Vol. 1, Issue 1, January 2024
Journal of Artificial Intelligence General Science JAIGS

Home page http://jaigs.org

Interdisciplinary Perspectives: Fusing Artificial Intelligence with Environmental Science for Sustainable Solutions

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ARTICLE INFO
Article History:
Received:
05.01.2024
Accepted:
10.01.2024
Online: 22.01.2024

Keyword: Interdisciplinary, Artificial Intelligence, Environmental, Climate Change

ABSTRACT

This article explores the transformative potential of integrating artificial intelligence (AI) with environmental science to address pressing challenges and foster sustainable solutions. The interdisciplinary synergy between AI technologies and environmental science is examined across key domains, including environmental monitoring, predictive modeling for climate change, conservation and biodiversity, and sustainable resource management. The article highlights the role of AI in real-time data analysis, predictive modeling, and optimization, offering innovative approaches to tackle issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion. Emphasizing the significance of collaborative efforts, the abstract underscores the need for interdisciplinary insights to harness the full potential of AI in promoting environmental sustainability.

Introduction:

In recent years, the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and environmental science has emerged as a promising frontier for addressing pressing global challenges related to sustainability and environmental stewardship. As our world grapples with complex issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion, there is a growing recognition of the need for innovative approaches that leverage the power of AI to enhance our understanding of the environment and develop effective solutions.

This interdisciplinary fusion brings together the strengths of two diverse fields: AI, with its ability to analyze vast amounts of data, identify patterns, and make predictions, and environmental science, with its deep knowledge of natural systems and processes. By integrating AI techniques such as machine learning, data mining, and predictive modeling with environmental research, scientists and researchers are gaining new insights into ecological dynamics, environmental risks, and potential mitigation strategies.

This introduction sets the stage for exploring the synergies between AI and environmental science and delving into the myriad ways in which these disciplines can collaborate to address sustainability challenges. From monitoring and managing natural resources to predicting environmental trends and informing policy decisions, the integration of AI holds immense potential to revolutionize our approach to environmental conservation and management.

Throughout this discourse, we will delve into various case studies, methodologies, and applications where AI is being harnessed to advance our understanding of environmental systems, optimize resource allocation, and develop sustainable solutions. By fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange between AI researchers, environmental scientists, policymakers, and other stakeholders, we aim to catalyze transformative innovations that contribute to a more sustainable and resilient future for our planet.

Objective:

1: Investigate the Current State of Integration

- Assess the existing research and practices at the intersection of artificial intelligence and environmental science.

- Identify key methodologies, techniques, and applications that are being used to fuse AI with environmental research.

- Evaluate the strengths, limitations, and gaps in current interdisciplinary efforts to leverage AI for sustainable solutions in environmental science.

Objective 2: Explore Promising Applications and Case Studies

- Explore diverse case studies and examples where AI techniques have been successfully applied to address environmental challenges.

- Highlight innovative approaches and technologies that demonstrate the potential of AI in enhancing environmental monitoring, prediction, and management.

- Analyze the effectiveness and scalability of AI-driven solutions in promoting sustainability and resilience across different environmental contexts.

Objective 3: Propose Strategies for Future Collaboration and Innovation

- Identify opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration between AI researchers and environmental scientists to advance sustainable solutions.

- Propose frameworks and methodologies for integrating AI techniques into environmental research and decision-making processes.

- Recommend policy interventions and institutional mechanisms to support the development and adoption of AI-driven solutions for environmental sustainability.

Literature Review:

Artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to contribute to sustainable solutions in environmental science [1]. By integrating AI technologies, such as advanced algorithms, predictive modeling, and machine learning, with environmental studies, it is possible to detect, monitor, and manage pollution, including heavy metal contamination [2]. AI can help identify contamination sources, assess risk levels, and guide remediation strategies [3]. Additionally, AI-driven solutions can be integrated with sustainable practices in agriculture, industry, and urban planning to reduce the release of heavy metals into the environment [4]. However, to fully harness the potential of AI for sustainable environmental solutions, interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial [5]. By combining expertise from environmental science and AI, global environmental challenges can be addressed holistically.

Methodology:

1. Case Study Selection:

- Select a diverse range of case studies that exemplify the application of artificial intelligence in addressing environmental challenges.

- Consider factors such as geographic location, environmental issue, scale of implementation, and level of technological sophistication.

- Ensure that selected case studies represent a variety of AI techniques, including machine learning, data mining, predictive modeling, and optimization algorithms.

2. Data Collection and Analysis:

- Collect relevant data sets, including environmental data, satellite imagery, sensor data, and socio-economic indicators, as applicable to each case study.

- Apply appropriate AI techniques to analyze and interpret the data, such as clustering analysis, classification algorithms, regression models, and neural networks.

- Utilize statistical methods and spatial analysis tools to identify patterns, trends, and correlations in the data.

3. Evaluation of AI-Driven Solutions:

- Assess the effectiveness, accuracy, and reliability of AI-driven solutions in addressing environmental challenges, using performance metrics and validation techniques.

- Compare the outcomes of AI-based approaches with traditional methods and baseline scenarios to evaluate their added value and potential impact.

- Consider socio-economic, ethical, and environmental implications of AI applications, including issues related to bias, equity, transparency, and privacy.

4. Synthesis and Interpretation:

- Synthesize findings from the literature review, case studies, and data analysis to draw conclusions about the role of artificial intelligence in environmental science for sustainable solutions.

- Discuss implications for policy, practice, and future research directions.

- Identify opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation to further advance the integration of AI and environmental science for environmental sustainability.

Exploring the Intersection of Sustainability and Artificial Intelligence

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) systems into our socio-technical-ecological landscape presents a myriad of challenges and opportunities across social, environmental, and economic realms. As discussions around AI intensify, questions arise regarding its potential impact on societal and ecological well-being. Terms like "AI for Earth" or "AI for Social Good" underscore the potential for AI systems to address sustainability objectives, spanning from ecosystem monitoring to sustainable manufacturing and beyond.

However, the relationship between AI and sustainability is complex and multifaceted. While AI holds promise for advancing sustainability goals, it also raises concerns about its potential to exacerbate environmental degradation or social inequities. This complexity necessitates a broader perspective that considers the entire life cycle of AI systems, from development to deployment and beyond.

In contrast to focusing solely on AI's contributions to sustainability, there is a growing emphasis on the sustainability of AI itself. This perspective acknowledges the broader socio-economic and ecological impacts of AI systems, urging stakeholders to consider not only the benefits but also the risks associated with their development and use.

Previous research has explored various dimensions of sustainability in the context of AI, ranging from environmental impacts to social and economic considerations. However, there remains a need for a comprehensive assessment framework that integrates these diverse perspectives and provides actionable insights for governing sustainable AI.

This paper aims to address this gap by introducing the Sustainable AI Assessment Framework (SAAIF), which considers the social, ecological, economic, and organizational governance dimensions of sustainability. By critically reviewing existing literature and assessment approaches, we develop a holistic framework comprising 19 criteria and 67 indicators for evaluating the sustainability impacts of AI systems.

Through the SAAIF, we seek to empower stakeholders to assess and improve the sustainability of AI development and deployment. By raising awareness and providing practical tools for evaluation, we aim to foster responsible AI practices that align with broader sustainability objectives.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines our socio-technical approach to AI and provides context on sustainability concepts. Section 3 details the methodology used to derive the sustainability criteria and indicators for AI systems. Section 4 introduces the SAAIF framework, while Section 5 discusses challenges and recommendations for future research in the realm of sustainable AI.

An Embedded Perspective on Sustainable AI and the Impacts of Socio-Technical-Ecological AI Systems

Our conceptual approach to sustainable AI, which we term the embedded perspective, delves into the intricate relationships between AI systems and the socio-technical-ecological fabric of our world. We define AI systems as dynamic entities where rules evolve not from human programming but through subsequent learning processes fueled by data. Encompassing both machine learning models and the data they learn from, our focus lies particularly on supervised machine learning given its prevalence and the challenges posed by its data-driven learning approach.

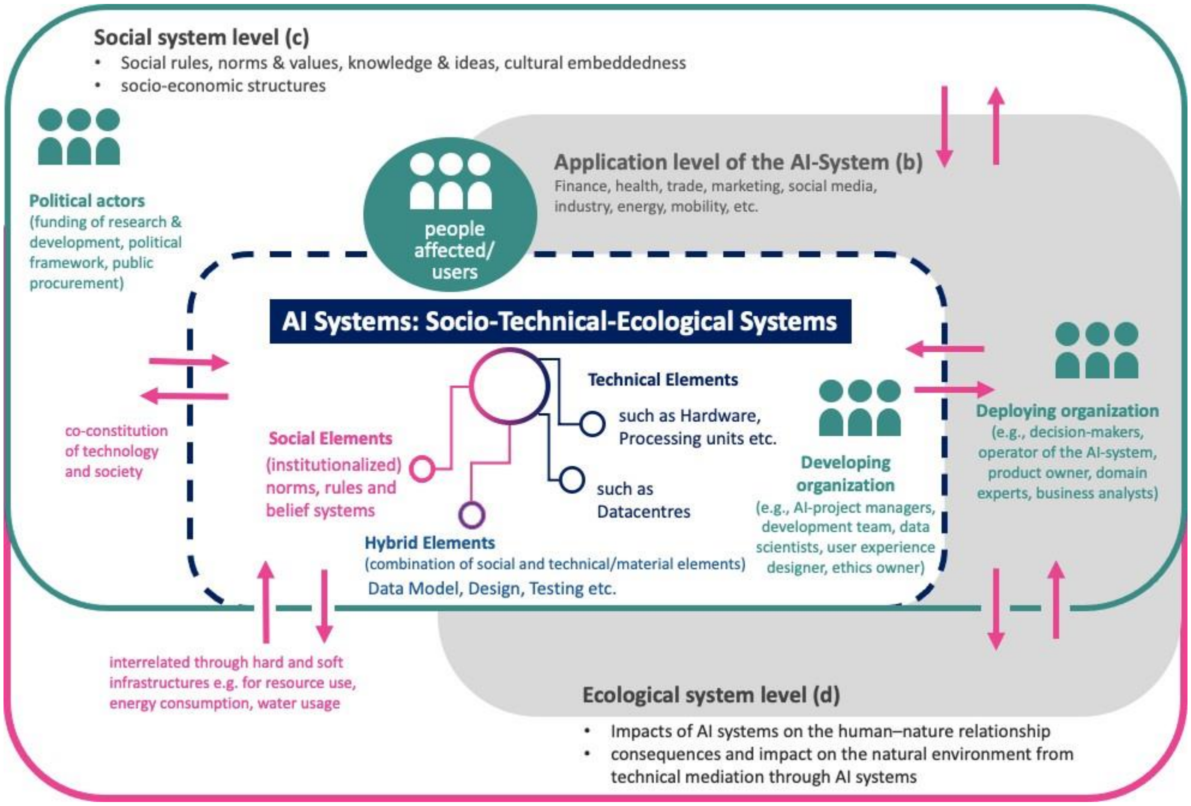
Central to our approach are several perspectives. Firstly, adopting a life-cycle view of AI systems, we delineate phases from organizational integration to model use and decision-making. Secondly, we conceive sustainability as a multi-dimensional concept, encapsulating ecological, social, and economic dimensions, intertwined with questions of justice and global equity. Despite its complexity, this tripartite framework helps structure our sustainability criteria, acknowledging the interconnectedness between these dimensions.

Thirdly, we extend this sustainability perspective to encompass not only socio-technical systems but also socio-technical-ecological systems. Recognizing AI systems as inherently intertwined with both human society and the natural environment, we emphasize their complex interactions and hybrid nature. AI systems, characterized by autonomy and adaptability, are best understood as part of larger socio-technical-ecological systems, where technological elements, human actors, and environmental factors converge.

Our assessment approach adopts a holistic view, treating society, technology, and environment as co-constituted entities. By integrating social-ecological and social-technical system thinking, we acknowledge the intricate interplay between AI systems and their broader socio-ecological context. This perspective underscores the need to recognize AI's mediation of human-environment relationships and its various impact levels, spanning from material flows and resource consumption to governance structures and societal implications.

Illustrated in Figure 1, our framework distinguishes between different impact levels of AI systems, highlighting the complex entanglements between social, technical, and ecological entities. While this visualization provides an overview of key impact levels, it inherently cannot capture the full complexity of sustainability impacts. Nonetheless, it serves as a foundational tool for conceptualizing sustainable AI systems, prompting considerations of the multifaceted interactions at play.

In the subsequent sections, we delve deeper into our socio-technical-ecological perspective on AI, elucidating our evaluation framework and discussing challenges and recommendations for fostering sustainable AI practices.



The sustainability assessment of AI systems considers four crucial impact levels:

(a) The AI System Level:

- This level focuses primarily on the AI systems themselves, encompassing the entire lifecycle from model development to implementation.

- It involves elements such as data acquisition, management, conceptualization, training, testing, and inference.

- Within the AI lifecycle, various social, technical, and hybrid components interact to shape the AI system.

- The AI system is embedded within and interacts with both the (macro)-social system and the ecological system, constituting a socio-technical-ecological system.

(b) The Application Level:

- This level pertains to the specific context and use cases of AI applications.

- Criteria related to ecological sustainability potential and effects on the labor market are considered within the application context.

- Understanding the application level is essential for assessing the real-world impacts and implications of AI systems.

(c) The Macro-Social Level:

- AI systems are embedded within broader social structures and systems.

- They are influenced by and influence societal norms, regulations, and cultural frameworks.

- Structural elements such as rules, legal frameworks, cultural norms, and values shape the development and deployment of AI systems.

(d) The Ecological System Level:

- AI systems have interconnectedness with ecological systems and the natural environment.

- This connection is manifested through resource extraction for hardware production and the quantification of nature.

- Understanding the ecological implications of AI systems is crucial for assessing their overall sustainability.

These conceptual foundations offer a holistic approach that bridges disciplines and acknowledges the complexity of AI systems and their impacts. The Sustainable AI Assessment Framework (SCAIS) is not only intended to stimulate academic discourse but also serves as a practical tool for organizations to develop and implement sustainable AI systems in the long term. By considering these impact levels comprehensively, we aim to foster positive contributions towards the development and deployment of sustainable AI solutions.

		Phase	
	(Organizational) governance dimension (Cross-cutting criteria)		
(1) Defined responsibilities	*(1) There are contact persons for ethical and social matters* *(2) The allocation of responsibility is clearly and transparently regulated & documented* *(3) There are regulations on liability aspects*	*1*	*[39,40]*
(2) Code of conduct	*(4) Norms and values for the implantation and use of AI systems defined in a code of conduct*	*1*	*[39,41]*
(3) Stakeholder participation	*(5) Identification and classification of stakeholders* *(6) Integration of stakeholders into design, test and release processes*	*1,2,4,5, 6*	*[39,42]*
(4) Documentation	*(7) Documentation of information regarding objectives, domain, users, data, model, feature selection, inputs, tests, metrics, etc. (Model card)*	*1,2,3,4, 5,6*	*[39,42,43]*
(5) Risk management	*(8) Implementation of risk assessment* *(9) Implementation of risk monitoring* *(10) Implementation of risk management*	*1,2,4,6*	*[42,44]*
(6) Complaint mechanism	*(11) Option to report errors, unfair and discriminatory decisions, privacy intrusions, etc. to AI-operating company*		
	Social dimension		
(7) Transparency & accountability	*(12) Parameter count* *(13) AI type (deep learning vs. statistical learning)* *(14) Use of methods for increasing transparency & explainability* *(15) Information about AI usage available* *(16) Access to information about functionality*	*1,3,5,6*	*[24,39,42, 43,45–49*]*
(8) Non-discrimination & fairness	*(17) Assessment of the potential for discrimination* *(18) Usage of methods for measuring fairness and bias* *(19) Definition of vulnerable groups and protected attributes* *(20) Measures to eliminate discrimination*	*1,3,4,5, 6*	*[44,49*–52]*
(9) Technical reliability & human supervision	*(21) Mechanisms for performance control* *(22) Ensuring appropriate data quality* *(23) Opportunity for human control*	*3,5,6*	*[53–58]*
(10) Self-determination and data protection	*(24) Privacy-by-design* *(25) Users have control over their data* *(26) Earmarked data use* *(27) Notifications regarding data use* *(28) Self-motivated use of AI-systems* *(29) Abandonment of addiction-enhancing mechanisms (nudging, dark patterns)*	*2,3,6*	*[2,5,44,49 *,59]*
(11) Inclusive & participatory design	*(30) Applying co-design principles* *(31) Ensuring accessibility*	*2*	*[44,60,61]*
(12) Cultural sensitivity	*(32) Team diversity*	*1,2,5*	*[60,62–64]*

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	(33) Integration of local experts and natives (34) Transferability of the AI system to adapt to local and new application contexts, norms, and values		
	Ecological dimension		
(13) Energy consumption	(35) Energy consumption is considered during the system development (36) Models with lower complexity are favored during model selection (37) Pre-trained models and transfer learning are used (38) Parameters that capture the model efficiency are measured (39) Methods for model compression are used (40) Methods for efficient training of the models are applied (41) Measures are used to reduce the amount of data	1,4,6	[65–71]
(14) CO_2 and GHG emissions	(42) CO_2 footprint (43) CO_2 efficiency (44) Emission compensation	1,3,4,5,6	[67,72–79]
(15) Sustainability potential in application	(45) Sustainable target function (46) Consideration of sustainability criteria in decision systems (47) Promotion of sustainable products (48) Promotion of sustainable consumption patterns (49) Reduction of resource consumption of processes or products (50) Impact of the AI system on the product quality and service life	1,2,3,6	[5,14,46,72,80]
(16) Embodied & shared resource consumption of hardware infrastructure	(51) Certified hardware (energy & resource efficiency) (52) Certified data center (transparency, energy & resource efficiency) (53) Efficiency metrics for data centers (e.g. Power-/Water-/Carbon usage effectiveness) (54) Hardware recycling rate (55) Hardware reuse rate (56) Use of waste disposal scenarios for hardware	1,2	[72,81,82]
	Economic dimension		
(17) Market diversity and exploitation of innovation potential	(57) Accessibility of code (58) Accessibility of data (data pools) (59) Accessibility of AI tools (60) Interfaces (APIs) (61) Multihoming & Compatibility	1,3,4,5,6	[83–85]
(18) Distribution effect in target markets	(62) Adaptability to data volumes and action requirements (63) No differences in accuracy between major and marginalized market players (64) Diversity of employing customers (65) Support for SMEs & NGOs	1,2,5,6	[83]
(19) Working conditions and jobs	(66) Evaluation of effects on working conditions (67) Fair wages along the AI-lifecycle	1,6	[86*–89]

Our Sustainable AI Assessment Framework (SCAIS) addresses the varied impact levels outlined above, offering practical value and guidance for organizations. To illustrate the practical application of our self-assessment tool, we present a hypothetical scenario. Through our pre-testing, we've observed that the self-assessment tool, developed based on the aforementioned criteria, assists organizations involved in AI development or usage to gauge their sustainability practices and identify areas for improvement.

For instance, let's consider the criterion of a "Code of Conduct" within the organizational governance dimension. The questionnaire prompts organizations to indicate the existence of such a code and specifies norms and values related to the implementation and use of AI systems (see Table 1, Code of Conduct at the indicator level). An organization may discover that establishing a Code of Ethics, outlining principles like transparency and non-discrimination, is a positive initial step. However, the tool might suggest improvements, such as establishing an internal oversight body to monitor adherence to the Code of Ethics and ensure effective oversight in AI development processes. It may also recommend strategies for making information about AI models and datasets more transparent to stakeholders.

Furthermore, in scenarios where AI systems have a direct impact on individuals, such as through automated decision-making, the self-assessment tool evaluates positively if the organization engages marginalized stakeholders in consultation processes across the system's lifecycle. Conversely, it may highlight areas for improvement if the organization lacks diversity management and has a homogenous workforce.

Regarding environmental considerations, the tool recognizes efforts such as employing carbon-efficient methods in AI development and utilizing eco-certified hardware and data centers. However, it may suggest enhancements, such as establishing partnerships with recycling or re-manufacturing companies to responsibly dispose of old hardware.

In summary, our self-assessment tool, grounded in the SCAIS framework, provides actionable insights for organizations involved in developing or implementing AI systems. It facilitates a comprehensive evaluation of sustainability practices, guiding organizations toward more sustainable AI development and deployment.

Challenges and Implications for AI Development, Research, and Policy

Previous discussions on sustainable AI primarily emphasized ethical and environmental dimensions, often focusing on presenting principles rather than practical implementation. Our work underscores the importance of adopting a holistic approach to AI sustainability and utilizes an indicator-based methodology to demonstrate practical pathways for sustainable AI implementation. However, our research uncovers two significant challenges that must be addressed to foster sustainable AI:

1. Practical Implications:

- There is a pressing need for regulations and industry standards to guide sustainable AI practices. A key obstacle is the lack of comprehensive data and documentation processes during AI development and deployment, stemming from limited awareness among AI development communities and organizational constraints. Our set of sustainability criteria offers a valuable resource for companies involved in AI development and deployment, fostering awareness of broader sustainability impacts. Policy initiatives, standards, and certification programs increasingly integrate sustainability aspects, signaling the importance of changing practices and enforcing mandatory reporting requirements. Comprehensive policy approaches should address all sustainability dimensions to steer the growing impacts of AI systems toward societal and environmental benefits.

2. Conceptual Implications:

- Research and reflection are needed to understand the interconnectedness and entanglements of sustainability impacts in AI systems. AI systems, being socio-technical-ecological entities, exhibit complexity and interdependence across impact levels. Achieving a comprehensive assessment approach requires a deeper understanding of these interdependencies. For instance, while shifting computation to cloud data centers may enhance ecological sustainability, it could also exacerbate market concentration issues. Future research should explore these trade-offs and synergies comprehensively, considering the socio-technical-ecological framework. Our set of criteria provides a foundation for assessing these impacts and identifying conflicting objectives. However, further research is needed to fully integrate social-ecological considerations into the assessment framework.

In addition to describing interdependent impacts, there is a need for societal negotiation processes to address trade-offs inherent in AI sustainability. As AI systems become more pervasive, understanding and navigating these trade-offs will be crucial. This requires enhanced critical discussion, organizational sensemaking, and societal dialogue. Defining priorities and allocating attention to different sustainability impacts will necessitate ongoing research and societal engagement. Our study contributes to this effort by offering a holistic assessment framework for AI sustainability dimensions, providing a basis for future research and policy development. Achieving sustainability in the AI lifecycle requires a multi-dimensional approach, underscoring the need for ongoing research and societal negotiation to define priorities and address trade-offs effectively.

conclusion

In conclusion, our work highlights the imperative of adopting a comprehensive and holistic approach to ensure the sustainability of artificial intelligence (AI) systems. By incorporating a diverse set of sustainability criteria and employing an indicator-based methodology, we have provided practical pathways for implementing sustainable AI practices. However, our research has also revealed significant challenges that must be addressed to advance the sustainability agenda in AI development, research, and policy.

Firstly, there is a critical need for regulations and industry standards to guide sustainable AI practices. This includes enforcing mandatory reporting requirements and integrating sustainability aspects into policy initiatives, standards, and certification programs. By addressing all dimensions of sustainability, policy approaches can steer the increasing impacts of AI systems toward societal and environmental benefits.

Secondly, there is a pressing need for further research and reflection to understand the interconnectedness and entanglements of sustainability impacts in AI systems. AI systems, being socio-technical-ecological entities, exhibit complexity and interdependence across impact levels. Achieving a comprehensive assessment approach requires a deeper understanding of these interdependencies and societal negotiation processes to address trade-offs inherent in AI sustainability.

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