



**United Nations**

Department of  
Economic and  
Social Affairs

UN HIGH-LEVEL ADVISORY  
BOARD ON ECONOMIC AND  
SOCIAL AFFAIRS

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## **AI for Social Inclusion: Opportunities, Risks, and Policy Priorities**

*(organised by the Philippines, Chair of ASEAN, in partnership with UN DESA)*

**Side event to the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development**

Wednesday, 8 July 2026

13:15-14:30 EDT

Conference Room 8

### ***Objectives***

As AI is rapidly transforming economies and societies, it presents both unprecedented opportunities and important social challenges. On the one hand, AI can support inclusive economic and social development by increasing productivity and fostering innovation, improving access to health and other social services, and providing new channels for political participation. On the other hand, the absence of inclusive AI policies and regulation risks widening socio-economic divides, reinforcing structural biases, and amplifying mis- and disinformation.

This event explores how countries can leverage AI for social inclusion and economic opportunity, while designing and implementing policies that protect citizens from economic, social, informational, and political harms.

### ***Background***

If governed responsibly, AI can play a catalytic role in advancing social inclusion. It can facilitate the *productive employment* of previously marginalized communities, by strengthening and complementing skill sets, facilitating entrepreneurship, and improving workplace accessibility; increase access to *quality education*, by helping students learn in multiple languages, support children with disabilities, provide adaptive learning content, and mitigating teacher shortages; improve access to *quality health care*, through applications in medical research, clinical diagnostics, and disease



surveillance; and broaden opportunities for *political participation*, by facilitating new and emerging channels for political engagement and participatory decision-making.

However, the opportunities to harness AI are unevenly distributed, both between and within countries. Many developing countries face structural barriers to successful AI adoption, including the high cost and limited suitability of ready-made AI tools to local conditions, and a lack of skilled workers and adequate datasets to develop more tailored solutions. Persistent digital divides are an additional hurdle for AI adoption between and within countries.

Without remedial policies, AI may widen existing divides within countries. Wealthier students and schools tend to access better tools and better broadband connectivity, while low-income youth risk exclusion (“AI-excluded” populations). Wage premiums for AI-related skills are rising globally, threatening to leave people without these skills further behind. Gender wage gaps are persistent, and higher in AI-related work than in the general workforce.

AI systems trained on non-representative data can perpetuate gender, racial, linguistic, and socio-economic biases. As a result, AI-enabled education, job matching systems, and financial services risk reinforcing existing inequalities, while AI-supported healthcare may cause unequal care and outcomes. A lack of digital skills and access may further limit the voice and political participation of the most marginalized populations.

Countries vary significantly in their capacity to design and implement AI policies for inclusive development. This includes investment strategies for providing digital infrastructure, datasets that reflect local contexts, and compute; strategies for education, AI skill development, and media literacy; frameworks for inclusive workplace integration and decent working conditions along the AI value chain; and governance that ensures privacy, data protection, equitable use of data, and human rights. Sound legal and regulatory frameworks are also needed to combat mis- and disinformation, harmful technologies, and digital abuse.

International cooperation, including through multilateral platforms and regional cooperation, can help overcome the global AI divide and promote international principles for AI governance that is inclusive, human-centred, and rooted in universal human rights. Regional cooperation can reduce AI gaps by pooling resources for the development of joint databases and contextually relevant AI tools – tailored to local languages and cultures – while strengthening regional innovation ecosystems.



### ***Guiding questions for participants***

- What are some of the main opportunities and risks from AI for inclusive social and economic development?
- How can countries with limited digital capacity leapfrog responsibly, and how can international and regional cooperation accelerate AI readiness?
- What are some proven strategies to prevent the emergence of “AI-excluded” populations, particularly among low-income youth, women, persons with disabilities, and linguistic minorities?
- How can education systems and labour markets be redesigned to ensure equitable access to AI-related skills and decent jobs – including for workers in informal sectors and for communities currently underrepresented in the digital economy?
- How can regional and international cooperation be strengthened to reduce global AI gaps, while promoting inclusive and human-centred AI governance principles?

### **Potential Speakers**

1. **Chair-** H.E. Mr. Enrique Austria Manalo, Permanent Representative of the Philippines to the United Nations
2. Mr. Navid Hanif, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, UN DESA
3. Ms. Xiaolan Fu, Professor of Technology and International Development; Founding Director, Technology & Management Centre for Development, University of Oxford, and member of the UN High-level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs (HLAB)
4. Mr. Kaushik Basu, Carl Marks Professor of International Studies, Cornell University (tbc)
5. Ms. Lina Khan, Associate Professor of Law, Columbia Law School (tbc)
6. Youth representative (tbc)

### **Video message:**

1. Mr. Joseph Gordon-Levitt, UN Global Advocate for Human-centric Digital Governance