

8th Regional Symposium on Effective Governance and AI Transformation for the 2030 Agenda: Fostering Transformative Actions for Innovating Public Services

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A few weeks after the Summit of the Future, **the 8th Regional Symposium on Effective Governance and AI Transformation for the 2030 Agenda: Fostering Transformative Actions for Innovating Public Services** took place from 30 October to 1 November 2024. The Symposium was organized by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government (DPIDG) through its Project Office on Governance (UNPOG), in collaboration with the Ministry of the Interior and Safety (MOIS) of the Government of the Republic of Korea and Incheon Metropolitan City.

The Symposium had significant momentum, attracting 1563 participants, with 379 attending in-person and 650 joining virtually. The recorded video has been watched 534 times to date.

The event featured a High-level Opening Session, a Setting-the-Scene session, four thematic sessions, a special session, a youth session, learning labs, and a Local Governance and Partnerships Forum.

These sessions paid particular attention to the integration of AI technologies in government operations to improve public service delivery and foster innovation in public services.

In general, the Symposium explored the powerful connections between governance, artificial intelligence, digital inclusion, and sustainable development to inspire innovation and change.

The core messages conveyed during the 8th Regional Symposium include:

- Artificial Intelligence (AI) is seen as having the potential to transform government functions and accelerate progress toward the SDGs but that greatly depends on **effective, accountable and inclusive governance framework for AI**, closing the digital divide and increasing access and affordability to AI technology.
- AI governance requires **global and regional cooperation** and **public-private partnership (PPP)** to establish policies that prioritize competitiveness and trustworthy use of AI.
- Governments should work towards providing seamless, user-friendly digital services at national and local level with **high levels of engagement** with youth, women and girls, older persons, persons with disabilities, and those living in remote areas with little or no access to the internet.
- Countries should adopt a **responsible and ethical approach** to the use of AI. This includes ensuring that AI applications respect human rights and are used for the common good with **comprehensive Regulatory Framework**.

Opening Session

1. AI and digital technologies have the potential to revolutionize public service delivery, decision-making, citizen engagement and sustainable development.
2. With only 17% of SDG targets on track, bridging the digital divide is crucial. Unified action and digital innovation are also essential to tackling cross-border challenges such as climate change, pandemics, bio-diversity loss and geo-political tensions.
3. AI offers powerful tools for collecting and analyzing data, improving public service efficiency, and delivering personalized services, fostering greater inclusion, empowerment, and prosperity. Uneven access to AI resources only widens existing inequalities.
4. The fact that 85% of UN member states lack AI policies underlines the need for robust national regulations and institutions. Establishing robust data governance is key for AI adoption in developing countries to address ethical concerns, data privacy, and algorithmic biases, while ensuring accessibility.
5. The Papua New Guinea (PNG) government has embraced digital transformation as a critical component of its development agenda and is an example of how Asia-Pacific's commitment to the development and use of AI can support SDG implementation.

Setting the Scene: Artificial Intelligence and the SDGs - Paving the Way for Accelerating Action

1. AI deployment can transform sectors such as health, energy, food security, transportation and public-private partnerships, impacting the way services are delivered, creating employment, economic growth and business opportunity.
2. Transitioning from a reactive to a proactive government approach, aided by AI, is seen as a valuable return on investment, appreciated by stakeholders when done within a secure regulatory and policy framework.
3. A lack of cohesive digital policy, stemming from a disconnect between AI governance and broader e-governance frameworks, is identified as a significant challenge.
4. Establishing trust-based governance frameworks is crucial to protecting human rights.
5. Despite positive trends in Asia and the Pacific Region, almost 28% of the population lacks internet access, primarily in rural and underserved areas.
6. Human oversight remains vital to ensure that AI decisions align with ethical standards and societal values, thereby reinforcing trust and accountability in digital governance.
7. The Global Digital Compact emphasizes the importance of strengthening digital cooperation globally. This initiative aims to close the digital divide by investing in infrastructure and promoting universal digital literacy.

Thematic Session 1. Revolutionizing Public Administration: AI-Driven Innovation and Transformation

1. Open-source AI holds promise for public administration, enabling transparency and customization. Open-source AI can enhance national sovereignty. However, challenges include potential misuse by malicious actors and data quality concerns, highlighting the need for robust security measures.

2. Generative AI introduces new challenges for transparency and accountability, such as identifying AI-generated content and preventing misinformation, which requires new techniques, training, continuous monitoring, and safeguards.
3. AI decision-making in public administration must be accountable and transparent and clearly address bias in data and ensure clarity in cause-and-effect relationships in AI systems.
4. AI should be viewed as a tool that requires a solid legal foundation to avoid rights violations. As AI systems process large amounts of data, including personal information, robust data protection measures must be implemented to address cybersecurity threats.
5. For effective AI integration, enhancing workforce literacy regarding AI tools is essential. This includes training public service employees to utilize AI effectively rather than just relying on global AI models.

Thematic Session 2. Digital Inclusion and AI: Fostering Equitable Innovation and Inclusive Governance

1. Approximately 2.6 billion people worldwide are still offline. Strategies are needed to expand connectivity, especially for marginalized communities. It is also necessary to increase awareness about gender-related issues in AI. Implementing monitoring processes to assess AI's impact will help build trust among citizens.
2. AI has multiple applications that require careful consideration of building blocks, including standardization, policy development, and regulatory frameworks. The focus is not just on governments as regulators of AI but also as users and sometimes developers. AI is increasingly used to engage citizens, improve service quality, and optimize resource allocation.
3. While AI creates demand for roles like AI specialists and data analysts, it may displace low-income clerical jobs. There is a pressing need for digital skills training, with a significant portion of the workforce expected to use generative AI in their daily tasks. However, challenges include limited access to training and high cost of AI solutions, and limited infrastructure.
4. Incorporating diverse languages and dialects into AI tools ensures accessibility for non-English speakers, as shown by initiatives like chatbots that support Filipino languages. Engaging local communities in the design process will address their specific needs and challenges.
5. Establishing platforms for knowledge sharing among countries can facilitate the exchange of successful strategies, frameworks, and lessons learned in AI implementation.

Thematic Session 3. Resilient Communities: AI for Early Warning Systems and Resilience

1. AI is viewed as an agent of change with the potential to transform disaster resilience by connecting data, insights, and human expertise in ways that empower communities, reduce risk, and improve overall readiness for future challenges.
2. AI-driven early warning systems (EWS) with clear accountability structures must be designed to benefit all communities, especially marginalized groups, by addressing data and algorithm biases to ensure accuracy and focus on disaster risk management and reduction.
3. AI can optimize how alerts are disseminated in multiple languages to facilitate actionable warnings. Human oversight and validation of AI-driven alerts are necessary to maintain trust.

Early warnings should no longer be one-time alerts but part of a timely narrative that adapts as new data and information becomes available. They also need to incorporate local knowledge and context to win trust and ensure adoption at community level.

4. Ensuring data integrity and accessibility within community and agency frameworks will improve decision-making and allow for timely responses.

Thematic Session 4. AI Ethics: Responsible Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Public Sector

1. Current AI systems often function as "black box" models, creating challenges in transparency and trust in AI outcomes. At the same time, rising costs associated with advanced AI and machine learning development were noted, with a call for a balance between innovation and accessibility.
2. AI development should prioritize eliminating bias. There's a need to ensure AI applications are inclusive and fair.
3. UNESCO's AI ethics principles promote transparency, fairness, and accountability in AI development and usage. These principles serve as a foundation for public sector AI policies to align with human rights.
4. The choices made in research, development, funding, and deployment of AI systems today directly influence whether AI will drive positive societal change. There is an emphasis on ensuring that these systems serve inclusivity and sustainability.
5. Given the rapid evolution of AI technologies, the Australian government ensures that AI policies are integrated within existing privacy, security, and environmental regulations to avoid redundant frameworks.

Special Session. Unveiling Insights: The UN E-Government Survey 2024: Asia and Pacific trends and key findings

1. Asia's Leadership in Digital Transformation: Asia is rapidly advancing in digital transformation, positioning itself to potentially become a global leader by 2030, outperforming other regions in the implementation of digital governance and innovative technologies.
2. Harnessing Digital Transformation for SDGs: Digital transformation in Asia can play a crucial role in accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Investments in Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI), including AI, are essential to drive sustainable development.
3. There is a risk of AI contributing to job losses. Policymakers must proactively address these concerns by promoting responsible AI use, providing re-skilling programs, and creating regulatory frameworks that protect workers' rights while fostering innovation.
4. The concept of "digital inclusion by design," as highlighted in the United Nations E-Government Survey 2024, emphasizes the need to embed inclusivity in all digital initiatives from the outset.
5. Public-Private Partnerships are crucial for driving digital transformation projects. Countries should encourage collaborations between governments and private sector to execute large-scale, cross-border digital infrastructure projects and improved service delivery.
6. Countries should set joint clear performance indicators and regularly assess the effectiveness of AI/digital government programs through regular monitoring and evaluation. Robust legal and

regulatory frameworks are needed to guarantee cybersecurity, safeguard digital assets and personal information. Asian countries should also commit to using AI applications for the common good, respecting human rights and pledge not to use AI for surveillance of the population or for automated weapons.

Local Governance and Partnership Forum: Innovative Local Governance through Smart Cities: Leveraging AI for Public Services through a Citizen-centered Approach

1. Broaden the policy framework to assess local online service governance, focusing on elements like e-government infrastructure, citizen accessibility, and standards across government units to better measure online services at the local level.
2. City governments are utilizing digital technologies such as AI, big data, and digital twins to build smart cities to provide more convenient and efficient public services in areas such as disaster preparedness and response, transportation, welfare and tourism.
3. The adoption of new technologies in the public sector remains very slow. Promises around AI mean little without reliable digital infrastructure like data centers and secure connectivity.
4. AI tools can assist in modeling urban growth and environmental impacts, helping city planners design more resilient urban spaces that accommodate changing demographics and climate challenges.

Youth Session: Shaping a Future of AI for and by the Youth

1. Youth perspectives are crucial for enhancing transparent, accountable and inclusive AI policy process and fostering innovative solutions to complex challenges.
2. The AI Transformation era necessitates young people to develop AI skills to succeed in the evolving job market. Integrating AI literacy into education empowers youth with the knowledge to navigate and influence a technology-driven future.

Learning Lab: Strategic Foresight and AI: Shaping Forward-looking Policies

1. Strategic foresight is needed in the domain of AI due to the unpredictable nature of advances in AI. It involves an approach to predicting and shaping future developments by leveraging collective intelligence to navigate AI's uncertain impacts on society.
2. Employing strategic foresight in AI involves systematic exploration of future possibilities through trend analysis, informed forecasting, and consideration of diverse outcomes. This enables stakeholders to make informed decisions today that will shape the future trajectory of AI development.

Key Insights for AI in the Public Sector

1. Global Cooperation and Collaborative Action

- **Urgent Need for Collaborative Action and Public-Private Partnerships:** Emphasizes bridging the SDG gap by enhancing collaboration between developed and developing

nations under the framework of the Global Digital Compact and promoting the Public-Private Partnerships for AI transformation in the public sector.

- **Supporting Innovation and Tech Ecosystems:** Asian countries should offer targeted research and development funding, incentives for tech startups, and innovation hubs to stimulate economic diversification and a vibrant tech ecosystem.

2. AI Safety, Ethics, Governance

- **Strong Guardrails for Safe AI Use:** Governments are developing multiple policy responses to guarantee that AI in the public sector is used in a safe, secure and trustworthy manner.
- **Implementing Ethical Technology Governance:** Establishing strong frameworks for ethical technology governance is vital to protect human rights and ensure responsible use of cutting-edge technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI).
- **Transparent and Accountable AI Systems:** Transparent and accountable AI systems, along with impact monitoring system, will increase public trust in government.

3. Digital Inclusion by Design

- **Inclusive Governance and Design:** Engaging stakeholders across the AI lifecycle—civil servants, high officials, end-users, providers, and civil society—is critical for inclusiveness and impact.
- **Addressing the Digital Divide:** Bridging this digital divide is essential for equitable access to digital public services.

4. AI Transformation for Public Sector Innovation

- **AI for Improved Public Services:** AI can transform citizen-government interactions, enhance analytical capabilities, and boost e-Government efficiency, particularly in social welfare, healthcare, and public transport.
- **Data Quality for AI Success:** High-quality, relevant data is essential for AI systems to achieve their intended purpose, alongside robust data protection to counter cybersecurity threats.

5. AI Capacity Development and Digital Infrastructure

- **Developing AI Skills and Talent:** Building an AI-competent public workforce and investing in AI talent will help reduce digital divides and foster autonomy.
- **Investing in Digital Infrastructure and Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI):** Prioritizing investments in digital infrastructure and STI is crucial for closing the digital divide.