IREX in the Age of AI

1 Achieving IREX's Mission with Responsible AI

IREX's vision of a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world has been influenced and accelerated by technologies for decades. From helping people use radio and computers to mobile devices and data to advance their impact, IREX has a rich history of adapting to emerging technology, driven not by hype but by practical use cases and an emphasis on the enabling environment that is required to nurture safe digital adoption.

The revolutionary and disruptive nature of artificial intelligence (AI)—as well as the compounded risks it presents—make this legacy of responsible digital development more important now than ever. While mindful adoption is paramount, IREX also cannot afford to let the well-known opportunities offered by AI pass it by. As a responsible social impact organization, IREX has a duty to tap into the efficiency and productivity gains that AI can offer, unlocking more time and insights to amplify downstream impact.

Striking this balance—between mindfulness and proactivity—underpins IREX's approach to AI. This note summarizes that approach, then turns to examples of AI deployed in IREX's work and the enablers that make those use cases possible. Finally, this note looks ahead to emerging AI tools and trends and explores how IREX is preparing for that future.

2 Summarizing IREX's Approach to AI

At a high level, four levers influence how IREX evaluates and uses AI tools:

USE CASES

IREX staff, participants, and partners are encouraged to utilize AI tools—especially widely accessible generative AI (GenAI) tools like ChatGPT—only when and where they make sense. Identifying and testing organic use cases, and driving adoption based on those, help to ensure that IREX adopts AI in contextually relevant ways while building quick wins and a broader appetite to explore the technology.

RESPONSIBLE ADOPTION

Whenever a use case emerges to apply an AI tool, IREX follows good responsible technology practices to evaluate and implement it. These practices draw not only from the field of responsible AI (RAI), but also from decades of digital development experience that emphasize sustainability, local ownership, soft skills, and participatory design methods. More details about some key RAI principles are below.

Responsible AI (RAI) refers to the development and use of AI in a manner that prioritizes safety, fairness, accountability, transparency, and respect for human rights. It emphasizes minimizing risks and harms while maximizing the positive impact of AI technologies. For organizations like IREX, RAI principles draw from decades of digital development experience, prioritizing sustainability, local ownership, soft skills, and participatory design methods in AI implementation. This ensures that AI tools are not just powerful, but also safe, equitable, and aligned with human values.

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3 From Principle to Practice: AI at IREX

Helping youth become digital citizens in Latin America

IREX partnered with Omdena to build youth AI literacy in Colombia and the Dominican Republic through the CREDIBLE program. As part of these trainings, young developers from the region built an AI-powered tool designed to detect misleading social media posts about migration. The AI tool is designed to educate users on how to recognize misleading narratives about migration, while building technical skills among the region's youth to build and code tools using AI.

Building digital literacy among Kenya's youth

Through IREX's Digital ESE program to equip youth to **E**fficiently, **S**afely, and **E**ffectively engage in lifelong learning to support employment, youth researchers used off-the-shelf technologies to build a custom AI bot on top of a vast amount of interview data to inform a curriculum about digital upskilling. This enabled the team to generate realistic scenario-based learning activities that fed into the curriculum's design.

Supporting pragmatic AI visioning in Jordan's education system

Together with Development Gateway, IREX is supporting organizational AI readiness with the Ministry of Education. This work will inform a fit-for-purpose AI strategy drawn from factors such as existing digital infrastructure, technology policies, and institutional capacity, balancing ambition and pragmatism. This approach allows for AI strategies that are context-driven and fit-for-future.

Analyzing the strength of information systems

For decades, IREX's Media Content Analysis Tool (MCAT) has played an essential role in understanding information systems and how to strengthen them. The process has conventionally involved a manual review of vast amounts of media content, but in the Dominican Republic, IREX partnered with a local AI developer to reimagine the MCAT using AI, enabling a review of over 25,000 articles in under three days—far more efficiently than a manual analysis. The AI-powered analysis itself produced valuable insights about the use of AI in media research and field-tested strategies to build a robust platform for AI-enabled media content analysis.

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💡 **Designing a responsive curriculum for young leaders**

IREX's highly competitive Community Solutions Program (CSP) and Community Engagement Exchange (CEE) regularly attract thousands more applicants than the programs can support. IREX used qualitative responses from application questions about applicants' interests, experiences, and learning priorities and a free and secure online AI tool called Google NotebookLM to create a curriculum for the 99% of applicants who were not accepted into these two programs (about 20,000 individuals). The tool produced meaningful and responsive curriculum ideas, sourced directly from the over 20 million words across the applications, in a matter of hours—a task that would have otherwise taken more than 360 days to complete.

These examples showcase the compelling potential of deploying AI-enabled tools to support outcomes in IREX programs. They demonstrate IREX's approach in practice: starting with practical use cases that emerge organically from programs, forging partnerships with local tech organizations who can build AI tools responsibly and safely, and adapting IREX's posture toward AI as the technology and social structures around it evolve.

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4 Enablers That Make These Use Cases Possible

Accompanying that approach are a series of enablers that make such use cases possible. For example:

AI POLICY

IREX developed an AI policy and circulated it among staff. In keeping with best practices, this policy struck a balance between encouraging genuine exploration of AI tools and providing safety guardrails to minimize risks of harm. For example, as an enterprise user of Microsoft's infrastructure, IREX asked all staff to use Microsoft's Copilot tool whenever sharing or accessing personally identifying information or business-sensitive material, such as draft proposals.

DATA MANAGEMENT

Years before an AI policy was developed, IREX put in place the foundation to make the most of AI. Specifically, long-standing investments in data culture, management, and use have ensured that IREX teams could find and access the right material to share with AI tools for context. For example, the CEE/CSP use case was only made possible because IREX had carefully managed and structured the 20,000 applications into one spreadsheet. Strong data controls and management are key enablers of IREX's uptake of AI.

AI LITERACY

IREX has familiarized staff with AI tools, opportunities, risks, and considerations. Several teams across the organization have participated in contextually relevant, practical trainings to build AI literacy. These have focused equally on the advantages of using AI and on the risks, biases, and concerns related to this technology—from legal and psychosocial to editorial and environmental. Capacity building has also focused on specific tactics for good **AI hygiene** to support safe and responsible adoption.

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AI hygiene is one way to put RAI principles into practice. It encompasses a set of tactics designed to minimize risks, protect sensitive information, and ensure ethical use of AI tools. For IREX, this includes building organization-wide understanding of the risks and biases of using AI and strategies to mitigate them. For example, key aspects of AI hygiene involve using appropriate tools for sensitive data, such as employing enterprise-level solutions like Microsoft Copilot for personally identifying or business-sensitive material. Good AI hygiene also relies on strong data controls and management, so that data shared with AI tools is properly structured and managed.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that these enablers have been part of a long-term, immutable, and perfected strategy. Like many organizations, IREX's AI adoption journey has been gradual and iterative to match the continuously evolving landscape.

Understanding that landscape—spotting emerging trends, evaluating new AI technologies, and understanding how they might inform how IREX achieves its mission in the world—is a key part of IREX's approach to AI. The next section articulates some emerging trends that IREX is particularly tuned into.

5 Futureproofing IREX's AI Readiness: A Look Ahead

The rapid pace of the development of AI requires IREX to continuously track and evaluate emerging trends. Scanning future developments will ensure that IREX maintains its proactive but mindful approach to AI, leveraging promising use cases while building resilience to emerging potential harms. Trends and technologies of particular interest to IREX at this stage are:

TECHNOLOGIES

- **Agentic AI:** Truly agentic AI is fast becoming a reality. Tools like ChatGPT's Operator expand the capabilities of large language models (LLMs) from merely making plans to implementing them through real-world actions, like clicking through a website or making a call. For IREX, agents introduce opportunities like building an "Opportunity Agent" that could autonomously analyze a young person's skills, interests, and local economic needs (drawing from real-time market data, job postings, and educational resources), recommend or even draft applications for online courses or vocational training opportunities, and facilitate introductions to local employers or entrepreneurship hubs.

- **Edge computing:** IREX handles sensitive data that must be removed from documents before using most general-purpose online AI tools. Edge computing promises to bring the computational power required to run AI queries to local computers. This will enable everyday users like IREX staff to run advanced AI models on their own machines, without running any risks of sending confidential or personally identifying information to servers or data centers owned by other companies. As a result, edge computing promises to advance good AI hygiene and RAI by minimizing the transmission and sharing of potentially sensitive data, which will help IREX advance its mission using technology safely.

- **Explainable AI (XAI):** XAI is a field of practice that seeks to make AI models more transparent and understandable to humans—especially their biases and decision-making processes. For example, when using AI to analyze fellowship or grant applications, IREX would benefit from more robust XAI resources to understand and mitigate potential biases in the models that could impact trustworthiness or fairness in how and where the AI is deployed in these decision-making processes.

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A loss of "deep thinking": Overreliance on AI tools, particularly for functions that involve creativity, focus, or strategic evaluation risks atrophying our problem-solving, research, and critical-thinking skills. Capacity for these skills (collectively called "deep thinking") will be essential for tackling new challenges as they continue to emerge.

Consolidation of AI infrastructure: A small and increasingly powerful cadre of companies, primarily based in the United States, is already consolidating its influence in how AI is designed, used, and deployed globally. IREX must remain resilient to the allure of turning to these tools at the expense of local ownership and agency.

A growing digital divide: For decades, IREX's approach to digital transformation has been centered on mitigating digital divides. As AI tools become more powerful and agentic, existing global gender gaps in internet access and use will only compound inequalities in how marginalized communities reap the benefits of AI.

The dynamic landscape of AI, while presenting novel challenges, also offers unprecedented opportunities to amplify IREX's mission. By leaning into our partnership with Development Gateway, experts at technology systems, responsible data, and governance, IREX will remain proactive yet mindful, continually adapt its approach, and prioritize responsible adoption rooted in decades of digital development experience. This recipe will ensure that IREX is well-positioned to harness AI's transformative power to build a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world.

This iterative journey, characterized by strategic partnerships, a robust data culture, and sustained investment in AI literacy, ensures that IREX can effectively navigate the evolving technological frontier, leveraging AI to deepen its impact and address complex global challenges safely and responsibly.

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