Outcome document 2: Roundtable on Democracy and Artificial Intelligence
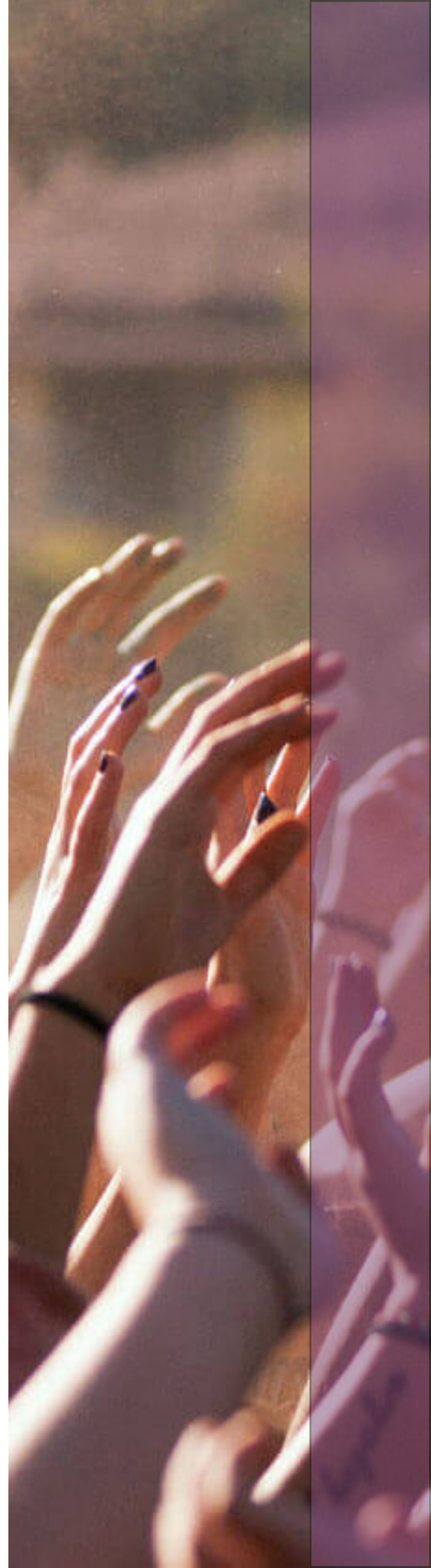
How to Foster Democratic Practices in the Governance of Artificial Intelligence?

Understanding the links between multilateralism & democracy to tackle global challenges more effectively

January 2025

On 28 November 2024, the Kofi Annan Foundation and the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Geneva Graduate Institute convened the second in a series of thematic roundtables exploring the intersections of democracy and global governance in Geneva. This session focused on artificial intelligence (AI) and its implications for democratic practices and the multilateral system. Close to 30 experts from international organizations, civil society, academia, and the private sector participated, examining how AI intersects with democracy and multilateralism. The discussion highlighted four key themes, along with actionable recommendations, as outlined below.

THEME 1: Equity and Inclusion in AI Global Governance

The governance of AI is deeply embedded in existing socio-political power structures, reflecting and amplifying entrenched inequalities. Power and resources are concentrated in a small number of countries and corporations, primarily in the Global North, exacerbating global inequities and marginalizing voices from the Global South. The lack of data sovereignty further disempowers nations and communities by exporting control over locally generated data. Additionally, AI systems often reinforce biases in their training data, disproportionately impacting marginalized groups, which threatens democratic principles and practices. Beyond biases, entire communities and issues are systematically excluded from decision-making processes, perpetuating "silences" in democratic governance. The risk for AI to increase the digital divide, particularly in regions like Africa, underscores the urgent need for equitable access to AI benefits and opportunities.

Recommendations:

1. *Adopt a rights-based framework rooted in international human rights law to ensure equity in AI governance.*
2. *Invest in capacity-building and literacy programs, particularly in underrepresented regions, to empower diverse stakeholders.*

THEME 2: Participatory and Multi-Stakeholder Approaches

AI global governance frameworks often fail to include civil society, marginalized groups, and local actors in meaningful ways. While multi-stakeholderism is increasingly recognized as essential, AI, data innovation, and financial capacity concentration in the hands of a few large technology companies limit genuine and inclusive collaboration. These companies act as de facto political actors, shaping global AI governance while prioritizing profit over public accountability. The exclusion of diverse voices, especially from the Global South, perpetuates systemic inequities. Broad access to AI technologies, which remains problematic, does not automatically translate into equitable participation in their governance.

Recommendations:

1. *Promote multi-stakeholder governance models that include governments, private actors, academia, and civil society.*

2. *Support training programs to enhance the participation of underrepresented groups in AI governance and AI standard-setting processes.*
3. *Establish accountability mechanisms to ensure that technology companies adhere to standards and human rights principles.*

THEME 3: Balancing Innovation, Safety, and Democratic Values

AI technologies possess a dual-use nature, offering significant benefits while also posing substantial risks. Positive applications, such as enhancing accessibility and efficiency, coexist with harmful uses, including disinformation, surveillance, and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions. The self-referential nature of AI-generated content can create feedback loops that manipulate perceptions and behaviours, compounding these risks. AI governance faces a persistent "trilemma" of balancing participation, safety, and innovation. Decisions often prioritize rapid technological advancement over inclusivity or safety, undermining public trust. The environmental impact of AI systems, particularly their energy consumption, presents an additional paradox that must be addressed to ensure sustainable development.

Recommendations:

1. *Adopt an ethical approach to navigate the complexities of governance decisions without relying on binary narratives.*
2. *Implement safety-by-design guidelines that integrate ethical considerations throughout AI development and deployment.*
3. *Address the environmental impact of AI by prioritizing energy-efficient models and sustainable practices.*

THEME 4: Human Rights and Structural Accountability

Human rights are increasingly at risk in the AI era. The unchecked influence of large tech companies threatens political and social rights by concentrating power and wealth while marginalizing civil society. The failure to establish enforceable standards allows these corporations to shape political opinion formation with limited accountability, often at the expense of privacy, equity, and democratic integrity. Efforts to combat these challenges must focus on integrating human rights principles into national and global governance frameworks, particularly through multilateral mechanisms. However, soft recommendations by international organisations alone are insufficient; there is a need to transition toward enforceable standards.

Recommendations:

1. *Anchor AI governance in human rights principles to protect individual freedoms.*
2. *Transition from soft recommendations to enforceable conventions that ensure accountability.*
3. *Prioritize data sovereignty and equitable access to digital infrastructure, particularly in the Global South.*

Conclusion: Towards Inclusive, Ethical AI Global Governance

The roundtable underscored the need for AI global governance frameworks that prioritize equity, inclusion, and accountability. The need to urgently address systemic flaws, amplify diverse voices, and adopt ethical approaches to decision-making was evident. Also clear is the contribution that international Geneva and its ecosystem of multilateral actors can and must make to these efforts. Several of the recommendations for action identified in the discussions align with the mandates of the participants in the roundtable and those of the Kofi Annan Foundation and the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. Many are also pertinent to the manner in which participants use AI within their own organisations – The Foundation and Graduate Institute will continue to mobilise International Geneva to advocate for the implementation of the recommendations, and where possible or appropriate, act directly on them to deliver inclusive and ethical AI use and governance.