139th Inter-Parliamentary Union General Assembly

Address by Senator Denis O'Donovan, Cathaoirleach (Speaker) of Seanad Éireann (Irish Senate)

General Debate on "promoting peace and development in the age of innovation and technological change"

- Madame President, fellow Speakers, colleagues and friends, it is both a pleasure and an honour to have this opportunity to address this assembly today in my capacity as Speaker of the Irish Senate and leader of the delegation from Ireland.

- I am particularly pleased that my few words to you today relate to the issues of innovation and technological change and their role in promoting peace and development. This is a topic which has a deep resonance with Ireland, given that as a nation, Ireland has been a global leader in embracing new technologies and is at the top end of global rankings in terms of mobile and smart phone and tablet ownership and usage.

- Innovation and technological changes have the potential to address OR widen global poverty and inequality. The situation in least developed countries is very different, where only 16% of individuals use the Internet, less than 2% use e-commerce and there is a huge urban–rural divide with 3G networks covering 89% of urban areas but only 29% of rural areas.

- While new technologies are already being used to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals, the benefit to the Least Developed Countries will be limited if their own populations are not part of developing and using the technological solutions to their challenges. Women and girls need to be at the centre of technological innovation given their significant role in development. Education is key – quality basic education and increased focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics in education and training systems.

- Ireland has been a consistent supporter in improving access to quality basic education especially for girls. The focus has largely been on primary education but as progress is being made in increasing primary completion, Ireland is paying more attention to the transition to secondary education and to technical and vocational education. In addition through the Fellowship and other scholarship programmes Ireland supports hundreds of young people annually to achieve advanced university degrees.

- Integrating technology into education systems is a real challenge, as technologies develop at such a fast rate while updating education curricula and systems is a slow process.

- In many countries Governments struggle to meet even the most basic education needs of all of their children. So while we should

continue to encourage and train teachers and students in new technologies and ICT skills we also need to look to innovative ways of bringing this learning into children's lives.

- There are a number of initiatives, where Ireland has been able to share initiatives that have generated an interest and excitement in science, technology and ICT among young people. I would like to share some examples with you–

  - Ireland actively supports Africa Code Week since it was founded in 2015. As we know, the goal of Africa Code Week is to empower the young generation by teaching the coding skills they need in order to thrive in the 21st century. Africa Code Week has gone from strength to strength and now reaches children and teachers in 36 countries across Africa developing digital literacy and coding skills.

  - The Young Scientist Exhibition has been a feature of Irish students' lives for 55 years and has hugely contributed to the uptake of science and technology in secondary schools in Ireland and enhanced the quality of teaching and learning.

  - Building on the Irish experience the Young Scientist Tanzania exhibition was launched in 2011 followed by the Young Scientist Tanzania Science Outreach Programme. Young

Scientist Kenya Exhibition held its inaugural National Science and Technology Exhibition in July this year.

- As well as providing a platform for young scientists to demonstrate their innovation and talents, the Young Scientist programme helps popularise science and technology amongst young people and encourages them to develop projects that seek practical solutions to the problems they and their communities face.

- CAMARA is an Irish NGO which refurbishes computers for use in its Education Hubs in Africa in countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Tanzania, Uganda. It also helps educators and students develop their ICT skills

- With support from Irish Aid, the Irish Government's programme for overseas development, CAMARA is enhancing the capacity of local organisations by establishing Regional Digital Hubs and building the capacity of educational institutions in Africa to deliver sustainable 'Education through ICT'. CAMARA was founded in 2005 and since then has impacted over two million learners.

- Increasing digital literacy is essential especially for girls and young women, marginalised youth and poorer children and

youth living in remote and inaccessible locations and creates access to vast resources of knowledge and skills. Two Irish based online learning initiatives – Shaw Academy and Alison – already provide online courses accessible to anyone around the world using digital technologies. Such initiatives are a catalyst for positive social change, creating opportunity, prosperity, and equality for everyone

- In conclusion, Science is vital for the social and economic development of society. It contributes to shaping sound policies, improving the welfare of people, building capacity in developing economies, and fostering international co-operation between nations. As parliamentarians we have a responsibility to support and strengthen the role and impact of the scientific community in addressing global challenges related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. I look forward to our own discussions here in this forum, and to exploring further the role of parliaments in this important matter.

- To conclude in Irish, colleagues, tá áthas mór orm bheaith anseo inniu and tá súil agam go mbeidh dul chun cinn a dhéanamh le duinn go leor againn– I am delighted to speak here today among friends and colleagues and I hope that progress will result from our discussions at this assembly.

- Go raibh maith agaibh go leor. Thank you all.