# Ayanda Madyibi Insight

# SA needs to ensure AI doesn't increase inequalities

Africa, a continent pulsating with diverse cultures, histories, and socioeconomic realities, stands at the height of a transformative wave: Artificial Intelligence (AI).

While AI promises immense potential for development across sectors like healthcare, agriculture and education, its ethical implications demand careful consideration.

This article delves into this complex landscape, exploring the challenges and opportunities surrounding AI in Africa, with a particular focus on SA, using the Unesco Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence endorsed in 2021 as a guiding framework.

AI refers to the development of intelligent systems that can learn and perform tasks typically requiring human intelligence.

It's not a single entity, but rather a broad field encompassing various technologies, from image and speech recognition to autonomous robots and decision-making algorithms.

Though not sentient, AI systems can analyse vast amounts of data, identify patterns, and make predictions or perform actions based on their learning.

From diagnosing diseases to powering chatbots, AI has the potential to revolutionise numerous fields across the spectrum.

In Africa, one of the most pressing concerns is the potential for AI to perpetuate existing inequalities.

Data, the lifeblood of AI models, often reflects societal biases, leading to discriminatory outcomes.

Imagine an AI-powered loan approval system inadvertently disadvantaging individuals based on their ethnicity or location, further marginalising already vulnerable communities.

This scenario highlights the need for robust data governance frameworks, ensuring transparency and accountability in data collection and usage.

Second, the vast amount of personal data collected for AI development raises concerns about privacy and data security.

In many African countries, robust data protection frameworks are still under development, leaving individuals vulnerable to misuse of their data.

This is particularly worrisome in the context of government surveillance and social control, which could be amplified through AI-powered tools.

The Unesco Recommendation emphasises the need for high-quality, representative, and robust data sets, while calling for the creation of "gold standard" data sets as benchmarks for quality and accuracy.

Furthermore, it advocates for open and trustworthy data and for stakeholders to contribute to the transparency, reproducibility, and accountability of AI research & development.

Moreover, the uneven distribution of internet access and digital literacy skills across Africa creates a digital divide that could be worsened by AI. Those with access to AI-driven solutions might benefit significantly, while those without risk being left behind.

This could worsen existing inequalities in education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

The Unesco Recommendation emphasises the need for inclusive development and multistakeholder collaboration, ensuring that AI benefits all members of society and promotes digital literacy and access. Critical is the job displacement and quest for reskilling.

The automation of tasks through AI could lead to job losses, particularly in sectors reliant on manual labour.

While some new opportunities might emerge, the pace of change and the availability of alternative skills training could leave many vulnerable.

The Unesco Recommendation encourages governments and the private sector to develop strategies to mitigate job losses and equip workers with the skills needed for the changing economy.

This can involve investing in reskilling programmes, promoting entrepreneurship and creating new jobs in the AI sector itself.

As AI systems become increasingly complex, it becomes difficult to understand how they reach their decisions.

This lack of transparency can hinder accountability and make it challenging to address potential biases or errors in the system. The Unesco Recommendation calls for AI systems to be "clear, transparent, and accountable," emphasising the need for explainable AI and ensuring that individuals have the right to understand how AI decisions affect them.

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The case of SA, with its advanced technology infrastructure and diverse population, presents a microcosm of the ethical challenges facing Africa in the context of AI.

However, the country also has unique considerations and opportunities.

Its history of racial segregation creates a context where AI systems must be carefully designed to avoid perpetuating past injustices.

Algorithms used in criminal justice, for example, need to be rigorously tested for bias and ensure equal treatment of all individuals.

The Unesco Recommendation emphasises the need to address historical injustices and promote social inclusion through AI development.

Moreover, SA's diverse linguistic and cultural landscape poses a challenge for AI systems that rely on large data sets in dominant languages.

This can lead to inaccurate or culturally insensitive outputs, highlighting the need for inclusive data collection and the development of AI models that understand the distinctions between different languages and cultures.

To that extent the Unesco Recommendation emphasises the importance of respecting cultural diversity and ensuring that AI systems are inclusive and culturally appropriate.

The potential for AI to worsen economic inequality is a significant concern in SA, particularly in sectors like mining and manufacturing.

The government and private sector need to work together to develop strategies to mitigate job losses, equip workers with new skills, and ensure that the benefits of AI are distributed equitably.

The Unesco Recommendation emphasises the need for inclusive development and calls for a focus on human rights and social wellbeing in AI development.

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