



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

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Speech by Dr. Tulia Ackson, IPU President

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Mr. Secretary General,
Honourable Speakers and Deputy Speakers of Parliament,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear colleagues,

Welcome once again to Geneva, home of the IPU and a city that stands at the crossroads of innovation and international cooperation.

From the advent of global humanitarian efforts in the 1860s to the invention of the World Wide Web in 1989, Geneva has always been a melting pot of ideas, cultures and nations.

The city continues to foster an environment in which science and diplomacy intersect, making it a perfect setting for this Assembly's General Debate on the theme of "Harnessing Science, Technology, and Innovation for a More Peaceful and Sustainable Future."

Allow me to begin these opening remarks with a real-life cautionary tale.

In the early 20th century, the world witnessed one of the most outstanding scientific achievements in human history: the splitting of the atom. As scientists like Marie Curie, Ernest Rutherford, and Lise Meitner began unveiling the mysteries of radioactivity and nuclear fission, the possibilities appeared immense: A virtually limitless source of energy that could power cities, revolutionize medicine through radiation therapy and drive progress at unequalled scales. These discoveries revealed a new realm of chemical and physical phenomena with the power to alter human society forever.

But, as we all know, an arms race to weaponize nuclear research erupted quickly, resulting in unprecedented levels of destruction. Unprecedented levels of destruction that, to this day, continue to threaten the very survival of humanity.

In other words, science, technology, and innovation can hold the promise of immense opportunities. Yet, when misused, weaponized, or poorly governed, they also bring world-threatening perils.

Today, we find ourselves at another crossroads in scientific and technological achievements. To cite a few examples, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and biotechnology are transforming societies at exceptionally fast speeds.

AI is revolutionizing industries, medicine, and education. Quantum computing promises to solve problems beyond the capabilities of today's most powerful supercomputers. Biotechnological breakthroughs such as gene editing could eradicate previously incurable diseases.

Scientific knowledge and expertise also play a critical role in advancing evidence-based policymaking and can help address our biggest challenges: tackling climate change, achieving the SDGs, boosting public scrutiny by amplifying the voice of the people, resolving long-standing inequalities, etc.

But we must also recognize the very real risks associated with innovation. Among these, technological developments may undermine democracy by spreading misinformation or misleading deepfakes. Enhanced surveillance tools have the potential to jeopardize human rights.

Socioeconomic disparities may widen if new technologies are only available to a select few, or if existing inequalities – such as gender inequality – are perpetuated by the biased data on which plenty of new software is based. Advancements in weapons technologies can seriously undermine global peace and security.

Dear friends,

We either learn from history or are doomed to repeat it. When approaching these transformative developments, we must ask ourselves:

How can we use scientific and technological progress to actually benefit everyone and create a more peaceful and sustainable future?

And, critically, how do we ensure that innovations do not come at the expense of widening disparities and inequalities, bolstering new forms of conflict and destruction and eroding our social fabric?

Harnessing science, technology, and innovation for the greater good means raising and addressing profound ethical, security, and societal questions. As policymakers, we must come together and have a serious discussion during this Assembly and beyond.

And we must also act decisively, mainly on three key areas: (1) legislation and regulation; (2) oversight and accountability; and (3) public engagement and education.

Firstly, in legislation and regulation, we have the power to craft laws that guide technological developments in a responsible manner and protect our economies and societies from potential risks. Many parliaments are already taking positive steps in this direction, like establishing comprehensive regulatory frameworks for emerging tools, such as AI.

Data protection laws, legislation that incentivizes sustainable and green innovation, and the implementation of laws that promote digital inclusion are all examples of parliamentary action to harness technology ethically.

Secondly, in terms of oversight and accountability, parliaments must vigilantly monitor the implementation of technologies and hold both private companies and governments accountable for their actions. For example, parliaments can summon tech executives, experts, and other officials to hearings to address issues like the proliferation of misinformation and hate speech on social media platforms, data breaches, or ethical violations.

Through the establishment of specialized committees or commissions, parliaments can also oversee developments in specific technological fields, such as cybersecurity or biotechnology, ensuring compliance with laws and regulations.

Thirdly, in terms of public engagement and education, we must foster informed and inclusive societies. This includes funding digital literacy and science education initiatives that will equip citizens with the skills needed to participate in a technology-driven world while remaining fully informed of risks and benefits.

As representatives of the people, we must also promote inclusive participation in technological development, ensuring that women, youth, people with disabilities, marginalized communities, and under-represented groups can contribute to and benefit from innovation.

Dear colleagues,

Technology governance is a collaborative effort that extends beyond the halls of parliament and necessitates partnerships with actors such as governments, civil society, the scientific community, and the private sector - both nationally and internationally.

The IPU, as the global organization of national parliaments, embodies this collaborative spirit. The IPU is ready to help parliaments navigate the technological revolution that is currently shaping our world. I urge each of you to engage wholeheartedly in these efforts and this General Debate. Let us exchange ideas, challenge perspectives, and build consensus on actionable strategies to harness science, technology, and innovation for a more peaceful and sustainable future.

Thank you.