
TOWARDS HARMONIZED INTERNATIONAL AI GOVERNANCE: THE UNITED NATIONS IN ETHICAL AND LEGAL SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT

The rapidly developing nature of the artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and the increase in their global integration have presented the world with not only extraordinary opportunities but also significant threats to the law, governance, and human rights. The critical research issue is the lack of harmonized international legal frameworks that can be used in the management of the multifaceted ethical, legal, and regulatory issues surrounding AI in different jurisdictions. The paper includes a critical legal analysis of the role of the United Nations (UN) in determining international principles of responsible AI, detailing the fundamental instruments of international law and main normative tools of the UN, such as the United Nations Recommendation on the Ethics of AI or the latest resolutions on this topic by the United Nations General Assembly. The study uses the doctrinal and institutional analysis to assess the efficiency of UN-led systems to governance mechanisms, including the Inter-Agency Working Group on AI and High-level Advisory Body on AI, to be effective in stating the transparency, accountability, human rights, safety, and inclusiveness as the key global principles. It points to some major issues associated with disjointed regulatory frameworks, weak institutional ability, national sovereignty issues, and the disproportionate power of the private sector players. The results show that, although the UN has established significant normative foundations and multilateral collaboration, there are massive gaps in implementation and flexibility. This paper ends with a conclusion and recommendation that recommends binding international agreements, institutional empowerment, inclusive capacity building, and innovative legal frameworks that will provide equitable, effective, and resilient AI governance internationally. Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, United Nations, AI Governance, Human Rights, International Law.

INTRODUCTION.

It is well-known that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is among the most radical technological changes in the 21st century that transform economic, social, political, and legal environments at the rate never seen before. The emergence of AI-enabled systems, such as automated decision-making algorithms in governmental services and autonomous vehicles along with massive data analytics, has sparked deep concerns about governance, ethics, human rights and international law. Although AI holds immense potential in terms of innovation and social good, it is also a major threat that includes the reduction of privacy, bias in algorithms, systematic discrimination, security risks, and difficulties in accountability and transparency in critical decision-making scenarios. On this background, the following research problem can be identified: How can the global community, including the United Nations (UN), devise effective legal and normative regimes that will effectively regulate AI internationally and yet not compromise state sovereignty, advance human rights, and respond to the socio-economic consequences of technological innovation? It lacks a threat to fragmentation of regulations, the development of conflicting standards, and the lack in the protection of fundamental rights, and this will only intensify inequalities and limit trust to the use of AI technologies. The United Nations, being the primary international organization aimed at the promotion of peace, security, sustainable development, and human rights, has become the widespread keeper of responsible AI regulation. Using its expansive normative authority and convening power, the UN has assembled a network of institutional tools, including the Inter-Agency Working Group on AI (IAWG-AI), the High-level Advisory Body on AI (HLAB-AI), and the leadership of the UNESCO on AI ethics, to express global principles, promote cross-border collaboration and give advice to member states. The paper presents a critical legal assessment of the presence of AI governance in the activities undertaken by the UN, through the notion of ensuring that the broad principles of global responsibility are framed in international law and implemented through normative tools and institutional mechanisms. It is a critical review of the issues of regulatory fragmentation, institutional capacity, sovereignty issues and the influence of the private sector. The study aims to shed light on the way forward to a unified, inclusive, and robust global system of AI governance that spreads the benefits and reduces the risks of AI fairly by looking at the recent UN initiatives and implications. The paper seeks to offer a substantive guide to legal scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, who have to grapple with the intricate intersections of AI, law, and global governance through this inquiry.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY.

Critically examine the UN law and institutional structure to design AI governance in the world;

Determine and assess the ethics of AI responsible principles in major UN documents and mechanisms;

Discuss significant obstacles to the realization of international harmonization and effective enforcement;

Recommendations on enhanced institutional capacity, inclusion, and innovation in the global legal frameworks.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY.

The study will focus on how the UN has been involved in leading AI governance systems in global contexts, particularly using such tools as the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI and important general assembly resolutions. Particular attention is paid to agency coordination, multistakeholder efforts and the ways in which both offer human rights and moral demands into national and industry-specific AI governance platforms. The interaction between the doctrinal sources of law (e.g., UDHR, ICCPR) and the UN-supported frameworks of soft law is also examined in the paper and evaluated in connection to their overall impact on domestic policy of the member states.

Secondly, the research evaluates the implementation of these principles into practice and capacity-building models, how both developed and developing countries have difficulty in introducing unified regulatory and ethical accountability. The cross-cutting themes such as data privacy, transparency, accountability, and inclusivity are given special attention.

Lastly, the study examines the practical issues facing AI governance by the UN: the clash of regional and national regulations, the constraints of UN institutional capacity, state sovereignty, and the complicated position of private tech companies. The analysis ends with evidence-based suggestions on how international law and multilateral governance should be developed to address the demands of AI so unique and dynamic.

BODY OF RESEARCH/ ANALYSIS.

The way, in which the United Nations regulates AI, is based on the principles of its Charter and the universally accepted human rights tools. The Charter mentions of peace, human rights and social progress have been construed as a positive obligation on the UN to guide the

development and use of transformative technologies, such as AI, in a way that promotes and not jeopardizes human dignity and security.¹ In practice the work on AI in the UN is organized by the Inter-Agency Working Group on AI (IAWG-AI), which brings together the expertise of over 40 entities, such as UNESCO, the ITU, the WHO, and the ILO.²

The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, which was adopted in 2021, is at the center of the UN normative architecture of global AI governance³. The Recommendation is influential because it has enabled harmonization of various national strategies using a common set of terminologies and expectations, setting standards in all aspects, including explainability of algorithms, risk evaluation, and the engagement of stakeholders, as well as cultural sensitivity.⁴

The UN, in its turn, raises the level of transparency as one of the responsible AI standards. Machine learning systems are characterized by opacity, which poses significant impediments to rights or opportunities to legal oversight and redress.⁵ The explainability principle, endorsed by the UNESCO as well as the High-level Advisory Body on AI (HLAB-AI) requires states and other actors in the field to ensure the intelligibility of algorithmic reasoning to individuals and regulators who are affected⁶. This is very similar to international legal guarantees on due process and access to information.

Meanwhile, accountability is understood as a necessary ingredient to attributing the responsibility, i. e. remedial or punitive liability, to harm due to AI. The UN advances frameworks that establish the accountability of states, corporations, and developers in the cases of privacy breach, discrimination, and even physical harm as the result of AI systems. These frameworks can contain regulatory penalties, judicial redress, and publicity requirement- all of which fulfill a different function in ensuring the rule of law.⁷ All major texts on AI governing the UN explicitly include human rights protections. Building on the principles of the UDHR, ICCPR, and other conventions, such as CEDAW and ICERD, the UN demands strict risk and impact analysis to identify and remove vulnerable populations, such as women, minorities, and

¹ United Nations System White Paper on AI Governance, Inter-Agency Working Group on AI, 2024, pp. 3–7

² Ibid.

³ UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, 2021.

⁴ UN General Assembly Resolutions 78/265 & 78/311, 2024.

⁵ United Nations Secretary-General's High-level Advisory Body on AI, 2025 Reports.

⁶ UNESCO Ethics Recommendation, Principle on Transparency.

⁷ United Nations System White Paper on AI Governance, *supra* note 1, at 10.

individuals with disabilities, at all stages of the AI development cycle.^{8,9}

The topic of safety and security has acquired additional importance in the age of autonomous and potentially hostile AI systems. As the UN suggests and the rigorous testing and evaluation that precede the deployment of a system can help achieve, the precautionary principle is meant to prevent cyberattacks, malfunctioning, and other unintended harmful effects on the population or the society, as a whole.¹⁰ The precautionary principle is a complement to a do-no-harm approach, which should direct both state and non-state actors in favor of societal and population safety over economic expediency. The important aspect of global AI governance architecture of the UN is the encouragement of legal responsibility frameworks that meet the complexity and novelty of the AI technologies. The conventional liability frameworks as practiced by international and domestic laws are very problematic when used with AI systems that are autonomous, have unpredictable machine learning and have multijurisdictional use. The changing policy of the UN has placed stress on the need of new liability paradigms which are elastic but strong enough to hold the persons responsible not only AI developers and deployers but users and intermediaries. These involve promoting the use of anticipatory regulatory frameworks that are responsive to the fast-changing cycles of innovation of AI development. The purpose of such structures is to work out the balance between encouraging technological advancement and providing victims of AI-related damages with readily available and real measures of restitution. Another aspect that the UN brings into focus is the need to have an institutional oversight body that is able to keep track of the effects of AI and impose compliance using consistent sanctions and reparation frameworks. However, the application of these accountability norms on the global level presents challenges, especially the difference in the legal capacity and willingness of the states to adopt these dynamic models. Furthermore, there are jurisdictional issues because AI systems are becoming transnationals, which makes it more difficult to enforce and redress victims. The intersection of AI governance with the wider framework of sustainable development and social equity is another facet that is of critical importance in the AI age and thus central to overcoming such challenges and thereby ensuring equitable access to justice. The so-called digital divide trends including unequal access to technology, digital literacy, and regulatory impact are very threatening to the ideal of inclusivity embedded in the UN AI governance agenda. The Secretary-General Roadmap to

⁸ UNESCO Recommendation, 2021; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979, Articles relevant to AI governance.

⁹ International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), 1965.

¹⁰ UN Governing AI for Humanity: Final Report, 2024, at 15.

Digital Cooperation openly recognizes that unless these divides are tackled, they would only continue to promote or even widen the current disparities across/and within nations. Such an emphasis on equity urges the UN to promote technology transfer and capacity building in the less affluent states as well as an inclusive policy platform that respectfully takes into consideration the voices of marginalized groups, including women, indigenous people and people with disabilities. The gender-responsive AI policy-making specifically has been in the limelight; there have been reported instances of the algorithmic bias supporting gender inequalities in the system. UN programs therefore promote disaggregation of AI impact information by gender and other social factors so that specific interventions can be undertaken. Moreover, the introduction of AI governance into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework shows that the UN has a broad vision: it is necessary to use AI as the instrument that will allow enhancing socioeconomic development, environmental preservation, and human rights. However, the profusion of stakeholders, including governments and international institutions, individual technology companies and civil society organizations, is a challenge to coordination. In this case, the convening force and normative leadership of the UN will be essential in the creation of multi-stakeholder partnerships, facilitating transparency, and enhancing trust in AI systems. Nevertheless, the conflict of processes between the dynamics of innovation in the private sector and the goals of the public governance requires well-defined regulation limits and effective supervision systems to avoid the process of capture or crushing the state of responsibility. Finally, AI governance cannot be implemented without sustainable development will require a prospective visionary-comprehensive strategy that will mitigate threats and enhance inclusive and rights-respecting technological progress not only locally but also internationally.

The dimension of inclusivity is also a crucial one and has been brought to the fore in the Secretary-General Roadmap to Digital Cooperation and different resolutions of the GA. The UN concept acknowledges the existing digital disparities (between and within states) and states the necessity to exchange knowledge and build capacity and take affirmative actions to make sure that disadvantaged nations and marginalized groups have an influential voice in the AI discourse^{11, 12}. UNESCO and the ITU, in particular, have come up with toolkits, training materials, and collaborative solutions to enable developing countries to have a significant hand in AI establishments and the development of digital futures.

¹¹ UN Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, 2024; White Paper, *supra* note 1, at 12.

¹² UN Secretary-General's Roadmap, 2024.

Although there is a consistent pronouncement of international values, adherence and execution of international uniformity in AI are out of reach. These disparities, in part, can be attributed to the fragmented regulatory environment: in the case of the Europeans, the AI Act offers a legally binding and risk-based model, and the key economies, such as the United States, prefer the decentralized and innovation-driven policy, and China adopts the state-centric approach that combines the national security and economic policies.¹³ This makes it difficult to provide universal legal standards and creates significant compliance problems to multinational players.

Another limitation is the institutional capacity; the technicality of AI, coupled with the speed of technological change, has uncovered weaknesses in the capacity of UN organs - and national governments - to respond to change quickly, including generative AI or military autonoeitic.¹⁴ Multilateral processes are not agile, yet they are inclusive; the lack of agility in their resources has exposed their inability to respond promptly to new developments, including generative AI or autonomous military systems. The sovereignty of states is another factor that limits the scope of global governance; states are not always willing to surrender regulatory power or sign binding international treaties, which albeit have an influence, are not legally binding¹⁵.

The fact that the actors of the international governance are the central ones in the development and implementation of the AI technologies makes international governance more complicated. States are not the largest AI innovators in the world, but corporations, the operations of which may be beyond the jurisdiction of the national legal system. The UN has started responding to this by promoting strong multi-stakeholder structures that involve industry, civil society, and government. Nevertheless, the danger of regulatory capture or dilution of norms by dominant forces in technology remains, which makes it important to intensify the mechanisms of social control and express the active legal demands to which the corporations should be subjected.¹⁶

There is an incremental though significant improvement evidenced by case studies. The establishment of the HLAB-AI is a sign of a new future of interdisciplinary and data-driven guidance that keeps up with technological change and contribute into Security Council and wider multilateral debates.¹⁷ The introduction of ethical impact assessment tools by UNESCO

¹³ European Union AI Act (2024); Comparison with US and China policies, see UN News, 2025.

¹⁴ United Nations System White Paper on AI Governance, *supra* note 1, at 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* See also discussion on sovereignty in international AI regulation, Khasru et al., 2024.

¹⁶ "UN moves to close dangerous void in AI governance," UN News, 2025.

¹⁷ United Nations High-Level Advisory Body on AI Reports, 2025.

is being used to assist states in translating global ethical imperatives into practical standards at the national level.¹⁸

The results of this study however show that although the multi-institutional action by UN has led to establishment of principles of AI globally, and further progress in global coordination, there are important gaps in the model that need to be addressed in making these models enforceable and quick response to international action. The soft-law approach, which is now essential, can be viewed as a starting point, yet legal innovation, codified treaties, and global mechanisms of monitoring and redress are much-needed. Increased support to developing nations and more emphasis on gender- and equity-sensitive AI regulation will play a crucial role in making sure that the benefits of AI and the costs of its regulation are distributed equally.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS.

The United Nations has strengthened itself as the one-stop place to form and reconstitute the global governance of AI based on the international human rights law, ethical responsibility and international cooperation. In spite of progress, including the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI and the creation of the HLAB-AI, there are inherent issues that prevent the implementation of an all-encompassing, legally sound system of AI regulation: regulatory fragmentation, capacity issues, sovereignty, and the influence of the private sector are all undermining the implementation of a worldwide, legally binding system of AI regulation. The research suggests the following in the future:

1. Intense pursuit of negotiations on a binding international treaty on AI governance that realizes human rights and sustainable development objectives;
2. Establishment of technical, expert AI governance departments in UN and regional organizations, with the capability to act responsively and proactively in regulation;
3. Investment in capacity building and technological empowerment of developing nations, to make global governance really inclusive;
4. Introduction of accountability requirements as legally binding to both the state and non-state actors within the AI sector;
5. The creation of agile liability, oversight, and impact evaluation frameworks, which are sensitive to the ever-changing nature and risks of AI.

¹⁸ UNESCO Ethical Impact Assessment Tool for AI, 2022.

Continued study and long-term international collaboration are essential to the realization of a future that sees AI innovations promote a common good, equity, and justice internationally.