

Development Cooperation, Human Rights and Emerging Technologies

*Does AI support a
Right-Oriented Development?*

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September 2024

Supported by:



Fondazione
Compagnia
di San Paolo

This study has been realized within the framework of the project
THE TECHNOLOGICAL LEAP AND COOPERATION: WHAT CHALLENGES FOR RIGHTS?
The implementation of the project is supported by the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation,
as part of the "Geopolitics and Technology" 2023 grant.

DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION, HUMAN RIGHTS
AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES
DOES AI SUPPORT A RIGHT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT?

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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and new technologies have emerged as decisive concepts reshaping global societies, presenting opportunities and challenges alike. This policy brief is the result of all the activities carried out within the project “[Il balzo tecnologico e la cooperazione: quali sfide per i diritti?](#)”, implemented by CeSPI ETS in partnership with the UniTrento’s School of International Studies, supported by Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo. The project focused on the impact of emerging technologies on human rights in development cooperation and, more broadly, on North-South relations. The Research Team realised a desk and qualitative research, organised a cycle of workshops and wrote three documents to define the links between technology, sustainable development, and human rights. The focus of the research is on one of the main actors for development cooperation, civil society, to understand the ongoing practices, hopes, fears and inhibitions around the idea of involving ICT or AI, for instance, in Civil Society Organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations’ activities related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Over the past decade, technologies such as AI have showcased remarkable potential to revolutionise sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, education, and beyond. However, its adoption raises profound ethical, social, and legal concerns. Issues such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, and the implications for human rights underscore the critical need for informed and ethical strategies.

The research convened stakeholders from diverse backgrounds including universities, civil society organisations, policy makers and international organisations. Through collaborative discussions and expert insights, the qualitative research and the workshops explored strategies to navigate the complexities of a responsible deployment of emerging technologies. Based on the current ongoing practices from the CSOs to the evolution of the latest technologies, this policy brief synthesises the outcomes of these workshops into possible actionable recommendations aimed at supporting public authorities and civil society organisations to dialogue with technology, putting at the centre of human rights consciously. It emphasises the importance of ethical frameworks, inclusive practices, and robust regulatory measures to ensure that the emerging technologies benefit society equitably and uphold fundamental human values.

1. Challenges for the Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Human Rights Perspective

The cycle of workshops organised within the project tried to cover a broad area of using emerging technologies in development cooperation and the impact on human rights by filling the gaps that have been discovered during the desk research and the interviews, such as the lack of AI policies tailored to local contexts, insufficient awareness of technologies' potential for human rights protection, ethical concerns related to AI bias and privacy, and the limited infrastructure available for new technologies implementation in developing regions.¹

The participants have expressed a diverse range of interests and learning goals centred around the application, impact, and ethical considerations of emerging technologies, in various contexts. They were eager to explore practical improvements and opportunities for using them in development cooperation, seeking to understand how it impacts practices and initiatives. The goal was to discern how emerging technologies can enhance effectiveness and efficiency in these fields.

As confirmed by the previous phases of the project, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are very attentive on understanding the aspects of human rights and ethics related to emerging technologies. In fact, during the workshops, participants were interested in ensuring that human rights, especially for the most vulnerable, such as children, are central to technological innovation, delving into ethical issues, and developing frameworks for responsible usage. In these early stages of technological development, particularly when dealing with AI, there has been a lack of use of new technologies and a lack of awareness about the impact on human rights, leading to the outcome that currently the civil society wants to deeply explore the broader implications of development and humanitarian programs and reflect on the potential of technology for good. Moreover, there is also a relevant need to acquire practical skills and knowledge for applying AI or ICT in their daily work. Many representatives from CSOs were interested in case studies that demonstrate successful applications in development projects, valuing networking opportunities that allow for the exchange of ideas, experiences, and insights too.

In addition, participants were also keen to explore the impact of AI on beneficiaries and potential changes in the unbalanced relation between the so-called North and South. There were concerns about the fact that research on emerging technologies in international cooperation is often led and managed by institutions or stakeholders from high-income countries. This can result in the exclusion of the low- and middle-income countries from critical decision-making processes, leading to a risk that the technologies developed or the policies proposed may not align with the needs or priorities of local communities. Moreover, this unequal control over research can reduce the Global South's ability to have ownership of development policies, as they may be treated as passive recipients rather than

¹ The four workshops took place from February to June, these were the organisations, Universities and national bodies participating as moderators and speakers: Gnucoop, Code for Africa, Forus International, University of Florence, University of Manchester, University of Trento, CIDU (Italian Interministerial Committee for Human Rights), University of Turin, University of Siena, Save the Children Italy, Punto Sud, Global Health Telemedicine, New Life for Children and Agency for Peacebuilding. The participants came from a variety of different areas: European Universities, CSOs, NGOs, National Authorities and European organisations.

active partners in shaping their own development agendas. Many were curious about how AI affects human rights and the role of civil society in limiting control and segmentation.

The positive and negative contributions of digital tools, such as AI, were a significant area of investigation, alongside concerns about the replacement of intellectual and artistic jobs, the risks of deep fakes, and the transparency of AI development, given the private nature of much research in this field. Understanding the level of technical knowledge among human rights advocates and identifying common ground for dialogue was another area of interest. Ensuring that technology is shaped fairly and accessible to the Global South was a common concern. Many were curious about how emerging technologies are harnessed in development cooperation to address human rights issues, particularly in conflicts such as those in Ukraine and Israel. The potential for new technologies to improve information access and transparency in development cooperation was seen as a significant opportunity. Balancing technological research with human rights protection is a key concern, with questions about AI's impartiality on gender issues and broader discrimination and biases.

Overall, participants seek a comprehensive understanding of how these new tools work and their practical implications in the development cooperation field, some of them having the perspective that a lack of knowledge and training on this issue will imply a loss for their organisation in the long term.

1.1 AI and Emerging Technologies in North-South Cooperation

The rapid integration of emerging technologies, such as AI, into various aspects of our lives is unprecedented. This surge of innovation has been particularly noticeable over the past few years, bringing about rapid changes across different sectors.

In the realm of development cooperation, the impact of technology is not a novel concept. Since the turn of the millennium, the digital divide has been a prominent issue, exacerbated by the emergence of internet access and the subsequent gap between those with adequate access and those without (by choice or not). In the early stages, there was optimism that the internet would usher in a new era of possibilities, bridging the gap between different regions of the world. However, the access alone proved insufficient. Once again, today, AI and other similar technologies represent a new form of power, albeit one predominantly wielded by a select few. Through discussions with experts, CSOs and NGOs, a nuanced perspective has emerged regarding the use of these technologies in development cooperation. Understanding and addressing the unique contextual factors of each country is paramount, as challenges vary significantly.

A major hurdle in many developing regions is beneficiaries' insufficient basic literacy and infrastructure, hindering the effective utilisation of technological advancements. Since AI and these kinds of new technologies are an essential source of power, these tools must be controlled and must not be misused as weapons. In some cases, instead of being a tool that helps the development cooperation sector, they could and already are, be used to secure power between the Global North and Global South. In the first workshop, five areas were mentioned as potentially reinforcing unbalanced relations when linked with the digital evolution: foreign intelligence; training; financing; facilitating; promoting legislation and surveillance. For the latter, recent research highlights a problem

of human rights violations when technologies are used to facilitate pushing back third-country nationals (TCNs) at the external borders, namely the breach of the refoulement provision in the case of the massive pushback of refugees.² The increasing reliance on surveillance technology at the borders, especially at the EU's external ones, raises concerns about its consequences³. It may push TCNs toward perilous routes, violating several of their rights, including the right to asylum, life, and freedom of movement. Privacy breaches, freedom of expression limitations, and potential misuse of spyware further complicate the situation. These potential human rights violations and the development of discriminatory practices stem not only from the low level of basic literacy and digital infrastructure in certain low and middle-income countries but primarily from the concentration of AI and new technology capabilities within a few companies in developed countries. Therefore, when discussing development cooperation, it is crucial to consider the developers of these technologies and involve civil society by providing them with the skills and knowledge to have their say in the digitalisation process. This approach is essential to prevent excessive control by a few and to ensure a fair distribution of power, incorporating diverse voices, especially those from the destination countries.

A significant challenge in the use of new technologies in low and middle-income countries is language diversity, especially in the use of Large Language Models (LLM) in development cooperation. These are types of artificial intelligence that use deep neural networks to learn from huge amounts of textual data, such as written or spoken texts. LLM models, primarily trained in English, Chinese, and certain European languages, risk perpetuating biases and discrimination, avoiding taking into consideration linguistic and cultural differences.⁴ Additionally, the potential weaponisation of AI, such as through the spread of hate speech, underscores the need for proactive measures to counter misinformation, particularly in the native languages of the affected regions. How do you detect hate speech without technologies based on specific languages?

Despite these challenges, some positive initiatives have been supported, leveraging technology for development in African countries. The company Lelapa AI⁵, for instance, is developing artificial intelligence models specifically for African languages. The organisation Masakhane⁶ works to strengthen and stimulate research in natural language processing (NLP) in African languages by and for Africans. In addition, Lanafrika⁷ facilitates the discovery of African works by cataloguing and linking African language resources. These initiatives, rooted in diverse African cultures, offer promising inclusive growth and collaboration opportunities.

The importance of North-South collaboration and cooperation on AI and emerging technologies cannot be overestimated, as it is a crucial element in ensuring equitable and widespread access to technological advances. This type of cooperation is fundamental for addressing the significant disparities in technological infrastructure and digital literacy while promoting innovation and development in a wide range of regions. Such efforts not only contribute to technological progress

² European and Artificial Intelligence and Society Fund, *Exporting Surveillance Technology to MENA: implication for human rights and regional stability*, September 2023 <https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Exporting-surveillance-technology-to-MENA.pdf>

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Masakhane, *NaijaNLP: Sentiment Lexicon & Hate Speech*, <https://www.masakhane.io/ongoing-projects/naijanlp-sentiment-lexicon-hate-speech>

⁵ <https://lelapa.ai/>

⁶ <https://www.masakhane.io/>

⁷ <https://lanfrica.com/>

but are also essential for improving the living conditions of local populations. At a global level, it is essential to establish shared governance to create an inclusive regulatory and operational framework involving all stakeholders, from governments to non-governmental organisations, from local communities to private companies. This global governance is crucial to promote the ethical development of artificial intelligence, protect data and privacy, and stimulate innovation.

In AI, some low and middle-income countries have started developing soft policies to guide their member states. For example, the government of Mauritius established the Working Group on Artificial Intelligence (MWG) and, in 2018, presented the National Strategy on Artificial Intelligence. Kenya has also taken significant steps towards integrating artificial intelligence into its future. The Ministry of Information Technology and Digital Economy, in collaboration with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), has initiated the development of the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy “FAIR Forward - Artificial Intelligence for All.” This strategy emphasises the responsible development of AI to foster sustainable growth⁸. However, at the national level, there has been limited progress in enacting comprehensive laws and policies, particularly on data governance. There is still much to be done in this regard. The African Union (AU), comprising 55 member nations, is formulating an ambitious AI policy to chart a path centred around Africa for developing and regulating this burgeoning technology. On 29 February, the African Union Development Agency published a draft policy outlining a model of AI regulation for African nations.⁹ The policy discourse within the African Union is still in a nascent stage; it is constantly evolving, with new products and discussions emerging daily. The African Union is an international organisation and, unlike the European Union, does not possess the authority to apply comprehensive policies and laws uniformly in all its member states. Nevertheless, in this flurry of activity, there is a pressing need to distil meaningful insights from this plethora of information and sift through the hype surrounding AI technologies.

The lack of governance is understood by CSOs as a reason for fearing the dominance of a few powerful companies, so-called Big Tech companies, driving the innovation related to AI and other technologies. This possible trend raises concerns, in some of the experts who engaged in the workshops, about the emergence of a new era of “*technological feudalism*” or “*techno-feudalism*”, as it is called, in which a small cohort of companies wield disproportionate influence.¹⁰ This inequality in the distribution of power creates an imbalance, exacerbated by the already existing differences between high-income and low-income countries. International cooperation is seen as the key element to support authorities to efficiently regulate the issue, balancing public, and private interests. Even if efforts can be made to influence institutional policies, the influence exerted by these economic giants remains formidable and difficult to counter.

The impact of new technologies on low and middle-income countries in the so-called Global South is complex and multifaceted. Looking at the negative aspects, it emerges that, if not managed properly, these technologies can violate the fundamental principles of international law of non-discrimination. In some cases, importing technologies to low-income countries leads to significant labour exploitation

⁸ *AI regulation and policy in Africa*, in Dentons, June 13, 2024

<https://www.dentons.com/en/insights/articles/2024/june/13/ai-regulation-and-policy-in-africa#:~:text=First%20among%20the%20African%20AI,any%20guidance%20on%20AI%20regulation.>

⁹ A. Tsanni, *Africa's push to regulate AI starts now*, in MIT technology review, march 15, 2024, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2024/03/15/1089844/africa-ai-artificial-intelligence-regulation-au-policy/>

¹⁰ For an overview on this idea see C. Durand, *Techno-féodalisme - Critique de l'économie numérique*, Zones, 2020.

as companies seek cheap workers and unregulated markets.¹¹ A significant example of how the development of new technologies can negatively impact local workers is the labelling of images. This process is essential to enabling LLM models to recognise objects and improve visual recognition. However, this work often exploits low-paid labour, contributing to precarious working conditions. Besides the economic aspects, image labelling can have a considerable emotional impact on workers, especially when analysing and categorising violent or disturbing content. Prolonged exposure to such images can cause psychological stress and trauma, further worsening the quality of life of these workers.¹²

An apparent paradox emerges in this context: while African workers, for instance, play a crucial role in the development of artificial intelligence, supporting the training of AI tools such as LLMs, this technology is not designed for them and often does not even speak their language. This points to a lack of inclusiveness and raises important questions regarding regulating and controlling emerging technologies. To address these issues, it is essential that technology platforms are developed in an inclusive manner, considering the protection of fundamental rights, cultural contexts, and the diversity of the countries in which they are implemented. Only by adopting an inclusive approach that respects different local realities can new technologies truly improve living conditions and offer economic and social opportunities to workers worldwide.

The perspective on AI is nuanced, reflecting both optimism and caution. While the metaphorical "knife" of AI technology is firmly in our hands, it presents a dual potential: it can either lead to self-harm or contribute to a better quality of life. For example, AI has already demonstrated its ability to enhance healthcare through early disease detection, improve education via personalised learning systems, and drive sustainable development through smart resource management. By harnessing AI responsibly, it can play a transformative role in addressing global challenges and enhancing human well-being. The crucial point is recognising that technology is a tool wielded by people with significant impacts on society. Therefore, deliberate decisions must guide its use, questioning who wields it and for what purposes. Although the "genie" of AI is out of the bottle and cannot be returned, a quote taken from the first workshop, it is within our power to determine its direction and impact. This sentiment underscores the importance of using AI for positive initiatives, advocating for equitable access and linguistic inclusivity, and necessitating regulation, possibly through institutions like the UN.

There is optimism regarding AI's potential when guided by ethical considerations and human-centred values. However, the acknowledgement of existing threats, such as misuse and lack of transparency, is crucial. Ensuring that AI technologies represent diverse perspectives and are comprehensible to all of society is paramount for equitable development. Despite the fact that the concentration of the economic resources to create AI tools is still in the hands of a few, there is a belief that collective action and understanding can guide the responsible and beneficial use of AI technologies. Thus, while challenges persist, there is a sense of agency and hope for the future of AI.

¹¹ A. Deck in Rest of World, *The workers at the frontlines of the AI revolution*, 11 July 2023 <https://restofworld.org/2023/ai-revolution-outsourced-workers/>

¹² *'It's destroyed me completely': Kenyan moderators decry toll of training of AI models*, in The Guardian, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/aug/02/ai-chatbot-training-human-toll-content-moderator-meta-openai>

1.2 The Human Responsibility for an Ethical Use

AI has emerged as a pivotal topic in public discourse, drawing significant attention from international organisations. In the second workshop, we focused specifically on AI due to its rapidly advancing capabilities and profound impact on society, including privacy, employment, and decision-making processes. Unlike other technologies, AI poses unique ethical challenges and opportunities that necessitate a dedicated exploration to ensure its development and deployment align with human values and ethical standards. As it can be observed, on the one hand, it promises groundbreaking capabilities, yet on the other, there are significant challenges to overcome.

Ethical considerations are at the forefront of discussions surrounding emerging technologies. The Council of Europe has emphasised the importance of protecting human rights in AI development and deployment.¹³ However, for some, the complex landscape of technologies such as AI could have important negative impacts on individual lives. This landscape could introduce what is referred to by some authors as "necropolitics"¹⁴, where technology dictates life and death decisions, particularly in humanitarian crises and geopolitical conflicts. Without regulations, these threats are perceived as concrete and potential risks for human beings. Regulatory frameworks like the EU AI Act aim to address algorithmic bias and uphold ethical standards. However, achieving ethical AI requires a collaborative effort involving governments, international organisations, civil society, and tech companies. An interesting finding was the importance of language in navigating power dynamics and advocating for ethical AI development and deployment. When discussing AI, it is essential to recognise that technological advancements are just one aspect; narrative framing also holds considerable importance. Whether traditional or AI-driven, information systems inherently rely on narratives and particular perspectives.

Therefore, when considering AI utilisation, emphasis should be placed on the role of language, both in the queries posed to AI systems and in the datasets used for training. The link to ethical AI lies in the fact that language shapes the way information is interpreted and decisions are made by AI systems; ethical considerations must ensure that the language used does not perpetuate biases or reinforce power imbalances, thus promoting fairness and accountability in AI outcomes.¹⁵ From a regulatory perspective, public procurement practices could mandate that stakeholders disclose the nature of training data provided to AI systems. This disclosure would ensure transparency regarding the sources and characteristics of the data, allowing for scrutiny of potential biases, data quality, and representativeness. Making this information public would promote accountability and enable better evaluation of whether the AI systems meet ethical and fairness standards, ultimately fostering trust in AI deployments.¹⁶ Transparency becomes imperative in ensuring accountability and understanding the biases inherent in the training process. Thus, transparency measures are owed to stakeholders to foster trust and mitigate potential ethical concerns surrounding AI deployment.

¹³ See the work of the Committee on Artificial Intelligence, within the Council of Europe. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/artificial-intelligence/cai>

¹⁴ See for instance: A. Mbembe, *The Earthly Community: Reflections on the Last Utopia. V2_Lab for the Unstable Media*, 2022.

¹⁵ Z. Chen, "Ethics and discrimination in artificial intelligence-enabled recruitment practices", *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 10, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02079-x>

¹⁶ A. Singhal, N. Neveditsin, H. Tanveer, V. Mago., Toward Fairness, Accountability, Transparency, and Ethics in AI for Social Media and Health Care: Scoping Review, in *JMIR Med Inform.* 2024, 10.2196/50048.

Another aspect that has been highlighted was the need to move beyond viewing AI solely as a technical innovation by stressing that AI is interconnected with broader institutional arrangements and societal contexts. As AI transitions from controlled environments like tech labs to public spaces, its vulnerabilities become apparent, and failures can have real-life consequences. AI's dependence on human intelligence and labour has been underscored by many researchers, who argue that AI's capabilities are derived from the collective intelligence of humans.¹⁷ This interdependence highlights the importance of human oversight in ensuring that AI systems align with ethical standards and shared societal values. Systems like the Lavender system¹⁸ exemplify this, as they target vulnerable populations, raising ethical concerns about their use in warfare. Moreover, AI's universality is questioned, as it predominantly reflects the perspectives and interests of powerful actors, particularly from the developed countries. This imbalance is evident in AI development projects, where the majority are led by researchers from Europe, US and in the recent years China as well, making it harder to reflect the diverse needs and voices of other regions. The possible monopolisation of AI markets, the phenomenon of free labour, such as crowd-sourced data labelling or unpaid work for developing AI technologies, and legislative misuses exacerbate ethical challenges. Civil society's freedoms are sometimes compromised, with technology utilised to suppress dissent and infringe privacy rights. The disparity in AI literacy and control further exacerbates inequalities, hindering effective ethical oversight.

Covering the ethics of AI and the main regulations released in the European Union, the EU AI Act could not be unnoticed from the discussion, as it presents a mixed bag of considerations. While it notably extends protection to vulnerable groups, there are criticisms surrounding its exclusion of certain other vulnerable demographics. This suggests a nuanced approach to regulation, balancing protective measures with potential oversights. The EU AI Act has the potential to advance standards and manage risks effectively. However, among the experts, concerns arise regarding its impact on specific rights holders, indicating the necessity for thorough scrutiny during the two-year implementation period. National legislation must carefully align with the Act to ensure comprehensive coverage. In contrast, the framework convention for AI within the Council of the EU adopts a different strategy, emphasising adaptable principles rather than rigid regulations. This convention, focusing on AI's implications for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, introduces ethical standards alongside legal frameworks for implementation. The broader context surrounding AI underscores the intricate interplay between AI technology and its environment. A conceptualisation of the "holy trinity" of AI—data, power, and people—illustrates how AI's material and immaterial dimensions intersect with socio-political rationalities. This analysis reveals divergent political ideologies' approaches to AI, from its commodification to its role in border management. A critique regarding the EU AI Act comes from several NGOs that have expressed deep disappointment with the outcome of the negotiations and the final version of the EU AI Act. They argue that the Act falls short of adequately addressing ethical concerns and risks associated with artificial intelligence. Despite their active participation in consultations and advocacy efforts, many CSOs and NGOs feel that the Act lacks sufficient safeguards against the misuse of AI technologies, particularly in high-risk applications such as surveillance and biometric identification. Moreover, some organisations are

¹⁷ <https://www.noemamag.com/the-exploited-labor-behind-artificial-intelligence/>

¹⁸ The Lavender system is an AI-driven tool designed to assist in mental health care by analysing patient data to provide insights and support clinical decisions. It aims to enhance the quality of mental health services while ensuring that ethical considerations, such as patient privacy and unbiased data interpretation, are prioritised.

concerned that the Act's focus on economic competitiveness and innovation may overshadow its ethical dimensions. They emphasise the need for robust regulations that prioritise human rights and societal well-being over corporate interests. Despite their disappointment, these organisations remain committed to monitoring the implementation of the EU AI Act and advocating for amendments to strengthen its ethical framework and protect vulnerable populations. This perspective reflects a broader scepticism among civil society organisations regarding the effectiveness of current regulatory frameworks in addressing the complex ethical challenges posed by AI. They argue for more ambitious and principled legislation that upholds democratic values and ensures AI technologies are developed and deployed responsibly.

In summary, the ethical considerations surrounding AI are multifaceted, encompassing human rights, discrimination, and societal impacts. AI technologies have the potential to either reinforce or mitigate existing inequalities, making it imperative to address these challenges through a holistic approach. The EU AI Act, while a step forward in regulating AI within the European Union, has faced criticism from NGOs for not adequately addressing civil liberties concerns and for potentially diluting ethical standards in favour of economic competitiveness. Addressing these concerns necessitates integrating robust regulatory measures, fostering civil society engagement, and promoting international cooperation.

Furthermore, fostering inclusive dialogue and promoting ethical practices are crucial. These efforts can help harness AI's transformative potential while safeguarding human rights and societal values. Effective implementation and continuous evaluation of AI policies will be essential to ensure that technological advancements align with ethical standards and contribute positively to global progress.

1.3 Inclusiveness and Non-Discrimination

The third workshop focused on the possibilities for inclusion and equality, namely for those who are marginalised. This can be seen as both a point of convergence and a point of fracture between NGOs, humanitarian organisations, and technology multinationals, as well as between Big Data¹⁹ and Small Data.²⁰ According to some experts, one of the main trends in artificial intelligence is AI for Social Good (AI4SG)²¹, which promotes using AI to support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by private entities and NGOs. However, this idea has received several criticisms.²² One of the main weaknesses of AI4SG is its conceptual vagueness. There is often talk of redefining development in terms of "good", using a rhetorical strategy that seems designed to avoid criticism and shift the discussion from the political to the ethical-moral plane. What needs to be highlighted is that behind

¹⁹ Big data are large computer data that cannot be analysed and stored with traditional tools. The most widespread definition of 'Big data' comes from IBM, which characterises them in terms of four variables (the four Vs): Volume, Variety, Velocity, Veracity.

²⁰ Referring to Martin Lindstrom's phrase, author and neuromarketing expert, small data are 'the tiny clues that uncover huge trends'. They are unique data related to individual people and not, like Big data, generic information related to the masses. They are used to learn about an individual's habits and characteristics, focusing on emotions, interests, and needs.

²¹ <https://www.aiforsocialgood.org/>

²² See G. Iazzolino, N. Stremlau, AI for social good and the corporate capture of global development, in *Information Technology for Development*, 2024.

the concept of AI4SG lies a broader and more controversial reality. Often, artificial intelligence is associated with projects from Big Tech companies, which tend to downplay their role of power and influence. This phenomenon has created a dependency on Big Tech from national authorities and international organisations, where companies have a predominant role in providing the technical expertise necessary to address development issues. However, this approach risks limiting grassroots participation and consultation, diminishing the voice of communities and organisations with fewer resources and capabilities. By linking the definition of development challenges to predefined solutions, there is a risk of excluding local actors and organisations that could offer different perspectives and solutions, leading to a lack of inclusivity and a limited view of global problems.

In development cooperation involving new technologies, it is valuable that Big Data and Small Data dialogue and integrate, supporting better accurate planning for the beneficiaries. However, in the reality of development projects, this is not easy. First of all, the culture of data is often lacking and there is also a significant absence of shared standards, which are central to the collection and comparison of reliable data across different contexts. Some of the experts within the third workshop stressed that NGOs are driven by idealistic tensions and an interest in creating benefits, but they frequently do not collect data other than what is requested by the funding bodies. Sometimes, this is due to a lack of resources. Collecting data requires specific expertise and adequate resources to ensure the quality of the data collected. Many CSOs and NGOs lack such resources and expertise, the data culture is often absent, and it is sometimes underestimated or evaluated as too expensive to realise in terms of initial investment. Even in countries where projects operate, the data culture may be lacking. In fact, if the government or other institutions do not collect data, decisions are made without a solid basis. For example, in Eswatini, only recently did the competent minister propose a country monitoring policy to rationalise and bring together all those who collect data and make it available. However, this is a complex issue. Even when data is collected, national authorities do not always make it available. In addition, coordination mechanisms are complex, interests are diverse, and trust is often lacking between the different private and public actors. One of the biggest criticisms is the lack of coordination: for some of the experts, when Big Tech are involved, it is because they see an interest in the data and often do not share it with the other stakeholders.

Moreover, the problem of dependence on Big Tech is related to the decrease in funding from donors, which creates the need for strategic alliances and increases the pressure on accountability and transparency. Technologies make the flow of aid more traceable, but this often happens without a parallel need for accountability from below, i.e., from the aid recipients. This phenomenon was considered by some of the participants as part of a certain attitude that could be called data colonialism or, more broadly, digital colonialism. Beside the threat perceived by some experts around the extension of a colonial logic in terms of power balance between different actors, the trend where many countries receive help from large consulting firms is currently present and is part of the digital transformation strategy. Many countries cannot afford to manage these processes themselves, as acquiring the necessary resources would be too expensive. To overcome this fear, there is a strong need for more horizontal collaboration and transparency among all the stakeholders.

When it comes to technology, discrimination and inclusive access, several points emerge that require special attention to avoid ultimately the violation of human rights. Technologies are a tool that can facilitate more inclusion and an equitable approach, supporting in different ways, the participation and involvement of different groups and minorities. However, as a tool it can also replicate the reality

of discriminations and abuses towards the most vulnerable ones, as for instance children. For instance, the impact of AI in general, mostly referring to Generative AI²³, on children can both ensure opportunities and minimise vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, it is essential to understand the risks and study the impact to ensure fair access and opportunities, bearing in mind the obligation to respect and promote international conventions such as the 1989 New York one on children's rights and specific instruments realised by national authorities, such as the AICS' guidelines on children focused on supporting child-oriented development cooperation initiatives.²⁴

A child rights-centred approach to emerging technologies and systems requires action on many levels to promote a digital environment that supports children's right to education, participation, protection, and well-being. Digital technologies must conform by *design* to the person's fundamental rights and aim to support children's voices to be heard. A child-rights-centred approach means designing technologies that are safe, accessible, and useful, including new regulations, minimising the risks of bias, discrimination, and exposure to violent experiences, and considering children's needs and the intersectionality of vulnerabilities. It means applying protective measures and incorporating strict ethical and safeguarding standards at every project stage. Civil society organisations using digital devices and technologies need a child safeguarding policy regarding online safety issues that minimises risks and implements a safeguarding system to prevent, recognise and manage online issues. The relationship between young people and technology is crucial, as proven by COVID-19, where the digital divide among children meant access, or not, to their right to education. Facilitating access to technology in vulnerable situations and promoting digital skills is crucial to avoid exclusion.²⁵

In development cooperation, we are confronted with different cultural, social, and economic contexts, but they are united by the tension of new technologies travelling the net. When considering projects in other countries, it is essential to understand the context in which one operates and on which the choice of technologies, data, and information depends. This does not mean that emerging technologies cannot be used in some countries; rather, regulatory limits need to be respected. In many low- and middle-income countries, data is read without considering how it is collected, often inaccurately due to the lack of possibility to sample the population. The use of technology is crucial, making a difference in inclusion processes, but it is not neutral per se. It often represents a great opportunity, but it is not always a given, especially because of the cost of internet access. Considering the wealthier population, this issue may not be significant. However, for most people, lacking access to the internet or digital tools, even laptops or smartphones, prevents them from other opportunities that could enhance their quality of life.

Therefore, implementing projects where internet access costs are prohibitive or data collection methods are not conscientiously considered may exacerbate existing disparities, which must be

²³ This model pertains to a segment of machine learning AI technologies that have recently advanced to create new content rapidly, such as audio, code, images, text, simulations, and video. Generative AI (GAI) software takes user-provided "prompts" in natural language and converts them into various outputs. These outputs may include generating text from text (Text-to-Text), creating images from textual descriptions (Text-to-Image), or generating images from other images (Image-to-Image).

²⁴ AICS, *Linee Guida sull'Infanzia e l'Adolescenza*, 2021.

²⁵ See Save the Children work on education, AI and children's rights. For instance, Save the Children, *Giovani e Tempi Digitali: XIV Atlante dell'infanzia*, 2023. See also: <https://www.savethechildren.it/cosa-facciamo/pubblicazioni/educazione-e-nuovi-media-3>; <https://www.savethechildren.it/blog-notizie/l-intelligenza-artificiale-spiegata-ai-ragazzi>

carefully evaluated. For instance, creating discrimination or misusing technology and data without ensuring anonymity not only perpetuates inequalities but also poses direct risks to the well-being and safety of those involved. Especially when using AI or similar technologies, in the context of crisis and with people in humanitarian needs, human rights must be preserved and not directly suspended because of the emergency.

1.4 AI and New Technologies for Rights: On-Going Practises

In previous sections, we have explored various issues related to using AI and other new technologies tools in development cooperation, addressing questions of ethics, discrimination, benefits, and concerns. In the fourth workshop, we focused on how current implementation practices of AI and emerging technologies contribute to the SDGs' achievement, and we analysed how technological innovation could have the role, or not, of being a powerful catalyst for social progress and improved living conditions.

A significant and concrete example concerns the right to health and the development of telemedicine, which is considered a positive achievement in healthcare. Often implemented in countries with poor internet connections, the implementation of telemedicine requires a process of computerisation and digitalisation of medical records in collaboration with national authorities and private organisations. This path led to the creation of advanced software capable of connecting doctors from around the world, facilitating difficult medical diagnoses in low and middle-income countries.

In 2013, GHTelemedicine²⁶ was founded, an innovative platform that enables the secure transmission of medical information and data in the form of texts, images, and other modalities necessary for the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and monitoring of patients. GHTelemedicine uses asynchronous teleconsultation, enabling healthcare professionals to collaborate effectively despite geographical barriers. Implementing telemedicine has made it possible to set up an integrated hospital-doctor-territory network, greatly improving access to care and the quality of healthcare. This system not only facilitates the sharing of knowledge and resources between health professionals but also promotes health inclusion and reduces inequalities in access to medical services. In the context of the development of these technologies in developing countries, effective organisation, networking, and collaboration with local communities play a key role. It is not only a matter of implementing the technology itself but also of transferring know-how and good public policies at the local level, which are essential for initiatives such as telemedicine.²⁷

Another area where technology can have a strong positive impact is education. Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda aims to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. AI and emerging technologies can play a crucial role in achieving this objective. To address these challenges, New Life for Children has embarked on an innovative project leveraging

²⁶ <https://ghtelemedicine.org/site/index.php>

²⁷ Telemedicine is at the centre of a project funded by AICS in Mozambique: “Rafforzamento del sistema degli istituti di formazione del personale sanitario e supporto allo sviluppo della telemedicina” AID – 12524, implemented by University of Sassari (UNISS), AISPO, Medici con l’Africa (CUAMM), ACAP – S. Egidio.

advanced technology.²⁸ The NGO has developed an avatar system capable of speaking over 200 languages and various dialects. These avatars support a micro-learning program, providing a structured training path for educators. This approach involves developing targeted teacher training programs to enhance the quality of education for children in low- and middle-income countries.

As a third example, technology can support designing and implementing different types of peacebuilding interventions. “Peacetech” referred to the strategic use of technology to promote peace, prevent conflict and support peace efforts in general, including peacekeeping, peace-making and peacebuilding. AI can analyse huge amounts of data to identify hidden and consistent patterns, making it extremely valuable in attempting to predict conflicts. Each conflict has unique characteristics, and AI can enrich the analysis of these conflict dynamics, providing deeper perspectives and useful information to formulate more effective conflict management and prevention strategies. For example, the Violence and Impact Early Warning System (VIEWS)²⁹ generates monthly forecasts for numerous countries around the world and can anticipate conflicts up to three years in advance. Moreover, in Sudan, an NGO employed Remesh, a software product developed for real-time written dialogue with up to 1,000 participants at a time, to support the peace mediation process. The software has previously been used by the UN in various peace processes, such as in Yemen and Libya.³⁰

Technology permeates every aspect of our lives; however, its diffusion, access, and utilisation can vary significantly. The examples mentioned above regarding the use of technology in development cooperation demonstrate how AI and new technologies can address global challenges, promote social inclusion, and create opportunities for sustainable economic development. It is, therefore, essential to be aware of the risks but not deterred, as technological innovation remains essential for progress towards a more promising future.

²⁸ <https://it.teachersoutreach.org/>

²⁹ <https://viewsforecasting.org/>

³⁰ <https://cmi.fi/2024/02/06/cmi-insight-artificial-intelligence-and-peacemaking-the-case-of-digital-dialogues-in-sudan/>
See Agency for Peacebuilding, *Digital technology and inclusivity in peace mediation*, 2024, May.

2. A Problem of Governance

According to UNCTAD, technology is “the systematic knowledge for the application of a process that results in the manufacture of a product or the delivery of a service.”³¹ This definition allows us to understand that when dealing with technology, the focus should be more on the process than a specific finished product or service. In development cooperation, the use of different technologies and the possibility to transfer certain know-how could have a positive impact not only for the direct beneficiaries of the project but, more broadly, for the country involved in the project. As underlined by the Addis Abeba Conference on Financing for Development in 2015, “*The creation, development and diffusion of new innovations and technologies and associated know-how, including the transfer of technology on mutually agreed terms, are powerful drivers of economic growth and sustainable development*”.³² However, as stated by various authors and within the 2015 Conference, there are several aspects to consider. From one side, the digital divide is a concrete obstacle that hinders North-South cooperation and even South-South cooperation when considering the important differences within the low- and middle-income countries.³³

In fact, the digital divide mentioned as one of the major critical issues at the launch of the 2030 Agenda is still very present, as proven by the latest findings from the World Bank: while internet use and internet speed are speeding up for the majority of the world, low-income countries have seen a slow rather than still advancement even in data use. For instance, when we analyse internet use: “*The world gained 1.5 billion new internet users during 2018–22. Internet users reached 5.3 billion in 2022, representing two-thirds of the global population. The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed the accelerating growth in internet users in middle-income countries. However, only one out of four individuals in low-income countries used the internet in 2022 behind.*”³⁴ If this difference is present in the North-South cooperation, making it harder to foster international cooperation among the uneven capacities and access to technologies, the South-South cooperation presents, for certain aspects, similar issues. China is, together with the United States, one of the bigger players in the digital sector: already in 2019, the two States accounted for 75% of all patents related to blockchain technologies and for 50% of global spending on the “Internet of Things”³⁵. The gap at the global level is still evident and, when reflected to development cooperation, imposes the evaluation of the capacity of the host country to absorb the used technology, in terms of human and economic capacity to implement in a particular country a specific technology created somewhere else and, often too, for different purposes. In this circumstance, it is clear that the process inherent to the implementation of

³¹ UNCTAD, Draft International Code of Conduct on the Transfer of Technology, as at the close of the sixth session of the Conference on 5 June 1998 (United Nations, Geneva 1985), United Nations publication, No. TD/Code TOT/47, 20 June.

³² Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, The final text of the outcome document adopted at the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 13–16 July 2015) and endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 69/313 of 27 July 2015, par. 114.

³³ S. Haug, C.M. Kamwengo, Africa beyond ‘South-South cooperation’: A frame with limited resonance, in *Journal of International Development*, 2023, 35, pp. 549–565.

³⁴ World Bank, *Digital progress, and trends report*, 2023, p. XVII.

³⁵ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1045572>

a certain technology will not have a positive outcome, and the aimed transfer of technology will not occur.

The international financial organisations, such as the World Bank, have supported the idea that the fostering of a digitalisation process will have a secure positive impact on national economies in terms of job creation, cost reduction, sustainability and economic growth however, they are also aware of the harmful risks in terms of inequalities, market concentration, national security threats.³⁶ In a theoretical repartition, it is confirmed though that global inequality is already there, evident not only for the concrete possibility of having a certain technology but also in terms of mental or skills access.³⁷ In Africa, only 22% of the population benefits from mobile internet, while it covers 84% of it; this gap is due to several factors, the lack of skills and the perception of relevance by the users being possible causes to reflect on.

Nevertheless, the fast evolution of technology and the use of it by individuals are factors with global relevance, involving countries from the North to the South. If we reflect on the importance of technology for the industrial sector, despite the fact that COVID-19, the medium and high-tech manufacturing value is growing at the global level with important differences within the less developed countries; in “*Eastern and South Eastern Asia, this sector accounted for approximately 50.6% of total manufacturing in 2021, whereas in sub-Saharan Africa, it represented just 18.3%.*”³⁸ However, national economies are benefiting from the IT sector, in terms of growth in the labour supply, for instance, Nigeria had rapid employment growth due to the IT service industry and exports, while Ghana, Malawi and Nigeria itself are among the countries that recorded the highest growth in finance app downloads.³⁹ Since the pandemic in the Global South, too, the effort to achieve internet access has shown the rapidity of certain countries such as Egypt and Ghana to bring a vast portion of the population to be able to navigate the web. The impressive latest achievements of AI development are reinforcing the idea that technology has and will have a key role in achieving wealth and development, an idea that already has a long history behind in terms of the need for society to “modernize”⁴⁰ and achieve the level of innovation that others already have.

Given the complexity that arises from tracing the impact of development cooperation on reaching the targets set by the 2030 Agenda, technology such as AI is seen as a strong support for sustainable development at the global level. The 17 Goal of the SDGs states the need to “Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development” and, in order to do so, defines three specific targets related to technology (17.6; 17.7; 17.8). Among these, the 17.6 enhances North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on access to science, technology, and innovation; enhances knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms and through a global technology facilitation mechanism.

³⁶ World Bank, *Digital divide, and trends report*, 2023, p. XV.

³⁷ J. Van Dijk, A Framework for Digital Divide Research, in *Electronic Journal of Communication* 12 (1), 2002, The author divides the notion of access in four aspects: ‘mental access’, ‘material access’, ‘skills access’ and ‘usage access.’

³⁸ UN, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals Report of the Secretary-General*, Distr. General 2 May 2024. See target 9.b.

³⁹ World Bank, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ On the theory of modernization see, W.W. Rostow, *The stages of economic growth*, Cambridge University Press, 1990; D. Engerman, N. Gilman, M. H. Haefele, M. E. Latham (eds), *Staging Growth. Modernization, Development and the Global Cold War*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003.

Development cooperation nowadays is complex and made by a multitude of actors with different natures (public or private) and at different organisational levels (international, national, and local). All the actors are reunited by the responsibility to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the SDGs. Thus, civil society organisations, which have a prominent role within the Italian system, are called to understand how to face the fast evolution of technology, pushed from certain parts of the world, and the impact of this process in the countries where they actively work to support sustainable development. It is important to notice that even if there is no specific goal related to technology in the 2030 Agenda, as cited above, some targets mention it specifically and several indicators consider certain access to technology in terms of inclusivity and non-discrimination. Goal 4, related to Education; 5, related to Gender equality; 9 that promotes resilient infrastructure, inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, and innovation, and the mentioned 17 are concerned by ICT related targets:⁴¹

- Target 4a: Proportion of schools with access to the Internet for pedagogical purposes
- Target 4a: Proportion of schools with access to computers for pedagogical purposes
- Target 4.4: Proportion of youth/adults with ICT skills by type of skills
- Target 5b: Proportion of individuals who own a mobile telephone by sex
- Target 9c: Percentage of the population covered by a mobile network, broken down by technology
- Target 17.6: Fixed Internet broadband subscriptions, broken down by speed
- Target 17.8: Proportion of individuals using the Internet⁴²

Moreover, technology is mentioned in several targets as an element that can support the realisation of the goal, saying, in some cases, the idea of “enabling technology”, for instance, in the goal related to energy (Goal 7) and in the agricultural sector (Goal 2). The idea is to empower individuals and to contribute to a process of adoption and appropriation of new technologies, such as AI, by people living in low and middle-income countries. However, the latest UN Progress report in 2024 shows that for the indicators related to 17.6, while the Fixed-broadband subscriptions continue to grow steadily among upper-middle-income and high-income countries, they are “*nearly non-existent in low-income countries due to high prices and a lack of infrastructure.*”⁴³

In this framework, almost 10 years after the approval of the 2030 Agenda, the partial results show the inherent economic and social differences related to the relationship between countries. At the same time, digitalisation has also proven its character of being an unavoidable aspect of present reality, proving also its relevance as a global issue with the potential to have a positive or negative impact on inclusivity, sustainability, and equity. Current research is enunciating the good impact on economies, employment and reduction of poverty in low-income countries, such as Senegal and Nigeria, which saw a 10% and 4,3% reduction of extreme poverty with the adoption of 3G coverage, according to World Bank.⁴⁴ On the contrary, relevant authors have explained the replication in the virtual dimension of the material differences already existing with the dependency theory, arguing that the terms of access, ownership and innovation related to technology are still damaging the so-called

⁴¹ UN, 71/313, Work of the Statistical Commission of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 6 July 2017.

⁴² <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/intlcoop/sdgs/default.aspx>

⁴³ UN, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals Report of the Secretary-General*, Distr. General 2 May 2024.

⁴⁴ World Bank, GSMA, *The poverty reduction effects of mobile broadband in Africa: Evidence from Nigeria*, 2020.

periphery of the world, reaffirming the global inequality and implying the impoverishment of certain countries in the long term.⁴⁵ In this idea, the global digital divide would be the consequence of economic and political factors, reinforcing not only the global divide but also the inner inequalities within a determined society, preventing vulnerable people, such as migrants, women, children, and minorities, for instance, from actively participating in society.⁴⁶

The need to rebalance and foster a more equitable relationship at the global level is at the core of the digitalisation process, considering how digitalised current societies are. In fact, while the digital divide is growing, “*at the global level, the quantity of data is expected to increase more than fivefold from 33 zettabytes in 2018 to 175 zettabytes in 2025, with 49 per cent stored in the public cloud, and the number of devices driven by the Internet of Things (IoT) will reach 10 times the world population (about 75 billion) in 2025*”.⁴⁷ The data value chain, involving AI technologies and digital platforms, is an international phenomenon with very few regulations at the national and international levels, especially considering the implications for individual daily lives. Even if national authorities are among the largest producers and consumers of data in many countries, their activism in the regulatory aspect is weaker than their concrete use. The use of large amounts of data has, in fact, a wider impact relying on a variety of national interests from data governance, cybersecurity, disinformation, consumer protection, online violence, taxation, trade, and other relevant areas of public domain.

The fragmentation of the regulation at the international level, exacerbated by the lack of institutional capacity of some countries to fully implement data management and national strategy focused on governing these emerging technologies, impedes the full realize a normative and policy structure of governance able to foster the possible benefits of the technological innovations. This field, particularly with AI, is also at the centre of global competition among major players such as the European Union, the United States and China for instance. While we see from one side shared efforts, from the United Nations and from other actors such as the Vatican, to support differences in an ethical approach to AI, with UNESCO’s Recommendation on the Ethics⁴⁸ of AI, the Rome Call on AI Ethics⁴⁹ and the work of the Council of Europe already mentioned; on the other side the big players are investing energies and resources in AI and its possible governance. The diversity of the approach is evident with the EU having a risk-based legislative framework, while the US has a flexible approach based on more soft law, and China is also trying to influence other countries with its own model. AI, in any case, will have a global impact and could be a tool that could threaten individual lives too. The International Monetary Fund has stated the consequences in terms of job losses dividing the outcomes for high and low-income countries: “*In advanced economies, about 60 percent of jobs are exposed to AI, due to prevalence of cognitive-task-oriented jobs. [...] Overall exposure is 40 percent in emerging market economies and 26 percent in low-income countries. Although many emerging markets and developing economies may experience less immediate AI-related disruptions, they are also less ready*

⁴⁵ M. Guillen, S. L. Suarez, Explaining the Global Digital Divide: Economic, Political and Sociological Drivers of Cross-National Internet Use, in *Social Forces*, 84, 2005, pp. 681–708.

⁴⁶ J. T. Mammen, M. Rugmini Devi, R. Girish Kumar, North–South digital divide: A comparative study of personal and positional inequalities in USA and India, in *African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development*, 2022, p.11.

⁴⁷ <https://publicadministration.desa.un.org/projects/developing-institutional-capacities-digital-data-management-and-cooperation-advance-0>

⁴⁸ To read the document, see: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380455>

⁴⁹ “The Call for AI Ethics is a document signed by the Pontifical Academy for Life, Microsoft, IBM, FAO and the Ministry of Innovation, a part of the Italian Government in Rome on February 28th 2020 to promote an ethical approach to artificial intelligence”. See <https://www.romecall.org/the-call/>

to seize AI's advantages. This could exacerbate the digital divide and cross-country income disparity.”⁵⁰

The rapid evolution of AI technology imposes on low and middle-income countries the need to design their policies and develop more solid infrastructures and skills at the national level. As mentioned by World Bank, some countries have started this path, such as Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Rwanda, South Africa,⁵¹ however, this diversity is causing relevant problems related to the different jurisdictions and possible lack of regulations, as proven for instance in a different but related field such as the taxation of the Big Tech companies. This small circle of multinational companies providing essential digital services represents another risk of global concern in terms of consumer protection and disinformation, as proven by the famous Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal, for instance.⁵² According to several authors, while the EU AI Act, as it was for the EU GDPR, will prove its capacity to set a standard for other countries, influencing the normative evolution at the national and perhaps international level, there is a need for more global cooperation on the issue. Some authors are asking for a Bretton Woods-style agreement, stating that “*When world leaders came together in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, in 1944, they laid the foundation for a model of global governance that would last for more than 70 years. To manage the far-reaching implications of digital technology and hyper-globalization, we must now pick up where they left off.*”⁵³

Having a direct impact on several human rights related to work, health care, education, privacy, non-discrimination, asylum, AI, and ICT will probably be part of human decision-making processes more and more. They will also have an impact on concrete tasks and activities being used as possible automated substitutes. In the development cooperation field, there are many sectors where technology can benefit or damage the long-term impact of the realized projects. At the UN level, there is strong support to involve digital technologies in the programs related to the achievement of the SDGs, especially when it comes to health, education, and sustainable production. The UN supported the development of the Action Lines and the associated matrix for linking digital technologies with the SDGs, realised by the World Summit on the Information Society. The aim is to integrate ICTs into all the strategies to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.⁵⁴ Already in 2009, UNICEF launched its Principles for Innovation and Technology Development, recognising the need to set standards in this constantly evolving domain.

At the national level, the fear of a security-driven digital framework is shared among the civil society organisations, that are aware of the potential use or misuse of specific technologies in the present situation where the regulation is still uneven among countries. Several National Agencies for Development Cooperation are, in different ways, analysing the possible linkage between the digital sector and development. Already in 2016, USAID endorsed the Principles for Digital Development, the result of a working group of international and national organisations, such as the German GIZ. These principles have the aim to be a reference framework, setting several criteria for planning, development, and evaluation of development initiatives; among them, the document supports the use

⁵⁰ G. Melina, *Gen-AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work*, 2024, p. 14.

⁵¹ World Bank, *op. cit.*, 2023, p. XXI

⁵² “Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: The Scandal and the Fallout So Far”, in *New York Times*, 2018, April 4th.

⁵³ R. Fay, *Global Governance of Data and Digital Technologies: A Framework for Peaceful Cooperation*, February 14, 2022.

⁵⁴ <https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/sdg/>

of “open standards, open data, open source and open innovation” to improve inclusiveness and replication of pilot digital projects.⁵⁵

Already since 2018, USAID has reflected on the future possibilities and current practices related to AI and other technologies related to Machine Learning, highlighting the current use of these tools in different areas. For instance, aggregated information from satellite images, to understand how supervised learning techniques from machine learning may be applied to unstructured data to reveal information about human welfare⁵⁶; early-warning systems in situations of crises as the Datamir platform;⁵⁷ image analysis to gauge damage from natural disasters as the services provided by OpenAerialMap;⁵⁸ remote data-gathering services, using drones, to gather relevant information from critical places while not exposing human lives at risk, as showed by Project Premonition by Microsoft. USAID also sheds light on the possibilities to improve knowledge management tools for donors, such as in the case of the collaboration between SAP and UN OCHA⁵⁹, to learn from mistakes and avoid future misfunctions in cases of urgent humanitarian needs. These examples, listed by USAID⁶⁰, show the evident collaboration between the private sector with the international organisations at the base of each initiative, where for some authors there is often a lack of transparency and public disclosure on procurement, data protection impact assessments and data-incident reporting as well as a certain hybridisation among humanitarian entities and tech companies in their respective functions and a progressive requirement for the beneficiaries to prove digitally their identity and biometrics data, “*as a prerequisite for digital access or even humanitarian assistance.*”⁶¹ The fear, shared with several CSOs and NGOs, is that further use of data systems will bring more advanced forms of surveillance and social control, especially when dealing with migration. USAID has underlined the numerous risks inherent when dealing with data, based on the fact that machine learning models make predictions based on what they have seen and sometimes this means that it is impossible to replicate the results of the analysis in different geographical context or that the following evolution, after the pilot analysis, cannot be considered by the system. Controversial is also for the US Agency the idea that these tools are neutral while it has been proven that they can reinforce patterns of exclusion or oppression.

Inequities, opacity of the model, and misplaced trust in the results of the model are at the base of discrimination and possible violations of human rights; the models themselves require constant training as well as the humans who will work with them. The “*weakness of privacy and data protection laws in many developing countries makes these technology developments even more troubling*” can lead to a misuse of the technology itself according to the US Agency.⁶² Not only depending on how emerging technologies such as AI are used but also from which elements, actors, and conditions these technologies have been created are key aspects that will determine the potentiality of them to support SDGs and the development of a certain country. All these aspects,

⁵⁵ www.digitalprinciples.org

⁵⁶ See for instance: World Bank, *Poverty from Space Using High-Resolution Satellite Imagery for Estimating Economic Well-Being*, 2017.

⁵⁷ “Datamir’s pioneering real-time AI platform discovers the earliest signals of events, risks and threats from within public data.” See for more information: <https://www.datamir.com/>

⁵⁸ <https://openaerialmap.org/>

⁵⁹ <https://news.sap.com/2021/12/empowering-united-nations-to-make-every-second-count-during-a-disaster/>

⁶⁰ USAID, *Reflecting the Past, Shaping the Future: Making AI Work for International Development*, 2023, March.

⁶¹ G. Coppi, *Private tech, humanitarian problems: how to ensure digital transformation does no harm*, AccessNow, 2024.

⁶² USAID, *Reflecting the Past, Shaping the Future: Making AI Work for International Development*, 2023, March.

combined with an ethical regulation of the sector, are crucial to govern a phenomenon that will, with high probabilities, enter all societies from those associated with high-income countries to those from low-income ones. It must be avoided the idea that these tools can be simply replicated in every context because they will confirm inner discriminations: they must be locally tailored from the beginning, starting on how software developers approach the design of these tools, implying the need for solid local partnerships and strong training for the users.

In addition, the digital divide remains significant, the under-institutionalised markets, the concentration in a small circle of big tech companies, the risk of explosive social disruptions and inequality and the fear of potential loss of human freedom are highlighted as concrete factors to take into consideration in order to have foster a better international governance at the global level.⁶³ The scale of disruption induced by digital and AI innovation under current intellectual property protection and “*lack of redistribution accrues immense winner-take-all benefits to first movers, leading to a historic concentration of capital and wealth and growing numbers of displaced or laid-off workers in declining industries.*”⁶⁴ Without fostering partnerships, collaboration, transparency, and true ownership for local people involved, the risk is to widen the gap already existing in terms of access, welfare, and growth.

For development cooperation, digitalisation has crucial elements to consider related to sustainability and human rights; national authorities, as well as civil society organisations, must be aware of the reasons and implications of the digitalization process that will take place in every context. Some donors are already analysing and facing the phenomenon; GIZ, for instance, has elaborated five criteria that are used as a lens in order to involve a human-centred perspective on digitalization in development cooperation⁶⁵. Five goals are the focus of its action: work and employment, local innovation, equal opportunities, good governance & human rights, and data for development. The 5 goals summarise a list of “sub-goals”, such as for instance promoting fair trade and decent work in the online platform economy, or promoting open data and local tech start-ups, fostering the network among European and African innovators that are concrete priorities for GIZ to include in their projects and programs.

As stated by UNDP, “*to really understand how new technologies are transforming governance requires moving beyond a tendency to focus on the state-society dichotomy and instead exploring the diversity and interactions of institutions and power structures affecting people’s lives today. The constellation of institutions through which power is exercised includes private sector actors such as platform owners, technology vendors, as well as newly visible and vocal civil society actors.*”⁶⁶ Thus, civil society has a pivotal role to play in structuring global governance on this fundamental issue, such as emerging technology. Given the global nature of these challenges, it is crucial that national organisations, such as Italian CSOs and NGOs working on development cooperation, are empowered to actively participate in these discussions. These organisations must be supported with training, resources, and assistance in order to be part of this process and engage in a fruitful discussion about how to shape digitally-oriented cooperation in respect of human rights. Without support, many CSOs

⁶³Y. Tiberghien, D. Luo, P. Pourmalek, *Existential Gap: Digital/AI Acceleration and the Missing Global Governance Capacity*, in *Global Cooperation on Digital Governance and the Geoeconomics of New Technologies in a Multi-polar World*, February 14, 2022.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ GIZ, *Digitalization in Development Cooperation*, Toolkit 2.0.

⁶⁶ <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-09/undp-a-shared-vision-for-technology-and-governance.pdf>

and NGOs will face several obstacles in truly engaging with these new tools for a variety of reasons going as the need for more funding to invest in this sector and more training on how to engage in a responsible manner, given the strong will to follow a human rights-orientation when dealing with technology.

Italian authorities could support this aim by providing more information and assistance, training, guidelines, toolkits, and workshops, for instance, but also platforms wherein partnerships could be built. In addition, they should offer adequate funding and create platforms that facilitate networking and collaboration with operators from other countries, fostering shared work, reflection, and experimentation. This approach would allow for economies of scale and greater impact. The international and European dimension also offers a significant opportunity, enabling Italian CSOs and NGOs to connect with broader initiatives and leverage continental resources for digitally-oriented cooperation. For instance, at the global level, the World Bank is working on a LLM to facilitate a better development cooperation, since the very first phases of the process, by starting from a more efficient planning. The specific LLM, created with the support of Google Accelerator, will be called Impact AI and will be ready in 2025. It has the aim to provide tailored and technical information related to all the aspects of global development⁶⁷. In addition, as shown in the mapping⁶⁸, engaging with ICT or AI tools is facilitated for Italian organisations by international and European partnerships. The Italian Agency for Development Cooperation has recently started a project, supported by the EU, going in that direction, providing an open atlas of data on international development collected from the main official data sources, using several indicators, with updated information about progress in each country and continent.⁶⁹ The ATLAS4DEV could support better-informed planning of the interventions programmed by all the actors of development cooperation, including CSOs and NGOs, improving the aid through a system of indicators representative of each country's historical evolution. This step could be a promise for a more inclusive involvement in the digital process and for more support for a human rights-centred engagement with these new tools.

At the global level, civil society is advocating for having a stronger voice on the evolution of the debate around AI and other emerging technologies, and G20 is one of the areas to engage with. The G20 Presidency of India has partnered with UNDP on Digital Public Infrastructure as part of the Digital Economy Working Group. The outcome document acknowledges the need for a comprehensive, multistakeholder approach with coordinated financing and technical assistance. The UN Secretary General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation emphasizes the importance of robust human rights and governance frameworks to enhance trust in technology and data use. The OECD notes that digital investment, infrastructure, regulations, policy, and capacity can either lock in digital divides or lay the foundations for shared prosperity and well-being. The next Brazilian G20 will probably follow the same focus on digital economy and cooperation, with the aim to reach a convergent position and support the UN Global Digital Compact.

International cooperation is crucial for a responsible digital future, addressing ethical and societal challenges. This includes establishing standards, fostering international cooperation, collaborative

⁶⁷ https://www.info-cooperazione.it/2024/09/la-banca-mondiale-lancera-uno-strumento-di-ia-dedicato-alla-cooperazione/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=VOXmail%3A2217263+INFO+COOPERAZIONE&utm_campaign=VOXmail%3A3387033+ImpactAI+Banca+Mondiale++Esiti+Riprogettiamo+il+futuro++Scad

⁶⁸ See M. Lunardini, C. Nelu, B. Pescetto, *AI and other technologies for a sustainable development*, CeSPI, 2024.

⁶⁹ <https://atlas.aics.gov.it/atlas4dev/>

research, and building capacity. A multi-stakeholder approach is essential, with governments, tech companies, academia, and civil society organisations all contributing to ethical digital or AI development. Transparency, open dialogue, public education, and continuous monitoring are essential for building trust and promoting public acceptance. This approach ensures that the governance frameworks address societal concerns and promote ethical practices, fostering a responsible technological future.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The concept of development cooperation has strong roots in the Italian landscape. The range of fields to be covered starts from education to health to agriculture or migration, with different projects in different countries. The presence of several historical CSOs in the Italian landscape is significant also in consideration of the nature and characteristics of the organisations; besides the ten major ones according to their incomes, there is a variety of different organisations and associations active for sustainable development in low and middle-income countries.

The idea of including technologies that are mostly still emerging must consider the precise and specific Italian landscape, where a lot of the CSOs are still in the process of assessing their own internal capacity from an economic to a human point of view. Still, the investment in a new expensive IT tool or AI system is considered not affordable or too risky, especially given the limited duration of individual projects and the relatively small size of many Italian NGOs ad projects. These factors restrict their ability to make substantial, long-term investments in innovative technologies. . Of course, an increase in the inclusion of certain technologies has happened in the last years, due to the pandemic that forced many CSOs to change their way of working, but also due to the fast changes regarding these technologies that brought the CSOs to start using these new tools in their daily activities. However, while being interested in understanding more, or even experimenting with more, the engagement will need to develop a partnership with other entities, public, such as authorities or universities, or private, such as big or medium private companies. In this relationship, the request of the CSOs and NGOs is very clear in asking for transparency and accountability in order to avoid possible countereffects of the use of technologies, first of all, violations of human rights. A fear of using emerging and disruptive technologies, such as AI, and contributing to the increase of inequalities or abuses in the specific country where they operate is present in some of the experts interviewed. Those who have spent many years supporting the development of the so-called Global South are very aware of the problems related to the inequalities in the North-South relations, such as the digital divide, for instance. A strong sensitivity imposes a deeper reflection on using a tool that could replicate the same violations in virtual reality.

Undoubtedly, the topic of human rights constitutes a primary concern for civil society, especially when it comes to the application of AI and new technologies, both within the organisation and in development cooperation projects. These tools have a significant impact on a wide range of fundamental rights. At the same time, there is growing uncertainty and apprehension regarding the principle of non-discrimination and the effect these technologies may have on vulnerable groups. The role of technology could have a positive impact on development and could be used to optimise the work and increase the success of the CSOs' activities in the long run. Italian CSOs are not fully aware of all the possible evolution and implications of using or not using AI and other similar emerging technologies. Nevertheless, given that technology is still characterised by uncertainties and challenges at various levels, the fear is to miss opportunities to strengthen their action for sustainable development while at the same time being forced to enter into an unclear partnership with other partners in an area still not regulated properly. The need is to have more governance on this issue and develop a clear dialogue with the donors to understand how to organise this path towards the use of

emerging and disruptive technologies. Outside the short-term life of a single project, there is maybe the possibility of structuring this process step by step. The approval of the EU AI Act seems to be a starting point for a lot of them, which needs to be strengthened with more dialogue with civil society.

In fact, for this transformation to happen and for the Italian CSOs and NGOs to feel safer using these new technologies/AI, several aspects have to be discussed at the national/international level by the different actors involved. From the research, the outcome was clear that more transparency is needed when the use of AI is taking place as, for the moment, most of the technologies used do not include any information about what is behind the system. Connected to transparency is the need for more training regarding the different elements, what are the positive/negative implications for human rights, and how these tools can be used for the needs of the project rather than just a concept on paper. From the perspective of CSOs, it is necessary to raise more knowledge and awareness regarding the use of AI or similar technologies in different fields, from health to agriculture and education, for instance.

The following recommendations are based on an analysis of current practices, consultations with key stakeholders, and insights gathered from recent research on digital tool integration for human rights. These recommendations aim to guide authorities in supporting CSOs and NGOs by offering dedicated funding, tax incentives, and fostering partnerships with universities, international organisations, and the private sector. This approach is designed to enhance the capacity of CSOs and NGOs to invest in and develop digital tools effectively.

To National Authorities:

- To enhance the achievement of the relevant SDGs indicators for eliminating the current digital divide.
- To facilitate knowledge exchange and capacity-building initiatives with beneficiaries in low and middle-income countries in order to foster equitable global collaboration in AI and emerging technologies.
- To develop shared standards, which are central to the collection and comparison of reliable data across different contexts
- To give space for civil society to shape the future of digital governance, by engaging in a collaborative dialogue around the impact of AI and digital tools in low and middle-income countries.
- To create guidelines on how to involve AI or other technologies in development cooperation.
- To ensure that human rights conventions are at the forefront of international development cooperation involving digital technologies.
- To organize trainings for relevant stakeholders (NGOs and Universities for instance) on how to engage with AI and digital tools when planning development interventions in a responsible way, realising for instance toolkits or guidelines or common platforms.
- To create opportunities for CSOs and NGOs to develop and internally invest in digital tools that support human rights, authorities could provide dedicated funding streams, tax incentives, or grants specifically for digital innovation. Additionally, they could facilitate partnerships with universities, international organisations, and the private sector by organising

collaborative platforms, offering mentorship programs, and fostering public-private partnerships.

- To invest in local innovation hubs and startups in developing countries to stimulate economic growth and create region-specific solutions.
- To encourage the adoption of ethical impact assessments to evaluate potential risks and benefits associated with AI and new technologies.
- To promote diversity in AI research teams and decision-making processes to mitigate bias and promote fairness.
- To facilitate the exchange and the collaboration between Universities and NGOs and CSOs on new technologies

To Civil Society Organisations:

- To enhance in their planning the inclusion of digital indicators in line with the SDGs ones
- To internally assess and evaluate the engagement with digital tools in their different projects, analysing the impact of these tools with a human rights-centred perspective.
- To support an internal process of digital training for their organisations, enhancing the ethical awareness with the new technical expertise in AI and ICT.
- To strengthen the partnership with diverse universities in order to be able to attract young technical "experts" in their subjects (doctors, computer scientists, engineers, etc.).
- To ensure that human rights conventions are at the forefront of international development cooperation involving digital technologies.
- To design and implement the project using digital tools with a locally tailored logic, avoiding the mere replication of AI technology without a previous risk assessment in terms of the impact on human rights.
- To advocate for and support frameworks that empower local stakeholders to participate in AI development.
- To advocate for diversity in AI development teams and decision-making processes
- To use AI tools to enhance the capacity of human rights defenders to monitor and document human rights violations.