ECOSOC

Topic 2: The question of sustainable development of AI and how to handle its ramifications

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I. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly become a general-purpose technology affecting nearly every Sustainable Development Goal (SDG): public health, education, food security, decent work, industrial productivity, climate adaptation, and governance. Simultaneously, AI systems can deepen inequality, increase surveillance, accelerate misinformation, intensify cyber risks, strain electricity grids, and expand environmental footprints (notably through data centres). This topic asks delegates to balance innovation with safety, human rights, inclusion, and environmental sustainability, while keeping the SDGs and equitable development at the centre of policy design.

In the FloMUN setting, delegates should treat ECOSOC as a forum for **coordinating international cooperation**, **mobilizing capacity-building**, and **recommending multi-stakeholder standards and best practices** that align with existing UN frameworks (rather than inventing "global laws" ECOSOC cannot enforce).

II. Definition of key terms

Artificial Intelligence (AI): Broadly, computational systems that perform tasks associated with human intelligence (e.g., prediction, classification, language generation). International documents often avoid a single fixed definition due to rapid technological change.

Sustainable Development (in the UN context): Development that integrates **economic**, **social**, and **environmental** dimensions, consistent with the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. (Delegates may reference this principle even when focusing on AI governance.)

Responsible / Trustworthy AI: AI that is safe, secure, transparent (as appropriate), accountable, human-rights-respecting, and designed to minimize harm. This concept is central to the UN General Assembly's first AI resolution.

AI Lifecycle Governance: Oversight across design, development, deployment, monitoring, and decommissioning—including data sourcing, model training, evaluation, and real-world impacts.

Digital Divide: Inequality in access to connectivity, devices, affordability, and digital skills. It shapes who benefits from AI—and who bears risks without recourse.

Compute / Data Centres: Physical infrastructure enabling AI training and deployment. Data centre electricity consumption is already substantial and rising quickly with AI-driven demand.

Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD): A process through which states and businesses identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for human rights harms linked to their activities—relevant to AI developers and deployers.

III. General overview

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a general-purpose technology reshaping economies, public services, and environmental planning, making it directly relevant to ECOSOC's development mandate. Properly governed, AI can accelerate SDG progress by improving healthcare delivery, expanding educational access, optimizing agriculture, and strengthening public

administration—especially where human and financial resources are limited. However, these gains are uneven because data, computing infrastructure, and technical expertise are concentrated in a small number of states and private actors, raising the risk that AI will widen global development gaps and increase dependence for lower-capacity countries. At the same time, AI governance intersects with human rights and social stability. AI systems are increasingly used in high-impact areas such as hiring, welfare allocation, border management, policing, and online content moderation, often with limited transparency and accountability. Without safeguards, they can reinforce discrimination, enable intrusive surveillance, and weaken civic space; generative AI also heightens threats to information integrity by lowering the cost of producing persuasive disinformation at scale. These risks have driven UN language stressing "safe, secure, and trustworthy" AI aligned with human rights obligations.

AI's sustainability implications extend to infrastructure and energy. Training and deploying advanced systems relies on power-intensive data centres, increasing electricity demand and raising concerns about emissions and resource use, particularly in states with constrained grids. The International Energy Agency projects that data centre electricity consumption could rise sharply by 2030, with AI a major driver, creating a tension between AI's potential to support climate solutions and its own growing footprint. In response, UN governance efforts have accelerated. The General Assembly adopted its first AI resolution in 2024 and followed with a capacity-building-focused resolution, while subsequent initiatives—including the Pact for the Future and steps toward a scientific panel and global dialogue—reflect a developing consensus: AI's benefits for sustainable development require inclusive capacity-building, evidence-based policy coordination, and safeguards that prevent harm without stifling innovation.

IV. Major parties involved and their views

1) High-capacity AI developers and major economies

United States:

- Often emphasizes innovation leadership, multi-stakeholder approaches, and AI safety framing that is compatible with a fast-moving private sector. Supported the UN's first AI resolution, which stresses safety, trustworthiness, and SDG alignment.
- Likely priorities in debate: interoperable standards, voluntary/industry mechanisms, targeted restrictions on high-risk uses, and capacity-building that does not constrain domestic innovation.

China:

- Commonly stresses state-led governance, stability, and national development strategies. Also supported UN-level language on safe AI and capacity-building.
- Likely priorities: technology transfer framed through sovereignty, strong state role in regulation, and international cooperation that respects domestic governance models.

European Union:

• Generally promotes rights-based regulation, risk classification, and strong safeguards. In UN contexts, often supports human rights language, accountability, transparency, and protections against discrimination.

• Likely priorities: global norms on high-risk AI, auditing and documentation, safety-by-design, and alignment with international human rights law.

2) Developing country coalitions and capacity-focused actors

Group of 77:

• Frequently foregrounds equity: access to compute, skills, infrastructure, and financing—plus protection against digital colonialism (extractive data practices, dependency on foreign platforms). The UN's capacity-building resolution strongly reflects this agenda.

African Union:

• Typically emphasizes digital infrastructure, skills, local innovation ecosystems, and safeguarding against exploitative data practices, while pursuing AI for development in health, agriculture, and public services.

3) UN agencies and international technical bodies

International Telecommunication Union:

• Focuses on connectivity, standards, digital inclusion, and tracking environmental footprints of digitalization. It has warned that data centre electricity consumption has been rising rapidly (2017–2023 growth far outpacing overall electricity growth).

UNESCO:

• Leads global ethics frameworks. Its Recommendation frames AI governance through human dignity, rights, inclusion, and policy action areas (including environment and ecosystems).

UNICEF:

• Highlights child-centred safeguards and policy guidance, including safety-by-design and protection in AI-enabled digital environments.

V. Relevant UN documents and articles

The 1945 United Nations Charter: Establishes ECOSOC's mandate to promote international economic and social cooperation, forming the legal basis for UN coordination on AI as a development issue.

UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/78/265 (2024): The first UNGA resolution on AI, calling for safe, secure, and trustworthy AI systems that support sustainable development and respect human rights.

UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/78/311 (2024): Focuses on international cooperation and capacity-building for AI, emphasizing equitable access to skills, infrastructure, and benefits for developing states.

UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021): Sets global ethical principles and policy guidance for states, including accountability, transparency, non-discrimination, and environmental sustainability.

UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/79/325 (2025): Establishes the framework for an Independent International Scientific Panel on AI and a Global Dialogue on AI Governance to support evidence-based, inclusive multilateral coordination.

VI. Questions to consider

- Should AI be governed through a **new international framework**, or can existing UN principles and human-rights obligations provide sufficient guidance for responsible AI development and deployment?
- How can the international community prevent a "two-tier AI world," where only a few states and companies control **data, compute, and talent**, while others become dependent technology consumers?
- What accountability mechanisms should exist when AI systems cause harm in high-impact areas such as **public services, policing, border management, healthcare, or welfare distribution** (e.g., audits, appeals processes, liability standards)?
- Should there be limits or safeguards on **high-risk AI uses**, such as biometric surveillance, predictive policing, or automated decision-making that significantly affects individuals' rights and opportunities?
- How can states balance **innovation and economic growth** with protections for privacy, non-discrimination, and freedom of expression in the digital sphere?
- What measures can reduce AI's environmental footprint, such as **energy-efficiency standards, emissions reporting, renewable procurement, or data-centre sustainability requirements**, without restricting development opportunities for lower-capacity states?
- How should capacity-building be structured so that developing countries gain **long-term domestic expertise** (education, research ecosystems, regulatory capacity) rather than only short-term technical assistance?

VII. Conclusion

AI is increasingly shaping development outcomes by influencing growth, public services, and access to opportunity, yet it also introduces serious risks related to inequality, human rights, information integrity, and environmental strain. While existing UN commitments already emphasize safe, secure, and trustworthy AI, effective governance will require stronger international coordination, meaningful capacity-building, and practical accountability mechanisms that apply across the AI lifecycle. ECOSOC can play a central role by aligning AI policy with the SDGs, supporting inclusive development pathways, and encouraging cooperative frameworks that enable innovation while preventing harm.

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