XXIV Infopoverty World Conference
UN HQ NY 10,30 a.m. - 11.04.25

I would like to start today by sharing a visit I made to a wine producer in Sardinia two years ago. While I was admiring the vines and enjoying the timeless natural environment around me, reflecting on the hard, physical work necessary for the production of our favourite wines, they started to explain how they had recently introduced a system for capturing insects, photographing them and transferring the data to a server. After identifying the insects, a procedure could be activated for protecting the vines if they were dangerous for wine production. The system existed thanks to AI, which was a great surprise to me. What does this story teach us? Perhaps that every time we realise that the reality around us is different from what we expect we enlarge our understanding. And that seeing things with our own eyes is the key to really understanding them.

I was reminded of this when I was invited to give the speech about AI here in New York at the Occam Conference. At times it can seem difficult to say positive things about this topic. We hear so much about the risks. It's going to destroy millions of jobs, it's going to become more intelligent than us, it's going to make us slaves to electronic devices and surveillance cameras and so on. It's going to make defending democracy and civil rights a real challenge. And this is without mentioning any of the existential risks we hear a lot about, like the malicious use of AI to build dangerous weapons and so on.

But the more I looked into the topic the more other aspects began to emerge. There are, in fact, many new opportunities offered by AI in different fields at every latitude, and even more so in countries like those of the African continent. I am personally following the projects of the multidisciplinary team of the Laboratory led by Prof Pecchia, the Intelligent Health Technology at the Campus Bio-Medico University of Rome, which

coordinates an international network of researchers developing safe, effective, and sustainable health tech solutions to tackle some of the ongoing challenges in Africa.

For instance, the severe shortage of qualified healthcare professionals, particularly in rural areas, is hindering early diagnosis and treatment of even easily treatable diseases. Moreover, there are environmental and infrastructural conditions very different from those for which Western technologies are designed, such as limited access to clean water, unstable electricity, and challenging environments. It is precisely in this scenario that Artificial Intelligence, if used responsibly and inclusively towards local communities, can make a difference. For instance, in collaboration with research centres in Ghana and the Republic of Congo, the Campus Bio-Medico team is developing a platform that integrates diagnostic devices into a real-time communication network with the World Health Organization. This transforms AI into a critical epidemiological surveillance tool in territories where every hour counts. The key point is that if a new epidemic were to break out, the information must arrive before the virus.

But even in countries with fewer specific critical issues, the encounter between AI and health does not fail to surprise us positively. After a serious motorcycle accident in 2017, Michele Roccati, 30 years old, was paralyzed. Then three years later, thanks to AI, he was able to walk again, thanks to an electrode that stimulates his damaged spinal cord with electrical impulses.

The use of AI can have a positive impact also in the field of agriculture. Federico II University of Naples is the leader of the National Centre for Agricultural Technologies, a centre of national research devoted to the development of new technology, including Artificial Intelligence. It aims to promote sustainable and innovative agriculture. I am aware that in Africa one of the critical aspects of agricultural production is the massive presence of parasites that make the use of chemical pesticides indispensable. AI can be an instrument which makes a real contribution to the monitoring and management of the insect population.

And the impact that AI can have in the field of education is also significant, where it can be a truly crucial tool in the fight against poverty.

I am referring in particular to distance learning and above all to education as a path to job creation. It is not a coincidence that the Italian Council of Ministers has promoted the *Piano Mattei* and has identified education as one of the main drivers of the plan which is based on the social and economic cooperation between Italy and Africa. In order to make the promotion of education a reality the following specific objectives have been laid down: the promotion of training in general together with the retraining of teachers; the setting up of new professional courses in line with market and local needs; a strong emphasis on technical and professional learning and the promotion of the specialist Italian technical school system.

No less important to the Plan are other interventions, for example in the field of agriculture and which deal with security, food self-sufficiency and the recognition of the importance of food production. While in the Health sector there is a real focus on making healthcare more accessible to wider sections of the population. In the energy field there are measures developing green energy in the continent. In each of the areas of interest both innovation and research are the fundamental pillars of the Plan.

The digital world is not only a world of innovation, but also of open competition. This is the crux that requires the search for a synthesis to safeguard human well-being.

Many developers are against regulation seeing it as an obstacle to what they are trying to create. Again we need to ask what type of development we want. Do we simply want to develop technology or do we want to use technology in an ethical way to bring social benefits? What is our goal? It is instructive that recently the UK has started to move towards a more European approach in relation to protection of copyright as AI becomes more and more powerful in so many fields. China too is reflecting on the necessity of labelling content as AI or nonAI. There is no better place than the UN to discuss different national perspectives in relation to the challenges we face. To listen to a wide

range of voices and find a form of development which is sustainable for our collective future.

Given the very strong technological competition in progress, the extreme speed of innovation and the fact that even developers do not know exactly what developments there will be, **is** it not in the interest of the entire human society to give progress a new highway with solid guardrails in order to innovate safely? And to understand clearly the advantages and disadvantages of using it in a positive way?

For example, we acquire information in many ways. It is possible to visit a wine producer and learn something, better still to work there. Or we can read a book about wine production, which is a kind of representation or photograph of that reality. When we read a book we take away four or five points that are useful for us, we use our powers of synthesis to extract useful information. If we read a summary of a book then we are extracting something from a synthesis already made by someone else. There is a danger that knowledge begins to contract if we do not insist on the importance of first hand experience, of going out to visit a place, to listening to the direct experience of those who touch the earth with their hands.

The digital world runs on synthesis and while this is essential for work, for life, for production, we should keep in mind that unless humans use AI in positive, active ways we risk losing important sources of knowledge, we risk that contraction which is an inevitable part of synthesis. Recent studies show that 90% of people stop after reading a summary rather than using the summary as a starting point for looking at a question in more detail. Will this contribute to progress? It is legitimate to ask.

The AI opportunities are immense and even if we want to go back, to slow down, to reverse innovation, we cannot. We must embrace AI and use it in positive ways.

There is a role for government here. To promote infrastructure and to create conditions in which start ups can use AI tools and compete with powerful organisations. Or to support journalism as a human activity which faces the AI challenge with a renewed ethical spirit.

In the current digital environment information flows are rapid and global. Disinformation finds both new ways of spreading and ways to avoid easy identification. Things like Deepfake can be produced at low cost and without a high level of technical skill. It is for this reason that the Italian government has approved a bill, which is currently being examined in Parliament, to introduce a new crime, that of Deepfake. In this context it must be added that it is not only necessary for the journalism profession to respect existing rules, but it is of fundamental importance to create an ethical code around the use of AI in the editing room.

For this reason, together with a Commission of experts in AI that I have set up, we are pursuing a process of nudging to try and encourage media providers to adopt an ethical code for AI.

What is the objective? To ensure that before the publication of a news story there must always be verification by a professional journalist who takes responsibility for that report; the news must be checked and any use of AI in image, sound or video must be clearly indicated. Citizens have the right to transparency and they need to experience a relationship of trust with the information system.

There are those who are already experimenting with making a newspaper entirely with AI, without "going and seeing". And soon anyone at a low cost will be able to make a film. The same in music. But I doubt that they will be great films or songs that remain in history if we let our creative identity die.

There is a huge difference between using artificial intelligence to improve healthcare, crops, make education more accessible on the one hand and, on the other delegating to artificial intelligence evaluations, interpretations, decisions that are up to us humans and us alone. There is a difference between using a technology to improve the life of the entire world, and using it to make the life of only a few better.

The essential needs of man do not change. And it was these needs that led man to fight for important rights. Rights that AI cannot violate in the name of progress, but must

serve in the name of the well-being of all. To embrace the incredible challenge of AI we must make it evolve in harmony with the good of humanity. And this is up to us.

Although the global landscape has undergone - and will continue to undergo - profound changes, I remain convinced of the viability of the model of international cooperation and its importance in achieving today's even more ambitious goals for peace, people, and prosperity. Indeed, we need an exchange of views on the topic of regulation at a global level. And we need our International organisations now more than ever. At the same time we must keep on asking ourselves the important questions and finding the best answers we can.