AI and Data for sustainable development

13 December 2024, 0900-1200h, Meeting room A, UN Conference Centre, Bangkok

Summary

Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems present new opportunities for sustainable development and sustainable development monitoring. Applications include remote sensing for earth observation, generative AI to enhance data and information accessibility, and machine learning to tap into unstructured data sources, among others. AI, though, has pitfalls, ranging from connectivity needs, the possibility of biased outputs, and its environmental impact. It is no surprise that AI and official statistics have together become a topic of conversation in the data and statistics world, with entities of all kinds including the UNECE High level working groups on the modernization of statistics, UN Big Data Hubs and others approaching it from different angles to frame and harness its capabilities for development. There are two ways through which AI is being discussed in this realm. The first and most established is using AI for data (e.g., machine learning). The second and less tried is the approach of data for AI, which poses interesting new questions on how to train AI models and with what kind of data.

This session will build on existing use cases and shared experiences to reflect on what needs to be done to unlock the power of AI for sustainable development, by diving into three topics:

1. **AI for more accessible data:** AI, and in particular generative AI and large language models can be leveraged to bridge the gap between data producers and non-technical data users such as policy makers and civil society. How do we make this happen?
2. **Quality data and statistics for reliable AI:** Current AI models are heavily trained with data from a handful of countries with highly mature data ecosystems, which can cause some biases and make it difficult for actors from the global south to leverage AI technologies. How do we ensure that the data produced by Asian and Pacific NSOs are interoperable and suitable for training AI models?
3. **AI and capacity gaps – a blessing or a curse:** On one hand, AI can be seen as yet again a new technology that only the most skilled institutions and organizations can master. On the other hand, AI tools are making it easier to analyze data, assess its quality, code, write or translate. Is AI likely to widen capacity gaps, or on the contrary, does it have the potential to make innovation, data and knowledge more accessible? How do we help NSSs get AI-ready and capable of harnessing its benefits?

Speakers

- Opening remarks: Johannes Jütting, head of PARIS21
- Facilitation: Jeanne Jadeau, Innovation lead at PARIS21
- Representatives of NSOs:
    - NSO Mongolia – Mr. Batdavaa Batmunkh, Chairman
    - Philippine Statistics Authority – Dr. Dennis Mapa, National Statistician
- Ms. Prim Rajasurang Wongkrasaemongkol – AI practitioner and Youth Advocate from Thailand

Overall organization

PARIS21 introduces the topic and sets the scene by discussing practical examples of how data, AI and development are currently intertwined, and the role that national statistical systems play in this ecosystem. The participants are then split into three groups that will each discuss one of the topics. Each group will then share their conclusions with the rest of the participants. PARIS21 will conclude the session by summarizing discussions and proposing consolidated feedback that will be shared with the bureau.

Session agenda

1. Setting the scene **– 1hr20min**
    a. Introductory remarks by Johannes Jütting, head of PARIS21
    b. Introducing the topic of AI, data and development – PARIS21
    c. Presentation by speakers of their use cases and perspectives
    d. Q&A/discussion segment
    e. Presentation of next phase
        i. Presentation of breakout questions
        ii. Participants are distributed into groups

15min coffee break while facilitators set the room up for the breakout group discussions

2. Deep dive – **1h25min**
    a. Breakout groups on each topic
    b. Reporting back from each group to the rest of the participants

3. Wrap-up, conclusion and feedback formulation – PARIS21