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Shaping AI for the people

Table of Contents

Foreword by Khaled El-Enany, UNESCO Director-General

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Artificial intelligence is reshaping how children learn, how scientists discover, how artists create, and how we access information. The question before us is not whether AI will change our world — it already is. The question is whether that change will serve all of humanity, or only a privileged few.

At UNESCO, our answer is unequivocal: AI must be for the people — all people. It must extend and amplify human intelligence, creativity, and safety, rather than supplant or diminish it.

We are defending this vision tirelessly through all our work, whether through our role in supporting the United Nations General Assembly's Global Dialogues on AI Governance and the United Nations Scientific Panel on AI, or the many global initiatives that UNESCO leads and co-leads around the world.

This brochure demonstrates our commitment in practice. UNESCO has developed a comprehensive range of policy frameworks, guidelines, capacity building programmes, and global normative instruments - notably its 2021 Recommendation on the Ethics of AI – as well as practical tools and training initiatives to support informed decision-making. These resources help civil servants, members of the judiciary, teachers, students, parents, scientists, researchers, artists, and cultural professionals, understand and navigate both the opportunities and the risks associated with AI.

UNESCO has now deployed its AI Readiness Assessment Methodology in more than 80 countries, helping governments build tailored national governance strategies. In Chile, UNESCO supported the first national cybersecurity and critical infrastructure law, along with supporting Costa Rica, Ghana, Kenya, and Uruguay in the development of national AI strategies. We have trained more than 38,000 judges and prosecutors in over 160 countries on the responsible use of AI in justice — a number that will continue to grow. Our Data Governance Toolkit, which has already reached 215 policymakers across 48 countries, our African Women in Tech & AI programme, and our in-person AI literacy training to 1,000+ civil servants across 12 countries, are driven by the same conviction: AI must work for everyone, in every

language, on every continent.This also applies to the essential role of culture and education in this transformation. At a time when many creative professionals express concerns about the impact of artificial intelligence on their work, livelihoods, and rights, UNESCO is responding with a comprehensive approach that combines protection, guidance, and empowerment. Supporting young women and men is at the core of our work, to ensure AI empowers them, opening new horizons for their creativity, knowledge, creation, dialogue, and protection of their human rights.

And through its AI competency framework, the Organization supports teachers in navigating both the use and misuse of AI in education. At the same time, UNESCO is equipping families with a practical guide for parents and children to better understand and engage with digital environments.

The pages that follow set out UNESCO's vision and concrete approach to AI implementation: ethical, inclusive, sustainable, and resolutely human-centered AI. Long before "artificial intelligence" became a household term, UNESCO laid the ethical groundwork. This foresight is why UNESCO remains an indispensable voice in shaping how the world governs this technology today. Our mission is to prepare the world for AI — and to prepare AI for the world. That work is well underway, but we must work together to take it forward.

Introduction

This publication, made possible by the generous support of the European Union, is a window into how UNESCO approaches AI and why. It covers some of the organization's most significant work: from the landmark Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, the first and only globally agreed standard of its kind, to concrete programmes helping governments, teachers, judges and creators to navigate a technology that is transforming nearly every aspect of human life.

This is not a comprehensive account of everything UNESCO does on artificial intelligence. It could not be. Across education, culture, science, communication and governance, UNESCO's engagement spans dozens of programmes, partnerships and policy processes in every region of the world. To capture all of them would be an ambition beyond any single document.

The publication does offer directions to explore and an orientation on some of the most important current issues related to AI. It also reflects on how, long before "AI" became a fixture of daily headlines, UNESCO was asking the hard questions — about bias, about rights, about who benefits and who gets left behind. That foresight is not incidental. It is the result of sustained commitment, grounded in UNESCO's core mandates and values, and its firm belief that AI must be for the people.

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The starting point: Ethics and human rights

AI has the power to transform our lives in every way, from how we work to how we learn and even interact with each other. The opportunities are great — but so are the risks. Will AI work for people, everywhere? Or worsen inequality and the environmental crisis?

Realizing the benefits and minimizing the harms requires getting AI right. Ethical principles must steer the individuals and organizations developing and using AI. AI should complement human skills and creativity and bolster human rights and fundamental freedoms, not undermine them.

As one AI system itself says: "Current AI systems don't have beliefs, values, conscience or moral understanding. They generate outputs based on patterns in data and training objectives."

This statement might imply that AI is "ethically neutral". But in reality, AI systems embody human values, positive and negative. Their impacts depend on how they are designed, deployed and governed. Without ethical guidance or safeguards, AI can easily be used to cause harm, violate human rights and erode public trust, especially by the companies and people managing it.

Over 100 countries have made progress towards governing AI, based on principles defined in the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. It is the first and only globally agreed standard of its kind. UNESCO issued it in 2021, even before AI became a household term.

Governments, public and private sector experts, civil society and vulnerable groups from all over the world created the Recommendation together. They defined four core values that apply to AI everywhere:

1. Protect and promote human rights
2. Support peaceful and just societies
3. Foster inclusiveness
4. Help the environment to flourish

Profits and principles: The business case for ethical AI

The business sector has a powerful role in driving the ethical use of AI — and its own built-in incentives to do so. A commitment to uphold ethics may generate several competitive advantages. These include reducing reputational and regulatory risks, such as legal cases related to privacy violations or intellectual property disputes. Other benefits comprise building customer trust, attracting talented personnel and amplifying shareholder confidence. Increasingly, access to some markets could depend on evidence of ethical AI practices.

A genuine embrace of ethics in business applies both where profits and principles align — and where they may not. Ethical obligations, such as protecting vulnerable groups or preserving cultural diversity, must still be upheld, even if financial returns are unlikely.


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A force for inclusiveness

In every area of life, and without leaving anyone behind, AI should be a force that benefits people and drives shared progress.

Managed with an ethical framework, AI could advance social inclusion in some concrete ways, such as:

- Personalized learning for disadvantaged students
- Standardized medical data to help reduce biases in care
- Multilingual and culturally inclusive digital services that expand access to information and education
- Analysis of satellite and weather data to increase crop yields in poor regions

Yet so far, today's AI ecosystem shows an unprecedented concentration of computing power, raising important questions about who benefits and who might be left behind. Without deliberate action, AI could become a new — and potent — driver of exclusion. Opportunities and risks will emerge haphazardly, cascading along existing inequities in societies and the world.

Among others, gaps could widen between:

- Connected and unconnected communities
- Men and women
- Younger and older people
- Poorer and wealthier countries
- Diverse cultures and languages

Disparities are already great among countries in their abilities to adopt AI. Barriers include a lack of skills, infrastructure and data, compounded by weak governance and limited investment. In Africa, for instance, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Africa, have become AI pioneers, using the technology in innovative ways that suit their specific realities. Uptake in the rest of the region, however, is significantly lower than in other parts of the world.

Harnessing AI for greater inclusion largely depends on investment and policy choices. These need to be made now, given the technology's rapid evolution. The UNESCO AI Recommendation urges all AI actors to minimize discrimination or bias in all aspects of AI development and use and to provide effective remedies.

The Recommendation also calls for building an AI bridge between the global North and South, where technologically advanced countries share the benefits of AI with less advanced nations. Policy action for gender equality

Policy action for gender equality

UNESCO's Women4EthicalAI platform builds on a study, Women for AI, that highlighted women's underrepresentation in the field. Women make up only 30 per cent of AI professionals and 12 per cent of AI-specific researchers. Further, public policies still neglect the gender dimensions of AI, even as specific risks rise, including technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

Some evidence, where available, suggests that gender gaps in AI use are closing. Yet women are far less likely than men to trust the technology, which could affect use. One study found that among people applying generative AI, only 18 per cent of women expressed high levels of trust in it compared to 31 per cent of men.3

Gender equality is a priority policy action area in the UNESCO AI Recommendation. It specifically calls for governments to maximize AI's potential to achieve equality for women and girls by:

1. Incorporating a funded gender action plan in national digital policies, aimed at including girls and women in an AI-powered digital economy

2. Investing in more opportunities for girls and women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics

3. Promoting diversity throughout the AI life cycle

4. Identifying and proactively addressing gender biases and stereotyping in AI, including to stop digital violence

5. Using economic and regulatory incentives to encourage female entrepreneurship, participation and engagement in AI

UNESCO has investigated gender bias in large language models. Its Red Teaming Playbook offers a practical guide to testing for gender bias and promoting ethical, inclusive AI systems.

Embedded inequities

AI systems learn from data, but data are not free from bias. Plenty of examples demonstrate how AI can amplify existing data biases and perpetuate disparities.

For instance, AI tools used by employers to evaluate job applications have penalized minority candidates. Facial recognition systems have higher error rates for people with darker skin. In one case, an algorithm used past healthcare spending to determine which patients needed "high-risk" care. It heavily favoured white patients, ignoring the history of racism that has left many Black patients with fewer resources to spend on care. By equating lower spending with better health, the algorithm denied care for sicker Black individuals.2

Experiences like these underline why AI must be well governed. To avoid and correct biases, developers of algorithms and AI applications must be transparent about how systems work and what data they have used to train them.

2 Datatron
3 Deloitte, 2024. Women and Generative AI: The Adoption Gap Is Closing Fast but a Trust Gap Remains.

The education of the future

Education is a deeply human act, rooted in social interaction. Technology, including AI, has a critical complementary role in learning, but it cannot replace rich exchanges among teachers and students.

An ongoing global learning crisis predates AI. It is driven by poor-quality education and the lack of schooling altogether. In low- and lower-middle-income countries, 70 per cent of children cannot read a simple text by age 10. In the least developed countries, the figure is up to 90 per cent.

AI could help tackle gaps in quality and access, but only if it remains guided by the principle of inclusion. It must support human interaction and agency, not attempt to replace it. And teachers, parents and students must lead the process. UNESCO believes that people — not algorithms — should drive how AI is used in education. Its work with countries and institutions to develop research-backed policies and learning practices puts a particular focus on underserved communities.

Generative AI is already shaking education. Adoption by teachers and students is accelerating fast. Across OECD countries, around one in three teachers reports using AI.4 At the same time, educational systems are struggling to keep up. In Brazil and Chile, more than 50 per cent of teachers rely on AI tools, yet less than 10 per cent of educational institutions in Latin America have formal guidelines on them. A 2025 UNESCO global survey found that 92 per cent of higher education professionals use AI tools but only 24 per cent feel very confident in doing so.

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UNESCO warns against viewing AI as a quick fix for systemic issues in education. Teacher shortages and school construction still require sustained policy attention and investment. Adding on technology while ignoring these concerns will be like roofing a house with a crumbling foundation.

In a race towards a future where human and machine intelligence may be closely connected, education systems face some fundamental questions These include how to:

- Avoid scenarios where the digitally disconnected are left behind, worsening the education gap
- Centre equity and inclusion, and sustain the agency and human rights of students, teachers and education communities
- Uphold human rights and data privacy when collecting data during learning

UNESCO has provided guidance on generative AI in education and research. It also recommends that governments integrate AI competency frameworks for students and teachers into a comprehensive strategy for all educational levels. The frameworks help understand AI's risks and potential to support human decision-making and intellectual development. Early pilots to use these tools for policy guidance are underway in Bangladesh, Brazil, Mozambique and Viet Nam.

A new source of evidence and ethical innovation

In 2026, UNESCO launched the Observatory on Artificial Intelligence in Education for Latin America and the Caribbean. It supports governments in integrating AI into education systems with a focus on inclusion, quality and sustainable development.

The first regional platform of its kind, the observatory is geared towards generating policy evidence, strengthening teacher training and promoting ethical innovations.

Telling the wrong history

AI can enhance the understanding of history, from providing quick summaries of long-ago events to presenting a range of diverse perspectives. But it can also perpetuate dangerous in-built biases.

UNESCO has chronicled how generative AI can distort the history of the Holocaust. It found, for example, that some search engines prioritize content promoting Holocaust denial and respond to user prompts with historical inaccuracies. They invent fake eyewitness testimonies and distort facts, such as the number of victims who perished in a particular event.

Such practices can exacerbate biases, erode trust, and even spill into violence online or in real life. The risks underscore the imperative of integrating ethics into AI design and monitoring. Inclusive interactions between people who develop and use AI can help refine prototypes and authenticate content.

Training new skills

Significant sums are being invested in making AI smarter. The amounts contrast sharply with the persistent underfunding of education. The cost of training just one frontier AI model is expected to reach $10 billion by 2027.5 That surpasses national education budgets in many developing countries several times over.

Underinvestment in education is evident in the stark reality that more than 700 million people remain illiterate. Regardless of how smart AI becomes, societies will not fully flourish until every person has access to high-quality education and the skills to thrive throughout their lives.

4 OECD, Results from TALIS 2024.

5 NWCast, 2026. "The Hidden Economics of AI Model Training: Why Companies Pay Billions."

Cultural connections

AI belongs to the people. AI models have been trained on massive amounts of knowledge, creations and ideas generated by human beings.

Yet the technology has moved so quickly that it already raises the question: Will AI replace the artists, writers, musicians, scholars and philosophers of the future? AI has shown its ability to generate cultural content, often at a lower cost. Potential pitfalls include losses in cultural distinctiveness, alongside widening inequalities and injustice.

Creative professionals have voiced their concerns. Nearly 80 per cent see AI as a threat to their art, livelihoods and rights. Generative AI threatens income losses, expected to reach 24 per cent in the music and 21 per cent in the audiovisual sectors by 2028. AI-generated content may also compromise rights related to creative products and infringe on cultural sovereignty. It could erode creative skills and cognitive capacities. Online harassment and censorship can create a hostile environment for creators and constrain freedom of speech and expression, especially among those from vulnerable communities.

On the positive side, AI could democratize access to cultural experiences and revitalize heritage. Among the world's creatives, it could lower entry barriers, automate tasks and foster new forms of cultural expression. Capturing these benefits will require the close attention of public policymakers, however. So far, while AI policy frameworks are increasing, very few pay significant attention to culture.

Some legislative basics, aligned with the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, include to:

- Mandate the disclosure of AI training data
- Label AI-generated content
- Require informed consent for using artists' works, voices and likenesses
- Strengthen and enforce copyright protections
- Guarantee creators' control and compensation when their material is used to train or fuel generative AI systems

Other priorities are to:

- Invest in digital and AI skills development for artists
- Update arts education curricula
- Expand equitable access to digital tools and infrastructure, especially for women creators, Indigenous communities, youth and rural populations


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New ways to share and safeguard culture

AI can offer new ways to share culture, such as through interactive museum exhibits and virtual recreations of historical events. UNESCO's Dive into Heritage platform provides immersive experiences of World Heritage sites.

With powerful data collection capacities, AI can also help protect culture. It can be used to detect the online trafficking of stolen objects, for instance, such as through the UNESCO Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects, and to assess disaster risks to monuments.

One promising gain is from documenting and revitalizing endangered languages before they are lost to history. Around half of spoken languages today could be at risk of disappearing by 2100. The Digital Initiatives for Indigenous Languages toolkit supports Indigenous and other marginalized communities to use digital tools to conserve, revive and promote their languages.

A sustainable solution

Innovations for a safer, more sustainable planet might just become an AI superpower.

By quickly crunching numbers from the massive amounts of data generated by satellites, drones, sensors and cameras, for example, AI can detect changes in ecosystems before they develop into crises. Among other possibilities, it can:

- Track wildlife populations
- Pick up patterns of illegal logging and poaching
- Predict extreme weather events
- Provide early warnings of fires, floods and droughts

AI is increasingly supporting disaster risk reduction and climate resilience. By combining satellite imagery, Earth observation data, weather forecasts and geospatial information, it can help identify emerging hazards, improve risk assessments, and strengthen prevention and early warning systems. These applications are helping governments to better prepare for floods, droughts, wildfires and other climate-related hazards.

AI can also support the management of water resources and energy grids and help people adapt to climate change. In agriculture, farmers can use AI to sustain food production and improve livelihoods, including by more efficiently using land, water and fertilizers. Optimizing irrigation schedules can sustain water tables. Detecting plant diseases early on can maintain productivity and cut both costs and pesticide use.

Clean by design

A UNESCO report, Smarter, Smaller, Stronger, looks at the future of resource-efficient digital transformation. It outlines "clean by design" AI systems that integrate energy and resource efficiency from inception, aiming at both high performance and environmental sustainability. Methods such as quantization and prompt optimization have already been shown to cut the energy consumption of large language models by up to 75 per cent.

For some repetitive tasks, such as translation, replacing a large general-purpose model with smaller, task-specific models slashes energy use by up to 90 per cent. These models not only perform well but may be better suited to resource-constrained countries in the Global South.

Countries are greening AI

Several countries stand out as leaders in greening AI. For example, Nigeria's National AI Strategy 2025 sets targets for clean energy use. A national competition spotlighted green AI solutions prioritizing efficiency from the ground up.

Spain has developed one of the most detailed initiatives globally through the national Green Algorithm Programme. Public procurement standards and regulatory incentives systematically reduce the computational and environmental footprint of public sector AI.

With all its potential benefits, AI also puts intense pressure on the environment. Its data centres absorb massive flows of water for cooling, rely on the extraction of rare minerals and generate e-waste. Energy demands are sky-high; the energy required to train one large language model is more than some developing countries use in a year. It contrasts sharply with the reality that in 2024, up to 730 million people globally still had no access to electricity at all.6

As the balance between people and the environment becomes increasingly fragile, AI needs to be part of the solution, not the problem. This means:

- Greening AI by reducing its impacts on energy, water and materials.
- Greening with AI to accelerate progress on climate and environmental goals.

Initiatives such as green AI sandboxes can pilot energy-efficient alternatives. The AI Tools Radar, developed with UNESCO's network of AI Research Centres, helps the public sector identify vetted, rights-respecting and resource-efficient open-source AI tools.

6 IEA, 2025. "Access to Electricity Stagnates, Leaving Globally 730 Million in the Dark."

Governments gear up for AI

Governments, like any other institution, increasingly use AI in daily operations, including to provide public services. Many are also charged with governing AI through national strategies, laws and regulations.

Public servants around the world — from agricultural agents to tax authorities to statistical producers — could benefit from AI efficiencies that save time and increase productivity. The technology also offers possibilities to improve public services, such as by automating job matching systems or targeting social protection benefits to the needs of specific excluded communities.

Many civil services have begun to use AI, but not systematically or with formal training or safeguards. This comes with risks. There have already been cases, for example, of court judgments that unwittingly denied justice by relying on incorrect AI-generated information. A 2024 UNESCO survey found that 44 per cent of judges and prosecutors used AI; just 9 per cent were trained on it.

Improving public sector AI skills is an urgent priority, one that UNESCO has taken up at scale. One resource to bridge this gap is the AI and Digital Transformation Competency Framework for Civil Servants. Used in over 50 countries, it provides guidance on developing civil service skills. It covers AI use along with challenges, such as work cultures averse to innovation, which can slow the adoption of promising AI tools.

UNESCO has also provided tools and skills to over 38,000 judicial system personnel in more than 165 countries so far, and 35,000 civil servants worldwide, with a target to train 100,000 over two years.

AI governance steered for all

Carried out by legislators and public regulators, AI governance refers to public policies, regulations and ethical guidelines to develop and deploy AI technologies. It should uphold the accountability of governments, companies, developers and other stakeholders to address the social impacts of AI and practice responsible innovation, in line with ethical obligations. UNESCO's Data Governance in the Digital Age Toolkit offers specific guidance on policies aligning AI data use with ethical and social principles.

Starting in 2026, the UN General Assembly is convening an annual Global Dialogue on AI Governance. It's a chance for all governments to sit at the same table and talk about the AI the world needs. Businesses, civil society, academia and others also take part. The Dialogue recognizes that for AI to benefit everyone, there must be international cooperation on AI governance. It should reflect the priorities of all nations, not just those with the most technology.

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A global tool integrates AI ethics in public policy

UNESCO has worked with nearly 80 governments to deploy the AI Readiness Assessment Methodology. It provides a comprehensive national overview of AI readiness and pinpoints policy reforms. The process is broadly inclusive, opening AI policymaking to civil society advocates, academics, entrepreneurs, legal experts, local communities, women's groups and more. Over 20,000 have taken part, giving different communities a voice in decisions impacting them. The mechanism is one of the most inclusive AI policy dialogues ever.

Following extensive public consultations for its assessment, Chile adopted a cybersecurity and critical infrastructure law, the first of its kind in Latin America. Colombia introduced its first AI Law, and Zimbabwe worked with UNESCO to develop and launch its national AI strategy.

Consultations in Ukraine surfaced sharply divergent concerns. Businesses feared costly regulation, while civil society expressed mistrust. Such insights will be invaluable as national policymakers align with the European Union's AI Act, a gateway to European markets, with continued support from UNESCO.

UNESCO supports countries to implement policy recommendations from the AI Readiness Assessment Methodology through the AI Ethics Experts Without Borders network.

A surge in AI adoption but a lag in corporate oversight

A UNESCO collaboration with the Thomson Reuters Foundation has generated the world's largest data set on corporate AI adoption. Grounded in the AI Recommendation, it covers nearly 3,000 companies in six regions.

A 2026 report, Responsible AI in Practice, found companies eager to adopt AI but less focused on managing risks. Only 13 per cent, for instance, require human oversight of AI systems. The report calls attention to the importance of corporate governance, since gaps create risks for business, workers, investors — and societies at large.

News flash: Trust cannot be automated

AI systems, increasingly embedded in online platforms and apps, have become primary gatekeepers of public discourse, influencing the flow and freedom of expression.

Generative AI systems can expand access to knowledge on an unprecedented scale. They make information more accessible, summarize complex issues and translate content across languages. Yet they also hallucinate convincing falsehoods. They amplify misinformation and disinformation, making it harder to distinguish fact from fiction.

As AI becomes embedded in everyday digital tools, people must be prepared to critically evaluate information, regardless of whether it is produced by a human or machine. Media and information literacy is more important than ever, equipping people to navigate increasingly complex information environments.

AI also raises deeper concerns about cognitive autonomy. As algorithms shape information, there is a growing risk of people becoming passive recipients of automated outputs rather than active interpreters of knowledge. Personalization may narrow exposure to diverse viewpoints. Constant streams of AI-generated content may discourage questioning, reflection and independent judgment. Protecting the ability to think critically is essential to understanding when information is inaccurate and when perceptions or choices are being steered by AI. Trust cannot be automated. As AI increasingly mediates access to information, the challenge is not only technological but civic. Democracies, scientific progress, and social cohesion all depend on people being able to assess information critically and participate meaningfully in public debate.

That's why UNESCO is leading global efforts to adapt media and information literacy to the realities of AI. It is responding to a call in the Pact for the Future to integrate such skills into education systems by 2030. Recent UNESCO analysis shows that progress remains uneven across regions, however, highlighting the need for continued support and investment.

Building skills to distinguish right from wrong

Recognizing their growing influence, UNESCO globally has trained more than 10,000 digital content creators on how to reliably source information. Partnerships with platforms such as Microsoft and Google are developing new tools to scale up this training for an even greater reach.

Parents have a critical role. In partnership with France's CLEMI, UNESCO produced Family Guide for the Digital Age: Growing Up in a Connected World. It provides support and practical guidance to parents on assessing the credibility of the information their children may be viewing, identifying AI-generated content, and responding to misinformation and disinformation.

What comes next: AI for the people

AI will transform our world. But for whom? On whose terms? The answers will determine how we live, learn, govern and express ourselves.

Above all, AI should have one overriding purpose: to serve humanity. AI must be for the people. It must protect human dignity, advance human rights and enhance human intelligence.

This means that AI:

- Improves education, without erasing teachers and students' agency
- Advances science, without diminishing knowledge diversity
- Enriches culture, without erasing its creators
- Expands information access, without corroding trust
- Accelerates development, without perpetuating inequalities
- Innovates for empowerment, without just turning a profit
- Strengthens resilience, helping communities anticipate, prepare for and respond to disasters and climate-related risks

Four pillars uphold AI for the people. Each operates in line with the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI.

Ethical AI benefits people and society while minimizing harms. Both its development and use are morally responsible, fair and aligned with human values.

Inclusive AI is a force for shared progress. It actively diminishes disparities in data, computing power, skills, infrastructure and governance capacity.


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Sustainable AI is efficient and inclusive. It grows through affordable, environmentally sound systems that can be adapted and maintained.

Human-centred AI amplifies human capabilities while remaining subordinate to human judgment, creativity and ethics. It emphasizes transparency and is easy and empowering to use.

Taking an approach to AI that is ethical, inclusive, sustainable and human-centred will prepare the world for AI — and AI for the world.

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AI and emerging technologies

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