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Workshop yields concrete AI solutions for advancing societal good

October 10, 2018 | By Amit Sharma, Senior Researcher

Artificial intelligence has made tremendous strides in recent years, but oftentimes, its potential to help tackle some of the world's most pressing issues is overshadowed by concerns and misunderstandings surrounding this growing technology. To focus on AI's potential for enabling social good, Microsoft Research India, in collaboration with the University of Southern California Center for Artificial Intelligence in Society, organized and hosted a two-day "AI and Societal Good" workshop on September 24–25 at Microsoft Research India's premises in Bangalore. The workshop, the second of its kind hosted by Microsoft Research India, focused on AI as an enabler for solving critical societal challenges, especially those impacting low-resource and vulnerable communities.

To help identify focus areas, Microsoft Research India brought together a wide range of stakeholders, including social work researchers, policy organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and social enterprises. The first part of the workshop saw talks by researchers from Microsoft and USC presenting previous work on using AI technologies for societal good. This was

followed by brainstorming sessions with participating NGOs and social enterprises to identify widespread problems. Through these discussions, five major application areas were identified:

- digitization and image recognition
- personalized health care
- urban planning
- public health awareness
- welfare of vulnerable youth

The second part of the workshop focused on proposing solutions in each of these areas. In multiple breakout sessions, participants discussed ideas that could accelerate current efforts by local organizations and allow stakeholders to address key societal problems jointly. At the end of the workshop, teams of researchers and NGOs presented concrete project proposals for each of the five application areas.

A consistent theme throughout these sessions was the importance of collaboration between AI researchers and experts from the social work sector in solving important problems. All of the proposed projects depend on creating effective AI systems, but more importantly require a deep understanding of the communities and localities these tools will serve. Each project team benefited from the interaction between researchers and practitioners, enabling discussion of the technical, social, and ethical challenges in the work.

The workshop continued the progress made by the previous year's gathering in creating a two-way dialogue between the AI and social work communities, and Microsoft Research India looks forward to reporting progress on these projects in the coming months. For more information and project updates as they become available, visit Microsoft Research India Workshop on AI and Societal Good.

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