AI, Equity, and Global Development
Emerging Ethical Concerns

Differential access to technology is already used by economists, governments, and NGOs as a metric to assess the relative level of development of different countries. Terms like"developed" and "developing" countries are used to distinguish states in part by their differential access to industrial technology and resources.[1] Unequal access results in developed countries having more economic and political power. As Artificial Intelligence (AI) is adopted by wealthy countries more efficiently and rapidly than developing ones, existing imbalances in global access to resources may intensify, further disadvantaging developing countries. If current trends continue, the economic benefits to countries that are adopting AI will come fast, potentially widening the gap in resources and economic, military and other capabilities between the developed and developing world. In so doing, AI-driven advances risk destabilizing global order as we know it.

Global wealth is currently extremely unequally concentrated. The economic and military implementation of AI is likely to benefit already wealthy countries more than those in the developing world. Developed and developing economies don't have the same capacity to integrate AI. AI may impact up to 60% of jobs in a developed economy, yet find traction in as little as 26% of jobs in emerging economies.[2] Because the benefits of AI may bring significant increases in GDP and economic efficiency, economies able to integrate AI are predicted to expand at a rate faster than those that cannot.[3] This has the potential to widen the divide between rich and poor economies. Historically, the global south has been particularly disadvantaged in times of technological advancement, facing barriers such as limited access to education, infrastructure, and investment opportunities. This trend perpetuates cycles of poverty, inequality, corruption and underdevelopment that continue to hinder the region's economies today.[4]

AI does not just affect relations between economies, it can unsettle countries internally. As companies in wealthy countries have outsourced manual and low-skilled jobs to developing countries, economic dependency on these jobs has grown. Much of the developing world relies on these outsourced manufacturing jobs for economic, and therefore political, stability. These jobs may be at high risk of AI automation in the coming years, presenting concerns for the stability of developing countries. A study by the International Labour Organization indicated that up to 56% of jobs in Southeast Asia's five major economies could be at risk of such automation.[5] One method of preventing economic and political destabilization is the implementation of better and more comprehensive regulation of AI technology. However, economically unstable countries with weak or corrupt governments are less able to pass effective regulatory legislation.[6] Additionally, poorer countries have more motivation to cut legal and regulatory corners in the name of competition and increasing GDP. Mitigating AI's harms through legislation will prove much harder to do in less developed social, economic and legal contexts relative to the developed world.

While its risks to the achievement of global equality are numerous, AI, properly managed, could also end up being a democratizing tool used to benefit the developing world. The technology may make medical, educational, and economic resources more accessible to poorer nations.[7] While the implementation of AI presents an extensive set of ethical and pragmatic challenges, if incorporated responsibly it could reduce costs and increase the efficiency of healthcare and education systems globally. With proper infrastructure, and regulation, AI implementation may not lead to economic and social catastrophe, but rather could ensure significant growth of and in the developing world. What this means, however, is that the development of technological and

legal infrastructure is a necessary first step in successful AI implementation. Such a step is, of course, challenging for developing countries. Funding for technological infrastructure is hard to acquire. Just and coherent legal infrastructure is less accessible and more difficult to develop in politically unstable and developing countries. Developed states are spending billions of dollars to develop legal and technological AI infrastructure, an unaffordable toll for much of the developing world.[8] The primary ethical burden then falls first and foremost on the shoulders of nations with means.

Historically, digital technology has tended to become concentrated in the developed world before diffusing gradually into developing countries. For AI, however, this trickle-down system contains many risks. The potential of AI to exacerbate already incredibly large global economic and infrastructural gaps requires that it be managed with a high degree of care. In cases like the roll-out of the internet, technology and infrastructure was implemented in the developing world inadequately and hastily in order to boost competitiveness with negative repercussions that persist today. Developing countries like India are currently working to mend internet infrastructure as a result of its hasty installation decades prior.[9] AI is in the process of being implemented very quickly in the developed world. We should not force a mad dash to integrate it in the developing world, without due regard to its potential harms. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure when it comes to ensuring that AI is integrated responsibly. With some countries already shifting from human to AI labour, reliance on the technology, along with global wealth inequality, is growing. Returning to a pre-AI age is becoming less and less conceivable. It is critical that there be ethical dialogue to ensure AI is used equitably and justly. I echo Paula Goldman, Chief Ethical and Humane Use Officer at software company Salesforce

Inc. in saying that it is important that "Trust become as central to the AI conversation as the technology itself."[10] It is the responsibility of the developed world, collectively and in dialogue with the nations of the developing world, to invest in the required infrastructure, legislation, and economic protections needed if we are to avoid creating an AI-driven dystopia.

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