

POLICY BRIEF

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# Strengthening the artificial intelligence readiness of the Caribbean



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# Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) systems, when applied well, could help in addressing key global challenges and advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, these potential benefits will not materialize automatically. The use of AI also carries significant risks, such as disruption to job markets and economies, loss of cultural diversity, new AI-enabled digital weapons that increase misinformation and surveillance, and threats to human rights and democracy.

While AI systems could support the achievement of many of the SDGs, they could also impede the achievement of others and increase inequalities within and between countries (Vinuesa and others). Many experts in the field of AI are concerned that existing or new harms resulting from AI will become substantially more serious or widespread in the near future, due to inequalities arising from differential control of and ownership over AI technologies (UN HLAB, 2024a).

Bearing in mind these risks and the promises of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to “leave no one behind”, “reach the furthest behind first” and “reduce inequality within and among countries”, it is clear that governments must strengthen their capacity to govern AI. The real harms associated with AI must be mitigated, new risks and threats must be anticipated, and its potential and opportunities could be harnessed for the benefit of people across the Caribbean. However, there is a governance gap relating to digital technologies, in particular AI, that must be filled to achieve this.

Caribbean governments are actively engaging with the global AI policy and governance dialogues, but governance gaps still exist at the national level. This policy brief discusses the Caribbean’s AI readiness by reviewing action taken by Caribbean governments, as well as discussing infrastructure, digital skills and the private sector. It also situates AI and the digital transformation in the context of the ongoing triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, by discussing certain sustainability and resilience considerations for Caribbean small island developing States (SIDS).

# CARIBBEAN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE READINESS

## Policies, strategies and laws

Caribbean governments are actively engaged with the global discussions on how to regulate AI. This is evidenced by the unanimous adoption of the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021), and that several Caribbean States co-sponsored the two 2024 General Assembly resolutions on AI (78/265 and 78/311). At the regional level, the Digital Agenda for Latin America and the Caribbean (eLAC2026) speaks to fostering innovation, emerging technologies and AI for sustainable development, while safeguarding human rights and the ethical use of technology. The Santiago (2023) and Cartagena (2024) declarations on AI, which were signed by a handful of Caribbean countries each, discuss key elements of AI governance. This includes establishing effective national institutional frameworks and developing ecosystems for the development and deployment of ethical, safe and inclusive AI. At the subregional level, the Caribbean Artificial Intelligence Policy Roadmap, which was developed in 2021 and updated following extensive regional consultation in 2024, seeks to support the efforts of policymakers to establish robust governance frameworks to mitigate AI risks. Discussions on AI in warfare have also taken place through CARICOM, which in 2023 adopted a Declaration on Autonomous Weapons Systems. Discussions at the Caribbean level have also taken place through ECLAC and the Caribbean Telecommunications Union. Work has also been ongoing through the platform for SIDS and the Commonwealth. The latter is developing a framework for sovereign AI strategy, which may influence the overall direction of AI governance in the Caribbean, given that 11 of its 16 States are members of the Commonwealth.

At present, however, the development of AI strategies is still in the emerging stages at the national level. Policies are reported to be in development in a few countries, but only one country has adopted a national AI strategy as yet. The manifold efforts of Caribbean countries is nevertheless evidence of their desire to establish a strategic direction for the subregion on AI. Their concerted efforts to deepen international and multistakeholder collaboration to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks associated with AI are laying a foundation for the development of new AI policies in the near future. Further international collaboration on AI in line with the strategic objectives of eLAC2026 could support such efforts, including through the established working groups.<sup>1</sup>

Laws and regulations on AI are in the very early stages of development globally, and no country or region is yet ready to fully regulate AI. Moreover, no one currently understands all of the inner workings of AI enough to fully control its outputs or predict its evolution (UN HLAB, 2024b), which presents a formidable challenge to regulators worldwide. Given the uncertainties surrounding AI technology, the rapid pace of development, the many varied documented harms and risks, and the fact that AI policy development is still in its early stages in most countries, AI legislation is likely to take some time to develop in the Caribbean. No national laws have been adopted on AI as yet in any Caribbean State, though some have begun to signal the type of approach they are considering. Discussions on AI have been held in the parliaments of several

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<sup>1</sup> Active working groups: Meaningful connectivity, digital economy, artificial intelligence, Caribbean.

countries and territories, with some bills having been introduced (Stanford AI Index, 2024). Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands have also adopted at least one AI-related law each (NSCL, 2024).

At the international level, the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law (AI Treaty), which was opened for signature in September 2024, is the only legally binding international treaty on AI currently in existence. However, no Caribbean country has signed the Treaty as yet, though Caribbean countries should consider whether such signature might be advantageous. The application of the Treaty to the Caribbean territories will be determined by their specific constitutional arrangements with their administering power, or will be clarified during the ratification process, which is likely to take years. The impact of the AI Treaty on the Caribbean is therefore likely to be limited in the near future. However, the European Union AI Act (2024) is likely to have some impact on the Caribbean, both due to its extraterritorial effect and because it will be fully applicable in the European Union “outermost regions”, including French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Martinique and the Collectivity of Saint-Martin.

While it might be too early to adopt AI-specific legislation in the Caribbean at present, this is a good time to build the capacity of legislators and regulators related to digital technology and AI. Legislators in the subregion also have plenty of topics to consider in the broader field of digital regulation, including cybersecurity, data protection and automated decision-making, regulation on which would greatly support efforts to mitigate risks associated with AI. Greater support for the development of legislation appropriate to national circumstances, and intensified subregional and regional cooperation in this area, including among parliamentarians, would be helpful.

## Infrastructure

Artificial intelligence readiness demands general digital readiness, which encompasses factors such as digital skills, trust and use at the individual level (Pew Research Centre), and infrastructure, government and business readiness at the national level (UNDP, n.d.). The ITU ICT Development Index (IDI) covers nine indicators measuring infrastructure, Internet access, Internet use, and affordability, among others. The highest ranked Caribbean country overall is The Bahamas, which ranks fortieth globally and third in the Americas. Only two other Caribbean countries rank in the top half of the IDI, which suggests that the Caribbean when viewed as a whole is below average in terms of ICT development.<sup>2</sup> Comparing the scores on each indicator supports this assumption, as the Caribbean scores below the global median on six of the nine indicators (figure 1). An observation that stands out is that while the average Caribbean citizen has better 3G and 4G coverage than the global or Latin American citizen, they use less mobile data, presumably because mobile data is significantly less affordable in the Caribbean than in other regions. The affordability of mobile data is also a challenge that is shared between the countries and territories of the Caribbean. For example, mobile broadband data costs 2.8 times more in Curaçao than the global average. This is a challenge that will need to be tackled if the Caribbean wishes to deploy the 5G mobile networks that are likely needed for AI uptake in the subregion. As mobile network operators in the Caribbean believe there is no business case for 5G here, the cost of deployment would likely have to be covered by Caribbean governments and ultimately recouped from individuals and businesses in the subregion, directly or indirectly. This could further reduce affordability and ultimately widen digital and AI divides in the region, unless measures are taken to curb cost increases.

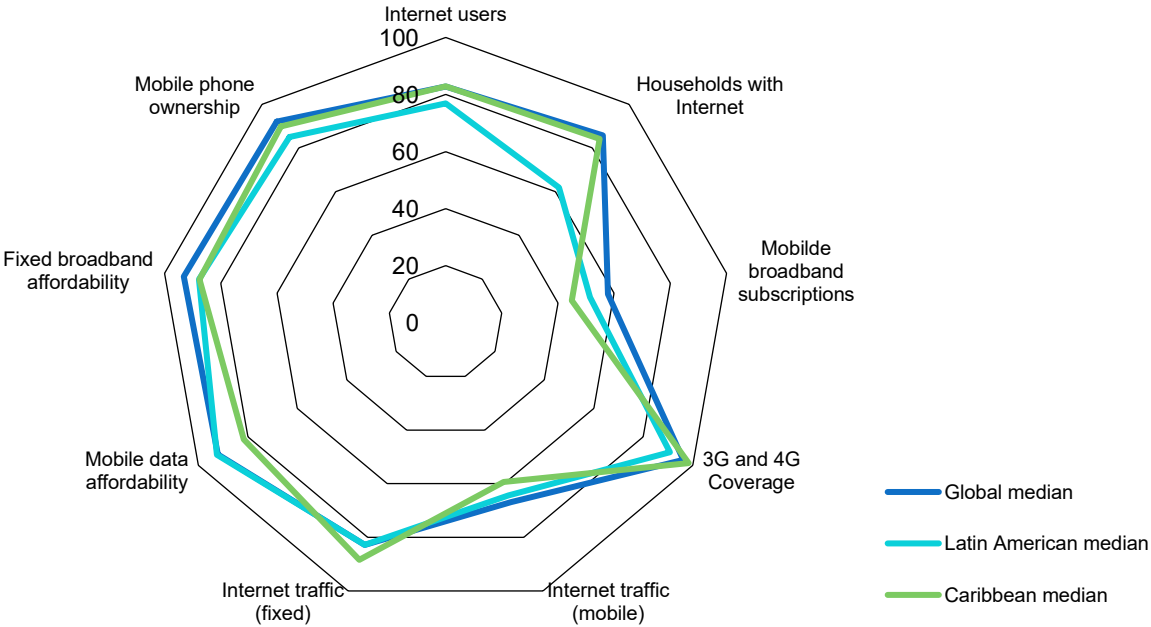
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<sup>2</sup> It is noted that the IDI only covers a small number of indicators for which enough data is available to conduct a comparison for all countries. Other valid indicators of ICT development that could be measured exist (ITU 2023).

This is a challenge to the strategic objectives of eLAC2026 to expand and improve digital infrastructure, and foster meaningful connectivity. If this is a uniquely Caribbean challenge, it could be addressed in the context of the eLAC2026 working group for the Caribbean.

In addition to general digital readiness and 5G network coverage, AI readiness would require specific types of infrastructure, such as supercomputers and data centres to train and run AI models. Currently, one supercomputer has been identified in the Caribbean, hosted at the University of West Indies at Mona. Data centres, which are essential to effectively run cloud storage services and manage the ever-expanding use of web-enabled services, are also essential AI infrastructure. However, the growing compute requirements of AI and machine learning systems are reshaping how data centres are designed, how sites are selected, and how investments are made (JLL 2024). Existing data centres may therefore not be sufficient to efficiently run AI models. Demand for data centres is rapidly rising and there are large disparities among countries in terms of availability. Bearing in mind these factors and the need to reduce the environmental impact of these data centres and to ensure their resilience to climate change, the Caribbean would benefit from greater collaboration in this area. The establishment of the Caribbean Datacenter Association in 2024 is a valuable first step in this regard.

**Figure 1**  
**Scores (0–100) on the 9 indicators of the 2023 ITU ICT Development Index**



Source: D. Alexander, L. Døhl Diouf and C. Wooding (2024), p.22.  
 Notes: Medians for world, Latin America and the Caribbean. Indicator terminology has been simplified. Normalized progress scores for each indicator.

## Academia and the private sector

For a country to become AI ready, it will need to strengthen its own capacity to develop AI systems that are tailored to its needs and circumstances. As agreed in eLAC2026, governments should invest in AI research, education and training programmes, support the adoption of emerging technologies, and support digital public goods and open innovation. To achieve this, both academia and the private sector must be actively engaged. The AI4SIDS platform being developed at the University of the West Indies to address climate resilience through AI (UWI, 2024) is a key example of an initiative that could benefit from greater collaboration and support. Greater collaboration is also needed to collate and share information about AI research conducted in the Caribbean. Latin American and Caribbean countries contribute substantially to several fields of research in computer science, with Cuba and Trinidad and Tobago having the highest number of reported research outputs in the Caribbean (ODD, 2024). However, more data is needed, as such information is unavailable for several countries and all territories in the subregion.

The Caribbean AI sector is currently small, with companies from the subregion making up less than 2% of the Latin American and Caribbean total. The Digital Development Observatory (ODD) records five Caribbean start-ups whose business model is based on AI. However, the region is home to several technology companies that provide services that may use AI, including in the fields of fintech (finance), edtech (education) and agrotech (agriculture). Caribbean private sector organizations appear to greatly value AI. In just four years, the number of AI tool users in enterprises in five Caribbean countries increased twelvefold from approximately 10,200 in 2020 to 123,100 in 2024 (Statista, 2024). Incus Services reports that 58% of survey respondents consider AI critical to the survival of their organization, though only 12% were currently using AI. In a 2024 PWC survey, 45% of respondents identified AI as the most critical technology to their company's strategy. While AI is seen as important, Caribbean businesses are also concerned about the risks and threats associated with digital technologies, with 55% reporting that their company's ability to safeguard sensitive data and defend against emerging cyberthreats needs improvement. Other cross-cutting challenges to private sector growth and transformation include high cost of electricity, gaps in digital infrastructure (World Bank, 2023) and gender inequity (IDB, 2022). These are challenges that could be addressed under the eLAC2026 pillar on digital transformation for productive development.

## Digital and AI skills

A country's AI readiness also depends on the readiness of individuals within that society to use AI proficiently and to prevent risks and reduce harms associated with their and others' AI usage. AI skills are fundamentally digital skills, which are notoriously difficult to measure and encompass a large variety of skills (UNESCO, 2024). Additionally, the increase in AI-generated information requires the development or strengthening of critical thinking skills such as assessing sources, evaluating information, identifying AI-generated content, and recognizing biases and stereotypes. At present, no agreed measures of AI skills exist, and data on digital skills in the Caribbean is also limited. Estimates from UNESCO suggests that people in Latin America and the Caribbean have relatively low levels of digital skills overall, with around 1 in 20 people having sufficiently advanced skills to write a computer program (table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Digital skills in Latin America and the Caribbean and four Caribbean countries**  
*(Percentages)*

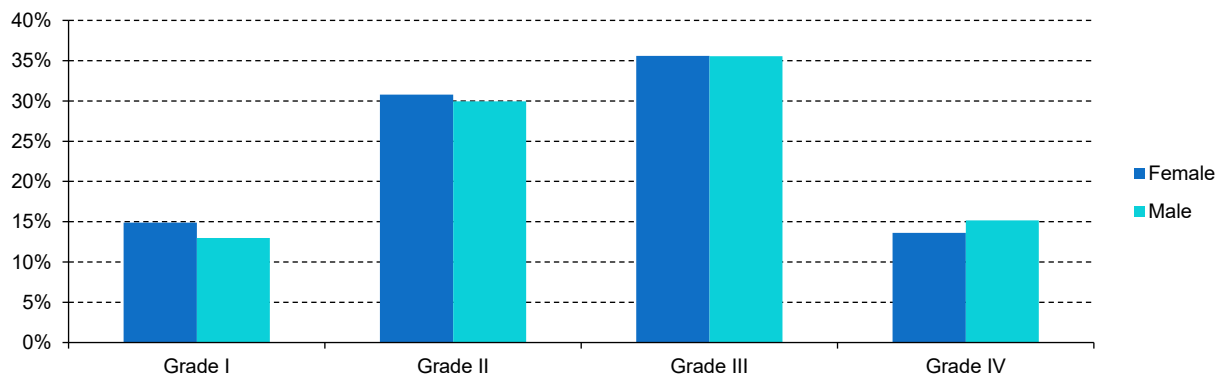
Area	Can copy and paste text within a document	Can use formulas within a spreadsheet	Can write a computer program
Latin America and the Caribbean	28	19	5
Cuba	22	22	6
Curaçao	29	21	4
Jamaica	15	6	-
Trinidad and Tobago	47	23	4

Source: Data from the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT), 2022 for Trinidad and Tobago and estimates from UNESCO, 2024 for all others.

These figures provide some insight into digital skills, but do not suffice to assess AI skills, except to note that there are large basic skills gaps that need to be filled. Further efforts to establish digital and AI skills standards at the national level, as well as international collaboration on this matter, is therefore advised, so relevant courses and awareness raising campaigns can be developed.

Caribbean countries should also invest in developing and harnessing the digital skills of the subregion’s youth population, in particular those of women and girls. Data from the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) shows that from 2017 and 2022, between 21,000 and 26,000 students sat the May/June examinations in information technology each year. The exam covers computer fundamentals, web technologies, word processing, web design, spreadsheets, database management and computer program design and implementation (CXC 2018). Students that pass this exam could therefore be expected to be equipped with a wide range of digital skills. CXC data shows that in 2022, more female than male students sat this exam, and female students outperformed male students in this subject, earning more Grade I and II results, and fewer Grade IV results (figure 2) (CXC 2022). Similar observations can be made for previous years.

**Figure 2**  
**Female students outperform male students in the 2022 CXC exam in Information Technology**  
*(Percentages)*

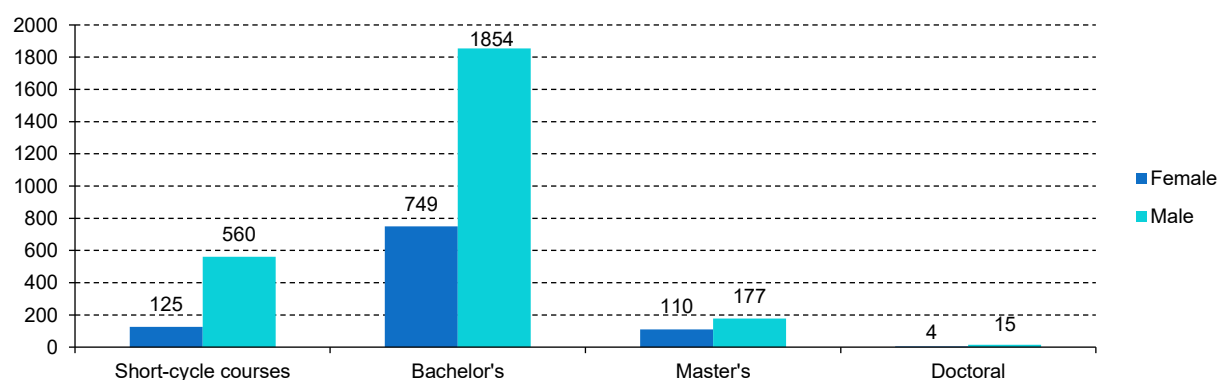


Source: ECLAC, based on data from CXC (2022).

However, the interest and skill demonstrated by female students in this subject does not appear to translate into higher education. At the university level, Caribbean women appear to be consistently under-represented in information technology-related courses. Of the 90 information technology-related courses surveyed across six Caribbean universities,<sup>3</sup> only seven had more female than male students enrolled, with the highest levels of gender disparity in short-cycle courses (figure 3).

The underrepresentation of women in the field of information technology is not unique to the Caribbean. In other regions with larger technology and AI sectors, the scarcity of women in those sectors has been identified as an obstacle to further development and to competitiveness that must be addressed. As Caribbean countries seek to develop these sectors further, encouraging women to take part could serve to eliminate that obstacle at an early stage. Mainstreaming gender into digital and AI policies, in line with eLAC2026, could be one way to support this goal.

**Figure 3**  
**More men than women are enrolled in university-level information technology courses in the Caribbean**



Source: ECLAC.

Note: Based on 2021/2022 enrolment data from six Caribbean universities (see footnote 2).

## Sustainability and resilience

Artificial intelligence could play a role in advancing the sustainable development of SIDS, for example by creating economic opportunities, improving environmental management and reducing disaster risk. However, considering that the world is in the midst of a triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, and that SIDS are particularly vulnerable, it is also necessary to consider the environmental impact of digital technologies and AI systems. The ICT sector has a significant, but largely hidden environmental impact, due to its need for infrastructure, energy, water and rare materials, and its associated greenhouse gas emissions and electronic waste. Digitalization can involve trade-offs across several SDGs and will increase demand for specific resources. At the same time, “digital technology supports decarbonization only if appropriately governed” (IPCC, 2022) and the current model of natural resource use to deliver economic

<sup>3</sup> The University of Curaçao, University of the Virgin Islands, University of the West Indies at Cave Hill, Mona and St. Augustine, and the University of Trinidad and Tobago.

growth is driving the triple planetary crisis (UNEP, 2024). Measures must therefore be taken to ensure that the digital transformation is not carried out at the expense of the local environment and population, the planet or future generations. This would include efforts towards establishing a circular economy, wherein access to digital technology can be facilitated through community-based models (libraries, leasing, shared facilities), the lifespan of products is extended through repair and refurbishment, electronic waste is reduced, and materials are recycled to reduce the dependence on new materials.

In the Caribbean, issues of particular concern include the energy and water usage of digital infrastructure and electronic waste. Data centres are essential infrastructure to countries that wish to develop their digital technology and AI sectors. However, data centres require continuous and stable access to electricity and water to function, including for their liquid cooling systems. The Caribbean is already importing fossil fuels to generate energy, at great cost, while also experiencing a water crisis, with demand increasingly outstripping supply in many countries and territories. While renewable energy and desalination technologies could help to remedy some of these issues, there are financial and environmental costs associated with those options that must be factored into the planning, in addition to the time factor. Caribbean countries must also address the issue of electronic waste, as they are currently producing more e-waste than the world average, while having low capacity to collect and treat such waste (Global E-waste Monitor, 2024). E-waste is on the agenda in some Caribbean countries, but more needs to be done, as it is a threat to both biodiversity and human health (Mohammadi and others, 2021). As AI-related resource use grows, including in the general population, strategies that maximize the value of each unit of resource used should be considered. This includes circular economy strategies, the implementation of formal e-waste recycling measures, and related public education efforts.

Though it is too early to fully assess the impact that AI and its associated infrastructure will have, negative effects on the environment and human health have already been documented. It is clear that there are many risks and threats that must be managed. Integrated, whole-of-government strategies related to the digital transformation are therefore necessary. For the Caribbean, which is at the forefront of the climate crisis, accounting for climate risks will need to be an important part of increasing its digital and AI readiness, as digital infrastructure is exposed to a variety of such risks.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## Objective 1 – International collaboration in AI policy and regulation

Taking into account agreed commitments and objectives, including in the Global Digital Compact and eLAC2026:

- Caribbean countries and territories should (continue to) participate in work at the subregional, regional and global levels to establish a common understanding of the risks and benefits of AI, as well as policy approaches and good practices to mitigate and address harm.
- Caribbean countries and territories should seek to adopt or update policies and legislation to regulate the digital transformation, particularly in areas such as cybersecurity and data protection.
- Caribbean countries and territories should also prioritize strengthening capacities to govern the use of AI and its associated risks, so that appropriate and tailored AI-specific laws may be adopted as understanding of the technology and its impact develops.
- Caribbean countries and territories should seek to foster collaboration among policymakers, regulators and legislators to develop AI-specific legislation that takes account of Caribbean realities.
- Intergovernmental organizations, academia, civil society and private sector organizations should provide support to governments, regulators and parliamentarians working on the digital transformation and artificial intelligence.

## Objective 2 – Manage the digital transformation in an integrated manner

Taking into account agreed commitments and objectives, including in the Global Digital Compact and eLAC2026:

- Strengthen collaboration across government departments to deliver integrated policies on the digital transformation, including relating to infrastructure, cybersecurity and use of digital technologies.
- Carefully consider the trade-offs between SDGs in the development of digital transformation policies, seeking to minimize harm to people, in particular marginalized groups and the environment.
- Provide opportunities for an integrated discussion on digital transformation and artificial intelligence in the context of the triple planetary crisis, considering economic, social and environmental aspects.
- Take water and energy availability as well as climate change and other natural hazards into account when planning and deploying digital infrastructure.
- Build human capacity related to the digital transformation and artificial intelligence, including in data privacy and cybersecurity, with the aim of enabling people to better protect themselves from digital harm.
- Promote digital inclusion in the context of the digital transformation, including by considering affordability.
- Promote gender equity in the context of the digital transformation by mainstreaming gender into all strategies, policies and laws relating to the digital transformation and AI, considering also the particular harms women and girls are exposed to.
- Advocate for, and encourage through procurement and other policies, resilient and environmentally sustainable practices in the context of digital technologies, including a circular digital economy.
- Establish e-waste management practices to reduce the negative impact of digital technologies on the environment and human health.

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