

Co-Design Artificial Intelligence (AI) with Communities: Feeding Local Languages, Oral Traditions and Ethics into AI Models

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Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper discusses how AI can be effectively governed through its co-design with communities. The paper observes that while AI has the potential to empower communities, it also creates risks and challenges that undermine their well-being. In particular, the paper notes that AI technologies can fuel injustices, inequalities and human rights violations against indigenous and local communities. It discusses how AI is impacting indigenous and local communities. Due to its potential to undermine the well-being of communities, the paper observes that effective AI governance is crucial towards protecting these vulnerable populations. In particular, the paper notes that co-design of AI with indigenous and local communities is necessary towards equity, inclusivity, justice, and human rights. The paper discusses how this ideal can be attained by feeding local languages, oral traditions and ethics into AI models.

1.0 Introduction

Appropriate governance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is key towards ensuring that the benefits of this powerful technology can be enjoyed by all nations, communities and people while minimizing its risks and challenges. It has been observed that effective, appropriate and ethical AI governance is vital in broadening access to AI for governments, industry, and civil society especially for developing countries while also ensuring that the adoption of AI responds to differing AI needs among regions, countries, communities and individuals¹. AI governance in general covers processes, standards, rules and regulations that help to ensure that AI systems are safe, inclusive, appropriate and ethical². AI governance has also been described as a framework of policies, regulations, and ethical guidelines that oversee the design, development and deployment of AI technologies across all sectors³. Through appropriate AI governance, it is possible to direct AI research, design, development and adoption towards ensuring safety, fairness and respect for human rights⁴.

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¹ Network architecture for global AI policy., Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/network-architecture-for-global-ai-policy/> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

² What is AI Governance?., Available at <https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/ai-governance> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'AI Governance' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/query-list/a/ai-governance> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

⁴ What is AI Governance?., Op Cit

AI governance is therefore a fundamental agenda towards ensuring that research, development and application of AI ensures safety, ethics, inclusivity, fairness and respect for human rights. Through appropriate and effective governance, it is possible to harness the positive benefits of AI in education, transportation, finance, data storage, communications, healthcare, environmental governance and law enforcement among other areas towards Sustainable Development⁵. On the other hand, AI governance safeguards against potential risks and challenges including algorithmic biases, digital colonialism, inadequate transparency and accountability, breach of data sovereignty, digital divides, errors and the potential for human right violations⁶.

Ensuring effective AI governance however remains a global challenge. For instance, the United Nations observes that the explosive growth and adoption of AI tools around the world is yet to be matched by effective, internationally agreed rules, policies and frameworks on how this powerful technology is to be governed⁷. Consequently, strengthening AI governance is key towards the safe, ethical, and inclusive development and adoption of AI for the benefit of all nations, communities and individuals.

This paper discusses how AI can be effectively governed through its co-design with communities. The paper observes that while AI has the potential to empower communities, it also creates risks and challenges that undermine their well-being. In particular, the paper notes that AI technologies can fuel injustices, inequalities and human rights violations against indigenous and local communities. It discusses how AI is impacting indigenous and local communities. Due to its potential to undermine the well-being of communities, the paper observes that effective AI governance is crucial towards protecting these vulnerable populations. In particular, the paper notes that co-design of AI with indigenous and local communities is necessary towards equity, inclusivity, justice, and human rights. The paper discusses how this ideal can be attained by feeding local languages, oral traditions and ethics into AI models.

2.0 Artificial Intelligence and Communities: Opportunities, Risks and Challenges

The emergence of AI provides tools and solutions that can empower indigenous and local communities. For example, it has been observed that AI tools are supporting language revitalization⁸. AI tools are aiding in the documentation and preservation of endangered indigenous and local languages thus ensuring their availability for the benefit of both present and

⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 'Governing with Artificial Intelligence' Available at https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/governing-with-artificial-intelligence_398fa287.html (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

⁶ Ibid

⁷ United Nations., 'UN moves to close dangerous void in AI governance' Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/09/1165898> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

⁸ United Nations., 'Ensuring Indigenous Peoples' rights in the age of AI' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/desa/ensuring-indigenous-peoples%E2%80%99rights-age-ai> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

future generations⁹. Further, it has been observed that AI technologies can support cultural preservation for the benefit of indigenous and local communities including through digitizing oral traditions and indigenous knowledge systems¹⁰. In particular, it has been observed that the use of AI to preserve and transmit indigenous knowledge systems including Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is key towards harnessing the wisdom of indigenous and local communities towards tackling challenges such as biodiversity loss and climate change¹¹.

AI is also improving environmental monitoring enhancing benefits for indigenous and local communities whose identity, culture, well-being and livelihoods are intrinsically linked to their lands and territories. It has been observed that AI tools such as satellite platforms and digital mapping are being utilised alongside cultural practices to track changes in lands and territories belonging to indigenous and local communities towards improving environmental governance¹². AI tools are supporting indigenous and local communities including pastoralist, agro-pastoralist and hunter-gatherer communities in securing rights to land and natural resources by mapping their territories and improving land management and tenure¹³.

AI therefore provides tools and solutions that can empower indigenous and local communities all over the world. However, the widespread adoption and use of AI also creates risks and challenges for indigenous and local communities all over the world. In particular, it has been observed that AI can reinforce harmful biases and discrimination faced by indigenous and local communities¹⁴. For example, it has been observed that facial recognition errors, predictive policing tools that disproportionately target vulnerable and marginalized communities, and healthcare and diagnostic errors are some of the AI biases faced by indigenous and local communities¹⁵. Further, it has been observed that since most AI models are designed in the Global North, their application in the Global South without necessary modifications usually fuels biases and discrimination against indigenous knowledge systems in healthcare, agriculture, and education among other sectors¹⁶.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Indigenous Knowledge Systems and AI., Available at <https://link.springer.com/collections/hjehacfe> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

¹² International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity., 'International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples and the Role of Artificial Intelligence' Available at <https://iifb-indigenous.org/international-day-of-the-worlds-indigenous-peoples-and-the-role-of-artificial-intelligence/> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ United Nations., 'Ensuring Indigenous Peoples' rights in the age of AI' Op Cit

¹⁵ Ofusu-Asare. Y., 'Cognitive imperialism in artificial intelligence: counteracting bias with indigenous epistemologies' Available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00146-024-02065-0> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

¹⁶ How to Break Digital Colonialism in African Software Development., Available at <https://www.ictworks.org/digital-colonialism-african-software-development/#:~:text=Defining%20Digital%20Colonialism%20in%20Software,serve%20its%20communities%20best%20interests> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

Another key risk and challenge that AI presents to communities is the appropriation of indigenous and local data sets and knowledge systems without consent. The phenomenon of digital colonialism is widespread in Africa and the Global South as evidenced by foreign control of digital infrastructure, unequal data flows and asymmetrical power relations¹⁷. It has been observed that digital colonialism mirrors the classic patterns of resource extraction where indigenous and local knowledge is extracted from Africa and the Global South and becomes proprietary algorithms controlled by foreign entities¹⁸. Digital colonialism is manifested by AI's reliance on large datasets, including indigenous knowledge systems, reinforcing colonial patterns of resource extraction and exploitation¹⁹. Digital colonialism impacts communities in Africa and the Global South by undermining their indigenous data sovereignty. The idea of data sovereignty posits that data should be subject to the laws and regulations of its physical location and source²⁰. However, AI tools have often been used to extract data from indigenous peoples and local communities in Africa and the Global usually without their Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) undermining indigenous data sovereignty²¹. AI can therefore violate indigenous data sovereignty by undermining the capacity of indigenous and local communities to control the creation, governance, and use of data relating to their lives, communities, and knowledge systems²². Extraction and commodification of indigenous data without the meaningful involvement of indigenous peoples and local communities therefore fuels digital colonialism while also violating indigenous data sovereignty²³.

In addition, it has been observed that AI can fuel injustices against communities due to its huge demand for resources including water and energy²⁴. For example, huge energy and water

¹⁷ Salami. A.O., 'Artificial intelligence, digital colonialism, and the implications for Africa's future development' Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386431459_Artificial_intelligence_digital_colonialism_and_the_implications_for_Africa's_future_development (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

¹⁸ How Digital Colonialism Threatens Kenya's Silicon Savannah., Available at <https://www.techpolicy.press/how-digital-colonialism-threatens-kenyas-silicon-savannah/> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

¹⁹ Indigenous Knowledge Systems and AI., Op Cit

²⁰ What is Data Sovereignty?., Available at <https://aws.amazon.com/what-is/data-sovereignty/> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

²¹ How AI can adapt to Indigenous knowledge., Available at <https://medium.com/blog/how-ai-can-adapt-to-indigenous-knowledge-2ae3cd442096> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

²² Prehn. J et al., 'Indigenous Data Sovereignty and the Governance of Artificial Intelligence: Toward Equitable Benefit for Indigenous Peoples' Available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14407833261460137> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

²³ Perera. M et al., 'Indigenous peoples and artificial intelligence: A systematic review and future directions' Available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20539517251349170#:~:text=Abstract,Discuss%20Literature%20under%20each%20category> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

²⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'AI has an environmental problem. Here's what the world can do about that.' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/ai-has-environmental-problem-heres-what-world-can-do-about> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

consumption in AI data centres raises sustainability concerns, particularly in regions already facing resource constraints due to climate change²⁵. In addition, AI data centres produce electronic waste which can cause environmental pollution if not well-managed with negative impacts on communities and ecosystems²⁶.

In light of the foregoing, there is need for effective AI governance in order to maximize benefits for communities while mitigating risks and challenges.

3.0 Towards Co-Design of Artificial Intelligence with Communities

AI provides both opportunities and challenges for vulnerable indigenous and local opportunities. On one hand, AI can support revitalization of indigenous and local languages, promote cultural preservation, and strengthen the protection of lands and territories belonging to indigenous and local communities²⁷. However, on the other hand, AI can fuel biases and discrimination, digital colonialism, breach of indigenous data sovereignty, and environmental sustainability concerns with grave impacts on indigenous and local communities²⁸. Effective AI governance is therefore key towards maximizing its benefits for indigenous and local communities while addressing its risks and challenges.

Co-design of AI with communities is key towards strengthening its governance for justice, equity, inclusivity and development. This is a key approach towards enabling communities to exercise greater agency in the development of AI, from setting priorities for the extraction and use of their data to governing the specific applications of AI and sharing the benefits of technology²⁹. Co-design of AI is necessary towards ensuring that indigenous and local communities have a meaningful role in deciding how their data, languages, and knowledge systems are represented and used in the age of technology and AI³⁰. The United Nations observes that at the heart of co-designing AI with communities is the recognition of indigenous peoples' and local communities' meaningful authority over how AI systems – their data, languages, knowledge or cultural materials – are developed and used³¹. In order to achieve this goal, it has been observed that

²⁵ United Nations Climate Change., 'AI and Climate Action: Opportunities, Risks and Challenges for Developing Countries' Available at <https://unfccc.int/news/ai-and-climate-action-opportunities-risks-and-challenges-for-developing-countries> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

²⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'AI has an environmental problem. Here's what the world can do about that.' Op Cit

²⁷ United Nations., 'Ensuring Indigenous Peoples' rights in the age of AI' Op Cit

²⁸ Perera. M et al., 'Indigenous peoples and artificial intelligence: A systematic review and future directions' Op Cit

²⁹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Turning global interest into support for Indigenous-led AI' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/turning-global-interest-support-indigenous-led-ai> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ United Nations., 'Counting (on) Indigenous Peoples: Data Sovereignty in the Age of AI' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/counting-indigenous-peoples-data-sovereignty-age-ai-0> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

indigenous and local communities must be granted meaningful participation in governing AI models that use indigenous and local languages, cultural materials, and knowledge systems including environmental knowledge or educational data, with emphasis from the start, not only after the system has been designed³².

Embracing co-design is therefore a fundamental approach towards effective AI governance for justice, equity, human rights and inclusivity. In order to realise this dream, there is need to harness indigenous and local languages in AI models. It has been correctly observed that incorporating all languages including indigenous and local languages is key towards making AI more inclusive, fair and complete³³. Failure to incorporate local languages in AI limits the ability of non-native speakers of English among other dominant languages from not only accessing the benefits of the digital transformation but also from informing their development in line with their cultural and context-specific needs³⁴. Marginalization and exclusion of local languages in AI often leads to biases and human rights violations especially where such models are applied to indigenous and local communities³⁵. Consequently, there is need to feed indigenous and local languages into AI in order to promote cultural and linguistic diversity and inclusivity while also harnessing indigenous knowledge systems and norms which are usually preserved in indigenous and local languages³⁶.

Incorporating oral traditions into AI is also necessary towards inclusivity, justice, fairness and human rights in the age of technology. The oral traditions of indigenous and local communities provide valuable knowledge systems that can promote Sustainable Development. For example, it has been observe that indigenous knowledge systems in the Global South support deep understanding of the intrinsic value of nature and provide local and context-specific solutions on key environmental issues including climate mitigation and adaptation, ecosystem management, and biodiversity conservation³⁷. Consequently, indigenous peoples and local communities have been identified as crucial agents of change, whose livelihood practices, traditional knowledge and ways of life are fundamental for sound environmental governance, protecting biodiversity, combating climate change and realizing the ambitious vision of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda

³² Ibid

³³ United Nations Development Programme., 'Harnessing Multilingual AI for Industrial Development Growth and Powering Local Communities' Available at <https://www.undp.org/digital/blog/harnessing-multilingual-ai-industrial-development-growth-and-powering-local-communities> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Empowering Linguistic Diversity: Harnessing Artificial Intelligence in Education., Available at <https://rsisinternational.org/journals/ijrias/articles/empowering-linguistic-diversity-harnessing-artificial-intelligence-in-education/> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Indigenous knowledge and traditional practices guiding nature and climate conservation In the Virunga National Park' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/indigenous-knowledge-and-traditional-practices-guiding-nature-and-climate-conservation-virunga> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

for Sustainable Development³⁸. Since the livelihood practices, traditional knowledge and ways of life of indigenous and local communities are usually preserved in oral traditions, co-design of AI with communities can ensure that these valuable resources are harnessed and preserved for posterity³⁹. Feeding oral traditions into AI models is vital towards ensuring that the practices, customs, beliefs and knowledge systems of indigenous peoples and local communities are widely known and transferred to future generations towards Sustainable Development⁴⁰.

Feeding ethics into AI models can also ensure effective co-design for posterity. Through this, it is possible to design culturally-appropriate and responsive AI models that adhere to the values held sacrosanct by indigenous and local communities. For instance, prioritizing indigenous epistemologies such as the African philosophy of *Ubuntu/Utu*, which focuses on social harmony/togetherness over individual interests, can ensure that ethics are effectively incorporated into AI⁴¹. It has been observed that unlike individualistic approaches of Western AI models ethics, *Ubuntu* focuses on interconnectedness and common humanity, offering a framework for AI systems that foster community cohesion and justice⁴². By providing an Afrocentric perspective on ethics, *Ubuntu* provides a pathway towards enhancing the impact of AI in society through values such as inclusivity, empathy, social justice, interconnectedness, and collective well-being⁴³. Co-design of AI with communities in Africa and the Global South is therefore necessary towards harnessing indigenous epistemologies and philosophies such as *Ubuntu* in order to effectively incorporate ethics into AI models.

4.0 Conclusion

With AI providing both benefits and risks for communities, its appropriate governance is a fundamental agenda towards maximizing the benefits of technology for all nations, communities, and individuals. In particular, co-design of AI with indigenous and local communities is key towards its safe, appropriate, inclusive and ethical governance. In order to achieve this goal, it is

³⁸ International Labour Organization., 'Sustainable Development Goals: Indigenous Peoples in Focus' Available at https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcms_503715.pdf (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

³⁹ United Nations., 'Counting (on) Indigenous Peoples: Data Sovereignty in the Age of AI' Op Cit

⁴⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Exploring the impact of Artificial Intelligence and Intangible Cultural Heritage' Available at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/news/exploring-the-impact-of-artificial-intelligence-and-intangible-cultural-heritage-13536> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

⁴¹ Kilungu. N., 'Pluriversalism and Artificial Intelligence in Africa: Toward a Decolonial Epistemic Reconstitution' Available at <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/pluriversalism-artificial-intelligence-africa-toward-mwelu-kilungu-g-oq1lf/> (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Akpah. G.K., 'Ubuntu in Artificial Intelligence (AI) Governance: Towards an Inclusive and Democratic Technological Future' Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/400422520_Ubuntu_in_Artificial_Intelligence_AI_Governance_Towards_an_Inclusive_and_Democratic_Technological_Future (Accessed on 29/10/2026)

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imperative to feed local languages, oral traditions and ethics into AI models for justice, equity, inclusivity, human rights and Sustainable Development.

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