THE UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

TOGETHER WE ACHIEVE

International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples 2025

"Indigenous Peoples and AI: Defending Rights, Shaping Futures"

8 August 9:00 - 10:30 AM EST/New York

Virtual commemoration

The International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is celebrated globally on 9 August. It marks the date of the inaugural session of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1982.[1] To commemorate the International Day, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) is organizing a virtual commemoration on Friday 8 August 2025 on the theme: *Indigenous Peoples and AI: Defending Rights, Shaping Futures*.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping our world at an unprecedented pace, transforming ways of life, work, interactions, and creating breakthroughs across education, healthcare and agriculture.[2] While it offers great potential, it also brings significant risks.[3] This holds especially true for Indigenous Peoples.

UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/78/265 from 2024 emphasized that human rights and fundamental freedoms must be respected, protected and promoted throughout the life cycle of artificial intelligence systems. Respecting Indigenous Peoples' rights is essential to realizing the positive potential of AI and avoiding perpetuating harm. Without safeguards, the potential of AI is unlikely to be distributed equitably and may instead contribute to widening digital divides.[4] Left unchecked, AI risks perpetuating colonial legacies.

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[1] Resolution adopted by the General Assembly 49/214. International Decade of the World's Indigenous People

[2] UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, "Great Power, Greater Responsibility: UN Secretary-General Calls For Shaping AI For All Of Humanity", statement at the AI Action Summit 2025, 11 February 2025.

[3] *Governing AI for Humanity: Final Report* (United Nations publication, 2024)

[4] *Governing AI for Humanity: Final Report* (United Nations publication, 2024)

A Matter of Governance, Rights and Inclusion

Indigenous Peoples' rights, including their rights to self-determination, lands, territories, and resources, languages, as well as the right to free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), are well-established in international law.[5] AI development, implementation and governance intersects directly with this. Upholding these rights in the AI context is essential to ensure that AI does not reproduce historical patterns of exclusion, marginalization, and appropriation.

Indigenous Peoples have long advocated for data sovereignty – the right to own, control and govern their own data.[6] In this regard, FPIC is fundamental to ensure that Indigenous Peoples have a say in how their data is used and shared, including through AI. This must be ensured by companies and developers that use Indigenous Peoples' data, knowledge, or cultural heritage in AI systems.

Decisions on the development and use of AI are currently led by powerful governments and major tech companies such as Microsoft, Google, and Amazon, with little or no representation of Indigenous Peoples. This exclusion raises serious concerns, including the lack of FPIC for the use of Indigenous data, knowledge, images, or identities in AI systems. The lack of meaningful participation in the development of AI regulations and ethical frameworks, whether in multilateral forums or private spaces led by the tech sector, can significantly undermine efforts that AI development respects and protects the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Global frameworks such as UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and the Global Digital Compact both emphasize the importance of inclusive governance of AI.[7] Meaningful inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in the development, implementation and governance of AI is essential – as recommended by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in its 24th session .[8] This is critical to ensure that its positive

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[5] See United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, A/RES/61/295, and ILO Convention No. 169

[6] UNESCO, "Leveraging UNESCO Normative Instruments for an Ethical Generative AI Use of Indigenous Data", 8 November 2023

[7] General Assembly Resolution A/RES.79/1; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence: Adopted on 23 November 2021*, (Paris, 2022)

[8] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2025, Supplement No. 23*, E/2025/43-E/C.19/2025/8

potential can be realized in line with the needs and wants of Indigenous Peoples themselves, without perpetuating or exacerbating inequities and harm. This also includes addressing the digital divide and barriers such as limited access to digital infrastructure, connectivity, and technical training, which continue to exclude many Indigenous Peoples from full participation in AI-related processes.

The Extractive Logics of AI, Environmental Impacts and Other Challenges

AI technologies are built and trained on vast amounts of online data. When Indigenous Peoples' languages, knowledge, and cultural materials are included in such datasets without transparency and their FPIC, it risks perpetuating patterns of exploitation and appropriation that Indigenous Peoples long have resisted.

The data that AI models are trained on also frequently excludes or misrepresents Indigenous Peoples, their knowledge and voices. AI algorithms also tend to be biased by the worldview of the developers. Such AI models are thus likely to reflect and may even exacerbate existing inequities. [9] For example, with increasing use of biometric and facial recognition technologies, this can contribute to further misidentification and profiling of Indigenous Peoples.

Moreover, AI systems depend on immense computational infrastructure with data centers that require significant amounts of electricity for their operations, water for cooling, raw materials for manufacturing electronics. [10] This can significantly intensify climate and environmental pressures. When situated near Indigenous Peoples' territories and lands, they can also exacerbate environmental degradation and resource scarcity, negatively affecting water availability and fragile ecosystems that Indigenous Peoples depend on for their survival and ways of life.

Construction of data centers and manufacturing of the electronics needed also requires significant raw materials, critical minerals and rare elements. Mineral extraction frequently results in land dispossession, environmental degradation, loss of livelihoods, and threaten the health, cultural heritage and spiritual connections of Indigenous Peoples whose lands

[9] EMRIP, Eighteenth session 14-18 July, A/HRC/EMRIP/2025/2
[10] UNEP, "AI has an environmental problem. Here's what the world can do about that.", 21 September 2024

are rich in extractive minerals.[11] The additional demand for critical minerals and rare elements from such data centers risks exacerbating such pressures and impacts. For example, in northern Chile Indigenous Atacameño Peoples are resisting AI-powered mining operations that extract lithium and copper—key materials for AI hardware and electric vehicles. These operations use AI to optimize extraction and logistics, threaten sacred lands and water sources in the Atacama Desert and are being challenged for violating Indigenous rights and environmental protections.[12]

There are also risks tied to the electronic waste produced by such data centers, which often contain hazardous substances such as mercury and lead.[13] Mercury exposure linked to extractive industries already presents a health crisis that negatively affects Indigenous Peoples, and in particular, Indigenous women.[14] As such, e-waste from AI data centers could further expose Indigenous Peoples to toxic substances when discarded on or near their lands.

Opportunities Through Rights-Based Innovation and Indigenous Leadership

Despite significant challenges and risks, AI also holds notable opportunities through Indigenous leadership and innovations. Across the world, Indigenous Peoples have already started exploring the use of AI, in ways that are in line with their priorities, cultures and ways of life. AI can be an important tool for intergenerational knowledge sharing and empowerment of Indigenous youth, enabling new ways of preserving and revitalizing culture, language and identity. However, there are still no specific mechanisms in place to support technology initiatives with cultural identity. Therefore, it is essential that international mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund, include dedicated lines of support for AI and Indigenous Peoples.

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[11] International expert group meeting on the theme "The rights of Indigenous Peoples, including those in voluntary isolation and initial contact in the context of critical minerals" Note by the Secretariat, E/C.19/2025/4

[12] Hao, Karen, "The real cost of AI is being paid in deserts far from Silicon Valley", *rest of world*, 26 May 2025.

[13] UNEP, "AI has an environmental problem. Here's what the world can do about that.", 21 September 2024

[14] International expert group meeting on the theme "The rights of Indigenous Peoples, including those in voluntary isolation and initial contact in the context of critical minerals" Note by the Secretariat, E/C.19/2025/4

One of such areas where AI may offer significant positive potential is in the revitalization of Indigenous languages, many of which are at risk of disappearing.[15] AI can help to document Indigenous languages, create content that can help revive their use, and make information more accessible. Similarly, AI can also help document and preserve Indigenous Peoples cultural heritage and practices, as long it is done with the consent of the Indigenous Peoples concerned. This can help preserve and safeguard Indigenous Peoples' cultural practices and knowledge for future generations.[16]

Across the globe, Indigenous Peoples are already leading the way. In Polynesia, Indigenous-led reef conservation projects are using AI to monitor coral health and restore marine ecosystems—blending traditional ecological knowledge with cutting-edge technology. In Inuit territories, AI models are being co-developed with Indigenous wisdom to help communities adapt to climate change, including shifting ice patterns and food security.[17] Through initiatives like Natives Rising, Indigenous technologists are exploring AI's role in emotional wellness, language revitalization, and digital sovereignty.[18] In New Zealand, Te Hiku Media is using AI, including a natural language processing tool, to help revitalize and promote the Māori language.[19] These are just some of several Indigenous-led innovations utilizing AI.

To realize the positive potential AI holds for Indigenous Peoples, especially when led by Indigenous Peoples themselves, it is critical to invest in culturally rooted, Indigenous-led digital tools and innovations. Indigenous Peoples are not only users of AI, they are co-creators, decision-makers, and rights-holders. As such, Indigenous Peoples must be meaningfully part of AI development, implementation and governance to avoid perpetuating harms, and realizing the positive potential of AI.

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[15] UNESCO, "UNESCO celebrates the International Decade of Indigenous Languages", *Press release*, 9 December 2022

[16] EMRIP, Eighteenth session 14-18 July, A/HRC/EMRIP/2025/2

[17] Martinescu, Livia. "AI for Climate Change: Using artificial and indigenous Intelligence to fight climate change", Oxford Insights, 4 December 2023

[18] Walther, Cornelia C. "Tech With Respect: AI And Indigenous Community Power", Forbes, 17 April 2025.

[19] EMRIP, Eighteenth session 14-18 July, A/HRC/EMRIP/2025/2

Format

The virtual commemoration will take place online. It will include an opening segment and statement from the Chair of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. A moderated panel with invited speakers will consider and discuss how Indigenous Peoples rights can be ensured in the age of AI, and the associated challenges and opportunities Indigenous Peoples face.

Indigenous Peoples, Member States, UN entities, civil society, and the public are all invited to attend.

Interpretation will be available between English and Spanish, kindly provided by FILAC.