AI for Social Innovation Conference 2026

October 20-22, 2026

Aspen Grove, Utah

G20 interfaith forum attended the AI for Social Innovation Conference to share the insights from the Forum which happened just the week before.

Powering AI in a Thirsty World

The conference explored the rapid growth of artificial intelligence and the infrastructure required to support it, focusing especially on energy, water, governance, and social responsibility. Speakers emphasized that discussions surrounding AI often become polarized, particularly regarding claims that data centers are depleting local water supplies. Rather than framing water as simply a problem, researchers argued for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between water, electricity, and computing infrastructure.

Data centers require large amounts of electricity, much of which ultimately becomes heat that must be removed from computing systems. Water can play an important role in cooling infrastructure, especially during hot periods when conventional air-cooling becomes less effective and power demand increases. Several presenters suggested that responsible water use can actually increase energy flexibility, reduce summer power spikes, decrease noise pollution, and unlock additional computing capacity. At the same time, growing public concern has prompted new transparency requirements and water-reporting regulations in regions such as California, Canada, and the European Union, highlighting the need for continued innovation, accountability, and sustainable resource management.

Beyond infrastructure, participants examined data sovereignty, AI governance, and community-centered innovation. Discussions highlighted the importance of protecting community data rights, fostering trust through informed consent, supporting open and locally adaptable AI models, and ensuring that technological benefits reach the communities that generate the underlying data. Particular attention was given to collective sovereignty, linguistic diversity, Indigenous data rights, public-interest applications, and the need for local capacity-building rather than technological dependency.

Group Discussion: Innovation and Harm Reduction

Participants explored how societies can encourage innovation while reducing potential harms from AI systems. Several speakers argued that regulation should be guided by a "do no harm" principle and informed by measurable assessments of risk and public benefit. Challenges identified included limitations in funding, liability concerns, geopolitical competition, and the difficulty of accurately measuring social and mental well-being.

A recurring theme was that consent should be understood as an ongoing relationship rather than a one-time transaction. Community members should be involved in the design, governance, ownership, maintenance, and future use of AI systems from the beginning. Communities should also retain the ability to leave arrangements, take their data with them, and exercise meaningful control over how technology affects their lives.

Reflections from Ambassador Kah

Ambassador Kah emphasized that lasting social innovation must be built with communities rather than for them. He reflected on the image of an Aspen grove, where individual trees appear separate above ground but remain interconnected through a shared root system beneath the surface. In much the same way, he argued, humanity's future is interconnected. Decisions about artificial intelligence, data governance, and technological development ultimately affect the well-being of all people, making collaboration and mutual responsibility essential.

He stressed that AI should not be judged solely by technical capability, economic output, or competitive advantage. Rather, its success should be measured by whether it advances human flourishing, protects human dignity, strengthens communities, and contributes to the common good. Technologies that increase efficiency while weakening trust, deepening inequality, or marginalizing vulnerable populations cannot be considered true progress. Social innovation must therefore place people at its center and ensure that the benefits of technological advancement are shared broadly across society.

Drawing upon work within the G20 Interfaith Forum, Ambassador Kah noted that faith communities have an important role to play in shaping public trust and ethical reflection around emerging technologies. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations often serve communities that may otherwise be excluded from policy discussions and can contribute valuable perspectives on dignity, justice, responsibility, and care for future generations. Their participation, however, should complement rather than replace the responsibilities of governments, institutions, and technology companies.

Ambassador Kah concluded by emphasizing that no single sector can address the challenges of artificial intelligence alone. Policymakers, researchers, businesses, civil society organizations, and faith communities must work together in a spirit of shared responsibility. Institutions retain an obligation to listen, to care, and to act in service of the public good. The future of AI will depend not only on technical innovation, but on the wisdom, trust, and cooperation that societies bring to its governance. Through such collaboration, AI can become a force for social innovation that empowers communities, respects human dignity, and serves the broader interests of humanity.

AI Ethics and Policy Round Table

Dr. Marianna Richardson participated in the Ethics and Policy Roundtable, where experts from diverse disciplines explored practical approaches for ensuring that artificial intelligence serves the public good. Discussions focused on moving beyond theoretical frameworks toward measurable social impact, emphasizing community participation, trust, accountability, and human flourishing as essential benchmarks for evaluating AI systems.

One promising proposal that emerged from the roundtable was the creation of a community-based recognition and awards program for AI initiatives that demonstrably improve people's lives. Rather than measuring success solely through technical achievement or economic return, the program would honor projects that generate meaningful benefits for individuals, families, and local communities. The concept aligns with broader conference themes emphasizing public-interest innovation, ethical stewardship, and social responsibility. Participants recommended piloting the initiative in Utah, with the goal of developing a scalable model that could later be shared with and adapted by other states. The awards program is intended to encourage AI developers, civic leaders, educators, and community organizations to work collaboratively in creating technologies that strengthen human well-being and contribute to the common good.

This proposal complemented Ambassador Kah's emphasis that AI should ultimately be judged by whether it advances human flourishing and serves society rather than by technological sophistication alone. By empowering communities to recognize and celebrate beneficial innovation, the initiative seeks to create positive incentives for AI development that is responsive to local needs and grounded in shared values.