, from the inception phase to the assessment phase. It was observed that the degree to which artificial intelligence could be utilized for good or bad would depend almost entirely on the way it was governed and regulated. Furthermore, it was noted that it would be useful to incorporate more explicit references to specific human rights norms and standards, such as civil, political, economic, social, cultural and labour rights, throughout the sections of the document in which such references had not yet been incorporated.

15. As for legal frameworks, it was appreciated that the draft United Nations system input noted that appropriate laws and frameworks existed and could be applied to artificial intelligence and other new technologies as well, but the need for controls and a stronger accountability and transparency element could be highlighted.

16. The importance of impact assessments was highlighted, and it was also stressed that the principle of due diligence deserved explicit attention to link action in the private sector with international human rights norms and standards and extend the rights-based principles, as well as data protection principles contained in the document to the private sphere. It was noted that addressing the role of corporations was not without challenges, yet they were recognized as key artificial intelligence stakeholders as well as duty bearers. It was therefore seen as important to bring corporations into the multi-stakeholder process to genuinely foster human rights in the development of artificial intelligence systems. Furthermore, ex ante impact assessments could be used as important tools to prevent the misuse of technology. The inclusion of specifically ethical impact assessments, proposed in the draft text, should be further elaborated.

17. The need to strengthen the environmental and climate change aspects in the draft recommendation was also pointed out during the discussion. In particular, it was underlined that such issues as environmental management of natural resources, preservation of biodiversity, animal welfare, food safety and combating climate change were not necessarily covered by the notion of environmental well-being used in the draft recommendation.

18.   The moderator thanked Committee members for their valuable feedback and noted that UNESCO would incorporate the comments into a revised draft. As for next steps in the intergovernmental process, UNESCO would continue with consultations in August, followed by the production of the second draft of the recommendation by the Expert Group by September 2020 and its submission to Member States for intergovernmental consultations. The Committee was expected to take up the topic again at its next regular meeting.

B.   Recommendations for future United Nations system-wide action on the ethics of artificial intelligence

19.   The moderator then invited the Committee to reflect on United Nations system actions on the ethics of artificial intelligence as introduced in the related discussion paper, developed by the Committee's artificial intelligence ethics drafting group. She noted that the proposals contained therein related to a variety of related initiatives, including the CEB-approved United Nations system-wide strategic approach and road map for supporting capacity development on artificial intelligence, and the Secretary-General's Road Map for Digital Cooperation.

20.   In the paper before the Committee, the drafting group had identified areas that could benefit from further United Nations system engagement, including in developing internal United Nations system-wide guidance and elaborating appropriate methodologies on ethical issues surrounding artificial intelligence, as well as guidance for Member States and other actors. A number of the recommended actions were expected to be taken forward through the creation of an inter-agency working group on the ethics of artificial intelligence, for which UNESCO could play a lead coordinating role, while other more general proposals were also put forward for consideration. The moderator highlighted the possible need to address the ethics of technology more generally, including to encompass recent advancements in biotechnology, nanotechnology, genomics, and neurotechnology.

21.   During the discussion, members expressed their initial support for the recommendations in the discussion paper, including the possibility of forming an inter-agency working group. Various views were offered with regard to the group's scope: whether it should focus on artificial intelligence ethics, be broadened beyond ethics to cover a wider array of artificial intelligence-related issues (such as human rights-approaches, data protection and privacy, and environmental and sustainability aspects), be extended beyond artificial intelligence to encompass ethical issues also applicable to other frontier technologies (such as biotechnology, nanotechnology, genomics, and neurotechnology), or take up wider "digital" issues (such as connectivity, trust and other elements addressed in the Secretary-General's Road Map for Digital Cooperation). Some members noted that, if an inter-agency group were to be formed, it could contribute to efforts to produce a broader artificial intelligence strategy for the United Nations that was being developed under the auspices of the Secretary-General. More generally, the importance of ensuring collaboration, coordination and coherence between the proposed inter-agency group and various related initiatives was stressed. Several entities were proposed to co-lead the group (or prospective thematic subgroups) alongside UNESCO, subject to decisions on its scope and operating modalities. Given the complexity of the issue and the range of possibilities indicated by members, the Committee would further discuss potential collaborative approaches during its regular session in October.

22.   The Committee was regarded as a unique forum in the United Nations system that could deepen a coherent system-wide understanding of artificial intelligence and other frontier technologies, as evidenced by its past work. The United Nations system

was well positioned to both support Member States in developing their artificial intelligence capacities and serve as a platform for a wide range of stakeholders, including the private sector, academia and youth, to discuss norms around artificial intelligence and frontier technologies. In that context, the need to avoid duplication and ensure alignment with existing initiatives was stressed. At the same time, it was emphasized that the United Nations system would need to further strengthen its internal capacity to benefit from artificial intelligence and other technologies, anchored in the human rights framework and ethical principles.

23.   In summarizing the discussion, the moderator noted the support offered for an inter-agency working group, whether dedicated to helping advance the ethical recommendations or with a broadened scope, which would be discussed in more detail at the Committee's next meeting. The normative instrument on artificial intelligence ethics was envisioned as providing a global standard that would inform the application of artificial intelligence in a variety of sectors of relevance to the United Nations system. She underscored that the United Nations had a strong leadership role to play in developing technologies on an ethical basis, an area in which UNESCO had specialized expertise, and that the impact would depend on how United Nations system entities coordinated amongst themselves and leveraged their respective strengths.

24.   Thanking the moderator for her skilful moderation, the Chair concluded by recognizing the inclusive consultation process undertaken by UNESCO and the artificial intelligence ethics drafting group, noting the positive discussion and the Committee's broad support for the draft input to the Ad Hoc Advisory Group on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and by requesting UNESCO to incorporate the comments made into a revised version, which would be sent to the Committee for virtual approval.

25.   He also reiterated that the Committee would continue its discussion on future United Nations system-wide action on the ethics of artificial intelligence during the Committee's session in October, including regarding the potential establishment of an inter-agency working group.

Conclusion

26.   **The Chair requested that UNESCO update the draft input to the Ad Hoc Expert Group on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, taking into account the various refinements and additions suggested by members to strengthen the paper, which would be circulated to the Committee by the Secretary for final approval.**

27.   **Taking into account the feedback provided by members in the initial discussion, the Committee will further consider United Nations system-wide action on the ethics of artificial intelligence at its October 2020 session, under UNESCO leadership.**

III. Follow-up to the system-wide strategic approach and road map for supporting capacity development on artificial intelligence

28.   In introducing the informational item, the Chair noted that the Committee, in 2019, had approved the United Nations system-wide strategic approach and roadmap for supporting capacity development on artificial intelligence, which was subsequently endorsed by CEB, and invited the speaker from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the lead agency, to provide an update on its implementation.

29.   The Head of the Emerging Technologies Division in the ITU Strategic Planning and Membership Department, Preetam Maloor, recalled the content of the strategic approach and the process to develop it. He highlighted that the strategy had been developed taking into account the complex technical, ethical, human rights, and socioeconomic facets of artificial intelligence. He noted that the implementation was to be taken forward by ITU in a collaborative manner within existing mechanisms. In line with those expectations, ITU had since worked to pursue the strategy by coordinating related initiatives through the community of United Nations system stakeholders supporting the annual Artificial Intelligence for Global Good Summit,[4] also taking advantage of the inputs from the large multi-stakeholder community contributing to the Summit.

30.   Following from discussions across the United Nations system, ITU was conducting a mapping exercise of existing artificial intelligence initiatives corresponding to the plan of action as set out in the strategic approach and would identify any gaps to drive and prioritize further action. He noted that ITU with the United Nations Environment Programme and other partners were also undertaking a stocktaking exercise of the various artificial intelligence resources within and outside the United Nations system, to identify potential external resources that the system could utilize and leverage for the implementation of the strategic approach. Finally, he highlighted that the third compendium of United Nations system activities on artificial intelligence was under development, with the aim of producing an artificial intelligence capability catalogue, including information on artificial intelligence tools and data sets.

31.   The Committee would receive an update from ITU on the mapping exercise and gap analysis at the Committee's October session, when it might wish to provide guidance, within its remit, on which areas of the Strategic Approach merited further attention from the United Nations system.

IV.   Other matters

A.   Dates and location of the fortieth session of the Committee

32.   The Chair confirmed the dates of 1 and 2 October 2020 for the Committee's fortieth session, to be held at the Greentree Estate in Manhasset, New York, while continuing to take into due consideration the evolving status of the COVID-19 pandemic and prioritizing the health and well-being of Committee members.[5]

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[4] See https://aiforgood.itu.int/.

[5] Given the still volatile and unpredictable situation due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, it was subsequently decided, in consultation with the Chair, to hold the fortieth session in a virtual format, with two half-day sessions, on 1 and 14 October.