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Indigenous Peoples and AI: Defending rights, shaping futures

Statement by the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, Albert K. Barume

Today, on the eve of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, we celebrate the enduring strength, wisdom, and cultural richness of Indigenous Peoples around the world. This year's theme, *"Indigenous Peoples and AI: Defending Rights, Shaping Futures,"* invites us to reflect on the profound implications of these technologies for Indigenous Peoples' rights, identities, and futures.

AI is evolving rapidly and holds the potential to reshape societies. While it offers opportunities for innovation and progress, it also poses significant risks—especially for Indigenous Peoples, whose voices, knowledge systems, and data are often excluded from the design, development, and governance of these technologies.

AI systems rely heavily on existing datasets, many of which reflect historical biases that have excluded, erased, stereotyped, or invalidated Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge.[1] These narratives—often embedded in laws and policies—have long been used to dispossess Indigenous Peoples of their lands, self-determination, and cultural heritage.

It is therefore essential that Indigenous Peoples' cosmovision, diversity, and rights are meaningfully integrated into the development of AI. Their participation must be ensured at every stage: from data collection and model training to storage, dissemination, analysis, and interpretation. Without this, AI risks becoming a tool of further exclusion and exploitation—through biased algorithms, cultural and intellectual property appropriation, and misuse of Indigenous Peoples' data.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms, in articles 31 and 32, the rights of Indigenous Peoples to maintain, control, protect, and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and intellectual property, including data related to their lands and resources.

[1] https://journals.law.harvard.edu/crcl/wp-content/uploads/sites/80/2023/01/ANewAgeIndigenousInstrument.pdf

Indigenous Peoples have long been stewards of knowledge, biodiversity, and sustainable living. Their scientific and technical expertise offers invaluable insights into ethical and inclusive approaches to technology. Yet, without their meaningful participation, AI systems risk perpetuating historical injustices and deepening the violation of their rights.

On this important day, I call on States, technology developers, academic institutions, and international organizations to work collaboratively with Indigenous Peoples to identify and support their aspirations and objectives in the development and use of AI. This includes using AI to demarcate and register lands, territories, and resources, and to safeguard endangered languages and cultural heritage. Developers must obtain the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples when using data related to their identity, history, cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and expressions.

It is also vital to empower Indigenous youth with the skills and opportunities needed to harness AI for the benefit of their communities.

Indigenous Peoples must be able to shape their own digital futures, in line with their right to self-determination. Let us seize this moment not only to safeguard their rights in the digital age, but to promote AI as a tool for justice, equity, and cultural survival. In this regard, the meaningful participation of Indigenous women and youth is especially essential.

Indigenous Peoples must be co-creators of their digital world—grounded in dignity, diversity, and respect.

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