

Who Gets to Shape AI's Future?

Trust in artificial intelligence will depend on whether countries and communities can have a meaningful say in its development and use

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The debate around frontier AI has become a test of public trust. The question is no longer simply how powerful these technologies will become. It is how they can be developed and governed in ways that people and countries can trust, understand and help shape. Action on this cannot be postponed. AI is already changing how children and adults learn, how people communicate and find and produce information, how artists create and how public services reach citizens.

The benefits can be substantial, but will not be distributed evenly by default. Unequal access to connectivity, skills, data, compute, institutional capacity and effective safeguards can deepen the divides that already separate societies and countries. Some will design the systems that shape everyone's lives; others will simply have to live with those decisions.

That is not an argument against AI innovation. AI can expand access to knowledge, strengthen public services, support scientific discovery, enable new forms of creativity, economic opportunity and sustainable development. But innovation must be accompanied by practical ways to protect rights, enable informed choices and ensure public institutions can assess, procure and govern the systems on which people will increasingly depend.

This requires making frontier technologies trustworthy in the fullest sense: serving human rights and dignity, inclusive of different needs and accountable to the public interest. Values, rights and ethics must be translated into policy, institutional capacity, technical design, and capacity development. International technical standards are an important part of that translation: turning principles such as safety, transparency and accountability into practical requirements that can be implemented, tested and used across borders. Equally, AI innovation needs to be guided by the lived realities of the people it affects.

This is where international cooperation has a concrete offer: UNESCO and ITU combine a human rights-based approach with a normative and ethical grounding, and the ability to facilitate dialogue across sectors and regions. Together we foster cooperation on access, connectivity and infrastructure as well as on training, digital literacy and skills development, ensuring that people have the knowledge and critical thinking needed to navigate these new technologies and use them wisely, instead of being used by them.

Together, we also help bring the wider UN system together on AI, strengthening coordination and drawing on the complementary expertise and capabilities of organizations across the system. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence provides a global normative reference and AI for Good provides a global multistakeholder platform. Across our respective mandates, we also invest in people through training and professional development to teachers, journalists, scientists, creators, and all those whose professions and daily lives are being reshaped by artificial intelligence.

Our shared strength lies in helping countries and multiple stakeholders turn shared principles into practical choices.

At the heart of this is capacity development and the ability of individuals to engage critically with these technologies. Countries and communities need the ability to determine how AI serves their own priorities, languages, cultures and social conditions. We need a global commitment to promoting AI literacy, ensuring that every boy and girl is equipped with the skills to thrive in the age of artificial intelligence, starting with their empowerment through critical thinking. As the world races to invest in technology and computational power, we must invest in human intelligence with the same urgency and determination. Women and girls, young people, persons with disabilities, and people of all ages and geographies must have meaningful opportunities to contribute to AI development and use. Inclusion is not simply a question of who is consulted; it is also a question of who has the connectivity, knowledge, skills, resources and institutional support to act.

No government, company or international organization can meet this challenge alone. AI that can be trusted requires multistakeholder cooperation: governments that set enabling and protective policy; companies that innovate responsibly and transparently; civil society and affected communities that bring lived experience and scrutiny; technical communities and researchers who contribute to the body of knowledge and develop international technical standards that provide a common foundation for trustworthy AI across countries, sectors and technologies; alongside educators and youth who contribute knowledge, creative solutions and critical questions. UNESCO and ITU can use their convening power to promote international cooperation that offers room for all of these voices, especially those too often excluded from decisions about technology. Together, they can mobilize their extensive global networks – from UNESCO Chairs and Institutes to ITU’s community of standards development organizations, academic, and research members – to support cooperation and translate diverse perspectives into practical action.

Existing avenues are already carrying this work forward. We will continue to support the Global Dialogue on AI Governance and the Independent International Scientific Panel on AI, while strengthening the wider partnerships through which expertise, technical standards, capacity and experience can be shared. The goal is not another abstract conversation, but a more practical and inclusive ability to shape AI’s trajectory together.

The real measure of AI will not be technological progress alone. It will be whether it expands capability and opportunity, protects rights and dignity, earns trust, and enables the diversity of societies affected by it to shape its future.

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