

Reimagining AI in Service to Humanity & Planet: Reflections from an SDG Digital Transformation Lab Dialog During UNGA 81

AI for Early Warning, Keeping Humans at the Center, Nations as Suppliers of Value not Sites for Extraction, Power and Incentives, and the Physical Footprint of AI

Last month, during the 81st Session of the United Nations General Assembly and New York Climate Week, the SDG Digital Transformation and Sustainability Solutions Lab (SDG Lab), Pegasus Capital Advisors (Pegasus) and UNDP co-hosted two events that brought together academics, philanthropists, investors, and practitioners. The second, on September 25th, focused on reimagining AI in service to humanity and planet.



Radhika Shah, co-founder of the SDG Lab, framed the conversation around **bending the arc of AI toward a sustainable, dignified future**. Craig Cogut, Founder, Chairman, and CEO of Pegasus Capital Advisors and co-founder of the SDG Lab, set the intention: **using data and AI to do good**.

AI as Early Warning: Lead Time Saves Lives

Minister Dr. Bernadette Arakwiye of Rwanda's environmental ministry spoke about **forecasting change, risk, and disaster outbreaks, where lead time translates directly into impact**. Minister Arakwiye described her guiding principles to the group: **"Do things right, do them well, do them on time."** She then extended an open invitation to the session to build alongside the ministry, calling for volunteers and companies to join.

Dr. Sanjeev Khagram, a Distinguished Research Scholar at the Stanford Hoover Institute presented both the **Global Resilience, Intelligence Platform and Partnership (GRIPP)**, a forecasting tool for countries that has been adopted by the World Bank, and an earthquake-prediction venture claiming six to eight hours' warning with 95% accuracy. He also discussed the various ways AI can be implemented: sometimes built from the ground up and sometimes layered onto existing data.

Positioning Nations as Value Suppliers, Not Sites for Extraction in the Age of AI

Lisa Kurbiel, Head of the Secretariat of the United Nations Joint SDG Fund, shared that as AI reshapes global demand for energy, water, and land, countries with these resources are being approached as sites for the next generation of digital infrastructure. The United Nations Joint SDG Fund supports governments to position themselves as suppliers of value, not only sites for

extraction, so that **a meaningful share of that value remains with the people and communities who hold the resource.**

Keeping Humans at the Center

Father Marcin Schmidt, a Catholic priest who has done much humanitarian work with groups such as Caritas, Scholas Occurrentes, Unbroken Kids Alliance, and the 5P Global Movement, spoke about remaining human in the age of AI. Drawing on Pope Leo XIV's letter *Magnifica Humanitas* and the idea of "**AI for the last first,**" he asked who should fill the empty chairs in the room to support this work. He also highlighted the **use of AI for coordinating humanitarian relief**, and Pope Leo's call to **move from declarations to action.** Father

Marcin and Craig Cogut also invited participants to join an upcoming conference planned for December centered around the ideas found within *Magnifica Humanitas*.



Power, Incentives, and Avoiding Climate's Mistakes



Heather Grady, EVP and Chief Strategy and Sustainability Officer at the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and a member of the Philanthropy Advisory Board of the SDG Lab, warned that AI power is concentrated in a few hands and that we risk repeating the same mistakes of climate change. She discussed where capital can shift power and systems, and shared her worry about it already being too little, too late.

Stanford Professor Madalina Vlasceanu of the Stanford Doerr School of Sustainability spoke about **systemic friction and collective action, and about aligning AI incentives with climate and equality goals**, with public pressure and voter engagement as the levers. She emphasized that **AI has enormous potential to accelerate climate solutions**, but that potential is not inherently beneficial.

The same technology, she explained, can accelerate clean-energy innovation and climate action, or reinforce fossil-fuel incumbency, misinformation, surveillance, and other forces that undermine

collective action. Which path we take will depend on the institutions and democratic safeguards governing how AI is developed and deployed.

On mobilizing people around challenges like climate change and AI governance, Professor Vlasceanu drew on behavioral science: fear alone can produce helplessness or disengagement, while **people are much more likely to act when concern is paired with efficacy, agency, and a concrete pathway for collective action.** Her research consistently finds that believing governments, communities, and individuals can work together effectively is a powerful driver of civic and collective engagement.

Aligning Agentic Commerce & Deliberative Polling of Stakeholders for Data Centers



Professor Ashish Goel, Chair of the Management Science and Engineering Department at Stanford and an advisor to the SDG Lab, spoke about a future where AI agents will discover products, negotiate, transact, and settle payments for consumers, merchants, and the firms between them. The hard part is not capability, but incentive: an agent can be perfectly capable and still not act in your interest. Goel argued that this shift will require

mechanisms that keep agents aligned with consumer welfare, market architectures that divide the gains efficiently and reward each party, and settlement and trust infrastructure that lets agents move value securely. He announced a new Stanford lab that will work on alignment and infrastructure for agentic commerce.

Ashish also described a separate Stanford initiative, "Using Informed Deliberation to Understand Citizen Priorities for Data Center Development," which applies Deliberative Polling to city-level decisions about data centers. The method, developed at Stanford's Center for Deliberative Democracy, measures how informed opinion shifts after structured deliberation: a representative sample of the population is recruited and surveyed both before and after they deliberate.

Building AI Where It's Needed: Understanding and Alleviating Poverty, Predicting Disease Surges, and Allocating Resources

Roshni Sahoo, a professor at Columbia University, discussed her research on how data-driven methods can address some of society's most pressing challenges in public health and poverty alleviation. In recent work, she and her colleagues asked a fundamental question: what would it cost to end extreme poverty under realistic information constraints?

To answer it, they assembled household survey data from 34 countries that collectively account for 76% of the world's poor. Using techniques from machine learning and optimization, they quantified

the cost of a feasible cash transfer program that could lift people living below the extreme poverty line at least to the level of the poverty line. The answer: \$300 billion in cash transfers for one year.

That may sound like a lot of money, but as Sahoo pointed out, it is not as much as you might think relative to other expenditures, or even historical expenditures on aid. The world currently spends three times as much on cosmetic products and eight times as much on alcoholic beverages.

In her ongoing work, Sahoo is collaborating with researchers from Stanford University and Addis Ababa University to develop an early warning system for Ethiopia that predicts disease surges and resource allocation from environmental signals. She is excited about the potential for AI and data-driven methods to help us respond proactively to public health challenges.

We also heard from Indonesian entrepreneur Pantro Pander Silitonga about his new AI-driven public health company launching in Indonesia: Sovereign Health AI for the Next Billion patients, which closes the gap between health coverage and clinical capacity in high growth emerging markets.

The Physical Footprint of AI: Recycling Already-Refined Minerals Above Ground

Lindsey Witmer Collins, CTO and co-founder of GridMine, reminded the group that AI runs on nickel, copper, iron, and rare earths. GridMine maps already-refined minerals above ground so they count as reserves instead of being lost to scrap. Her team puts current losses at about 80% of minerals and 99% of rare earths, but Collins and GridMine's goal is to mine less by using what we already have.



The task before us is to move from ideas and declarations to concrete action. How can we capture the potentially enormous benefits of AI while accounting for its environmental and economic consequences and its environmental footprint? **AI's benefits will depend on who builds it, who governs it, what it runs on, and what it is ultimately used for.** They will also depend on how we align incentives for fairness, sustainability and equity.

This article reflects solely the views of the SDG Digital Transformation and Sustainability Solutions Lab, not Pegasus Capital Advisors, L.P. or its personnel.