

Artificial intelligence

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There is no universally agreed definition of artificial intelligence (AI) in the United Nations. AI was originally described as a field in computer science that investigates methods to make machines simulate intelligent behaviour (McCarthy et al. 2006). Current discussions on AI in international and regional organizations (for example, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2024; Regulation [EU] 2024/1689 2024) refer more specifically to machine-based systems that are configured to compute, based on data they receive, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content or recommendations.

While discussions on AI in the United Nations system have raised ethical concerns, they have tended to highlight its potential to contribute positively to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Since 2017, the International Telecommunication Union has run a digital platform with information on AI solutions for the SDGs, called ‘AI for Good’. Key United Nations documents have emphasized the importance of ‘safe, secure and trustworthy’ AI that can contribute to humanity, as well as cooperation towards benefit-sharing. For example, the United Nations General Assembly adopted in 2024 a resolution on seizing the opportunities of AI systems to achieve all 17 SDGs (United Nations 2024a). Likewise, the Global Digital Compact, adopted at the 2024 Summit of the Future, pays attention to AI by setting the strengthening of international governance of AI ‘for the benefit of humanity’ as its fifth objective (United Nations 2024b).

International institutions mandated to govern AI technologies are still at an early stage as of 2024. The United Nations Secretary-General’s High-level Advisory Body on AI was formed in 2023. Based on its report, the Summit of the Future agreed to establish a multi-disciplinary Independent International Scientific Panel on AI in the United Nations to promote scientific assessments of the impacts, risks and opportunities of AI. They also

agreed to launch a Global Dialogue on AI Governance that will involve governments and stakeholders (United Nations 2024b). The development of these institutions, however, remains to be seen.

The impact of AI on sustainable development is multifaceted, and deliberative approaches are needed when discussing the potential of AI to help achieve SDGs. While AI may be used to achieve some SDG targets, negative impacts are also predicted. For example, AI may facilitate the eradication of extreme poverty (SDG target 1.1) if satellite data is used to track areas of poverty and foster international cooperation. At the same time, AI may exacerbate poverty by increasing inequalities (Vinuesa et al. 2020). Furthermore, the potential benefits of using AI to achieve SDG targets may come at the cost of inhibiting the overall achievement of the 2030 Agenda, not least due to the high consumption of natural resources and energy associated with the development and use of AI (Crawford 2021). In this context, it is important to note that AI is often linked to economic interests by industry and political actors. The apparent high profitability of the technology may hinder balanced discussions among stakeholders, making it essential to encourage the assessment of the legal and ethical implications of AI technologies, including societal and environmental ones. Indeed, policymakers need a good understanding of the challenges posed by AI to formulate sound and effective policies (Vinuesa et al. 2020).

In conclusion, AI has rapidly become a significant topic in sustainable development discussions, and the United Nations has begun to take the first steps to ensure the governance of AI ‘for the benefit of humanity’ (United Nations 2024b). Yet given the apparent high profitability of AI and the debate’s focus on its positive impact on SDG achievement, policymakers must also not overlook to assess the negative impacts of its development and use on sustainable development.

References

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