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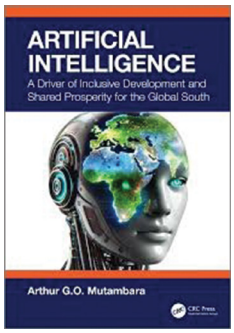
Artificial Intelligence: A Driver of Inclusive Development and Shared Prosperity for the Global South



AUTHOR:
Arthur Mutambara

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REVIEWER:
Martin Bekker[1]

AFFILIATION:
[1]School of Electrical and Information Engineering, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

EMAIL:
martin.bekker@wits.ac.za

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Lost in the labyrinth of good intentions – A review of 'Artificial Intelligence'

A book on harnessing artificial intelligence for the development of the Global South could hardly be more relevant. In an era of stalling development, rising inequality, and profound climate crises, the promise of AI as a panacea demands rigorous, critical examination. We need public intellectuals to help us ask the right questions: *Cui bono?* Who benefits from this new suite of tools? And how can we ensure that the rollout of AI leads to genuine human betterment, rather than simply new forms of dependency and control?

Arthur Mutambara – roboticist, politician and head of the University of Johannesburg's Institute for the Future of Knowledge – is well positioned to take on this monumental task. His 450-page tome, *Artificial Intelligence: A Driver of Inclusive Development and Shared Prosperity for the Global South*, is admirable in its ambition to provide a comprehensive guide for policymakers. The book attempts to serve as both a primer on AI applications and a development manifesto. Unfortunately, while long on ambition, the work is short on the analytical rigour and strategic coherence its subject demands, making for a deeply frustrating read.

The core problem is the book's relentlessly formulaic structure. Across dozens of topics, the narrative follows a predictable and unenlightening pattern: a concept is introduced, its potential is extolled, and a few obligatory caveats are tacked on before moving to the next item on the list. We learn, for instance, that "nanotechnology is based on nanomaterials", which "can revolutionise health", but that "there are concerns over their interaction with the natural environment". We are told that "value adding ought to be done" in the Global South, but "before this can happen, Africa must be decolonised". One nods in agreement, yet is left unarmed with any new insight or actionable plan.

This 'new thing, good thing, caveats' formula reduces complex issues to a series of truisms. The book feels less like a sustained argument and more like an encyclopaedia of vaguely linked concepts. Discussions of Amartya Sen's capability approach, the Human Development Index, and Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index are presented as a list of alternatives, with no evaluation or analysis of their connections or tensions. The reader is left to wonder: what is the point of learning that different development metrics exist? We were promised an argument, but are given a catalogue.

This lack of critical analysis is most apparent in the book's unashamedly 'pro-tech' stance. The narrative accepts the Fourth Industrial Revolution thesis uncritically, flashing just about every buzzword available: blockchain, quantum computing, the Singularity, and the Internet of Things are scattered like flotsam. The phrase "data is the new oil" appears on pages 103, 136 and 149; similarly, allusions to a "brave new world" appear repeatedly, each time without a hint of the dystopian irony it evokes.

This uncritical lens leads to strange conclusions. In a 150-page chapter of country studies, China is presented as a model for the Global South to emulate. The text acknowledges China as a leader in domestic coercion through facial recognition, widespread surveillance and a social credit system, yet this is presented as part of a package from which to learn. Similarly, after a perfunctory review of AI's potential benefits and risks in education, the inevitable conclusion is that schools across the Global South should change their curricula and adopt AI. The complex trade-offs are noted, but never truly weighed.

Further weakening the book's intellectual core is a pervasive repetition that befuddles the reader, making them feel trapped as if in a labyrinth. Ideas introduced on one page are reintroduced on the next as if for the first time, while whole phrases manifest verbatim in different sections. One company is introduced three times. This frustrating sense of déjà vu both distracts from and compounds the book's tendency towards vague dictums. A discussion of a large US tech company ends with the claim that "the Global South must have a piece of that pie"; yet the how and why are never explained. Claims are often left unsourced and unexplained; for example, a figure reports that AI has a potential benefit of "Cancer: 63%", leaving the reader to guess if this means 63% of cancers will be cured, or something else entirely.

Ultimately, the book's grand vision is undone by its reliance on injunctions. The author uses the word "must" around 800 times. States *must* be developmental, ministries *must* create vocational training centres, industries *must* follow pro-tech diktats. Page 95 alone contains the word 'must' 15 times. The effect is not of a strategic plan, but of a political speech from an opposition bench: one that can pontificate at leisure without the burden of implementation. In one particularly ironic moment, the African Union's continental AI strategy is criticised for being a "laundry list without strategic coherence" – a charge that could easily be levelled at this book.

What should have been a landmark work is drowned by its interminable lists and numbed by its unending carousel of commands. For a book that tells the Global South what it *must* do on almost every page, this reviewer is left with only one word in response: mustn't.

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