

2026 DIGITAL WORLD CONFERENCE: AI FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Governing the Future

Artificial Intelligence for Equitable and Inclusive Social Development

Rapid advances in artificial intelligence and digital technologies are reshaping economies and societies at an unprecedented pace. Global discussions have largely centred on technological innovation and economic potential, yet comparatively less policy attention has been paid to the broader social dimensions of these transformations: their implications for inequality, governance, labour markets, and human well-being. As AI becomes progressively embedded in public services in the areas of healthcare, education, and cultural production, concrete concerns are emerging around uneven access, the concentration of technological power, and the erosion of public trust.

On 21 April 2026, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) convened the 2026 Digital World Conference: AI for Social Development at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland, in partnership with the World Digital Technology Academy (WDTA). The main objectives of the conference were to:

- offer a timely assessment of the social implications of digital transformation with particular attention to the role of Artificial Intelligence across key social sectors;
- conduct a re-examination of various governance approaches to AI development from the perspective of human rights and social development;
- facilitate a multistakeholder dialogue to promote equitable and inclusive AI for social development; and
- provide insights about humanity's future with AI, based on inclusive engagement across regions (global North and South), genders, generations, and sectors including academia, industry, governments, and civil society.

The conference brought together 35 speakers from a range of leading international institutions, including ITU, ILO, UNCTAD, UNOHCHR, WTO, WEF, ISO, and UNICC, as well

as representatives from governments, permanent missions, foundations, and universities including EPFL, Tsinghua University, the University of Washington, and the Geneva School of Diplomacy. Over 250 participants attended in person, drawn from academia, research institutions, international organizations, governments, and civil society.



2026 Digital World Conference sessions

Opening Session

Session 1. AI and Data Governance

Session 2. AI for Social Protection

Session 3. AI for Just Transition

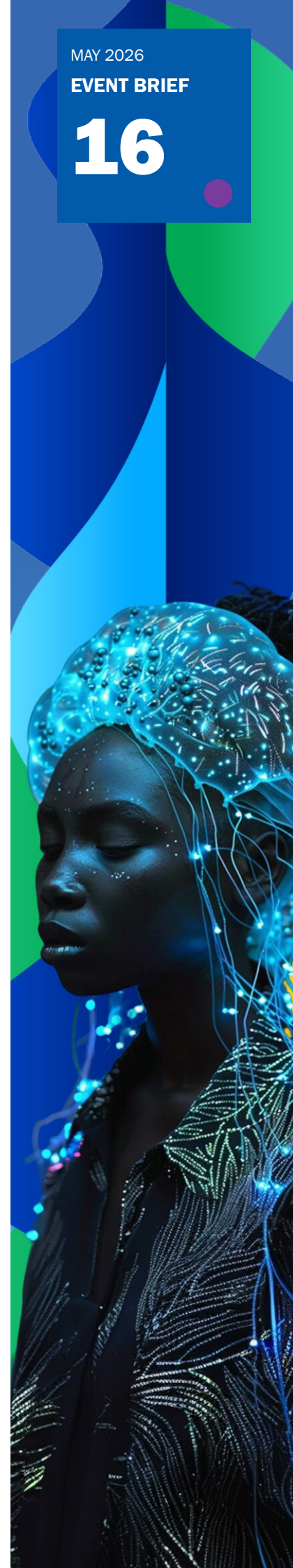
Session 4. AI for Art and Culture

Session 5. AI for Education and Training

Keynote Session: Mastermind Dialogue with Geoffrey Hinton and Terrence J. Sejnowski, moderated by Deng Li

Closing Session

More information and resources at
www.unrisd.org/dwc2026



“
[To AI community] regulation is not a brake, but a steering wheel. [Currently] they want a very fast car with no steering wheel.”

— Geoffrey Hinton, Nobel Laureate in Physics 2024



Keynote addresses were delivered by Geoffrey Hinton, Nobel Laureate in Physics 2024, and Terrence J. Sejnowski, Professor at UC San Diego. The 35 speaker presentations yielded a rich body of evidence about the social implications of AI and what governments, international organizations, and civil society can do to steer AI toward equitable and inclusive development. The key questions that were addressed and debated are outlined in this brief. Attributions in parentheses refer to speakers at the conference.

What exactly is AI's social impact?

During the conference it became clear that AI is not a neutral technology: it embeds the biases, power structures, and values of those who design, own, and deploy it. What AI systems have in common is that they are reshaping economic activity, social relations, and governance—but unevenly, and largely in ways that reflect and amplify existing inequalities (Shamika N. Sirimanne, UNCTAD).

Speakers from across sectors emphasized that AI simultaneously creates new opportunities for some and forecloses others. It lowers barriers to information and creative production, enabling wider participation. But it also accelerates content proliferation, disrupts labour markets, concentrates ownership, and risks reproducing at the level of digital infrastructure the same inequalities AI promises to reduce (Fiorenzo Manganiello, LIAN Group).

The theoretical attraction of AI as a social development tool, and its pertinence to contemporary efforts to rethink governance, lies precisely in this ambivalence. It simultaneously enables economic dynamism and threatens social cohesion; it can expand human capabilities or erode them through cognitive atrophy; it can foster democratic accountability or concentrate decision-making power. Speakers stressed the need for a conception of AI governance that takes into account multiple dimensions—economic, social, environmental, and rights-based—and the diverse realities of the global North and South.

Speakers from the global North often focused on regulatory design, standards-setting, and the governance of large-scale AI platforms (Silvio Dulinsky, ISO; Caitlin Kraft-Buchman, Women at the Table; Isabel

Ebert, UN OHCHR B-Tech Project). Speakers representing the global South and cultural diversity perspectives emphasized data colonialism, the extraction of indigenous and cultural knowledge, and the risk of a second great divergence in which the global North shapes AI while the global South consumes it (Unathi Lutshaba, South African Cultural Observatory; Janice Robinson, International Human Rights Consortium).

Scientific voices converged on the urgency of regulation. Geoffrey Hinton cautioned that the current research landscape remains critically imbalanced, with roughly 1% of effort directed at safety and human-AI coexistence against 99% focused on expanding system capability. Terrence Sejnowski situated these concerns within the broader challenge of global governance: in an era of intensifying geopolitical competition, intergovernmental cooperation on AI remains both difficult and essential.

Why AI governance? Why now?

- AI is projected to create 11 million jobs while displacing 9 million over the next five years, with 39% of total skill sets disrupted by 2030—yet the skills required in growing roles diverge sharply from those in declining ones.
- The ITU estimates that 25 to 40 per cent of the global population lacks the devices, data plans, or digital literacy to meaningfully engage with AI tools, compounding existing inequalities.
- Many AI systems are trained on cultural materials without adequate recognition or compensation, raising urgent questions about ownership, equity, and benefit distribution that existing legal frameworks are ill-equipped to answer.
- Fragmentation in national regulatory approaches creates an increasingly uneven global landscape, particularly for actors operating across borders and for lower-income economies.
- The diffusion of AI into public services—healthcare, education, social protection—raises human rights concerns around transparency, accountability, and the risks of automating discrimination.
- Geopolitical competition is making intergovernmental cooperation on AI both more difficult and more essential.

“
Most of our public conversations oscillate between utopia or catastrophe. But I want to talk about the vibrant center—where AI is neither miraculous nor obviously disastrous.”

— Caitlin Kraft-Buchman, Women at the Table



Is AI giving old questions new urgency?

Can growth be shared or will AI concentrate power further?

The session on Just Transition surfaced a question running beneath much of the conference discussion: who bears the cost of transformation? Three groups face particular exposure: entry-level workers whose learn-to-earn pathway is eroding; middle managers increasingly targeted for elimination—positions that constitute the middle class upon which societal structures are built (Ricky Li, WEF); and low-paid essential workers such as teachers, nurses, and care aides, who are the least automatable yet the least compensated.

At the global level, this risk is compounded by an access gap that precedes AI entirely. Where AI does penetrate lower-income economies, benefits tend to accrue to well-capitalized actors while smaller ones absorb the costs—a dynamic Janice Robinson (International Human Rights Consortium) described as a potential second great divergence.

The question of Universal Basic Income surfaced from the floor and discussed in a very much positive sense as it was suggested to be economically feasible given current productivity gains. Robinson emphasized a cultural and political urgency and necessity to prepare in years, not decades; Li saw it as a risk of displacing the more immediately actionable priority of reskilling at scale.

Regarding the regulation on AI, Hinton drew a sobering historical parallel, cautioning that even well-intentioned domestic regulation may not prevent the export of harmful regulation or spread of de-regulation on AI systems—a pattern he likened to the tobacco and asbestos industries of the twentieth century.

Who owns the planet, the data, and the creative work?

AI is not only transforming creative processes but also reshaping the broader structures through which cultural value is produced, distributed, and recognized. Many AI systems are trained on existing cultural materials used without adequate recognition or compensation, raising questions of ownership, equity, and benefit distribution. As Unati Lutshaba (South African Cultural Observatory) framed it, the question is not only who creates, but who benefits—and whose

culture is being used to train the systems that will shape culture for others. Growing platform concentration risks reproducing at the level of infrastructure, the very inequalities AI promises to reduce (Fiorenzo Manganiello, LIAN Group).

Can the earth sustain the cost of intelligence?

Is AI simply digitizing the old extractive economy rather than designing a new regenerative one? David Jensen (UNEP) argued that AI should function as a planetary dashboard, capable of addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution simultaneously. The tension, however, has been heightened: AI is currently driving a significant surge in energy demand, contributing to continued fossil fuel reliance, even as it holds potential to discover new materials for solar energy and optimize carbon capture (Geoffrey Hinton, Nobel laureate and Terrence Sejnowski, UC San Diego). As algorithmic systems take on greater roles in infrastructure, professional accountability must not be displaced by what Marsh called a Black Box of liability (Alastair Marsh, EPFL).

“Without active intervention, AI will become the biggest de-equalizer. Middle managers are increasingly targeted for elimination, and these positions constitute the middle class upon which our societal structure is built.”

— Ricky Li, World Economic Forum



Why Geneva? Why the United Nations?

- Geneva hosts the international governance architecture most relevant to AI: ITU, WTO, WHO, WIPO, and the UN Human Rights system all have a direct stake in how AI is regulated, and none can act alone.
- The United Nations is uniquely placed to convene diverse sectors of society and examine AI governance from all regions of the world—ensuring the global South is a shaper, not merely a consumer, of AI.
- Sejnowski urged the UN to leverage its unique asset—over 80 years of historical, geospatial, and social data—by developing specialized large language models trained on UN datasets and deployed against concrete global challenges, from malaria to climate change.
- While particular dimensions of AI governance—standards, trade, intellectual property—have received fragmented attention, a coherent, multidimensional UN approach to AI for social development remains critically underdeveloped.
- UNRISD's new AI for Equity and Inclusion (AEI) programme will position the Institute at the forefront of human-centred AI governance, ensuring that social equity, inclusion and justice are central to AI development thinking, policy and practice.

“The shift from ‘irreducibly human’ to ‘specifically human’ in creation takes cultural policy out of an unwinnable competition with AI systems, and back into the older task of practicing what is human rather than defining it. That practice is what gives cultural labour its public value.”

— Pascal Montjovent, Cinematographer & Head of Pedagogical Innovation, Geneva School of Digital Arts



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In education, AI-induced cognitive atrophy—the tendency to accept AI outputs uncritically, eroding human judgment and critical processing—is emerging as a significant concern, documented in recent research including MIT Media Lab, for example. The governing principle applies broadly: before exposing any learner to AI-mediated education, ask who wins, who benefits, and who loses.”

— Juliette Torabian,
University of Lausanne



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Cultural data, indigenous knowledge, and creative outputs are being scraped—and creators are being charged to have access to what they have actually given inputs into. We call this Data Colonialism.”

— Unathi Lutshaba,
South African Cultural
Observatory



In education, AI-induced cognitive atrophy—the tendency to accept AI outputs uncritically, eroding human judgment and critical processing—is emerging as a significant concern, documented in recent research from MIT and Wharton. The governing principle applies broadly: before exposing any learner to AI-mediated education, ask who wins, who benefits, and who loses (Juliette Torabian, Geneva School of Diplomacy).

What new initiatives are emerging from the experts?

Across sessions, a convergence emerged: the challenge is not whether to govern AI, but how to build governance that is coordinated, adaptive, and values-driven. Specific recommendations pointed in several directions.

On regulatory design: Caitlin Kraft-Buchman (Women at the Table) and Isabel Ebert (OHCHR B-Tech Project) emphasized that effective governance requires not only regulation but institutional alignment and economic incentives that shape behaviour in practice, particularly to address inequalities already visible in current systems. Guppeum Han (OHCHR B-Tech Project) called for human rights due diligence across the full life cycle of AI products in education, with public procurement used as a lever to require companies to meet rights-based standards. Janice Robinson (International Human Rights Consortium) called for governance rooted at the grassroots level, inclusive of those most affected, while acknowledging the pacing problem: democratic processes move considerably slower than technological change.

On intergovernmental cooperation: Jun Yang (Canadian Academy of Engineering) argued that the United States and China bear a particular responsibility to align on AI governance standards, given their respective dominance in computational power and industrial data. Terrence Sejnowski (UC San Diego) cautioned that current large language models inherit the biases embedded in the world’s existing knowledge base, lacking the cultural feedback mechanisms through which humans learn what is acceptable and what is not. This makes the curation and governance of training data—including the UN’s own institutional datasets—a matter of values, not only of technical performance.

On educational institutions: The central question has shifted from whether AI belongs on campus to how deliberately it is governed. This means moving beyond policing academic integrity toward redesigning assessment itself—reintroducing oral examinations and process-based grading that AI cannot simply replicate—and treating AI literacy as a core academic competency rather than a supplementary skill (Ahmad Ezzeddine, University of Washington).

How can multistakeholder action advance AI for equity and inclusion?

Whatever the policy-making context, the capacity of actors across society—civil society organizations, researchers, governments, and the private sector—to organize collectively to influence AI governance processes remains crucial (Ekkehard Ernst, ILO, Ya-Qin Zhang, Tsinghua University and Boyang Xue, WEF). The following dimensions were emphasized during the conference presentations and discussions:

- the need for effective and legitimate intermediary organizations, capable of representing the interests of those most affected by AI—particularly communities in the global South, women, workers, and marginalized groups—in governance processes at the local, national, and international levels (Pascal Montjovent, Geneva School of Digital Arts and Annie Hartley, Laboratory for Intelligent Global Health and Humanitarian Response Technologies);
- the importance of skills, standards, and policy and governance solutions as the foundations for an Intelligent Society that works for everyone, everywhere, ensuring that digital transformation does not widen existing divides (Nur Sulyna Abdullah, ITU);
- the need for cross-sectoral alliances among civil society actors, research institutions, and intergovernmental bodies, to build governance frameworks that are both technically competent and socially accountable (Ilcheong Yi, Mariana Balboni, and Yuyu Chen, UNRISD and Raul Ruggia-Frick, ISSA);
- the importance of grassroots inclusion in AI governance design: democratic processes must catch up to technological change, and communities most affected by AI must be placed at the centre of deliberation, not consulted after decisions are made (John Francis Leader, EFPA).

The internal governance of AI systems embedded in social services—healthcare, education, social protection—must also be subject to democratic oversight and human rights accountability (Magdalena Sepulveda, UNRISD and Yale Li, Melan Xu, Yuan Chi, WDTA).

What happens next?

The research findings and recommendations presented at the conference are being compiled by UNRISD and will serve as a foundation for future research on the social dimensions of digital technologies and AI. Presentations and recordings of each session can be found at www.unrisd.org/dwc2026. Selected presentations may also be further developed for publication in other formats, subject to the availability of resources and the decisions of the respective authors.

In closing, Ilcheong Yi, Head of Partnerships and Senior Research Coordinator of UNRISD, announced the Institute's plan to establish a new programme tentatively titled AI for Equity and Inclusion (AEI), dedicated to advancing socially just, inclusive, and development-oriented pathways for artificial intelligence, and to ensuring that the United Nations system remains at the forefront of human-centred AI governance.

Conference findings are expected to be presented at various regional and global events,

including the 3rd Virtual Worlds Day and AI for Good Summit. The findings are also being used as input for United Nations processes on AI governance and the broader post-SDG development agenda.

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AI for all—where the benefits of artificial intelligence are shared broadly across society, enhancing opportunity and quality of life.

Building on this vision, Korea is exploring concrete avenues for cooperation, with the realization of a AI Universal Basic Society as a core vision, both within its own society and in partnership with the international community.”

— H.E. Ambassador SONG Si-jin of the Republic of Korea



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The focus should be on establishing collaborative frameworks on AI, quantum technology and sustainable development, to ensure the benefits of Africa and small countries.”

— H.E. Ambassador Prof. Muhammadou M.O. Kah



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China has successively issued the Global AI Governance Initiative, the AI Capacity-Building Action Plan for Good and for All, and the Global AI Governance Action Plan.

We advocate a people-centered approach and AI for good, emphasize the need to balance development and security, and support building an open, fair and effective governance framework.”

— H.E. Ambassador SHEN Jian of the Republic of China



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About UNRISD

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) is an autonomous research institute within the UN system that undertakes multidisciplinary research and policy analysis on the social dimensions of contemporary development issues. Through our work, we aim to ensure that social equity, inclusion and justice are central to development thinking, policy and practice.

Support for the conference

The event was organized by UNRISD in partnership with the World Digital Technology Academy (WDTA) and held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva.

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