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AI for the Nation: Why We Need More Than Just Coders at the Table



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Introduction: Artificial Intelligence (AI) is often seen as a technological revolution—but in truth, it's a societal one. As countries attempt to craft national AI strategies, one critical pitfall often undermines progress: the overrepresentation of programmers and technical specialists in policy discussions, with insufficient input from applied AI experts and actual end users.

This is particularly true in developing nations or fragile economies where the discourse around AI is still forming. The danger? A purely technical narrative that misses the point: AI is valuable *only* if it solves real-world problems. We must urgently rethink who sits at the decision-making table.

1. The Misconception: Technical Expertise Equals AI Readiness

A common mistake in national discussions is equating programming or data science knowledge with comprehensive AI expertise. While technical proficiency is crucial, it's not sufficient. Programmers are skilled at building algorithms—but that doesn't mean they understand how AI should reshape education, healthcare, logistics, or agriculture.

AI-readiness isn't about how many developers a country has—it's about how well AI is embedded into key sectors.

2. The Three AI Roles: Clarifying the Landscape

To elevate the conversation, we must clearly distinguish between three essential roles in the AI ecosystem:

a. Programmers and Coders

They build tools, develop models, and write code. Vital for creating AI systems—but often lack sector-specific insight or strategic vision.

b. AI Experts and Practitioners

These are the architects of applied AI. They combine deep understanding of AI technologies with domain knowledge (e.g., healthcare AI, AI in education, legal tech). They bridge the gap between theory and deployment.



c. End Users and Domain Leaders

Hospital directors, factory managers, educators, municipal planners—those who understand the pain points and know where AI can create the most value. Their voice is often absent in national AI dialogues.

Real AI transformation occurs when all three groups work together.

3. The Risks of a Code-Centric AI Strategy

When AI strategies are dominated by purely technical voices:

- **Solutions are misaligned** with real needs (e.g., building predictive models for data that doesn't exist or is inaccessible).
- **Ethical, social, and usability issues are ignored** (e.g., how will AI affect rural populations? Will it reinforce inequalities?).
- **Sustainability and scalability are compromised**—solutions may work in a lab but not in the field.

This tech tunnel vision slows adoption, wastes resources, and undermines public trust.

4. Building the Right AI Governance Model

A balanced national AI ecosystem should be:

Interdisciplinary:

National AI councils and advisory bodies must include technologists, economists, policymakers, sector leaders, civil society reps, and ethicists.

Application-Driven:

Prioritize sectors where AI can have *immediate impact*—healthcare, energy, education, transportation, environment—and involve those sector champions early.

Human-Centered:

Policies should focus on inclusion, accessibility, digital literacy, and protecting citizens' rights—not just on building datasets and models.

Global-Aware, Locally-Relevant:

Look outward for inspiration but customize frameworks for local realities—especially in regions with fragmented data, unstable infrastructure, or policy vacuums.



5. Practical Steps for Our Country

To shift toward an inclusive and effective AI strategy, we propose:

- **Audit the current discourse:** Who is being heard? Who is missing?
- **Establish a National AI Task Force** that includes applied AI experts and user-sector leaders.
- **Create sectoral AI roadmaps** co-developed by ministries, local stakeholders, and AI practitioners.
- **Build capacity** for non-technical leaders to understand AI's potential and limitations.
- **Fund pilot projects** that involve users from day one and demonstrate real impact.

Conclusion: AI Is Not a Coding Competition—It's a National Priority

AI is not just about technology, it's about transformation. If we continue to confine its development to those who code, we will miss its true potential. We must open up the conversation, balance the table, and empower those who can translate AI into national resilience, inclusion, and growth.

It's time we stop asking only: *Can we build it?*

And

start asking: *Should we? For whom? And how do we make it work on the ground?*