

ABOUT ECLAC and the CDCC

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) is one of five regional commissions of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It was established in 1948 to support Latin American governments in the economic and social development of that region. Subsequently, in 1966, the Commission (ECLA, at that time) established the subregional headquarters for the Caribbean in Port of Spain to serve all countries of the insular Caribbean, as well as Belize, Guyana and Suriname, making it the largest United Nations body in the subregion.

At its sixteenth session in 1975, the Commission agreed to create the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC) as a permanent subsidiary body, which would function within the ECLA structure to promote development cooperation among Caribbean countries. Secretariat services to the CDCC would be provided by the subregional headquarters for the Caribbean. Nine years later, the Commission's widened role was officially acknowledged when the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) modified its title to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

Key Areas of Activity

The ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean (ECLAC/CDCC secretariat) functions as a subregional think-tank and facilitates increased contact and cooperation among its membership. Complementing the ECLAC/CDCC work programme framework, are the broader directives issued by the United Nations General Assembly when in session, which constitute the Organisation's mandate. At present, the overarching articulation of this mandate is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Towards meeting these objectives, the Secretariat conducts research; provides technical advice to governments upon request; organizes intergovernmental and expert group meetings; helps to formulate and articulate a regional perspective within global forums; and introduces global concerns at the regional and subregional levels.

Areas of specialization include trade, statistics, social development, science and technology, and sustainable development, while actual operational activities extend to economic and development planning, demography, economic surveys, assessment of the socio-economic impacts of natural disasters, climate change, data collection and analysis, training, and assistance with the management of national economies.

The ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean also functions as the Secretariat for coordinating the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. The scope of ECLAC/CDCC activities is documented in the wide range of publications produced by the subregional headquarters in Port of Spain.

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Antigua and Barbuda	Haiti
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Barbados	Saint Kitts and Nevis
Belize	Saint Lucia
Cuba	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Dominica	Suriname
Dominican Republic	Trinidad and Tobago
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A Note on this issue of the FOCUS

The illustrations used in this issue of the Focus were generated using Artificial Intelligence.

COVER

SOURCE: Adobe Stock

PROMPT: Hands of a African Caribbean child holding crystal glowing globe, planet Earth at a sunny green meadow background, copyspace, taking care Ecology, sustainable nature, conversation concept

PAGE 4

SOURCE: Adobe Firefly

PROMPT: Woman working in a futuristic office sci fi style

PAGE 6

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PROMPT: Globe in robot hand with icon on nature background,

FOCUS: ECLAC in the Caribbean is a publication of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) subregional headquarters for the Caribbean/Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC).

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“IT’S MESSY, BUT WE HAVE TO DO IT NOW” – CRAIG RAMLAL, UN ADVISOR, ON AI REGULATION

By Lika Döhl Diouf

Few technological advances created more global buzz in 2023 than artificial intelligence: One tool captured global attention by generating text in different formats based on simple prompts; another created new covers of recent songs by singers who passed away decades ago; and others created full works of art in distinct styles based on user descriptions.

The sudden and widespread access to these tools triggered discussions and collective imagination of what an AI-powered future could look like. At the same time, longstanding concerns related to privacy and intellectual property rights, bias and discrimination, environmental impacts and the overall ethics of AI were raised. In this article, Craig Ramlal, who was recently appointed to the United Nations Secretary General’s High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence, addresses some key questions related to artificial intelligence and its global governance.

In October 2023, the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, established a 32-member, multistakeholder, AI Advisory Body that is aimed at building a global scientific consensus on the risks and challenges related to AI, helping to harness AI for the Sustainable Development Goals, and strengthening international cooperation on AI Governance.

Craig Ramlal, a national of Trinidad and Tobago and lecturer at the University of West Indies at St. Augustine, was among those recently appointed to the AI Advisory Board. He holds a PhD in Electrical and Computer Engineering, and serves as principal investigator of the Intelligent Systems Lab, which focuses on AI theory and governance. He has also worked on developing open data strategies for the Caribbean, developing systems to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19, and developed diagnostic tools using deep learning algorithms for the national electrical

grid of Estonia. In the AI Advisory Body, he is involved in the working group on “Opportunities, enablers, governance and risks”, and will be co-leading the engagement on education and leading the engagement on youth in AI. Ramlal also recently participated in the Seminar of the Monitoring Committee (MonCom) of the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC) in November 2023, providing key insights on AI in his presentation “The Digital Caribbean: Advancing the edge of AI by playing to our strengths”.

In this article, Lika Döhl Diouf (LD) and Dale Alexander (DA) ask Craig Ramlal (CR) about everything AI and the Caribbean, followed by key information on next steps and how governments, the private sector and civil society can engage with the ongoing work on AI. The interview section has been edited and condensed for clarity.

LD: What do you think are the most interesting use cases or opportunities for AI to address challenges in the Caribbean? What are you most excited about?

CR: I think that the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) are extremely important to the Caribbean, and like I said in [the MonCom seminar], we are extremely prime for this AI thing. Extraordinarily prime! Why? Because we

are an emergent market, we have these niche industries. We have cocoa, that’s a big one, we can take the cocoa industry, merge that with climate change, merge that with tourism, and we can allow AI to foster that kind of thing. We also have a regional university and that regional university speaks to these different cultures and survives in these different countries. And so we can utilize that university to form as a basis of the collaboration with the governments, the private sector and the public sector to educate the nations. And when I say “educate the nations”, it doesn’t have to be at only the degree and higher-level studies, it can be as upskilling the labour force, teaching people with a CSEC or CXC-based associate diploma, and really raising their ability to deal with these AI systems.

LD: If AI continues to develop the same way it has so far, what do you think will be the impact on the Caribbean?

CR: You know, this is a rough question because of the current things that we are seeing right now with OpenAI, and there’s speculation of AGI (Artificial General Intelligence) and all those kinds of things. There’s going to be significant impact on us with our jobs for sure, and... Productivity is the first one. If we can’t compete with these other markets who are using AI, then we are going to be left behind. And then our jobs are going to change, because there’ll be a large amount of job displacement. And

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if we continue in the same path without implementing these AI systems, it'll impact a lot of things, like our culture and [creative industries]. I feel as if our promotion of the arts may not be well-represented because we are slow to market. Because AI is a transformative technology, impacting all sectors.

DA: Would you say that AI is transformative or disruptive?

CR: I think it has passed disruptive. It has already disrupted us within the first six months of the year [2023, eds.], and it's now where we have these open source models that are allowing individuals to have AI in their hands. So now they're using it to transform their sectors. We have these things that we can use, anyone here can download it, and it's probably not as smart as [other tools], but it's very good at what it does. So I think we're in that stage of transformation.

LD: What would you say are the main challenges for Caribbean countries related to AI development? Where are the sticking points?

CR: There are three major ones that we are seeing: The first one is, and everybody says it, the compute capacity and the access to compute; it's difficult for us to get the GPUs [Graphics processing unit, a specialized electronic processing circuit, eds.], that are required to do [AI] training. Another one is the actual training and capability of the individuals in the Caribbean. We need to train them at all levels, at the very technical level, to design these AI tools, and to look at the software ecosystems that is there for these AI tools, because it's not just AI alone. Cybersecurity is a major one. Why would people give us their data if we can't keep it private? So we need to enforce these other platforms that will enable AI. Another one is public discourse and sentiments around AI. What we see is that in the Caribbean, most people either don't know about [AI], they fear it, or they're kind of on board with it

and want to push it. The ones who are on board with it and want to push it are very few compared to those that fear it. The ones that fear it say, and this is something that they said in MonCom when we were there, that these big companies are going to take our data, make their AI systems better, and we are not going to benefit at all. So we need to change the public discourse around it, and I think one way to change the public discourse around it and to really capture all of these things is by collaboration with all of these sectors I mentioned before, but to strengthen these industries. What you want to show is a high-valued project that can have people talking about the positive impact of AI and what it can actually do for them. You want to show job creation, you want to show competitiveness, you want to showcase our capacity, our ability to create these AI models and to play in this space. I think that is absolutely necessary, and the regulations have to follow from that.

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"IT'S MESSY, BUT WE HAVE TO DO IT NOW" – CRAIG RAMLAL, UN ADVISOR, ON AI REGULATION (CONTINUED)

LD: What are the top challenges for Caribbean countries related to AI governance? You already talked a bit about cybersecurity and privacy.

CR: In terms of governance and AI, a big part of the issues is that we are kind of slow to get the ball rolling in terms of regulations, and things need to happen much faster. There are conversations happening, and there are things coming out, but we probably need to push a bit quicker for these kinds of regulations to happen. Which would mean countries coming together at the table and looking at actually producing a consensed document, these guidelines that we would follow. Because if the technology is changing very quickly, and we are slow to create and adopt regulations, our regulations will be outdated by the time the new technology hits us. So we need some push here.

In terms of safety and privacy concerns... I think that is kind of nation specific, because what you want to do is to create these models that can benefit that nation, as is. I don't think there can exist some foundational model or something that could work across all the islands. So I think that if we had to do regulations or do any kind of governance at that level, it should come out of ministries of digital transformation. But it's slow, and there needs to be collaboration of everybody. I'm not seeing that much yet, but we have to push that.

DA: Would you say that we have made progress in terms of the supporting legislative frameworks, e.g., cybersecurity?

CR: Yeah, it's not really there. Those kinds of things that have to be built before we can get into the conversations with AI haven't really been put into practice yet, and I think the major issue there is because of our culture, and how we treat with technology and how we see technology and its development within our nations. Maybe there needs to be an agenda where we have a harmonized set of guiding principles for this as well... If it can do it like how [CARICOM] did with the Stop Killer Robots campaign [referring to Autonomous Weapons Systems, eds.], then that's fantastic. But here's the thing with that: If we do guiding principles, there can be no monitoring and compliance, so how do we write that in such a way that there is some kind of [adherence] to what we are saying? I think that would be the major challenge here, and the worry is that because we are faced with so many other issues in the Caribbean, I'm afraid that these kinds of things will only get the [green] light once they impact the nations in a bad way, just like with the cybersecurity thing that came up. And you know, AI would hit us like that too, if we continue in this way. Oh yes, this is real worrying, boy.

LD: So related to that, would you say that we need more technology-neutral things as a basis first, or do we need AI specific things, or do we need all of it all at once?

CR: We need all of it all at once, right now, because we can't let AI speed off, we can't let the rest of the world speed off and leave us. And the reason why I say that is because of where AI is, in terms of getting into the hands of consumers. As soon as it has reached the hands of consumers, we are already in the race of AI speed, dominance,

and trying to catch up with people.

DA: What are the opportunities and enablers that we could advance to try to allow [important changes to be made quickly]?

CR: So [setting aside] the structural challenges... We spoke about the collaborations, we spoke about having projects. And I think that is what we want: to meet these short-term goals. I think that the world is going to have structural challenges, not just us. Because the world is also grappling with these kinds of things. I think there are massive changes, and policies are going to inform them, and after policies inform them, there's going to be a teething period where the changes are going to happen and then feedback is given. And it could be terrible, but it could not. And then the policies will have to change again, but the [collaboration and projects] we talked about before, we need to do that now.

It's messy, but we have to do it now.

The conversation with Craig Ramlal continued to cover many other topics, which may be the subject of future articles. Towards the end, the expert urged Governments and other stakeholders not to be afraid to engage with him and the AI Advisory Body: "If you want to add me on LinkedIn, add me on LinkedIn. We have to hear everybody's voice."

The AI Advisory Body will begin holding consultations in January 2024 with Member

States and regional groups, and will also be hosting events and engagements on specific topics that are open to all. As a final message, Craig Ramlal noted his desire to increase engagement, to have participation from every industry, representation from every culture, and for the Caribbean to be more involved with the discussions on AI.

The AI Advisory Body launched its interim report, “Governing AI for Humanity” in December 2023. The interim report identifies five principles that should guide the formation of new global AI governance institutions: Inclusivity; public interest; centrality of data governance; universal, networked and multistakeholder; and international law.

The Interim Report is now open for feedback, and inputs can be made on behalf of individuals or entities/organizations through an online form. The due date for the online submission process is 31 March 2024. More information is available at: <https://www.un.org/en/ai-advisory-body>.

The final report of the AI advisory body will be published ahead of the Summit of the Future in September 2024, which is also set to adopt the Global Digital Compact. The Global Digital Compact is expected to “outline shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all”. ■