

People, Power, and AI: Rethinking Development for the New Era

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Nolte, Lourens, 2013



United Nations Foundation, 2015



People Images, 2025



New Jadsada, 2026



Neeraz Chaturvedi, 2020

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Overview¹

Artificial intelligence has rapidly moved from the margins of technological discourse to the center of policy debates about economic development, governance, and social well-being.



In United Nations circles and elsewhere, this debate is dominated by two narratives. One is focused on existential risks, arguing that AI technology is so potentially dangerous that frontier development needs to be carefully controlled (often by the companies themselves). A second argues that the revolutionary potential of AI is such that the priority should be to overcome the capacity and infrastructure barriers that limit development in the Global South. Both are important perspectives and well represented in current debates.

However, it is the range of social impacts and policy issues between the two extremes of risk and benefit that is already shaping how societies will adapt to the integration of AI over the next decades, including whether the extreme future scenarios come to pass. There is a growing body of evidence on how AI is shaping societies and what the trajectories might be across specific dimensions. This paper pulls that evidence together into an integrated framework to inform priorities for AI policy in a development context.

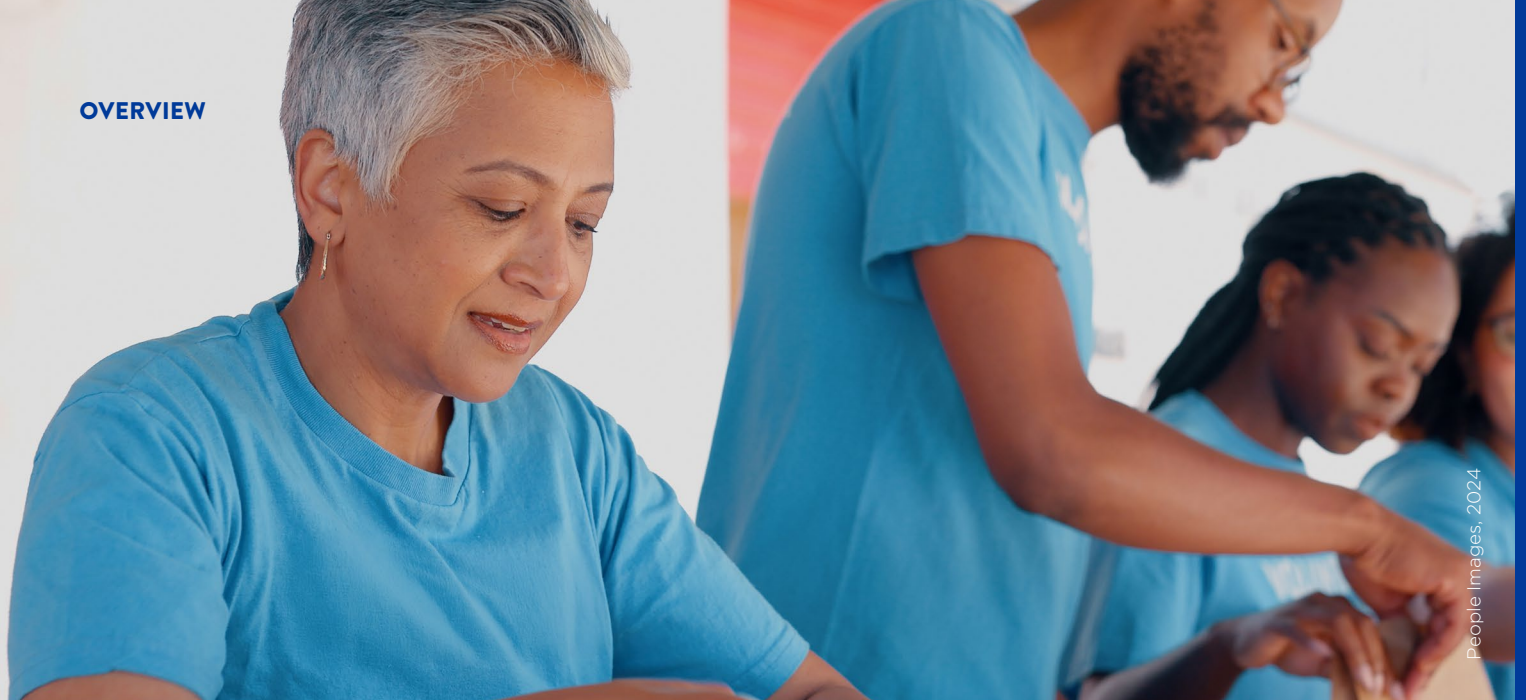
More governments are now developing national AI policies and considering how to ensure that their approach to AI protects national sovereignty and aligns with the public interest. The emerging discussion on the next UN development agenda offers a chance to consider collectively what is needed in different contexts so that people everywhere can live well with AI. We hope that this framework approach will be useful in grounding these discussions in the realities of current AI trends.

If the first development agenda was about extreme poverty, and the second emphasized sustainability and climate limits, any global goals after 2030 (new or retained), and indeed any future national policy and development cooperation strategies and partnerships will need to be interpreted through the lens of technology. Specifically, how will AI permanently shift relationships, creating new opportunities and risks? How can this be managed in a context where both extreme poverty and sustainability are still unfinished business? How does AI affect the context in which human development outcomes will, or will not, be achieved?

Understanding current trends, and acting now to address any unwanted effects, will be critical in determining the pathways for the future impact of AI. Humanity is not powerless in the face of technological change, but the first step toward choosing the future we want is understanding the present.

This paper uses the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to understand these current trends. The global development agenda — agreed at the UN — is not a policy blueprint, but it is a signal of what governments, and their people collectively, think is necessary for a good life. The analysis groups the SDGs into four clusters that reflect important pathways through which AI interacts with human well-being: growth, poverty, and inequality; public services; governance, institutions, privacy, and safety; and resources, energy, and environment.

¹With grateful thanks to David Steven, Renata Dwan, Pablo Angulo-Troconis, George Hampton, Emrys Schoemaker, and Friederike Schueuer for very helpful comments on an earlier version. Any errors are those of the authors alone.



AI poses four challenges to human well-being:

- 1. For growth and poverty,** the key challenge is **inequality**, and the way that AI will shape economic relationships, employment, and earnings.
- 2. For public service provision,** the key challenge is **accountability** and how AI reshapes and reframes the relationships among governments, companies, and people.
- 3. For governance and institutions,** the key challenge is **trust**, and how AI reshapes the information environment upon which institutional legitimacy depends.
- 4. For resources and energy,** the key challenge is **resources** and how AI is driving demand for energy and other key inputs in the material world.

These challenges will shape the context in which governments, civil society, and the private sector collaborate at the local, national, and global levels to achieve human well-being.

Whether and to what extent AI enhances or undermines human lives will depend on the institutional choices that are made, and political priorities that are set, over the next few years.

It is worth noting that this framing excludes some important aspects of how AI might affect lives and outcomes in the future. In particular, AI creates new security challenges, not least managing the development and use of autonomous weapons, and protection from the risks of misuse including the development of biological or chemical weapons and cyberattacks. It may in the future also create new, as yet unknown, existential risks to humanity as a whole. New risks to security create a potentially disastrous future for human well-being, but these scenarios are not the subject of this paper. Rather, we look at the challenges of the present and use them as the guide for future pathways.

Introduction

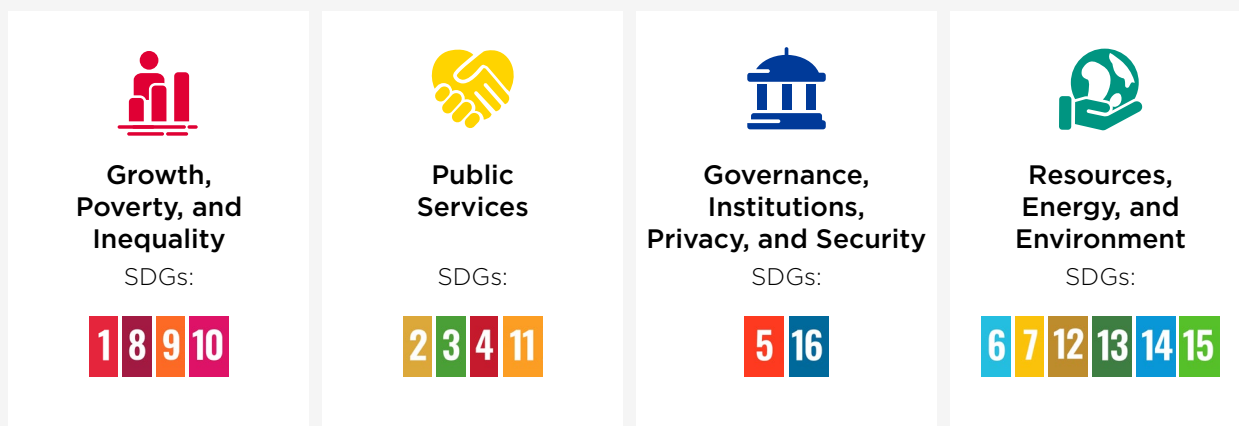
Over the past decade, advances in machine learning, computing infrastructure, and data availability have moved AI from specialized research into commercial applications, public administration, and everyday life.

The policy discourse is focused on a hypothetical future and veers between optimism about technological progress and predictions of disaster. This paper concentrates on how AI is reshaping human well-being in the present and what policy responses are required now. We identify four areas where policy action is urgently needed: inequality, accountability, trust, and sustainability.

We propose that the Sustainable Development Goals provide a useful reference point to examine this issue. The SDGs articulate a broad conception of development that extends beyond economic growth to include social inclusion, institutional quality, environmental sustainability, and human dignity. AI technologies have an impact on all of these areas.



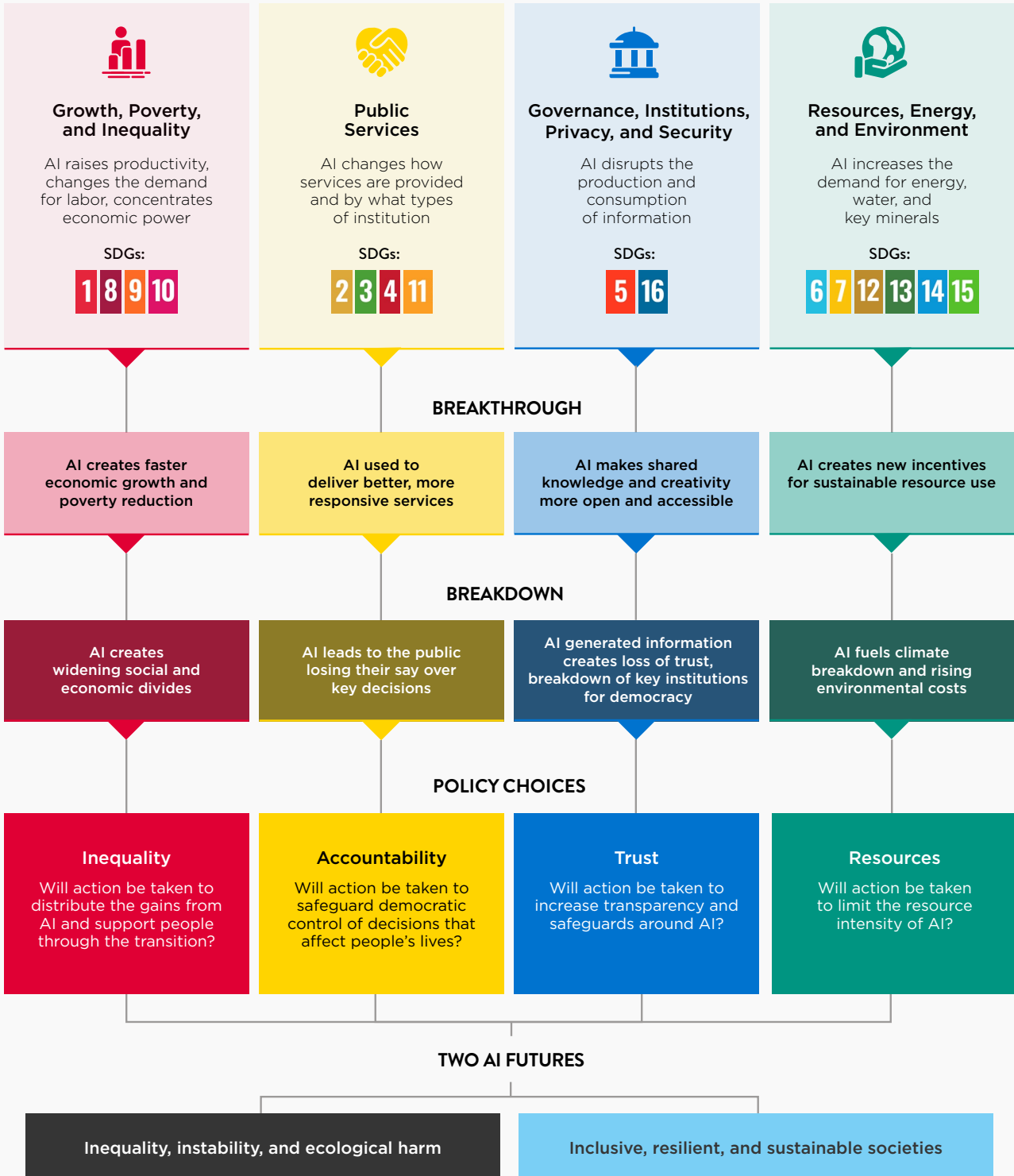
This paper is organized around four clusters of goals, representing the four key mechanisms through which AI is affecting human well-being²:



² SDG 17 is excluded from this analysis, as it represents a crosscutting set of ways to achieve the goals, including technology and artificial intelligence. AI may, however, have impacts on some of these means of implementation themselves, including finance, technical assistance, and trade.

Choosing the AI future we want

AI is shaping outcomes across all areas of life, posing new opportunities and challenges for human wellbeing.



INTRODUCTION

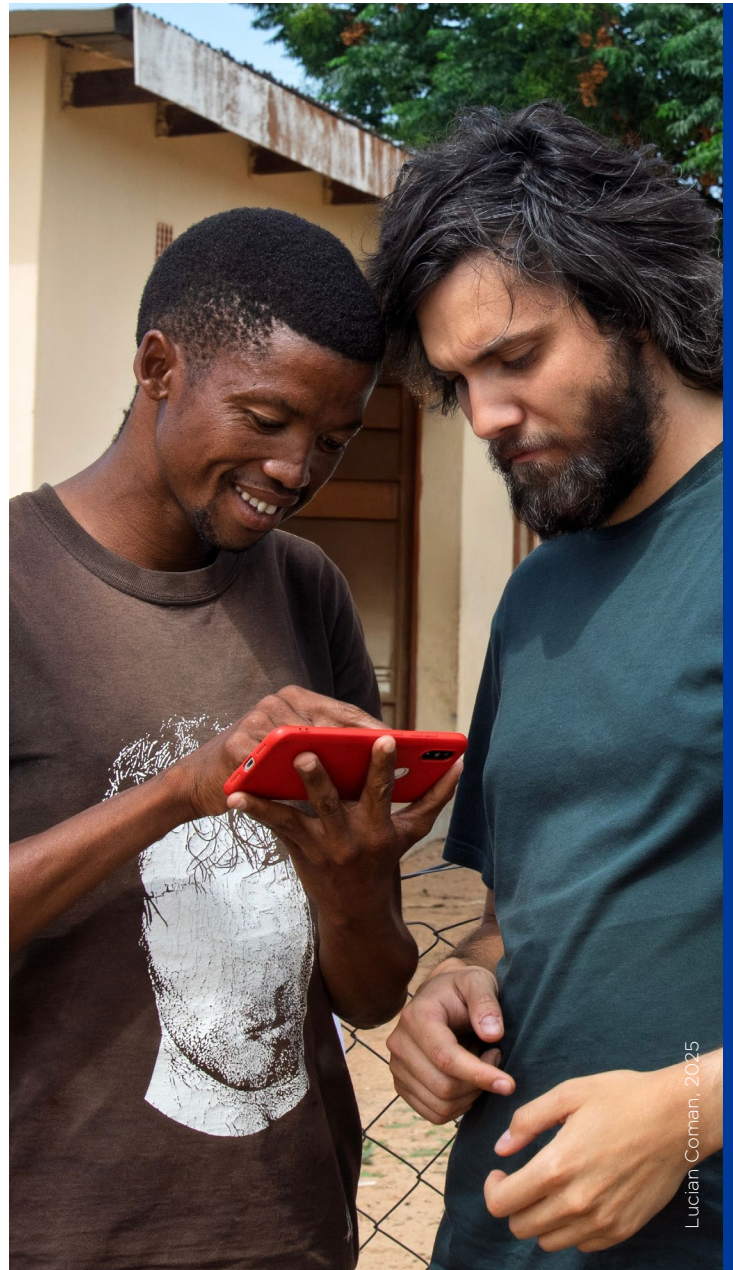
Two analytical caveats are important. First, empirical evidence about AI's impacts remains incomplete. Many applications are relatively recent, and systematic research and data are still emerging. Second, the effects of AI are highly heterogeneous. Outcomes vary across sectors, occupations, income groups, and national contexts.

Digital divides will shape the pace and nature of how these trends affect the populations of different countries. The digital divide now extends beyond connectivity to computing power, data, language representation, standard-setting influence, and public-sector capability, and it is widening (OSET/ILO 2024; Microsoft 2026).

Countries that adopt AI late will miss out on opportunities but may not be protected from AI's negative effects. They may simply be locked into consuming systems built elsewhere and experience lower productivity growth and less autonomy over their own development. Overcoming the digital divide will need to be a priority across all dimensions of human progress.

What distinguishes AI from previous waves of technological change is the combination of speed, generality, and ability — as well as the scale of infrastructure required for even basic adoption. Earlier automation enabled humans to overcome their physical limitations: the engine allowed faster travel, the internet allowed faster communication. AI enables humans to overcome the limits to their mental capacity: It accelerates and increases the scale of cognition, judgment, and information processing to an unprecedented extent. These are the capacities on which professional work, institutional authority, and democratic decision-making all depend. AI is also diffusing faster than previous general purpose technologies, leaving

less time for the gradual institutional and societal adaptation that eased earlier transitions. This in itself does not make AI uniquely dangerous, but it does mean that policy frameworks designed for slower and narrower forms of technological change are unlikely to be adequate.



Lucian Coman, 2025



Kreative Kwame, 2021



Growth, Poverty, and Inequality

AI raises productivity, changes the demand for labor, concentrates economic power

SDGs:



BREAKTHROUGH

AI creates faster economic growth and poverty reduction

BREAKDOWN

AI creates widening social and economic divides

POLICY CHOICES

Inequality

Will action be taken to distribute the gains from AI and support people through the transition?

01 Growth, Poverty, and Inequality

AI's impact on economic growth threatens to deepen inequality through three reinforcing mechanisms: the concentration of the AI industry in a small number of firms; the displacement of workers across a wide range of occupations; and digital divides that lock poorer countries into dependency on systems built elsewhere.

While AI is already delivering productivity gains and has clear potential to raise economic growth, current trends suggest that this growth will come with a high risk of increased unemployment and inequality, within and among countries, threatening to further weaken the link between economic growth and general well-being.

At present, the policy agenda on AI and economic growth is focused almost entirely on investments in hardware, in particular data centers, sufficient to allow for widespread adoption of AI across the economy. There is little concomitant attention to the nature and pace of that adoption, how to ensure it supports broad-based income growth, and how to manage the inevitable disruption.

If the gains from AI are to be widely shared, public policy needs to focus more attention on addressing inequality and how the costs and benefits of change are distributed, rather than, as is done so often, simply assuming that growth will ultimately benefit all.

Productivity and economic growth

AI is already contributing to productivity gains and growth in some sectors and countries (OECD 2025a; Bick et al. 2026). Machine learning systems can automate routine cognitive tasks and support complex decision-making. In principle, these capabilities allow firms to produce goods and services more efficiently and to innovate more rapidly (OECD 2024a; Brynjolfsson et al. 2025; Cai et al. 2025).

However, the magnitude and distribution of these gains remain uncertain and contested (Acemoglu 2025). Productivity improvements often depend on complementary investments in skills, organizational change, and digital infrastructure (Calvino and Fontanelli 2023). Firms and countries lacking these resources will struggle to capture the benefits of AI adoption and will fall further behind as the rest accelerate.

Concentration of economic power

This growth is already highly concentrated in a small number of firms in a very few countries. AI systems require access to large datasets, specialized computing hardware, and highly skilled researchers. These resources are disproportionately available to large technology companies and well-financed research institutions (IEA 2025; OECD 2024b; Microsoft 2026). Developing the most advanced frontier systems, which set the pathway to future innovations, demands a scale of investment in both hardware and human capacity that are at present out of reach to all but a small number of countries and companies.

AI is fueling an investment boom, with huge volumes of funding flowing to a few companies that are leading in developing AI models and creating the infrastructure, particularly the data centers, that are needed to support AI systems. In 2025, investments in AI made up over 60% of all venture capital investments, of which three-

quarters was directed toward firms in the United States (OECD 2026). This investment is contributing significantly to GDP growth in the United States in particular, and it represents a pattern of growth that is highly concentrated.

This concentration has several implications. First, it may allow a relatively small number of firms and countries to capture a disproportionately large share of the economic value generated by AI. Second, it may increase dependence on a limited set of technological platforms that provide cloud computing, data infrastructure, and foundational models. For example, the top three companies accounted for about two-thirds of all spending on cloud computing in 2025 (Synergy Research 2025). Third, this allows countries to use their geopolitical muscle to dominate across the so-called stack (the combination of data centers, cloud computing services, foundation models, and specific applications needed to run AI products). Such a scenario would then potentially limit the choices available to countries investing in their own national AI stack, weakening the possibilities for global cooperation and reducing the capacity of smaller firms and developing economies to participate fully in the AI economy. The result is a concentrated industry, countries locked into single systems and subject to intensive political pressure around procurement and strategy, and a system less able to produce a more diverse set of models that cater to different needs.





The Road Provides, 2019

Labor markets and employment

The impact of AI on how economic gains are distributed among people is also uncertain but likely to amplify existing patterns of distribution. Routine information processing tasks may become increasingly automated; analytical and creative work may be augmented by AI tools; and new occupations may emerge around the development, oversight, and application of AI systems (ILO 2025; IMF 2024a; Jaumotte et al. 2026).

The labor market consequences of AI are already visible in some sectors. Unlike earlier forms of automation that primarily replaced routine manual tasks, contemporary AI systems are complementing and, in some cases, replacing human skills in cognitive, creative, and analytical work. The long-term balance between complementing and replacing human labor remains uncertain and in part dependent on policy choices made over the next few years.

One area of emerging concern is the impact on entry-level professional employment. Generative AI tools can produce text and analytical summaries that resemble tasks traditionally performed by junior workers in law, journalism, marketing, finance, and other fields. If firms rely more heavily on AI to perform these functions — especially at a time of conflict and economic crunch — the number of early-career positions available for young workers may decline. Initial evidence from financial and legal firms suggests that generative AI tools are already substituting for junior analysts and associates in document drafting and research tasks (Liu et al. 2025).

Existing labor market inequalities will mediate AI's short-term effects in contradictory ways. Women are disproportionately represented in clerical, administrative, and service roles that are among the most exposed to automation by AI, so they may lose out disproportionately (Massenkoff and McCrory 2026).

At the same time, some of the least-valued jobs also currently disproportionately performed by women — in care, food service, agriculture — may prove least vulnerable, creating the possibility of a revaluation of those roles, though equally the risk of a race to the bottom as displaced workers compete for these jobs (ILO 2025; IMF 2024b; UN Women 2025; World Bank 2025). Other research suggests that high- and low-income workers will benefit most from the AI transitions, with middle-class workers losing out (Jaumotte et al. 2026).

In addition to changes in the level of demand for different roles, AI may amplify changes in the nature of work, shifting risks and costs from companies to workers. The predictive power of AI enables employers to judge more accurately when periods of high demand will occur, increasing the possibility of firms reducing costs through the use of zero-hour contracts and other flexible working arrangements that mean less secure incomes and employment for workers (Veliz 2026).

The impact of AI will also intersect with demographic trends around the world. In countries where population decline is already causing labor shortages, the labor-replacing effect of AI might be more benign for society as a whole than elsewhere. In countries with large populations of young people and already serious employment challenges, anything that further reduces opportunities will generate serious social and political consequences.

The long-term implications of these trends are uncertain and will vary depending on the rates of adoption of AI in different countries (Demombynes et al. 2025). Many economists argue that technological change historically creates new forms of employment even as it eliminates others. Research also suggests that both the pace of change and the direction of policy affect whether technologies result in displacing workers or augmenting tasks (Acemoglu and Johnson 2024; Acemoglu and Lensman 2024; Acemoglu, Autor, and Johnson 2026). Individuals and societies can adapt more easily if change is slower and more deliberate.

We can be sure from previous episodes of disruptive change that individuals with the most social capital, education, and higher incomes will be better placed to manage changes to the demand for different skills.

Whatever the conclusion, the transition period will involve significant adjustment costs for which governments and societies are arguably not ready.



CHALLENGE 1 Inequality

The highly concentrated structure of the AI industry and current evidence on how AI is reinforcing existing inequalities suggest that any productivity gains might come alongside increased inequality, with potentially damaging effects on well-being for some groups of people and for societies as a whole.

These mechanisms also interact. If AI raises output while narrowing labor's share of income, the result is not only unfair but potentially unstable. It could lead to an economy that produces more but in which fewer people have the purchasing power to sustain demand (Citrini and Shah 2026). Shifts in the labor market will also affect the tax base and government's ability to use public spending to manage transitions (Korinek and Lockwood 2026). Policy choices need to be made now to shift the trajectory and manage the transition.

If AI adoption happens at the speed and intensity that some of the most extreme predictions suggest, the impact on inequality could be considerable. The combination of industry concentration, labor market disruption, and geographical and cultural divides could lead to a level of inequality not seen for centuries.

With the right policies, it is also possible that AI could generate growing productivity, more satisfying work, and more leisure. Unlike in previous transitions, governments will not be able to prioritize growth and trust that minimal market interventions will suffice to spread the benefits. Instead, deliberate measures to nudge adoption toward more job-creating uses, limit the effects of concentration, and redistribute the wealth generated by AI will need to rise up on policy agendas.



The public policy debate on AI within national governments, and the discussions on a new development agenda at the UN, should include the following.

New ways of raising revenue:

New approaches to taxation to ensure that the benefits flowing from AI are fairly and effectively taxed to fund the costs of disruption.

Renewed focus on public policy action to support individuals through disruption and reduce inequalities:

- Investments in social protection systems adequate to manage a major transition.
- Lifelong education and training provision for all workers, with economic incentives.

Global economic cooperation to spread opportunity while managing risks.

- Developing financing mechanisms to support the necessary expansion of digital infrastructure worldwide.
- Global cooperation between competition and market regulators.



Tersi Dae Alesti, 2023



Public Services

AI changes how services are provided and by what types of institution

SDGs:



BREAKTHROUGH

AI used to deliver better, more responsive services

BREAKDOWN

AI leads to the public losing their say over key decisions

POLICY CHOICES

Accountability

Will action be taken to safeguard democratic control of decisions that affect people's lives?

02 Public Services

AI's use in public services brings many benefits. AI is increasingly applied in health, education, agriculture, and urban management, with the potential to reduce costs, improve service quality, and expand access (Kogan 2025; Lam et al. 2022; Wu et al. 2025).

There are also risks. How decisions about service delivery are made, how information is shared and transmitted, and the assumptions and values underlying decision-making are, in many countries and sectors, increasingly shaped by AI. AI's ability to process information means more can be known about people, but at the same time the use of AI in decision-making means that decisions made from that knowledge are less transparent. This will shape public service delivery as well as the relationship of other key institutions to the public they serve. As more information is collected and decisions are automated, new forms of transparency and accountability may be needed to ensure that it is the values and choices of the population, and not the producers of AI technologies, that are driving the actions of key institutions (World Bank 2025).

Data governance

AI hugely expands the information available to institutions about individuals. It makes it feasible to collect, analyze, and connect datasets that were previously isolated and unused, increasing the scope of data available to governments and companies for decision-making and enabling data sources to be linked together in new ways for new insights. For example, by using facial

recognition to fight crime, governments, and the companies that run the systems, have access to huge new datasets that can be connected to other criminal justice records as well as to health or Social Security records.

Policy is not keeping up with technology. Many countries are investing in AI tools for surveillance or other purposes ahead of either developing new frameworks for data privacy, or consulting with the public on their views and limits for the collection and use of personal data (Kovrilja 2025; Wakabi and Roberts 2026).

The use of AI may improve outcomes in some sectors, but it also changes the relationship between people, governments, and the companies that are often responsible for collecting, storing, and processing data on individuals. These decisions need to be made openly and with public consent, requiring new policies and institutional forms to safeguard and manage the data upon which AI depends. In the long run, failure to be open and accountable about how the data that feeds public sector AI systems is collected, analyzed, used, and stored will reduce public trust and possibly slow down the rollout of useful AI products, as well as leaving people vulnerable to surveillance and abuse of their privacy.

Accountable decision-making

One of the most important uses of AI to deliver services to the public is to support decision-making, helping make routine decisions faster and more accurately. AI offers the opportunity to process huge volumes of information almost instantly, increasing both the speed of decision-making and the range of information that can be included.

Use of AI is supporting often resource-constrained public services so they can offer more to the population for less. (Lam et al. 2022; Rahman and



Freeman 2025). In healthcare, AI systems can analyze radiological images to detect early signs of disease, with AI systems outperforming clinicians in detecting certain cancers in imaging data (WHO 2021). In social protection systems, AI can quickly assess eligibility, improving the efficiency and effectiveness of systems (OECD 2025b).

However, AI models come with values and assumptions embedded in them from the data used to train them, which means existing patterns and biases are reproduced. Algorithms used in healthcare can systematically misdiagnose certain groups of people or types of condition (Cross et al. 2024). When combined with human biases, as in sentencing decisions where judges receive AI scores for defendants but ultimately make the decision, AI can sometimes amplify inequalities between groups (Ho et al. 2025).

A key element of accountability is the ability of an institution to explain the reasons behind a decision. Algorithmic decision-making that makes disclosure more opaque, whether because of lack of capacity or commercial confidentiality, may reduce accountability between governments and the people they serve and in turn erode trust (Crawford and Schultz 2019).

Information and learning

The ability of AI to capture and process information means that it is also widely used in public sector roles that require information to be shared, whether students in a classroom or farmers using agricultural extension services.

AI-based educational technologies have the potential to personalize learning experiences and provide real-time feedback to students, while adaptive learning systems can adjust the difficulty and content of lessons based on individual progress (OECD 2024c; Wu et al. 2025; Kestin et al. 2025).

AI is also being applied in agriculture to improve crop yields and resource management. Satellite imagery, sensor networks, and machine learning models are helping farmers monitor soil conditions, detect pests, and optimize irrigation (World Bank 2025).

These tools have real value in providing access to critical information and learning. However, it's important that public sector bodies not adopt them uncritically: The value of AI in education has been shown to be dependent on the human interactions that take place alongside the tools (Burns et al. 2026).

Given the geographical concentration in the AI sector, many countries will be adopting technologies trained on datasets that do not represent their population, environmental conditions, or culture. Studies have already found that some AI-enabled medical devices have been approved without undergoing robust clinical validation, leading to biased or inefficient outcomes, and AI products designed to assist farmers have not recognized common crop diseases or pests if they were not included in training data. The value of AI systems to deliver information depends on the extent to which models have been trained on data that includes locally specific conditions (Majdalawieh et al. 2025; Cross et al. 2024).

AI and public/private boundaries

AI's power to expand the information available on individuals and make decisions based on that information is available to both the public and private sectors, and the widespread use of AI tools may require some renegotiation of the boundary between them. As above, public sector institutions require private sector contractors to carry out key functions to support the use of AI. Additionally, AI may enable companies to do things that were previously only the domain of governments and also require governments to more closely monitor business functions to ensure that key products are still delivered to those who need them.

AI used for facial recognition, combined with the reduced costs of surveillance technology such as cameras, means that individuals or companies are now able to monitor and control individual movements and behaviors in ways that were previously exclusively the domain of law enforcement.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is already happening, with consequences for individuals' rights for which no one can currently be held accountable (Shachtman and Silverman 2026).

AI will also change the nature of private institutions that perform a critical social function. The insurance industry is already being shaken by AI and its ability to use the vast array of data available on individuals. If companies are able to use this data to calculate premiums based on individual risks, rather than group-level risks, it would undermine the entire purpose of insurance as a risk-sharing mechanism (Veliz 2026). The risk that AI makes some people effectively uninsurable is a real one, and the consequences for individuals and societies would be profound. The social function of risk sharing through insurance may need to be deliberately protected in the face of AI.

Frederick Shaw, 2023



In an age of AI, governments may need to consider existing boundaries between public services and private companies, to ensure that the use of information on individuals reflects the right balance between freedom to use technology and protection from its impact. Governments also need to ensure that essential public functions remain accountable to the public.

CHALLENGE 2 Accountability

The ability of AI tools to expand the information available to make decisions and to speed up how those decisions are made can bring great benefits for individuals that will be critical for accelerating progress on the SDGs in a time of scarce resources. At the same time, though, it will create new challenges that will require new capacities and institutional frameworks in the public sector, if democratic accountability is to be maintained (Busuioac 2021). In many countries and sectors, these challenges will come on top of services that are already stretched and are inadequate to meet the demands of the population.

Public services have always relied on private companies for delivery, but AI brings these companies further into the heart of defining the values and the information that let public services be run in ways that command public support and enable public accountability.

Widespread use of AI to support service delivery will demand more from the public sector if it is to effectively manage these new relationships.

AI is also changing how private companies interact with individuals in ways that affect the public good, and the relationship between government, companies, and individuals may need to shift to protect key public interests.

Ensuring that human well-being is served and not harmed by the use of AI tools in public services will require a range of responses at local, national, and global levels, including:

Rigorous evaluation of models before and after deployment.

As with health technologies, AI needs to be subject to transparent, consistent, and expert evaluation before being deployed at scale, and consistent monitoring once deployed, across communities or countries. This will require new skills on the part of the public sector, new institutions such as third-party evaluators, to bridge the public sector and private providers, and transparent and consistently applied evaluation criteria to build public confidence.

Strict procurement rules for AI products.

The range of issues involved in procurement will expand beyond simple value for money calculations to take into account data quality, adaption to local contexts, data governance, model transparency and intellectual property, and a range of other key considerations. This will require new skills in the public sector, along with strong leadership and information sharing across governments. Procurement agreements will also require clarity and transparency on the sharing of liabilities between public service providers and developers of private sector products, and the insurance requirements and penalties if things go wrong. There is a strong case here for cooperation between

governments that share common values, as they are all trying separately to manage their relationships with powerful global companies.

Clarity and effective communication on human responsibilities, data governance, and accountability in public and private sector institutions.

Systems that use AI for decision-making need to be set up with clear and transparent lines of accountability and governance, including for the private sector, to keep AI from becoming a so-called accountability sink, in which lines of accountability are obscure, and to cope with the expanded scope of data collection and use that AI systems involve. This may require new thinking about how to combine automated decision-making with human intervention, what data governance and sharing requirements should be embedded in private and public sector institutions, and how to communicate effectively with the public on these issues.

The introduction of AI into relationships between individuals and both public and private sector institutions will demand more from governments to ensure that they are effectively managing procurement, evaluation, and accountability so that democratic control of services and key social functions can be maintained in the new context of AI-assisted delivery.



Governance, Institutions, Privacy, and Security

AI disrupts the production and consumption of information

SDGs:



BREAKTHROUGH

AI makes shared knowledge and creativity more open and accessible

BREAKDOWN

AI generated information creates loss of trust, breakdown of key institutions for democracy

POLICY CHOICES

Trust

Will action be taken to increase transparency and safeguards around AI?

03 Governance, Institutions, Privacy, and Security

AI technologies reduce the cost of creating and sharing information, and content that resembles information, to almost zero. This poses urgent challenges for the public trust and norms upon which key institutions depend.

These are the consequences most feared by those who know the most about AI: A recent report found that, in the United States, while more than half of AI experts were positive about the impact of AI on healthcare, education, and the economy, fewer than 1 in 5 thought AI would have a positive impact on the news people get, and only 1 in 10 were positive about the likely impact on elections (Sajadieh et al. 2026). The consequences of AI for the information environment and the institutions that depend on shared norms and a shared evidence base could well be the most far-reaching and ultimately destructive unless action is taken now to safeguard trust and common values.

Institutional legitimacy: Synthetic media and information integrity

Generative AI systems can produce highly realistic and persuasive text, images, audio, and video. While these capabilities have legitimate applications, they also facilitate the creation of deceptive or harmful content. During recent elections, AI-generated robocalls and synthetic media have already been used to mislead voters and influence outcomes (OECD 2024d; UNESCO 2024; Schroeder et al. 2026).

AI is disrupting institutions whose legitimacy depends on access to and processing of information.

Governments, the judiciary, media, and universities are all reliant on commonly accepted information for their claims to credibility, and today all face challenges to that credibility. The words of politicians are edited or sometimes entirely fabricated; deepfakes are entering courtrooms; AI-generated content is overwhelming professional journalism at near-zero cost; and students increasingly treat AI as an authoritative text. AI ‘swarms’ – coordinated synthetic harassment – are becoming increasingly able to flood social media and other platforms with extreme and false content, which is nonetheless irresistible to politicians and others who use it willingly for short-term advantage (Schroeder et al. 2026).

There are two risks here: that people believe false information, and, more destructively, that persistent uncertainty dissolves the shared factual ground on which institutional legitimacy and social cohesion depend. When nothing can be definitively verified, the default shifts from trust to suspicion, and the shared framework of facts on which democratic decision-making relies begins to fracture.

These are not new challenges. Norms around what is true and how to judge the reliability of evidence have underpinned trust in institutions in implicit ways for decades and have often been contested as part of debates over power and control. Governments have responded through different kinds of public action: creating new institutions such as independent statistics agencies, funding public service broadcasting, or working with academia on quality standards for research. However, the scale and breadth of AI’s impact on the creation and spread of information change the terms of these contests. AI threatens some of the basic norms that have endured for decades, and

therefore some of the most basic institutions on which societies depend. Action will be needed at different levels: by governments, by the public, and by AI companies themselves, to safeguard trust and protect systems in this new context.

Individual rights and risk: Privacy, surveillance, and deepfakes

The use of AI-generated content to erode certainty about what is true or not creates risks to individuals as well as institutions. Nonconsensual intimate imagery has emerged as a significant form of abuse, particularly against women and girls (UN Women 2025). With AI, new forms of control and abuse of individuals have become technically feasible, and public policy, underpinned by public debate and values, needs to catch up to determine a new set of limits.

Legislative responses have begun to address these harms, with several jurisdictions criminalizing the creation and distribution of such content (UK Government 2026). However, enforcement remains difficult because of the speed and scale at which AI-generated media can spread through social media platforms.



Information diversity: Exclusion and homogenization

AI systems are typically trained on large bodies of existing digital content. As a result, these systems may reduce the diversity of available information, reproducing dominant cultural patterns while marginalizing less widely represented languages and traditions (Adilazuarda 2024). This phenomenon may well further erode the information landscape as AI-dominated systems tend toward cultural homogenization and the erosion of linguistic diversity. The preservation of culture and diversity is a live political issue in many societies, but AI has shifted the goalposts, as some languages and cultural norms are systematically excluded from information and systems in which they were previously incorporated.

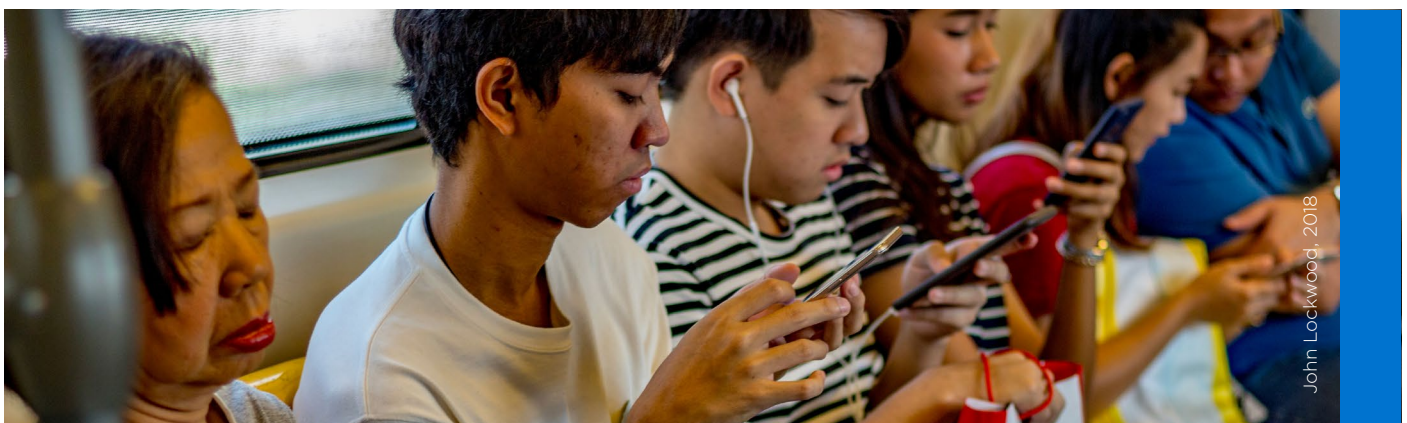
The practical implications may be to reinforce discrimination and exclusion from economic, cultural, and other opportunities, with some individuals and groups systematically excluded from the benefits offered by systems that cannot accommodate them. Restricting the diversity of information in this way may in the longer term also further weaken the evolution and dynamism of human societies: How do new musical forms or artistic movements evolve when more and more content is produced from data rather than from imagination, from challenge, from the stimulation of interactions between people?

CHALLENGE 3 Trust and shared information

AI is fundamentally changing how information is produced and shared. Generative AI reduces the cost of producing convincing false content to near zero, overwhelming verification capacity and eroding the shared factual ground on which institutional legitimacy and social cohesion depend. At the same time, AI-generated information is enabling new forms of control and creating new risks for individuals, while reducing linguistic and cultural diversity, with implications for minority groups and for society as a whole.

Government attempts to intervene in the information environment have generally been limited to the protection of children (e.g., through film classifications) and restrictions in certain specific contexts such as during elections. Amid new threats, the tendency has been to reach for the same tools, such as banning social media for children in response to the availability of sexualized content.

This kind of response, however, is unlikely to be sufficient to safeguard trust and information in the AI era. Simply banning certain types of content for certain groups leaves the wider information system unchanged. Instead, governments need to consider policy options on both the supply and demand sides.



On the supply side, several areas demand attention.

- **Clarity:** Companies can be required to label AI content through watermarks or other markers that make it harder to pass it off as true images, with greater public investments in verification and enforcement.
- **Liability:** Stronger attempts may need to be made to hold companies liable for content produced on their platforms. Recent court losses by Meta in the United States set a helpful precedent, and one that AI companies are watching closely. But effectively holding companies liable for content produced on their platforms requires both serious policy attention and a sophisticated and determined approach to definition and enforcement of content standards.
- **Penalty:** Attention should also be paid to penalties for individuals who produce and distribute harmful content. Free speech must be protected, but as with all rights, the free speech of one individual needs to be considered against the rights of another not to be violated through, for example, nonconsensual sexualized imagery.
- **Plurality:** Many countries have reduced investments in public media sources. As AI supercharges the production of false or deliberately divisive content, the role of public media in providing trusted information needs to be rethought and potentially increased.
- **Diversity:** If societies want to preserve linguistic and cultural diversity in an age where AI is reshaping the information and cultural environment, they will need to invest in it. Standards can be developed requiring a certain level of diversity before large language models can be used in key sectors. Public sector small AI models that are built with diverse languages and perspectives can embed that diversity into AI systems. Funding for arts and culture can inspire creativity that does not come from AI models.

On the demand side, there is an urgent need for a more consistent and society-wide approach to media literacy and critical thinking, including school and university curricula. The ability of individuals to interrogate and assess sources of information will be the difference between electoral systems that function and those that don't. Investments are necessary in the widest and most effective possible system to communicate the tools that individuals need to navigate this new, and rapidly evolving, world.

Institutional legitimacy. If control and management of shared information has been the basis of the institutional legitimacy of courts, universities, governments, and other key institutions over recent decades, active attempts need to be found to shore up that legitimacy by both constraining AI's impact on the information environment and investing in alternative sources of legitimacy. These include exploring how AI itself, used in different ways, can help to confer legitimacy and improve public debate. Some research points to promising experiments that use AI to enhance public decision-making (Tett 2026).

The inclusion of a dedicated goal on governance and institutions in the SDGs framework was a signal that institutions matter. A world of AI might require a further shift toward a common normative framework for how information is created, validated, and shared to ensure that it does not cause new risks and threats for people and the institutions that are meant to serve their interests.



Mojo CP, 2026



Resources, Energy, and Environment

AI increases the demand for energy, water, and key minerals

SDGs:



BREAKTHROUGH

AI creates new incentives for sustainable resource use

BREAKDOWN

AI fuels climate breakdown and rising environmental costs

POLICY CHOICES

Resources

Will action be taken to limit the resource intensity of AI?

04 Resources, Energy, and Environment

AI affects the physical world as well as the world of institutions and relationships. On the one hand, AI technologies are being used to support environmental sustainability. For example, machine learning models can optimize energy grids, improve climate forecasting, support biodiversity monitoring, and make transport routes in cities more efficient.

On the other hand, AI is a resource-intensive industry. AI systems need significant computational resources, which require minerals and energy to produce, and these in turn depend on energy-intensive data centers at a time when energy systems are under considerable stress (IEA 2025; OECD 2024, UNCTAD 2024). Energy demands from data centers have grown 12% per year in the past five years, and this growth is projected to increase to 15% a year in the next five years (IEA 2025). On current trends, 600 million people will still lack access to energy in 2030.

Training and operating large machine learning models can consume substantial amounts of electricity and water. Data centers must be cooled continuously, often using water-intensive systems. As demand for AI services grows, these environmental costs are likely to increase significantly. In regions already facing water scarcity or energy constraints, large data center developments may place additional pressure on local resources — but may also increase the economic incentives to invest in renewable energy and water management. Major technology firms have reported significant increases in water consumption linked to AI-related data center expansion.

The hope of those who believe that AI expansion can be made sustainable is that these pressures lead to a race to the top, where companies and governments work together to meet the demand from renewable sources, ensuring that the needs of both AI and the global community can be met. A less optimistic scenario is that companies succeed in pressuring governments to relax environmental limits or simply invest in their own electricity supply and further reduce incentives to find common ground between AI companies, governments, and the population.

The challenge is not simply one of energy consumption. The hardware required to run AI systems depends on a steady and growing supply of minerals, many from some of the poorest and most fragile parts of the world. This is creating incentives for mining in new and sensitive areas, including the deep seabed and protected lands, with potentially irreversible environmental consequences.

CHALLENGE 4 Resources

Effective policy frameworks are needed to address the environmental costs of AI infrastructure. These material dependencies mean that AI sustainability cannot be addressed through efficiency gains alone; it requires structural choices about where infrastructure is built, how minerals are sourced, and what environmental costs are acceptable. However, rather than use demand for AI as a driver to create incentives for greater investment in renewables, many governments are granting AI companies exemptions from environmental regulations in the name of prioritizing investment and innovation.

There is an opportunity to make choices now that create virtuous rather than vicious circles, where AI provides both the right tools and the right incentives to speed up investments in renewables and environmental protections, rather than undermining them. Two areas are critical:

Transparency. While some major AI companies publish sustainability reports, disclosure remains inconsistent, incomplete, and difficult to verify — particularly on the full supply chain impacts of model training and data center operations. AI companies must be subject to the same environmental regulations as other sectors, with attention paid to the whole supply chain and to the impact on community water and electricity supplies as well as other externalities.

Alignment. There is an opportunity to leverage the huge wave of AI investments to incentivize green energy and other virtuous circles, but this depends on effective signals from policymakers and consumers. The new UN development agenda is an opportunity to send a clear signal to the private sector about political priorities and expectations and to encourage a race to the top on sustainable AI.

Conclusion

AI is a general purpose technology whose impacts will seep into every area of life. How this affects individuals, communities, and countries will depend on both the nature of the technology itself and on the social, economic, and cultural structures where it is being introduced.

This technology also, critically, depends on state capacity, which is highly variable, and the political economy of AI. Along with economic and institutional changes, AI is bringing new political challenges and risks. At the national level, the AI industry is actively involved in politics in major markets, most notably the United States. Some companies have formed close relationships with government, and many are funding political candidates who support their stance on regulation. It is also becoming a key topic for public debate.

Globally, concerns about AI supply chains, and a desire for military supremacy and new markets, are becoming growing drivers of trade and investment policies. As the AI industry becomes larger and ever-more entwined with governments around the world, the political economy challenges of effectively managing AI in any of the ways described in this paper are likely to grow.

Some governments and civil society groups are already engaging with the realities of AI, with regulatory efforts underway across the world to develop and enforce safety standards, protect national sovereignty and increase capacity, and provide effective policy responses to the upheavals AI is bringing in some sectors. What is needed, before it is too late, is acceleration of those efforts and stronger collaborative efforts to share learning and build on successful approaches.



The global development agenda — agreed at the UN — is not a policy blueprint, but it is a signal of what governments and their people collectively think is necessary for a good life. While AI does not change the basics of human well-being, it does create new barriers and opportunities for achieving it. The debate around new goals can be an opportunity to anchor this collaborative effort in questions of what a good life looks like in the age of AI, and what each actor's role is in achieving it.

Institutions, relationships, and whole societies will be reshaped over the next 15 years as the AI wave breaks across countries, sectors, and communities: Across markets for capital and labor, across the institutions of government and service delivery, and across the natural world upon which we depend, AI is creating new opportunities, widening existing fractures, and increasing environmental stress.

What this wave leaves behind will depend on the actions taken now by governments, companies, communities, and individuals to respond to the four key challenges identified in this paper.

AI adoption is already well underway and will not be reversed. What matters is the social terms under which it is embedded, who should benefit, what should be protected, and what forms of resilience will be needed if the transition proves more disruptive than current policy discourse assumes.



Melvin Ankray, 2021

The future challenge is less about setting targets for a known technological pathway than about constructing adaptable and robust systems capable of making decisions in the public interest during conditions of profound uncertainty.

For the past decade, much of the digital development discourse has rested on a relatively benign progression: to diffuse technology and expand access primarily through market-led approaches and to build skills so that broader development benefits will follow. This theory of change may now be insufficient. In the AI context, diffusion alone may widen inequality; skilling alone may not absorb labor displacement; and innovation alone may intensify concentration if the infrastructures of intelligence remain controlled by a small number of firms and countries.

Any future agenda therefore needs to move away from the paradigm of existential risk versus benign technological adoption. Instead it needs to focus on inequality, accountability, trust, and sustainability. It needs to ask how to socialize the gains of AI, manage its implications, and preserve room for social and cultural goods that market metrics do not easily value.

Taken together, these arguments suggest the following elements to incorporate AI in any post-2030 development agenda:

- It should move from a broad presumption that innovation, diffusion, and skilling are the main developmental tasks and toward a sharper recognition that AI may generate severe inequality unless competition, redistribution, and transition management are built in early.

- It should move from treating better delivery as the sole end point and toward also considering public accountability and oversight, institutional capability, and the governance of privately controlled infrastructures as issues central to the long-term survival and improvement of public services.
- It should move from post-hoc fixes for misinformation and digital harm and toward a broader defense of institutional trust, cultural plurality, language diversity, and democratic resilience.
- It should move from tolerating a trade-off between AI expansion and environmental limits and toward strategies that create incentives to reconcile computational demand with water, energy, and mineral constraints through disclosure, regulation, renewable investment, recycling, and ecological restraint.
- And it should move from static development measurement and toward faster, more reflexive systems of socioeconomic learning capable of detecting harms and opportunities in near real time.

Perhaps most importantly, the next agenda should not try to predict the final social shape of AI. That would be impossible and perhaps misleading. It should instead try to influence the *character* of the transition. It should ask what kinds of societies are better able to absorb technological shocks without surrendering equality, dignity, plurality, and ecological limits. That is more modest than technological salvation, but it is a more plausible and democratic ambition.

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