The 10th session of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

Item 5 of the Provisional Agenda
Implementation of the mandate and programme of work –
Focused thematic discussion and interactive dialogue
Palais des Nations, Room XXI, Geneva

Artificial intelligence, cultural rights and right to development

Tuesday 29 October 2024, 15h to 16h30

Statement by Mr. Mehdi Snene,
Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology

Excellencies, distinguished ambassadors, and esteemed colleagues,

Please allow me to express our gratitude and appreciation for extending the invitation to the office of SG's Envoy on Technology.

I would like to start with a statistic that reveals a striking imbalance in our digital world: English alone accounts for over 50% of all content on the internet. Seven additional languages make up another 30%. But for over 30 other languages— each spoken by millions worldwide— their combined presence is between 0.2% and 2%. Beyond these, thousands of languages barely register at all, often representing less than 0.1% of content. With the expected surge of the internet content produced and generated by the AI, which is expected to reach 80% of the global content, we may face a stronger gap given that most usage of GenAI is done in English.

As we enter the AI age, this imbalance doesn't just persist—it deepens. AI models are trained on the data we feed them, so they replicate and amplify these biases. Voices and perspectives most represented online continue to dominate in AI, while others risk being sidelined or erased. To better understand the scope of this issue, let us examine how these dynamics unfold across three key areas: **building AI systems, exploiting AI systems, and using AI systems.**

AI systems are built on vast datasets, most of which reflect existing biases in online content. This creates significant risks to cultural rights, as certain languages and perspectives are amplified while others are neglected.

A key risk is linguistic marginalization: AI often performs poorly in underrepresented languages, limiting speakers' access to information and self-expression in their native languages, thereby undermining their cultural rights.

Another concern is the loss of cultural autonomy. Most AI development occurs in high-income countries, with little input from local communities, meaning these systems often reflect external values. For example, AI-powered education tools may impose Western norms on rural communities, conflicting with local traditions.

Lastly, there is AI-driven cultural homogenization. As dominant cultural norms are embedded in AI, minority cultures risk being overshadowed, replaced by a globalized digital culture that disregards their right to preserve unique identities and traditions. We face what some call **digital colonization and probably soon a form of AI colonization.**
After AI systems are built, they are often exploited to generate or commodify cultural heritage, frequently without compensation or acknowledgment to the communities that originated these traditions. This raise concerns around cultural appropriation, economic exclusion, and cultural piracy.

A clear example of this risk can be seen **in biopiracy** in traditional medicine. When AI is used for evidence extraction, it can accelerate the commodification of Indigenous knowledge, exploiting traditional remedies for commercial gain without the originating communities' consent or benefit. This mirrors the risks AI poses to cultural expressions in art, music, and language, where heritage is repurposed for profit without any benefits to its rightful owners.

Cultural appropriation and economic exclusion are major concerns. AI art generators, for instance, can recreate Indigenous motifs without permission, selling these designs commercially with no benefit to the originating communities. This commodifies cultural heritage and denies communities the right to profit from their knowledge.

The loss of economic benefits is equally troubling. AI can produce art, music, and language inspired by specific traditions, yet profits rarely flow back to the communities. For example, AI music platforms might popularize tracks inspired by traditional African sounds, but revenue seldom reaches those who cultivated these traditions, limiting their economic opportunities and right to development.

Finally, insufficient intellectual property protections mean communities often lack the legal means to prevent AI from using their cultural expressions, turning their heritage into commodities without control or benefit.

At the end of the AI production value chain, the use, or misuse, and missed use of AI systems raise further issues concerning privacy, representation, and self-determination.

One critical issue is representation in policy and decision-making. Many low-income communities have limited influence over how AI is integrated into public services, from healthcare to law enforcement. This lack of representation often means that AI systems do not align with local values, reinforcing power imbalances rather than addressing them. Without diverse voices guiding AI’s deployment, technology risks marginalizing communities instead of empowering them. Furthermore, when AI is misused, it may impose decisions that conflict with community interests, while missed use—when AI’s potential to meet local needs is overlooked—leaves critical gaps unaddressed.

Another significant area of concern is the ethical and personal risk associated with data permanence in AI. Once personal data is used to train an AI system, individuals have no option to opt out, correct misrepresentations, or delete their data. The data, once incorporated into an AI model, cannot be rolled back, meaning that all future iterations of that model will contain the same information. This lack of control over personal data creates ongoing privacy and ethical risks, as individuals cannot revise or remove data that may lead to biased, harmful, or inaccurate outcomes for them or their communities.

Digital and economic exclusion due to inadequate infrastructure also leaves many communities unable to benefit from AI technologies. Although AI use is expanding globally,

less than 1% of AI traffic originates from low-income regions. This divide restricts access to AI's benefits, creating economic and informational disadvantages and infringing on the right to development. Missed use of AI in these areas fails to meet local needs, while misuse leads to reliance on inappropriate applications that may not serve community interests.

These risks make it clear that while AI holds vast potential, it must be developed and deployed with a profound sense of responsibility to prevent deepening inequalities. In conclusion, as emphasized in the recent report by the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Body on AI, a global governance mechanism is urgently needed. Such a framework would help prevent the amplification of existing inequalities and ensure that the right to development is upheld for every individual and community. Establishing these governance standards is essential if we are to create an AI-driven future that is inclusive, equitable, and respectful of cultural and developmental rights.

Thank you.