

Rule of Law or Rule the World: Artificial Intelligence, SDG 16, and the Risks of Technocracy in the Global South

Imad Antoine Ibrahim, Jon Truby, and Paolo Davide Farah (eds.), *Artificial Intelligence, Governance and Sustainable Development: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions*. Routledge, 2026.

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Introduction

In a time when Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a dominating topic in a world that barely understands its true potential, it is important that legal thought leaders with technical expertise ensure nuanced deliberation on its opportunities and risks. Beyond treating AI as a fix-all solution, discussions must encompass not only its potential contributions, but also potential hazards. This book seeks to fill this gap in the distinct field of development work through a compilation of essays across various intersections of Artificial Intelligence and rule of law governance, namely its relationship to Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16).¹ The contribution is a needed piece of the puzzle in the rule of law, as many countries, especially in the Global South, may possess limited information, access and capacity for deployment of this technology. This being, Ibrahim, Truby and Farah facilitate a robust discussion from a plethora of contributors, with topics ranging from the deployment of artificial intelligence in anti-corruption and financial crime efforts, social media considerations, as well as its impact on access to justice and good governance. This volume also proposes ethical and legal frameworks that inform the protection of human rights in the use of AI.

¹ Imad Antoine Ibrahim, Jon Truby, and Paolo Davide Farah, eds., *Artificial Intelligence, Governance and Sustainable Development: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions* (London: Routledge, 2026).

As this compilation contains the contributions of 11 authors, there are a range of perspectives included. Overall, this contribution helps address the legal profession's ongoing challenge of lagging behind technological change by fostering further dialogue across a broad range of perspectives. For that reason, it serves as an excellent introduction for practitioners with limited exposure to the subject.²

Book Summary

The editors Ibrahim, Truby and Farah can be seen as positioning this compilation as a corrective intervention. This intervention essentially argues that Sustainable Development Goal 16 in the international context requires that AI be adopted in a setting predeveloped prior to deployment. Or, it should be developed contemporaneously with strengthened frameworks including legal, ethical and institutional. By taking a scholarly approach to the presentation and analysis of this information, this text provides a foundation for exposure to pertinent issues and lays the foundation for further exploration. SDG16 is described by the United Nations as "... promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels."³ The theme interwoven throughout the entire book is that institutional design and the law are the pillars of governance, not simply leveraging emerging technological advancements. The authors break these down into into three categories, with the relevant essays being assigned to their matching subgroup – rule of law, ethics and access to justice and criminal justice. The first chapter, drafted by the editors, lays the foundation for the remaining text. The authors frame AI here as a tool that can facilitate good governance while simultaneously having dire consequences to the SDG Agenda. Later chapters of note navigate corruption,

² The reviewer notes that one contributor to this volume serves as faculty in the reviewer's program.

³ "Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions," United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, accessed May 16, 2026, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/>.

automated facial recognition as it relates to the right to privacy and social media regulation, among other topics.

While the entire text presents an appreciation of the wide-ranging impact on AI in the rule of law field, this review will concentrate on chapters that can be considered as pressing for developing nations. Part I, which focuses on Artificial Intelligence, SDG 16 and Governance comprises of two chapters. In Chapter 2, it focuses on AI and corruption, describing it as a “pervasive issue that particularly afflicts developing nations, remaining resilient despite extensive efforts to eradicate it.”⁴ Presenting the advents in the development of AI as an opportunity to address this, the points addressed in this chapter are seen as critical considerations for tackling corruption on varying levels. Chapter 3 focuses on AI and the Political Targets of SDG 16, with this SDG being touted as directly addressing peace, justice and strong institutions through which sustainable politics is developed. It describes rule of law as one part of the ‘trinitarian formula’ of constitutionalism, and how AI can contribute to, among other things, increased effectiveness of institutions without sacrificing accountability and transparency.⁵

Having established the foundational challenges and opportunities presented by AI in governance and development, Part 2 now turns to a deeper exploration of the practical applications and implications of these technologies within specific contexts. Part II, which consists of 5 chapters introduces how artificial intelligence impacts SDG 16, Ethics and Access to Justice. While all chapters lend to compelling analyses, two significant areas of interest arise in chapters 6 and 7. In

⁴ Imad Antoine Ibrahim and Jon Truby, “Artificial Intelligence against Corruption: Steering Developing Nations Towards SDG 16,” in Ibrahim, Truby, and Farah, *Artificial Intelligence, Governance and Sustainable Development*, 19–41, esp. 19.

⁵ Henrik Skaug Sætra, “AI and the Political Targets of SDG 16,” in Ibrahim, Truby, and Farah, *Artificial Intelligence, Governance and Sustainable Development*, 42–70, esp. 42.

Chapter 6, the author performs an analysis of the efficiency gains of AI in sustainable development such as its ability for dynamic response to societal needs because of its access to information through big data and lack of inconsistency that is a limitation for human judgement. These features are also examined as limitations, with the author citing that the activities of Big Data can also further biases, and that thoughtless application of skewed determinations can occur that further inequalities. This furthers the divide of public and private governance which can stand in the way of the advancement of SDG 16.⁶ Chapter 7 develops a comprehensive review, which centers around social media regulation and that impact on SDG 16. It proposes that the ability for public discourse is central to maintaining democracy and rule of law, and this is increasingly occurring on social media. However, it is proposed that this freedom without boundaries can be deemed to have negative effect on the achievement of sustainable development by contributing to election interference by foreign agents, hate speech and disinformation. This chapter assesses the questions of whether social media regulation is needed and what kind should be deployed.⁷

A critical component of SDG 16, criminal justice is examined in Part III through the lens of AI's impact. Of note are chapters 11 and 12. Chapter 11 highlights the fight against illicit proceeds are highlighted in chapter 11, discussing how the promotion of the rule of law through anti-money laundering and financing of terrorism activities can be greatly enhanced through the deployment of artificial intelligence. However, it is opined that the requisite frameworks must be in place for safeguards and guidance to stay ahead of criminal masterminds.⁸ In Chapter 12, Automated Facial

⁶ Ignas Kalpokas and Julija Kalpokiene, "Datafication, Artificial Intelligence, and Rule of Law: A Tale of Incompatible Values," in Ibrahim, Truby, and Farah, *Artificial Intelligence, Governance and Sustainable Development*, 115–35, esp. 115.

⁷ Thomas F. McInerney, "Social Media Regulation and Achievement of SDG 16," in Ibrahim, Truby, and Farah, *Artificial Intelligence, Governance and Sustainable Development*, 136–54, esp. 136.

⁸ Georgios Pavlidis, "Watched by the One Hundred Eyes of Argus: Artificial Intelligence and the Fight against Illicit Proceeds with a Focus on SDG16," in Ibrahim, Truby, and Farah, *Artificial Intelligence, Governance and Sustainable Development*, 235–61, esp. 235.

Recognition (AFR) is discussed contrasting its crime fighting gains to the potential risks of infringement against human rights. An intriguing comparative approach is taken to analyze its impact on the rule of law and negative impacts on privacy, and how countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States and China have enacted laws to safeguard against this. Key principles examined relate to necessity and proportionality.⁹

Critical Evaluation

This book serves a useful and meaningful purpose in the rule of law and development community. It is intended to inform and critically engage academia and policy makers alike, while offering opportunities for further thought and research. The multiplicity of perspectives offers a breadth of information to audiences that may not have intricate knowledge on the subject matter of artificial intelligence and its application in rule of law or development work. This snapshot of the field goes beyond the potential limitation of one specialist author or a generalist and provides the field with a needed compilation of resources, especially for a nuanced topic of Sustainable Development Goal 16. The book engages beautifully with existing scholarships on AI including extensive references to other bodies of work from a myriad of disciplines. This is a direct benefit of the essay format of each contribution.

The editors' central argument is balanced, proposing that artificial intelligence certainly offers a transformation to societies and economies. They take a stable approach to the discussion of whether that transformation is positive or negative. Ultimately, it is offered throughout the authorship of various contributors that the application of AI to SDG 16 can certainly be

⁹ Qingxiu Bu, "The Deployment of Automated Facial Recognition (AFR) and Privacy Implications under SDG 16: Building Effective and Accountable Institutions for Data Governance," in Ibrahim, Truby, and Farah, *Artificial Intelligence, Governance and Sustainable Development*, 262–96, esp. 263.

problematic because of the risk of technocracy and adverse effects on human rights, with some contributors still asserting that it will be positive driver of this goal through efficiency gains. The argument is sound, as with an emerging technology such as AI, providing a definitive answer as to whether its efficiency gains are in absolute 'good' or 'bad' is not practical. This is due to the rapidly evolving nature of the industry.

As a scholarly piece, the evidence provided in each contribution was in keeping with academic standards by providing readers with a surplus of reference material to further develop topics particularly of interest to them. That presentation style and the range of authors may have in some ways detracted from the flow of the narrative, but as these essays seek to provide readers with a wide array of information and considerations, that detraction may have been unavoidable.

With its many successes, the book does have its limitations that should be considered. Chapter 2 for example, does highlight a crucial point in the deployment of AI for development as it relates to "black box" problems and their opaqueness.¹⁰ In chapter 3, it is further stated that "AI based on deep learning is particularly vulnerable to "black box" problems, and despite substantial efforts to develop explainable AI, the results have thus far not been what would be required to dismiss the fears of AI-induced opaqueness."¹¹ This is an important challenge in AI deployment which deserves significant attention, as developing nations are potentially the greatest victim to black box problems. Both chapters do well to address it in the context of governance. However, stemming from a lack of resources and technical capacity, deployment of AI in a developing states national context is not just as a tool to increase speed or efficiency. In this context, it is one that provides algorithmic outputs to be relied on for decision making and nation building. This being,

¹⁰ Ibrahim and Truby, "Artificial Intelligence against Corruption," 30.

¹¹ Sætra, "AI and the Political Targets of SDG 16," 54.

the programmers of these systems are free to exercise a degree of autonomy unchecked by that of the developing nation if there is no capacity to audit for bias, underlying assumptions or to check if the model has been adequately trained on local dynamics. A more robust discussion of how this impact can be potentially mitigated by developing nations with limited resources and expertise would be highly instructive for practitioners.

A harrowing tale is told in chapter 6, exposing that with the development of a compulsory digital society, the progression of law and regulatory frameworks lag behind.¹² The discussion on this training data being the basis of foundational AI outputs but still lacks nuance and meaning¹³ for thorough analysis puts those relying on those outputs in good faith at a disadvantage. In the Global South, where AI is being championed as solution to governance issues and lauded for its efficiency gains, many states and national institutions are adopting these technologies. However, these countries often must rely on the data protection policies of the contracted company providing the technology when the capacity to build and deploy these systems independently is out of budgetary reach and the institutional capacity and expertise to challenge questionable agreements may not exist.¹⁴ Countries such as small island developing states and post conflict regions are especially susceptible to this. While this chapter is particularly effective in highlighting the concerns of AI and datafication, addressing challenges that particularly affect developing nations would further aid the discussion.

With Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrining the right to freedom of opinion and expression as a basic human right, steering a conversation on social media regulation

¹² Kalpokas and Kalpokiene, “Datafication, Artificial Intelligence, and Rule of Law,” 118–19.

¹³ Kalpokas and Kalpokiene, “Datafication, Artificial Intelligence, and Rule of Law,” 130.

¹⁴ Wasmiya Malik, Seema Gul, and Gohar Masood Qureshi, “Regulating Artificial Intelligence: Challenges for Data Protection and Privacy in Developing Nations,” *Journal of Social Signs Review* 3, no. 5 (2025): 95–108.

and speech rights is a complex topic. What this chapter does well is highlight challenges that arise from the state, company and personal level and current deficiencies in legal frameworks to address these problems. The constraint of this chapter is that the analysis is based on the context of US law, which foreign audiences can find instructive but limiting. This approach may be due to the fact that platforms in the United States are the originating founders and as such this land scape is more developed than many other legal jurisdictions. This chapter raises awareness on the effects of foreign election interference and demonstrates where social media has been manipulated to attempt to advance agendas of foreign territories.¹⁵ Many developing nations are not aware of this as a potential threat to sovereignty, and as a result can seek no mediating steps to avoid interference. By exposing the self-regulating nature of the industry, this gives the reader insight into the gap in US law to effectively oversee the activities of these industries. This can certainly lead to technocratic behavior.

The reviewer found Part III particularly intriguing in its arguments on AI and criminal justice. Of note, chapter 11 discussed how AI can positively address issues in the fight against the illicit proceeds of crime. With anti money laundering and counter terrorist financing being at the heart of many international discussions, this author brings in the reality that AI can pose significant risk to development due to “hasty and untested experimentation with AI tools.”¹⁶ Also, the cross section of crime prevention with AI monitoring while also considering the right to privacy is an important consideration. Chapter 12 and its discussion on Automated Facial Recognition (AFR) stands out as compelling contribution, as the comparative approach and inclusion of China in the discussion shines light on the international standards of AFR. Of interest is the highlighted case of

¹⁵ McInerney, “Social Media Regulation,” 142–43.

¹⁶ Pavlidis, “Watched by the One Hundred Eyes of Argus,” 251.

Bing Guo v Hangzhou Safari Park, where the Chinese courts held that it was in fact an infringement on Guo's rights by the park to collect his biometric facial data without his consent.¹⁷ This shows that even in a state that heavily leverages AFR, there are still boundaries that should not be crossed as it relates to personal privacy. Additionally, the conversations on the moral superiority of the UK over China's use of AFR lend to an analytical look on the international philosophy surrounding this technology. There must be further conversations by policymakers on the first movers' advantage that occurs when states set the foundation of this technology. This allows them to lay the foundation on international principles that govern this space; therefore there must be provisions to ensure that infringement on the sovereignty of nations is mitigated. As such, the discussion on AI in development is brought to a level that seems vitally important to comprehend with urgency.

Conclusion

The work done in this text is an important addition to the rule of law body of literature. With many legal minds, field workers and professionals in the development space still grappling with the full breadth of its legal and practical implications of artificial intelligence and its deployment, this scholarship fills a needed gap in the field. While each chapter engages in needed conversations and the book traverses considerable thematic ground, there are still areas that can benefit from further discussion that this compilation does not handle in depth. For professionals in the Global South navigating the institutional and regulatory challenges that AI deployment presents, this volume offers a substantive, if not all-encompassing, point of scholarly departure. Critically, the volume alerts developing nations to the subtler and often imperceptible dimensions of AI's encroachment on national sovereignty.

¹⁷ Bu, "The Deployment of Automated Facial Recognition (AFR)," 271.