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FAO and ITU launch Global initiative empowering youth to drive innovation in agrifood systems

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At the opening of the AI for Good Summit (8-11 July) in Geneva today, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) officially launched the Robotics for Good â?? Youth Challenge 2025â??26, a global initiative aimed at empowering youth to drive innovation in agrifood systems.

The second edition of this initiative invites young people aged 12 to 18 from around the world to design and build robots that help address one of humanityâ??s most pressing challenges - food insecurity.

â??This challenge is not just about robotics,â?• said FAO Director-General QU Dongyu during his keynote address at the summit. â??It is about empowering youth to become agents of change in the fight against hunger.â?•

FAO will serve as a strategic partner in the initiative, providing technical guidance, mentorship, and support through its Youth Innovation Lab and Transformative Research models.

Digital divide

In his address, the Director-General also highlighted the transformative potential of artificial intelligence (AI) in advancing food security and building climateâ??resilient agriculture.

Qu presented FAOâ??s vision for inclusive and ethical AI in agrifood systems, designed to empower farmers and rural communities, particularly in low-income countries.

â??The digital divide is becoming development divide,â? Qu said. â??If we allow these gaps to persist, the promises of artificial intelligence to reduce poverty, improve resilience and drive innovation will remain out of reach for those who need it most.â?•

According to the ITU, 1 in 3 people worldwide remains offline, most of them in rural and low-income countries. Nearly 2.6 billion people still lack access to the Internet, and only 26% of people in low-income countries use it at all. According to the World Bank, fewer than 1 in 5 people in Sub-Saharan Africa have access to broadband, limiting not only connectivity, but also the capacity to participate in the digital and AI revolutions.

Leveraging the power of AI in agrifood systems

The Director-General outlined how FAO is harnessing digital tools to close the connectivity gap and drive transformation across global agrifood systemsâ??from precision agriculture and resource management to food security early warning systems and market access.

FAOâ??s approach focuses on ensuring that AI technologies benefit those who need them most. This includes new AI-powered advisory services tailored to smallholder farmers and delivered in local languages, made possible through partnerships such as with Digital Green. Through generative AI, FAO has already reduced the cost of farmer advisory services from 30 dollars to just 3 dollars per farmer, with further reductions anticipated.

Through FAOâ??s advanced remote sensing and geospatial platforms, AI allows the Organization to rapidly analyze drought, water stress, crop types, land use and forest management. FAO is also leveraging open-source Big Data to track food security threats before they become crises. Predictive models help farmers make better-informed decisions about sowing, harvesting, and marketing their crops.

Among its flagship innovations, the Organization is piloting a specialized â??knowledge botâ? built on its extensive repository of nearly 150,000 scientific publications, and working on the worldâ??s first agrifood-focused foundation AI model to provide tailored, context-specific solutions from planting to post-harvest.

As a founding member of the Digital Public Goods Alliance and a signatory to the Rome Call for AI Ethics, FAO continues to champion digital solutions that are guided by transparency, human dignity, and the principle to â??do no harm.â?

The Director General re-affirmed that responsible governance of AI is essential to delivering the Organizationâ??s Four Betters: Better Production, Better Nutrition, a Better Environment, and a Better Lifeâ??leaving no one behind.

Qu called on all partners to work together to ensure that AI is inclusive, transparent and human-centered, addressing global challenges while accelerating progress across agrifood systems.

Organized by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in partnership with over 40 UN sister agencies and coâ??convened by the Government of Switzerland, the Summit brings together policymakers, researchers, industry leaders, startups, civil society, and other stakeholders to harness AIâ??s potential in solving global challenges.