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**Ai**

# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ACTION PLAN



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



Ai

# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ACTION PLAN

## Charting the Course for Responsible AI in USAID Programming

MAY 2022

This document does not impose, nor is it intended to impose, any legal commitments on the United States Government, including USAID. It does not reflect the United States Government's official position on artificial intelligence; rather, it is intended to inform USAID's approach to responsibly engaging with artificial intelligence technologies.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies are increasingly prevalent in our lives—from digital voice assistants to personalized advertising and entertainment or advanced medical diagnostics. Access to the data and computing power that fuel AI is growing year-over-year, both in developed and developing economies. At the same time, [new techniques](#) are being developed that enable the use of AI in domains where data is scarce, greatly widening the applicability and accessibility of AI in the [near future](#). AI applications' projected impact on the global economy by 2030 is equivalent to an [increase in global GDP by 16 percent](#), and it is predicted to play a role in addressing each of the [17 UN Sustainable Development Goals](#).

However, we have also begun to see the ways in which the use of AI can inflict harm. AI tools can be used to infringe on basic human rights by enabling surveillance, censorship, or more effective targeting of individuals for malign or exploitative purposes. AI applications lies at the center of emerging national security concerns: malicious cyber activity, the creation and spread of disinformation, microelectronics supply chain vulnerabilities, or the energy demands and climate impacts of cutting-edge AI systems. In addition, well-intentioned AI can nonetheless exacerbate inequities and amplify bias. For example, AI technologies may systematically give lower credit scores to women compared to men, in part because there is less available financial data for women, thereby amplifying existing disparities in financial access. Because non-dominant or minority languages are often not well represented in digital form, language-based AI tools may systematically fail for, or misrepresent, speakers of these languages.

As the use of AI technologies proliferates across a broad range of markets, sectors, and country contexts, so too will the benefits, but also misuse and AI-related harms. Development actors have a responsibility to ensure that appropriate measures are taken to promote AI's positive potential and to protect those most at risk of being negatively impacted by its use. This includes advocating for the use of AI in USAID programming when its benefit is clear—but importantly, also advocating against its use when the risk of harm is too great.


Even beyond our programming, as AI technologies are built and deployed globally, development actors have an opportunity to influence important questions around AI's evolution—how it's constructed, by whom, and to what end. Today's global AI ecosystem is [increasingly centralized](#), with investment, talent, data assets, and decision-making power concentrated in a handful of major North American, European, and Asian firms. Development actors, including USAID, can encourage inclusive, equitable AI development and application, striving to serve those who stand to benefit the most, rather than solely those who have the strongest market presence or largest digital footprint.


As AI technologies are embedded and intertwined in digital ecosystems, a responsible approach to AI should include strengthening key aspects of the enabling ecosystem. This includes data systems, connectivity, and local workforce capacity. In addition, there must be a focus on strengthening the civil society structures holding AI systems and actors accountable, and shaping policy environments that in turn encourage open, inclusive, and secure digital ecosystems. Together, these investments will support governments, businesses, and individuals to sustainably and equitably benefit from the use of AI technologies.


As the leading international development donor, USAID must continue to prioritize the rights-driven, responsible use of digital technologies and data in our work. When we turn to AI, we must commit to do so with full appreciation of the potential for benefit and harm, as outlined in Executive Order 13960, Promoting the Use of Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence in the Federal Government. For AI, this includes constructing appropriate safeguards, investing in relevant talent, and understanding how AI technologies are connected with the broader digital ecosystem and the different stakeholders therein. It also includes working closely with digital rights partners and experts to help determine when AI technologies should not be used in our work—and when the rights-infringing use of AI by others may merit USAID lines of effort to address potential harms. Our approach is, and must continue to be, aligned with the two mutually reinforcing

objectives of the USAID Digital Strategy: promoting the responsible use of digital technology for development, and working toward more inclusive, open, and secure digital ecosystems. As a technology that can identify, interpret, and act on patterns in data, AI is a natural extension of the international development community's push to become more empirical and data-driven, and to drive innovation to where it is needed most. AI's ability to derive insights from disparate data sources offers potential for greater impact even across contexts where data scarcity or system fragmentation is a challenge. From AI-enabled health chatbots to satellite imagery analysis for resilience and disaster response, AI holds great promise for increasing efficiency, boosting productivity, expanding the reach of needed services, and empowering countries and communities.

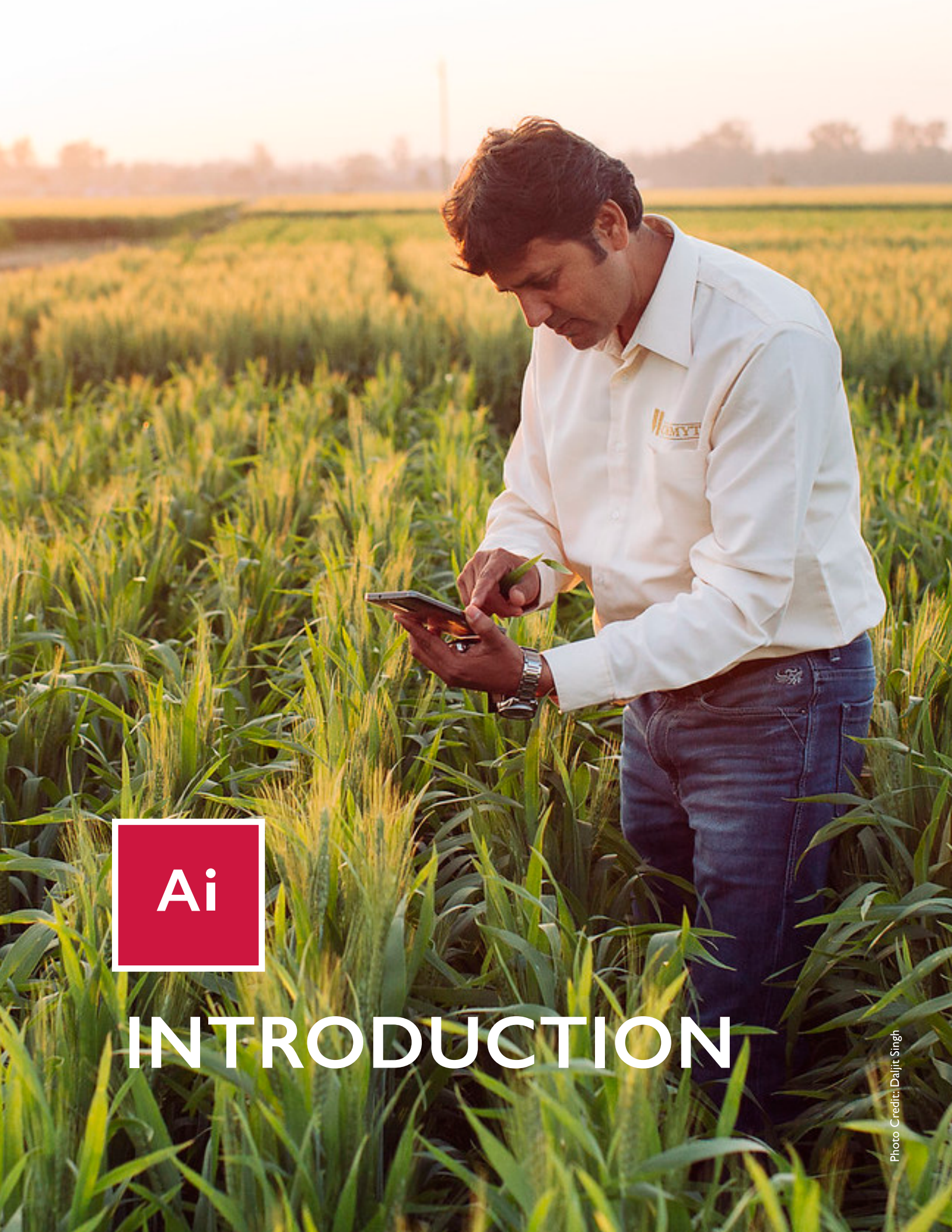
## USAID should take concrete steps to:

- **1** **Commit to Responsible AI in USAID programming**

A formal commitment to responsible use, more systematic exploration of the risks and rewards of using AI in development programming, and investments in staff capacity will help USAID to responsibly harness AI technologies for improved development and humanitarian assistance.
- **2** **Strengthen digital ecosystems to support responsible use of AI**

USAID's efforts to strengthen digital ecosystems should include focused attention on key AI components: investment in digital data infrastructure and data governance, strengthening in-country systems of AI accountability and oversight, and promotion of a responsible, capable global AI workforce. These efforts should be grounded in a holistic understanding of the broader digital ecosystem; Digital Ecosystem Country Assessments can be a valuable precursor to AI-focused work.
- **3** **Partner to shape a global Responsible AI agenda**

Policy setting, research partnerships, and multi-stakeholder engagement play critical roles in promoting accountability and rights protection in the AI ecosystem, and USAID should continue to elevate the importance of including developing country actors in key global AI decision-making or policy-setting fora.



# INTRODUCTION

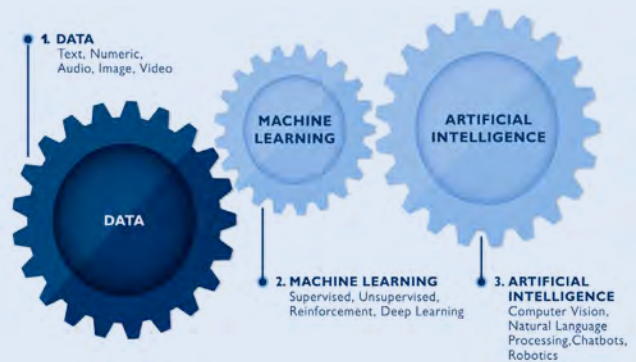
# INTRODUCTION

As a suite of technologies that can identify, interpret, and act on patterns in data, AI is a natural extension of the international development community’s push to become more empirical and data-driven, and to drive innovation to where it is needed most.

The ability to derive insights from disparate data sources using AI technologies offers potential for greater impact even across contexts where data scarcity or system fragmentation is a challenge. From AI-enabled health chatbots to satellite imagery analysis for resilience and

disaster response, AI technologies hold great promise for increasing efficiency, boosting productivity, expanding the reach of needed services, and empowering countries and communities.

Artificial intelligence (AI) uses computers to make decisions or recommendations in an automated way. AI often relies on machine learning (ML)<sup>1</sup>, a subset of AI focused on finding patterns in data and making predictions, decisions, or groupings based on those patterns. Crucially, all applications of AI rely on data, which can come in many forms (e.g. textual, numeric, audio, image, or video).



However, despite its promise and growing prevalence, AI technologies are not a panacea. AI techniques may introduce unnecessary complexity for little gain, or they may simply fail to perform well for a given application. The same technologies that offer efficiency and customization can be used to manipulate or marginalize, as when facial recognition technologies are used to [surveil and oppress](#) minority groups. Misuse of AI technologies can reproduce, amplify, and entrench social, economic and political [inequities](#). Improper data collection, storage, and sharing can threaten privacy. Sometimes, the misuse of AI is a clear security threat, such as when AI tools are built as systems of social, political, or economic control and interference. Other times, given the opaque nature of some AI technologies,

even well-meaning actors may cement unfair and harmful outcomes, such as through hiring [algorithms](#) that aim to reduce bias but instead only push it out of view. Further, there are [substantial energy costs](#) of computationally intensive models; fossil-fuel powered AI could exacerbate environmental impacts in communities already vulnerable to climate change.

As with any new technology, AI applications test the boundaries of regulatory frameworks and societal norms. To achieve the social good we seek, we must proactively and intentionally invest in AI technologies that are trustworthy, respects human rights and diversity, and includes appropriate safeguards for a just, fair society.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Colloquially, “machine learning” or “ML” is often used interchangeably with “artificial intelligence” or “AI.” There are other kinds of AI that do not involve ML, but they are not essential to understand for this paper.  
<sup>2</sup> Consistent with the OECD Recommendation on AI, adopted in May 2019.

# AI IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Through USAID's innovation and research, we are learning firsthand both the immense potential for AI technologies in our work, as well as their inherent risk. In 2018, the Agency published [Reflecting the Past, Shaping the Future: Making AI Work for International Development](#), which outlines the promise of AI and details reasons for caution. The Agency has also published a [practitioner's guide for managing AI projects](#), and work on AI as it relates to individual sectors (e.g., [health](#))<sup>3</sup>. Promising applications funded by USAID are proliferating across various geographies and sectors, including [agriculture](#), [health and infectious diseases](#), [civic spaces and democracy](#), [education and employment](#), [financial services access](#), [food security resilience](#), and [humanitarian assistance](#). And beyond USAID, other international donors are [exploring the use of AI](#) in pursuit of more effective gains toward the SDGs and SDG-aligned efforts.

USAID is also implementing its first-ever [Digital Strategy](#), and is working to stay abreast of the rapid evolution of digital technology in development through the [Digital Research and Learning Agenda](#). A key component of the Digital Strategy is the focus on building open, inclusive, and secure digital ecosystems. As countries work to keep up with the rapid pace of innovation in AI, digital ecosystem capabilities—like workforce capacity, connectivity infrastructure, or policies—often lag behind. Without a strong local digital ecosystem, AI tools may be unrepresentative of local norms and structures, lack appropriate safeguards to protect against misuse or abuse, or simply fail to work for certain communities. USAID's Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation is beginning to make investments and leverage private sector partnerships to strengthen the talent pools in USAID partner countries in AI-relevant fields such as computer science. This work can ensure that there is a vibrant local, digital-savvy workforce to meet market needs, drive advances in the digital ecosystem, and build resilience against external influences and AI-fueled threats.

At present, the development of AI tools and services is largely being driven by a few influential stakeholders with outsize power in shaping digital ecosystems worldwide: Big Tech firms and academic researchers primarily based in developed countries and China, as well as governments seeking to gain geopolitical advantage and social control through AI. Too often, the same actors are also driving the uptake of these tools and services in other, less economically and digitally developed parts of the world. Strong local ecosystems, including a skilled local workforce and empowered civil society, are essential to ensure that AI is deployed in a rights-respecting and fit-for-purpose manner in every country, and that countries are able to build and sustain their own, locally led and developed AI systems.

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## What does a local AI ecosystem look like?

In any country, the AI ecosystem overlaps with components of the underlying digital ecosystem, including: processes and policies for digital data collection, storage, management and sharing; a local workforce that contributes to research, development, and private sector engagement; an engaged civil society; as well as governance and policy frameworks. There are numerous stakeholders involved in-country, ranging from government actors, to businesses and startups, to universities and training institutes, to civil society and human rights organizations.

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<sup>3</sup> [AI and Global Health](#), and [Advanced Analytics and HIV/AIDS](#).  
USAID - AI Action Plan



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## The Intersection of AI and International Development

AI tools and their impacts will touch all aspects of international development. USAID must be prepared both to integrate the technology into our development and humanitarian assistance, and to respond to the changing development landscape that AI technologies will bring about.



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### Economic Growth:

AI technology development and deployment will impact USAID's economic growth objectives across the world; AI technologies have the potential to reshape employment (e.g., workforce shifts away from labor-intensive manufacturing or toward the gig economy), education (e.g., tools for increased literacy), and financial services (e.g., improved access to credit).

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### Inclusive Development:

Youth, women, persons with disabilities, and gender and sexual minorities have historically been left out of formal financial systems, education systems, and employment. AI technologies have the potential to unlock insights from new approaches and sources of data that don't rely on traditional evaluation models, thereby supporting greater financial and social inclusion for excluded groups. However, these new approaches can also amplify, rather than address, bias and lack of access unless they are designed in a way that is equitable and inclusive.



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### Democracy, Human Rights and Governance:

AI technologies are increasingly being misused toward authoritarian ends; advanced facial recognition and individual surveillance can [enable state social control and undermine human rights](#). This has even led certain [development partners](#) and [experts](#) to call for a moratorium on their use. AI can also be used to produce, manipulate, and distribute falsified media at scale, contributing to increased spread of dis/misinformation. At the same time, use of AI can promote governance and rights in creative and novel ways; advanced digital tools can be used to [circumvent online censorship](#) and [monitor human-rights abuses](#).

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### Global Health:

In the context of a supportive digital health ecosystem, [AI tools hold potential](#) to improve individual and population health, [through](#) better disease monitoring and outbreak forecasting, clinical diagnosis support, treatment discovery and development, and improved healthcare system efficiency.





### Agriculture and Food Security:

AI tools can be used to boost agriculture yields and strengthen food security using earth observations and real-time data like temperature, rainfall, and water availability; strengthen resilience to disease and pests through digital surveillance; drive agriculture supply chain resiliency, agility, and predictability using intelligent software and systems; and tackle on-farm problems using chatbots or image-based disease detection. AI tools can also be used to determine how much food supply is needed for a particular population, or to help farmers become more efficient and sustainable.

### Employment and the Workforce:

The widespread introduction of digital technologies creates complex interactions for labor markets and social safety nets. On the one hand, AI-based digital work platforms can allow clusters of businesses to form irrespective of geographical barriers, and AI-driven automation could improve job quality (e.g., flagging egregiously violent videos so that human moderators do not need to view them). On the other hand, [concerns about](#) income instability and lack of social insurance remain, meaning that digital economy jobs can increase the already large pool of informal workers in developing countries without social protection. There is also early evidence that automation from AI tools could [depress wages](#), particularly for agriculture, textile, and industry workers.



### Climate Change:

AI methods can be used to anticipate climatic events which can help mitigate their harmful impacts, for example, by [improving forecasting](#) of extreme weather events, and informing [climate-smart adaptations](#) to agricultural practices. AI tools have also been used to better detect and enforce restrictions on harmful activities like [deforestation](#). Yet, AI technologies can be resource-intensive; training AI models can take [significant computing power](#). Without dedicated mitigation efforts, AI-driven energy consumption could become a major contributor to climate change.

### Disaster Response:

Fundamentally a prediction tool, AI can be used to estimate when and where supplies or services will be needed in humanitarian crises, or in some cases even when a disaster is most likely to occur. By rapidly processing data from a variety of historical and real-time sources, AI can quicken aid delivery and help humanitarian workers make critical decisions about where to direct their efforts.





Photo Credit: Morgana Wingard, USAID

## AI poses risks to rights, security, and inclusive development

Successful engagement with AI hinges on navigating an ever-changing social, political, and economic landscape. While AI has great potential to enhance development work, it also poses risks that threaten to undermine hard-won development gains. AI technologies can lead to harm through design or through application, with deliberate misuse or without. Increasingly, in environments of growing digital authoritarianism, AI tools enable surveillance, oppression, or social control. USAID must be at the forefront in ensuring that in any instance of use, AI tools serve development goals. This means working to ensure that AI tools are designed to align with the [Principles for Digital Development](#), that potential harms brought about by the use of AI

are understood and mitigated, and importantly, that risks introduced or exacerbated by the use of AI are uncovered and addressed, wherever they may arise.

While prominent estimates predict that AI technologies will [fuel significant global GDP increase](#), there is also the risk that much of that economic benefit will be realized by a small number of countries and companies. This could further drive economic disparity and income inequality, challenges at risk of being exacerbated by potentially decreased competitiveness of countries and companies unable to fully capitalize on AI technologies.



Photo Credit: Shutterstock

### **AI and Democratic Values: Facial recognition exemplifies urgent need for skills and safeguards**

Facial recognition algorithms are being deployed to surveil and control people, threatening human rights. For example, through the government of the People’s Republic of China’s use of facial recognition algorithms in conjunction with surveillance programs like “SkyNet,” AI has enabled [widespread surveillance](#) and eased the ability to target and detain individuals of interest—from suspected fugitives to members of the Uyghur ethnic minority.

Concerningly, this digital authoritarianism is spreading in other parts of the world—particularly where there is limited local AI workforce capability, and where emerging technologies can be used with little oversight, regulatory safeguards, or legal protections. In Zimbabwe, the government has partnered with the [Chinese company CloudWalk](#) to deploy facial recognition technology for law enforcement and public service provision. In many countries, companies are facilitating arbitrary and unlawful surveillance by providing both hardware and software systems that readily lend themselves to advanced AI-based surveillance. These examples are not exceptions but rather indications of how social, political, and technological systems are interconnected. The threat of AI-enabled authoritarianism will continue to collide with traditional USAID programming focused on democracy and human rights—and as we explore novel uses of AI in our programming across all sectors, USAID staff will need to recognize when certain innovations, like facial recognition technology, should not be supported in certain contexts due to the risks posed. The Agency needs to be prepared to navigate this terrain, building safeguards and capacity both internally and in developing countries to protect and promote human rights as AI use proliferates.

Beyond the intentional use of AI by malicious actors, AI applications can introduce a number of harms that are less obvious. For instance, rights erosion or infringement can arise out of poor design, insufficient data scrutiny, or a host of other factors, including weak or absent accountability mechanisms to protect against possible harms<sup>4</sup>.

Errors in AI systems can be purely technical in nature, but they can also be the product of inappropriate design, use, or interpretation of the AI model's results<sup>5</sup>. While the underpinnings of these types of AI harms may be unfamiliar to many working in international development, their impacts manifest in ways that will likely feel familiar to development practitioners:

- **Amplifying inequality:** AI systems often fail in ways that distribute benefits to the historically most-privileged or most prominent segments of the population, while risk and harm accumulate for the most-marginalized. Given existing digital divides across gender, geography, ethnicity, and economic status, many of the communities development actors engage with are potentially those most likely to experience AI amplifying inequity.
- **Exclusion leads to exclusion:** Often, some groups of people are [systematically excluded](#) at the beginning of the AI development process—missing from training datasets, absent from model design discussions, and unrepresented in the technology development team. It shouldn't be surprising, then, when the resulting tools are ineffective or harmful for people in these same excluded groups. Considering representation and [principles of universal design](#) can help to make AI tools and associated content (and other technologies) more accessible.

- **Hollowed-out service delivery:** AI tools are often deployed as a cost-saving measure or an effort to compensate for a lack of trained professionals such as physicians, therapists, or fraud investigators. These aren't bad goals, especially in the short-term. However, when AI systems lack accountability mechanisms or performance monitoring, AI can become a high-tech veneer for underinvestment in basic services.
- **'Solutions' that don't actually solve the problem:** Development challenges are often systemic in nature, and AI tools will inevitably be just one component of a larger system. When AI tools are deployed as the primary solution for a multi-faceted problem without accounting for all the other necessary "analog" pieces that need to fall into place—e.g., stronger regulatory protections, or greater societal oversight into how decisions get made—they likely won't solve anything, and might even make the situation worse.

Awareness of AI-related risks should motivate commitment to mitigate them across USAID's work. While many aspects of responsible digital development—and the [Principles for Digital Development](#)—extend naturally to AI tools, the above examples illustrate specific, unique risks that should be addressed to safely and effectively deploy AI technologies.

4 Annex 1 outlines several common failure points of AI, ranging from inflated expectations to exclusion, the amplification of bias and unjust outcomes, and insufficient accountability.

5 For a more in-depth discussion of potential harms, including how many of these harms originate at a more technical level, see pp.36-43 of the [original 2018 Reflecting the Past, Shaping the Future report](#).

# RESPONSIBLE AI: EQUITABLE, INCLUSIVE, AND RIGHTS-RESPECTING

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While use of AI is relatively new in developing country contexts, there are already clear values and emerging best practices that can guide responsible design and use of AI technology, in addition to the Principles for Digital Development. For USAID, Responsible AI applies both to the Agency's AI programming as well as how AI evolves and is incorporated into digital ecosystems in low and middle-income countries. The table below describes what responsible use of AI entails during the conception, design, and implementation of AI tools.

## Responsible Use Means ...

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### When considering the use of AI technology...

- Use AI tools only when there is clear alignment between AI capabilities and a development objective, and AI tools provide demonstrable advantage over simpler alternatives
  - Recognize how AI applications fit in the broader ecosystem of digital tools in the local context, taking steps to minimize fragmentation and redundancy, and creating opportunities for reuse where appropriate
  - Assess risks and harms that might be introduced through the development or use of AI in a given context or with a certain population; act on these assessments to proactively address risks or even avoid use when risk is too great
  - Understand whether potential technology partners will approach the development and use of AI in ways aligned with democratic values and respect for human rights, and choose partnership opportunities accordingly
- 

### When designing and developing AI tools...

- Think critically about data representativeness, inclusiveness, and relevance of the AI solution to the local context
  - Prioritize diversity and inclusion of local voices and perspectives in the problem definition and AI application design
  - Understand the digital ecosystem in which the AI system will be deployed, including how it may impact different communities directly and indirectly
  - Ensuring that where human oversight is needed, sufficient measures are taken to overcome "automation bias" (people's tendency to defer to automated aids)
  - Consider who may be adversely impacted by the use of the AI tool, or who may be left out or excluded from positive impact based on model design choices or assumptions; consider how principles of universal design might be applied
- 

### When piloting and implementing AI tools...

- Plan for long-term maintenance of AI tools, including the necessary capability to retrain and update models over time
  - Evaluate effectiveness of the AI application and compare against the status quo and alternative approaches
  - Reach out to those impacted by use of the AI intervention to understand and adapt based on their experience and potential consequences
  - Develop feedback mechanisms for those impacted by algorithms to communicate their experience and seek redress of harm
- 

### Throughout an AI project lifecycle...

- Lead with a 'do no harm' mindset
- Engage end-users throughout the design and implementation of AI applications
- Adhere to local data protection and cybersecurity policies, implementing stronger protections where needed
- Analyze risk routinely and in a context-aware manner
- Recognize relevant power dynamics and accordingly incorporate fairness in design and evaluation
- Mitigate potential harms that may result from AI use especially for marginalized or underrepresented groups

Responsible use depends upon the broader digital ecosystems and social and political contexts in which AI tools are situated.

Local workforce capacity, data governance systems, community or government buy-in, or connectivity infrastructure as well as societal inequities and governance structures are all factors that affect whether and how an AI system can be developed or deployed responsibly. In addition to the considerations defining Responsible Use, ecosystem-level and socio-political factors should always be considered as part of the overall enabling environment for Responsible Use of AI.

A number of [principles and frameworks](#) have emerged to help align AI exploration toward more responsible, beneficial evolution of AI. The U.S. Government has endorsed the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Recommendation on AI, which includes five principles and five recommendations to policymakers to promote a human-centric approach to trustworthy AI.

The principles state that AI actors should proactively engage to ensure AI promotes inclusive growth, sustainable development and well-being; that it is human-centered and fair; that it is transparent and explainable; that it is robust, secure, and safe; and that AI actors are accountable for the proper functioning of AI systems. The recommendations stress the important role that governments have in investing in AI research and development; fostering digital ecosystems for AI; shaping and enabling the policy environment for AI; building human capacity and preparing for the labor market effects of AI; and engaging in international cooperation for trustworthy AI.

[The OECD Recommendation on AI](#), along with the [Principles for Digital Development, EO 13960 on Trustworthy AI](#), and best practices we have learned over the course of our exploration with this technology so far, must guide the way USAID approaches AI technologies.





# A STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN



## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE:

# A STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN FOR USAID

USAID must effectively respond to AI’s evolution, but we also have an opportunity to shape how AI technologies evolve in the developing world. With a significant global footprint, a strong network of partners across public and private sectors, and long-standing influence in the development and humanitarian communities, USAID can bend the arc of AI development towards better serving the most marginalized and vulnerable populations worldwide.

We must work with local actors—including host-country governments, technology companies, digital rights activists, civil society organizations, local financial institutions, academic institutions, and regulatory bodies—to better understand and highlight how AI technologies co-evolve with digital ecosystems worldwide, and strengthen local actors’ capacity both to make ecosystem-informed strategic investments, and to develop effective safeguards for AI technology and data. Our goal is to foster the necessary conditions for AI systems that protect and safeguard human rights online and offline. This means engaging local actors to better understand governance dynamics and human rights conditions in countries where we are considering deploying or promoting AI technologies, assessing risks, and critically analyzing local laws and their applications vis-a-vis AI technology<sup>6</sup>. It also means learning how best to broaden emerging markets to equitably serve all consumers of AI products as well as accounting for the disparate impacts of technological development. It also means investigating—and supporting—policies that

promote inclusive, rights-respecting data systems as the foundation for responsible AI applications.

As an Agency, our approach to AI technologies must be consistent with—and informed by—the mutually reinforcing programmatic and ecosystem-oriented objectives of USAID’s Digital Strategy, the essential focus on promoting democratic values and advancing a free, peaceful, and prosperous world described in the [Joint Strategic Plan](#), and the participation, representativeness, and accountability put forth in USAID’s Democracy, Rights, and Governance Strategy. We must strive for responsible, effective, and rights-respecting use of AI in our programming (with a particular focus on research and learning), as well as ecosystem-level AI investments that foster inclusion, openness, and security. The sections that follow identify three key priority actions for USAID, both with respect to our internal investments and practices as well as our role in the broader development community:



<sup>6</sup> Repressive uses of AI technologies have been erroneously justified on the grounds of national security and safety; see, e.g. [Freedom House](#), [The Atlantic](#).

# 1 COMMIT TO RESPONSIBLE AI IN USAID PROGRAMMING

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Although USAID's programmatic investments are modest compared to the global AI economy, we have a role to play in shaping this technology's propagation worldwide. USAID must exercise leadership by setting an example and an expectation around Responsible AI through our policy, programming, and messaging. USAID's commitment to Responsible AI can go a long way in ensuring we contribute to a world where technology is fair, sustainable, aligns with democratic values, and works for the most vulnerable populations.

This is a critical moment to ensure the Agency has the workforce, technical expertise, tools, and partners to engage effectively. The NSCAI final report supports this conclusion, recommending that USAID should shape the development and deployment of AI by further investing in the USAID Digital Strategy, and investing in resources, tools, and expertise to support broader U.S. digital development projects, and advising on international technical standards for AI.

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## Embrace Responsible AI for development programming

First and foremost, we must ensure that our use of AI, when it is merited, is consistent with U.S. values—that it is equitable, inclusive, and rights-respecting, and that it accounts for, and mitigates, potential harms. Even if our investments are modest compared to the global AI economy, how we approach AI in our programming can influence how others in the development community engage with it as well.

Importantly, AI applications will not always be the right tool for our work. Even in cases where it has potential, AI tools may not succeed at offering improvements over the status quo. When we bring AI into our programming, we must maintain a clear-eyed focus on learning from our efforts, adaptively managing our programming for maximum efficiency and effectiveness, and balancing enthusiasm for innovation with caution and a duty of responsible use and rights protection. Careful planning and intentional, real-time learning can

help us take smart risks to embrace AI technologies when it is appropriate—and to recognize when it is not.

To effectively deliver on our goals in the countries where we work, we must use all the tools USAID has at our disposal. We know AI technologies can offer significant efficiency gains and can help address challenges that seemed beyond our reach just a decade ago. We must prioritize exploration with AI tools to better understand its value proposition in development and humanitarian assistance programming and ensure that when and where AI tools offer gains, USAID and partners are positioned to reap them. This will require new funding streams designed to encourage responsible use of AI, alignment with the Principles for Digital Development, and dedicated innovation efforts to surface opportunities and cultivate open, inclusive, and secure digital ecosystems.

## Explore risks and rewards of AI through research

While we increase the role of Responsible AI in our development programming, projects should be scoped and budgeted for learning, enabling both USAID and the broader community to better understand what works—and what doesn't—when applying AI in development. Responsible use of AI will elude us if we are not actively learning and adapting. USAID must make a dedicated effort to track and understand the impact of existing or proposed AI deployments in field-based programming. This research would complement traditional Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning practices to focus specifically on the benefits, challenges, and risks of AI technology in the context of broader digital ecosystems. It must ensure that, beyond traditional metrics, we are learning from our AI experiences to refine USAID's approach to responsible use of AI. This includes how problems are defined and interventions designed, how we collaborate with our partners, and how we hold ourselves

accountable to our responsible use commitments.

Building processes for more systematic approaches to understanding the impact of AI, and documenting the factors that contribute to success—including local context and team composition, along with data and compute resources—can help future activity designers assess whether AI tools are an appropriate fit for their work, and can help us deliver on the promise to responsibly use AI in service of measurable development impact. Importantly, learnings generated around AI's real-world development impact and associated programmatic challenges should feed back into USAID processes, as well as documents such as this Action Plan, related policy efforts, and Digital Strategy implementation, to ensure that our work is continually guided by evidence.



Photo Credit: USAID's Emergency Food Security Program/World Vision



Photo Credit: USAID

### Collaboratively Learning About AI at USAID

USAID has begun to take steps toward building effective learning partnerships to explore the role for AI in our work. Across For example:

- DDI/ITR Hub's Technology and Research Divisions, in collaboration with MIT, has invested in [research-based guidance](#) and an [online course](#) for our technology partners to design and deploy AI technology that is rooted in fairness and inclusion. This guidance and training reflects advances in the understanding of AI fairness from the academic community.
- In collaboration with the Office of HIV/AIDS in the Bureau for Global Health, DDI/ITR Hub's Technology Division put together a series of learning exchanges between Washington and Mission staff, along with implementing partners, that are using AI to address similar challenges in health service delivery happening in different country contexts and with different partners. These events allow USAID teams to transparently share successes, challenges, and operational considerations related to using AI across these parallel projects, while encouraging adaptation and ongoing learnings.
- The Center for Water in the Bureau for Resilience and Food Security has similarly invested in producing learning documents, with support from DDI/ITR Hub's Technology and Research Divisions, that detail challenges and insights in an AI-backed project to better inform similar investments by others in the Agency.
- A USAID-wide community of practice involving those who are either interested in learning more about AI or are actively involved in managing or carrying out AI programming, the AI@AID working group meets monthly to share experiences and insights across sectors and regions (AI@AID comprises both DC-based and Mission-based staff).
- Additional opportunities for learning may arise through similar efforts under the DATA board, with the AI sub-working group led by the CTO, to align with the [2020 Executive Order 13960, Promoting the Use of Trustworthy AI in the Federal Government](#) and to ensure USAID's AI capabilities have explicit, well-defined uses, and that the safety, security, and effectiveness of such capabilities are subject to testing and assurance.

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## Cultivate a Responsible AI community of practice

We are most effective when we are able to share experiences, learn from one another's challenges and successes, and rely on a trusted community within the Agency when navigating AI projects. By cultivating Agency-wide engagement on AI and encouraging knowledge sharing between technical working groups intersecting with AI issues, we can strengthen a cross-sectoral community to collectively build USAID's capacity to engage responsibly on AI issues.

Increasing our internal capacity to responsibly use and respond to the use of AI in the countries in which we

work requires that we strive for a coherent approach across our programming, increasing the visibility of not only where AI applications are shaping our programming, but how. To that end, we must develop systems to identify and monitor AI programming and encourage knowledge sharing—potentially growing the intra-Agency working group AI@AID to be a primary venue for knowledge sharing and collective learning. Further, we need to increase engagement of field-based colleagues, creating avenues for staff to learn about AI tools in a way that complements their existing efforts and technical expertise.

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## Strengthen USAID staff capacity and resources

Training is needed to enable USAID staff to identify the value proposition that AI technologies offer for development programming, as well as the risks its use may introduce. Staff should have access to training resources, workshops, and technical assistance supplied through teams in technical bureaus like DDI/ITR Hub's Technology Division or M/CIO to increase their levels of comfort navigating the new terrain of AI. In addition to upskilling existing staff, building USAID's technical capacity also must entail hiring new staff to support further exploration of this increasingly important technical area. Likewise, a USAID workforce that has internalized both the value and the risk inherent in AI technology will lead to more strategic, context-appropriate investments in AI innovations.

We must continue to build the body of resources available across technical and thematic areas to ensure our staff have the technical assistance and the general support needed to effectively manage AI components of USAID programming. While we have a strong foundation, more needs to be done to integrate and make this guidance readily available and effective in facilitating responsible practices by default. In addition, as the use of AI in USAID programming grows, so too will



the proliferation of data science artifacts (e.g., metadata, data dictionaries, reusable code, libraries, and packages, etc.). We must strive to work together to develop more sustainable, collaborative, and efficient practices for curation and sharing of AI artifacts when and as appropriate, in alignment with key policies, like ADS 579, and in coordination with key intra-agency groups, like the DATA Board.

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## Capacity Development Resources

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- Resources for Development Practitioners**
- [Reflecting the Past, Shaping the Future: Making AI Work for International Development](#)
  - [Managing Machine Learning Projects in International Development: A Practical Guide](#)
  - [Artificial Intelligence in Global Health: Defining a Path Forward](#)
  - [Data and Advanced Analytics in HIV Service Delivery](#)
  - [NetHope Emerging Technologies Resources](#)
  - [Considerations for Using Data Responsibly at USAID](#)
  - [Principles for Digital Development](#)
  - [Digital Investment Tool](#)

- Resources for Data Science Practitioners**
- [Exploring Fairness in Machine Learning for International Development](#)
  - MIT Open Courseware [Online courses](#) on Fairness in ML
  - [Google's What-If Tool](#)
  - [IBM Fairness360](#) and [ExplainableAI](#)

- Training and Technical Assistance Resources for USAID staff**
- Digital Development Training (USAID University)
  - Responsible AI in International Development Training (USAID University)
  - Data Literacy Virtual Series (USAID University)
  - AI Activity Design Workshop (DDI's Technology Division)
  - Data Driven Design Training (DDI's Technology Division)
  - Data governance Technical Assistance (DDI's Technology Division)

- Awareness-Raising Resources**
- [OECD AI Policy Observatory](#)
  - [GPAI](#)
  - [The Montreal AI Ethics Institute](#)
  - [The AI Now Institute](#)
  - [ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency](#)
  - [Data & Society](#)
  - [The Data Science and Ethics Group](#)
  - [Center for Security and Emerging Technology](#)
  - [Algorithmic Justice League](#)
  - [The Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence](#)

In addition to these efforts to strengthen our internal capacity and expertise around the responsible use of AI, we also need to sensitize USAID staff and partners to the broader context in which AI technologies are evolving. Emerging technologies like AI will create opportunities and risks in the digital ecosystems in which USAID works, and awareness of AI trends should inform strategy development and program design. **We must commit to continuous development and updating of appropriate resources to guide USAID and partners, so that we all are positioned to responsibly react to a rapidly evolving AI landscape.**

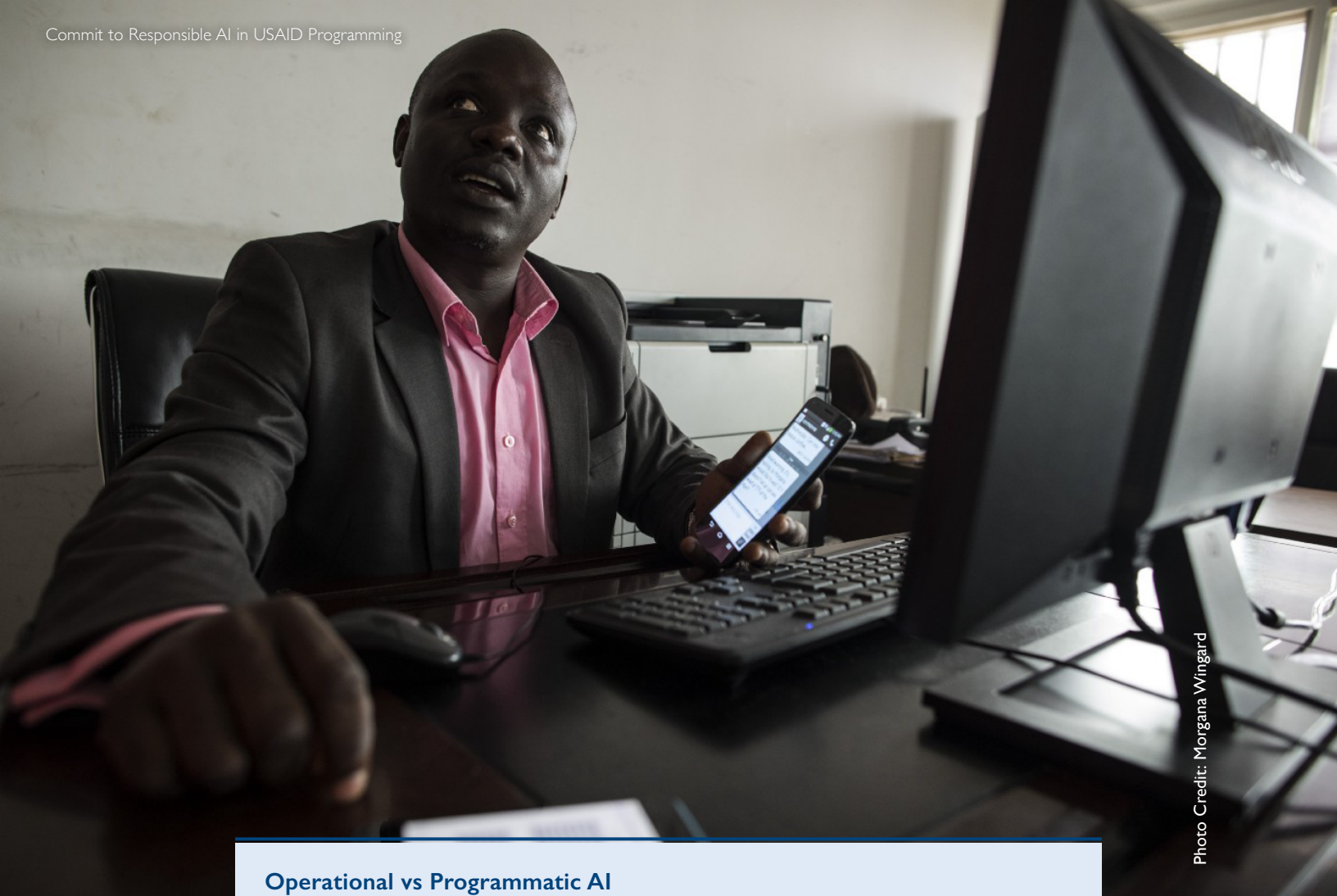


Photo Credit: Morgana Wingard

### Operational vs Programmatic AI

In addition to the value AI technologies offer in furthering development and humanitarian programming goals, AI tools also offer promise to streamline internal operations. Some operations-oriented groups within USAID have begun active exploration of AI's potential to automate rote processes and mundane tasks—for example, the USAID Management Bureau Office of Acquisition and Assistance's efforts to explore robotic process automation, or RPA. Identification of key internal processes, especially in procurement, knowledge management and project management, will allow USAID to not only be part of this AI ecosystem in development programming, but serve as a model for strategic implementation of these technologies.

While much of this Action Plan, including recommendations, may apply in the context of operational or enterprise AI use, this document focuses primarily on USAID's programmatic use of AI, and how USAID and partners interact with the use of AI in digital ecosystems worldwide. For more information on USAID's enterprise or operations approach to AI, outreach is best directed to USAID's Office of the Chief Information Officer—specifically the Data Services Team and the Agency's Chief Technology Officer who is charged with leading the implementation of EO 13960.

## 2 STRENGTHEN ECOSYSTEMS TO SUPPORT RESPONSIBLE USE OF AI

There are numerous ecosystem-level barriers that inhibit global progress toward responsible AI: a dearth of representative digital data and sustainable data systems; a critical shortage of computer science talent that can sustainably create and manage models locally; weak or non-existent mechanisms for monitoring AI systems and holding accountable the people responsible for them; patchwork, ineffective, or altogether absent regulatory protections; and the existence of data science siloes and imbalanced, exploitative, or improper data sharing arrangements and data governance models. These barriers differ substantially across contexts, but they have tremendous influence over the responsible use of AI across each of the contexts in which USAID works.

We must support partner-country governments in their efforts to navigate this rapidly changing field. Many upper-income countries [have begun to develop comprehensive AI strategies](#), along with a few developing nations (notably Brazil, India, Mexico, Serbia, and Tunisia). More than just a written strategy, however, our partner countries will benefit from expert guidance, technical assistance rooted in a local workforce, and open-source tools that can broaden access to responsible AI.

USAID can provide more targeted support on AI to presence-country governments and key civil society actors, offering advisory and funding support for the responsible use of platforms that facilitate the use of AI. Concurrently, USAID must act on the urgent need for investment in both the technological infrastructure and accountability mechanisms that enable responsible use of AI—for example, in-country digital infrastructure and policy implementation that support robust privacy protections and data flows, as well as a skilled, values-aligned local AI workforce.



Photo Credit: Fenix International



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## Invest in data infrastructure as a digital public good

Given the outsized role data play in shaping AI models, data infrastructure and digital public goods are key components of AI ecosystem development. Data infrastructure includes the technology, policies, standards, human resources, and related activities necessary to acquire, process, distribute, use, maintain, and preserve data. [Digital public goods](#) can be open source software, open data repositories, or shareable AI models and transparent standards around well-accepted best practices.

Data infrastructure includes both traditionally structured data collection systems, like government-run health information systems, as well as more nascent approaches to data collection—for example, metadata generated through the use of digital tools; or private sector data collected through consumer activities like internet searches or online purchases that can fuel AI models in both the private and public domain. When privately held data sources are repurposed for public good applications, we must ensure that the public interest is served and that the benefits are distributed equitably. This means infrastructure components like policy efforts, standards, and algorithmic impact assessments must be prioritized.

Data infrastructure points to the important overlay between development of inclusive AI and the interlinked goal of closing the digital divide. Responsible AI depends on investments in the quality, security, representativeness, and interoperability of local data sets, and the open, inclusive, and secure digital systems that underpin them.

USAID should identify and work with key partners in presence-country governments, civil society, and the U.S. interagency to strengthen data infrastructure as well as the laws, policies, and practices that govern them.

This 'soft' infrastructure should include—as mentioned above—AI strategies, but also privacy and data protection policy, data-sharing agreements that promote innovation, and the necessary practices and skills to safely manage, store, and share data and monitor data's impact on AI systems.

In many cases, USAID programs generate data resources that can be combined with other types of data in AI applications. Examples include the Demographic and Health Surveys and Americas Barometer. When data resources are shared with the public, USAID has an opportunity to demonstrate the value of data as a public asset, and to embody the high standards of transparency, quality, and inclusion that we expect in this sphere.

Importantly, and especially in the context of privately held data resources, data infrastructure must carefully balance consumer protections—such as privacy and mechanisms for redress—and support for innovation and market growth. The capacity for digital ecosystems to foster sustainable, rights-respecting use of AI hinges on these critical components of any digital ecosystem.

## Infrastructure, standards, and data sharing

To clarify the role of data infrastructure, we can use an analogy with a more familiar form of infrastructure: roads. Just as roads facilitate the movement of people and goods, data infrastructure facilitates the movement of data as we share, use, and preserve it. While roads are necessary, the construction of roads does not ensure traffic safety; the latter requires that safety laws be defined and enforced. Similarly, our investments in expanding and improving data infrastructure need to be coupled with data governance efforts that clarify and enforce the (metaphorical) “rules of the road.”

Many roads are owned and maintained by a government and are part of a public network, while some roads are built on private property and are not intended for public access. Similarly, some data infrastructure assets lie in the public domain while others are private and proprietary. In some situations (such as during emergency response) these privately owned roads might be opened up for public use. This happens frequently with data infrastructure—privately held data assets might be procured by public agencies (such as using targeted Facebook ads for a public-health campaign) or opened to the public (such as in a hackathon or “Data for Good” initiative).



Because data can be easily shared, copied, and repurposed, they freely cross boundaries between organizations and use-case domains. If an incomplete, biased dataset is opened outside its original domain of use and used to build AI tools, especially in a crisis situation, it could lead to unforeseen consequences. This is one of the reasons those using public domain resources may care about whether privately held datasets are inclusive and representative. To continue with the road metaphor, if privately owned roads are going to be opened to the public, we don't want them to be shoddily built or dangerous. Privately held datasets may be used to construct AI services that become widely used (such as through a cloud-based API service) – in this case the data are never shared publicly, but predictions based on them are incorporated into diverse products and services.

Even when data infrastructure is privately owned, there are actions USAID can take to influence its impact on the AI ecosystem:

- Promote best practices for inclusiveness, representativeness, and disclosure and mitigation of algorithmic bias.
- Build capacity of public-sector partners to evaluate the quality and fairness of data and models (akin to inspecting roads before allowing public use)
- Advance norms around the responsible use of AI

## Strengthen capacity for accountability and oversight

AI tools are not “done” when they are deployed. At a purely technical level, many systems continue to learn from new data and others need to be retrained to remain viable, so future model performance will differ from past performance. This is often a good thing, but can introduce the risk of new problematic behaviors, biases, or even [sabotage](#) that were not present at the time of initial deployment. At an organizational level, AI tools are owned and operated by people who have the ability to retrain, modify, and correct problematic behaviors—but only if systems of monitoring, feedback, and accountability are in place.

Uncovering AI-derived harms often requires familiarity with technological nuance that may not be

commonplace among important stakeholders like investigative journalists, rights advocates, or government officials. It can often be difficult to know whether an AI tool has even been used, let alone whether it has been responsibly used. **USAID must help build mechanisms for accountability to ensure that when the use of AI does result in harm, local actors have the knowledge and skills to uncover and redress these harms.** Specifically, USAID must focus on equipping journalists, human rights advocates, public figures, and government officials with the knowledge, skills, and tools that allow them to analyze and understand when and how the use of AI tools might result in unfair or unjust outcomes.



**Importantly, USAID can strengthen the ability of civil society to shine a light on problematic uses of AI and hold government and corporate actors accountable to those impacted.** Additionally, USAID can further develop its network with civil society organizations (CSOs) globally and host fora for CSOs to interface with each other, USAID practitioners, and AI experts to enable active collaboration, learning and idea-sharing among CSOs from different parts of the world, and ultimately shape an environment where CSOs are empowered to engage locally on AI-related issues.

USAID can also assist government officials in holding privately designed AI systems to account. Governments across the globe will need significant technical capacity to identify and challenge inequitable private AI systems. Development actors will need to be flexible in

contextualizing and understanding local and international AI regulatory and policy implications (e.g., ongoing AI policy deliberations in the U.S. and E.U. may have ripple effects globally); governments and development practitioners alike they will likely benefit from centralized resources and standardized best practices that USAID can support and explore systematically with our partners. In spite of the novelty of the technology, the best starting point for AI accountability may well be grounded in far more general best practices in human rights—for example, conducting [human rights impact assessments](#) and ensuring partners align with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. AI accountability and oversight can, and should, benefit from the solid rights foundation that exists independent of technology.

## Promote an AI-ready and adaptable workforce

Technology is never neutral; it embeds the world views and the cultural biases of its creators. Despite having a veneer of autonomy and neutrality, AI technologies are no exception. Indeed, perhaps precisely because of an often-misperceived neutrality, AI tools can introduce or exacerbate pernicious challenges regarding how AI and society intertwine. When AI applications are developed without knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity to the context in which they will be deployed, harms arise—inadvertent exclusion, inequitable outcomes, or outright failure. Because AI tools reflect the values and worldviews of their designers, we must ensure that those with local knowledge are positioned to shape the development and use of AI, and that local actors—including traditionally underrepresented groups like women—are equipped with the skills to hold accountable the use of these tools. This requires investing in the AI workforce of the future.

Whether data science curricula are taught in higher education institutions or through alternative methods—e.g., vocational training or online channels—**strengthening local capacity and supporting workforce development efforts will ensure AI tools better reflect the communities they impact.** These capacity strengthening efforts should cover both core data science techniques and interdisciplinary skills to guide responsible AI design and deployment, embedding ethics and fairness as core pieces of AI training. This approach to AI training will enable an environment where the AI innovations of tomorrow are created by

those most intimately familiar with their own country contexts, and in a way that promotes human rights and the integrity of all.

Through a wide range of approaches—developing and promoting buy-in for risk assessment tools, tailored policy choices, robust educational curricula, and continued training and support—USAID must embed democratic, rights-respecting values throughout the entire AI workforce ecosystem, with a particular emphasis on empowering local communities to assess and mitigate risk in their contexts as this technology continues to evolve. More broadly, USAID must lead in connecting the role of a strong data science workforce to the overarching progress of country development. AI capacity building can feed into growing digital economies, fostering competition in a global market, and ensuring local and inclusive solutions to development problems.

At the same time, while an AI-ready workforce is essential at every level, so too is a workforce prepared for increased automation. Critical to this goal will be understanding key questions, like which labor markets are most vulnerable to job displacement? What will be the effects on wages, power structures, and economic inequality? Which policy levers must be pulled to mitigate the negative repercussions of automation? **These issues**—central to the future of work—must be a priority for the Agency and partner countries as part of economic growth programming and research.

### Novel Approaches to Strengthen AI Readiness of the Global Workforce

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) are working to build AI talent, research, and innovation in Africa by funding interdisciplinary [AI for Development Labs](#) in Sub-Saharan Africa. GIZ's [FAIR Forward](#) initiative strives for a more open, inclusive, and sustainable approach to AI internationally through several related lines of effort in Africa and South Asia, including AI policy development, fostering AI-enabled startups, and developing training data for under-resourced languages. The Mozilla Foundation's [Responsible Computer Science Challenge](#) aims to instill responsible use principles in the next generation of computer scientists by supporting the development of holistic computer science curricula that can be scaled and adopted globally.

# 3 PARTNER TO SHAPE A GLOBAL RESPONSIBLE AI AGENDA

With [less than 1 percent of the federal budget](#) and [less than 25 percent of official development assistance](#), USAID cannot build responsible AI ecosystems alone. Nor should this be a goal unique to USAID. Partnerships and collaboration matter.

Building inclusive coalitions, partnerships, and shared agendas will ensure that those who stand to be affected by AI tools can shape its development. USAID can work to anchor influential partnerships around responsible use, promoting inclusion and accountability as use of AI proliferates globally. It is especially important to build partnerships and coalitions **with US Government (USG) partners, developing countries, and multilateral organizations, which can help push back against digital authoritarianism and ensure that responsible, inclusive, and equitable applications of AI are propagated globally.** Of notable importance is USAID's partnership with the U.S. Department of State in this arena. Continued partnership between USAID and the Department of State regarding the international AI policy environment—including relevant international standards and data governance considerations—will continue to

be critical to the pro-competitive evolution of rights-protecting, human-centered AI.

As the largest development Agency in the world, USAID must take the lead on shaping a coherent vision for responsible AI in international development, and should co-create this vision with the U.S. interagency and our partners and allies. Mirroring USAID's Digital Strategy, this effort must be panoramic, ranging in scope from local civil society organizations, governments, corporations, standards-setting institutions, and multilateral organizations. Partnerships should focus on research and learning as well as policy- and agenda-setting for greater inclusion and accountability. In short, we should aim to both leverage and broaden our influence, partnering with like-minded actors to shape a global responsible AI agenda.



Photo Credit: Dorothy Nabatanzi / Uganda Sanitation for Health Activity

## Who are our partners in shaping Responsible AI?

Many of USAID's existing partners are already engaging with AI-relevant issues, and these relationships can serve as a starting point for new partnerships around policy and research toward more responsible, values-aligned AI. The following illustrates the range of actors USAID should engage to promote responsible AI. High leverage points of engagement include:

- **Host-country governments** are responsible for setting ICT policy, writing and enforcing regulations in key sectors adopting AI technologies, designing and procuring AI-enabled systems, funding R&D, and setting educational priorities. Through its Missions and with technical assistance from USAID/W, USAID should assist governments to set policies and processes that enable responsible AI.
- **Private-sector companies** design, build, import, deploy, and profit from AI-enabled tools. They can influence the adoption of standards and have a powerful stake in discussions of regulation and policy. As an example, telecommunications firms use AI for cybersecurity and network automation, applications that play an important role in expanding their services to developing countries. In addition, the world's seven most-valuable publicly traded companies (Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Alphabet, Alibaba, Facebook, and Tencent) are all fundamentally "AI companies." Given private companies' reach in developing countries, USAID can develop stronger relationships with these organizations (e.g., through DDI's Private Sector Engagement Hub) and influence their priorities, but also commit to a high threshold for engagement to ensure AI partnerships meet USAID's pledge to responsibility.
- **Civil society, media organizations, local think tanks and activists** often act as watchdogs, helping to keep the public informed about the use (and misuse) of AI tools and advocating for the public interest. USAID must support these organizations in developing greater in-country accountability mechanisms to identify and advocate for the redress of technological abuses and harms, and to support the development of more locally rooted and locally responsive approaches to AI systems.
- **Global technology and society oriented think tanks and non-profit research organizations** offer critical viewpoints from researchers and policy advocates, many of whom have had prior experience in the technology industry. Although often oriented toward the Global Minority, these organizations can illuminate important issues with relevance to the Global Majority. USAID should seek to understand and act on these implications, and support the expansion of these organizations' focus toward developing countries.
- **Universities** are a key site for AI research, as well as for training and equipping an AI-ready workforce. This includes programmers and engineers, but also managers, journalists, and policymakers who are able to engage with AI issues. USAID should facilitate partnerships between US research institutions and developing country universities, promoting collaboration and coordination of resources and ideas.
- **Multilateral organizations and initiatives** including the OECD, the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI), and others have engaged on AI policy and implementation issues, along with standards-setting bodies like IEEE and ISO. USAID should support U.S. delegations to these organizations and initiatives to help advance U.S. interests, encouraging increased inclusion of developing country perspectives.
- **AI innovators**, including social enterprises, NGOs, and others, are at the forefront of implementing AI for social good, building context-relevant solutions to locally identified development and humanitarian challenges. USAID should partner with these innovators to help them scale, as well as strengthen the enabling ecosystem around them to help new local innovators emerge.
- **Other donors**, including bilateral aid agencies and foundations, are also engaged on AI issues. By exchanging both policy and research ideas, USAID and other donors can capitalize on a shared agenda and pool investments in appropriate projects.



Photo Credit: Dorothy Nabatanzi / Uganda Sanitation for Health Activity

## Elevate Development in USG Policy Setting and Cooperation

**USAID must play a leadership role in ensuring that the implications of AI technologies in developing countries feature in high-level policy exchanges and interagency dialogues.** USAID's development assistance can ensure that developing countries prioritize Responsible AI, lead locally, and become less reliant on AI capabilities from U.S. competitors. Development programming and digital ecosystem-strengthening that encourage Responsible AI can also promote

greater economic and geopolitical stability, democratic governance, and national security. This was made clear in the 2021 National Security Commission on AI (NSCAI) [Final Report to Congress](#), and [has long been noted](#) as an area deserving of greater attention. USAID must continue to aggressively pursue opportunities that engage the interagency on critical priorities like the responsible use of AI globally.

Our goal is strong networks—plural—of countries, companies, universities connected by shared values and a shared commitment to design and deploy technology for the benefit of all people, to strengthen open and interoperable systems, to encourage freedom of thought and expression, which are the heart of innovation, to defend each other against those who are intent on taking technologies that could be used for good and using them for harm.

—**Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken,**  
[Remarks](#) at NSCAI Global Emerging Technology Summit, 13 July 2021

At the working level, USAID must continue to engage—and invest further—in interagency communities of practice on AI—such as those organized by the General Services Administration (GSA) on Responsible AI, privacy, and workforce issues—ensuring global development priorities figure in broader interagency efforts on AI. Many USG agencies have equities in AI and development. With increased focus on AI, USAID could further identify opportunities for policy and programmatic coordination with USG colleagues at the Department of State or Department of Agriculture, for instance, both of which already conduct extensive development work. USAID must dedicate resources toward helping low- and middle-income countries develop and implement values-aligned AI frameworks and build healthy digital ecosystems for Responsible AI development and use. **USAID has a unique role to play in ensuring that our partner countries contribute meaningfully to shaping the AI policies, approaches, and frameworks that will drive the global AI ecosystem.**

In addition, the AI resources made available by other USG entities are significant. USAID can work to use interagency fora to direct more of these resources toward development objectives. This could include, for instance, building interagency agreements to share satellite imagery and geospatial data provided by NASA or NOAA to support innovative AI solutions in developing countries. USAID can leverage existing partnerships (such as SERVIR) to get more out of these data with AI-enabled analysis.



Photo Credit: USAID

## Encourage Multilateral and Multi Stakeholder Engagement

Outside of the USG, there are many multilateral platforms focused on AI. **USAID should support increased developing-country representation among prominent multilateral initiatives.**

By encouraging inclusion of developing country representatives, USAID can raise development priorities as central to the work of these coalitions.

For instance, the Global Partnership on AI ([GPAI](#)) is a multi-stakeholder organization that fosters international cooperation on AI research and policy. [OECD's](#) efforts on AI have focused on developing high-level principles for AI adoption, and influencing global policies around AI through the OECD Recommendation on AI. The World Economic Forum's Global AI Action Alliance (GAIA) aims to accelerate deployment of "trusted, transparent, and inclusive AI systems globally." Notably, while each of these initiatives aims toward consensus, a key question

is who is included in this consensus: members are substantially (or entirely) limited to developed countries with already thriving AI ecosystems.

**USAID can broaden the range of ideas available to our partners by encouraging "trilateral" partnerships,** including with both relatively-advanced partner countries (e.g., India) and emerging donor partners (e.g., Estonia). The inclusion of developing country governments in global knowledge-sharing and agenda-setting bodies and initiatives—such as GPAI or discussions of the [OECD Working Party on AI Governance](#), will lead to greater buy-in for these important global efforts, and more importantly will strengthen these bodies' ability to reflect a truly global scope. The next page illustrates the alignment between USAID's work, the actions USAID should take, and the broader AI community.





Photo Credit: USAID

### USAID's Focus on Responsible AI Aligns with the Broader AI Community

The Agency's existing work on AI—as well as the proposed activities in this Action Plan—are strongly aligned with existing efforts undertaken by the U.S. Government and multilateral organizations. While the USG is involved in a wide variety of lines of effort around AI technologies, the values we aim to embed in each—a push for rights-respecting, democratic, open, and inclusive AI systems—are shared.

For instance, through the Biden-Harris Administration's global infrastructure initiative, G7 partners aim to leverage private capital and government funding to advance digital infrastructure in low- and middle-income countries. While only one piece of open, inclusive, and secure digital ecosystems, digital infrastructure built around the public good is an essential component for Responsible AI. In the [New Atlantic Charter](#), the UK and US have committed to embrace the promise and manage the peril of emerging technologies, to promote the development and deployment of new standards and technologies to support democratic values, and to foster sustainable global development.

Among multilateral organizations, the World Economic Forum recently stood up the [Global AI Action Alliance](#) with the goal of accelerating the adoption of trusted, transparent and inclusive AI systems globally. The World Health Organization (WHO) has [similar goals](#) for its ethical AI principles: promoting human well-being and safety and the public interest; ensuring transparency, explainability and intelligibility; fostering responsibility and accountability; ensuring inclusiveness and equity; and promoting AI that is responsive and sustainable.

As USAID continues to advance the three priority areas in this Action Plan, we must continue to align with and build off these existing synergies.



Photo Credit: Jessica Benton Cooney, USAID

## Share Approaches for Accountability

It would be naive to assume that all actors who wield AI do so with noble intentions. Malign actors will undoubtedly continue to leverage AI to oppress communities, repress rights, and inhibit freedoms. Responsible design alone will not address these challenges. The same AI-backed tools that allow for targeted advertising or improved personal security can also enable government-backed citizen surveillance or illegal targeting of political rivals.

**The best protections against malign use of AI-backed tools are often the same tools that help protect against oppression and rights erosion in more traditional contexts—for example, the existence of a strong judiciary, implementation of appropriate regulatory safeguards, and engagement of an informed and empowered civil society that can shine light on misuse and demand accountability when harms arise.** Well-tested approaches like [human rights](#) impact assessments, and working to ensure our use of AI aligns with the widely adopted [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) can help USAID and partners to protect against AI-enabled harms. But the whole world is still learning how we can best hold accountable the

use of this technology so that both intentional and inadvertent harm is identified and redressed. Given AI's rapid evolution, it is important to ensure that any legal, regulatory, or societal protections will remain effective.

USAID must encourage collaboration and shared learning across those stakeholders who are well-positioned to influence the evolution of AI accountability mechanisms in their countries. For example, practices that have proven successful for one CSO should be broadcast and amplified to reach other CSOs facing similar challenges. Promising legal or regulatory approaches to developing citizen safeguards should feed into joint (ideally South-South) learning between governments concerned with how geopolitics might influence private sector-led development of the AI ecosystem. The complex challenges that arise around AI accountability will benefit from collaborative networks of actors working to jointly grow their understanding and identify new approaches that no actor alone could. USAID must support these collaborative structures that promote innovative approaches and knowledge sharing around the responsible use of AI in development.



Photo Credit: USAID El Salvador

## Pursue Responsible AI Research and Learning Partnerships

While USAID can play an important role in establishing evidence for AI-enabled development programming, acting alone will lead to duplicative efforts and wasted resources. **Research partnerships—including with academia, responsible private sector actors, implementing partners, and other donors—can help us extend our reach and multiply our learning.**

In particular, multi-stakeholder learning partnerships can help us to identify (and advocate for) proven “guardrails” that can serve to keep AI interventions effective and responsible in development and humanitarian contexts. Through participation in global research partnerships, USAID must prioritize ecosystem-level research around the implications of increased reliance on AI in developing country contexts. This will help ensure that our evidence base for decision-making includes locally generated research, and that global best practices are verified in local settings. Strengthening local AI research and development capacity will be critical to this goal, and will reinforce Agency priorities of working with local partners and enabling locally-led development.

Expanding its reach, USAID must build partnerships with R&D-focused agencies, including the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. Together, these organizations can advance the pursuit of

AI research topics with high international development impact, including explainable deep learning systems, privacy-preserving AI technology, AI-enabled healthcare, natural language processing for underserved languages, and energy-efficient computing infrastructure. We may find that, for some problem areas, specific technical advances (e.g., low-resource AI systems) or regulatory changes (e.g., appropriate data sharing laws) would enable high-impact AI applications that are not currently feasible in developing countries. In such cases, USAID must raise the visibility of these ecosystem gaps and organize collective action with like-minded partners to address them.

As we learn more about which sectors and application areas have the most potential for development impact, we must promote and advocate for responsible AI applications in these specific areas, encouraging and funding international collaboration with researchers in developing countries. The Partnerships for Enhanced Engagement in Research (PEER) mechanism through the DDI/ITR Hub’s Research Division is an ideal mechanism for this, allowing US and developing country researchers to collaborate on shared research projects. The Agency must prioritize efforts like this to both set and promulgate a shared AI research agenda globally.

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# LOOKING FORWARD

AI has arrived in the developing world. The development and deployment of AI technologies in developing countries will undoubtedly continue regardless of whether USAID chooses to engage. However, if USAID takes bold measures to support more inclusive, fair, and responsible production and use of AI, we can shape how the diffusion of AI technologies impacts everyone, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized in society.

We have the opportunity to articulate a clear vision about the use of AI in development: which technologies, which issues, and which impacts need to hold our collective attention, and where our community has an important role to play in helping to ensure rights-respecting action is taken. Indeed, USAID's inaction would be, instead, an abdication of responsibility, allowing AI technologies to become an instrument to centralize power, limit civil liberties, or further entrench inequality, fundamentally making our Agency's mission harder to achieve.

With thoughtful action, USAID can maintain its commitment to maximize development's effectiveness and avoid and mitigate harm through analysis, planning, strategy, evaluation, and learning. We must interrogate the real impact of AI tools in development and build the safeguards necessary to ensure our use of AI is equitable, inclusive, and that it truly benefits the causes and communities we serve. To accomplish this, we need to be **risk-aware without being risk-averse**; just as we must avoid harm in our use of AI tools, we also have the duty to embrace innovation and improve the effectiveness of development programs.

Looking beyond our own programmatic use, we must partner to foster digital ecosystems that underpin trustworthy, responsible use of AI in developing countries. Overwhelmingly, **governments worldwide**—and USAID partner country governments in particular—will struggle to manage the ramifications of a changing AI landscape and implement a Responsible

AI approach with fidelity. The need is clear: USAID must choose to engage with this technology in a way that fosters a more inclusive and equitable future.



Photo Credit: Bobby Neptune, USAID

The [2021 U.S. Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#) states, “The world’s leading powers are racing to develop and deploy emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing, that could shape everything from the economic and military balance among states to the future of work, wealth, and inequality within them. The future potential is enormous.... but the direction and consequences of the technological revolution remain unsettled.”

The direction USAID chooses on AI—either demanding a responsible AI future, or ceding that future to others—will impact whether our implementing partners, partner governments, and the people USAID serves thrive or falter in a digital age.

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# ANNEX

## Box A.1: How AI can go wrong

In recent years, AI deployments around the world have run into similar sets of challenges. The list below is not exhaustive, but highlights some common issues related to AI tools. These problems can be difficult to avoid entirely, but can be mitigated through a risk-aware approach throughout AI development and deployment.

- **Failing to work for all:** AI algorithms make decisions and predictions based only on the data they have seen—their “training data”. This means that when an algorithm encounters new data, it will make mistakes for people, places, or events that differ from its training data. This often results in disparities or errors that affect certain populations more than others, leading to inequitable outcomes that negatively impact those who were underrepresented in the datasets. For example, [a 2018 study](#) showed that because darker-skinned faces were not sufficiently present in training data used to develop facial analysis software, those algorithms failed to identify darker-skinned individuals accurately at a disproportionately high rate. Disparities or error patterns may also be baked into the problem definition or system design, independently of the training data used.
- **Cementing the status quo:** Data for training AI algorithms can be thought of as a snapshot of the past. If those data reflect historical inequities, the model’s predictions about the future will likely reinforce those unjust conditions. For example, models that analyze résumés by making predictions based on prior hiring decisions that are skewed in favor of men [may discriminate](#) against female applicants simply because the training data reflect past, systemic patterns of discrimination.
- **Displacing accountability:** Even when AI models are highly accurate, they are often opaque—that is, it is difficult to explain how the model works in general or why it behaved the way it did in a specific case. [Individual people impacted by algorithmic decisions](#) may find themselves unable to understand or—importantly—contest those decisions. Particularly for highly sensitive uses, such as law enforcement or credit allocation, an algorithm’s small error, when combined with a lack of institutional systems to respond to algorithmic harms, can have disproportionately large consequences for individuals with no opportunity for recourse.
- **Ignoring Real-world Context:** Systems that perform well in controlled test environments may behave unpredictably once a tool is rolled out in the field. Unless the algorithm is designed and implemented with careful consideration of context and strong “live” model oversight, these issues can go undetected, causing unexpected harm and eroding trust. Even successfully vetted models might need to interface appropriately with existing “analog” systems—for example, an AI system to detect fraudulent financial transactions may only have real-world benefit if there is capacity to handle a resulting increase in fraud investigations.

## Box A.2

Sector	Potential Benefits of AI	Potential Risks of AI
<b>Economic Growth</b>	Optimizing job-candidate matching Strengthening financial inclusion through better credit scoring	Embedding structural bias in past hiring and lending practices
<b>Education</b>	Using AI technology to provide personalized feedback and boost reading fluency	Neglecting to develop tools that are accessible for learners with disabilities and speakers of minority languages
<b>Democracy Rights and Governance</b>	Monitoring human rights abuses, Circumventing censorship, Enhancing content moderation abilities	Abetting spread of mis/disinformation, enabling 'deep fakes', and undermining democratic integrity
<b>Global Health</b>	Point of Care diagnostics Supply chain optimization Outbreak forecasting	Contributing to fragmentation in health systems and standards of care;  Development of tools with biased predictions that entrench inequities  Undermining trust in institutions when they act on outputs of poorly performing models
<b>Agriculture and Food Security</b>	Informing climate smart agriculture with improved yield and crop management predictions  Supply chain optimization	Widening food security and economic disparities with tools that don't benefit the most vulnerable
<b>Disaster Prevention and Response</b>	Famine, drought, and disease forecasting to enable targeted, timely mitigation efforts.  Rapid analysis of social media data to inform and target disaster response to areas of greatest need	Skewed targeting that directs response to the best-connected and best-monitored areas rather than those with the greatest needs.



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