



The President
of the
Economic and Social Council



PRESIDENT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Joint General Assembly - Economic and Social Council Special Meeting

“From Digital Inclusion to Innovation: Advancing Science, Technology and Youth Entrepreneurship for Development”

Tuesday, 5 May 2026

10 a.m. – 1 p.m.

ECOSOC Chamber, United Nations Headquarters, New York

Concept Note

Overview

The President of the General Assembly and the President of the Economic and Social Council will convene a Joint Special Meeting entitled “*From Digital Inclusion to Innovation: Advancing Science, Technology and Youth Entrepreneurship for Development*”, in conjunction with the 2026 Multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals (STI Forum).

In line with General Assembly resolution A/RES/80/147,¹ the meeting will focus on science, technology and innovation for development, with a special emphasis on actions to address the needs of developing countries in these fields. It will examine persistent gaps and opportunities in developing countries related to governance capacities for STI-led development, digital infrastructure, access to finance, technology transfer, and innovation—while also considering the implications of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

The meeting will also address the critical shift from digital inclusion—as an end in itself—to STI-driven youth entrepreneurship as a driver of transformation, reflecting a priority of the President of the Economic and Social Council. Through a multi-stakeholder dialogue, the meeting will examine how young people can be supported with skills, digital tools, and financing to leverage science, technology and innovation for entrepreneurship. It will contribute to a shared understanding of how to translate global commitments into actionable pathways that support countries in closing digital divides, building innovation ecosystems, and enabling youth as drivers of sustainable development.

¹ See <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/80/147>

Thematic Focus

Challenges and Opportunities in Developing Countries in Relation to Science, Technology, and Innovation

Recent global policy frameworks highlight the critical role of science, technology and innovation (STI) in accelerating progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while underscoring persistent challenges faced by developing countries. Despite its transformative potential, the benefits of STI remain unevenly distributed. Gaps in regulatory frameworks and institutional capacity, limited digital infrastructure and access to high-performance computing, and shortages in STEM skills continue to constrain progress. Fragile innovation ecosystems, weak research – industry linkages, and limited access to finance further restrict national research capacity and increase the risk of brain drain.

Emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, risk widening inequalities as their development outpaces countries' capacity to adopt and govern them. Persistent digital and AI divides -- across geography, gender, income, and age -- limit inclusive participation, while the digital gender divide continues to hinder the engagement of women and girls in STI fields. These challenges are compounded by reliance on imported technologies, unequal access to data, and intellectual property regimes that may constrain affordability and technology transfer.

At the same time, developing countries have significant opportunities to harness STI for economic transformation. Advances in digital technologies and scientific research are creating new pathways for participation in the global economy. With enabling policies, investments in skills and innovation ecosystems, and strengthened international cooperation, these transformations can drive inclusive growth and accelerate progress toward the SDGs. General Assembly resolution A/RES/80/147 highlights priorities including strengthening governance systems, expanding investment, particularly from the private sector enhancing STEM education, and fostering inclusive innovation ecosystems that engage youth and women and vulnerable groups. It also emphasizes the importance of multilateral, North – South, South – South, and triangular cooperation to support capacity-building, technology transfer, and knowledge sharing. Complementary frameworks, including A/RES/80/173², underscore the role of digital public infrastructure and digital public goods in advancing inclusive digital transformation.

Youth Innovation in Action: Creating Enabling Environments for Youth-Led Entrepreneurship, Advancing STI Skills, and Leveraging Strategic Finance

The large and growing youth population in many developing countries represents a significant opportunity for entrepreneurship and innovation, particularly when supported by investments in skills, finance, and inclusive access to technology. While expanding digital inclusion remains essential, access alone is insufficient. The next frontier lies in supporting young people to exercise

² See Outcome document of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the overall review of the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) adopted in December 2025, at <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/80/173>

their agency as entrepreneurs, creators, and innovators, leveraging STI to drive inclusive and sustainable development.

Global frameworks reinforce this shift. The [Global Digital Compact](#) calls for an inclusive and equitable digital future, emphasizing universal connectivity, digital skills, and meaningful youth participation. The [Declaration on Future Generations](#)³ urges support for youth entrepreneurship and innovation, while the [Doha Political Declaration](#) highlights persistent youth unemployment and decent work deficits. The [Sevilla Commitment](#) further emphasizes mobilizing financing, strengthening innovation ecosystems, and supporting entrepreneurship in developing countries.

While young people are disproportionately affected by digital divides⁴, they also represent one of the most dynamic and overlooked sources of creativity, entrepreneurship, and innovation. With approximately **1.2 billion youth aged 15-24 globally**, youth represent a powerful driver of innovation and economic transformation⁵. As digital natives, many young people are well positioned to leverage emerging technologies to develop solutions to pressing challenges, including climate change, food security, urbanization, and inequality. Youth-led innovation is already contributing to inclusive digital services, sustainable urban solutions, and climate-smart technologies. However, structural barriers continue to limit their full participation in the digital economy, especially in small island developing States, least developed countries, and landlocked developing countries.

Despite steady progress in connectivity, an estimated 2.6 billion people – with a significant share of them being young people in developing countries -- remain offline⁶, highlighting persistent disparities in access, affordability, and digital skills. In addition, youth are nearly three times more likely to be unemployed than adults⁷ and many face constraints related to limited access to finance, inadequate digital and STEM skills and insufficient linkages between education systems and labour markets. In sectors such as agribusiness, where youth employment is significant⁸, barriers to land, finance, technology, and markets persist, despite growing opportunities through digital and climate-smart innovations.

Addressing these challenges requires policies and ecosystems that enable youth-led innovation. This includes improving the ease of doing business, expanding access to finance and markets, and investing in digital and STEM education, as well as entrepreneurship support systems such as incubators and accelerators. Strengthened partnerships among governments, the private sector,

³ See Action 34(e) Pact for the Future, at https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sof-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf

⁴ See ITU data on [Digital inclusion of youth](#). While youth are often seen as digitally connected, many, especially in low-income, rural, or marginalized communities, face barriers such as limited access to devices, affordable internet, digital skills, and safe online environments, which restrict their ability to fully participate in education, employment, and civic life.

⁵ See <https://social.desa.un.org/publications/world-youth-report-2025>

⁶ See [Press release](#)

⁷ See Employment and Social Trends 2026 by International Labor Organization (ILO) at <https://www.ilo.org/publications/flagship-reports/employment-and-social-trends-2026#:~:text=Young%20people%20face%20particularly%20severe,of%20these%20groups%20of%20workers.>

⁸ See FAO, [The Status of Youth in Agrifood Systems](#) 2025.

academia, and youth are essential to bridge gaps between education and employment, align innovation with development priorities, and scale impactful youth-led solutions.

Objectives and Expected Outcomes

The meeting aims to:

- Examine the challenges that developing countries face in leveraging science, technology and innovation as drivers of sustainable development, with particular attention to barriers affecting youth agency and STI-driven entrepreneurship.
- Identify key policy, institutional, and financial enablers that support STI development in developing countries and, within that context, youth entrepreneurship in science, technology, and innovation sectors.
- Share good practices, evidence, and lessons learned from national and regional experiences.
- Promote multi-stakeholder partnerships among governments, the private sector, academia, and youth-focused and youth-led organizations.
- Amplify youth voices and highlight their role as partners and drivers of sustainable development and inclusive economic growth.

The meeting is expected to contribute to:

- Enhanced understanding of developing countries' challenges and opportunities in harnessing STI, and how to promote youth entrepreneurship
- Identification of scalable and replicable approaches to strengthen inclusive innovation ecosystems in developing countries, including for youth.
- Strengthened collaboration and partnerships across sectors and stakeholders
- Policy-relevant recommendations to support youth-led innovation, entrepreneurship, and digital service exports.
- Increased visibility of youth innovators and entrepreneurs and their contributions to achieving the SDGs as agents of change.

A summary of the discussions prepared by the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Economic and Social Council will be circulated after the meeting.

Proposed programme

The three-hour meeting will be held from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Tuesday, 5 May 2026 in the ECOSOC Chamber at UNHQ, New York.

The programme will feature an opening segment followed by two panel discussions with experts, practitioners and young innovators. Interventions by Member States, UN system entities and civil society organizations will be possible during each panel discussion. Panels will ensure gender and regional balance.