Speech by Mr. Ari Koponen, Chair of the Finnish delegation at the 149th IPU Assembly in Geneva on the general debate theme:

Harnessing science, technology and innovation (STI) for a more peaceful and sustainable future

Dear Colleagues, fellow parliamentarians,

The world around us is constantly changing and evolving, and we cannot stand still, hoping things will remain the same forever. It is in human nature to seek solutions for a better and easier life. This has been the case for civilizations for millennia: from early hunters who domesticated dogs for hunting, to the industrial revolution, and now to modern knowledge-based economies, where the collection of information and computing power are key. Countless scientific innovations have improved our quality of life by eradicating diseases, increasing food production efficiency, and speeding up long-distance travel. The pace of progress is only accelerating at this very moment.

All of this may sound wonderful at first. However, many innovations and developments have also brought significant challenges. Digitalization, for instance, presents major challenges and significant changes to daily life in many countries. How do we ensure we don't become complacent, and how do we maintain our ability to work in an increasingly passive environment? How do we care for the environment when the demand for raw materials keeps growing? Despite these challenges, I aim to stay positive and see potential solutions in science, technology, and innovation. For example, in energy production, there is a shift underway from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. This includes the electrification of transportation, which I personally support by driving an

electric car. In addition to electric vehicles, gas-powered cars should remain part of this progress, and this is why internal combustion engine technology should not be demonized but rather seen as part of the solution. Technological innovations and the abundance of renewable energy also allow energy-intensive industries, such as steel production, to transition to fossil-free methods. This approach is already in use, and the possibilities for reducing emissions in the steel industry are enormous.

My beloved homeland, Finland, is doing a great job in developing these technologies. Finland has recently committed to ambitious goals and is exploring ways to increase R&D financing in the long term. As a small and open economy, Finland focuses on competitiveness by investing in research and development to promote sustainable growth. A prime example of this is the Kvarken region, where both Finland and Sweden have made significant investments in the clean transition. The Vaasa energy cluster exports energy technology that promotes electrification, emission reductions, and energy savings globally. The region's R&D activity is among the highest in the country, with 85% driven by the business sector.

Another promising field is carbon capture and storage (CCS), where CO2 emissions are captured and stored in rock or used, for example, in concrete structures. Additionally, smart solutions can help reduce energy consumption, allowing resources to be directed towards more productive areas. Closely tied to the depletion of raw material resources is the circular economy. We simply cannot afford to throw away valuable materials that could easily be recycled. Here too, we can find solutions through science, technology, and innovation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The level of STI (science, technology, and innovation) often goes hand in hand with the accumulation of capital and education. In other words, to foster new innovations and developments in science and technology, we need new ideas and investment. However, I am optimistic that with determination, any country can become part of this progress. Let me use an example from my own country, Finland. Immediately after World War II, we were a poor, rural country with limited opportunities to attract significant investments. But with the little money we had, we invested in education, aiming to provide every child with a high-quality education. We also introduced free school meals early on, as well as tuition-free higher education. Today, Finland is one of the most developed economies in the world, one of the least corrupt countries globally, the only country to have achieved 100 points in the Global Freedom Status index, and has been ranked the happiest country in the world – for the seventh year in a row! So yes, I believe it is possible to close what seem to be endless development gaps. But for this to happen, a stable society on which to build is needed. Each one of us policymakers can influence this in our own countries.

Finally, a few words on artificial intelligence. I am confident that AI usage will increase, and the opportunities it offers are vast. However, it is not the solution to everything. A combination of AI and human expertise is the best way to harness AI's potential. Our role as parliamentarians is to provide the legal framework for AI use. Furthermore, transparency is necessary regarding how AI systems operate, and all of this must be under the supervision of public authorities.

Dear colleagues, development is not a zero-sum game. One country's positive progress does not take away from another! On the contrary, it creates more opportunities for all of us. Thank you for listening.