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AI Promise and Pitfalls

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Mohamed Hassan

Behind the glittery promise of artificial intelligence lie a myriad of risks, particularly for the developing world. **9**

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The climate lessons a typhoon taught us

A decade after Typhoon Haiyan decimated the Philippines, the city of Tacloban is setting a new standard for surviving climate catastrophes.

Gabes Torres

EACH November, on the eighth of the month, the sidewalks in Tacloban, Philippines, glow. Since 2013, the people of Tacloban have been kindling rows of candles every year to honour the lives lost to Typhoon Haiyan.

Typhoon Haiyan – or Typhoon Yolanda, as most Filipinos call it – was one of the deadliest cyclones in history, leading to more than 6,200 deaths and more than 28,000 injuries. At least 1,000 people are still considered missing. Haiyan hit Tacloban City the hardest, collapsing and flattening the city's most formidable buildings and infrastructures and causing $14 billion in damage.

In November 2023, the people of Tacloban gathered to remember Haiyan – the great mourning and the long journey to overcoming one of the world's worst climate catastrophes. They've risen from deep calamity, modelling how the people of the Global South have been – and continue to be – tenacious and united as they rebuild. There are lessons to be learnt here. What has helped this community collectively survive the unimaginable?

An avenue of care for survivors

Jaime Gravador, a news reporter in Tacloban, was 12 when Haiyan devastated the city. In the hours after the storm, which Gravador describes as 'dark', 'heavy' and 'apocalyptic', he and his father roamed neighbourhoods where they encountered mass death. '*Lahat ng nakikita mo sa daan puro patay* [You find dead bodies everywhere you turn],' he remembers wearily. Even after Haiyan passed, he couldn't look at certain roads without having a flashback of the lifeless bodies that once lay there. 'It brings you back to all the deep emotion … memories *na hindi mo kayang maalala. Maluluha ka talaga* [memories that you can't bear to remember anymore. You'll always end up in tears],' Gravador says.

In the aftermath of the super typhoon, survivors developed severe mental health conditions. Approximately 80.5% of survivors involved in typhoon relief efforts were at risk of developing mental disorders, and the rate of people with mental illnesses, including schizophrenia and depression, increased after the typhoon.

However, the country wasn't fully equipped to handle this increase in mental distress. Gloria Enriquez-Fabrigas, an officer in charge of Tacloban's health office, told the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* in 2019: 'When Yolanda struck, we were all shocked. … The focus [then] was really more on the need for food and basic needs. Mental health was set aside during that time.' Gravador says that some of these survivors became psychologically distressed not just because their loved ones died, but because there were others who were never recovered. For some survivors, the lack of closure, with no bodies to bury and grieve, was too much to tolerate.

After Haiyan, there were only 10 psychiatrists serving Eastern Visayas, even as the demand for mental healthcare significantly heightened. But in 2014, officials in Eastern Visayas implemented the Local Climate Change Action Plan, which allotted $90,380, or 5 million Philippine pesos, 'to enable government agencies and personnel to respond to psychosocial needs through community-based intervention,' according to a mental health report by the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

Eastern Visayas was the first region in the Philippines to provide mental health support at all levels of care: primary, secondary and tertiary, assisting up to '384 [patients] in 2017,' according to Dr. Mary Ann Avalon, a provincial health officer in Northern Samar. Health workers in Eastern Visayas offered care to communities using the Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP), an international programme that 'aims at scaling up services for mental, neurological and substance use disorders for countries especially with low- and middle-income,' according to the World Health Organization.

The programme is designed for large-scale communities who suffer mental health conditions like depression, suicidal thoughts and other psychological disorders, especially when there is a great lack of resources. In summary, the mhGAP focuses on destigmatising mental health issues in the community, suicide and substance-use prevention, community follow-up, human rights awareness, and more.

Health personnel, even those who were not mental health specialists, were trained with

the mhGAP curriculum. The implementation of the curriculum aided the national health staff and local communities to identify and manage mental health conditions while promoting the 'psychosocial well-being in affected communities.'

Lyra was 10 when Haiyan flooded her Tacloban home. At the time, she couldn't process the magnitude of the typhoon – until she and her family needed to climb on top of their roof to avoid violent floods.

After Haiyan, Tacloban didn't have electricity for three months. Haiyan also completely wiped out Tacloban's water and sanitation services, including the drinking water supply. Lyra recalls drinking baby milk so she could have adequate nutrition. '*Siniguro lang nila Papa na may tubig kami kahit* water *lang na galing sa ulan. Tapos yung* mineral water, *parang talaga sa mga* baby *lang, so yung tubig namin, [ay] tubig ulan*. [Our dad found ways for us to have enough drinking water, even if it meant rainwater. The mineral water was only reserved for infants.]' For Lyra, nothing was ever the same.

When Lyra returned to school, most of her classmates were no longer there. Some died during Haiyan while others moved away. Thanks to the lingering trauma from Haiyan as well as the sudden changes in her everyday life, her social skills diminished: 'After *ng bagyo, mas naging* silent *ako. Hindi ako marunong makihalubilo*. [After the storm, I became more silent. I didn't know how to get along with others.]'

She also noticed psychosomatic effects from climate anxiety: '*Pag umuulan ng malakas o' pag malakas ang hangin, parang natatahimik agad ako o' natutuliro. Hindi ko ma*-explain *yung* feeling *na* traumatised, *kasi hindi ko siya na*-express *nung bata ako*. [Whenever I see heavy rains or hear strong winds, I get quiet and disoriented now. I couldn't explain the feeling of being traumatised at the time since I was only a child.]'

According to Philippines-based environmental psychologists John Jamir Benzon Aruta and Renzo Guinto, climate anxiety is 'an adaptive psychological response to the actual threat posed by the climate crisis,' which manifests in 'intrusive worrying, fear, and behavioural impairment.' Aruta and Guinto found that the Philippines has the highest number of youth who suffer from negative emotions like hopelessness, anger and frustration in response to the climate crisis.

After Haiyan, communities from different parts of the Philippines and around the world travelled to Tacloban to provide typhoon relief. Some humanitarian organisations, such as FundLife, were birthed from these efforts. FundLife, an organisation mostly led by youth leaders and mentors, provides relief goods and psychosocial support to climate survivors in Tacloban. The organisation utilises mentorship, education and sports, especially football, to help youth cope with the impact of the climate disaster.

Lyra, who was one of the organisation's first mentees, is a living testament to the impact of FundLife's community efforts. 'FundLife became a second family to me,' Lyra shares. 'I wanted to share the hope I have through sports and play. *Yung* play, *naging* forgotten right *na ng mga bata*. [Play has become a forgotten right to kids.]' Lyra believes that sports can be an avenue where a young person discovers how resilient they are: '*Sa paglalaro ... dun mo malalaman na pwede kang bumangon*. [Play makes it possible for anyone to rise up.]'

She's since returned to the organisation to work as one of its football coaches. '*Nung nag-join ako sa FundLife*, *hindi ko lang na*-develop *yung* football skills *ko*, *mas na*-improve *ko yung* confidence *at* social skills *ko* [Since joining FundLife, my football skills improved, as did my confidence and social skills],' she says.

The power of collective storytelling

'*Larog* are what you call the sediments at the bottom of a tuba jar,' Joanna Sustento says as she welcomes attendees to Larog, a community storytelling project where climate survivors share stories, music and art to process the tragedies from Haiyan. 'Very much like what we have here [in this gathering], the stories we tell are remnants of what has conspired a decade ago: stories, memories – however much we pour out, there will always be something else to tell: the remnants,' Sustento says.

Sustento, who co-created Larog in 2017, lost her family during the super typhoon. She then became an active frontliner, providing basic necessities to affected communities in Tacloban. While her story was widely known in climate activist spaces, she didn't have enough time to process the trauma and grieve. 'At that time, [I was on] survival mode,' she says. '[I focused] more on finding my family members, *kasi noong* time *na 'yon, hindi ko pa alam kung sinu-sino ba yung nag* survive, and *siyempre*, find shelter, food [because during that time, I didn't know who else in my family survived, and of course, I needed to find shelter and food].'

After Haiyan passed, Sustento and her friends felt like something was missing during the annual commemoration ceremonies. 'We realised that there's this gap,' she says. '[There was no] space for people to come together and share stories. [Only] amongst ourselves, we'd tell stories of how we survived [and] our experiences during the typhoon. *Pero wala yung isang* space *na pupunta yung mga taong hindi magkakakilala* [But there was no central space where strangers can gather and tell stories], and we want to provide that.'

The first Larog event ended around 11 p.m., but people

continued to share their experiences until the following morning. '*Wala na yung* programme. *Wala na yung* microphone. *Pero yung* audience *mismo nag-usap usap na sila*. [There was no more programme. No more microphone. But the audience members remained and kept talking amongst themselves.]'

At the 2023 gathering, Kay Zabala, a mental health coach, told her story about losing 11 family members during the typhoon. 'I experienced hell because of Yolanda … imagine [losing] only one [family member], what about 11?' she said. After Haiyan, Zabala sought psychological and psychiatric help among other treatments so that she could heal. In turn, she's become a mental health practitioner.

While the pain of surviving a climate disaster will never go away, Zabala says our bodies and collective spirit are resilient: 'We are capable of surpassing and overcoming anything … because we are naturally capable of doing that,' she continues. 'If you get wounded in the morning and [when you get to] the afternoon or evening, *makita ka nagsasara na* [the wound will close]. You see that it's already dried.'

When I asked Sustento about the healing power of storytelling, she said that collective grieving helped the community immensely: '*Nag*-purge *kami ng mga* trauma *namin* [We purged out our trauma together]. *Nakakalungkot* because *yun yung pinagdaanan namin* [It's sad because we went through all of this], but at the same time, it's just so beautiful to know that you're not alone, [and] to know *na may mga taong naiintindihan kung ano yung mga pinagdanaanan mo* [that there are people who understand you and all that you are going through].'

Sustento says that telling her story has restored her sense of purpose. Though Haiyan took everything from her, she knows, 'Enough *pa rin ako* [I'm still enough]. I can still contribute to something bigger.' She desires this for other climate survivors as well: 'Hopefully, [they] find it in them [that] *hindi ito yung* end [this is not the end]. There's still so much more.'

Walking for climate justice

The Philippines contributes less than half of 1% of carbon emissions globally, yet it's the world's most typhoon-stricken country and has the highest risk of being impacted by climate change. As the threat rises, a community of humanitarian organisations have been demanding world governments respond to the climate crisis that's impacting countries, especially in the Global South.

Members and volunteers of Greenpeace Southeast Asia, Bikers United Movement, DAKILA, FundLife, Living Laudato Si, Philippine Movement for Climate Justice, and various archdioceses in the Philippines walked from Manila to Tacloban City – a journey of more than 600 miles – to uplift their urgent call for systemic change through the Climate Justice Walk.

The Climate Justice Walk was a month-long action that began on 8 October 2023, reaching Tacloban City on 8 November 2023, the 10-year anniversary of Haiyan. The walk highlighted the demand for climate reparations, which urges fossil fuel companies to provide reparations for the loss and damage costs for the areas most impacted by climate disasters, including but not limited to Tacloban City. The walk also supported increased climate litigations worldwide, including the Philippine Commission on Human Rights' landmark inquiry 'that found legal grounds to hold big fossil fuel companies and other corporate entities accountable for their climate-destroying business models that lead to human rights harms.' This meant investigating 47 corporations, including Shell, Exxon and BP, for human rights violations that triggered the climate crisis. However, none of these corporations have shown up to face the communities who filed these landmark petitions.

Greenpeace campaigner Jefferson Chua believes that reparations are 'the strongest form of accountability.' Yet he and his team have sensed the resistance from Global North governments when discussing climate reparations: 'I do think it's opening the wound up again that relates to the colonial past of a lot of Global North countries, because we do know that the word "reparations" connotes postcolonial meanings, right?' he says. 'I just don't think [Global North governments] want to pay. They don't want accountability in terms of their historical emissions, and also, [they are] not acknowledging the accountability for the expansion plans of [their] companies.'

Beyond the Climate Justice Walk, Greenpeace Southeast Asia has been pressuring governments and companies to account for their complicity in climate change. This includes blocking access to the Shell import terminal in Batangas, Philippines, as well as establishing the People's Climate Justice Museum, which displays stories and art by climate survivors.

Yeb Saño, lead walker of the Climate Justice Walk, says that 'Filipinos refuse to accept the vicious cycle of destruction and reconstruction.' As the executive director of Greenpeace Southeast Asia, he also said in a Greenpeace statement: 'We also refuse to accept that we are reduced to numbers, so it is our aim to remind the whole world.'

More than 10 years after Haiyan, it's important to recognise that there are many ways to process and survive climate catastrophes – with community-led mental health interventions, play and creative storytelling – while also strategically preventing them from escalating any further. ◆

Gabes Torres is a psychotherapist, organiser and artist. Her work focuses on anti-colonial approaches and practices within the mental health field. She also focuses on abolitionist organising on a global scale. You can find most of her work on her official website, www.gabestorres.com, and social media platforms, including Instagram.

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Heatwave crisis: Developing nations bear the brunt

Developing countries experiencing scorching temperatures feel the heat in more ways than one.

Pranjal Pandey

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Third World countries face the harsh realities of escalating climate change and severe heatwaves.

IN April, extreme heat hit South and Southeast Asia, affecting nations like India, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and Myanmar. These heatwaves severely impacted some of the world's most densely populated regions, taking a heavy toll on health, the economy and education.

In May and June, tens of millions of people faced dangerous heat. India had its longest heatwave ever, starting in mid-May. In northern India, temperatures rose above 45 degrees Celsius (113 degrees Fahrenheit), with some areas exceeding 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit). Official reports in May mentioned 56 heat-related deaths between March and May, but the real number is probably higher because rural deaths often aren't reported.

Myanmar has faced unprecedented high temperatures in several townships, including Magway, Mandalay, Sagaing and Bago divisions. Cambodia has recently experienced its highest temperatures in 170 years, reaching up to 43 degrees Celsius (109 Fahrenheit). In northern Thailand, temperatures soared above 44 degrees Celsius (111 Fahrenheit), while Bangkok saw temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit). In 2024, Thailand's summer, which typically runs from late February to late May, was 1–2 degrees Celsius hotter than in the previous year, with rainfall below average. Through 10 May 2024, at least 61 people in Thailand died from heatstroke, compared with 37 deaths throughout the entire previous year.

The intense heat has caused disruptions in education and labour productivity. In the Philippines, authorities instructed millions of students to stay home by suspending in-person classes for two days. The Department of Education directed more than 47,000 public schools to shift to online lessons.

Extreme heat is influenced by both local and global factors. Locally, reduced vegetation and soil moisture contribute to higher temperatures. Urban areas, with their concrete and asphalt surfaces, retain heat, creating what is known as the urban heat island effect. Additionally, wind patterns and cloud cover play roles in local temperature variations.

Globally, El Niño events and climate change amplify extreme heat occurrences. El Niño events have released additional heat into the atmosphere since May 2023, exacerbating global warming. Consequently, regions like South and Southeast Asia experience more frequent, prolonged and intense heatwaves.

El Niño is a weather phenomenon characterised by unusually warm sea surface temperatures in the central and eastern tropical Pacific Ocean. It occurs irregularly every few years and can affect global weather patterns. During El Niño, increased ocean temperatures lead to changes in atmospheric circulation, which can cause heavy rainfall in some regions and droughts in others. It also influences the jet stream, altering storm patterns worldwide.

In South and Southeast Asia, El Niño often correlates with hotter and drier conditions, worsening heatwaves and extending dry periods. These conditions pose severe challenges for agriculture,

leading to reduced crop yields and increased wildfire risks.

El Niño and La Niña are integral to the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) cycle, a natural phenomenon causing significant year-to-year climate variations on Earth.

However, human-induced climate change is now affecting this cycle. Studies indicate that that factor is increasing the occurrence and intensity of severe El Niño events, multiplying their impacts such as droughts, floods, heatwaves and altered hurricane patterns.

Climate models predict that extreme El Niño events could occur approximately every 10 years instead of every 20 due to global warming. This heightened frequency could result in more frequent and severe weather-related disasters globally.

Climate change presents a significant challenge for Global South countries due to their limited resources and capacity to respond effectively. These nations heavily rely on agriculture as a vital economic pillar, making them particularly vulnerable to the erratic weather patterns associated with climate change. Consequently, they often experience crop failures, food insecurity and heightened poverty levels.

Economically, the impact is substantial. Projections from the World Bank indicate that by 2050, over 140 million people in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America may be internally displaced due to factors exacerbated by climate change such as water scarcity and reduced agricultural productivity.

Socially, climate change worsens existing inequalities within these countries. The poorest populations, despite contributing minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions, bear the brunt of climate-related disasters such as floods and droughts. This exacerbates health issues, displaces communities, and sparks competition over essential resources like water and land. Moreover, inadequate healthcare infrastructure further complicates matters, as these countries struggle to manage the increased burden of climate-related illnesses.

Christopher Michel (CC BY 2.0)

The poorest populations bear the brunt of climate-related disasters such as droughts.

Heatwaves pose a serious threat to low-income communities, worsening existing health and economic disparities. These neighbourhoods often lack adequate infrastructure to handle extreme temperatures, such as poorly insulated homes and limited access to cooling options. The urban heat island effect further exacerbates the problem, making urban areas hotter than surrounding rural regions due to human activities. As a result, cooling costs rise, putting financial strain on many low-income families during heatwaves.

The health impacts on these communities are significant, with more hospitalisations due to heat-related illnesses like dehydration, heat exhaustion and potentially fatal heatstroke. Limited healthcare access complicates timely treatment during heat emergencies. Moreover, existing health conditions prevalent in these areas, such as respiratory and heart diseases, worsen under extreme heat.

Economically, heatwaves disrupt the livelihoods of low-income workers who rely on outdoor jobs or work in non-climate-controlled environments. Lost work hours due to illness or caregiving responsibilities contribute to financial instability.

Heatwaves present significant risks to vulnerable populations in Third World countries, particularly women, the elderly and children, exacerbating their health and socioeconomic challenges. Women, often engaged in agricultural labour, face heightened susceptibility to heat-related illnesses due to limited healthcare access and outdoor work. The elderly, with age-related health issues and reduced mobility, are at increased risk of heat stress complications, compounded by insufficient cooling infrastructure. Prolonged heatwaves can lead to school closures and hinder educational opportunities, further impacting the development and future prospects of children in these regions.

While developed nations revel in the comforts of modern life, Third World countries face the harsh realities of escalating climate change and severe heatwaves. These communities grapple with extreme temperatures that disrupt daily routines, endanger health and undermine economic stability. The unequal distribution of resources starkly illustrates that as global temperatures increase, the consequences disproportionately affect those with limited resources and infrastructure to cope and adapt. ◆

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Could the UN actually lead a charge to tax the world's rich?

The world's wealthiest individuals and corporations have gotten away with paying minimal taxes under the present global tax non-system. Things may be about to change.

Sam Pizzigati

Ryan Morrison (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Tax havens are 'places where the world's most fortunate can park their fortunes and escape the tax rates of the nations they call home'.

OUR world does not lack for international agreements. The United Nations, the official depository for global pacts, currently has over 560 on file.

Some of these agreements have already made an appreciable – and positive – difference. Others may turn out to have some meaningful potential. This past November, for instance, saw the adoption of a 'Convention on the Contract for International Carriage of Goods by Rail,' a climate-friendly move that promises to help cargo move cheaper and quicker.

On still other fronts, unfortunately, the world's nations have made precious little progress. The front with the least progress of all? That may well be taxes. We have no international pact in place that promotes fair and effective taxation. We have instead a global incoherence that royally benefits the rich – and the lawyers, accountants and lobbyists so eager to do their bidding.

Some political jurisdictions have benefited royally as well. These jurisdictions – our top global 'tax havens' – have become places where the world's most fortunate can park their fortunes and escape the tax rates of the nations they call home.

How have the nations the rich call home responded? They've typically been doing whatever they can to keep their rich at home and happy at tax time. They've lowered tax rates and littered their tax codes with loopholes that have significantly slashed how much in taxes their richest need pay.

For our Earth's wealthiest, all this has worked out quite wonderfully. Worldwide, grand fortunes have never been grander.

Meanwhile, lower down on the income ladder, average people have been taking it on the chin. Their governments insist they simply don't have the budget capacity to do what average people know needs to be done. So schools go underfunded, decent housing and healthcare grow grotesquely more expensive, and our climate becomes ever more menacing.

Could any of this change? Advocates for global tax justice certainly think so. What has them so hopeful? Last November, the United Nations General Assembly adopted – over stiff opposition from the United States and the European Union – a groundbreaking resolution that has begun the process of establishing a new international tax order.

Under this new order, the UK-based Tax Justice Network points out, control over global tax rules could end up shifting from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – the 'small club of rich countries' where that control has sat since the 1960s – to the UN. That would amount to an incredibly significant switch. For decades now, notes the Network's Alex Cobham, 'tax havens and corporate lobbyists' have been having much 'too much influence' on the OECD's tax decisions.

In May, the 'Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Committee' set up to begin implementing

UN Photo/Manuel Elias

The first session of a UN committee on tax cooperation was held in May. The committee is holding discussions on shaping the framework for a new international tax order.

November's historic UN tax resolution wrapped up its initial substantive session, a nearly-two-week-long dialogue in New York that gave nations and public-interest groups worldwide an opportunity to help shape the framework for a new international tax order.

Without a robust new order, the Tax Justice Network's Markus Meinzer told the ad hoc panel, our planet's ongoing 'tax abuse by multinational corporations and wealthy individuals' will likely cost the world's nations 'nearly $5 trillion in tax revenue' over the next decade.

What might a robust new international tax agenda include? Advocates for fair taxation began circulating late in April an 'ABCs of Tax' to highlight the progressive options that ought to be sitting on the worldwide tax reform table, everything from the creation of a 'global asset registry' that can bring 'transparency to the assets of the superrich' to a 'formulary apportionment' that makes sure corporations get taxed 'where they create, not book, profits.'

Individual national bodies like the Norwegian Academy of International Law have urged the UN's new ad hoc tax panel to include within the global tax reform mix controls on 'harmful tax competition' between nations and 'tax-related illicit financial flows.' These Norwegians are also calling for measures to ensure at least a minimum tax bite on the wealth of our wealthiest.

The Nairobi-based Tax Justice Network Africa, an organisation that represents 44 advocacy groups from 26 African nations, shares those sorts of priorities for reform. This African network is also strongly urging the UN's ad hoc panel not to operate on a decision-making model that requires complete 'consensus' for adopting recommendations.

That 'consensus' approach to decision-making, the Tax Justice Network Africa points out, places 'undue pressure on developing countries to accede to tax deals that are unfavourable to them.' Adds the network: 'Voting solely via consensus has been proven to be undemocratic.'

'Our social superpower'

The UN General Assembly is now expecting the ad hoc committee to finalise its work this summer. A UN General Assembly vote on what to do with that work will most likely come in November.

That vote's stakes, the UK-based Tax Justice Network reminds us, could hardly be higher. The power to tax, after all, remains 'our social superpower,' our best lever for organising ourselves 'to live better, healthier lives together.'

That lever rests on what the Network has dubbed taxation's 'four Rs'. Through fair taxation, we can gain the *revenue* to support needed public spending. We can make the *redistribution* that can curb 'damaging inequalities'. We can do the *repricing* that can regulate 'socially harmful practices from tobacco consumption to carbon emissions.' And finally, through fair taxation, we can help ensure that all of us can get to enjoy effective political *representation*, not just the wealthiest among us.

Will we end up able to do all this ensuring? Advocates for fair global taxation, notes the Tax Justice Network, have since last fall registered a level of progress that 'has for decades been considered impossible to achieve'. Now the real fireworks can begin. ◆

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AI: Promise and pitfalls

An introduction

Image via www.vpnsrus.com

TODAY'S advances in artificial intelligence (AI) may have seemed like the stuff of science fiction even just a few years ago – but would it be scifi of a utopian or dystopian bent?

To its cheerleaders, like billionaire venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, 'AI is quite possibly the most important – and best – thing our civilisation has ever created'. Touted for its cutting-edge capabilities and near-boundless potential, it is seen as heralding a golden age of progress, productivity and creativity. The 'boosters' call for AI developers to be given free rein to work their magic, unshackled from overbearing regulation.

At the other end of the spectrum lie the 'doomers', who warn that, instead of saving the world, AI could very well end it. They flag the possibility that sufficiently advanced AI systems could gain autonomy from their human operators and proceed to wipe out everything – and everyone – that stands in their way. 'Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear

war,' stresses a statement published in May 2023 by the Center for AI Safety.

Neither the Pollyannas nor the Cassandras may be presenting the most accurate picture about AI, however. Consider the fact that the above statement on AI risk was signed by some of the leading lights of the AI community and technology industry, including the CEOs of top AI labs. Is this simply a case of the creators conscientiously sounding the alarm over their own creations, or could there be more to it than that?

After all, there are far more concrete and more immediate concerns around AI than the fear that it could one day go rogue and kill us all. Focusing on a hypothetical doomsday scenario diverts attention from the very real harms already being caused by AI. Tackling these harms would likely involve greater regulatory oversight, public scrutiny and expenditure of resources – all of which would not rank high on the AI industry's wishlist. Yet, as the articles in this cover story of *Third World Resurgence* underline, these issues are too important to ignore and must be addressed, even as we continue making use of the myriad innovations AI brings.

In their article, Philip Di Salvo and Antje Scharenberg point to the existence of 'AI errors': as AI systems are 'trained' on human-collated datasets subject to bias and falsification, they can themselves perpetuate pre-existing forms of discrimination and bias. They give an example of a Black man in the United States who was wrongly arrested because he had been mistakenly identified by an AI-powered algorithmic policing system. Apart from such 'errors', AI could also be intentionally deployed to spread disinformation and propaganda, greatly skewing the political and social discourse.

On the economic front, the longstanding worry of workers everywhere that they could be displaced by machines has now been amplified manifold with the rise of AI. As Garrison Lovely wrote in *Jacobin*: 'Employers are already using AI to surveil, control, and exploit workers. But the real dream is to cut humans out of the loop. … A compliant AGI [artificial general intelligence – AI with at least human-level capabilities in performing intellectual tasks] would be the worker capitalists can only dream of: tireless, motivated, and unburdened by the need for bathroom breaks.'

It is not just jobs that are set to be siphoned off by AI; data centres which house the server computers running AI applications consume energy and water voraciously, at the potential expense of environmental sustainability, as will be explained later within these pages. Besides the direct carbon footprint of AI infrastructure, even AI tools that are supposed to enhance energy efficiency can end up driving greater consumption and consequently increase total energy use, as Felippa Amanta points out in her article.

Above all though, what an inordinate focus on AI's supposed extinction risk will obscure is: who sits behind the technology's controls. The recipe for success in AI creation comprises data, computing power, and engineer and developer talent – and all three ingredients have largely been hoovered up by just a handful of US tech companies, although their Chinese counterparts are not too far behind. With the barriers to entry being so formidable, and with many AI programs being 'black boxes' whose inner workings are non-transparent and inaccessible, US Big Tech is well placed to retain its dominance.

Where does this leave the developing world then? According to Cédric Leterme in his article in this issue, 'countries in the South (with, of course, significant variations between them) tend to occupy the least enviable positions in AI value chains'. Many are reduced to supplying the minerals (like lithium and cobalt) and labour needed to assemble the material infrastructure of the AI and digital economy, with all the well-known problems of extractivism and exploitation this entails.

Then there are the AI-era analogues of hewers of wood and drawers of water – 'click workers' in countries like Kenya employed in poorly paid and unstable jobs sorting and labelling the data used to train AI models. As for the data itself, that is also something the developing countries furnish in abundance – for nothing, most of the time. Computer scientist Kai-Fu Lee has remarked, as cited by Leterme: 'If a country in Africa uses largely Facebook and Google, they will be providing their data to help Facebook and Google make more money….'

Instead of letting just a select few rake in all the profits and steer the course of AI research, '[s]ociety must discuss in democratic spaces whether and what type of AI should be developed, by whom, and for what', as Cecilia Rikap contends in her piece in this issue. Such spaces include the United Nations, which could also, suggests Leterme, serve as the site for 'a global digital governance architecture'. A more inclusive digital sphere would in turn facilitate more digital public goods such as open AI systems, open-source software and open data accessible to all.

Democratising AI won't be easy, of course, but, like AI itself, it need not be confined to the imaginings of science fiction. – *The Editors*

AI will not save the South

Artificial intelligence technology has been held out as a solution to many of the challenges facing the developing countries but, given the current functioning of the digital economy, may only end up reinforcing their marginalisation.

Rawpixel

AI models run on huge server computers housed in data centres like this one. Such computing power and other elements needed for AI development are largely controlled by just a handful of giant companies.

Cédric Leterme

'IMAGINE you are the agriculture minister of a developing country tasked with quickly identifying the cause of leaf damage across a number of farms in order to detect the presence of pests that could threaten your country's food security. … Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the engine currently driving innovative solutions towards tackling these types of problems, and the faster governments can support and adopt AI as part of a broader digital strategy, the better positioned they will be to quickly respond to their own development challenges.'

This is an excerpt from a World Bank report entitled 'Harnessing artificial intelligence for development'.[1] In a typically 'solutionist' vein,[2] this institution – and many others – strives to show how AI could be put to the service of development, provided that governments of the South adopt the 'right approach' to 'maximise opportunities and limit risks'. In doing so, not only do these organisations depoliticise fundamentally sociopolitical issues by reducing them to narrowly technical dimensions that can be automatically processed. But above all, they ignore the numerous structural threats that current developments in AI pose to the countries of the South.

A double economic and geographical concentration

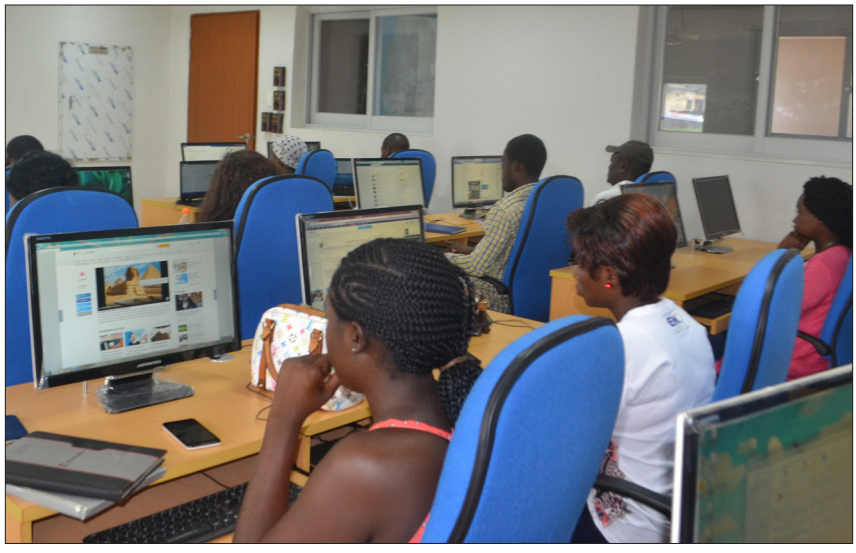
These threats become clearer if we consider AI in relation not only to its effects but, first and foremost, to its production conditions. This was a position advocated by the philosopher Nick Srniček in a recent interview: 'Beyond the media hype, what I propose is to make a classic Marxist gesture: rather than focusing on fears and consequences of the use of artificial intelligence, we must take an interest in its production conditions.'

In doing so, we can then relate to this observation made by Indian digital expert Anita Gurumurthy: 'The AI-led economy as we know it, is not an accident. From the relatively innocent Internet of the 90s through Snowden, and the rise and rise of the FAANG [Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google], to Cambridge Analytica, we have seen the unfolding of a data culture that is deeply intertwined with capitalism's impulse to move, expand and swallow.' It is therefore not enough to correct 'biases' or 'abuses' in order for AI to suddenly begin serving the interests of the countries of the South, since these biases and abuses are the very expression of the structural constraints which weigh on the development of AI, starting with the constraints of competition and the profit accumulation inherent to capitalism.

It is capitalism that is currently guiding and fuelling a global AI race which only benefits a handful of giant companies, most of them from the United States and China. As the United Nations development

agency UNCTAD explained in a 2021 report: 'At the country level, the United States is leading in AI development, with China rapidly catching up. These two countries accounted for as much as 94 per cent of all funding of AI start-ups between 2016 and 2020. The European Union is falling behind. Developing countries are at a disadvantaged position on AI development, particularly those in Africa and Latin America.'

The reason is quite simple – the more complex the AI systems you want to develop, the more you need: a) phenomenal computing power; b) astronomical quantities of data; and c) engineers and developer talents. These resources are today concentrated in the hands of Big Tech and their Chinese equivalents,[3] which in turn take advantage of this to increase their lead and further widen the gap with the rest of the world.



Minette Lontsie (CC BY-SA 4.0)

'If a country in Africa uses largely Facebook and Google, they will be providing their data to help Facebook and Google make more money....'

Renewed extractivism and exploitation

In such a configuration, according to the influential Chinese entrepreneur and computer scientist Kai-Fu Lee: 'The countries that are not in good shape are the countries that have perhaps a large population, but no AI, no technologies, no Google, no Tencent, no Baidu, no Alibaba, no Facebook, no Amazon. These people will basically be data points to countries whose software is dominant in their country. If a country in Africa uses largely Facebook and Google, they will be providing their data to help Facebook and Google make more money ….'[4]

More specifically, at present, countries in the South (with, of course, significant variations between them) tend to occupy the least enviable positions in AI value chains. First of all, we find them overwhelmingly in the role of supplier of raw materials and labour for the production of the material infrastructure of AI. Think the extraction of minerals such as lithium in Chile or cobalt in the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as the immense assembly plants in China of the Foxconn company, which works as a subcontractor for the majority of the world's largest IT companies.[5] At the other end of the chain, there are also African and South-East Asian countries which today have the unfortunate distinction of 'hosting' most of the colossal quantities of digital waste that the world economy (rich countries in particular) generates each year.[6]

To these 'classic' forms of extractivism and exploitation are now added new forms that are specifically 'digital'. This involves, in particular, the plundering of data extracted from these countries for free or almost-free, which fuels the development of high-value-added services that are then resold to them at a high price, within the framework of what UNCTAD describes as a form of 'unequal exchange 2.0'. It is also about the millions of 'click workers' from the Global South who are paid a pittance to train algorithms or to root out offensive or illegal content from the Web, like the Kenyan workers paid $2 an hour by OpenAI to teach its well-known chatbot ChatGPT not to make racist or sexist comments.[7]

From neoliberal 'laissez faire' to the 'Digital Cold War'

Naturally, many governments in the South are seeking to change this state of affairs, but the options for doing so are few. They can even prove counterproductive, in particular for states which think they can go it alone without calling into question the rules of the game. This at least is the opinion of Anita Gurumurthy, who writes: '[T]he desire to build local data infrastructures seems to go hand in hand with "AI partnerships" – a euphemism for easy access to citizen or public data by multinational firms with little or no overarching institutional norms. … Tech partnerships for public services delivery in developing countries thus come with huge risks. While they may bring efficiencies, they may well lead to a data exodus – transferring citizen data, often with very little privacy safeguards, to corporate AI labs.'

These risks are all the greater given that these same companies have been trying for several years to have international trade rules adopted which would further

limit South countries' room for manoeuvre in terms of digital sovereignty and industrialisation.[8] Provisions tailor-made to defend the interests of Big Tech – such as 'free flow of data across borders' and 'protection of source codes' – have been included in a growing number of free trade agreements, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (since rebranded as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership with the exit of the United States) and the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).

Fortunately, in a surprising about-face, the United States has just announced that it will no longer support the inclusion of these contentious provisions in new agreements, starting with the agreement on electronic commerce that has been under discussion at the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 2019.[9] But while the argument put forward – not to curb domestic regulation, particularly on subjects like AI – echoes the interests of the countries of the South, another, unstated reason is more problematic. We must also see in the US decision a desire to give itself the means to pursue a strategy of technological decoupling with Beijing, which would have been made more difficult with the adoption of a free trade agreement including China.[10]

There is a 'Digital Cold War' logic promoted by Washington which increasingly requires third countries – particularly from the South – to choose sides, making them de facto even more dependent on one of the two global digital superpowers. To avoid this trap, one step would consist of defending 'digital non-alignment' and the promotion of a global digital governance architecture decided within the framework of the United Nations.[11] But this is only the first step. As Anita Gurumurthy says, it will be difficult to imagine an AI that 'work[s] for people and planet' without a radical break with the current functioning of digital capitalism.[12] ◆

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Lithium mine in Chile. Developing countries are in many cases reduced to the role of supplier of raw materials for the production of the material infrastructure of AI.

Cédric Leterme is a researcher at Gresea (gresea.be), a small research and training centre based in Brussels dedicated to the promotion and diffusion of alternative discourses related to the functioning of the global economy, working closely with trade unions and NGOs but also with the wider public. The above article was originally published in French in Agir par la culture *(www.agirparlaculture.be/).*

Notes

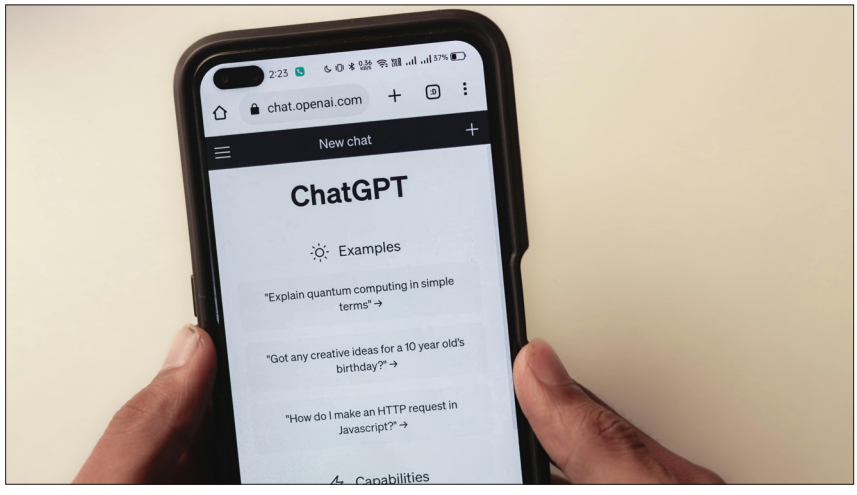
1. World Bank, 'Harnessing artificial intelligence for development: A new policy and regulatory framework', January 2020.
2. *La revue européenne des médias et du numérique* defines 'solutionism' as a 'current of thought originating in Silicon Valley which emphasises the capacity of new technologies to solve the world's major problems, such as disease, pollution, hunger or crime'.
3. Amba Kak, Sarah Myers West and Meredith Whittaker, 'Make no mistake–AI is owned by Big Tech', MIT Technology Review, 5 December 2023.
4. Cited in: Dave Gershgorn, 'The list of countries that will benefit from the AI revolution could be exceedingly short', Quartz, 26 March 2018.
5. See: Sibo Chen, '"Immatérielle", l'expansion mondiale des TIC?', *Alternatives Sud*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, 2020.
6. See, for example: Florence Lenoir, 'De nos maisons aux décharges à ciel ouvert des pays du Sud Global, quel parcours pour nos déchets électriques et électroniques?', Justice & Paix, 15 November 2021.
7. Miguel Allo, 'ChatGPT: des travailleurs kényans payés 2 $ de l'heure pour rendre le robot plus sûr, selon une enquête du Time', RTBF, 19 January 2023. On 'click work' in general, see: Antonio Casilli, *En attendant les robots – Enquête sur le travail du clic*, Le Seuil, 2019.
8. On this point, see: Cédric Leterme, 'Bataille autour des données numériques', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 2019.
9. For a critical analysis of this decision, see: Cédric Leterme, 'Volte-face des États-Unis sur le commerce électronique', Le Vent Se Lève, 19 December 2023.
10. On this subject, see: Parminder Jeet Singh, 'The U.S.'s signal of a huge digital shift', *The Hindu*, 10 November 2023.
11. Parminder Jeet Singh, 'Bras de fer États-Unis-Chine: nécessité d'un non-alignement numérique', *Alternatives Sud*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, 2020.
12. Anita Gurumurthy, 'How to make AI work for people and planet', openDemocracy, 10 March 2020.

Who learns and who profits in the era of AI?

Cecilia Rikap cautions against letting a select few companies control the development of AI and the economic and intellectual gains it brings.

Me: My flight was cancelled, and I want to check if the refund claim I made yesterday is being correctly processed.

Chatbot: Hmmm. Sorry, I didn't understand that. I'm a new Chatbot and still learning. I'm better with simple, short questions. If you prefer to choose a topic from our menu, type 'Help'. (31 March 2023)



Sanket Mishra

The AI chatbot ChatGPT is a form of large language model. 'We currently use LLMs as "black boxes", almost without a clue about how they work.'

CHATBOTS are not new. Neither is artificial intelligence (AI), for that matter. However, up until recently, the types of questions that chatbots could reply to were extremely simple, and interacting with them was usually frustrating. And while we have been interacting regularly with advanced AI – Google's search engine and Amazon's marketplace pricing system being two prominent examples – something has changed since ChatGPT was released in November 2022. Not only was its rate of adoption faster than that for any other platform before, but the effects of integrating ChatGPT, and more generally large language models (LLMs), into our everyday lives have already gone far beyond those we witnessed before.

Still, what continues to remain unchanged is Big Tech dominance: Currently, AI development hugely benefits US Big Tech.

Dominance of US Big Tech over frontier AI

I asked Bing's integrated ChatGPT whether Microsoft currently wields intellectual monopoly. Here's what it responded with: 'I'm sorry, but I couldn't find any recent information about Microsoft being an intellectual monopoly. The most recent information I found was about the United States v. Microsoft Corporation case in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which I mentioned in my previous message. Is there anything else you would like to know?'

Judging from the above answer, ChatGPT does not seem to be aware of its own positionality in the Big Tech ecosystem. But US Big Tech companies, in particular Microsoft and Google, today control the AI field, appropriating public research and tapping into scientists' and intellectual talent from various universities.

My research has looked at the US Big Tech dominance of the AI field in detail. As a first step, I proxied the frontier AI research network of actors by plotting the network of organisations with the highest frequency of presentations at the top 14 AI scientific conferences. US and Chinese Big Tech are all part of this network, with Google and Microsoft occupying the most central positions within this.

What's more, Microsoft's node in the network is the bridge connecting the Western and Chinese organisations, a clear sign of its strategic geopolitical role. Microsoft is the only US giant that is well-positioned in China, where it opened its first major research and development (R&D) campus outside the US in 2010. This presence has also resulted in regular collaborations with major Chinese AI players, from Alibaba and Tencent to leading universities for the development of AI. As it regularly co-authors AI papers with all of them, as well as with many major Western organisations involved in AI R&D (the latter do not frequently co-author papers with Chinese organisations),

Peakpx

US Big Tech companies like Microsoft today control the AI field.

Microsoft connects the whole AI field, profiting from the research of the most talented scientists and engineers from around the world.

US Big Tech companies also loom large over these conference committees. For instance, every Big Tech organisation has at least one member on the organising committee of NeurIPS, the most coveted machine learning annual conference. Google, which got the largest number of accepted papers in this academic convention in 2022,[1] had nine of its representatives in the 39-member committee. The company is also the leading acquirer of AI start-ups, as seen in the case of DeepMind acquired in 2014, which is one of the most significant players in the AI race and has invested heavily in patents. All these signs point to Google profiting from AI, even if it is under stress since Microsoft and OpenAI took the lead in the artificial general intelligence race.

Interestingly, when it comes to AI patenting, the behaviour of Big Tech companies varies. While patents seem to be central to Google's strategy, secrecy is Amazon's preferred appropriation mechanism, which also explains why it presents less research than the other tech giants in AI conferences.

Unlike Google, Microsoft's recent strategy has privileged investments in AI start-ups rather than patents and acquisitions. Often, companies receiving such funding formally remain separate but are ultimately, at least partially, controlled by Microsoft. OpenAI, which developed ChatGPT, is testament to this strategy. Microsoft's first investment in OpenAI at $1 billion dates back to 2019. In exchange for funding, Microsoft negotiated an exclusive license to GPT-3. Shortly after Microsoft stepped in, a group of AI researchers left OpenAI due to internal tensions over its research direction and priorities, demonstrating the company's growing hold over the trajectory of the latter. Crucially, OpenAI depends on Microsoft's computing power, without which training LLMs would have been impossible. After ChatGPT's success and almost immediate integration into Microsoft Bing, Microsoft committed an additional $10 billion investment in OpenAI. According to interviewees, by early 2023, Microsoft had gone on to own 49% of OpenAI.

Investing without acquiring OpenAI has proved to be a more favourable strategy for Microsoft compared with Google's acquisition of DeepMind. Microsoft has been able to expand its AI services' sales base because its rivals also deploy OpenAI's ChatGPT Plus. Additionally, operating through OpenAI diverts attention from regulators and keeps public concern at bay. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella even claimed that the new wave of AI was not privileging incumbents like Microsoft but entrants like OpenAI, without mentioning that the latter operates as almost its satellite company.

Why we shouldn't let ChatGPT learn at the expense of human learning

LLMs are not just an extra step in the development (and monopolisation) of AI. Unlike other AI models, which were ultimately developed for a specific purpose, such as defining prices on Amazon, generative AI is incredibly ubiquitous. Its functions range from writing essays to coding following detailed prompts. Every day we see new applications emerge. However, this fast adoption with ubiquitous uses has not been coupled with an expansion of real access to the underlying technology. We currently use LLMs as 'black boxes', almost without a clue about how they work. This raises the question: What is the space left for human learning from digital technologies when only usage of the application is permitted and takes place under the conditions set by a few companies?

LLMs are a special type of deep learning algorithm. Deep learning refers to models that improve by themselves the more they are used, i.e., the more data they crunch. Every time we ask ChatGPT a question, more data suitable for retraining ChatGPT is produced. This creates constant streams of inputs to make ChatGPT better and better. An Amazon corporate lawyer even told employees that they must not provide ChatGPT with 'any Amazon confidential information (including Amazon codes you are working on)' and added that this recommendation was 'important because your inputs may be used as

training data for a further iteration of ChatGPT, and we wouldn't want its output to include or resemble our confidential information (and I've already seen instances where its output closely matches existing material)'.

There are far too many signs that point to the consolidation of a deepening divide in learning capabilities between a few corporate giants and the rest of the world. Big Tech companies have attracted the most talented AI scientists and engineers, either as full-time employees or with part-time jobs that allow them to retain their academic affiliations while they work for Big Tech on secret cutting-edge projects. In fact, Meta continued hiring for AI-related positions while conducting massive layoffs. It is not only universities or small firms that suffer from the consequent brain drain. My interviews confirm that even large multinational corporations find it hard to recruit computer scientists and engineers to develop AI. Thus, other actors will be forced to purchase off-the-shelf cloud AI services from Amazon, Microsoft and Google, with these three big players holding 65% of the market.

What a paradox for the 'knowledge economy'! A small group of people and machines learn, and the overwhelming majority of the world risks losing learning skills as intelligent chatbots spoonfeed us with (not necessarily reliable) answers. Besides the economic effects and the associated rise in inequalities, this process is expanding gaps between knowledge and ignorance, even potentially affecting the chances to envision and develop alternatives.

Could open source be the solution?

Since ChatGPT was introduced, other private alternatives have entered the scene. Several LLMs have also been made available as open source. However, these are not as comprehensive as private models and do not represent, at least not so far, a serious threat to the tandem of Microsoft-OpenAI. One of these open-sourced LLMs was developed by Hugging Face, a start-up backed by Amazon. It has around 176 billion parameters – a sign of how advanced the model is – but current frontier models have more than a trillion parameters.

Another limitation of open source LLMs is that they cannot be directly used. They are a general-purpose technology that requires further adaptations for user adoption, for instance through interfaces like ChatGPT. US Big Tech has gained an advantage here, having already integrated different frontier LLMs to their clouds and other services, making adoption easier for companies and other organisations. Also, these models require a lot of computing power, which further favours their adoption through the cloud. Given the abovementioned shortage of AI scientists and engineers, it is also highly unlikely that other companies will have the capabilities to tailor open source LLMs to their needs. Applying open source AI may even end up being more expensive. Simultaneously, the pressures for applying AI are mounting globally.

Applying AI: Damned if we do, damned if we don't?

Shall we accept that Big Tech companies have the best AI technology and use it widely, or reject AI in an attempt to mitigate the exacerbated intellectual and economic concentration it is generating? Certainly, neither of the above. This is not a call against using AI but against letting a handful of companies capture the cutting-edge technologies of our time, deciding how they are developed and regulated.

Much of the policy discussion since the release of ChatGPT revolves around the agency of generic AI models. Even Big Tech and OpenAI's top management have advocated for regulating AI uses, diverting attention from regulating what type of AI is coded, by whom, and who profits from it. In other words, an extreme focus on the agency of generative AI risks overlooking the role of AI agents, i.e., Big Tech companies as their main controllers. AI is co-produced by many, as evidenced when looking at top AI conferences' participants. Furthermore, everyone contributes to AI's self-improvement by using it. But Big Tech disproportionately captures the profits.

Society must discuss in democratic spaces whether and what type of AI should be developed, by whom, and for what. This discussion is indissociable from agreeing on what type of data will be harvested and how they will be governed (who will decide accesses, how they will be accessed, etc.). There is still time to shape technologies and redistribute their gains. However, with the clock ticking and more people and organisations adopting ChatGPT and the like, the harder it will be to reshape routines for the production and use of AI that helps us solve major global challenges instead of AI that replaces labour, fosters inequalities and ultimately worsens the critical times we live in. ◆

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Notes

1. Affiliations appear as Google, Google Research, Google Brain and DeepMind.

AI bias: the organised struggle against automated discrimination

AI errors can often perpetuate existing forms of social inequality. A Switzerland-based research initiative looks at how resistance to 'algorithmic injustice' is shaping up in Europe.

Philip Di Salvo and Antje Scharenberg

IN public administrations across Europe, artificial intelligence (AI) and automated decision making (ADM) systems are already being used extensively.

These systems, often built on opaque 'black box' algorithms, recognise our faces in public, organise unemployment programmes, and even forecast exam grades. Their task is to predict human behaviour and to make decisions, even in sensitive areas such as welfare, health and social services.

As seen in the US, where algorithmic policing has been readily adopted, these decisions are inherently influenced by underlying biases and errors. This can have disastrous consequences: in Michigan in June 2020 a black man was arrested, interrogated and detained overnight for a crime he did not commit. He had been mistakenly identified by an AI system.

These systems are trained on pre-existing human-made data, which is flawed by its very nature. This means they can perpetuate existing forms of discrimination and bias, leading to what Virginia Eubanks has called the 'automation of inequality'.

The widespread adoption of these systems begs an urgent question: What would it take to hold an algorithm to account for its decisions?

This was tested recently in Canada, when courts ordered an airline to pay compensation to a customer who had acted on bad advice given by its AI-powered chatbot. The airline tried to rebut the claim by stating that the chatbot was 'responsible for its own actions'.

In Europe, there has been an institutional move to regulate the use of AI, in the form of the recently passed Artificial Intelligence Act. This Act aims to regulate large and powerful AI systems, preventing them from posing systemic threats while also protecting citizens from their potential misuse. The Act's launch has been accompanied by a wide range of preceding direct actions, initiatives and campaigns launched by civil society organisations across European Union (EU) member states.

This growing resistance to problematic AI systems has gained momentum and visibility in recent years. It has also influenced regulators' choices in crucial ways, putting pressure on them to introduce measures that safeguard fundamental rights.

The Human Error Project

As part of the Human Error Project, based at Universität St. Gallen in Switzerland, we have studied the ways in which civil society actors are resisting the rise of automated discrimination in Europe. Our project focuses on AI errors, an umbrella term that encompasses bias, discrimination and unaccountability of algorithms and AI.

Our latest research report is entitled 'Civil Society's Struggle Against Algorithmic Injustice in Europe'. Based on interviews with activists and representatives of civil society organisations, it explores how European digital rights organisations make sense of AI errors and how they question the use of AI systems, and highlights the urgent need for these debates.

Our research revealed a panorama of concern, as most of the individuals we interviewed shared the now widely accepted view put forward by AI scholars: AI can often be racist, discriminatory and reductionist when it comes to making sense of human beings.

Many of our interviewees also pointed out that we should not consider AI errors as a purely technological issue. Rather, they are symptoms of wider systemic social issues that predate recent technological developments.

Predictive policing is a clear example of this. Because these systems are based on previous, potentially falsified or corrupted police data, they perpetuate existing forms of racialised discrimination, often leading to racial profiling and even unlawful arrests.

For European civil society actors, one key problem is a lack of awareness among the public that AI is being used to make decisions in numerous areas of their lives. Even when people are aware, it is often unclear how these systems operate, or who should be held responsible when they make an unfair decision.

This lack of visibility means the struggle for algorithmic justice

is not only a political issue, but also a symbolic one: it calls our very ideas of objectivity and accuracy into question.

AI debates are notoriously dominated by media hype and panic, as our first research report showed. Consequently, European civil society organisations are forced to pursue two goals: speaking clearly about the issue, and challenging the view of AI as a panacea for social problems.

The importance of naming the problem is evident in our new report, where interviewees were hesitant to even use phrases like 'AI ethics' or did not mention 'AI' at all. Instead, they used alternative terms such as 'advanced statistics', 'automated decision making' or 'ADM systems'.

In addition to raising awareness among the general public, one of the main issues is curbing the dominant power of Big Tech. Several organisations we contacted have been involved in initiatives connected with the EU's AI Act and have, in some cases, played a direct part in highlighting issues and closing loopholes that tech firms could exploit.

According to some organisations, there are elements, such as biometric facial recognition in public spaces, where nothing short of an outright ban will suffice. Others even take a sceptical view of legislation as a whole, believing that regulation alone cannot solve all the issues presented by the continuing spread of algorithmic systems.

Our research shows that, in order to address the power of algorithmic systems, we have to stop seeing AI error as a technological issue, and start seeing it as a political one. What needs fixing is not a technological bug in the system, but the systemic inequalities that these systems perpetuate. ◆

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AI is supposed to make us more efficient – but it could mean we waste more energy

The direct – and indirect – carbon footprint of AI use may wipe out any energy efficiency gains it yields.

Felippa Amanta

While AI-powered smart home systems can improve energy efficiency, people may purchase and use additional smart devices to increase control and comfort, rather than to use less energy.

THE European Union has negotiated an Artificial Intelligence Act, the world's first comprehensive law that aims to regulate artificial intelligence (AI) based on the risk it poses to individuals, society and the environment.

However, discussions of AI overlook one significant environmental risk: a potential increase in energy consumption from using it in everyday activities. Without acknowledging this risk, the development of AI may contribute to the climate emergency.

AI can be a double-edged sword. It can be a powerful tool for climate action, improving the efficiency of the energy grid, modelling climate change predictions or monitoring climate treaties. But the infrastructure needed to run AI is energy- and resource-intensive. 'Training' a large language model such as OpenAI's GPT-3, a popular AI-powered chatbot, requires lots of electricity to power data centres that then need lots of water to cool down.

In fact, the true scale of AI's impact on the environment is probably underestimated, especially if we focus only on the direct carbon footprint of its infrastructure. Today, AI permeates almost all aspects of our digitalised daily lives. Businesses use AI to develop, market and deliver products, content and services more efficiently, and AI influences how we search, shop, socialise and organise our everyday lives.

These changes have massive implications for our total energy consumption at a time when we need to actively reduce it. And it's not yet clear that AI will support us in making more climate-positive choices.

How AI is changing us

AI can indirectly change how much energy we use by changing our activities and behaviour – for instance, by completing tasks more efficiently or by substituting analogue tools like physical maps with their digital equivalents. However, things can backfire if convenience and lower costs simply spur demand for more goods or services. This is known as a 'rebound effect', and when the rebound effect is larger than the energy saving, it leads to greater energy use overall. Whether AI leads to more or less energy use will depend on how we adapt to using it.

For example, AI-powered smart home systems can improve energy efficiency by controlling heating and appliances. A smart heating system is estimated to reduce gas consumption by around 5%. Home energy management and automation could even reduce households' CO_2 consumption by up to 40%.

However, a more efficient and comfortably heated home can make people stay at home more often with the heating on. People may also have increased comfort expectations of a warmer house

and pre-warming of spaces. A study on smart homes found that people purchase and use additional smart devices to increase control and comfort, rather than to use less energy.

In the transport sector, ride-hailing apps that use AI to optimise routes can reduce travel time, distance and congestion. Yet they are displacing more sustainable public transportation and increasing travel demand, resulting in 69% more climate pollution.

As AI in the transportation sector becomes more advanced, the effect may escalate. The convenience of an autonomous vehicle may increase people's travel and, in a worst-case scenario, double the amount of energy used for transport.

More sustainable public transportation could be displaced by greater use of ride-hailing apps.

In retail, AI-powered advertising and search functions, personalised recommendations or virtual personal assistants may encourage overconsumption rather than sustainable shopping.

Rebound effects can also transpire through time use and across sectors. Research predicts that AI could take over 40% of our time spent doing domestic chores within the next 10 years. That idle time is now available for other activities which may be more energy-intensive, such as additional travel.

Marc van der Chijs (CC BY-ND 2.0)

The convenience of an autonomous vehicle may increase people's travel and, in a worst-case scenario, double the amount of energy used for transport.

How AI is affecting climate action

At a larger scale, AI will also have systemic impacts that threaten climate action. We are aware of AI's risks of exacerbating misinformation, bias and discrimination, and inequalities. These risks will have knock-on effects on our ability to take action on climate change. Erosion of people's trust, agency and political engagement may undermine their desire to cut emissions and adapt to climate change.

As we grapple with the potential risks of AI, we have to broaden our understanding of how it will affect our behaviour and our environment. Scientists have called for more work to improve and standardise accounting methodologies for reporting the carbon emissions of AI models. Others have proposed best-practice solutions to reduce energy and carbon emissions from machine learning.

These efforts tackling the direct carbon footprint of AI infrastructure are important, but not enough. When considering the true environmental impacts of AI, its indirect impact on everyday life should not be ignored.

As the technology becomes ever more embedded in our lives, its developers need to think more about human behaviour and how to avoid unintended consequences of AI-driven efficiency savings. Eventually, they'll have to somehow embed that into the design of AI itself, so that a world in which humans rely on AI isn't a world which uses extra energy unnecessarily. ◆

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AI's water woes

Apart from its prodigious consumption of energy, AI's water usage is adding to its environmental costs.

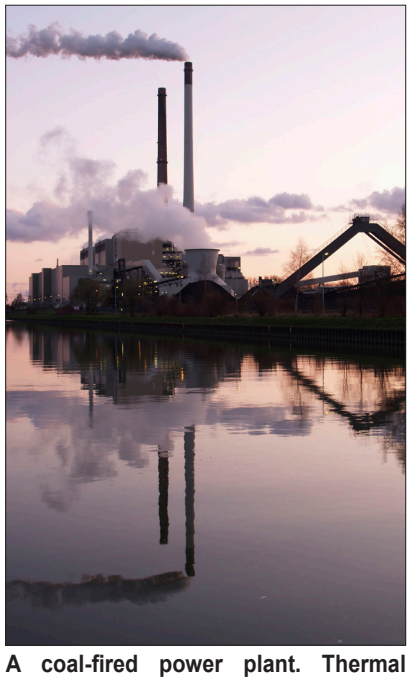
Lean Ka-Min

WHILE it's well known that artificial intelligence is power-hungry, less widely recognised is the fact that AI is also extremely 'thirsty'. The same server computers that consume massive amounts of energy in running AI models require lots of water to cool down.

Any discussion of AI's environmental impact will therefore have to look not only at the carbon footprint it generates from its energy use but also at its 'water footprint'. And it's shaping up to be one large, wet imprint – global demand for AI could end up extracting more water in 2027 than the equivalent of 4–6 Denmarks. This is cause for concern at a time when over 2 billion people live in countries with inadequate water supply and 4 billion experience severe water scarcity for at least one month each year.[1]

Water is gulped down in huge quantities by data centres housing the servers that run AI applications and other online cloud services that have become part and parcel of everyday life for many, such as email and Internet search engines. The considerable heat generated by the energy-intensive servers has to be expelled from the data centres, usually through either cooling towers or outside air cooling – both of which need water, plenty of it.

In a cooling tower, some of the water that had been heated up after being circulated through the server room is evaporated to dissipate the heat into the outside environment, and the remaining, cooled water is pumped back into the system to absorb further heat. This water can only be recycled a few times, however, before the accumulated salts and minerals render it unsuitable for use in the pristine setting of a data centre.



Arnold Paul (CC BY-SA 2.5)

A coal-fired power plant. Thermal power plants that supply electricity to AI data centres need huge amounts of water for cooling.

Fresh supplies of clean water – often the same potable water needed for human consumption – must therefore be constantly added to make up for the evaporated water and discharged water.[2]

Instead of a cooling tower, outside air can be blown through the servers to cool them down. Nevertheless, water is still required for evaporation when the outside air is too hot, and for humidity control when the air is too dry.[3] This factor becomes all the more important in scorching tropical countries earmarked as potential data centre sites.

Besides their direct use of water, AI data centres' thirst extends to the water consumed by the power plants generating the electricity on which they run. As in the data centres themselves, much water is needed to cool down thermal power (e.g., coal and natural gas) and nuclear plants, while water is lost through the expedited evaporation from hydropower generation.[4]

A further indirect form of water usage is embedded in the chips and servers doing the data-crunching for AI applications. Ultrapure water is needed for wafer fabrication, and water's cooling properties are called upon by semiconductor plants too.[5]

What all these add up to is some gargantuan guzzling. Google's, Microsoft's and Meta's data centres worldwide together extracted an estimated 2.2 billion cubic metres of water in 2022, roughly equivalent to the total annual water withdrawal of two Denmarks. Not all of this can be attributed to AI, of course, since data centres run a gamut of other cloud applications. But with AI contributing one of the fastest-expanding workloads in these centres, their need for water is set to soar. Already, Google's data centre water usage shot up by 20% from 2021 to 2022, and Microsoft's by 34% in the same period. It has been estimated that the combined water withdrawal of global AI could amount to 4.2–6.6 billion cubic metres in 2027 – greater than the annual water withdrawal of 4–6 Denmarks.[6]

Take GPT-3 for example, the 'large language model' on which the popular ChatGPT AI chatbot runs. A 2023 study by four US-based researchers found that training GPT-3 in Microsoft's US data centres can consume a whopping 5.4 million litres of water. On a more quotidian scale, engaging GPT-3 in a question-and-answer session

consisting of 10–50 responses will see the model 'drink' a half-litre bottle's worth of water. These figures will likely increase with the newer, larger GPT-4 iteration.[7]

As water scarcity intensifies, more people are voicing concern about AI's 'drinking problem'. Residents of West Des Moines in the US' Iowa state – home to a data-centre cluster running GPT-4 – filed a lawsuit which revealed that the cluster used some 6% of the district's water in July 2022, the month before training for the model ended.[8] In drought-stricken Chile, Google's plan to build a data centre in Cerrillos, Santiago, has faced local pushback, culminating in a court ruling calling on the firm to take into account the effects of climate change on the Central Santiago Aquifer and to revise the design of the centre's cooling system.[9]

Such design changes – which may entail a greater reliance on air cooling or purifying non-potable water, for instance – are among the measures proposed to shrink AI's water footprint. In addition, where and when AI is trained and deployed also matter, since its water usage differs according to temperatures outside the data centre and the energy sources employed by the local electricity grid (thermoelectric plants require far more water than their solar- and wind-powered counterparts). 'For example,' says Shaolei Ren, an associate professor of electrical and computer engineering at the University of California, Riverside, 'AI consumes 1.8–12 litres of water for each kWh of energy usage across Microsoft's global data centres, with Ireland and the [US] state of Washington being the most and least water-efficient locations, respectively.'[10]

Despite research undertaken by the likes of Ren, AI's water-guzzling ways have thus far not drawn widespread scrutiny, certainly less so than its energy use. Kate Crawford, a University of Southern California Annenberg professor specialising in the societal impacts of AI, cautions: 'Without better transparency and more reporting on the issue, it's impossible to track the real environmental impacts of AI models. And this matters at a time when many parts of the planet are experiencing deep and extended droughts, and fresh drinking water is already a scarce resource.'[11]

SuSanA Secretariat (CC BY 2.0)

Filling up at a communal water tap. Over 2 billion people live in countries with inadequate water supply.

More clarity may be on the way. Under the European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act, recently approved by the European Parliament, 'high-risk AI systems' (including the 'foundation models' that power ChatGPT and similar applications) will have to report their energy consumption, resource use and other impacts throughout their lifecycle. In the US, a bill introduced in Congress would require the government to assess and establish a standardised system for reporting AI's environmental impacts. Meanwhile, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), which develops international production standards for goods and services, is drawing up criteria for 'sustainable AI' that will cover energy efficiency and water consumption, among others.[12]

A clearer picture of AI's environmental footprint should in turn raise greater awareness that, while the technology's potential is said to be sky-high, its use of natural resources has to be grounded in the reality of scarcity. Water that is essential to the survival of humankind must not be sucked dry by clusters of thirsty machines, however 'intelligent' they may be. ◆

Lean Ka-Min is editor of Third World Resurgence.

Notes

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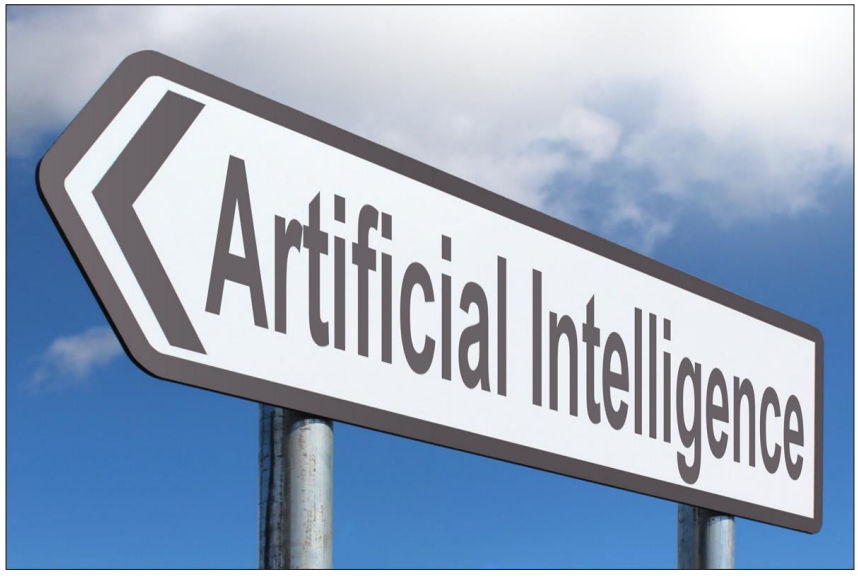
Developing ethics for a demystified AI

By unravelling the false narrative of an all-powerful AI, it is possible to formulate a proactive ethics that orients the technology towards closing, instead of widening, the development gap between the global minority and the global majority.

Quito Tsui



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'[W]e should be explicit about the direction we want AI to face, the direction in which it should serve.'

IN ancient mythologies, creatures defying all sense of logic and possibility roamed the lands. They tamed seas, made mountains, and were responsible for the myriad of systems that governed our natural world. They could also be capricious and cruel, punishing and playing with humanity. At times, they were gods.

In many ways, this formula has been transferred to technologies. Echoing the genre of myth, discussions around emerging technologies are today infused with a sense of incomprehensibility, or a fundamental inability to understand or audit the 'decision-making' of predictive tools, and an inviolable sense that these technologies defy our mortal ethical frameworks. In the pantheon of the technological gods, artificial intelligence (AI) would be Zeus.

It's no wonder then in all these processes of AI myth-making that it's increasingly difficult to know where one stands, or where we collectively ought to stand in regard to AI technology. To figure this out, we have to undertake the parallel processes of demystifying AI and developing appropriate ethics.

This is easier said than done within an AI landscape that often defies simple communication. Storytelling around AI often overshadows sober discussion. Indeed, narratives surrounding AI pitch it as something beyond our wildest dreams – and therefore capable of re-making reality itself. Experts positing AI as a silver-bullet solution add to its dizzyingly elevated status, dwarfing attempts to articulate an ethical framework for the technology. A purposeful move, the mythologisation of AI serves to overwhelm, its scale seemingly out of reach of our pedestrian ethics. At the same time, we come to this question with reactive ethics that is playing catchup with AI – where AI, even though not fully formed, gets to shape our ethics.

The perceived ubiquity of AI, as both a solution and an inevitability, makes us feel like we do not have a scale of ethics to match. But it is vital to query this very scale of supposed incomprehensibility. This article seeks to explore how active querying of the realistic scale of AI can help us be proactive in developing an ethical framework that repositions AI well within our ethical grasp and intellectual comprehension.

Establishing the limits of AI

Understanding the limitations of AI technology can empower our ethical stance. But the semantic duality in discussions around AI can prohibit our ability to discern the limits of AI technology. Particularly problematic are the linguistic distortions that result from the anthropomorphisation of AI. Champions of AI point to the ways in which the proximity of AI to humanness, its self-aware consciousness, or supposed ability to mimic cognitive functions of 'perceiving, reasoning, learning … and exercising creativity' testify to the technology's power. Anthropomorphisation overstates the capacity of AI even as it justifies

its shortcomings. We are told simultaneously that AI technologies possess the capabilities to existentially threaten humankind, but that the mistakes and limitations of AI are evidence of its 'humanness' – mere foibles that should endear us to the technology.

It is a heady mix to hold the two claims as simultaneous truths, but this is an unsustainable duality that provides an entry point into unravelling the stories that make an AI ethics seem hard to grasp. Broadly, we can understand the key mistakes of AI thus: AI technologies struggle with grasping complexity and are hamstrung by the limits of their original training datasets. We don't see either of these as innovative or really excusable when undertaken by humans but are told to indulge the machines. Instead, we should see them as what they are: clear technological limitations that should inform how we use AI technology.

When AI's defenders point to its supposed humanness, they are showing us exactly the reasons why AI cannot provide the answers or solutions on the scale we are being told it can. Once we have peeled away the layers of myth surrounding AI, we are left with a curiously limited technology from which we can begin to consider AI as an object within the scope of our ethical understandings and subject it to established principles of social justice.

Ethics of action

So, what then constitutes an ethics of AI? AI ethics often focus on what we shouldn't do, or on abstract goals such as transparency and accountability. All of this is important, but it does not actively inform us in trying to assess the utility and appropriateness of AI for the vast array of tasks we envision it to fulfil. Undoing the mythologisation of AI technologies requires closing the gap between AI's technical capabilities and its governing ethics.

We should see this vagueness as a direct product of the ephemerality AI has been imbued with. In our ethics, much like our understanding of AI, we can instead seek tangible answers. What should we use AI for? Identifying and clarifying the use case, and by extension the purpose of developing AI, is fundamental to sober assessments of the technology.

In this article, I want to focus in particular on what a directive and proactive ethics of action for AI could look like in the context of development. A proactive ethics opens up space for us to consider how we might use AI to create space to reimagine equitable development. In other words, how could AI be in service of something new and better, rather than AI in itself being seen as new and better? The development context allows us to embed technological progress into the question of shared economic upliftment.

Towards this end, what is the potential of an ethical approach to AI that prioritises AI for creative development? How might we use the process of demystifying AI to allow us to posit an AI ethics that is proactive: one that allows us to push against the historical determinacy of capitalism, and empowers us to seek collective forms of upliftment?

Reorienting the direction of AI

In the context of economic development, one key mechanism of mystification is at work: the creation of distance. AI is a technology fuelled by extraction, taking information and skills from one place and transferring them into a product that serves another. By severing the connection between producer and product, AI technologies make it more difficult to ensure that economic gain accrues to all spaces and places that contribute to its production. Content moderators for social media platforms or data labellers for machine learning who are paid a pittance in the Global South, very rarely have connection or claim on the Global North corporations profiting from their work. Indeed, data labellers in Kenya were not told whom or what product or purpose their labelling was for, nor that their work was for the multi-billion-dollar company Scale AI, a supplier to some of the biggest names in AI. Both Scale AI and its competitors have spread this approach to AI labour across the Global South, segmenting further the production line of AI in the pursuit of cheap labour.

The diffused network that feeds AI's expansion exacerbates this inaccessibility. AI takes the production line to new heights: where before, individuals placed a single bolt onto a car door ad infinitum, now they do not even know that the bolt is for a car door, let alone the car. With ever more diffused layers, the means of production of AI are obscured. Meaning, ill-treated workers or communities living with the environmental impacts of building AI models have little capacity to challenge the systems wreaking havoc on their lives.

This distance is venerated by economists and other proponents of AI, who point to ways in which AI advances the supposed frontier of innovation. They point to abstract improvements in processing speed or indicate the efficiency gains AI technology can contribute to the economy. This is a misnomer; what they really point to is the way AI broadens the gap between human and machine, rendering humans mere cogs in the AI machine. In this environment, processes of mystification thrive.

I would argue that it is vital to reorient the direction of AI: instead of widening economic inequalities and extending the technological gap between spaces, AI should be used to close this gap.

The politics of development

itself inhibits the potential economic utility of AI in the Global South. The historical lineage of the current model of development propped up by plunder, extraction and slavery – systems of white supremacy – has set up the global minority to enjoy the dividends of plunder in both the past and the present. Within this paradigm, the global majority has long experienced reduced opportunities, a differential that AI explicitly amplifies.

In fact, we can contextualise AI in a larger trend of technology widening the gap between the global majority and the global minority. The World Bank's Identification for Development (ID4D) initiative and expansion of digital ID systems in the global majority world underpinned by global minority companies means profit and data both flow back to the global minority. The biometric technology underpinning these systems is also often developed or provided by global minority companies. The use of technology by global minority donors, governments and corporations to entrench the spoils of ill-gotten gains is clear.

Rather than feeding the gap between global minority and global majority countries, AI should instead be aligned with trying to close this gap, to narrow the spaces in between, and reduce the margins on the edge of global development.

What does this mean in practice?

There is currently very little room to dream about alternatives to these models, or even what capitalism might look like in a very different landscape to the one it emerged in. Those trying to tread a different path face high opportunity costs, in part because there are high barriers of entry to creating the kind of infrastructure and living standards that support economic growth and societal development. Additionally, trying new things is risky in an environment where incorrect choices can have substantial long-term consequences.

There are two clear ways in which a proactive AI ethics focused on reducing distance can be useful in addressing these central challenges:

1. Processing information we already have about infrastructure. A key facet of AI is the ability to process large amounts of data in a fairly mundane sense. Tapping into the more mundane abilities of AI to help process existing information on prior developmental and infrastructure decisions from urban planners, architects and policymakers can help paint a picture of how the prior infrastructural decisions have panned out. The ability to then sift through this data and augment it with contextual and historical knowledge can allow for new pathways to be mapped out, and previous pitfalls to be avoided. Rather than turning to AI technologies for answers, planners and policymakers can look to them as a synthesising measure which is beholden to wider concerns and interests.

2. Supporting decision making about alternative futures. Imagining is often an expensive game and, at times, an impossible one given the strength of the status quo. But having the opportunity to dream, to explore different ways of growing, is critical to decision making. AI technologies can assist in visualising different scenarios, making alternatives more tangible for assessment and reflection. Using AI in this assistive rather than deterministic manner can reduce the start-up costs of undertaking economic development differently.

In this ethical paradigm, AI is limited to its utility in aid of uncovering new and more contextually rooted pathways of development. By putting AI technologies functionally in service of larger imaginings, we can unpick the threads that have woven a narrative of AI as being itself autonomously capable of imagining a new era.

Where to next?

A proactive approach to AI ethics posits that we should be explicit about the direction we want AI to face, the direction in which it should serve. By focusing the gaze of AI on responding to the needs of the global majority, and mobilising AI for those purposes in a directed manner, we can rein in its mystical status. In some ways this may seem limiting, and may at first glance appear insufficiently capacious for all that AI could be used for. And that is exactly the point. In developing an ethics of AI explicitly designed to limit AI's reach, motivated by a desire to close economic and technological distance rather than increase it, we are forced to engage earnestly with what AI can realistically, meaningfully and ethically provide.

Saying no to the techno-solutionists' voracious calls for the AI-ification of decision making, is saying no to the whims of rudderless innovation. It is saying no to a surveillance capitalism under which environmental impacts and the loss of labour rights are seen as simply the cost of doing business. Though this approach does not reshape capitalism fundamentally, it is possible, in bending the capitalistic tendencies of AI to the majority will, to find a clarity of ethics rooted in a clear-eyed understanding of AI.

Perhaps the most pernicious myth of all is that of AI's ungovernability. The tale that tells us we are incapable of either comprehending or curtailing AI's power. An ethical framework that is able to concisely inform and direct when AI is used can serve as an important reminder that sometimes myths really are just mere stories. ◆

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Colonialism revamped in the DRC

The ruinous legacy of colonial exploitation, coupled with ruthless new forms of extraction, are devastating the resource-rich Democratic Republic of Congo.

Soleil-Chandni Mousseau

A-hundred-and-forty years ago this November at the Berlin Conference, Belgium's King Leopold II was recognised as the sole owner of the Congo Free State, a territory including the entirety of today's Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Leopold's reign was marked by slavery, millions of deaths, and widespread atrocities committed during the first colonial exploitation of the territory's exceptional wealth of natural resources.

Sixty-four years after its independence, the DRC remains plagued by various forms of colonialism and extraction, resulting in massive human suffering, land grabs, human rights abuses, hunger and poverty.

Cartoon depicting Belgium's King Leopold II cutting up a pumpkin representing the Congo at the 1884 Berlin Conference.

Following the brutal reign of King Leopold II in what was then considered his private property, the Congo became a Belgian colony in 1908. Three years later, the colonial authorities granted British industrialist Lord Leverhulme a licence to create large-scale oil palm plantations on over 750,000 hectares. In addition to the theft of land from indigenous communities, historical records show that in the following decades, forced labour was used on a massive scale, enforced by the Belgian colonial army on behalf of Leverhulme. With the goal of establishing a monopoly, local communities were prevented from cultivating and trading oil palm despite the fact that they had produced it long before Belgian colonisation. These plantations fuelled the rise of the Lever Brothers and laid the foundation of what is today one of the world's largest multinational corporations – Unilever.

With their land forcibly stolen to establish the oil palm plantations, the Lokutu, Yaligimba and Boteka communities in the DRC remain displaced and afflicted with human rights and environmental abuses today. Their livelihoods are severely impacted by the lack of land, a situation that has been worsening over time as the population grows. Hunger and poverty are widespread, and the dumping of untreated industrial waste has polluted major sources of drinking water. Unilever sold the plantations in 2002, and they have changed ownership a few times since.

Remarkably, the land that became the private property of a Belgian king 140 years ago has still not been returned to its Congolese owners. Instead, it is now controlled by a US-based private equity fund, funnelling profits to its high-profile investors, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Trust and endowments of several prestigious universities in the United States.

Community members who work as labourers on the plantations are subjected to unpaid wages and harsh working conditions. Their day-to-day life is plagued by violence and repression prosecuted by plantation security forces and police forces directed by the company, with a myriad of unlawful detentions, beatings, torture and even murders. Residents in Lokutu rose up in March 2019 when the Congolese police, who had been sent to end the demonstrations, ended up firing live bullets into the crowd.

In addition to historical colonial exploitation, the DRC continues to face new forms of extraction, with even more dire consequences for the Congolese people. For the past three decades, the country has faced bloody conflicts which have claimed millions of lives, particularly affecting the mineral-rich eastern region of the country.

These wars not only destroy the country economically, they ruin its people, especially the women. The use of rape as a weapon in the DRC has been widely reported and is so prevalent that the country has been labelled the rape capital of the world. The United Nations estimates that more than 200,000 Congolese women are rape survivors. Congolese doctor Denis Mukwege, the Nobel Prize winner who earned the moniker 'the man who heals women', has spoken about how the global demand for the mineral coltan, like rubber and oil palm during Leopold's time, is fuelling conflict and, consequently, rape in his country. Mukwege has highlighted that the problem is not just the Congolese men and government, but pointed to the responsibility of the international community and the multinational corporations which benefit from Congo's mineral wealth in ensuring the return of peace.

In his book *King Leopold's Ghost*, the historian Adam Hochschild tells how the DRC has had the most difficulty escaping from the colonial powers even today. 'From the colonial era, the major legacy Europe left to Africa was not democracy as it is practised today in countries like England, France, and Belgium; it was authoritarian rule and plunder. On the whole continent, perhaps no nation has had a harder time than the Congo in emerging from the shadow of its past.' But with a strong government and good leaders, they could ensure the atrocities that happened before will never happen again.

Unfortunately, even the best Congolese leadership may not prove enough in the face of the massive economic interests at play for the extraction of the DRC's exceptional mineral wealth at a time when many industries, from cellphones to electric cars, are boosting the demand and competition over the pricey resources.

Two neighbouring countries, Rwanda and Uganda, are extensively involved in illegal exploitation of the DRC's mineral resources and the violence that has plagued the eastern region in the past three decades. In recent years, the Rwanda-backed rebel group M23 has intensified its activities, which resulted in the resurgence of widespread violence and massive displacement of people. For years, the United Nations has sounded the alarm over Rwanda's continued assistance to M23, putting forward solid evidence of the 'direct involvement' of Rwandan Defence Forces in the conflict in eastern Congo-Kinshasa, as well as Rwanda's provision of 'weapons, ammunitions, and uniforms' to the M23 rebels. The United Nations has also implicated Uganda, which has allowed M23 'unhindered' access to its territory during its operations.

Afrewatch 2020

Artisanal cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The massive economic interests at play for the extraction of the DRC's vast mineral wealth have fuelled bloody conflicts.

Despite this evidence, Western countries, especially the United States, have continued to provide support to the two countries, including military aid. This is happening despite the legal restrictions that are supposed to prohibit the US from releasing International Military Education & Training (IMET) funds to countries in the African Great Lakes region that 'facilitate or otherwise participate in destabilising activities in a neighbouring country, including aiding and abetting armed groups.' The US has continued to provide IMET assistance to Rwanda and Uganda every year to date. It was only in October 2023 that the US State Department placed Rwanda on a blacklist for violating the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (CSPA) due to Rwandan support for M23, which recruits child soldiers. Support to Uganda continues.

Violence is not the only consequence of the current forms of exploitation and extraction in the country. Whether it is from the firms producing palm oil or from the tech companies profiting from mineral extraction, the exploitation of the DRC's resources has had a dire impact on the country's economy. Poverty and hunger are widespread through what has often been labelled the 'resource curse', to describe countries not benefiting economically from their own natural resources. However, looking at the forces driving this exploitation, there is no curse. Rather, it is the cold and cynical attitude of governments and corporate actors that is to blame. ◆

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A brief history of kill lists from Langley to Lavender

Medea Benjamin and *Nicolas J.S. Davies* trace the grisly evolution of the technologies employed by US intelligence organs to identify and kill their enemies across the globe.

THE Israeli online magazine +972 has published a detailed report on Israel's use of an artificial intelligence (AI) system called 'Lavender' to target thousands of Palestinian men in its bombing campaign in Gaza. When Israel attacked Gaza after 7 October, the Lavender system had a database of 37,000 Palestinian men with suspected links to Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).

Lavender assigns a numerical score, from 1 to 100, to every man in Gaza, based mainly on cellphone and social media data, and automatically adds those with high scores to its kill list of suspected militants. Israel uses another automated system, known as 'Where's Daddy?', to call in airstrikes to kill these men and their families in their homes.

The report is based on interviews with six Israeli intelligence officers who have worked with these systems. As one of the officers explained to +972, by adding a name from a Lavender-generated list to the Where's Daddy? home-tracking system, he can place the man's home under constant drone surveillance, and an airstrike will be launched once he comes home.

The officers said the 'collateral' killing of the men's extended families was of little consequence to Israel. 'Let's say you calculate [that there is one] Hamas [operative] plus 10 [civilians in the house],' the officer said. 'Usually, these 10 will be women and children. So absurdly, it turns out that most of the people you killed were women and children.'

The officers explained that the decision to target thousands of these men in their homes is just a question of expediency. It is simply easier to wait for them to come home to the address on file in the system, and then bomb that house or apartment building, than to search for them in the chaos of the wartorn Gaza Strip.

The officers who spoke to +972 explained that in previous Israeli massacres in Gaza, they could not generate targets quickly enough to satisfy their political and military bosses, and so these AI systems were designed to solve that problem for them. The speed at which Lavender can generate new targets gives its human minders only an average of 20 seconds to review and rubberstamp each name, even though they know from tests of the Lavender system that at least 10% of the men chosen for assassination and familicide have only an insignificant or a mistaken connection with Hamas or PIJ.

The Lavender AI system is a new weapon, developed by Israel. But the kind of kill lists that it generates have a long pedigree in US wars, occupations and CIA regime-change operations. Since the birth of the CIA after the Second World War, the technology used to create kill lists has evolved from the CIA's earliest coups in Iran and Guatemala, to Indonesia and the Phoenix programme in Vietnam in the 1960s, to Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s and to the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Just as US weapons development aims to be at the cutting edge, or the killing edge, of new technology, the CIA and US military intelligence have always tried to use the latest data-processing technology to identify and kill their enemies.

The CIA learnt some of these methods from German intelligence officers captured at the end of the Second World War. Many of the names on Nazi kill lists were generated by an intelligence unit called Fremde Heere Ost (Foreign Armies East), under the command of Major General Reinhard Gehlen, Germany's spy chief on the eastern front (see David Talbot, *The Devil's Chessboard*, p. 268).

Gehlen and the FHO had no computers, but they did have access to four million Soviet prisoners of war from all over the USSR, and no compunction about torturing them to learn the names of Jews and communist officials in their hometowns to compile kill lists for the Gestapo and Einsatzgruppen.

After the war, like the 1,600 German scientists spirited out of Germany in Operation Paperclip, the United States flew Gehlen and his senior staff to Fort Hunt in Virginia. They were welcomed by Allen Dulles, soon to be the first and still the longest-serving director of the CIA. Dulles sent them back to Pullach in occupied Germany to resume their anti-Soviet operations as CIA agents. The Gehlen Organization formed the nucleus of what became the BND, the new West German intelligence service, with Reinhard Gehlen as its director until he retired in 1968.

After a CIA coup removed Iran's popular, democratically elected prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953, a CIA team led by US Major General Norman Schwarzkopf trained a new intelligence service, known as SAVAK, in the use of kill lists and torture. SAVAK used these skills to purge Iran's government and military of suspected communists and later to hunt down anyone who dared to oppose the Shah. By 1975, Amnesty International estimated that Iran was holding between 25,000 and 100,000 political prisoners, and had 'the highest rate of death penalties in the world, no valid system of civilian courts and a history of torture that is beyond belief.'

In Guatemala, a CIA coup in 1954 replaced the democratic government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman with a brutal dictatorship. As resistance grew in the 1960s, US special forces joined the Guatemalan army in a scorched-earth campaign in Zacapa, which killed 15,000 people to defeat a few hundred armed rebels. Meanwhile, CIA-trained urban death squads abducted, tortured and killed PGT (Guatemalan Labour Party) members in Guatemala City, notably 28 prominent labour leaders who were abducted and disappeared in March 1966.

Once this first wave of resistance was suppressed, the CIA set up a new telecommunications centre and intelligence agency based in the presidential palace. It compiled a database of 'subversives' across the country that included leaders of farming cooperatives and labour, student and indigenous activists, to provide ever-growing lists for the death squads. The resulting civil war became a genocide against indigenous people in Ixil and the western highlands that killed or disappeared at least 200,000 people.

This pattern was repeated across the world, wherever popular, progressive leaders offered hope to their people in ways that challenged US interests. As historian Gabriel Kolko wrote in 1988, 'The irony of US policy in the Third World is that, while it has always justified its larger objectives and efforts in the name of anticommunism, its own goals have made it unable to tolerate change from any quarter that impinged significantly on its own interests.'

When General Suharto seized power in Indonesia in 1965, the US embassy compiled a list of 5,000 communists for his death squads to hunt down and kill. The CIA estimated that they eventually killed 250,000 people, while other estimates run as high as a million.

Twenty-five years later, journalist Kathy Kadane investigated the US role in the massacre in Indonesia, and spoke to Robert Martens, the political officer who led the State-CIA team that compiled the kill list. 'It really was a big help to the army,' Martens told Kadane. 'They probably killed a lot of people, and I probably have a lot of blood on my hands. But that's not all bad – there's a time when you have to strike hard at a decisive moment.'

Kadane also spoke to former CIA director William Colby, who was the head of the CIA's Far East division in the 1960s. Colby compared the US role in Indonesia to the Phoenix programme in Vietnam, which was launched two years later, claiming that they were both successful programmes to identify and eliminate the organisational structure of America's communist enemies.

The Phoenix programme was designed to uncover and dismantle the National Liberation Front (NLF)'s shadow government across South Vietnam. Phoenix's Combined Intelligence Center in Saigon fed thousands of names into an IBM 1401 computer, along with their locations and their alleged roles in the NLF. The CIA credited the Phoenix programme with killing 26,369 NLF officials, while another 55,000 were imprisoned or persuaded to defect. Journalist Seymour Hersh reviewed South Vietnamese government documents that put the death toll at 41,000.

How many of the dead were correctly identified as NLF officials may be impossible to know, but Americans who took part in Phoenix operations reported killing the wrong people in many cases. Navy SEAL Elton Manzione told author Douglas Valentine (*The Phoenix Program*) how he killed two young girls in a night raid on a village, and then sat down on a stack of ammunition crates with a hand grenade and an M-16, threatening to blow himself up, until he got a ticket home.

'The whole aura of the Vietnam War was influenced by what went on in the "hunter-killer" teams of Phoenix, Delta, etc,' Manzione told Valentine. 'That was the point at which many of us realized we were no longer the good guys in the white hats defending freedom – that we were assassins, pure and simple. That disillusionment carried over to all other aspects of the war and was eventually responsible for it becoming America's most unpopular war.'

Even as the US defeat in Vietnam and the 'war fatigue' in the United States led to a more peaceful next decade, the CIA continued to engineer and support coups around the world, and to provide post-coup governments with increasingly computerised kill lists to consolidate their rule.

After supporting General Pinochet's coup in Chile in 1973, the CIA played a central role in Operation Condor, an alliance between right-wing military governments in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia, to hunt down tens of thousands of their and each other's political opponents and dissidents, killing and disappearing at least 60,000 people.

The CIA's role in Operation Condor is still shrouded in secrecy,

but Patrice McSherry, a political scientist at Long Island University, has investigated the US role and concluded, 'Operation Condor also had the covert support of the US government. Washington provided Condor with military intelligence and training, financial assistance, advanced computers, sophisticated tracking technology, and access to the continental telecommunications system housed in the Panama Canal Zone.'

McSherry's research revealed how the CIA supported the intelligence services of the Condor states with computerised links, a telex system, and purpose-built encoding and decoding machines made by the CIA Logistics Department. As she wrote in her book *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*: 'The Condor system's secure communications system, Condortel, … allowed Condor operations centres in member countries to communicate with one another and with the parent station in a US facility in the Panama Canal Zone. This link to the US military-intelligence complex in Panama is a key piece of evidence regarding secret US sponsorship of Condor….'

Operation Condor ultimately failed, but the US provided similar support and training to right-wing governments in Colombia and Central America throughout the 1980s in what senior military officers have called a 'quiet, disguised, media-free approach' to repression and kill lists.

The US School of the Americas (SOA) trained thousands of Latin American officers in the use of torture and death squads, as Major Joseph Blair, the SOA's former chief of instruction, described to John Pilger for his film *The War You Don't See*: 'The doctrine that was taught was that, if you want information, you use physical abuse, false imprisonment, threats to family members, and killing. If you can't get the information you want, if you can't get the person to shut up or stop what they're doing, you assassinate them – and you assassinate them with one of your death squads.'

When the same methods were transferred to the US hostile military occupation of Iraq after 2003, *Newsweek* headlined it 'The Salvador Option.' A US officer explained to *Newsweek* that US and Iraqi death squads were targeting Iraqi civilians as well as resistance fighters. 'The Sunni population is paying no price for the support it is giving to the terrorists,' he said. 'From their point of view, it is cost-free. We have to change that equation.'

The United States sent two veterans of its dirty wars in Latin America to Iraq to play key roles in that campaign. Colonel James Steele led the US Military Advisor Group in El Salvador from 1984 to 1986, training and supervising Salvadoran forces who killed tens of thousands of civilians. He was also deeply involved in the Iran-Contra scandal, narrowly escaping a prison sentence for his role supervising shipments from Ilopango air base in El Salvador to the US-backed Contras in Honduras and Nicaragua.

In Iraq, Steele oversaw the training of the Interior Ministry's Special Police Commandos – rebranded as 'National' and later 'Federal' Police after the discovery of their al-Jadiriyah torture centre and other atrocities.

Bayan al-Jabr, a commander in the Iranian-trained Badr Brigade militia, was appointed Interior Minister in 2005, and Badr militiamen were integrated into the Wolf Brigade death squad and other Special Police units. Jabr's chief adviser was Steven Casteel, the former intelligence chief for the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) in Latin America.

The Interior Ministry death squads waged a dirty war in Baghdad and other cities, filling the Baghdad morgue with up to 1,800 corpses per month, while Casteel fed the Western media absurd cover stories, such as that the death squads were all 'insurgents' in stolen police uniforms.

Meanwhile US special operations forces conducted 'kill-or-capture' night raids in search of resistance leaders. General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of Joint Special Operations Command from 2003–08, oversaw the development of a database system, used in Iraq and Afghanistan, that compiled cellphone numbers mined from captured cellphones to generate an ever-expanding target list for night raids and air strikes.

The targeting of cellphones instead of actual people enabled the automation of the targeting system, and explicitly excluded using human intelligence to confirm identities. Two senior US commanders told *The Washington Post* that only half the night raids attacked the right house or person.

In Afghanistan, President Obama put McChrystal in charge of US and NATO forces in 2009, and his cellphone-based 'social network analysis' enabled an exponential increase in night raids, from 20 raids per month in May 2009 to up to 40 per night by April 2011. As with the Lavender system in Gaza, this huge increase in targets was achieved by taking a system originally designed to identify and track a small number of senior enemy commanders and applying it to anyone suspected of having links with the Taliban, based on their cellphone data.

This led to the capture of an endless flood of innocent civilians, so that most civilian detainees had to be quickly released to make room for new ones. The increased killing of innocent civilians in night raids and airstrikes fuelled already fierce resistance to the US and NATO occupation and ultimately led to its defeat.

President Obama's drone campaign to kill suspected enemies in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia was just as indiscriminate, with reports suggesting that 90% of the

people it killed in Pakistan were innocent civilians. And yet Obama and his national security team kept meeting in the White House every 'Terror Tuesday' to select whom the drones would target that week, using an Orwellian, computerised 'disposition matrix' to provide technological cover for their life-and-death decisions.

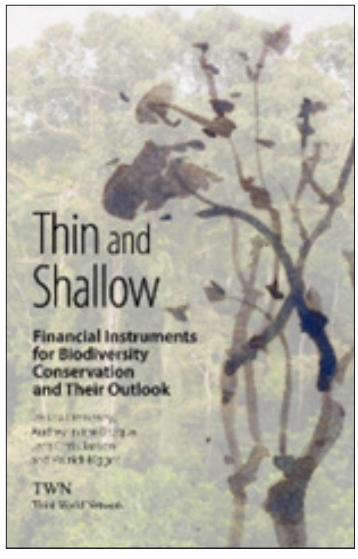
Looking at this evolution of ever-more-automated systems for killing and capturing enemies, we can see how, as the information technology used has advanced from telexes to cellphones and from early IBM computers to artificial intelligence, the human intelligence and sensibility that could spot mistakes, prioritise human life and prevent the killing of innocent civilians has been progressively marginalised and excluded, making these operations more brutal and horrifying than ever.

Nicolas has at least two good friends who survived the dirty wars in Latin America because someone who worked in the police or military got word to them that their names were on a death list, one in Argentina, the other in Guatemala. If their fates had been decided by an AI machine like Lavender, they would both be long dead.

As with supposed advances in other types of weapons technology, like drones and 'precision' bombs and missiles, innovations that claim to make targeting more precise and eliminate human error have instead led to the automated mass murder of innocent people, especially women and children, bringing us full circle from one holocaust to the next. ◆

Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J.S. Davies are the authors of War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict*, published by OR Books in November 2022. Benjamin is cofounder of CODEPINK for Peace, and the author of several books, including* Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Davies is an independent journalist, a researcher for CODEPINK and the author of* Blood on Our Hands: The American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. The above article is reproduced from ZNetwork (znetwork.org) under a Creative Commons licence (CC BY-NC 4.0).*

Thin and Shallow: Financial Instruments for Biodiversity Conservation and Their Outlook



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This paper examines the track record of private financial mechanisms aimed at funding conservation of biological diversity. It finds that, due to lack of rigorous and consistent benchmarks and monitoring, these investments may not necessarily safeguard biodiversity and could even, in some cases, have adverse impacts. Further, despite decades of attempts to draw private capital to biodiversity protection, the quantum of finance remains limited, especially in the highly biodiverse countries of the Global South where it is most needed.

Written for a research project established by a group of central banks and financial supervisors, this paper cautions these authorities from deploying resources towards promoting such biodiversity-focused private financial instruments. Instead, the supervisory bodies are urged to step up policy coordination to address drivers of biodiversity loss in the financial system.

Available at: https://www.twn.my/title2/books/pdf/Thin%20and%20shallow.pdf

The unremarkable migrant deaths in the Sahara

Making their way across the Sahara in search of a more secure life in Europe, many African migrants succumb to the perils of the vast desert, unnoticed and unmourned.

Vijay Prashad

Azer Koçulu

'[S]ome experts believe that more migrants die while crossing the Sahara Desert than in the Mediterranean Sea.'

SABAH, Libya, is an oasis town at the northern edge of the Sahara Desert. To stand at the edge of the town and look southwards into the desert towards Niger is forbidding. The sand seems to stretch past infinity, and if there is a wind, it lifts the sand to cover the sky.

Cars come down the road past the al-Baraka Mosque into the town. Some of these cars come from Algeria (although the border is often closed) or from Djebel al-Akakus, the mountains that run along the western edge of Libya. Occasionally, a white Toyota truck filled with men from the Sahel region of Africa and from western Africa makes its way into Sabah. Miraculously, these men have made it across the desert, which is why many of them clamber out of their truck and fall to the ground in desperate prayer. Sabah means 'morning' or 'promise' in Arabic, which is a fitting word for this town that grips the edge of the massive, growing and dangerous Sahara.

For the past decade, the United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM) has collected data on the deaths of migrants. This Missing Migrants Project publishes its numbers each year, and so this April, it released its latest figures. For the past 10 years, IOM says, 64,371 women, men and children have died while on the move (half of them died in the Mediterranean Sea). On average, each year since 2014, 4,000 people have died. However, in 2023, the number rose to 8,000. One in three migrants who flee a conflict zone dies on the way to safety. These numbers, however, are grossly deflated, since IOM simply cannot keep track of what it calls 'irregular migration'. For instance, IOM admits, '[S]ome experts believe that more migrants die while crossing the Sahara Desert than in the Mediterranean Sea.'

Sandstorms and gunmen

Abdel Salam, who runs a small business in Sabah, pointed out into the distance and said, 'In that direction is Toummo,' the Libyan border town with Niger. He sweeps his hands across the landscape and says that in the region between Niger and Algeria is the Salvador Pass, and it is through that gap that drugs, migrants and weapons move back and forth, a trade that enriches many of the small towns in the area, such as Ubari.

With the erosion of the Libyan state since the NATO war in 2011, the border is largely porous and dangerous. It was from here that the al-Qaeda leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar moved his troops from northern Mali into the Fezzan region of Libya in 2013 (he was said to have been killed in Libya in 2015). It is also the area dominated by the al-Qaeda cigarette smugglers, who cart millions of Albanian-made Cleopatra cigarettes across the Sahara into the Sahel (Belmokhtar, for instance, was known as the 'Marlboro Man' for his role in this trade). An occasional Toyota truck

makes its way towards the city. But many of them vanish into the desert, a victim of the terrifying sandstorms or of kidnappers and thieves. No one can keep track of these disappearances, since no one even knows that they have happened.

Matteo Garrone's Oscar-nominated *Io Capitano* (2023) tells the story of two Senegalese boys, Seydou and Moussa, who go from Senegal to Italy through Mali, Niger and then Libya, where they are incarcerated before they flee across the Mediterranean to Italy in an old boat. Garrone built the story around the accounts of several migrants, including Kouassi Pli Adama Mamadou (from Côte d'Ivoire, now an activist who lives in Caserta, Italy). The film does not shy away from the harsh beauty of the Sahara, which claims the lives of migrants who are not yet seen as migrants by Europe.

The focus of the film is on the journey to Europe, although most Africans migrate within the continent (21 million Africans live in countries in which they were not born). *Io Capitano* ends with a helicopter flying above the ship as it nears the Italian coastline; it has already been pointed out that the film does not acknowledge racist policies that will greet Seydou and Moussa. What is not shown in the film is how European countries have tried to build a fortress in the Sahel region to prevent migration northwards.

Open-air tomb

More and more migrants have sought the Niger-Libya route after the fall of the Libyan state in 2011 and the crackdown on the Moroccan-Spanish border at Melilla and Ceuta. A decade ago, the European states turned their attention to this route, trying to build a European 'wall' in the Sahara against the migrants. The point was to stop the migrants before they get to the Mediterranean Sea, where they become an embarrassment to Europe.

TM1972 (CC BY-SA 4.0)

French soldiers in Mali, 2016. While its troops have since been asked to leave the country, France had previously led efforts to stem migration through the Sahara to Europe.

France, leading the way, brought together five of the Sahel states (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) in 2014 to create the G5 Sahel. In 2015, under French pressure, the government of Niger passed Law 2015-36 that criminalised migration through the country. The G5 Sahel and the law in Niger came alongside European Union funding to provide surveillance technologies – illegal in Europe – to be used in this band of countries against migrants. In 2016, the United States built the world's largest drone base in Agadez, Niger, as part of this anti-migrant programme. In May 2023, Border Forensics studied the paths of the migrants and found that due to the law in Niger and these other mechanisms, the Sahara had become an 'open-air tomb'.

Over the past few years, however, all of this has begun to unravel. The coups d'état in Guinea (2021), Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023) have resulted in the dismantling of the G5 Sahel as well as the demand for the removal of French and US troops. In November 2023, the government of Niger revoked Law 2015-36 and freed those who had been accused of being smugglers.

Abdourahamane, a local grandee, stood beside the Grand Mosque in Agadez and talked about the migrants. 'The people who come here are our brothers and sisters,' he said. 'They come. They rest. They leave. They do not bring us problems.' The mosque, built of clay, bears within it the marks of the desert, but it is not transient. Abdourahamane told me that it goes back to the 16th century, long before modern Europe was born. Many of the migrants come here to get their blessings before they buy sunglasses and head across the desert, hoping that they make it through the sands and find their destiny somewhere across the horizon. ◆

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Allez Les Grenadières

Haiti's national women's football team have overcome imposing odds to become the pride of the country.

Magdala Louis

ACCORDING to Haitian sports journalist Bertinie Cherizard, 'Haiti is one of the bastions of women's football in the Caribbean.' Les Grenadières – named for an armed unit of the Haitian indigenous army – have attracted significant attention for being what international football governing body FIFA has called Haiti's golden generation of women footballers, making their impact known year after year in the face of overwhelming local obstacles. In 2023, the national senior women's football team competed in the women's World Cup for the first time – appearing with one of the youngest teams in average age, with only four players older than 25 and six teenagers on the squad – but were unable to make it out of the group stages. Les Grenadières appeared on the international stage again in February 2024 for the CONCACAF Women's Gold Cup preliminaries, competing for the final qualifying slot of the tournament against Puerto Rico.

The recent attention is certainly a boon, but this newfound visibility did not happen in a vacuum – it is the result of a hard-fought journey spanning over 50 years. In 1971, Parc Sainte Thérèse, located in Pétion-Ville, a suburb of Port-au-Prince about eight kilometres away from the heart of the city, began hosting young women's football games with girls from nearby neighbourhoods. That December, the Amazones, Haiti's premier women's football club, was founded. Other clubs quickly came to fruition – AS Tigresses, Excelsior from la Plaine, and Gladiatrice were founded by early 1972. By the second tournament at Parc Sainte Thérèse in October 1972, 10 women's football teams had signed up. The sport quickly expanded past the Port-au-Prince area – with teams like Aurore de Brach and Anacaona in Léogâne, Star des Gonaïves, Les Irondelles des Cayes, Les Jongleuses du Cap Haitien, and Surprise de Jacmel – and the clubs all had loyal fans and drew large crowds.

In October 1973, the Haitian Football Federation (FHF) officially recognised women's football, giving the teams access to the country's national stadium, Stade Sylvio Cator. This pivotal change allowed Haitians to easily walk to the women's games, eliminating prohibitive transportation costs for Port-au-Prince's working-class fans who would have to commute to Parc Sainte Thérèse. Over the years, more resources became available to women's football, like Camp Nou, a residential facility for young players offering traditional schooling in addition to sports training, referred to by most people as 'the ranch'.

Fifty years later, the women's national team is the darling of the country. 'Today, the excitement has been taken to a new dimension. More money has been invested into the women's football scene, there is more visibility, and the technology is more advanced. We have some veritable stars on the team,' said Cherizard.

Among these star players is national team captain Nérilia Mondésir – aptly nicknamed 'Nérigol' for her scoring capability – who started in AS Tigresses and now plays for France's Ligue 1 team Montpellier HSC. There is also Melchie Dumornay, a.k.a. Corventina – Haiti's star midfielder who 'is going to be one of the best players in the world,' according to the Stade des Reims head coach – and Batcheba Louis, the Most Beautiful Goal winner of France's top women's soccer division in the 2021–22 season. 'These ladies have been producing great results from the time they were participating in U20 and U17 tournaments,' Cherizard further explained. 'The recent World Cup qualification has attracted the attention of eyes outside of Haiti to our team, but in Haiti, we have been tapped in for a long time.'

Kerly Théus, the brilliant goalkeeper of the Haitian national team and FC Miami City, has undoubtedly become a darling of the Haitian people since the 2023 World Cup. Born on 7 January 1999 in Canapé-Vert, Pétion-Ville, Théus got her start playing in her neighbourhood like the rest of her teammates; her career as a goalkeeper began with the Aigle Brillante team in Port-au-Prince on a day when there was no other available goalkeeper. 'My sister yelled at me to go play goalie. I didn't want to do it; I wanted to play,' Théus recalled. 'There is this notion that you stick the players who aren't very good to guard the goal, so nobody wanted to play that position.'

Théus admits she was not a very good goalkeeper in her early days on the ranch. She recalls a game where her team was losing 3-1: 'They put me in the game, and we ended up losing five to three. There wasn't even that much time left on the clock,' she laughed. 'But I believe in hard work. Cristiano [Ronaldo] is my favourite player. He also believes in hard work. That's why he's earned several Ballons d'Or [an annual international football award]. That is also my goal.' Her discipline would pay off:

during the three matches played by the Grenadières in the World Cup, she was an essential element. While polls predicted Haiti would face overwhelming defeat against England, Théus prevented a massacre by making an impressive 10 saves and keeping the score to a 1-0 loss.

In February, qualifying senior national women's football teams of the Confederation of North, Central America, and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF) competed in the inaugural Women's Gold Cup. After the team successfully landed in second place in a qualifying group that included Costa Rica and Saint Kitts and Nevis, they were bested in their 17 February matchup with Puerto Rico. Haiti conceded a goal via a penalty in the 41st minute of the game; the Grenadières' impressive offensive efforts could not tie the match by halftime. Mondésir failed to take advantage of a penalty in the 75th minute, and the team ultimately lost 1-0. Despite the talent of the Haitian players and the high-level professional clubs to which they now belong, the women's team once again were not able to make it out of the qualifying rounds.

Théus blamed the loss on a lack of connection. 'There were many new players, many of our usual players were not there, and we had new staff,' she explained. 'We couldn't find the balance. It all comes down to connection. When you see us on the field, it's as if each person is doing their own thing.' This is in no small part due to years of lacking much of the necessary infrastructure that is viewed as vital to establishing a successful team on the world stage. While Haiti's fans may have been disappointed, the team still left its mark: one of the top scorers of the Road to CONCACAF qualifying games was Melchie Dumornay (who also plays for football club Olympique Lyonnais), tying with El Salvador's Brenda Cerén with eight goals each.

In 2020, two journalists published an article in *The Guardian* exposing interference, corruption and crimes within the Haitian Football Federation. The president of the FHF, Yves Jean-Bart, was accused of sexually abusing underage female players for several years at the ranch. The allegations included harassment, threats, blackmail and psychological pressure. Jean-Bart was ultimately removed from his position as a result and banned from holding a position at the federation by FIFA, but in 2023 he appealed before the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) and won. The investigative journalists and opposing organisations argue that the victims were threatened into silence. Despite CAS's ruling, the federation continues to be led by a normalisation committee.

Haiti's women's team made great strides to recover and continue to play at the highest level despite the impact of the damning allegations. But as they rebuilt, the team were also forced to confront their country's troubles. According to a UN report, 80% of Port-au-Prince is controlled by armed gangs. The catastrophe of insecurity that Haiti has been facing over the last few years has been a significant roadblock for the group and caused the ranch to shut down. The majority of social activities have been suspended, and Stade Sylvio Cator, located at the centre of several armed groups' strongholds, has been pillaged, burned and left inoperative, with the FHF unable to organise friendly matches.

Through the political upheaval, the women of the Haitian national team have preferred to avoid speaking about politics in the press or on social media. Members of the Haitian men's national selection are much more candid on social media and have faced criticism for making insensitive comments. The Grenadières are more cautious with their images, letting their impact as political symbols of pride be their main contribution to the discourse.

The sustained instability has significantly affected the team's cohesion, preventing the players from developing synchronicity among themselves. Friendly matches are a critical practice to building compatibility as a team, and since 2020, the Grenadières have played together outside official matches only four times in as many years. In addition to their limited playing experience as a team, the insecurity in the capital prevented the national teams from organising matches at home, forcing athletes to play in the neighbouring Dominican Republic. These games occurred amid a hostile diplomatic dispute between the two countries over the construction of a canal by Haitian farmers on the Massacre River, which runs between Haiti and the DR. These extenuating circumstances would easily decimate any team, making the Grenadières' accomplishments – from qualifications to scoring records – all the more impressive, all by a group of talented women who continue to persevere despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Over the last several decades, the Haitian people have faced a series of increasingly tragic crises, and Haiti's sports teams have not been spared. A corrupt federation, violent misogyny, a de facto government that has allowed all major institutions to crumble – the Haitian women's football team has had to confront unimaginable odds in their desire to represent their country. Despite this, they have managed to create something special – and although they could not make it past the group stage, history will remember Les Grenadières as forces to be reckoned with. 'Everything I'm doing right now is something I dreamed of,' Théus told us.

Through all of these obstacles, the Grenadières continue to fight. And whenever these young women take to the field, for 90 minutes, the Grenadières allow the Haitian people to dream. ◆

Magdala Louis was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. She studied psychology at Haiti State University, but her current focus is writing. In addition to being an editor, she is an author and screenwriter.

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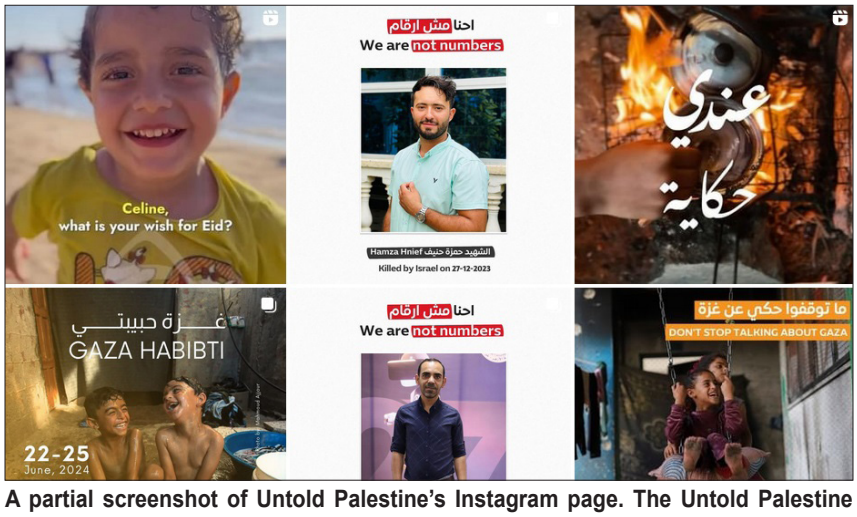
Telling the 'untold' stories of Palestinian lives, dreams and hopes

Even as the carnage in Gaza rages on, an independent media collective is helping Palestinians share their personal stories, and those of victims of the conflict, with the wider world.

April M. Short



A partial screenshot of Untold Palestine's Instagram page. The Untold Palestine platform aims 'to create a multifaceted image of the Palestinian people in all their diversity'.

AFTER a decade of struggling with infertility and undergoing IVF procedures, 27-year-old Alaa gave birth to her first son, Kareem – an 'energetic and brilliant child' with a 'sweet' soul who 'filled the house with joy.' Two years later she had another child, Ahmed, nicknamed Moudi, who was 'the funniest kid ever with his words and stories.'

Maram Al Masri, the boys' aunt, shared their story on Instagram, which was posted by the media collective platform Untold Palestine on 18 March 2024. On 8 January 2024, Kareem and Ahmed Al-Masry were killed by an Israeli artillery shell. 'It took away Kareem and Ahmed, the children we had longed for over many years … vanished in the blink of an eye.'

Kareem and Ahmed are two of more than 13,000 children killed by Israel's attacks on Gaza since 7 October 2023, according to figures provided by UNICEF on 17 March 2024.

Ibrahim Sha'ban loved life. He was 'like a book full of stories and memories, laughter and joy' and 'the best engineer in Gaza,' writes his brother, Mohammad Sha'ban, in a note shared by Untold Palestine on Instagram on 13 March. 'He was also my teacher for mathematics, physics, and Arabic and the keeper of my secrets. He filled us with his kindness, happiness, and love,' adds Mohammad. Ibrahim and his wife Aya, his 'soulmate in kindness and happiness,' had many projects and travels planned with their two children – the youngest not yet three months old – when the four of them were all killed by Israel on 24 October 2023.

As of March 2024, the Sha'ban family were among the more than 30,000 victims killed by Israel since the war began, in what UN experts have called a genocidal campaign. Despite ongoing mass protests worldwide, and a ruling in January 2024 by the International Court of Justice ordering Israel to do everything in its capacity to prevent death, destruction and any acts of genocide in Gaza, Israel has continued constant military bombardment in the region and prevented food and aid from reaching people in refugee camps in Gaza. Experts warned that millions of people in Gaza were on the brink of famine due to Israel's actions, PBS reported on 19 March.

Beyond its brutality in Gaza, Israel's military, as well as informal settler militias, have thwarted international law with violent attacks that have increased at an 'unprecedented rate' throughout Palestine since 7 October. For example, every morning, 42-year-old Lina Amr gets her children ready and takes them to school, 'saying goodbye with a heavy heart, as if it might be our last farewell.' She works as an ambulance officer at the Palestine Red Crescent Society in Hebron in the West Bank, and since 7 October, 'the dangers and

fears have increased on this job,' she writes in a post Untold Palestine shared on Instagram on 21 March 2024.

'We often face settler attacks and obstacles from checkpoints, settlements, and challenges by the Israeli occupation army, which threaten our lives and hinder our work. Sometimes, soldiers give us a minute to leave before opening fire, which has sadly happened,' she writes, noting that while paramedics were once protected in Israel (as they are supposed to be, by international law), they are now being directly targeted.

Untold Palestine

The personal narratives above were collected and shared by Untold Palestine, an independent digital media platform organised as a collective, which has been working since 2019 to share stories of Palestinian life, told by Palestinian people by way of photos that are accompanied by these stories on social media (shared in both Arabic and English).

As its website states, the stories they share 'are people-centred.' '[W]e shed light on their personality, interests, and passions.' In this way, Untold Palestine aims to connect the Palestinian diaspora throughout Palestine and around the world, and 'to create a multifaceted image of the Palestinian people in all their diversity. Our platform is an open space, and we want to make it accessible particularly … [for] those whose voices are usually not heard due to marginalization, racism, and exclusion.'

In addition to social media channels, Untold Palestine offers learning opportunities for artists and journalists, including photography trails for professional and amateur photographers.

Photographer Mohamed Badarne, who works with the Untold Palestine collective, spoke with me for the Independent Media Institute 160 days into Israel's bombardment of Gaza. He says that the Palestinian people are typically portrayed in much of the Western media through racist stereotypes, and are often presented as either the victims of violence or perpetrators of violence and terrorism. In the Arab media, they are often shown as heroes in the context of the struggles and clashes they witness almost on a daily basis. He says the Untold Palestine platform was established to paint a more accurate picture of Palestinians and to give people of the region a way to take back ownership of their stories. In this way, the platform might help humanise Palestinian people in the eyes of the world.

Badarne, a Palestinian from Haifa who is now living in Berlin, has been involved in social activism since he was a teen. He worked as a human rights organiser and teacher for years, before becoming a photographer when he was 35 years old. He has experience sharing the stories of those who have been overlooked or oppressed. His exhibition, the Forgotten Team, documented the treatment of 2022 FIFA World Cup workers in Qatar.

He says as a Palestinian person he always has to fight for his rights and safety. After facing years of racism in Israel, he moved to Berlin in 2012, but has faced more difficulty and racism living in Berlin.

'I work as a photographer and I hold workshops here for refugees and women,' he says. 'All of my work is focused on photography and storytelling for social change.'

Badarne says the Untold Palestine platform started out by sharing everyday stories about the hopes, dreams, art and activities in Palestine, across ethnicities and ages. The idea was to help people in Palestine to reclaim how they were portrayed. And the hope was that it would inspire people in other places in the world where narratives are often coopted into stereotypes, to take back their own stories as well.

'We don't often have the chance to tell our story as we want because the international media and Western media tend to control our stories – our photography, our videography, and our scenes … we don't have the chance, oftentimes, to bring our voices out,' he says. He adds that telling stories from everyday life can help people find shared humanity with Palestinians.

'People can be in solidarity with us when we bring our normal photos to the world,' he says. 'One of the very problematic things is that regimes, like the Israeli regime or Western regimes, don't see us as human. They don't see that we also like to dance, to swim, and to read books. And if you go to our platform, you will find hundreds and hundreds of doctors, teachers, engineers, women, children, and so on … and see that they have a life.'

He says one of the platform's challenges has been that while the idea is not to tell political stories but personal ones, they are often political by nature due to the realities of everyday life for Palestinians. He shares the example of a teacher who has to cross seven checkpoints on his way to school each day. 'He is the same teacher as everywhere in the world – he has the same dreams – but in the end his story is different,' Badarne says.

He says the goal of Untold Palestine is to give ownership of the Palestinian story back to its people – and that means their photos and stories need to be freed up to the public. Badarne says that Palestinian photographers and journalists seldom have the chance to publish their photos as they would like because they lack the access and funds necessary to reach larger media platforms.

'We established [Untold Palestine] because we believe that not just the Palestinians, but everyone who is under occupation, must have the right to tell their story as their own,' he says.

He says they aim to humanise as many victims as possible, telling their stories, in hopes of increasing

solidarity with Palestinians, and with all those people who are fighting for freedom.

'We Are Not Numbers'

Badarne says if you scroll back through the Untold Palestine platform before 7 October 2023, you will find photos and stories of women, children, artists, culture, beauty and life in Gaza and beyond.

'Now, we show the life that Israel destroyed,' he says.

He says that even before the war began on 7 October, it was not always easy to convince photographers, journalists and others in Palestine to share photographs and stories that had messages of hope, because so often they were focused on commemorating oppression and clashes. However, over time, Untold Palestine collected stories from all around Palestine, as well as from Palestinian people living around the world, which showed inspiring and humanising moments from daily life.

In the aftermath of 7 October – due to the level of bloodshed and violence Palestinians have been experiencing on a daily basis – the collective came to the decision to shift the focus to telling the stories of the lives of victims before they were killed.

This is what the collective has been doing since the war began, and the stories of the victims' lives have received millions of views. Badarne says that through these stories, people around the world may be better able to connect with the realities of what is happening at a human level, rather than seeing them as just numbers.

'People can be in solidarity with us not just when we are killed, not just when we are bloody … this is a kind of solidarity with the small details in life,' he says.

In fact, 'We Are Not Numbers' is the title of Untold Palestine's Instagram posts, which provide the stories of victims' lives shared by their friends and families.

The text at the top of these posts reads: 'With each martyr and martyr raised, it increases our responsibility to document their stories and lives, and ensure that they do not become just numbers.' This is followed by an invitation for people to send in photos and stories of those they've known who have been killed during the war.

'I think the kind of story that we publish has more effect than learning about "30,000 people killed",' Badarne says. 'I think about all the photos from Gaza that people see of tanks or bombing – now there are photos of life; these are photos and stories of the people, and details about people we care about.'

In addition to the stories of victims, the platform continues to share stories of those living in Palestine – like Lina Amr – including a daily post that often provides insights into the lives of people living in refugee encampments.

Badarne says the platform has inspired other groups to create similar platforms to share the life stories of people who are victims of war and violence, in various languages around the world.

The work of storytellers

Every day since 7 October, Badarne says, he or other members of the Untold Palestine collective learn about a personal friend or relative who has been killed, or receive an overwhelming number of stories from the friends and relatives of victims. The work 'is not easy' – and it's unending, because the violence is unending, and the stories keep flooding in.

'We publish stories about the lives of our friends and people that we know … and we don't have the time to be sad about our friends,' he says. 'All the time you must publish news.'

He notes that Untold Palestine's photographers in Gaza are working under very difficult conditions. 'They suffer on two levels: First, they are photographers and they must [keep] storytelling, and tell the stories of other people,' he says. 'Second, they must also care for their families – and themselves are victims.'

He says working as a media collective, rather than a top-down media channel, allows Untold Palestine's storytellers, photographers and videographers to mutually support and uplift each other. 'We try to give our photographers [on the ground in Gaza] power and support,' he says. 'We work with them; we try to help them. We try to work together … to spotlight their photos and stories.'

The Untold Palestine team mostly comprises people from Gaza and the West Bank, and most work as volunteers, while the organisation is funded by donations. They operate under the umbrella Yura, a nonprofit based in Berlin. Badarne says the collective is a mix of media and art, and that it hopes to increasingly fund itself through its own art rather than relying on outside funders. For example, he shares that there was an exhibition in Berlin in early 2024 where they sold the photos of their photographers.

'While our goal is to become self-funded through art projects, donations play a critical role in the sustainability of our operations,' he says. 'In addition, we have partnerships with organisations such as the IMS [International Media Support], the EED [European Endowment for Democracy], and the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders, as well as individual donors and grants from other organisations.'

Badarne says another hope of the collective is to expand on the concept to include other places. He imagines organisations such as Untold Sudan, Untold Morocco, Untold Africa and so on.

'Our goal is to bring this kind of model to other places, and also to bring more voices about people and life everywhere because we think that solidarity is the main

way to change the narrative,' he says. He thinks the only real solution is to free Palestine, and the only way to do this is through global solidarity. And, according to Badarne, solidarity has poured in from everywhere as the platform continues to share people's stories.

After sharing the stories of the lives cut short in Gaza, 'still more people are killed' each day. This can be disheartening. Badarne says it is difficult at the moment for him and the Untold Palestine team, and the situation has taken a toll, but that there is no time or room to rest and feel it or mourn, as the requests to share stories keep pouring in.

'You can't rest, you can't just cry for your friends that you've lost – and it is very sad every day to [read] messages and there are people telling you, "Please talk about my family", or "Talk about my brother, talk about this…",' he says. 'This work is really a responsibility. You can feel so bad about the situation.'

Badarne thinks that with time, the power dynamics will change. He says little changes have already given him hope and gives the example of mass protests against Israel's actions in the US that have been led by Jewish people, as well as protests around the world that are fighting for human rights and basic freedoms of the Palestinian people.

'My team and I, we think about it as this: we did our best; we did everything to bring the stories [to the world],' he says. 'Every day that I see a new story on our platform, I believe more that we have hope. And because of the people that are still in Gaza, there is no way to stop talking about Palestine.' ◆

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Rio's street poets have something to say

The artists who sell their poems on the streets of Rio de Janeiro see the occupation of public space as a necessary effort to expand self-expression and access to art.

Hannah McKenzie

Hannah McKenzie

Nelson Neto selling poems in Rio de Janeiro.

'DO you like poetry?' Depending on the day, if you stand outside the Banco do Brasil Cultural Centre or the National Library in Rio de Janeiro's city centre, you may hear this question hundreds of times. Most people don't stop to respond. Perhaps they have not even heard, lost in the rush. It is worth stopping to listen.

The people who ask this question day in and day out are the *poetas da rua* or street poets of Rio, who walk the streets selling independently printed, palm-sized books of their poetry for a flexible price. On the cover and within the pages, the poets include their own visual art, usually drawings or prints of collages. Many of these poets make a living solely off their poems; some have been at it for decades. The poets see their work as something beyond themselves and their self-expression – something bigger, a sort of essential pushback to the dynamics of power and artistic practice that shape the immense and complicated city of Rio de Janeiro.

I recently had the pleasure of speaking with Marquinho Torre, Nelson Neto and Shaina Marina, three of Rio's street poets, to learn more about the political dynamics that surround their work as public artists.

A free speech platform

Nelson, who entered the street poetry scene 20 years ago, says he found the zine medium through involvement in Rio's punk music scene and Black liberation movement. The street poets' writing is often political, always personal. Among endless other topics, their poems deal with racism, misogyny, police brutality, and daily life in the city's peripheries, both its challenges and ordinary joys.

Shaina is a founding member of the collective 'Nós, as Poetas!' (We, the Poets!), a group composed of 23 women street poets across Brazil. The group recently published a poetry collection focused on experiences of gender-based violence. 'I wanted to talk about what bothers me in society, the things that turn me inside out,' Shaina told me. 'It's about revolutionising people's mentality through art.'

Marquinho recites a poem for me to illustrate the kind of themes he deals with in his work. Throughout our conversation, he rarely breaks eye contact. He pauses briefly to make sure I know the word *camburão*, meaning police van.

They manipulate my opinion
Crucify me in a police van
They call me a thief
Steal my dignity
Stab me with a knife
Turn my pen into handcuffs of solitude
Vaccinate my brothers
They steal my thoughtfulness
Throw me in the desert to preach to

cacti and aimless winds
Look what a transformation:
from hero, I'm considered an imbecile
Hypnotise me
Teleport me to a world without crisis
Where my heart redeems
And frees itself from sadness

From abstraction to concrete political manifesto, street poems serve as a sort of platform for grassroots, raw, uncensored political discourse. Very often, the street poets write about their love of the street. The artists speak proudly about the freedoms allowed by the independent nature of their work, in contrast to working in formal art roles or with publishers.

Hannah McKenzie

Shaina Marina's latest poems, March 2024.

Shaina, who has been writing and selling her work for eight years, says that on a typical day working outside a popular spot in downtown Rio, she typically sells 30 or 40 poetry booklets. All three poets spoke of travel. Marquinho took recent trips to Minas Gerais and Paraíba, financed fully by his poems. 'I'm known as the guy who lives exclusively from poetry,' he brags. Nelson told me about a trip from Rio to Porto Alegre, stopping to sell in more than 50 small towns across approximately 1,000 miles. When we met, Shaina had just returned from a weeklong trip to São Paulo, where she'd sold 309 poetry booklets.

Along with being able to choose their work hours, locations and production timelines, above all, the artists speak about the freedom they find in the writing itself. 'I can talk about whatever I want to,' Nelson explains. 'There won't be any marketing department that will say "don't talk about it because it doesn't sell".' Similarly, Shaina tells me she can't imagine letting someone tell her how she should express her voice, or how she should format or bind her poetry books. 'I like to be totally free in the way I express myself,' she says.

A love for the street

Outside the writing itself, Rio's street poets take on a political role by the very nature of the physical space they occupy. For these artists, the street stands in sharp contrast to more 'mainstream' artistic and literary spaces in Rio, which they say are often accompanied by elitism and exclusion. Marquinho mentions the South Zone of Rio in particular, naming discrimination perpetrated by a majority white, Portuguese or otherwise European-descendent people: 'They create a wall so that I don't enter … It comes from imperialism,' he says.

He notes the challenges that Black and peripheral artists face in accessing financial resources that are available in Rio to support the arts, and connects this exclusion to one from his childhood, when he recalls being pointedly excluded from art classes. In public art, by contrast, Marquinho named himself a poet: 'Nobody said this to me: you are a poet. I hit my chest and said, "Bro, I'm a poet".'

Writing without searching for outside publication or validation, these street poets define their own worth and work. Nelson disagrees with the idea that one must be famous to call themselves an artist. The street poets in Rio work to construct an inclusive space for artistic expression, one without walls, without tricky doors to unlock: the urban environment. Towards this aim, the street poets make deliberate efforts to expand the streets they occupy beyond the city centre, also frequenting more peripheral parts of the city or ordinary public transit routes.

Nelson tells me that poetry events often feel very formal and 'closed'. In response to feeling unwelcome or uncomfortable in mainstream poetry settings, the street poets have built something else in their *saraus* (evening parties) held in the open air of Rio. 'We abolish the microphone,' Nelson explains. He had seen at other poetry events that the microphone intimidates some artists, preventing some from sharing their work publicly. 'We thought, let's do ours in a way that people feel free,' he said, adding that after they began doing no-mic events, several poets told him it was the first time they felt the courage to recite.

'We are always occupying some square, some corner, some place where we can hang around,' says Nelson. He explains that many people have a non-collective vision of the street, viewing it as a place belonging to others, to commerce, or to the State. 'People pass through without understanding that we are all part of the street,' Nelson tells me. 'If you stand on a corner for half an hour, you realise that everything has changed. You will see that the place is alive, it has a

whole dynamic. And the occupation of public space with art is essential for critical thinking and expression.'

He connects this collective use of the street to the hip-hop movement some years ago. People took to the streets with political ideas, he explains: 'They saw, the street is mine. The street is ours.' Sometimes people spend hours on a bus to come to Rio's city centre to produce or access art, he explains. 'People feel nothing is happening [in the peripheries] because there are no cultural institutions. But the street is perfect for that,' Nelson says, suggesting that street art offers an escape from the capitalist constraints that are normally associated with art.

'Think of a young guy who takes two buses to get here to the city centre, who has to leave before midnight because the buses will stop running,' says Nelson. 'For him to be able to have fun close to home with quality work, the same quality he has here in the centre and in the South Zone, this is extremely political. And it can create new perspectives for that young person of what his life could be like.'

Hannah McKenzie

Street poets at one of their *saraus* (evening parties) in Rio.

The role of the street poet

'I've always done social work, but I didn't know I was doing social work, you know?' Marquinho says to me, reflecting on the role of the public artist. 'I took young people from my community and made them write, draw, do graffiti. Where I live, they said that graffiti was a crime, so I thought I was a criminal. And then I discovered that I did social work, you know?' Marquinho goes on to say that three of these young people were killed by a local militia, prompting him to dedicate his poetry to the youth in his community who have lost their lives.

Nelson conceptualises the work of the street poet differently. He says that the 'welfare-oriented view' of social work doesn't resonate with him, and that his work is more 'anarchist', based on the assumption that his capacity is the same as anyone else's. He fell into this role as a street poet by a twist of fate. 'I don't see the poet as an enlightened, superior being,' he explains. 'Poetry for me is as important as the bricklayer who builds your house, as the salesman, as the plumber. For me, the needs are the same.' That said, there is something special about his work, something he tries to share with others: 'There is an autonomy that poetry can give you. I don't mean just poetry, but street art itself. You have your financial autonomy, your autonomy of expression.'

The street is not an easy place to work. Some artists mention selling on the street as a site where Rio's racist dynamics play out most clearly. Beyond that, unsurprisingly, there is a softer, consistent rejection. Standing with Nelson, I watch as dozens of people pass, negating the question '*Você gosta de poesia?*' Oftentimes, they don't respond at all. Nelson says he sometimes sells outside of public universities, and that he has more luck selling outside the maths and physics buildings than outside of literature wings. The poets take the rejection in stride, generously waiting for a moment of patience.

I stand with Nelson as he works the side entrance of a museum downtown. He has a gentle energy and a tote bag full of poems. I ask him about the people who say no. He tells me about one man who, when asked if he liked poetry, said 'I don't even like lasagna.' 'Look how poetic that is! That guy, he has a conscience, he is aware of the beauty of poetry,' says Nelson. Though he considers his poetry political, he does not see it as resistance: 'Because art is natural, like breathing, like eating. It's in the essence of being human,' Nelson explains. 'A baby learns to dance first and then he will walk. He claps before writing, he sings before speaking.'

Do you like poetry? It's hard not to, Nelson tells me. ◆

Hannah McKenzie is a freelance journalist with a background in anthropology, reporting on culture and human rights from Rio de Janeiro. This article is reproduced from nacla.org, the website of the North American Congress on Latin America.